

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 26 September 2024
1.00pm

Jeneba Kanneh-Mason piano

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

Sonata in D Kk29

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 1 (1835)

Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2 (1835)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 35 'Funeral March'
(1837-9)

*I. Grave - Doppio movimento • II. Scherzo •
III. Marche funèbre • IV. Finale. Presto*

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Prelude in C Op. 11 No. 1 (1888-96)

Prelude in B Op. 11 No. 11 (1888-96)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in G sharp minor Op. 19 'Sonata
Fantasy' (1892-7)

I. Andante • II. Presto

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Note: The running order of this programme has changed since these notes were written

It's increasingly accepted that **Domenico Scarlatti** wrote, not so much for the harpsichord, as for the very first type of pianoforte, as invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori and developed by his pupil, Giovanni Ferrini. These, like the harpsichord, lacked a sustaining pedal, but brought the new opportunity (as implied by the name of the instrument) of playing each note at a different degree of loudness. Vladimir Horowitz's fondness for the composer, occasionally controversial in the past, is triumphantly justified! In this light, this sonata's crowded passages with hands crossing, and even fighting a little over sharing notes, are not so much a demonstration that two manuals are required (as in a harpsichord), but that Cristofori's repetition-action was exemplary. Which indeed it was: he invented a version of the double-escapement, which the world then forgot about until Sébastien Érard re-invented it in the 1820s. For Scarlatti, a sonata was a single movement, divided into two sections, each repeated. Sometimes he wrote them in pairs, but they work well enough singly.

Skryabin injured his hand by over-practising, rather like Schumann. Had either of these artists maintained a career as a virtuoso, would there have been such music? Skryabin's life, like Wagner's, was dedicated to the realization of some mighty opus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner managed it: Skryabin only got as far as purchasing the land for his equivalent of Bayreuth, a plot in Darjeeling (India being the home of mysticism in **Skryabin's** mind) for the production of his 'Mysterium'. It came to nothing after **Skryabin's** death from sepsis.

As a youngster, **Skryabin** used to take Chopin to bed with him – literally. He began composing by transforming familiar Chopin genres – mazurkas, nocturnes, etudes and preludes. The mazurkas and nocturnes are early works, but etudes and preludes continued throughout **Skryabin's** life. In this, he reflects a more general situation. Few mazurkas and nocturnes are written nowadays, but the etude stretches from Cramer to Ligeti; the prelude from Bach via Debussy and Gershwin to all the composers today who want to pay homage to Chopin's Op. 28. Bach's preludes are nearly always followed by the words 'and fugue', which makes perfect sense of the word 'prelude'. (Chorale preludes, in theory, were followed by a chorale.) Chopin, who didn't write fugues, kept just the 'in every key' aspect of Bach's 48 for his book of *Preludes*. Not everyone noticed that, but it does explain why he called them 'preludes'.

Once pianists had developed a habit of playing just a few favourite Chopin *Preludes*, other composers were happy to jump aboard the prelude bandwagon more indiscriminately. In the end, a prelude could be just any short piece. Some are indistinguishable from etudes, and some could quite easily be called something else – a poem, perhaps. A set of preludes can be in as many

different styles as you like, and composers who didn't want to limit their stylistic options seized the opportunity.

Skryabin published his Second Sonata in 1898. His own 'programme' runs: 'The first part evokes the calm of a night by a southern shore; in the development we hear the sombre agitation of the deep. The section in E major represents tender moonlight after the opening darkness. The second movement, *Presto*, shows the stormy agitation of the vast ocean.'

Chopin did not so much play the piano – rather, he was the piano. A degree of self-identification with the instrument is indicated by his remark about the relative merits of Pleyels and Erards. Liszt preferred the latter, with their foolproof double-escapement action. Chopin explained that an Erard came with its sound all ready-made, but at a Pleyel, he had to make his own sound, which he preferred, if his health was good enough to allow the effort. As his friend George Sand remarked, 'he made a single instrument speak a language of infinity'. 'Chopin is the greatest of them all', said Debussy, 'for through the piano alone he discovered everything'.

The 18 nocturnes Chopin published during his lifetime span the whole of his composing career. A nocturne is a right-hand melody with a left-hand accompaniment, a device hit on by the Irish composer John Field to demonstrate the beauties of the pianos he was selling. Surprisingly few piano pieces used this texture until the early 19th Century – 18th-century melodies were always breaking off to be developed. Up until Op. 27, which was published in 1837, Chopin had published nocturnes in sets of three, but thereafter he issued them in pairs. The key-schemes of his sets of nocturnes are very varied. Op. 15 creeps up by semitones, F major, F sharp major, G minor. Op. 48 starkly opposes C minor and F sharp minor. Op. 27's switch from minor to major on the same note (even though Chopin mischievously gives the note its alias) proved so satisfactory that he adopted it again for Op. 37, in G minor and major.

Chopin's B flat minor sonata had its origin in just its most famous movement, the 'Funeral March', which was written in 1837, and which was performed at Chopin's own funeral. (It's one of Chopin's few mood-inducing titles, the other being the *Berceuse*). The remaining three movements followed two years later, Chopin clearly wanting to big-up what must obviously have been a piece with a future. The most remarkable part of Chopin's frame is the movement that comes after we've heard the kernel of the work. If you know it, no words are needed, and if you don't, any words at all would only spoil it. It's a remarkable solution to the problem of not turning the funeral march into just a slow movement.

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