

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 28 May 2026
7.30pm

Wigmore Hall 125th Anniversary Festival

The Anniversary Festival is supported by the 1901 Patrons' Circle and
Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a Donor Advised Fund, held at The Prism Charitable Trust

Alexandre Kantorow piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Variationen über das Motiv von Bach S180 (1862)

Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951)

Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 5 (1895-1903)

I. Allegro • II. Intermezzo. Allegro •

III. Largo divoto • IV. Finale. Allegro risoluto

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 45 (1841)

Anders Hillborg (b.1954)

The Kalamazoo Flow (2025)

Commissioned by Alexandre Kantorow, with assistance from the Gilmore
International Piano Festival

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor Op. 111 (1821-2)

I. Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato •

II. Arietta. Adagio molto semplice cantabile



This concert is being broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 and will be available on BBC Sounds for a further 30 days.

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Anders Hillborg The Kalamazoo Flow

It's rare that a musical idea comes to me fully formed, but with the melody that opens this piano piece that is exactly what happened. I was captivated by its charming simplicity, which soon suggested more music. From almost naïve two-part writing, grand and more dazzling textures emerged: gleaming, rippling passagework that gives way to driving toccatas, as well as resonant chorales like vast, submerged bells. To me, this music suggests ever-changing forms of water (a working title was 'what the water sang'). When I realised that the Michigan home of the Gilmore Festival takes its extraordinary name from a river, then I realised I had found my title.

© Anders Hillborg

By 1847, **Franz Liszt**, then in his mid-thirties, had turned away from the life of a touring virtuoso to concentrate on composing. His affair with Marie d'Agoult had ended in 1844, and in 1848 Liszt and his new mistress Princesse Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein moved to Weimar, where he had been appointed the city's Kappellmeister *extraordinaire*. Weimar was where the young JS Bach had honed his organ technique and had written a great deal of organ music. Liszt honoured his illustrious predecessor with piano transcriptions of some of Bach's Preludes and Fugues and wrote two of the 19th Century's organ masterpieces, the *Fantasy and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam'* and the *B-A-C-H Fantasy*. Then in 1862, at the end of his time in Weimar, his and d'Agoult's daughter Blandine died during childbirth – a tragedy shrouded in mystery – and he wrote his *Variations on a motif by Bach* as a tribute to her. The Bach motif is from the *Sinfonia* to his Cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (loosely translated as 'Weeping, Wailing, Fear and Trembling', later deployed in the Crucifixus section of the *Credo* in the B minor Mass), a stepwise descent of semitones over four bars, that Liszt works into some 43 brief, increasingly brilliant variations. The overall effect is similar to that of a Baroque Passacaglia, especially Bach's magnificent example in C minor for organ. The middle section moves into the realm of Liszt's soon-to-be son-in-law Wagner and his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, a desolate recitative that finds its way into F major and the Lutheran chorale *Was Gott tut, das ist wohl getan* (What God does is done well), a pious act of affirmation. The first version of this work was for piano, quickly followed by the one for organ. It is so suited to organ sonority that you could imagine that the organ version came first. Both pianists and organists claim the work their own.

Nikolai Medtner was born and raised in Moscow by his German parents into a cultivated family that had lived and prospered in Russia for many generations. In 1900 he emerged from 10 years at the Moscow

Conservatoire as a brilliant pianist with a great career as a concert artist beckoning. But he was torn between the piano and composing. The Russian Revolution of 1917 resulted in Medtner joining the artists fleeing the new and repressive regime. In 1921, he moved first to Berlin, then Paris, with some extended tours in the United States and Canada providing much needed financial relief. He moved to England in 1935, settling with his wife Anna in a 1930s semi in Golders Green where he lived for the rest of his life. In a precarious life beset with hardship, friends stood by him, especially Sergei Rachmaninov, another Russian émigré, who helped with his career and, for example, funded his unworldly friend when an unscrupulous agent pocketed all the money. Another notable figure who recognised Medtner's worth was the Maharaja of Mysore, who made possible an extensive recording project of his music.

Medtner was uncompromising, reclusive, prodigiously gifted, with a monk-like devotion to his art. His immediate musical influences were Skryabin and Rachmaninov, but Beethoven was his abiding inspiration. You couldn't describe Medtner's response to German form and Russian fantasy as a fusion, but he balanced both aspects in his music, all of which is piano-based or for piano solo. The Sonata in F minor, Op. 5, was the first of 14, completed in 1903, in four movements – the first taut, formal and windswept; the second an *Intermezzo* in C minor; the third a monumental *Largo divoto*; and the driven *Finale* finally breaks through into F major resolution. The idiom is conservative, passionate and Brahmsian, clearly structured with much interweaving of themes.

Chopin wrote his Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 45, in 1841 in George Sand's house in Nohant, an enigmatic and highly-charged miniature, with a fluid accompaniment anchoring an improvisatory surge of rich harmony and a ghost of a theme, and dissolving into a short cadenza.

Of all **Beethoven's** output, his piano sonatas are the most personal and experimental, not least the two-movement Sonata Op. 111, in which a dynamic first movement, in classic sonata form, is followed by a set of increasingly time-bending variations. The first three variations of the slow movement, all in the same tempo, quickly become more rhythmic, foot-tappingly so in the third, and then in the fourth Beethoven expands, suspending a shorthand version of the theme over a series of repeated pedal notes in the bass, then moving everything skywards to the starry night at the top of the keyboard. The last variation gathers in rapture to a repeat of the time-suspending trills flooding the theme with light, and then the breathtaking addition of a C sharp to the theme, quietly repeated a bar later down an octave – a moment of understatement, tenderness and release, both a destination and a sublime letting go.

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