

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 5 January 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Dmitry Shishkin piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ BWV639 (1708-17)

César Franck (1822-1890)

Prélude, fugue et variation Op. 18 (1860-2)
*I. Prélude. Andantino • II. Lento • III. Fugue.
Allegretto ma non troppo • IV. Variation.
Andantino*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Dumka Op. 59 (1886)
Scherzo à la russe Op. 1

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in G sharp minor Op. 19 'Sonata
Fantasy' (1892-7)
I. Andante • II. Presto

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Prelude in F sharp minor Op. 23 No. 1 (1901-3)
Prelude in D minor Op. 23 No. 3
Prelude in G minor Op. 23 No. 5
Prelude in G Op. 32 No. 5 (1910)
Prelude in A minor Op. 32 No. 8
Prelude in B minor Op. 32 No. 10
Prelude in G sharp minor Op. 32 No. 12

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 14 (1912)
*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro
marcato • III. Andante • IV. Vivace*



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The tragic chorale prelude 'I cry out to you' from the *Little Organ Book* uses its modest three contrapuntal parts merely to hint at chords which piano arrangers like Busoni dared to make explicit in great handfuls of notes. **Franck's** over-ambitious father named his first-born son Caesar-Augustus – a pair of names which greatly amused the music critics – and did his best to turn him into a child-prodigy pianist and composer, on the model of Liszt. César-Auguste did well as a pianist at the Conservatoire. At his final exam in 1838, after playing a Hummel concerto flawlessly, he gratuitously transposed the difficult sight-reading test down a minor third, which so confused the examiners that they decided to award two first prizes, because Franck was so much better than anyone else ever had been, and it seemed a pity to leave the others out all together.

At the age of 21, the exhausted young man retired into obscurity until his father forbade him to see his new lady-love, whereupon César pruned his name, moved in with her, and proceeded to turn himself into a great organist. His *Six Pièces*, the most important organ works since Mendelssohn, were published in 1868. The *Prélude, Fugue et Variation* form the third piece. The *Prélude* is one of Franck's most attractive melodies, tempering the grace of waltz-time with five-bar phrases and hemiola (where the music swings into duple time for a moment). The Fugue, marked *serioso*, leads, surprisingly enough, into a variation of itself, which turns out to be a counter-melody to the original tune. Both Friedmann and Bauer have stolen this piece for the piano.

Tchaikovsky's *Dumka* bookends some exciting virtuosity with more sombre thoughts. The equally consciously 'Russian Scherzo' – a surprisingly late Op.1 – is dedicated to Nicolas Rubinstein, brother to Tchaikovsky's composition teacher, Anton.

Rachmaninov and **Skryabin** were classmates in Moscow. In thinking about them, Rutland Boughton's distinction between Musicians and Artists is useful. Boughton was speaking of Brahms and Wagner, but it clarifies a lot about the two Russians as well. Skryabin's life, like Wagner's, was dedicated to the realisation of some mighty opus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner managed it: Skryabin only got as far as purchasing the land for his equivalent of Bayreuth, a plot in Darjeeling (India being the home of mysticism in Skryabin's mind) for the production of his 'Mysterium'. It came to nothing after Skryabin's death from sepsis. He published his Second Sonata in 1898. His own 'programme' runs: 'The first part evokes the calm of a night by a southern shore; in the development we hear the sombre agitation of the deep. The section in E major represents tender moonlight after the opening darkness. The second movement, Presto, shows the stormy agitation of the vast ocean'.

As a youngster, Skryabin used to take Chopin to bed with him – literally. He began composing by transforming familiar Chopin genres – mazurkas, nocturnes, etudes and preludes. The mazurkas and nocturnes are early

works, but etudes and preludes continued throughout Skryabin's life. In this, he reflects a more general situation. Few mazurkas and nocturnes are written nowadays, but the Etude stretches from Cramer to Ligeti; the Prelude from Bach via Debussy and Gershwin to all the composers today who want to pay homage to Chopin's Op. 28. **Bach's** Preludes are nearly always followed by the words 'and Fugue', which makes perfect sense of the word 'prelude'. (Chorale Preludes, in theory, were followed by a Chorale). Chopin, who didn't write fugues, kept just the 'in every key' aspect of Bach's 48 for his book of Preludes: a rather flimsy justification for the title.

Skryabin and Rachmaninov were amongst the comparatively few composers who noticed that 'in every key' aspect. Skryabin's 24 Preludes Op.11 (1896) were exemplary, neatly arranged in pairs with the same key signature. His six preludes of Op.13, together with the five of Op.15 set off well, but included two preludes in E major while the next set included one in G flat major and one in the homosonic F sharp major. Skryabin's last seven preludes don't mention 'key' at all, since by 1914 Skryabin's music had become atonal, though sensuously and attractively so. Rachmaninov's procedure was complicated by a habit of economy and the fact that his early hit, the C sharp minor Prelude of 1892, had been a solitary exemplar. His 10 Preludes Op.23 (1903) added ten more keys, rather randomly, and the 13 Preludes Op. 32 (1910) polished off the complete set of 24 keys.

Prokofiev's mother, Maria, came from a family of serfs once owned by one of Russia's most enlightened great families, who encouraged their dependents to pursue the arts and theatre. Maria, having made a fortunate marriage, spent Sergey's early childhood having piano lessons in Moscow or St. Petersburg for two months every year, and the boy benefited from her contacts – the composer-pianist Reinhold Glière spent several summers at the Prokofiev's house, teaching him. Prokofiev left the Conservatoire in 1914 having won a grand piano for his performance of his First Piano Concerto Op. 10. A review of its première in 1912 said that the composer 'seems to be either dusting the keys or striking high or low notes at random', but two years later the tolerance of the musical world had increased dramatically. 1912 also saw the composition of the well-known Toccata Op. 11, a Second Piano Concerto (to be rewritten in 1923), and this Second Sonata, the work of a pleasant summer break in Kislovodsk.

Prokofiev declared that his music followed two major principles, clarity and brevity, and embodied four characteristics: classical ('born when I heard my mother play Beethoven sonatas'), innovation ('which started after Taneyev's mocking remark about my "much too simple" harmony'), toccata-like character ('of less importance'), and lyricism. 'A fifth character,' continued Prokofiev, 'the so-called "grotesque", is a side-line'.

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