

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 October 2021 1.00pm

Kirill Gerstein piano



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

**Komitas** (1869-1935)

7 Armenian folk dances (pub. 1925)

*Manushaki of Vagharshapat • Yerangi of Yerevan • Unabi of Shushi • Marali of Shushi • Shushiki of Vagarshapat • Het u Aradj of Karin • Shoror of Karin*

**Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)

Page d'album (Pièce pour le Vêtement du blessé) (1915)

Elégie (1915)

Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon (1917)

Berceuse héroïque (1914)

Etude retrouvée (1915)

**Leoš Janáček** (1854-1928)

Piano Sonata 1. X. 1905 ('From the Street') (1905-6)

*I. Foreboding • II. Death*

**Vítězslava Kaprálová** (1915-1940)

April Preludes Op. 13 (1937)

*Allegro ma non troppo • Andante • Andante semplice • Vivo*

**Aleksandr Skryabin** (1872-1915)

Vers la flamme Op. 72 (1914)

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**Komitas** (to give this musician-priest the name he took on ordination) was educated from the age of 12 at Etchmiadzin, the Armenian ecclesiastical capital, and had thoroughly absorbed his nation's musical and religious heritage before going to Berlin, 14 years later, to complete his musical training. The result in these dances is an exoticism that comes from within. Various folk instruments are indicated in the score as potential models for the pianist: tambourine, drums, reed pipes and flute. Others – bells – might be suggested by the resonant octaves and fifths, especially of No. 5.

Each dance is composed of a small number of nuggets, from two to four, set together in varying combinations and themselves varying in their subsidiary parts, register or ornamentation. The piano writing, transparent, does not betray the monodic nature of the originals, of which the first five are all dances for a woman soloist (Komitas did not feel his vow of celibacy required him to shun women), the last two group dances.

**Debussy** might have heard some of this music, since the pianist Shushanik Babayan, who gave a performance in Paris in 1906, was married to his friend Louis Laloy. Could the bells of Armenia have been still echoing through his mind a decade or so later, when he was ill and agitated by the war? A group of his piano pieces from this period follows, three of them contributions to wartime charitable efforts.

The *Page d'album* (so called on its first publication, in 1933) was something he wrote in June 1915 to be auctioned by the French charity Le Vêtement du blessé (Dressing the Wounded). All done in under a minute, it is a skipping, fluttering, settling waltz. The other two pieces he wrote for fundraising albums, the sombre *Élégie* in December 1915 for *Pages inédites sur la femme et la guerre*. The *Berceuse héroïque* had come earlier, in November 1914, for *King Albert's Book*, published to support Belgians after their country's rapid conquest; hence the presence of the opening phrase of the Belgian national anthem, which arrives shortly after some bugle calls have been added to the 'heroic lullaby' in slow march time.

Debussy's very last piano composition remained unknown and unsuspected until November 2001, when it turned up among possessions passed on by a Parisian coal merchant. It had been written in February-March 1917, at the end of a hard winter, when this dealer, though coal was in short supply, had made sure the Debussy household stayed warm. The composer expressed his gratitude with a two-minute piece whose title he took from a Baudelaire poem he had set almost three decades earlier, 'Le Balcon': 'The evenings lit by glowing coal'. He could hardly forget he had done the same thing in one of his *Préludes*:

find a title – and an atmosphere – in a line from a Baudelaire poem he had made into a song. The coal merchant's gift duly starts with a reference back to 'Les Sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir' before settling into its own domain of warmth and glow.

Another late addition to the Debussy catalogue was a draft headed 'Pour les arpèges composées', which Roy Howat discovered in 1977 at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Debussy used the title for another piece he included in his set of twelve études, but he did not discard this one, which Howat published as *Étude retrouvée*. The 'composed arpeggios' turn at different speeds and through different modal colours in continuous opalescence.

We also owe **Janáček's** *Sonata 1.X.1905* to a salvage operation. Janáček wrote it in immediate response to events in Brno on the date in question, when a young worker lost his life at a demonstration for a Czech-speaking university. The composer then tried to destroy it, unaware that the pianist had copied its first two movements.

Loss is in the music itself, as it attempts to recover a forgotten idea, through episodes of search and frustration. The first movement is in sonata form, with a second subject that makes a beautiful scalewise descent. Taking an element from the principal theme, the second movement follows an A–B–A pattern, the first section repeated. Both movements are in an E flat minor infiltrated by folksong modality, and both duly end with tonic chords. Nothing, however, has been resolved.

Born in Janáček's city of Brno, **Vítězslava Kápralová** in her short life attracted the attention of notable Czech musicians, among them Rudolf Firkušný, to whom she dedicated her *April Preludes* of 1937. There are touches of Janáček's rotating folk motifs and Debussy's harmony in these pieces, and the second of them could have been modelled on the slow movement of the Second Piano Concerto of Martinů, whose pupil and lover Kápralová was soon to become. However, the clear counterpoint, the motivic ingenuity (a pattern of three-note scalar rise followed by leaps up and down runs all through) and the freshness are all this composer's own.

We reach the end of a path with **Skryabin's** *Vers la flamme*, which carries its motif (up a half step, up a major third, back down) from darkness to blaze, and which conveyed its composer on towards the limitless realms of the mystery play that had obsessed him for years, and that he would leave barely begun.

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