

2025/26 Anniversary Season Launch

Jeneba Kanneh-Mason piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 in C sharp minor S244 (1847)

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An overview of the 125th Anniversary Season with Wigmore Hall Director **John Gilhooly** and journalist, writer and broadcaster **Samira Ahmed**

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Pavel Haas Quartet

Veronika Jarůšková violin

Marek Zwiebel violin

Šimon Truszka viola

Peter Jarůšek cello

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my life' (1876)

I. Allegro vivo appassionato

II. Allegro moderato alla polka

III. Largo sostenuto

IV. Vivace

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By the time **Franz Liszt** settled in Weimar in the summer of 1848, many of Europe's major cities and their surrounding regions had undergone a series of revolutions, the violence of which forced sundry ruling powers to grant liberal concessions to various national groups. The Habsburg monarchy and its reactionary officials, shocked by uprisings across their empire and the initial weakness of their military against civilian insurrectionaries, mounted a generally successful, punitively violent counter-revolution; Liszt's homeland, Hungary, however, resisted under the leadership of Lajos Kossuth and, although eventually defeated by a coalition of Austrian and Russian forces, set the foundations for the later compromise of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

The nationalist fervour of 1848-49 mirrored Liszt's own patriotic sentiments, which had deepened since his return in 1839 to Hungary after a long absence. During the 1840s he composed a collection of *Magyar Dallok* or 'Hungarian National Melodies'. These, he noted in a letter to Marie d'Agoult, mother of his three children, might be recomposed to create 'the musical epic of this strange country, whose rhapsode I want to become'. The first of his two volumes of *Hungarian Rhapsodies* arose from this idea, their raw material and spirit drawn from the *Magyar Dallok* and other anthologies that Liszt compiled between 1840 and 1847. Many of the 'Magyar' melodies that he heard performed by itinerant Romani bands on his travels around Hungary were in fact recent inventions, popular dance hall products fashioned by forgotten amateur composers; some, however, belonged to the culturally diverse repertoire of traditional Hungarian tunes, albeit reimagined by generations of Romani musicians.

Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, first published in 1851, recalls the 18th-century *verbunkos*, a dance form conceived to lure new recruits to the imperial Habsburg army and distinguished by its contrasting slow (*lassan*) and fast (*friska*) sections. Liszt's composition also evokes the capricious nature of Romani music making, especially so in the many elaborate melodic decorations in the opening *lassan* and the sudden accelerations and tempo changes in the *friska*. The work's dazzling technical demands reflect its composer's status as one of the greatest virtuoso pianists of all time, a performer able to drive audiences wild with his impassioned improvisations and seemingly infinite command of the keyboard.

While Liszt the showman is omnipresent in his second Hungarian Rhapsody, the composition's breathtaking virtuosity is counterbalanced by passages of exquisite lyricism: the *lassan*, for instance, concludes with a series of lightly embellished low chords that supplies a sublime prelude to the *friska*'s shimmering, bell-like opening. As the composer's compatriot Béla Bartók observed, the rough-cut melodic material refined here by Liszt 'could not be treated with greater artistry and beauty'.

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Programme music came naturally to **Bedřich Smetana**. A child prodigy on the violin, he was an extrovert by nature, and aimed high – 'I wanted to be a Mozart in composition, and a Liszt in technique'. Personal happiness proved more elusive. He lost two young children within nine months in 1855-6; three years later his beloved first wife Katerina died after ten years of marriage. Meanwhile, syphilis caused him escalating nervous difficulties throughout his adult life, and in the space of a few months in 1874, acute tinnitus developed into severe hearing loss. He retreated from Prague into the peace of the country, where he composed the String Quartet 'From my life' between October and December 1876. By then he could compose for only an hour at a stretch before his condition made concentration impossible.

First performed in private in 1878 (with Dvořák on viola), the Quartet was finally premièred in Prague on 28 March 1879. 'I did not set out to write a Quartet according to recipe or custom in the usual forms', said Smetana. 'My intention was to paint a tone-picture of my life.' In his own words, 'The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning of something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune.' Some listeners have heard the viola's heroic opening solo as a kind of 'fate' motif (it returns at the finale's tragic climax), and the movement as a whole as a recollection of the revolutionary days of the 1848 nationalist risings.

'A quasi-polka brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance music and gave it away left, right and centre to other young people, being known myself as a passionate lover of dancing.' In the second theme, Smetana marks the viola quasi tromba – 'like a trumpet'. The demure central section evokes 'the aristocratic circles in which I lived long years', and 'the slow movement recalls the happiness of my first love for the girl who later became my wife'. A mournful cello solo begins and ends this third movement: Smetana never ceased to mourn Katerina, and the impassioned central climax is touched with sorrow.

And in the finale, Smetana describes 'the discovery that I could express national ideas in music, and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of my deafness.' The moment when the jaunty slavonic dance breaks off, and the violin plays a piercing high E remains one of the most chilling – and haunting – moments in Romantic chamber music: 'It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which, in 1874, announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke because it was so disastrous to me', observed Smetana, with bitter irony. 'In a sense, it is private and therefore written for four instruments, which should converse together in an intimate circle about the things that so deeply trouble me. Nothing more'.

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