

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 5 January 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Sir Jack Lyons Charitable Trust



Alim Beisembayev piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor Op. 57 'Appassionata' (1804-5)
I. Allegro assai • II. Andante con moto • III. Allegro ma non troppo - Presto

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)
I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo • II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo

Interval

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915) 4 Preludes Op. 22 (1897)
Prelude in G sharp minor • Prelude in C sharp minor • Prelude in B • Prelude in B minor

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Prelude in B minor Op. 32 No. 10 (1910)

Etude-tableau in D Op. 39 No. 9 (1916-7)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)
I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo



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In the Enlightenment, genius was understood as something one had rather than something one was, an idea more similar to our concept of talent. For **Beethoven**, this spark of musical inspiration became an obligation that was threatened with the deterioration of his hearing. The famous Heiligenstadt Testament of 1802 - an unsent, almost-suicide letter - lays out his struggle: 'how could I possibly admit such an infirmity in the one sense which should have been more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in highest perfection', eventually resolving, 'it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce, and so I endured this wretched existence.'

This grappling is also worked through musically in the 'Appassionata' sonata, begun shortly afterwards in 1804. The opening is a quiet plunge down and up followed by a little tremor in the major. Immediately it is repeated, but this time in the distant neapolitan key of G flat, very far away and totally unpredicted, setting up the wild mood swings of the entire piece; however, this unpredictability is very strictly organised. Almost the entirety of the themes of the first movement spring from these first ten seconds and adhere to a fairly regular sonata form. The second movement is a theme and variations that emerges organically, each variation with more rhythmic energy, beginning from a beautiful, near static chorale in D flat major, climbing higher and faster with every variation, until the chorale returns. A brief series of diminished flourishes takes us straight into the third movement, which hammers out this chord again and again in violent tension before dissolving in spinning runs. Eventually these grow and break out into a fast new section, something like a rustic danse macabre that flings us into the *coda*, faster than ever before - and finally into a wall of three massive F minor chords.

After Beethoven's death, it took several decades for the later music to escape claims that deafness affected its composition, and the A flat major sonata, with its warmth and tunefulness, was one of the first to gain popularity. The first movement opens with a chordal theme that within the first minute breaks off into 5-6 fragments all based on these opening chords: a melody, rippling arpeggios, dotted rhythms. At this point in his life, Beethoven is able to move between all these ideas without ever losing the control or the line of the piece of music. The second movement is a much more rambunctious scherzo, based on two street songs of the time: 'My cat has had two kittens' and 'I'm a slob, you're a slob.' Then directly into a mournful slow movement, something like an Italian arioso, but this one with a depth of feeling and inner pain that sets it far apart. From a short pause we go into a fugal finale, beginning very quietly, almost choral in nature, that builds before

falling all the way back into the arioso of the previous movement, this time in even greater pain. This then breaks apart again to move back quietly to the fugue, this time turned upside down in inversion. Rather than being a purely technical device, this inversion slowly gains steam and as it builds in emotion, the theme turns itself back around the right way and the entire sonata finishes in huge arpeggios.

Despite the grand visions of **Skryabin**, some of his greatest works are miniatures for solo piano. In the early days they were useful when he was short of cash and were dashed off to publishers, but always later organised into opus numbers. Op. 22 is a very short set of mostly darker and highly chromatic preludes, offset by the cheerful and bird-like third prelude.

Rachmaninov wrote the *Etudes-tableaux* in two sets and termed them 'picture pieces' for the undisclosed images he had used in writing them. The D major Etude finishes the second set and as such is a bombastic fanfare mixed with a march, that has brilliant counterpoint beneath its more martial themes. The *Etude* is preceded by the tenth *Prelude* in Rachmaninov's Op. 32 set of 13 from 1910. It is one of the slower in the set, siciliano-based, with its 'pulverizing' contrasting section.

The macabre triptych of *Gaspard de la nuit* is a testament to the jewel-like construction of **Ravel's** writing, combining detail and extreme virtuosity. Each of the movements is an individual scene taken from a collection of darkly fantastical poems by the poet Aloysius Bertrand.

The first describes the water nymph *Ondine*, who, from her lake, tempts the watcher to come under the water and marry her to rule over her watery kingdom together, in so doing drowning himself. When he replies that he already loves a mortal woman (the piece's climactic passage) she sheds a tear, laughs, and vanishes into a white spray.

The tension then ratchets up for *Le gibet*, where at night the distant tolling of bells from the city walls sound without stopping. They ring as the body of a hanged man on the gallows sways back and forth in the night air, in a composition of incredible economy and anxiety. Then immediately on to the goblin *Scarbo*, the piece Ravel infamously wrote to be even harder than Balakirev's Romantic showpiece *Islamey*. Ravel creates a highly taut musical depiction of the shutterings and scrapings of the goblin in dark corners of the room, reflecting as well the terror of the person locked in with him. At the piece's grandest climax, Scarbo reveals himself, growing and growing to his full height, when suddenly he turns transparent, and vanishes...

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