

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 28 February 2025  
7.30pm

Roman Rabinovich piano

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

From *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin*  
*L'Egyptienne* • *Les Triolets* • *Les Sauvages* •  
*La Poule* • *L'Enharmonique*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Sonatine (1903-5)  
*I. Modéré* • *II. Mouvement de menuet* • *III. Animé*

Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951)

Sonata-Reminiscenza from *Forgotten Melodies, Cycle I*  
Op. 38 (?1919-22)

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 5 Op. 53 (1907)

*Interval*

Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)

*Pictures from an Exhibition* (1874)  
*Promenade 1* • *The Gnome* • *Promenade 2* •  
*The Old Castle* • *Promenade 3* • *Tuileries* •  
*Bydlo* • *Promenade 4* • *Ballet of the Unhatched*  
*Chicks* • *"Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle"* •  
*Promenade 5* • *The Market Place at Limoges* •  
*Catacombs (Sepulchrum Romanum)* •  
*Cum mortuis in lingua mortua* • *The Hut on*  
*Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga)* • *The Great Gate of*  
*Kiev*

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With the Early Music revival of recent decades we have become better acquainted with the stage-works of **Rameau** – *Les Boréades*, *Les Indes galantes* and *Les fêtes d'Hébé* among them – all of which he wrote after the age of 50. But earlier in his career (1706–1728) he published over 60 *Pièces de clavecin*, arranged in five suites across three volumes. Tonight's four movements are drawn from the character pieces (as opposed to the dance movements) from the third volume's second suite and mostly show Rameau capacity for wit and mimicry. The title of 'L'enharmonique' refers to the 'enharmonic' pitch equivalences that allow harmonic shifts into foreign keys; here Rameau's chromaticism is startlingly experimental. 'Les triolets' (whose title refers to a poetic verse form) is among the most lyrical of all the *Pièces*, a feature emphasised when performed on the piano as opposed to the harpsichord. The next two pieces show influences from distant lands considered exotic at the time: 'Les sauvages' ('The Savages') was written after Rameau witnessed Native American dancers perform in Paris, while 'L'Égyptienne' (The Egyptian Girl) is an exuberant dance requiring some hand-crossing. 'La poule' (The Hen) pecks, clucks and flaps by way of its repeated notes, crushed arpeggios and florid decoration.

Brilliant, toccata-like (perpetual-motion) writing and the dance forms of the French Baroque found their way into **Ravel's** *Sonatine* nearly two centuries later. Compact yet elegant, and teeming with detail yet crystalline in transparency, it seems fashioned in the image of its meticulously dressed, mechanical-toy-loving creator. A critic at the work's Paris première in 1906 complained, 'It is finely made, it is appealing, it is even often entertaining – but it remains cold.' In fact, this is perfectly in keeping with Ravel's unique combination of flair and modesty. The first movement was apparently written as an entry to a competition promoted by the *Weekly Critical Review*. According to Ravel's friend the critic M.D. Calvocoressi, the competition was abandoned since Ravel was the only entrant, and to boot had exceeded the stipulated limit of 75 bars. The three movements – a poised central Minuet flanked by two quicker movements – are unified by themes based on the interval of the fourth or its inversion, the perfect fifth.

At this point, tonight's programme shifts from France to Russia.

**Medtner** (unlike Ravel) was a pianist of prodigious ability. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory aged 19 with the Gold Medal and was a friend of Rachmaninov. After the First World War he moved first to Germany, then France, then England. A plaque is erected on the house in Golders Green, north London, where he lived for the last 16 years of his life. Medtner's *Sonata-Reminiscenza* (in one movement) opens the first of three books of *Vergessene Weisen* ('Forgotten Melodies') that he wrote at a friend's dacha outside Moscow before leaving his homeland. It opens innocently enough, and recognisably in the vein of Rachmaninov, but the second theme is darker and the mood intensifies, breaking out in disturbed agitation. It's

only with the eventual return of the opening theme that the picture of happier times forever lost is complete.

To regard **Skryabin** as an eccentric is to underestimate the loftiness of his artistic purpose and his Messianic self-belief. His outlook was shaped by mysticism, symbolism and his own synaesthesia, which caused him to experience chords as colours. The Piano Sonata No. 5 is linked in philosophical terms to his fourth symphony, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, and he attached to it part of the grandiose poem he wrote to accompany the orchestral work: 'I call you to life, O mysterious forces!/Drowned in the obscure depths/Of the creative spirit, timid/Shadows of life, to you I bring audacity.' After the opening – less an introduction than a rising spontaneous combustion – the sonata continues rhapsodically with ravishing, crepuscular harmonies. This mood alternates with an idea comprising fast, zig-zagging chords; this is marked 'with cheerfulness' but its freneticism suggests something less contained. The contrast between sensuous reverie and wild abandon seems only to widen, with the climax marked 'ecstatic'. Echoing the short fuse of the opening burst, the brief *Presto coda* is abruptly halted by a destructive upwards torrent.

With **Musorgsky's** monumental *Pictures from an Exhibition* tonight's programme comes full circle, but these character pieces vary widely from Rameau's. The suite was written in the spring of 1874 after the composer visited an exhibition in St Petersburg commemorating his friend the painter and architect Victor Hartmann. Musorgsky based his suite on 10 of Hartmann's designs and paintings, opening with a strolling Promenade (a device that returns from time to time). The music is as varied as the subjects, and the piano-writing conceived so colourfully that Maurice Ravel (most famously, but many others too) made orchestral arrangements. Not only is this the only one of Musorgsky's piano works to be regularly performed, it has remained a cornerstone of Russian piano repertoire. Dark and grotesque, 'Gnome' is suggested by the design for a gnome's-head nutcracker, 'with crooked legs'. Mists seem to shroud 'The Old Castle', underpinned by a swaying *ostinato* ('repeated pattern') in the bass. Children are unmistakably at play in the garden at Paris's 'Tuileries', while a heavy trudge weighs down in the next piece, representing a cart drawn by oxen. The frenetic pecking of the 'Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks' is followed by a portrait of two Jews – one rich, one poor – respectively imperious and trembling. After the bustle of the 'Market at Limoges' we arrive at the cavernous 'Catacombs' with grim, vanishing chords; this leads to 'With the Dead in the Language of the Dead', a ghostly transformation of the Promenade. Leaping octaves then capture the flight of the witch Baba-Yaga before rising into the suite's climax, inspired by Hartmann's design for a 'Heroes' Gate'. It was never built, but Musorgsky's musical rendition has at least kept Hartmann's vision alive.

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