

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 5 May 2025
7.30pm

Lucas Debargue piano

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

9 Préludes Op. 103 (1910-1)

No. 1 in D sharp • No. 2 in C sharp minor •
No. 3 in G minor • No. 4 in F • No. 5 in D minor •
No. 6 in E flat minor • No. 7 in A • No. 8 in C minor •
No. 9 in E minor

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E minor Op. 90 (1814)

*I. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und
Ausdruck • II. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar
vorgetragen*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Scherzo No. 4 in E Op. 54 (1842-3)

Interval

Gabriel Fauré

Thème et variations Op. 73 (1895)

*Thème. Quasi adagio • Variation 1: L'istesso tempo •
Variation 2: Più mosso • Variation 3: Un poco più mosso •
Variation 4: L'istesso tempo • Variation 5: Un poco più
mosso • Variation 6: Molto adagio • Variation 7: Allegro
moderato • Variation 8: Andante molto moderato •
Variation 9: Quasi adagio • Variation 10: Allegro vivo •
Variation 11: Andante molto, moderato espressivo*

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2 'Moonlight'
(1801)

I. Adagio sostenuto • II. Allegretto • III. Presto agitato

Fryderyk Chopin

Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47 (1841)



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Fauré must have wished that he and Chopin had overlapped a little more. He arrived to study in Paris at the early age of nine, missing by five years the man whose elusive pianistic style he was to develop for himself. He composed 13 Nocturnes and 13 Barcarolles, as well as some Valse-Caprices and a Mazurka. Fauré's son Philippe tells us that his father was not really happy with such generic titles – he would have preferred 'Piano Piece number ... whatever' – but his publishers insisted. The young Aaron Copland, then studying in Paris, surveyed Fauré's work for the *Musical Quarterly*, the article appearing aptly just before Fauré's death. 'It was with the Sixth Nocturne that Fauré first fully emerged from the shadow of the great Pole', wrote the 24-year-old, and went on to quote Alfred Cortot: 'There are few pages in all music comparable to these'. Copland's concluding peroration – 'the world at large has particular need of Gabriel Fauré today; need of his calm, his naturalness, his restraint, his optimism' – suggests that not much has changed in a hundred years.

In 1910, Fauré was increasingly worried about his encroaching deafness. He was contracted to his publisher Heugel to deliver a certain number of piano pieces each year. Short of time and worried about money, he returned to three Preludes that he had published already. In July he wrote to his pianistic advocate Marguerite Long: 'I have finished the Fifth Prelude – that's 1,200 francs earned – and I have begun the Sixth. It's sheer misery when I try out what I have written on my marvellous Érard. The sounds of the middle range I can just hear in the distance, but accurately, while the bass line and the treble offer me no more than an indefinable din.' Perhaps as a result, the Preludes are predominantly contrapuntal, even sparse, studies in texture. Long premièred them that autumn. 'What a shame it is that these charming pieces are hardly ever played any more', she wrote in 1963.

According to Long herself, she was single-handedly responsible for establishing Fauré as a piano composer. At the beginning of the 20th Century, his songs were prized, but his piano works little-known. Long was led to Fauré by the enthusiasm of a young Army officer, Joseph de Marliave, who used to accompany Fauré's songs from memory, and who, on first hearing Marguerite play, was disgusted that she knew no Fauré at all. Fauré was a witness at their subsequent wedding. (After de Marliave was killed in the first month of the Great War, Ravel dedicated the Toccata of *Le tombeau de Couperin* to him – Long premièred the piece in 1919.)

The *Theme and Variations*, Fauré's longest piano work, were composed in 1895. Fauré described the theme as an Etude, and he regarded the fifth variation as one of the expressive peaks of his output. It is perhaps unfortunate that the second edition notes all the cuts that were authorised when the piece was set

for a prize competition at the Conservatoire in 1910. Two of the 11 variations were cut completely, along with chunks of the theme. But perhaps Fauré was pleased to have the extra sales.

Copland makes an interesting comment on the piece. 'How many pianists, I wonder, have not regretted that the composer disdained the easy triumph of closing on the brilliant, dashing tenth variation. No, poor souls, they must turn the page and play that last, enigmatic (and most beautiful) one, which seems to leave the audience with so little desire to applaud.'

The same sort of thing could be said of other fastidious composers – take Alan Rawsthorne's Violin Sonata, for instance. Long puts her finger on it, though she thinks she's talking about Fauré's notorious amatory habits. 'The composer, wearing his little white boater jauntily over one ear, seemed to be paying marked attention to a very pretty young woman – a pianist, and, well, ambitious: she had just filled the place left vacant in Fauré's rather flighty heart. The master, attractive, cajoling – in a word, adorable – possessed to a supreme degree the art of disentanglement. It had become second nature, and made him prefer flight to explanation.' As in life, so in music.

The *Sonata quasi una fantasia* that we know as the 'Moonlight' was composed in 1801, the year **Beethoven** wrote the poignant Open Letter to the world about his deafness, known as the Heiligenstadt Testament. 1814 was a year of mixed fortune. The pot-boiler *Wellington's Victory* was doing so well that Beethoven sent a speculative copy to the Prince Regent (who failed to respond with the hoped-for present), and a revised version of *Fidelio* was holding the stage. But two terrible performances of the 'Archduke' Trio persuaded Beethoven it was time to stop playing in public. It was then that he began Op. 90.

Chopin's four Ballades explore a new way of composing; no longer the sonata forms arrived at by Haydn and Mozart, which, however wonderfully disguised by the composer's fancy, exemplify a rigorous harmonic logic; but rather an allusive logic of melody and tempo, hard to capture in notation, and therefore rare in performance. At every turn of the music, what-happens-next can sound mysteriously inevitable, or just one thing after another, according to the insight of the performer. All four of Chopin's Ballades use a lilting tum-ti tum-ti tum rhythm which gives them a strangely narrative quality. And they all end with the incoherent passion. The Third Ballade has always been the most popular: a musical bran tub, full of good things. As to the E major Scherzo, one might be forgiven for thinking it was by Richard Strauss. What a harmonist Chopin was!

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