

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 2 January 2025
7.30pm

Danny Driver piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 1 (1835)
Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Musica ricercata (1951-3)
No. 1 • No. 2 • No. 3 • No. 4 • No. 5 • No. 6 • No. 7 •
No. 8 • No. 9 • No. 10 • No. 11

Interval

Thomas Simaku (b.1958)

Catena IV (2024) *world première*

Fryderyk Chopin

Ballade No. 1 in G minor Op. 23 (c.1831-5)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Barcarolle No. 4 in A flat Op. 44 (1886)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47 (1841)



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When John Field published his first three piano nocturnes in 1814, the genre title was already familiar, associated especially with a species of vocal-instrumental serenade. Likewise, the 'nocturne style' of pianism was by no means a novelty. However, it was really only in **Chopin's** 3 Nocturnes Op. 9, published in 1832, that genre title and style came together. Op. 9 established an archetype we all recognise, where vocal imitation is defining, facilitated technically by the development of the sustaining pedal, which made possible a widespread arpeggiated accompaniment. From Op. 27 onwards, Chopin published his nocturnes in contrasted pairs rather than in groups of three. The two of Op. 27, composed in 1835, are perfectly complementary, the darkly brooding C sharp minor of the first transformed enharmonically into the consolatory D flat major of the second. In formal organisation the two nocturnes also work differently. The first encloses within its outer flanks a faster, more dramatic middle section, while the second alternates a through-composed aria, with ever more elaborate ornamentation, and a stanzaic developmental theme that builds towards major tension points in a dynamic and evolutionary fashion.

Ligeti composed his *Musica ricercata* in 1953, a few years before fleeing Hungary in 1956. In the separate countries of what was once called 'Eastern Europe', politicians and composers alike had to engage (often polemically) with the legacy of those giant figures from early 20th-century music, Bartók, Enescu, Szymanowski and Slavenki. For Ligeti, it was deemed to be of 'existential importance' (his words) that Hungarian composers should not be crushed by the heritage of Bartók and Kodály, but should remain open to the 'New Music' stemming from Darmstadt. In transitioning from the mantle of Bartók to a post-war avant-garde, he confessed the need to forget everything and 'experiment with a single note'. This is precisely what he did in the first of the eleven movements of his *Musica ricercata*, though he added a second note at the very end. The conceit of the work is that each movement allows for a progressively larger repertory of pitch classes (thus, three in the second movement, four in the third movement, and so on). It is not hard to detect the lingering shadow of Bartók in some of these movements, but in others, and especially in the ones written with very few pitch classes, Ligeti's voice is both innovatory and inimitable.

Born in Albania, but granted British citizenship in 2000, **Thomas Simaku** is one of the most distinctive voices in British music today. *Cantena IV*, given its world première in this concert, is the fourth work of his *Cantena Cycle* for solo piano. The composer has stressed that, despite its nine self-contained sections and four interludes, it was conceived as a single movement, a linked chain of events rather than an episodic form. Our programming here is strategic, given that its fourth section is a 'Homage à Chopin' (built on the exact notes of the opening of the First Ballade) and its fifth section a 'Homage à Ligeti' (a re-working of Ligeti's signature lamento motif). Fittingly,

the eighth section is titled 'Ligeti meets Chopin'. Here the Chopin quotation is overlaid by different manifestations of the lamento motif, and at registral extremes.

When he composed his First Ballade, Op. 23 in the mid 1830s, Chopin effectively created a new genre, a musical response to the early-Romantic literary revival of medieval and folk ballads. The four ballades are the closest Chopin ever came to a direct musical response to literature, though it was a generalised response, and any attempt to relate the ballades to specific poems can only ever be speculative. In the case of the First Ballade, there is a calculated ambiguity in the form between a goal-directed sonata-based narrative, allied to an accelerating intensity curve, and the more closed formal symmetry of an arch design, where the order of themes is reversed in the reprise and the peak of the arch is marked by a distinctive waltz-like episode. At the heart of the work, then, lies a counterpoint of shape and pattern, of process and form. As in the other ballades, the sonata-form archetype is transformed in such a way that the resolution of tonal tension is delayed until the latest possible stage to create an apotheosis, a moment of catharsis.

One of Chopin's last and greatest works for solo piano was his Barcarolle, Op. 60. However, as a generic fragment, the barcarolle also invaded his other compositions, including episodes in his ballades and (most obviously) the second of his Op. 37 nocturnes. This was part of Chopin's legacy to **Gabriel Fauré**, who greatly favoured the barcarolle genre, perhaps because its lilting, unchanging accompaniment pattern mapped so perfectly onto his compositional style. The A flat major Barcarolle, Op. 44, composed in 1886, is a case in point. In this work, it is the fluid, non-accentual rhythmic profile and evenly flowing accompaniment figuration that so subtly conceals the boldness and originality of the harmony. We scarcely notice how those imperceptibly changing enharmonic progressions serve to loosen familiar syntactical connections between chords, undermining the tonic-dominant polarity of classical tonality.

Composed and published in 1841, Chopin's Third Ballade, Op. 47 owes a great deal to Op. 23, in particular its tonal structure, which is unorthodox and third-related, and its formal symmetry, which is again emphasised by a mirror reprise, and by a waltz-like central episode, lighter in tone than surrounding material. Despite these similarities, however, the Third Ballade establishes its own profile, not least through the character of its themes: a song-like, almost Schubertian, opening theme, and a contrasted second theme in a 'lumpy' iambic rhythm. Strikingly, in an unusually placed development section, Chopin draws both these themes together, welding them into a 'new' composite theme. And in a further echo of Op. 23, the ensuing reprise is more apotheosis than synthesis.

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