

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 7 October 2022  
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

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|---|---|
| <b>Johann Sebastian Bach</b><br>(1685-1750) | Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720)<br><i>arranged by Ferruccio Busoni</i>  |
| <b>Maurice Ravel</b> (1875-1937)            | Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)  |
| <b>Fryderyk Chopin</b> (1810-1849)          | Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 35 'Funeral March' (1837-9)<br><i>I. Grave - Doppio movimento • II. Scherzo •<br/>III. Marche funèbre • IV. Finale. Presto</i> |
| <i>Interval</i>                             |   |
| <b>Nicolas Medtner</b> (1880-1951)          | Sonata-Reminiscenza from <i>Forgotten Melodies, Cycle I</i> Op. 38<br>(?1919-22)  |
| <b>Maurice Ravel</b>                        | Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)<br><i>I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane •<br/>IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata</i>  |

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‘On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings.’ Thus Brahms described **Bach’s** Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin. Bach may have been more than able to encapsulate a vast gamut of emotions and experiences on a single stave, yet composers (including Brahms himself) have never quite been able to refrain from adapting its final *Chaconne* to their own ends. It was in 1893 that **Busoni** produced his transcription, perhaps the most famous of them all, and one of an extensive series of editions and arrangements of Bach’s works that he made around the turn of the century. In it, he tests the limits of Romantic virtuosity and employs – and even transcends – the full range of the piano’s expressive capabilities. Yet the theme and 64 variations that make up Bach’s *Chaconne* are no mere exercise in technique for its own sake. Its concentrated emotional intensity has led many to speculate about the circumstances that inspired it, and some have suggested that Bach’s original might be a memorial to his first wife, Maria Barbara, who died in 1720.

The chaconne is a stately dance in triple time that may have originated in the Spanish colonies of South America in the 16th Century, before becoming popular in Europe. Likewise, the pavane was a solemn dance associated with Spanish court ritual (its name may also be derived from the Italian city of Padova). **Ravel’s** *Pavane pour une infante défunte* dates from 1899, when he was still studying with Fauré at the Paris Conservatoire. Fauré had himself written a famous *Pavane* for solo piano in 1887, and Ravel’s exercise can be seen as something of an homage to his teacher. It was, however, dedicated to the Franco-American patron, salon hostess and sewing-machine heiress Winnaretta Singer, known by her married name as the Princesse Edmond de Polignac. For such a short, even gnomic piece, the *Pavane* has elicited a good deal of commentary, and its title has led many to wonder who the ‘dead child’ might actually be. Ravel countered such speculation in characteristically ironic tone. ‘When I put together the words that make up this title,’ he said, ‘my only thought was the pleasure of alliteration.’ As he went on, ‘it is not a funeral lament for a dead child, but rather an evocation of the pavane that might have been danced by such a little princess as painted by Velázquez.’

In 1837, **Chopin** composed his *March funèbre*, and this single movement has gone on to become one of his most celebrated works, performed at funerals and memorial services around the world – including at Chopin’s own, held at Paris’s Père Lachaise cemetery on 30 October 1849. Two years after its composition, he returned to this sombre torso, placing it at the emotional heart of an extended four-movement sonata. It was a bold decision for a composer associated above all with the delicacy and intimacy of the prelude, the etude, the mazurka, and the nocturne. In the sonata, however, he set aside the

world of the miniature and began to experiment with more complex and expansive structures – just as he would do in other late works, such as his third piano sonata (1844) and cello sonata (1846). Not everyone was convinced. Schumann felt that Chopin ‘could not quite handle sonata form’, and that the sonata was little more than ‘four of his most unruly children’, housed under the same musical roof. Schumann’s criticism seems unfounded, for as well as Chopin’s abundant lyricism, the sonata contains allusions to works by Bach and Beethoven, and combines emotional sincerity with understated intellectual sophistication.

**Medtner’s** wistful, one-movement *Sonata-Reminiscenza* is simultaneously the tenth of his 14 piano sonatas, and the first movement of his first cycle of *Forgotten Melodies*, published in 1922. An outspoken opponent of musical modernism, Medtner looked instead to the legacy of German and Russian Romanticism. He revered Goethe, Beethoven and Pushkin, who, he felt, offered an antidote to the chaos and disorder of contemporary life. Less well known than his near contemporaries Rachmaninov and Skryabin, he left Soviet Russia in 1921, touring France, Germany and the United States as a pianist, before finally settling in London in 1935, where he lived until his death in 1951. His aesthetic views and compositional style did not always endear him to audiences and critics, although he has long enjoyed the loyalty of a small group of devoted admirers. Rachmaninov called him ‘the most talented composer of our age’, and he was a regular visitor to Wigmore Hall.

Medtner’s ‘reminiscence’ would appear to hark back to the lost culture of pre-revolutionary Russia. In *Le tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel employs six movements typical of a Baroque suite to honour not just French music of the 18th Century, but also a number of friends and colleagues killed during the Great War. The *Prélude*, *Fugue* and *Forlane* are written in memory of Jacques Charlot, Jean Cruppi and Gabriel Deluc respectively, and the *Rigaudon* celebrates Ravel’s childhood friends, Pierre and Pascal Gaudin. The *Menuet* remembers Jean Dreyfus, and the concluding *Toccata* pays homage to Joseph de Marliave, the husband of Marguerite Long, who premièred the *Tombeau* on 11 April 1919. In his transcription of Bach’s *Chaconne*, Busoni had transformed a Baroque dance into a flamboyant piece of Romantic pianism in the spirit of Liszt. Ravel’s relationship to the music of the past was altogether cooler and more aloof, though no less sincere. Anticipating the stripped-down mood and ironic manner of interwar neo-classicism, he rightly grasped that less is often more, and that sobriety need not mean solemnity. ‘The dead are sad enough’, he wisely observed, ‘in their eternal silence.’

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