

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 7 May 2023
7.30pm

Benjamin Grosvenor piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin
BWV1004 (1720) *arranged by Ferruccio Busoni*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasie in C Op. 17 (1836-8)
*I. Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich
vorzutragen - Im Legendenton*
II. Mässig. Durchaus energisch
III. Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten

Interval

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)
I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane •
IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1939-42)
I. Allegro inquieto • II. Andante caloroso •
III. Precipitato

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Familiar in countless transcriptions, the titanic final *Chaconne* of **JS Bach**'s violin Partita No. 2 in D minor is an expressive and architectural miracle. In it 64 continuous variations unfold over repetitions, actual or implied, of a stern four-bar falling bass line. Each of the *Chaconne*'s three large sections - two in D minor, with a lyrical centrepiece in D major - traces a crescendo of virtuoso brilliance and emotional intensity, culminating in a noble restatement of the opening bars, with a final new chromatic twist to the harmony.

Composers from Mendelssohn onwards have transcribed and elaborated the *Chaconne*. Brahms made an arrangement for piano left-hand. But the stupendous version made in 1891-2 by that avid Bach transcriber **Ferruccio Busoni** (1866-1924) outdoes all comers in textural complexity and torrential keyboard virtuosity. Busoni dedicated his transcription to fellow composer and pianist Eugen d'Albert, who recoiled from its technical demands and refused to perform it.

In June 1836 **Robert Schumann** sublimated his despair at his enforced separation from Clara Wieck in a movement titled *Ruines. Fantaisie...* That autumn he added two more movements, *Trophies* and *Palms*, to create what he termed a 'Grand Sonata for the Pianoforte for Beethoven's Monument...' - a reference to Liszt's project to raise funds for a Beethoven monument in Bonn. By the time the work appeared in print in 1839 it had become a *Fantasia*, with the titles replaced by a quotation from the Romantic poet Friedrich Schlegel: 'Through all the sounds in earth's motley dream, one soft note echoes for the one who listens in secret'. 'Are not *you* really the "note" in the motto?' wrote Robert to Clara in June 1839.

Marked 'fantastic and passionate throughout', the first movement is permeated by the 'Clara motto' of five descending notes, heard in the opening bars. Also threaded through the movement are veiled references to the last song in Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*, which finally sounds explicitly in the coda: at once a tender avowal to Schumann's own 'distant beloved', and a reminder that Schumann conceived the *Fantasia* as a homage to Beethoven.

Clara described the second movement as 'a victory march of warriors returning from battle'. Schumann here augments the orchestral weight of sound with spread chords that fractionally anticipate the main beat. Clara's motto reappears both in the main section and in the more relaxed central trio, where the melody is often half-concealed in an inner part.

After two highly charged movements the finale, marked 'slowly and softly throughout', exudes a profound spiritual peace. The Clara allusions are legion, beginning with the motto (sounded in the bass in bar five), and continuing with a reference to Schubert's song 'Die Gebüsche' ('The bushes'), which contains the cryptic Schlegel lines quoted at the head of the *Fantasia*.

Small and slight, **Maurice Ravel** was determined to fight for France in World War One. 'Surely they'll finish up being seduced by the grace of my anatomy', he

commented after being rejected for military service in autumn 1914. While attempting to enlist he began a projected *Suite française* by composing a bittersweet *Forlane* modelled on François Couperin (1668-1733). (The *forlane* was originally a lively Italian folk dance before being refined at the court of Louis XIV.) As the criteria for enlistment relaxed, Ravel was pronounced fit for service in March 1915, though even then the would-be bombardier was directed to drive lorries at Verdun. Only in the summer of 1917, after being discharged with a heart condition, did he add five pieces to the original *Forlane* and retitle the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin*.

'The tribute is directed not so much towards the individual figure of Couperin as to the whole of French music of the 18th Century', wrote Ravel. Yet on another level the suite is a memorial both to six of his friends killed in the War, and to his own mother who had died early in 1917. Opening with a *Prélude* that spices Baroque *moto perpetuo* figuration with decidedly un-Baroque harmonies, *Le tombeau de Couperin* filters Ravel's personal desolation through the styles and forms of a more elegant age.

Some of Ravel's contemporaries mistook the music's surface lightness and grace for an inappropriate levity, to which the composer responded: 'The dead are sad enough in their eternal silence.'

With **Prokofiev**'s Seventh Piano Sonata, triumphantly premièred by Sviatoslav Richter in Moscow in January 1943, we move from one World War to another. Completed in 1942, months after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, the Sonata forms the central panel of Prokofiev's triptych of 'War Sonatas', Nos. 6-8. It became the most performed of all his sonatas, and won the composer a Stalin Prize. Prokofiev was doubtless relieved that the jury failed to pick up the slow movement's reference to a song by Robert Schumann.

Constantly evading its nominal key of B flat, the first movement alternates music in faster (*Allegro inquieto* = anxiously) and slower tempos, linked by their use of repeated note patterns. The *Allegros* evoke a wild gallop, brutally punctured by crushed chords and rising in the central section to a new pitch of dissonance. Prokofiev often seems to be thinking orchestrally, at one point asking the repeated notes to be played '*quasi Timp[ani]*'. The same repeated-note pattern sounds softly in dreamily wandering *andantino* sections, marked *espressivo e dolente*.

The *Andante caloroso* ('warm') is framed by an unmistakable allusion (in the alto register) to 'Wehmut' ('Sadness') from Schumann's *Liederkreis* Op. 39. The mood is shattered at the movement's violent centre (*poco più animato*), whose bell chimes continue to sound after the crisis has receded. Living up to its *Precipitato* billing, the finale, in 7/8 metre, is a toccata of demonic energy and fiendish difficulty, shot through with fleeting shards of lyricism before hurtling to its pitiless close.

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