

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 3 November 2025
7.30pm

Pierre-Laurent Aimard piano
Sir George Benjamin piano

Nicolas Obouhow (1892-1954)

Révelation (1915)

*The Tolling from Beyond • Death • The Void •
Immortal • The Distress of Satan • Truth*

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016)

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1946)

I. Lent • II. Assez large

George Benjamin (b.1960)

Shadowlines (2001)

*I. Cantabile • II. Wild • III. Scherzando •
IV. Tempestoso • V. Very freely, solemn and spacious •
VI. Gently flowing, flexible*

Interval

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)

*I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane •
IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata*

George Benjamin

DIVISIONS for four hands (2024-5) *UK première*

Commissioned by Boulezsaal, the Library of Congress and Wigmore Hall



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Shadowlines – six canonic preludes for piano (2001)

This sequence of pieces, all canons in different ways, was conceived as a continuous, cumulative structure:

- 1) A brief, seemingly improvisatory prologue.
- 2) The high register, fierce and harshly chromatic, against the lower, which is consonant and calm; a compact coda reconciles these opposites.
- 3) A miniature scherzo, all placed within a compact span in the bass, leading immediately to:
- 4) Explosive and monolithic, the pianist's hands perpetually rifting apart then re-uniting in rhythmical unison.
- 5) The most expansive and lyrical movement; at its heart a slow ground-bass, over which builds a widely contrasted procession of textures. After a short pause:
- 6) A simple and gentle epilogue.

This work was written for Pierre-Laurent Aimard, who gave the world première in London in 2003, and was commissioned by Betty Freeman.

Divisions – for four hands (2024-5)

Playing piano four hands is an activity which I have relished since my youth, and which I continue to enjoy to this day. But it's also a medium which has been neglected over the last century – and therefore, I feel, of potential interest.

Divisions: in terms of partitioning the single keyboard and the varied ways in which the four hands interact, separate, interpenetrate and cross – and also in terms of rhythm and structure, and the simultaneity of opposed strands and figuration.

But the title also implies friction, even potential discord – and there is often a marked contrast in the types of material given to the two players. I must stress, however, there are absolutely no autobiographical implications to this, as Pierre-Laurent Aimard and I have been close friends and collaborators for decades; indeed, all of my keyboard works since the mid-1980s have been conceived for him.

© George Benjamin

Shell-shocked former servicemen returned home to Paris after the Armistice in 1918 to find a city struggling to house refugees from the Bolsheviks, the French colonies in North Africa, Poland and southern Europe. Thousands of Russians travelled to France following the October Revolution, with princes and White Army generals becoming taxi drivers or working in factories. The composer **Nicolas Obouhow**, or Nikolai Obukhov as he was styled in his homeland, had studied at the St Petersburg Conservatory with Maksimilian Steinberg and Nikolay Tcherepnin. He struggled after leaving revolutionary Russia and settling in the outskirts of Paris, where he worked as a bricklayer. Maurice Ravel, from whom Obouhow received lessons in orchestration, helped ease money his worries by introducing him to a publisher and the Parisian network of cultural patrons.

While many employed postwar hedonism to ease wartime traumas, Obouhow toiled over *Kniga Zhizni*, 'The Book of Life', a vast, visionary work for voices, electronic instruments and orchestra, steeped in Christian mysticism. The Russian Orthodox tradition of interior prayer, the shift from mind to heart towards spiritual union with God, runs deep in Obouhow's music as does the mystical spirit of Russian Symbolism. The six *tableaux psychologiques* of *Révélation*, composed in 1915, distil that spirit into music of pristine beauty. Sound and silence overlap in *Le glas d'au de là* ('The tolling from beyond'), before fury erupts and soon subsides in *La mort* ('Death'). *Néant* ('The Void') enters an enigmatic space, marked by what the historian of religion Mircea Eliade called *In illo tempore*, the primordial time when sacred myths were created and the world was formed. *Immortel* ('Immortal') offers a luminous meditation on the soul's afterlife; its profound compassion survives to counter the violence of *Le détresse de Satan* ('The Distress of Satan') and achieve its apotheosis in *Vérité* ('Truth').

In the aftermath of the Second World War, **Pierre Boulez** beguiled audiences at the Folies-Bergères with virtuoso performances on the ondes martenot. His skills were also noticed by the musician and inventor Maurice Martenot, who convened a concert in the winter of 1946 at which Boulez gave the première of his First Piano Sonata. The work evolves from a sequence of simple gestures, a gentle rising figure and its explosive answer clear among them; the contrasts between these ideas serve as the template for polarising tensions that mount as the first movement unfolds. Those contrasts exist on several plains, present in the difference between the slow underlying tactus of the opening movement and the rapid pulse of its successor, the work's sudden shifts from incisive rhythms to passages that sound like the outcome of free association, and the less obvious but no less important juxtaposition of pitches organised around strict serial principles and much looser arrangements of melodic material and expressive affects. Flecks of sound, like those of Webern's aphoristic compositions, shape the second movement's beginning, before Boulez unleashes a welter of motoric, stabbing rhythms. Contrasts of texture and timbre, mood and expression continue until silence marks a decisive interruption that ends with a final 'very brutal and very dry' arpeggiated chord.

Service in the transport corps during World War One interrupted work on *Le tombeau de Couperin*, which **Ravel** completed in 1917 after illness forced his discharge from the army. Each movement is dedicated to a friend killed in action, the classically pure style of the music far removed from the horrors of war. As the composer's friend Hélène Jourdan-Morhange noted in her published conversations with the pianist Vlado Perlemuter, 'Ravel admired Couperin; the idea of being inspired by him was an homage to the French tradition; what's more, Ravel liked to yield to the constraints of a framework.... Didn't he say to his pupils ... "Copy, and if while copying, you remain yourself, that's because you have something to say". Ravel tried to copy Couperin ... and produced Ravel!'

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