

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 5 March 2025
7.30pm

Tim Horton piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Fantasia in C minor K396 (1782)

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Masques Op. 34 (1915-6)
*Schéhérazade • Tantris le Bouffon •
Sérénade de Don Juan*

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 1 in G minor Op. 23 (c.1831-5)
Ballade No. 2 in F Op. 38 (1836-9)
Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47 (1841)
Ballade No. 4 in F minor Op. 52 (1842)



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The story of **Mozart's** Fantasia in C minor, K396 is not a straightforward one. Famously, in 1821, Goethe tested the 12-year-old Mendelssohn's mettle by inviting him to sight-read a Mozart autograph then in his possession. This was a two-page manuscript for violin and piano, though the violin part was left blank for all but the last few bars. Following Mozart's death, Maximilian Stadler completed this draft as a work for solo piano, adding a development section and a closing section in the major. But the exposition (up to the repeat marks) is as Mozart conceived it, and it is notable not just for its improvisatory character, but for an unusually high level of expressive chromaticism and poignant dissonance. The mood throughout is dark, melancholy, and even somewhat disturbing. That the finished product makes such perfect sense musically is no small testimony to the compositional acumen of Maximilian Stadler.

Karol Szymanowski's indebtedness to Chopin was registered during two distinct phases of his creative life. As a young apprentice composer, studying in Warsaw in the early years of the 20th Century, he wrote piano preludes and études that were closely modelled on the music of his great compatriot. Then, in the early 1920s, in the context of a newly independent Poland, he wrote a set of mazurkas that paid conscious homage to Chopin, but were also of their own time, re-defining a national music for the new century. Between these two 'historical moments', during the years of the First World War, the composer found the most congenial working conditions of his lifetime. Exempt from conscription, he worked in a gardener's hut in the grounds of the family home in what is now Ukraine, turning out a plethora of major works, whose closest points of reference stylistically are Skryabin and what was then modern French music. The term 'Impressionism' is over-used, but it might serve as a pointer to the relevant associations.

Those wartime works included the piano cycle *Masques*, completed in 1916. As the title suggests, these three pieces (which were composed in reverse order to the published format) are all about concealment, and specifically about love and its deceptions. Thus, 'Schéhérazade' represents a mask of real feelings where fantasy is a prerequisite of survival, 'Tantris le Bouffon' (based on an Ernst Hardt story) depicts a mask of Tristan, unrecognised by Isolde, while the hero of 'Don Juan's Serenade' is exposed as a deceiver, selling an illusion of love. These three pieces are really short tone poems for piano, with highly complex harmonies and elaborate multi-sectional formal schemes. In 'Schéhérazade', for example, there are distinctive 'fantasy' sections, sometimes orientalist in character, that stand somewhat apart from the main thematically-based narrative. Likewise, in 'Tantris le Bouffon' there are separate 'dance' sections, where sharp points of dissonance enliven the rhythmic patterns. Only in 'Don Juan's Serenade' do we have the formal continuity of a single unfolding melody. This flows from an introductory passage of quasi-

improvised character, its characteristic 'bitonality' of pentatonic black and white note patterns evocative of Spanish-Arabic musical traditions.

Just what was in Chopin's mind when he chose the title 'ballade'? The most common association of the term was with early Romantic literature, and specifically with the revival of medieval and folk ballads, where the use of the vernacular carried a powerful nationalist charge. For the early Romantics, literature acted as a direct source of inspiration, and it is characteristic of Chopin that he went some way along this path, but only so far, channelling literary inspiration into a piano piece with a deliberately generalised rather than an explicitly programmatic title. The four ballades were composed between c.1835 and 1842, and their defining characteristic is their marriage of generic themes drawn from popular culture (themes grounded in social functions such as dance, worship, mourning and procession) and the sonata-form archetype. This perfectly embodies Chopin's larger synthesis of post-Classical traditions (of popular pianism) and classical traditions. After all, generic themes such as waltz, barcarolle, chorale, or march are not typically the basis of actual sonatas in the classical and early romantic eras.

Among the features that unite these four ballades are their characteristic 'narrating' metre, either 6/8 or 6/4, and their common approach to the sonata-form archetype. Thus, all four avoid the double reprise – tonal and thematic – that is characteristic of the classical sonata-form allegro. And all four have a similar large-scale tonal organisation, delaying ultimate tonal resolution, via a structural V, until the later stages of the work. The result is an end-weighted musical structure in which the reprise functions more as apotheosis than synthesis. In Op. 23, this results in a calculated ambiguity between the goal-directed intensity curve of the music and the formal symmetry of an arch design. In Op. 38, completed in Majorca in 1838, the musical dynamic is shaped by successive mediations of the initial collision between a pastorale in F major and an explosive étude in the mediant minor. Op. 47, composed in 1841, owes something to each of its predecessors, its mirror reprise and third-related tonalities to Op. 23 and the generic character of its themes to Op. 38. The Op. 52, composed in 1842, is widely recognized as one of the masterpieces of Chopin's later years. As in Op. 23, its first theme has the generic character of a slow waltz and its second that of a barcarolle. Also as in Op. 23, the second theme is transformed in the reprise into a powerfully expansive, 'enlarged' restatement. The true goal, as in all four ballades, is the structural V. This is delayed until the gradually rising intensity curve of the second theme reaches its climax, to be released in the white heat of virtuosity that is the final bravura coda.

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