

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 7 September 2023
7.30pm

Sir Stephen Hough piano

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| Federico Mompou (1893-1987) | Cants màgics (1917-9) <i>Energic • Obscur • Profond - Lent • Misteriós • Calma</i> |
| Claude Debussy (1862-1918) | Estampes (1903) <i>Pagodes</i> <i>La soirée dans Grenade</i> <i>Jardins sous la pluie</i> |
| Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915) | Piano Sonata No. 5 Op. 53 (1907) <i>Interval</i> |
| Sir Stephen Hough (b.1961) | Partita (2019) <i>I. Overture • II. Capriccio • III. Canción y Danza I •</i> <i>IV. Canción y Danza II • V. Toccata</i> |
| Franz Liszt (1811-1886) | From <i>Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année, Italie</i> S161 (1838-61) <i>Sonetto del Petrarca No. 47</i> <i>Sonetto del Petrarca No. 104</i> <i>Sonetto del Petrarca No. 123</i> <i>Après une lecture du Dante</i> |



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Sir Stephen Hough gives us his own introduction: 'There are a couple of themes occurring throughout this programme: firstly the world of charms and spells: Mompou's *Magic Songs*, then Debussy's triptych with its dreams of Asia, Spain and France, then Skryabin's audacious conjuring of ecstatic fire. We end the concert in hell with Liszt. But also I wanted to celebrate composer-pianists, not so much as performers but as creators at the piano. It is impossible to imagine the music in the first half of this programme as having been written away from the keyboard, so direct is the connection from hands to strings to sound.'

The story goes that **Mompou**, as a young man in Barcelona about to start studies at the Paris Conservatoire, was given by Enrique Granados a letter of introduction to the institution's director, Gabriel Fauré. He failed to deliver that letter. Had he done so, perhaps he could never have written the music he did, for this is music of reticence, of standing back, of waiting. It hardly belongs in the 20th Century - least of all at one of that century's hotspots, for Mompou was in Paris at the time of the *Rite of Spring* première. But there it is, in all its contradictory simplicity: quiet yet definite, modest yet intimating worlds.

The set *Cants mágics* of 1917-9, the first work Mompou published, contains many of his abiding features: simple repetition, ostinato, bell chords (Mompou's mother came from a long line of bell founders, and he in his youth worked briefly in the factory), free rhythm unarticulated by barlines. It is music untying itself, but also, by its own rules, pulling itself absolutely tight. 'I don't think I could ever,' he said, 'enclose my music in the *correct* world.'

Debussy felt the same way. *Estampes* (1903) was his first set of piano pieces showing how music could now hold a paintbrush in its hand, the overall title 'Prints' referring to the Japanese images then in vogue.

Pagodes opens the group in an instantly Eastern location, with gong sounds and, soon, a pentatonic motif (drawn from a five-note scale). As this goes on revolving, a more European theme enters in the left hand, now descending and ascending, and turning the pentatonic mode into a Lydian one. Perhaps the Asian image is a Western dream. There is a middle section, more with the occidental dreamer, but the Asian motif persists, to regain its original identity in the wholesale reprise.

The second piece, *La soirée dans Grenade*, announces its place and its time with a waft of habanera rhythm - which will remain throughout - and the moonlight of C sharps resonating across six octaves. Guitar sounds confirm the Iberian location. The piece is composed of small fragments, recurring or new, that lead back to the opening along a route more circuitous than the ABA pattern of its predecessor. Near the end comes a beautiful effect of two musics intercut, one more distant, fading.

Jardins sous la pluie is, in several senses, a homecoming. It is based on two nursery songs from France; it is tonally clearer, starting in E minor to end affirmatively in the major; and besides offering a musical picture, as arpeggios teem over the melodic phrases like rain on flowers, it is the kind of toccata finale Debussy often preferred.

It was while tidying his recently completed *Poem of Ecstasy* that **Skryabin** composed his single-movement Fifth Sonata, in the latter part of 1907. The magician swirls his cloak and brings forward the first inklings of something alluring. Suddenly, on a compulsive rhythm, a dance bursts in. The two continue in alternation: expectation and exhilaration. Increasingly they show what they share, which is, again, ecstasy. Finally this is bodied forth, but only for a moment before it must whisk itself away.

'My *Partita*, to quote **Sir Stephen Hough** again, 'is in five movements. Its outer, more substantial bookends suggest the world of a grand cathedral organ. The first of these alternates between ceremonial pomp and sentimental circumstance, whereas the final movement, taking thematic material from the first, is a virtuosic *Toccata* - a sortie out of the gothic gloom into brilliant Sunday sunshine. At the centre of the work are three shorter movements each utilising the interval of a fifth: a restless, jagged *Capriccio* of constantly shifting time signatures, and two *Canciones y Danzas*, inspired by the Catalan composer we heard at the beginning: Federico Mompou.'

Liszt's dreams are different. The second, Italian volume of his travel notebooks 'Pilgrim Years' includes a night's worth, evoked by his reading of Petrarch and Dante. Petrarch made him dream, inevitably, of love - of love as expressed in Italian opera of his time. When he began this project, in his mid-30s, he was working on versions both as songs and as solo piano pieces, and the vocal setting of Sonnet 104 has the form of a recitative and aria. He condensed the former in the piano solo version, to get more quickly to the gorgeous aria theme (each of the three pieces has its rapturous love melody), and condensed it further on the way to the music's final state, published in 1858.

The Dante piece came three years later as a supplement, based on a poem in which Victor Hugo spirits up visions from the *Inferno*. Liszt, who had read Dante before he read Hugo, does the same to begin with. However, this is, to go by its subtitle, a 'fantasia quasi una sonata', and a reprise of the first hellish outburst leads into paradisiacal music that might be counted a sonata-form second subject. Hell comes roaring back, but the stars of heaven return to guide the music, though assailed, to a rousing positive conclusion.

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