WIGMORE HALL

Monday 30 January 2023
7.30pm

Severin von Eckardstein piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Andante lagrimoso S173 No. 9 (1848-53) St François de Paule: marchant sur les flots S175 (1863)
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)	Tod und Verklärung Op. 24 (1888-9) *transcribed by Severin von Eckardstein* *Largo - Allegro molto agitato - Meno mosso - Moderato*
	Interval
Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951)	4 Lyrical Fragments Op. 23 (1896-1911) *Allegro commodamente • Andantino gracile • Tempo di Valse • Andantino tenebroso*
Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)	Piano Sonata No. 3 in C Op. 25 (1931) *I. Allegro molto e deciso • II. Andante religioso • III. Tempo di menuetto molto comodo • IV. Rondo. Allegro giocoso*

So much of what we now take to be normal when attending an evening of solo piano music goes back to the example of **Liszt**. The presence of a virtuoso on stage, the tradition of playing by memory, a mixed programme of works by various composers, even the name 'recital' itself – we owe all of this to Liszt. It was in the late 1830s that he began to experiment with these practices, and it was in London, on 9 June 1840, that he gave his first official 'recital.' Previously, the word had referred to a public reading of poetry. Now, Liszt performed solo piano works as if they were literary texts, telling stories through music and captivating audiences with his magnetic personality. As he wrote to a friend: 'Le concert – c'est moi.'

The *Andante lagrimoso* is the ninth of Liszt's *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, a sequence of ten pieces compiled between 1834 and 1853. Inspired by the poetry of Alphonse de Lamartine, each movement has some form of programme or extra-musical association. *Andante lagrimoso* is prefaced by the opening two stanzas of Lamartine's *Consolation* and evokes the falling of the poet's lonely tears. If this piece represents the worldly side of Liszt's personality, then *St François de Paule marchant sur les flots* reflects his profound, if eccentric spirituality (he was ordained a minor friar in 1865). The second of his *2 Legends* S175 (the first relates the story of St Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds), it was composed in Rome in 1863. That year, Liszt even played it for Pius IX and other Vatican luminaries; the pope repaid the compliment by singing a Bellini aria. The piece conjures up images of the saint miraculously crossing the turbulent Strait of Messina on foot, a story that also inspired Liszt's contemporary, the German artist Eduard von Steinle.

Liszt was an inveterate arranger of other composers' works, producing piano transcriptions that would dazzle audiences with their extravagant, even diabolical brilliance. His death in 1886 meant that he was never able to hear the early works of the young **Richard Strauss**, let alone arrange them for his own instrument, so Severin von Eckardstein's version of *Tod und Verklärung* brings Liszt's legacy into our own day. In many respects, Strauss was Liszt's musical heir, although he wrote very little for solo piano. As a conductor, he programmed many of the older composer's symphonic poems in his orchestral concerts, and in his own works, he developed Liszt's practice of imbuing music with literary or philosophical programmes.

Tod und Verklärung dates from 1888-9 and was one of the works that brought Strauss to the attention of audiences in Germany and around Europe. Strauss asked his friend, the violinist Alexander Ritter, to pen an explanatory poem to be included in the score. It relates the story of an artist, who, on his deathbed, reviews the events of his life and contemplates the transfiguration that awaits him and his art.

Liszt and Strauss had been regarded as musical progressives in the 19th Century, pitched against the more conservative classicism of a figure such as Brahms. By the early 20th Century, however, their hypertrophied Romanticism began to be challenged by the emergence of modernism and the avant-garde. The era itself had changed. Art was no longer the realm of the lonely, inspired creative genius. Mass culture, urban life, the crowd and the machine defined the new world and its values.

Yet Romanticism certainly did not die. Composers continued to write in a musical language that may have sounded increasingly old-fashioned, and audiences were still drawn to the familiar values of the past than the innovations of the present. A younger contemporary of Rachmaninov and Skryabin, **Medtner** was born into a Baltic German family in Moscow. He left Soviet Russia in 1921, settling first in Germany and then in North London, where he died in 1951. The *4 Lyrical Fragments* date from between 1896 and 1911 and amply demonstrate why Rachmaninov thought Medtner one of the greatest composers of all time. Closer to the wistful interiority of Chopin than the self-dramatization of Liszt or Strauss (especially in the third of them, a graceful *Tempo di Valse*), they give voice to a strain of songful melancholy. Only at the end of the concluding *Andantino tenebroso* do more passionate emotions surface.

Like Medtner, **Korngold** fled his homeland, although his career in Hollywood was rather more successful than Medtner's was in interwar Europe (audiences at Wigmore Hall have always been appreciative of his self-effacing muse, of course). Before he left his native Austria in 1934, Korngold had matured from a brilliant *Wunderkind* into a leading opera composer. He wrote his first piano sonata in 1908 at the age of just 11, and Strauss praised extravagantly, saying 'this assurance of style, this mastery of form, this characteristic expressiveness, this bold harmony, are truly astonishing!' A second sonata followed in 1910, but he would not return to the form until 1931.

The Piano Sonata No. 3 gives little indication of the turmoil of the age. Appropriately enough for a composer who first made his name in Vienna, there are echoes of the music of Schubert. The sonata's home key of C major seems bright and confident, and there are moments when it feels as though Korngold had been leafing through some of the neo-classical scores of the interwar years (although there is no hint of the knotty dissonance of Berg, Schoenberg or Webern). Throughout, Korngold's gift for expressive melody is on full, ardent display – it is easy to hear how readily he adapted to writing for the movies. Whatever its status in the concert hall, Romanticism would find a happy home on the Silver Screen.