

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 4 June 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle

Boris Giltburg piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in B Op. 62 No. 1 (1846)
Nocturne in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 1 (1835)
Nocturne in F sharp minor Op. 48 No. 2 (1841)
Nocturne in F Op. 15 No. 1 (1830-2)
Nocturne in G minor Op. 37 No. 1 (1838)
Nocturne in E flat Op. 55 No. 2 (1842-4)
Nocturne in C minor Op. 48 No. 1 (1841)
Nocturne in E Op. 62 No. 2 (1846)

Interval

Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in G minor Op. 22 (1901-10)
*Tenebroso, sempre affrettando - Allegro assai -
Interludium. Andante lugubre - Allegro assai*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Dumka Op. 59 (1886)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 Movements from *Petrushka* (1921)
*Danse russe • Chez Pétrouchka • La semaine
grasse*



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This evening's programme tells a tale about the virtuoso piano tradition that emerged in the Russian Empire from the early 19th Century onwards. A paradoxical claim, perhaps – even a controversial one. After all, doesn't the first half consist of eight nocturnes by Chopin, whose music has often been heard as the quintessential expression of Polishness? Since the 18th Century, Poland had been divided between Austria, Prussia and Russia, and Chopin's arrival in Paris in 1831 was seen by many as a patriotic protest at Russia's suppression of the Polish uprising of 1830-1. Yet the nocturne was first made famous not by Chopin, but by the Irish-born John Field, who enjoyed a celebrated career in Moscow and St Petersburg in the first decades of the 19th Century (one of his pupils was none other than Rachmaninov's grandfather, Arkady). Whether or not we chose to hear Field's nocturnes as evidence of his susceptibility to the spectral mood of St Petersburg's white nights, he certainly excelled in conveying what Carl Czerny described as 'an impression of a soft, fanciful, gracefully romantic, or even passionate kind, but never harsh or strange'.

Field's genius was to transcend the mechanical limitations of the modern piano – then undergoing a rapid series of technical developments – and investing it with the bel canto lyricism of 18th- and early 19th-century vocal music. When Liszt first gathered Field's nocturnes together for publication in 1859, he claimed that 'they opened the way for all the productions which have since appeared under the various titles of Songs without Words, Impromptus, Ballades, etc., and to him we may trace the origin of pieces designed to portray subjective and profound emotion'. That sense of 'subjective and profound emotion' was perfected by **Chopin** in his sequence of 21 nocturnes. Written and published in small groups of two or three between 1829 and 1846 (a further two appeared in print only posthumously), they are full of the singing quality first pioneered by Field. They typically conform to a straightforward ternary structure – ABA – that is characteristic of the song form or operatic aria. Yet the seeming simplicity of their form belies the subtle range of moods they evoke, and their very title hints at the kind of hidden emotions that are wont to surface during the night-time hours, whether in dreams or in sleepless reflection. They are a quintessential expression of Romantic interiority, and their lack of words only serves to invite the susceptible listener to engage in acts of imaginative speculation about their sources of inspiration.

Medtner could trace his origins back to the Baltic Germans who had played such an important role in the administration of the Russian Empire from the 18th Century. Born in Moscow in 1880, he became – along with Rachmaninov and Skryabin – one of the greatest composer-pianists of his era. Like Rachmaninov, he was often seen as a rather anachronistic figure – an ardent late Romantic in the age of modernism and the avant-garde. The piano sonata in G minor Op. 22 was completed

in 1910. Combining a 'Germanic' rigour in its handling of musical architecture with a more spontaneously 'Slavic' sense of lyricism and emotional intensity, it has long been one the most popular of Medtner's sequence of 14 piano sonatas. Its opening marking is *tenebroso, sempre affrettando* ('darkly, always pressing onwards'), and its single 15-minute sweep miraculously combines and condenses all of the expected movements of the conventional sonata.

Medtner tended to avoid obvious touches of national colour in his music. By contrast, **Tchaikovsky's** *Dumka* Op. 59 audibly conjures up the world of traditional folk culture from East-Central Europe. Its title is derived from a Slavonic word meaning 'to ponder' or 'to reflect', and by the 19th Century, composers such as Chopin and Moniuszko in Poland, Dvořák in Bohemia and Lysenko in Ukraine had turned the *dumka* into a way to voice their melancholy feelings of frustrated patriotism. Tchaikovsky's exercise in the genre was written in 1886 and was the result of a commission from his French publisher, Félix Mackarr. Subtitled 'scène rustique russe' ('Russian rustic scene'), it capitalised on the vogue for all things Russian that was then sweeping all of western Europe, from the symphonies and orchestral works of Tchaikovsky himself to the novels of Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

Exactly a quarter of a century later, Sergei Diaghilev would delight Parisian audiences with the gaudy evocations of Russian traditional life that were so central to the scandalous success of the *Ballets Russes*. *Petrushka* – with music by **Stravinsky**, choreography by Michel Fokine and designs by Alexandre Benois – opened at the Théâtre du Châtelet on 13 June 1911 with Vaslav Nijinsky in the title role. Stravinsky had originally thought of it as a work for solo piano and orchestra, but Diaghilev soon persuaded him to refashion it for the stage. Benois and Stravinsky set about concocting a libretto set at Shrovetide in the Russian capital, St Petersburg, and featuring the woeful story of *Petrushka* – a Russian cousin to the English Mr Punch (or indeed Pierrot, from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition).

Later on, Stravinsky would claim that 'in composing the music, I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts'. The *3 Movements from Petrushka* for solo piano date from 1921 and were written for and dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein (who was born in the Polish city of Łódź, then part of the Russian Empire, in 1887). Rubinstein was famous, above all, for his interpretations of Chopin, but here Stravinsky set him the daunting challenge of treating the piano as a terrifying mechanistic automaton, robbed of all humanity and introspection.

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