

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 30 June 2024  
7.30pm

Alexei Volodin piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Klavierstück in E flat D946 No. 2 (1828)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 24 in F sharp Op. 78 (1809)  
*I. Adagio cantabile - Allegro ma non troppo •  
II. Allegro vivace*

Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951)

Sonata-Ballade Op. 27 (1912-4)  
*I. Allegretto • II. Introduzione e Finale. Mesto -  
Allegro*

*Interval*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

12 Etudes Op. 25 (1835-7)  
*Etude in A flat • Etude in F minor • Etude in F •  
Etude in A minor • Etude in E minor • Etude in G  
sharp minor • Etude in C sharp minor • Etude in  
D flat • Etude in G flat • Etude in B minor • Etude  
in A minor • Etude in C minor*

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The 3 *Klavierstücke* D946 are among **Franz Schubert's** last compositions for the piano. Composed in May 1828, just six months before the composer's death, it has been speculated that they were conceived as an incomplete third set of four impromptus, to follow the two sets from 1827 (D899 and D935). However, they were only published in 1868, edited by Johannes Brahms, who may well have been mistaken in uniting them. The second piece, in E flat major, is the most well-known of the three. It opens with a lyrical theme that reappears twice, interspersed with two trio-like episodes. The first begins in C minor, alternating between stormy darkness and moments of greater tranquillity in the parallel major. The second, in the remote key of A flat minor, brings with it a change in metre and a longing, despairing melody that sings out over an agitated accompaniment. Calmness is again restored with the return of the opening material to create a touching end.

**Ludwig van Beethoven's** Piano Sonata No. 24 Op. 78 is the only piece he composed in the unusual key of F sharp major. Written in 1809, it was dedicated to his student Countess Therese von Brunsvik, once believed to be the possible intended recipient of the 'Immortal Beloved' letter (although it is now thought much more likely it was her sister Josephine). Today, this work is often overshadowed by the larger sonatas that surround it – the 'Appassionata' Op. 57 and 'Les Adieux' Op. 81a – but, according to his student Carl Czerny, Beethoven thought very highly of the F sharp major sonata.

It opens with an extraordinary four bars, marked *Adagio cantabile*, for which, as Charles Rosen notes, 'there are no models or precedents'. Beethoven then introduces his main theme, an expressive, lyrical melody that is then expanded upon and decorated in subsequent phrases using innovative motivic transformation techniques, foreshadowing his late style. In the development, he takes us into a darker realm, passing through keys such as G sharp minor, D sharp minor and C sharp minor, before the main thematic material returns (with a twist). The brief second movement, a rondo, proclaims its eccentricity from the very first chord: an augmented sixth, around which the entire movement is structured. The angular, humorous theme quotes 'Rule, Britannia', on which Beethoven had written a set of variations in 1803.

There are many riches to discover in the magnificent oeuvre of the Russian composer **Nicolas Medtner**, not least fourteen piano sonatas that span his entire career. Medtner's *Sonata-Ballade* Op. 27 was originally published in 1913 as a single movement, with an *Introduzione e Finale* added for a new edition the following year (without any break between the movements). According to Medtner's students, this sonata was based on a poem by Afanasy Fet, *When Christ ran from idle human talk*, and religious themes permeate the entire work. The first movement opens with an evocation of the joys of springtime, before introducing a second theme that

represents an allegorical struggle between Light and Darkness; just as it seems Light has won, however, a turbulent coda brings the movement to a bleak conclusion. In the following movements, Medtner inscribes quotations from Fet's poem in the score, explicitly illustrating how the 'Satanic' theme of the *Introduzione* is then gradually rebuffed by another theme of great beauty, first in fragments, before appearing in full in the *Finale*. This theme, representing Christ's response to Satan in the wilderness, seems to have been of special significance for Medtner, as he reused it in several other works, including his setting of Pushkin's poem *The Muse*. Despite battling with the 'Satanic' theme once more in a severe fugue, the 'Muse theme' and Light and Faith prevail in the end, now juxtaposed with the 'springtime' theme from the first movement and recast as a joyous peal of bells.

Tonight's recital concludes with one of the landmarks of 19th Century piano literature: the Op. 25 *Etudes* by **Fryderyk Chopin**. The étude became a hugely popular genre in the early 19th Century, designed to address particular aspects of piano technique for aspiring virtuosos. Chopin, however, lifted this genre to new heights: far from being utilitarian 'studies', his études not only explore different technical challenges but are also highly original and beautifully formed pieces of concert music in their own right (indeed, Liszt revised his own concert études after encountering them).

Like his earlier Op. 10 collection of *Etudes*, Chopin's Op. 25 was composed over several years. When it appeared in print in 1837 (dedicated to Liszt's mistress, Marie d'Agoult), this second collection revealed itself to be even more sophisticated than the first. Among its highlights are the magical No. 1 in A flat ('Aeolian Harp'), in which a beautiful melody must be shaped and projected against a background of rippling arpeggios; No. 2 in F minor, featuring difficult polyrhythms; No. 5 in E minor, where a simple motif is transformed into music of amazing structural and harmonic complexity; and No. 6 in G sharp minor, with its treacherous double third trills.

The final four études are some of Chopin's most well-known pieces, including the 'Butterfly' *Etude* (No. 9 in G flat), requiring light, delicate octave playing and staccato leaps; No. 10 in B minor, almost entirely in octaves; No. 11 in A minor, the famously difficult 'Winter Wind' *Etude* that not only demands bravura finger and arm technique but enormous stamina; and, lastly, the so-called 'Ocean' *Etude* (No. 12 in C minor). In its synthesis of sweeping arpeggios with extraordinary counterpoint, it recalls the music of JS Bach, but also the very first étude of Op. 10. The achievement of performing this towering set of masterpieces may belong to the pianist, but the compositional feat is uniquely Chopin's.

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