

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 5 January 2026
1.00pm

Julius Asaf piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

4 Ballades Op. 10 (1854)

*No. 1 Ballade in D minor 'Edward' • No. 2 Ballade in D •
No. 3 Ballade in B minor • No. 4 Ballade in B*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Prélude (1913)

Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn (1909)

Improvisation

A la manière de ... Borodine (1913)

Improvisation

César Franck (1822-1890)

Prélude, choral et fugue (1884)

*I. Prélude. Moderato • II. Choral. Poco più lento •
III. Fugue. Tempo I*


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'I played some of Johannes's ballades very well', Clara Schumann noted in 1860 after a concert in Vienna, 'but in spite of this they were a complete failure, which I felt very much.' Her diary entry indicates both how mystifying the young **Brahms's** music must initially have seemed, and also her intimate connection to music from a traumatic period in Brahms's life and her own. Brahms composed the 4 Ballades in Düsseldorf in spring 1854, only weeks after rushing there to support Clara and her children after Robert Schumann threw himself into the Rhine. The pieces' title was both fashionable and audacious: Chopin had effectively invented a new genre in the 1830s with his Ballades, one to which only Franck, Liszt and Clara herself (in the 1836 *Soirées musicales*) had thus far added, and his precedent would have daunted any composer less confident than the 20-year-old Brahms.

A ballad in poetry tells a story, but in Chopin's Ballades the storytelling is implicit, with no link to specific extra-musical narratives. The first of Brahms's Ballades, by contrast, is subtitled 'After the Scottish Ballade "Edward" in Herder's *The Voices of Peoples*'. Herder's 1773 translation of Thomas Percy's 1765 ballad had already been set by Schubert, and Brahms himself would set it in 1878 as a duet for soprano and tenor. It is a dialogue between mother and son: the mother asks why her son's sword is covered in blood; he unconvincingly claims to have killed a bird then a horse, before admitting that his victim was his father. The final stanza shockingly reveals that the mother incited the parricide; her son damns her with the 'curse of Hell'. The Ballade's bare fifths and octaves and hypnotic repetitions convey the grim story and the bleak Scottish landscape with a vividness that might surprise listeners who know Brahms only as the mature composer of 'absolute music'.

Though the remaining three Ballades are not associated with literary texts, they share the first piece's sense of drama. The serene *Andante* melody that opens No. 2 is forcefully interrupted by interludes whose keys (B minor and B major) foreshadow those of the final two Ballades, making the set an early experiment in 'progressive tonality': Brahms himself did not pursue this novel method of constructing a multi-movement work, though successors such as Mahler and Nielsen did. No. 3 is an unpredictable *Intermezzo* with an extraordinary central section focused on the upper reaches of the keyboard and building towards seemingly portentous repetitions. The final movement begins as an elegant waltz, but also takes unexpected turns, as a brooding middle section melts into a mysterious, hushed close.

Each of the three miniatures that features in today's programme (interspersed with Julius Asa's improvisations) was composed when **Ravel** was in his twenties; each lasts around 90 seconds. The *Prélude* was composed in 1913 as a sight-reading test for the ladies of the Paris Conservatoire, and is based on a six-

note motif from 'Surgi de la croupe', one of Ravel's dazzling Mallarmé settings from the same year. *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* makes ingenious use of a five-note motto (B-A-D-D-G) chosen by Jules Ecorcheville as the basis for pieces commissioned from several French composers for the centenary of Haydn's death. *A la manière de ... Borodine* was one of two pastiches (the other was of Chabrier) that Ravel contributed to a set published in 1914 by his friend, the pianist Alfredo Casella: it draws on themes from Borodin's *Petite suite* and Second String Quartet and mimics the Russian composer's fondness for repeated-note ostinatos.

Franck spent most of his career as an organist and professor at the Paris Conservatoire whose compositional efforts were focused on liturgical and organ music. It was only after his sixtieth birthday that he turned in earnest to music for the concert hall, producing masterpieces such as the Violin Sonata (1884), the *Symphonic Variations* for piano and orchestra (1885) and the Symphony (1886-8). The *Prélude, choral et fugue* is another accomplished product of this late flowering. Its unusual title invites comparison with Franck's well-known *Prélude, fugue et variation* for organ (1860-2), but the later work was conceived from the outset for piano. Vincent D'Indy reported that his former teacher had 'intended simply to write a prelude and fugue in the style of Bach', but soon 'welcomed the idea of linking these two pieces with a chorale whose melodic spirit would hover above the composition'.

Although each of the forms named in the title is associated with the venerable German tradition of Bach and his followers, Franck makes no attempt to imitate Baroque music. Indeed, Saint-Saëns observed of this piece that 'the chorale is not a chorale and the fugue is not a fugue' – technically true if somewhat curmudgeonly! Instead, Franck treats the three genres as staging posts in a single musical journey from B minor to B major (the same keys chosen by Brahms for the later stages of the 4 Ballades). The way in which Franck animates and relates the archetypal structures owes much to 'cyclical form', his own distinctive method of ensuring unity across a multi-movement work through easily identifiable musical 'mottoes'.

Two such mottoes dominate here. The first is a chromatic, sighing figure, first heard about 30 seconds into the *Prélude* and featuring prominently in the *Chorale* before being adapted as the main subject of the *Fugue*, where it also appears in inversion. The second is a bell-like motif constructed from falling fourths, first heard at the top of a sequence of widely spread chords in the *Chorale* before emerging from the dense figuration towards the end of the *Fugue*. In the piece's final seconds the two mottoes combine to compelling effect.

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