WIGMORE HALL

Friday 4 April 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by David and Clare Kershaw

Igor Levit piano
Lukas Sternath piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

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. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1942)
I. Allegro inquieto • II. Andante caloroso • III. Precipitato

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Symphony No. 10 in E minor Op. 93 (1953) *arranged for piano 4 hands*
I. Moderato • II. Allegro • III. Allegretto • IV. Andante – Allegro

Igor Levit appears by arrangement with Classic Concerts Management GmbH

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Together with Skryabin, Rachmaninov, Medtner and Shostakovich, **Prokofiev** was one of the remarkable constellation of composer-pianists who emerged in Imperial Russia around the turn of the 20th Century. As was so often the case at the time, Prokofiev received his earliest lessons from his mother, and at the St Petersburg Conservatory, his technique was honed by Anna Yesipova. Many years later, Heinrich Neuhaus would describe his playing as having '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.'

The same could be said of the nine piano sonatas composed between 1910 and 1947, many of which Prokofiev premièred himself. Failing health meant that the final ones were entrusted to others; the two sonatas heard this evening were both first performed by Sviatoslav Richter. The Sonata No. 9 was composed in 1947, but its première did not come until 1951, and it did not appear in print until 1955. The reasons behind such delays are not hard to find. In 1948, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian and other leading Soviet composers had been viciously attacked at the Congress of the Soviet Composers' Union, and many of their works were banned. The optimism that heralded the end of the war in 1945 was now replaced by a wave of tyranny that lasted until Stalin's death on 5 March 1953 – ironically, the very day that Prokofiev himself 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 open to debate.

The Sonata No. 7 was premièred by Richter in January 1943. Fighting still raged for control of the city of Stalingrad. Then, on 2 February, the Germans surrendered. This historical background has meant that the seventh has sometimes been dubbed the 'Stalingrad' – a clear allusion to 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 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 proper attention to Prokofiev's scrupulous dynamics and with space between its cascading notes it can embody, if not optimism, then at least the daring of human hope and the anticipation of a victory against darkness, cruelty, and barbarism.

At its première in Leningrad on 17 December 1953, **Shostakovich**'s Symphony No. 10 was hailed not just as a masterpiece, but as evidence of a new, more liberal mood in Soviet society and the arts. Named after a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Thaw* entailed the closure of the Gulag, the rehabilitation of political prisoners, an easing of censorship, a greater openness to the outside world, and a denunciation of the excesses of Stalinism. Shostakovich had good reason to welcome the easing of cultural restrictions – he had been denounced in Pravda in 1936 for his opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and again in 1948, for his supposed 'formalism'. His new symphony – which he claimed to have composed between July and October 1953 – breathes the new air of the post-Stalin era. The pianist Tatiana Nikolaeva claimed it had actually been completed as early as 1951. If so, it would not be a surprise: Shostakovich held back several important works until after Stalin's death, such as his Violin Concerto No. 1 (1947-48, premièred 1955), the song cycle, *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (1948, premièred 1955), and the String Quartet No. 4 (1949, premièred 1953).

The tenth symphony is not, though, a straightforwardly optimistic work; Shostakovich was too scarred by his previous encounters with Soviet power to be entirely naive when it came to the future. Accordingly, the symphony traces a journey from darkness to light. The opening movement – a long, brooding *Moderato* – builds to a resolute climax, before falling back into uncertainty. Then comes a blistering, relentless *Allegro* that functions as a decidedly unfunny *Scherzo*. The third, slow movement constitutes the symphony's emotional heart. Its use of Shostakovich's trademark musical signature – the motif DSCH (the notes D, E flat, C, and B in German) – has led some commentators to intuit some hidden programme. But what of the haunting solo (played by the horn in the orchestral version) that interrupts it? Shostakovich himself hinted that it was an echo of a theme from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, but many years after his death, it was revealed to be a cryptonym masking the name of Elmira Nazirova, a young Azerbaijani music student with whom he had fallen in love. In the perky, almost cartoonish finale, the major key finally dispels the gloom and the introversion.

The piano duet version of the symphony was made by Shostakovich himself, and he used it to introduce the new work to fellow musicians. Together with his friend, the composer Mieczysław Weinberg, he performed it to the conductor Evgeny Mravinsky, and it would have been heard by the artistic committees that would authorise its official première. The recording that Weinberg and Shostakovich made in 1954 has a blistering emotional authenticity.

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