

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 October 2021 7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 6 in A Op. 82 (1939-40)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Allegretto • III. Tempo di valzer lentissimo • IV. Vivace

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911)

Modéré, très franc • Assez lent, avec une expression intense • Modéré • Assez animé • Presque lent, dans un sentiment intime • Vif • Moins vif • Epilogue. Lent

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Carnaval Op. 9 (1834-5)

Préambule • Pierrot • Arlequin • Valse noble • Eusebius • Florestan • Coquette • Réplique • Papillons • Lettres dansantes • Chiarina • Chopin • Estrella • Reconnaissance • Pantalon et Colombine • Valse allemande • Paganini • Aveu • Promenade • Pause • Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

La valse (1920)

Welcome back to Wigmore Hall

We are grateful to our Friends and donors for their generosity as we rebuild a full series of concerts in 2021/22 and reinforce our efforts to reach audiences everywhere through our broadcasts. To help us present inspirational concerts and support our community of artists, please make a donation by visiting our website:

[Wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate). Every gift is making a difference. Thank you.

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG

Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



There is an obvious thread to Boris Giltburg's recital – waltzes by Ravel bookending the waltzes that figure in Schumann's *Carnaval* and the waltz that haunts one of Prokofiev's so-called 'War' sonatas. Schumann's are carefree, but the difference between the two Ravel works here is marked, the charm of the first giving little idea of the disintegration of the second. Another strand is that Schumann and Prokofiev were both concert pianists (although Schumann's ambitions as a virtuoso faded early in his career). Ravel was too, but he was no virtuoso. It is all the more remarkable that he was one of the last century's most innovative composers for the instrument.

It comes as a surprise that the chic, dapper composer with a notoriously sharp tongue – he considered music that didn't come from the heart to be worthless although he himself gave the impression of being heartless and remote – produced music of such emotional depth and absorbing ambiguity. He also had an enviable facility to filter the world of the child through adult reflection, and his style ranged intuitively from meticulous Mozartian grace to the demonic bravura of Liszt – he deliberately avoided Wagner – while he openly acknowledged the crucial moment of epiphany delivered by Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

The famous first performance, in 1911, of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* took place in a recital of new music with all the composers remaining anonymous until the end, which briefly had Ravel keeping company with Satie and Kodály. After the nightmarish grotesqueries of *Gaspard de la nuit* (1909), this sequence of seven short waltzes and an epilogue was a new departure, in a style described by the composer as 'simpler and clearer, in which the harmony is harder'. The opening is a confident chromatic fanfare, the mood abruptly switching in the enigmatic, spare second waltz. From the third, Ravel starts playing with rhythm, as though he is trying to square the triangle of waltz-time. The seventh builds up a head of steam which Ravel will take to drastic extremes in *La valse*, and the *Epilogue* recalls elements of the set, winding down to a wistful close.

Schumann wrote *Carnaval* while in his 20s, still intent on a career as a concert pianist, and briefly engaged to Ernestine von Fricken before he embarked on his tortuous, five-year-long courtship of Clara Wieck, the teenaged daughter of his piano teacher Friedrich Wieck. It was also the period when, in his role as a music critic, he launched the journal *Die neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in which he introduced people he knew disguised as 'Davidsbündler', whose 'March against the Philistines' brings *Carnaval* to a rousing conclusion. The whole work is seeded with a musical ciphers based on the name of the town, Asch, where Ernestine was born.

The sequence of 20 miniatures, some of them very short – give the dancers at a masked ball their moment in the limelight – a host of *commedia dell'arte* figures; Schumann himself, represented both by extrovert 'Florestan' and diffident, dreamy 'Eusebius'; Clara ('Chiarina') with a sudden passionate outburst; Ernestine ('Estrella'), in a piece marked '*con affetto*'; the composers Chopin

and Paganini (Schumann famously had hailed Chopin as a genius in his journal, although Chopin did not return the compliment), along with waltzes and other 'colour' pieces to add to the sense of riotous occasion. Soon after the mock-pompous 'Préambule' comes a rising tune, in the 'Valse noble', which recalls the first number of Schumann's *Papillons*, completed in 1830, and which he also uses in 'Florestan'. There is another reference to *Papillons* in its finale, which introduces the same *Thème de XVIIIème siècle*, the rather portly Grandfather's Dance that used to mark the end of the ball and which serves the same function in *Carnaval*, here with Philistine-bashing intent. Schumann's febrile imagination, nourished at the time by the bizarre novels of Jean Paul, is matched by some virtuosic demands – for example, the inner repeated notes of 'Reconnaissance' – and resistance to the parade's spell is futile.

Having lived abroad since the Russian Revolution in 1917, **Sergey Prokofiev** returned permanently to the USSR fold in 1936 and found himself in the thick of the Stalinist purges and, very soon, the Second World War. The music from this period included the patriotic score for *Alexander Nevsky* and a cantata celebrating Stalin's 60th birthday. He also composed, in 1939, the three 'War' sonatas, Nos. 6, 7 and 8, which are more ambiguous, and after the war, in 1948, the Sonatas Nos. 6 and 8 were among Prokofiev's works to be banned by the Soviet Politburo. The Sonata No. 6 is very much in Prokofiev's ruthless and furious style, taking no prisoners among both performers and listeners. Like Beethoven's and Schubert's last three sonatas, all three of the 'War' sonatas have been played as a cycle, requiring a pianist of prodigious stamina.

The first movement opens with a malevolent motif, more rhythmic than melodic, and this casts a blight over the whole work. Sometimes it reappears softened and submissive, but when Prokofiev brings it back at the end of the busy rondo finale, it is unequivocally in its original, pungent form. The scherzo has a balletic energy reminiscent of music from his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, and there is a memorable passage built on a mechanical-style left-hand ostinato summoning up the shade of Mosolov's *The Iron Foundry*. The deeply felt slow movement presents a stream of unguarded and romantic melody.

Ravel denied that *La valse* had any post-war, collapse-of-European-civilisation connotations, along the lines of, say, Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*. Originally conceived as a ballet, this 1920 work charts the Strauss waltz as the musical emblem of the Austrian empire at its height. Nevertheless, the moment when Ravel's tribute careers so spectacularly off the rails cannot help but propose any number of agenda. It is probably the composer's most romantic piece, and the composer's transcription for solo piano, not surprisingly, is formidably difficult.

© Peter Reed 2021

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.

The order of tonight's programme changed after the above programme notes had been written. We apologise for any inconvenience caused and thank you for your understanding.