

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 27 February 2022 7.30pm

Sergei Babayan piano

Martha Argerich piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

arranged by Sergei Babayan

12 Movements from *Romeo and Juliet* Op. 64 (1935-6)

Prologue • Dance of the Knights • Morning Dance • Quarrel • Gavotte • Juliet as a Young Girl - The Nurse Delivers Juliet's Letter to Romeo • Folk Dance • Dance with Mandolines • Morning Serenade • Dance of Five Couples • Romeo and Juliet Before Departure • Death of Tybalt

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Sonata in D for 2 pianos K448 (1781)

I. Allegro con spirito • II. Andante • III. Allegro molto

Sergey Prokofiev

arranged by Sergei Babayan

The Ghost of Hamlet's Father from *Incidental music from Hamlet* Op. 77 (1937-8)

From *Incidental music from Eugene Onegin* Op. 71 (1936)

Mazurka • Polka

From *The Queen of Spades* Op. 70 (1936)

Polonaise • Idée fixe

Pushkin Waltz No. 2 in C sharp minor from *Pushkin Waltzes* Op. 120 (1949)

Natasha's and Andrei's Valse from *War and Peace* Op. 91 (1941-3 rev. 1946-52)

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Prokofiev was an inveterate arranger and recycler of his own compositions, especially after he returned permanently to the Soviet Union in 1936 after nearly two decades living between Western Europe and North America. If a work offended the censors, he would plunder the outlawed score and reuse its best ideas in new contexts. As a virtuoso pianist, he would make fresh transcriptions for his own instrument. Although he wrote nothing for the combination of two pianos, he would surely have been delighted by **Sergei Babayan's** arrangements of movements from his ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as a number of other film and stage works from the 1930s and 1940s.

Best known for his seven symphonies, five piano concertos and nine piano sonatas, Prokofiev was above all a creature of the stage, who devoted himself to opera, ballet and, later, cinema. Indeed, one of the reasons behind his move back to the Soviet Union was the prospect of being able to devote himself to the kind of ambitious collaborative works that had proved impossible to realise in the West. *Romeo and Juliet* was commissioned for Leningrad's Kirov Theatre in 1934 and was designed to replace ballets based primarily on decorative display with something more narrative and dramatic. Although now seen as one of Prokofiev's masterpieces, it had a troubled journey to the stage. Its un-Shakespearean 'happy end', in which the young lovers survived, provoked intense discussion, and the scandal surrounding Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in 1936 made artists and officials yet more anxious. The ballet was first seen, in fact, in Brno, then part of Czechoslovakia, in December 1938, and would not make it to the Soviet stage until January 1940 when it finally opened at the Kirov Theatre. In the meantime, Prokofiev had produced three orchestral suites for concert performance, as well as a set of ten pieces for solo piano.

Babayan's arrangement of 12 movements from *Romeo and Juliet* follows neither the original plot of the ballet, nor the structure of Prokofiev's own orchestral suites and solo piano transcriptions. Yet it is profoundly faithful to composer's spirit. Prokofiev famously identified five main 'lines' which made up his compositional style – the classical, the innovative, the toccata, the lyric, and the grotesque – and all of these can be heard here. Babayan's arrangements also nod to the Russian tradition of works for two pianos – from Rachmaninov's two Suites (1893 and 1901), to Stravinsky's Concerto (1935) and Sonata (1944), and Shostakovich's Suite (1922) and Concertino (1953).

Unlike the Prokofiev works performed this evening, **Mozart's** Sonata in D K448 was originally composed for two pianos. He had written a few youthful pieces for piano duet (two players at a single keyboard) for himself and his equally talented elder sister Nannerl, but the sonata was his only work for two instruments. It dates from

1781 and was inspired by his gifted pupil, Josepha Barbara Auernhammer. Initially, Josepha had a crush on the young composer, although her feelings were not reciprocated. 'The girl is a fright,' he wrote, 'but her playing is delightful.' Auernhammer would go on to establish herself not only as one of Vienna's most noted pianists, but also as a composer in her own right. It is, though, Mozart's sonata that has immortalised her reputation. Its three movements have a playful quality, fully in keeping with the gallant world of Viennese sociability. In the first movement, scales pass from one player to the other like witty conversation – or perhaps ebullient champagne. The second movement feels like a reflective aria from one of Mozart's operas, with the pianists being required to produce a cantabile line as effortlessly as the human voice. The finale brings the sonata to a florid conclusion, with echoes of the kind of exotic Turkish music that was so fashionable at the time.

If *Romeo and Juliet* has conquered ballet stages and concert houses around the world, then the works that form this evening's closing sequence are much less familiar, although they certainly give an excellent insight into the complexities of Prokofiev's creative life in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1937-8, he composed the incidental music for a Leningrad production of *Hamlet* directed by Sergei Radlov, who had already staged landmark productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*. At least audiences got to see *Hamlet*, unlike the stage adaptation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* for which Prokofiev composed 44 individual numbers in 1936. Directed by Alexander Tairov, the founder of the Moscow Chamber Theatre, and with a scenario by the modernist prose writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, this should have been one of the high points of the celebrations held to mark the centenary of Pushkin's death in 1937. In December 1936, however, Prokofiev was told to cease work on the score, and the production was cancelled. The same fate befell the film version of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, which was to have been directed by Mikhail Romm, also as part of the festivities. Prokofiev was luckier when it came to the two *Pushkin Waltzes*, commissioned by Moscow Radio for the 150th anniversary of Pushkin's birth in 1949, although their première was still delayed until 1 January 1952. The story of the composition of Prokofiev's *War and Peace* is almost as convoluted as Tolstoy's novel itself, and to this day, debate rages about which of the many versions of the score should be considered authoritative. What is clear, though, is that it contains some of Prokofiev's loveliest music, especially when dealing with the relationship between Natasha Rostova and Prince Andrei. Like the music for the abandoned Pushkin projects, Prokofiev's waltz deftly evokes the atmosphere of the early 19th Century, as filtered through his own quirkily modernist sensibility.

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