

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 4 April 2024  
7.30pm

Piers Lane piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

French Suite No. 2 in C minor BWV813 (c.1722-5)  
*I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande •  
IV. Air • V. Menuet I and II • VI. Gigue*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in F K332 (1781-3)  
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro assai*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Fantasy in F minor Op. 49 (1841)

*Interval*

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Préludes (1928-9)  
*La colombe • Chant d'extase dans un paysage  
triste • Le nombre léger • Instants défunts •  
Les sons impalpables du rêve • Cloches  
d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu • Plainte calme •  
Un reflet dans le vent*

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It was not until a decade after the death of **Bach** that his 'French' suites acquired their epithet – rather a misleading one as, like the 'English' suites, they draw on much more cosmopolitan sources. They are essentially a synthesis of different European styles which Bach subsumed into his own musical language. They were written during his years at Cöthen, perhaps as teaching pieces, and five of the suites, including the C minor, were included in the book of pieces compiled for Anna Magdalena Bach in about 1722. Following his move to Leipzig, Bach revised the suites in about 1725 when Anna Magdalena wrote out a copy of the new versions of the first two suites. Other early copies were made by several of Bach's pupils, and these pieces were among the most frequently performed of Bach's works during his lifetime, though they were not published until long afterwards, in 1802. In common with the others in the set, the C minor *Suite* has no prelude, but starts with a flowing and ornate *Allemande*, followed by a vigorous *Courante*, a *Sarabande*, an *Air*, a pair of *Menuets* (of which only the first appears in some sources) and a robust *Gigue*. All the movements are in C minor, and all reveal Bach's astonishing inventiveness – creating utterly individual music within the strict parameters of these dance forms.

**Mozart's** Piano Sonata in F K332 was one of three published by the Viennese firm of Artaria in August 1784 as his 'Opus 6'. It was once believed that the sonata was composed in the late 1770s, but analysis of the paper Mozart used for his manuscript indicates that he did not write it until c.1783, probably in Vienna, or perhaps during a short visit to Salzburg. There is much to fascinate in this sonata: the first movement opens over what appears to be a conventional 'Alberti' bass, but already in the second bar, Mozart subverts this by introducing unexpected harmonic colouring. The rest of the movement includes an abundance of short thematic ideas (seven in all), with some striking dramatic episodes and abrupt changes from major to minor keys. The slow movement presents two themes which are then repeated with extensive embellishments, all underpinned by rich harmonies. The finale is a brilliant showpiece, marked, like the first, by a profusion of ideas and contrasts between major and minor. At the very end, the musical fireworks are spent, the energy is dissipated, and the sonata ends quietly.

In October 1841, **Chopin** wrote from Nohant to his friend Julian Fontana: 'Today I finished the *Fantasy* – the weather is lovely, but I am sad at heart – not that it matters. If it were otherwise, my existence would perhaps be of no use to anyone.' The work first appeared in print soon afterwards and the freedom of Chopin's design baffled even the most enlightened critics. Robert Schumann wrote that 'In the *Fantasy*

we again meet with the bold, stormy tone-poet which we have often encountered before. It is filled with genial individual ideas, even if the whole is not bound together by a harmonious framework. We can only imagine what figures floated before Chopin when he wrote this, but the images were certainly not cheerful ones.' Half a century later, the work was better understood: Frederick Niecks wrote that 'there is an enthralling weirdness about this work, a weirdness made up of force of passion and an indescribable fantastic waywardness ... The music falls on our ears like the ... outpouring of a being stirred to its heart's core, and full of immeasurable love and longing.'

**Messiaen** composed his eight *Préludes* in 1928-9, mostly at the home of his aunts at Fuligny in the department of Aube, while he was still a student of Paul Dukas at the Paris Conservatoire. They were among the first of his works to be published (by Durand in June 1930). Messiaen performed them at a private concert in Durand's salon on 28 January 1930 – an occasion when Dukas was present – and the public première was given a few weeks later, on 1 March 1930, at the Salle Erard, played by Henriette Puig-Roget, a brilliant pianist and organist who shared several of Messiaen's teachers (including Marcel Dupré) and to whom the pieces were dedicated. Roget was understandably proud of the dedication, and recalled an amusing request by Messiaen, who asked her to wear a dress which reflected 'the colour of water, of leaves, of the sky' – elements of nature which are evoked in the pieces. Roget also noted that the performance 'caused a sensation among a group of enthusiasts: there are in these pieces more than just the promise of a very individual musical palette, a modal style of writing inspired by Hindu scales, experimentation with rhythms and a unity of conception.' Roget was surely right about these characteristics, to which could be added the immense refinement of the piano writing.

The sixth prelude, *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu*, is perhaps the piece which is most prophetic of later Messiaen, particularly its extraordinary coda where the music sinks into silence and becomes fragmented (its last three notes marked 'adieu'). There are riches aplenty in the other preludes, not least the first of them, *La colombe* ('The dove'), which has none of the features of his later bird-song pieces, but captures a mood with exquisite tenderness and delicate pianistic colours. While there's certainly a hint of Debussy's piano writing in places (the opening of *Plainte calme*, for instance), even so they constitute a remarkable point of creative departure for Messiaen.

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