

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 29 July 2025  
7.30pm

Roman Borisov piano

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Out of Doors BB89 (1926)

*I. With Drums and Pipes • II. Barcarolla • III. Musettes •  
IV. The Night's Music • V. The Chase*

Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938)

From Renaissance (1906-9)

*Sarabande (after Rameau) • Pastorale (after Corelli) •  
Courante (after Loeillet)*

César Franck (1822-1890)

Prélude, choral et fugue (1884)

*I. Prélude. Moderato • II. Choral. Poco più lento •  
III. Fugue. Tempo I*

*Interval*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

12 Variations on the Russian Dance from Wranitzky's ballet *Das Waldmädchen* in A WoO. 71 (1796-7)

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 8 in B flat Op. 84 (1939-44)

*I. Andante dolce • II. Andante sognando • III. Vivace*



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The evening opens with an imaginative sequence of three works that reinvent the music of the early 18th Century, but in very different ways. **Bartók's** *Out of Doors* suite, written in 1926, is a strikingly modernist tribute to the Baroque keyboard suite. The first piece, *With Drums and Pipes*, is an especially raucous example of Bartók's 'barbaric' style, with frightening drum sounds in the bass. The *Barcarolle* hints at the expected gentle 'rowing' motion in 6/8 time, but this is soon left behind as the music becomes more wayward. In the following movement, *Musettes*, there are distant echoes of trilling harpsichord music; the musette genre, inspired by the bagpipes, was conventionally the middle section of the gavotte movement in Baroque suites. The fourth piece belongs to Bartók's own trademark genre of 'night music', populated by unsettling noises of nature whose source a human cannot discern in the darkness. Amidst these sounds, a chorale-like tune emerges, and then a quicker folk-like melody. To round off the suite, we have a toccata with a fierce left-hand ostinato, where snatches of melody chase each other around the keyboard.

Jumping back 20 years, we meet **Leopold Godowski**, a super-virtuoso pianist and composer who became famous for his impossibly complex versions of Chopin's études. In his *Renaissance* suite, he turns to pre-Classical composers who were much in demand at the time. He takes quite modest pieces by Rameau, Corelli and others, and infuses them with a spirit of noble grandeur through the elaborate textures and heightened expression of his late-Romantic art.

Going back another two decades, we encounter the majestic *Prélude, chorale et fugue* by **César Franck**, a pioneer of the Baroque revival. Working for most of his life as a church organist, he wanted to revive the spirit of the older music while clothing it in the grandeur of Liszt's virtuosic pianism. Franck takes Bach's monumental Preludes and Fugues for organ as his model, which served as a stimulus rather than a curb to his musical fantasy. Franck rethinks Bach's mighty organ textures and harmonic progressions, forging them into a unified Romantic tone poem that suggests a fervent spiritual quest.

**Beethoven's** *12 Variations on a Theme from Das Waldmädchen* were written in 1796, shortly after the first three piano sonatas that helped the young composer make a name for himself in Vienna. The theme came from a new ballet by the then eminent Moravian-Austrian composer Paul Wranitzky. The ballet was a hit, and Beethoven thought he could capitalise on its success. But the theme also had its own musical attractions: it had unusual phrase lengths, with five- instead of four-bar phrases owing to its derivation from a Russian folksong. This means that the music is pleasantly elusive, making ordinary progressions sound odd because they arrive at the 'wrong' time. Beethoven preserves this unusual form underneath a wide range of embellishments, until the

coda, when Beethoven the great improviser allows his imagination to fly wherever it will.

When **Prokofiev** presented his new Eighth Sonata for review by the Composers' Union in 1944, he was no longer a serious performing pianist, and could only give a general picture of this, the most demanding of his sonatas. First reactions were mixed, but Prokofiev now had the able young champions Emil Gilels and Svyatoslav Richter, who soon brought the sonata before the public in its full glory. This complex and sometimes puzzling work won Prokofiev a prestigious and lucrative Stalin Prize, but this was entirely thanks to Prokofiev's official standing, since the sonata does absolutely nothing to fulfil Socialist Realist principles.

The unusual lyrical character of the first movement stems from the composer's personal life. Prokofiev mentions that the opening theme occurred to him as he took a walk with Mira Mendelson, who was later to become his second wife. Mira's presence seems to continue through Prokofiev's use of earlier themes associated with literary heroines: Lisa's theme from his film score for *The Queen of Spades*, and Tatiana's themes from his incidental music for a staged version *Eugene Onegin*. Neither of these scores had been heard by the public, so the references were private.

Even these fascinating insights into the composer's mind help us little in grasping the Sonata's overall narrative trajectory. In the first movement, the 'Mira' lyrical sections give way to anxious and intense fast music that harks back to Prokofiev's earlier operatic depiction of demonic possession, but in the context of the War, this could be heard as a more concrete representation of evil, in the shape of a ruthless invading army. The climax of the movement, marked by bell-like sonorities, seems to depict a great catastrophe, but the tension is allowed to dissipate. The introverted lyricism and the anxious passagework continue to alternate, as if unaware of each other, and there is no final resolution.

The second movement is full of grace and warmth, and draws from Prokofiev's *Onegin* score, originally intended for a scene in which Tatyana charms Onegin. This is one of Prokofiev's slow waltzes that take the place of the classical minuet in the sonata structure. In the finale, another waltz/minuet appears in the middle section, but this time, it revolves claustrophobically around the same repeated patterns, growing ever more sinister, as in Ravel's *La Valse* or, indeed, the 'invasion episode' of Shostakovich's recent Seventh Symphony. The finale's outer sections have much in common with Prokofiev's youthful toccata-like pieces, but the virtuosic bustle builds up momentum and depth towards the end, closing the monumental work with breath-taking energy and sweep.

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