

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 November 2023
7.30pm

Gautier Capuçon cello
Kim Bernard piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Barcarolle in F sharp Op. 60 (1845-6)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Images, Series 1 (1901-5)

Reflets dans l'eau • Hommage à Rameau • Mouvement

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)

I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane •

IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)

Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht •

Rasch und mit Feuer

Interval

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Cello Sonata in A minor Op. 36 (1882-3)

I. Allegro agitato • II. Andante molto tranquillo •

III. Allegro molto e marcato

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The origins of the barcarolle are implicit in the name, with 'barca', the Italian word for boat, referencing the traditional songs of Venetian gondoliers. Typically composed in some form of triple metre (usually in 6/8 or 12/8), the gentle tempo suggests the rocking motion of the vessel on water, and perhaps also served as a helpful accompaniment to the repetitive strokes of the boatman's oars. Having said that, this particular *Barcarolle* by **Fryderyk Chopin** begins in rather more tempestuous waters. There is an octave crash in the lower register of the piano, followed by a lilting ostinato (or repeated figure) beginning in the left hand, which is joined by a beguiling melody in the right. As with many of the Polish composer's works, this simple tune returns, decorated with virtuosic flourishes in quasi-operatic style. Chopin composed this work between 1845 and 1846, three years before his death in Paris at the age of 39, leading some listeners to comment on the wistful and melancholic tone of the work.

'Without false pride, I feel that these three pieces hold together well, and that they will find their place in the literature of the piano... to the left of Schumann, or to the right of Chopin...' So wrote **Debussy** to his publisher Jacques Durand, and in today's programme, these three short piano works find themselves in excellent company. *Reflets dans l'eau* ('Reflections on the water') conjures all the mystery and magic of water, with a panoply of cascading, rippling effects that unfold with effortless fluidity. Debussy composed *Hommage à Rameau* in 1903, around the same time that he was editing some of the Baroque composer's works. Yet is an enigmatic tribute to the 18th-century genius, seemingly evoking the spirit of a vanished era, rather than referencing any specific compositional traits of the old master. The lively *Mouvement* specifies the performer play with 'a whimsical lightness, but precisely' - and it thrums with energy, dancing over the keys like a hummingbird's wings, until it whirs to a comically abrupt ending.

Like Debussy, **Maurice Ravel** was interested in the music of the French Baroque, although initial sketches for *Le tombeau de Couperin* were interrupted by the First World War, when he was called up to serve in 1915. Following his formal discharge in 1917 and the death of his mother in January that year, Ravel returned to composition, creating this unique work, each of whose six movements is dedicated to a different fallen comrade. Given this sombre context, the movements are disarmingly exuberant; perhaps a refuge from grief or a celebration of life, rather than an elegy. The *Prélude* whirls through a kaleidoscopic array of harmonies, the skipping third movement (*Forlane*) is based on a Venetian folk dance, while it is impossible to resist the toe-tapping rhythms of the *Rigaudon* - a

French folk dance with its origins in the 17th Century. The first performance of the work was given in Paris by the pianist Marguerite Long, widow of the musicologist Joseph de Marliave, who was killed in action in 1917, and to whom the closing *Toccata* is dedicated.

There is an infectious energy and headlong momentum to the three *Fantasiestücke* which **Schumann** composed in a flurry of inspiration over the course of two days in February 1849. Originally scored for clarinet and piano - specifically with the Dresden court clarinetist in mind - Schumann indicated that the woodwind part could also be performed on violin or cello. And despite the lower tessitura of the cello, which is scored an octave lower than the clarinet, the piano part is so cleverly arranged that the cello is never overwhelmed by the keyboard. Each of the three movements is a perfect Romantic miniature, following a traditional A-B-A structure, and evoking contrasting moods. The melancholic opening piece begins with surprising immediacy, as if continuing a conversation already underway. It is followed by the lively middle movement, and concludes in the blazing heroism of the final component.

The winter of 1882-3 was a difficult period in **Edvard Grieg's** life. The Norwegian composer wrote: 'I am both spiritually and bodily unwell, and decide every other day not to compose another note, because I satisfy myself less and less.' Yet the Bergen-based musician persisted with this work, and dedicated it to his cello-playing brother, John. It was first performed in Leipzig in 1883 by John's teacher Julius Klengel, with the composer at the piano. The work had a mixed critical reception, perhaps on account of its references to a number of Grieg's earlier compositions, but that hasn't stopped the Sonata becoming a favourite among performers. In 1906, the year before his death, Grieg performed it with the great Catalan cellist Pablo Casals, who continued to programme it for many years afterwards. As the cellist Stephen Isserlis writes, 'The melodies are convincingly beautiful, and deeply felt... It is a marvellous work, combining warm-hearted charm with joyous excitement.'

The stormy first movement begins with a moodily insistent cello line and darkly motoring piano chords, before rising to a frenetic pitch. Then, within two minutes, we are basking in the sunshine of an expansive melody that sings off the page. Following the comparative calm of the second movement, the third opens with a folkloric solo figure for the cello, before galloping off into a high-energy finale.

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