

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 29 October 2025
7.30pm

Tim Horton piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 45 (1841)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

English Suite No. 2 in A minor BWV807 (c.1720)

*I. Prelude • II. Allemande • III. Courante •
IV. Sarabande • V. Bourrée I and II • VI. Gigue*

Fryderyk Chopin

Waltz in A minor Op. 34 No. 2 (c.1834-8)

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin

Fantasy in F minor Op. 49 (1841)

Polonaise in C sharp minor Op. 26 No. 1 (1835)

Polonaise in E flat minor Op. 26 No. 2

Mazurka in B Op. 63 No. 1 (1846)

Mazurka in F minor Op. 63 No. 2

Mazurka in C sharp minor Op. 63 No. 3

Polonaise-fantaisie in A flat Op. 61 (1845-6)



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In the matter of musical form early 19th-century composers often looked back across the so-called 'classical style' to Baroque precedents. They favoured, in short, a unitary conception of form – a single impulse of departure and return – over the dialectic of tonal contrast and synthesis characteristic of classical thought. In this respect, **Chopin's** Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 45 is typical, and it is relatable to a rather specific genre of modulating prelude with antecedents in Bach. Certainly, this prelude has little or no connection with Chopin's better-known 24 Preludes, Op. 28, though it does confirm some of the title's connotations with improvisation through the harmonic 'wandering' of its single motive and its closing cadenza. Composed in 1841, Op. 45 was one of the fruits of Chopin's second summer at George Sand's manor house in Berry, and it was originally designed for inclusion in an album (*Keepsake des pianists*) to be published by Schlesinger. This haunting, evocative piece remains somewhat singular in Chopin's output, and is certainly unrelated to the pianism of his contemporaries.

The precise dates of **Bach's** six so-called 'English' Suites have not been determined, but these works certainly pre-dated the French Suites, and were probably composed in the second decade of the 18th Century, either during the composer's last years in Weimar or his early years in Cöthen. Despite the title they represent a kind of synthesis of French, German and Italian styles, with the second in A minor presenting an extended opening *Prelude*, somewhat in the manner of a two-part Invention. The contrapuntal working of this *Prelude* then continues through into both the elegant, measured *Allemande* and the lively *Courante*, before yielding to a mainly chordal *Sarabande*. This latter is deeply expressive in *Affekt*, and it was presented by Bach in two separate versions, one plain and one ornamented. A pair of *Bourées* follows, with the second in the tonic major, its double notes set in relief against the prevailing counterpoint. Its rustic character is echoed in the final *Gigue*.

Not a single waltz by **Chopin** was styled by the composer himself as 'grand', 'brilliant' or 'melancholic'. Such descriptions were entirely the province of publishers, and they were often blatantly mis-applied. The first and third of the Op. 34 waltzes, published in 1838, are indeed both 'grand' and brilliant'. But the second, the one performed this evening, is very different in character, and hardly deserves Maurice Schlesinger's label *Grande Valse brillante*. Its deeply expressive lyricism leans rather towards some of the slower (*kujawiak*) mazurkas, with which it has clear generic links.

With the Fantasy, Op. 49, composed in 1841, Chopin created one of the undisputed masterpieces of 19th-century pianism. Commentators have often identified a 'late style' in his music from the early 1840s onwards, a time when his composing was undertaken mainly during summers spent in Berry. Op. 49 inaugurated this phase. It belongs to a rather specific genre of Fantasy (cultivated

inter alia by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert), which might be thought of as a kind of composed-out improvisation, typically opening with a slow introduction and often incorporating a 'slow movement'. In both respects the Chopin Fantasy conforms, with the introduction comprising slow marches in F minor and F major respectively, and the 'slow movement' in B major in the manner of a chorale. For the rest, the formal outline is somewhat *sui generis*, though it unfolds against the background of a sonata-form archetype.

Chopin's polonaises were composed in two distinct phases. The early ones, composed while a teenager in Warsaw, were not submitted for publication by the composer himself, and they can be related to the 'brilliant style' of composers such as Hummel, Weber and Field. When he returned to the polonaise as an exile in Paris, Chopin studiously rejected these cosmopolitan associations to create a quite new genre, a powerful symbol of cultural nationalism. The 2 Polonaises, Op. 26, composed c.1835, inaugurated this later phase, with the first in particular characterised by a 'massive', orchestral-sounding sonority and by rhetorical gestures in which individual moments are invested with conspicuous power and energy, standing out in sharp relief against less differentiated backgrounds. In contrast, the mazurkas represent a continuity throughout Chopin's creative life. Indeed, following the complex dance poems of his Op. 50 and Op. 56 sets, the Op. 63 mazurkas of 1846, the last to be published during Chopin's lifetime, represented something of a simplification of style, a glance back to some of the mazurkas composed during the composer's student years in Warsaw.

There is a narrative about Chopin's polonaises that describes an ever-increasing complexity through the series. This culminates in the great *Polonaise-fantaisie*, Op. 61, his final extended work for solo piano (that Op. 61 is invariably included in editions of the polonaises strengthens this narrative). It is, however, a narrative in need of revision. Chopin remarked in his correspondence not just that he had great difficulties with the composition of Op. 61, but that he could not decide on its title. Because he wrestled with the work for 18 months, there is more sketch material than is usual for Chopin. And if we examine this material, we learn that he was really composing a Fantasy, similar in conception and even in tonal organisation to the other Fantasy performed this evening, and that he added the polonaise rhythm – the semiquaver bounce – to the principal melody as an afterthought; note that it does not return in later sections. The sketches also help us understand how the formal complexity of this great work took shape, as Chopin 'stretched' the initial ternary design by inserting nocturne-like paragraphs, and by bringing back the slow introduction just before a transcendent reprise, where the polonaise theme and the 'slow movement' theme are drawn together in a gesture of apotheosis.

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