

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 26 April 2025
1.00pm

This concert is supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Grace Francis piano

- Franz Liszt** (1811-1886) *Après une lecture du Dante from Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année, Italie S161* (1838-61)
- Fryderyk Chopin** (1810-1849) *Nocturne in E flat Op. 9 No. 2* (1830-32)
Scherzo No. 1 in B minor Op. 20 (1834-5)
- Sergey Prokofiev** (1891-1953) *From Visions fugitives Op. 22* (1915-7)
Lentamente • Molto giocoso • Pittoresco • Ridicolosamente • Feroce • Presto agitassimo e molto accentuato • Lento irrealmente
- Franz Liszt** *Sonetto del Petrarca No. 104 from Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année, Italie S161*
Tarantella from Venezia e Napoli S162 (1859)



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Liszt's withdrawal from public pianism in the late 1840s to a post at the Weimar court was symptomatic of a more general shift in values. Prior to Weimar he was a pianist-composer, and his music was geared towards his appearances on the concert platforms of Europe's cultural capitals. From the late 1840s, he was to be a composer in a fuller, more self-conscious sense. On settling in Weimar, he tidied his work desk, so to speak. He grappled with new projects, of course, but he also reviewed systematically his earlier compositions, and went on to revise several of them in a spirit somewhere between salvage and renovation. In a letter to Czerny in April 1852, he wrote: 'I have gone through a rather severe work of revisions, and have remodelled entirely several of my old works'. Thus, the first of his three books of *Années de pèlerinage* redrafts much of his earlier collection *Album d'un voyageur*. Likewise, 'Après une lecture du Dante', the last and most ambitious piece from the second (Italian) book of *Années de pèlerinage*, reworks an earlier 'Fragment after Dante', while the 'Sonetto del Petrarca No. 104', also from the second book, is a recasting for piano of an earlier song.

The poetic inspiration for these two pieces was also part and parcel of Liszt's Weimar agenda, articulated in his extended essay on *Harold in Italy*. Here he suggests that the 'poetic solution' for instrumental music is 'an idea whose time has come, for both arts [poetry and music] feel themselves mutually attracted and are striving for inner union'. Liszt's musical reflection on Dante, as seen through the prism of the Victor Hugo poem *Après une lecture de Dante*, takes the form of a piano sonata in a single movement. Its thematic representations of the infernal and celestial spheres (in the symbolically resonant keys of D minor and F sharp major) are not only contrasted, but also mediated in various ways, including motivic transformations and interpenetrations. And especially germane here is Liszt's command of what Wagner called 'the art of transition'. In the case of 'Sonetto del Petrarca No. 104', this same art is rather a means of moving through the various stages of a single unfolding melody depicting love in its many manifestations, and with characteristic cadenza-like interpolations. In 1859, Liszt added a supplement to this second book of *Années de pèlerinage*, the triptych 'Venezia e Napoli', of which the final piece is a tarantella in G minor elaborating themes by Guillaume-Louis Cottrau.

Genre titles were used permissively, and even interchangeably, in the world of early 19th-century pianism, and were in any case often supplied by the publisher rather than the composer. In contrast, **Chopin** arrived at very specific, though not always conventional, generic meanings, established through an internal consistency in their application. Thus, he crystallised the meanings of some existing titles (*études*, *impromptus*, *mazurkas* and *nocturnes*), transformed the meanings of others (*préludes*, *scherzos*, *polonaises*) and devised new titles for piano

music (ballades). It was only really in Chopin that the 'nocturne style' and the genre title 'nocturne' truly converged, and they did so above all in the three nocturnes of Op. 9, composed somewhere between 1830 and 1832, and the first set Chopin himself submitted to a publisher. The second, in E flat major, is probably the most familiar of all his nocturnes, and presents an archetype of the genre, where an ornamental 'aria' alternates with a more developmental 'theme'. It is telling that it closes with a cadenza, since this spells out a generic link with the operatic aria, as also with the slow movements of concertos.

By adopting the title 'scherzo' for a single-movement work, Chopin immediately transformed its meaning, a transformation so radical that it confused not only his contemporaries but also late 19th- and early 20th-century critics. Yet, his use of the term was by no means arbitrary. Like the four ballades, the four scherzos really do belong together. In all four, he reinterpreted the element of contrast at the heart of the conventional genre, building the central formal contrast into the detailed substance. This is clear from the opening paragraphs of all four scherzos, where fragmentary motives are presented with calculated discontinuity, something far from common in Chopin. Of the four, the simplest in construction is the first in B minor, composed around 1833, in which a popular melody (almost certainly based on the opening phrase of a Polish carol) is enclosed within an impassioned figuration. That figuration is remarkable for its drive and energy, establishing immediately the ambition of this genre in Chopin's hands. Schumann's reaction has become legendary: 'How is tragedy to clothe itself, if humour wears such dark veils?'

Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives* is – as the title suggests – a collection of aphorisms: fleeting thoughts that are complete in themselves and minimally developed. In this sense 'aphorism' rather than 'fragment' is indeed the *mot juste*. Composed at different times between 1915 and 1917, these 20 miniatures have some conceptual affinity with the kind of neo-classicism we associate with Stravinsky a year or two later, in that there are recognisable stylistic backgrounds that are subject to foreground distortion. But the tone of Prokofiev's miniatures is really quite different, at various times playful, tender, agitated, elusive, wistful and even downright quirky. Where else in music do we find the performance indication *ridicolosamente*? It is worth bearing in mind the context of the composition of this collection. Of the penultimate piece, Prokofiev wrote, 'The February revolution found me in Petrograd [...] hiding behind house corners when the shooting came too close. Piece XIX of the *Visions fugitives* written at this time partly reflected my impressions – the feeling of the crowd rather than the inner essence of the Revolution'.

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