WIGMORE HALL

Olli Mustonen piano

Monday 31 October 2022
7.30pm

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 4 in C minor Op. 29 (1917)
I. Allegro molto sostenuto • II. Andante assai • III. Allegro con brio, ma non leggiere

Piano Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 14 (1912)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro marcato • III. Andante • IV. Vivace

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 9 in C Op. 103 (1947)
I. Allegretto • II. Allegro strepitoso • III. Andante tranquillo • IV. Allegro con brio, ma non troppo presto

Piano Sonata No. 6 in A Op. 82 (1939-40)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Allegretto • III. Tempo di valzer lentissimo • IV. Vivace

Tuesday 1 November 2022
7.30pm

Sergey Prokofiev

Piano Sonata No. 5 in C Op. 38 (1923)
I. Allegro tranquillo • II. Andantino • III. Un poco allegretto

Piano Sonata No. 8 in B flat Op. 84 (1939-44)
I. Andante dolce • II. Andante sognando • III. Vivace

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 1 (1909)
Allegro

Piano Sonata No. 3 in A minor Op. 28 (1917)
Allegro tempestoso

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1939-42)
I. Allegro inquieto • II. Andante caloroso • III. Precipitato

CLASSIC fM Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.
In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.
Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.
Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.

Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • Wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

Department for Culture Media & Sport | LOTTERY FUNDED | Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND | Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Along with Skryabin, Rachmaninov, Medtner and Shostakovich, **Prokofiev** is one of the brightest members of the constellation of composer-pianists to have emerged in Russia around the turn of the 20th Century. As was so often the case in Russia, Prokofiev took his first lessons from his mother, with whom he studied the classics – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin – and developed a rudimentary, if still imperfect, technique. Lessons with Anna Yesipova at the St Petersburg Conservatory provided more discipline, yet even she characterised her ambitious pupil as 'talented, but rather crude'. Later on, Heinrich Neuhaus would offer a more judicious assessment, discerning in Prokofiev's playing 'energy, confidence, indomitable will, steel rhythm, powerful tone (sometimes even hard to bear in a small room), a peculiar "epic quality" that scrupulously avoided any suggestion of over-refinement or intimacy, yet with a remarkable ability to convey true lyricism, poetry, sadness, reflection, an extraordinary human warmth, and feeling for nature.'
These characteristics can be heard in Prokofiev's music too, which Prokofiev himself divided into five interrelated 'lines':

1. The classical line, which could be traced back to my early childhood and the Beethoven sonatas I heard my mother play.
2. The second line, the modern trend, which took the form of a search for my own harmonic language.
3. The third line is toccata or the 'motor' line, traceable perhaps to Schumann's *Toccata*, which made such a powerful impression on me when I first heard it.
4. The fourth line is lyrical.
5. I should like to limit myself to these four 'lines', and to regard the fifth, 'grotesque' line which some wish to ascribe to me, as simply a deviation from the other lines.

As a student Prokofiev enjoyed a reputation as a provocateur and made regular appearances at the Evenings of Contemporary Music in the Russian capital, where he gave the Russian première of Schoenberg's *3 Pieces* Op. 11 in 1911 (the first time Schoenberg's music had been heard in Russia, in fact). Later on, when he was living in France, critics often treated him as an artistic 'Bolshevik'. Yet Prokofiev never sought to deform or destroy the sonata as a vehicle for sophisticated musical thinking. With few exceptions, his sonatas conform to the multi-movement structure pioneered by Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, and he found inspiration – rather than limitation – in the possibilities of sonata form, with its tripartite division of exposition, development and recapitulation.

Premièred in Moscow in 1910 by its composer, the **Sonata No. 1** was officially billed as Prokofiev's Op. 1. It was not his first work, of course, still less his first sonata. As a student of Glière and then at the St Petersburg Conservatory, Prokofiev had written plenty of apprentice pieces, including six youthful sonatas. In 1909, he returned to a work he had originally drafted in 1906, discarding its second and third movements entirely, and thoroughly revising the opening sonata-form allegro that was left. Its torrid, tumultuous cascading lines suggest an affinity with the lush, late romanticism of Skryabin, Medtner and Rachmaninov, rather than the *enfant terrible* Prokofiev was to become.

The **Sonata No. 2** gives a greater sense of Prokofiev's individuality and creative confidence. By the time he gave its première in Moscow in February 1914, he had composed both the Piano Concerto No. 1 Op. 10, and the Toccata for piano Op. 11, and the linearity, angularity and drive of both works permeate the new sonata. Some commentators have detected the impact of *Petrushka* too: Stravinsky's ballet had first been staged in Paris in 1911, and was heard in concert in Russia soon thereafter. But the influences on the sonata go beyond the artistic. It is dedicated to the memory of Maximilian Schmidthof, a close friend of Prokofiev's from the St Petersburg Conservatory. Although the sonata was composed the year before Schmidthof's suicide in 1913, the introspection of the third movement, cast in the uncanny key of G-sharp minor, feels like a stoic lament for Prokofiev's lost friend. In daily life, Prokofiev could sometimes come across as cold, distant and even egotistical, but the sonata offers a better record of his inner emotional world.

The **Sonata No. 3** and **Sonata No. 4** form a closely related pair. Both are described as being 'from old notebooks', both were revised in 1917, and both were premièred by the composer within two days of each other in Petrograd in April 1918. The third sonata is the shortest of all the sonatas, and its ideas date back to 1907. Like the first sonata, it comprises a single compact movement whose motifs are elaborated with great economy. Prokofiev was certainly not the first composer to write a single-movement sonata – Liszt, Skryabin and Berg all did so before him – but the third sonata's brisk and unsentimental rhetoric mark it out as a modernist departure from the world of late Romanticism. The fourth sonata recycles material first sketched in 1908 and is the last of the sonatas to be written before Prokofiev left Soviet Russia in 1918. Like the second sonata, it is dedicated to Maximilian Schmidthof, yet Prokofiev's grief was indirect and introverted, rather than extravagant and expressive. Sviatoslav Richter felt that the sonata 'concealed riches that are not immediately obvious to the eye'. Its opening and closing movements are neoclassical in style, as if Prokofiev were still set on exploring the ideas he had first proposed in his 'Classical' Symphony, completed in September 1917. There is greater complexity in the brooding chromaticism the opens the slow movement, yet the lyricism of its second theme – played entirely on the white notes of the keyboard – bespeaks a refusal to yield to morose sentimentality.

By the time that Prokofiev wrote his **Sonata No. 5** in 1923, he had left Soviet Russia, travelled extensively through the United States, and settled in Western Europe. The fifth was the only sonata to be written in

emigration, and is dedicated to a fellow émigré, the writer and philosopher Pyotr Suvchinsky. It is one of Prokofiev's most experimental works and attests to what he referred to as 'the effect of the Parisian atmosphere where complex patterns and dissonances were the accepted thing and which fostered my predilection for complex thinking'. There are echoes of Stravinsky's neo-classical works, and of French modernist composers, particularly 'Les Six' (Prokofiev and Poulenc would become firm friends and loved to play bridge together). Although audiences did not always warm to the sonata's dissonances, Prokofiev was clearly fond of it. He revised the score in 1953, softening its harmonies, regularising its rhythmic angularity, and providing it with a new and triumphant ending. It is the original version that is heard this evening.

Prokofiev began to make periodic trips to the Soviet Union from 1927, returning finally in 1936. He now emerged as a quasi-official composer of operas, ballets and other theatre scores, wrote sonatas and concertos for the country's leading virtuosi and contributed to the development of the monumental Soviet symphony. He also continued to explore the potential of the piano sonata, even if he seldom appeared in public as a performer any more. The three sonatas composed between 1939 and 1944 are sometimes referred to as the 'War Sonatas', although this was not a term that Prokofiev ever employed. He began working on all three sonatas simultaneously as some point in 1939, before concentrating on the **Sonata No. 6**, which he premièred in Moscow in April 1940. At this point, Nazi Germany was not yet at war with the Soviet Union, but Prokofiev would have known of the violence that had been unleashed across Europe. The sonata was later taken up by Sviatoslav Richter, who declared that 'the remarkable stylistic clarity and the structural perfection of the music amazed me. I had never heard anything like it. With wild audacity the composer broke with the ideal of Romanticism and introduced into his music the terrifying pulse of twentieth-century music. Classically well-balanced in spite of all its asperities, the Sixth Sonata is an utterly magnificent work'. It was a view shared by others, notably Shostakovich, who responded to the sonata's epic scale and dynamic sense of contrast. Across its four movements, Prokofiev deployed all five of his stylistic 'lines' to take the listener on a vertiginous adventure in musical storytelling.

The **Sonata No. 7** was premièred by Richter in January 1943 at a time when the course of the war was at a decisive turning point. Fighting still raged for control of the city of Stalingrad. Shortly after, on 2 February, the Germans surrendered. This background has meant that the seventh is sometimes dubbed the 'Stalingrad', in an echo of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, the 'Leningrad'. The mood of the sonata is often harsh and militaristic, and its harmonies can be unsettling and dissonant, yet its overarching narrative is also heroic and resolute, and Prokofiev pays homage to the conventions of the Classical sonata structure, as if celebrating the survival of tradition in the face of unspeakable barbarity. The third and final movement has become something of a showpiece, and when played very fast and very loud, it can sound hollow and bombastic. When performed with due attention to Prokofiev's scrupulous dynamics and with space between its cascading notes, it can embody universal human hopes, as we as stumble, precipitously, towards a painful victory won at great cost.

Whilst the 'war' sonatas certainly emerge from the upheavals of those years, they also reflect aspects of Prokofiev's personal life. At around the time he embarked on the sonatas, he met a young writer and translator, Mira Mendelson, with whom he began an affair. Ten years later, in 1948, they married, whilst his first wife, Lina, was sent to the Gulag (she was released in 1956, by which time Prokofiev was dead). The **Sonata No. 8** is dedicated to Mira, and its mood is far more dreamy and expansive than that of the previous two sonatas. It reuses music Prokofiev had first composed for a number of abortive Pushkin projects from the 1930s – a play based on *Evgeny Onegin*, and a film version of *Queen of Spades*. Mira had helped to draft the libretto for his operatic adaptation of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, so perhaps Prokofiev was thinking about the heroines of these works – Tatyana Larina, Lisa, and Natasha Rostov – as he reflected on his relationship with her. The sonata was premièred by Emil Gilels in Moscow in December 1944 at a time when the defeat of Nazi Germany looked ever more certain. The personal and the political meet on its pages.

The **Sonata No. 9** was written in 1947, yet its première – by its dedicatee, Richter – was delayed until 1951, and it wasn't published until 1955. The reasons are not hard to find. In 1948, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian and other leading composers were viciously attacked for supposed 'formalism', and many of their works were banned. The optimism that heralded the end of the war was replaced by a new wave of tyranny that lasted until Stalin's death on 5 March 1953 – the day that Prokofiev also died. The ninth sonata has remained one of his least performed and most misunderstood works: even Richter confessed to being disappointed when he saw the score. Cast in C major, it is simple, direct, disarming and childlike. Whether this was the result of a natural evolution in Prokofiev's style, or an attempt to write accessible music for Soviet audiences is a matter of debate. It was not, however, quite Prokofiev's last word. The year before his death, he drafted 44 bars of a projected tenth sonata, which even had its own opus number (Op. 137). He had planned to revise the two sonatinas he wrote in Paris in 1931-2 as a new pair of sonatas. Suffering from ill health and persecuted by his political enemies, he found solace by looking back to the past.