

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 April 2024
7.30pm

Alexander Gadjevi piano

César Franck (1822-1890)

Prélude, fugue et variation Op. 18 (1860-2) *arranged by Harold Bauer*

I. Prélude. Andantino • II. Lento • III. Fugue. Allegretto ma non troppo • IV. Variation. Andantino

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in F Op. 15 No. 1 (1830-2)

Nocturne in F sharp Op. 15 No. 2 (1830-2)

Scherzo No. 3 in C sharp minor Op. 39 (1839)

Interval

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 9 in F Op. 68 'Black Mass' (1912-3)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

15 Variations and a Fugue on an Original Theme in E flat 'Eroica Variations' Op. 35 (1802)

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Franck's over-ambitious father effectively named his first-born son Caesar-Augustus – a pair of names which greatly amused the music critics – and did his best to turn him into a child prodigy pianist and composer, on the model of Liszt. César-Auguste did well as a pianist at the Conservatoire. At his final exam in 1838, after playing a Hummel concerto flawlessly, he gratuitously transposed the difficult sight-reading test down a minor third, which so confused the examiners that they decided to award two first prizes, because Franck was so much better than anyone else had been, and it seemed a pity to leave the others out all together.

At the age of 21, the exhausted young man retired into obscurity until his father forbade him to see his new lady-love, whereupon César pruned his name, moved in with her and proceeded to turn himself into a great organist. During the 1860s, Franck began to attract private composition pupils of the calibre of Henri Duparc and Vincent d'Indy. They became the nucleus of an admiring group – the Franckists – who called him Père Franck. His 6 *Pièces*, the most important organ works since Mendelssohn, were published in 1868. The *Prélude, fugue et variation* forms the third piece. The *Prélude* is one of Franck's most attractive melodies, tempering the grace of waltz time with 5-bar phrases and hemiolas (where the music swings into duple time for a moment). The *Fugue*, marked 'serioso', leads, surprisingly enough, into a variation of itself, which turns out to be a counter-melody to the original tune.

Chopin did not so much play the piano – rather, he was the piano. A degree of self-identification with the instrument is indicated by his remark about the relative merits of Pleyels and Erards. Liszt preferred the latter, with their foolproof double-escapement action. Chopin explained that an Erard came with its sound all ready-made, but at a Pleyel, he had to make his own sound, which he preferred, if his health was good enough to allow the effort. As his friend George Sand remarked, 'he made a single instrument speak a language of infinity'. 'Chopin is the greatest of them all', said Debussy, 'for through the piano alone he discovered everything'.

The eighteen nocturnes Chopin published during his lifetime span the whole of his composing career, from 1830 (around when tonight's *Nocturnes* were composed) to 1846. A nocturne is a right-hand melody with a left-hand accompaniment, a device hit on by the Irish composer John Field to demonstrate the beauties of the pianos he was selling. Surprisingly few piano pieces used this texture until the early 19th

Century – 18th-century melodies were always breaking off to be developed. The C sharp minor *Scherzo* was composed in 1839. Chopin played it in one of his rare concerts, in the Salle Pleyel on 26 April 1841. He had hoped that the concert would prove impossible to promote, but three quarters of the tickets were sold before it was even announced.

Skryabin's life, like Wagner's, was dedicated to the realisation of some mighty opus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner managed it: Skryabin only got as far as purchasing the land for his equivalent of Bayreuth, a plot in Darjeeling (India being the home of mysticism in Skryabin's mind) for the production of his *Mysterium*. It came to nothing after the composer's death from sepsis. As a youngster, Skryabin used to take Chopin to bed with him. He began composing by transforming familiar Chopin genres – mazurkas, nocturnes, études and preludes – but sonatas took over, the First appearing in 1892, the Tenth (and last) in 1913. The last five have just a single movement. Skryabin said of his Ninth Sonata: 'This is almost not music, not melody, but... an incantation in sound.' Its nickname was not Skryabin's invention, but once someone else had called it that, he saw how useful a nickname can be. 'In the Ninth Sonata I have touched most profoundly the satanic,' he remarked. 'It is genuine evil... the Satanic Poem (written 10 years before) is but a foreshadowing of the Ninth. There, Satan is a guest, but here he is at home.'

The piece in which **Beethoven** achieved compositional maturity was a set of variations – the 'Righini' Variations – and the genre continued to suit his particular way of thinking throughout his life. He took the ideas for tonight's E flat variations from the finale of his heroic ballet *Prometheus*, composed in 1800-1. The ideas also appeared in an orchestral dance before their apotheosis as the finale of the 'Eroica' Symphony in 1803. The variations deal with the fundamentals of music. They begin with a loud E flat chord to announce the key, and proceed to lay out a bass line, the first part of which makes sense on its own Baroque-y terms, but which then becomes enigmatic, to say the least. Clearly, something else must happen to fill in the bass's silences, and Beethoven offers solutions – successively in two, three and four parts – before taking pity on us with a tune. Fifteen variations later, he deconstructs the bass once more, into a fugue subject this time, before the tune returns to bow its farewell.

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