

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 6 October 2024
7.30pm

Inon Barnatan piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911)

*Modéré, très franc • Assez lent, avec une
expression intense • Modéré • Assez animé •
Presque lent, dans un sentiment intime • Vif •
Moins vif • Epilogue. Lent*

Thomas Adès (b.1971)

Blanca Variations (2015)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 movements from *The Firebird Suite* (1919) arranged by
Guido Agosti

I. Danse infernale • II. Berceuse • III. Finale

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Symphonic Dances Op. 45 (1940) arranged by Inon
Barnatan

*I. Non allegro • II. Andante con moto. Tempo di
valse • III. Lento assai - Allegro vivace*

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Dating from 1911, **Ravel's** *Valses nobles et sentimentales* were conceived of as a homage to Schubert, who had written 34 *Valses sentimentales* in 1823, followed by a dozen *Valses nobles* in 1826. Ravel's previous composition for solo piano had been the diabolically difficult *Gaspard de la nuit*, but here he was intent on producing something he described as 'simpler and clearer, in which the harmony is harder and the lines of the music are revealed'. A clue to the mood of this suite of seven waltzes and an epilogue can be found in the epigraph that Ravel borrowed from the symbolist poet Henri de Régnier: 'the delicious and always new pleasure of a useless occupation'. There was nothing so insouciant about their première though. When they were first performed on 9 May 1911, the name of their composer was withheld from the programme in an attempt to force members of the audience to judge the music for itself. Few guessed that who was behind the new work, which some listeners even conspired to find formless and unattractive. Posterity has been kinder to Ravel's delicate, wistful score, which gives a clue to the carefully guarded emotional world of this most discreet of composers.

The *Blanca Variations* by **Thomas Adès** were composed in 2015 as a commission for the Clara Haskil International Piano Competition and subsequently incorporated into Act I of his opera *The Exterminating Angel*, based on Luis Buñuel's 1962 film of the same name. The variations are based on a traditional folksong that was sung in the Judeo-Spanish language of Ladino by Sephardic Jews living around the Mediterranean. 'Lavaba la blanca niña' ('The pure maiden washes') tells the story of a sorrowful young woman, whose husband has been away fighting for seven years. A stranger asks her for a drink of water, before revealing himself to be her beloved. Adès finds in the song 'an unassuageable harmonic structure very typical of Jewish music of longing and bereavement'. His variations have an improvisatory quality, full of keening ornament and inward melancholy.

One of **Stravinsky's** most gorgeously colourful scores, *The Firebird* was commissioned by Diaghilev for his 1910 Ballets Russes season in Paris. Diaghilev had first approached Tchernepin, who was too busy, and then Lyadov, who proved to be too lazy. Instead, Diaghilev turned to Stravinsky, then a young and little-known former student of Rimsky-Korsakov with few works to his name. The risk paid off handsomely, and the success of *The Firebird* launched a career that would take Stravinsky from Russia to France and eventually the United States. Stravinsky would later make three orchestral suites from *The Firebird* for concert performance, but the version of three of its movements for solo piano heard here was created by the Italian pianist, **Guido Agosti**. Agosti dedicated his arrangements to his teacher, Busoni, famous for his extravagant piano transcriptions of the music of Bach.

But Agosti's main source of inspiration was none other than Stravinsky himself, who had arranged his 3 *Movements from Petrushka* for solo piano in 1921, dedicating them to the great Polish-born pianist, Arthur Schnitke. Based on Stravinsky's second ballet for Diaghilev, this was a dazzling piece of virtuoso writing, pushing the performer's technique to its very limits and transcending the mechanical limitations of the piano so that it might sound like a living, breathing orchestra. Agosti matched this with his flamboyant transcription of three scenes from *The Firebird*. In the *Danse infernale*, Stravinsky summons up the demonic world of the ballet's villainous antihero, Kashchey (the 'Deathless'). After this, the *Berceuse* offers a moment of somnolent respite. And in the *Finale*, the ballet's hero, Prince Ivan, finally gets to marry his beloved princess.

Stravinsky and **Rachmaninov** were neighbours in Beverly Hills in the early 1940s, although neither cared much for the music of the other. The *Symphonic Dances* were completed in 1940 on Long Island, not long after Rachmaninov had arrived in America after fleeing the outbreak of military conflict in Europe. Like *La valse* (1920), in which Ravel had conjured up the malevolence wrought by the First World War, Rachmaninov turned to dance in order to convey something of the brutality that had been unleashed once again on the world. His use of the *Dies irae* theme, which he had cited in so many other works, seemed more grimly appropriate than ever. Yet even though they were written when the aging Rachmaninov had lost – for a second time – his entire world, there is no sense of creative fatigue about the *Symphonic Dances*. They certainly contain moments of wistful introspection, as well as nostalgic quotations from two of Rachmaninov's pre-revolutionary works: the unpublished and (then) unknown First Symphony, and the *All-Night Vigil* (1915). He inscribed the end of the score with a triumphant 'Alleluia', a vindication of a life devoted to art, and perhaps a conviction – or at least a faint hope – that peace might once again prevail.

The *Symphonic Dances* were premièred by the Philadelphia Orchestra in January 1941 and are often also heard in Rachmaninov's own spectacular version for two pianos. In 2018, a recording surfaced of the composer demonstrating the score to the conductor Eugene Ormandy. It was the discovery of this recording that inspired **Inon Barnatan** to make a version of his own: 'hearing the composer play it alone on a single piano, I got a tantalizing new perspective on how the score must have been conceived, and how a solo piano version could promise a new dimension of spontaneity and flexibility. All I had to do was create it'. Rachmaninov was a keen transcriber of other composers' works, making Barnatan's version of the *Symphonic Dances* a worthy act of homage to that greatest of composer-pianists.

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