

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 30 April 2024
7.30pm

Alexander Gavrylyuk piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Rondo in D K485 (1786)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 2 in F Op. 38 (1836-9)

Nocturne in C minor Op. 48 No. 1 (1841)

Fantaisie-impromptu in C sharp minor Op. 66 (c.1834)

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor Op. 20 (c.1833)

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

2 Arabesques (c.1890)

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 36
(second version) (1913, rev. 1931)

*I. Allegro agitato • II. Non allegro - Lento •
III. Allegro molto*

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Mozart's D major *Rondo* fascinatingly amalgamates the recurrence of the rondo theme with the 'monothematic' sonata form we associate with Haydn. Here, the rondo theme becomes a 'second subject', as it were, whenever the left hand plays it; and the way the theme, in any number of keys, pervades the whole piece takes us far away from the standard ABACADA pattern of the form's infancy. Mozart erased the initial dedication to a young lady, and failed to enter the piece in his personal catalogue, so there may be some delicate secret about the work.

Chopin, like Mozart, was famous for his 'rubato' playing: a way of pulling the time around for greater expression. The subtle part of the rubato trick, according to both Chopin and Mozart, is that the accompaniment in the left hand should carry on at the proper pace, while the right hand scurries forward or hangs back, miraculously getting back with the left hand for important moments: a bit like taking a puppy for a walk. Tonight's *Nocturne* shows Chopin experimenting with ways of writing such things down, adding the word *stretto* to the end of the tune, and putting the notes a semiquaver late to indicate their technical 'dislocation'. He ceased to use the word rubato after spending a day with Mendelssohn in 1835. As Liszt explained, 'the term taught nothing to those who did not know, understand, and feel'. Chopin himself put it more bluntly: 'there are perhaps only four people who would understand – the rest would play it just as badly as now'.

Chopin's four *Ballades* explore a new way of composing; no longer the sonata forms arrived at by Haydn and Mozart, which, however wonderfully disguised by the composer's fancy, exemplify a rigorous harmonic logic; but rather an allusive logic of melody and tempo, hard to capture in notation, and therefore rare in performance. At every turn of the music, what happens next can sound mysteriously inevitable, or like just one thing after another, according to the insight of the performer. All four of Chopin's *Ballades* use a lilting *tum-ti tum-ti tum* rhythm which gives them a strangely narrative quality, though they remain pieces of music, not an accompaniment for some unrealised political agenda - or even a poem, despite the title. The second *Ballade*, written between 1836 and 1839, is a strange mixture, a real Jekyll and Hyde of a piece. It begins with a simple tune, and then it tears off its sheep's clothing.

The *Fantaisie-impromptu*, despite its clear ternary form, is in fact as unique as its title – Brahms was impressed enough to re-work the idea in his B minor *Rhapsody*. Chopin's B minor *Scherzo* reaches its climax with a most unusual *fff* marking, with ten-note chords (though the two thumbs play two notes each, so if Chopin could have thought of one more note within range, it could have been louder still).

Debussy was born into a family with no musical traditions, but by the time he was ten, his talent had declared itself clearly enough to gain him admittance to the Paris Conservatoire. Here he proved himself a natural, but indolent, pianist. One of his first jobs was domestic pianist to Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's wealthy patron. The luxurious lifestyle suited Debussy, and he embarked on a life of hedonistic free love which lost him many of his more respectable friends over the years. His music demonstrated a kindred love of untrammelled beauty, especially of ravishing chords, employed in defiance of the rules. Despite the disapproval of his composition teachers, at the age of 22 he won the Prix de Rome, perhaps because his brief period of subjugation to the style of Wagner gave his artistic licence a touch of authority: though Debussy was later to remark, with unparalleled insight for 1903, that Wagner was 'a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn'. Apart from occasional morale-boosting visits from Liszt, he did not enjoy his sojourn in Rome, which he frequently interrupted for visits to his lover (and her husband) in Paris.

Debussy's Bohemianism began to express itself in his music in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894). His earlier music paves the way to this break-through by taking more from Chabrier than from Chopin, except perhaps as to pedal technique – Debussy's own use of the pedal was much admired, and a friend remarked that to hear him play was to have a wonderful harmony lesson. The 2 *Arabesques* date from about 1890. The title, which refers to Islamic linear decoration, suggests that Debussy, like many contemporary French poets, was intrigued by Algerian culture, much as similar contemporary English artists were captivated by the idea of India.

Rachmaninov came from a rich, aristocratic family with no fewer than five estates, but his father, whom the composer described as a wastrel and a gambler, reduced them to a small flat in Saint Petersburg by the time the boy was ten. Rachmaninov's first years at the conservatoire were uncontroversial – everyone simply agreed that he was lazy. That all changed when he moved in with a new piano teacher, Nikolai Zverev, who also taught Skryabin. The first version of the Second Sonata was composed in 1913, three years after his triumphant tour of America with his Third Piano Concerto (which he performed in New York with Mahler conducting) – a tour so successful he was able to fulfil his ambition of buying a motor-car. In 1931 he revised the Sonata, cutting out some 20% of it; in 1940, he assented to Vladimir Horowitz's request to put some of it back.

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