

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 8 January 2024  
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in G sharp minor Op. 19 'Sonata Fantasy'  
(1892-7)

*I. Andante • II. Presto*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Kreisleriana Op. 16 (1838)

*Äusserst bewegt • Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch •  
Sehr aufgeregt • Sehr langsam • Sehr lebhaft •  
Sehr langsam • Sehr rasch • Schnell und spielend*

*Interval*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor Op. 20 (c.1833)

Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 31 (1837)

Scherzo No. 3 in C sharp minor Op. 39 (1839)

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



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'You've had that piece long enough! Send it to me right away.' **Skryabin's** publisher and friend, Mitrofan Belyayev, was referring here to the composer's Piano Sonata No. 2 in G sharp minor Op. 19, a work that, despite its modest length, was almost six years in the making. 'It has been revised seven times', the composer remarked, before finally submitting it to **Belyayev** in 1898. Sandwiched between the dark-hued and expansive first and third sonatas, Skryabin's second is lighter and more luminous in character. Its two-movement design (slow-fast), to be replicated in the fourth sonata, embodies an underlying archetype – a pairing of speculative questing and joyful, flight-like euphoria – that would become characteristic of Skryabin's later music more generally, shaping not just the larger form but even the fragmentary phrase or sentence.

The composer himself privately acknowledged a generalised programme for the second sonata, a variegated seascape inspired by his first sight of the Baltic Sea in Latvia. But this is not made explicit, and listeners may do better to focus on the generic subtitle 'Sonata Fantasy'. Despite its sonata-form outline, the first movement has the improvisatory quality of a fantasy, its intricate and nuanced rhythms – echoes of Chopin – constituting a kind of composed-out *rubato* (in this respect, the expressive fluidity of Skryabin's own performance of the work on a piano roll is revelatory). In contrast, the second movement, marked *Presto*, is a bravura *perpetuum mobile* etude. In due course its figuration yields to melodic definition, a transformation and apotheosis of a theme from the first movement.

Subtitled 'Fantasien für Pianoforte', **Schumann's** *Kreisleriana* pays tribute to ETA Hoffmann's fictional musician Johannes Kreisler, to whose quixotic eccentricities and volatilities the composer was famously attracted. Composed at high speed in May 1838, the cycle was dedicated to Chopin, whose music was greatly admired by Schumann, but who found it difficult to reciprocate. Not that Chopin was alone in finding *Kreisleriana* hard to assimilate. The complexity and unorthodoxy of this sequence of eight pieces, whose mercurial mood swings and affective extremes were directly responsive to literary inspiration, proved baffling to many of Schumann's contemporaries. This is music that yielded up its multiple subtleties and felicities only with time. Long after its composition Schumann himself still counted it among his favourite works.

Two 'slow movements' are embedded in the cycle (Nos. 4 and 6), and represent perhaps the most explicit expression of Schumann's love for Clara Wieck ('You and one of your ideas play the main role in it'). But most of the pieces are multi-sectional, with two fast-paced intermezzi enclosed within the lyrical No. 2 and a slow section flanked by rapid, agitated figuration in No. 3. Above all, little is predictable. Note the remarkable chromatic musings that follow the second intermezzo in No. 2, casting new light on the main theme. Or the

headlong rush to the finish in No. 3. Or the abrupt collapse of a high-energy narrative into a meditative chorale in No. 7. Or, and most striking of all, how the playful right-hand figure of No. 8 is counterpointed against a sombre left-hand dirge, purposefully out-of-sync.

By adopting the title 'scherzo' for a single-movement work, **Chopin** immediately transformed its meaning, a transformation so radical that it confused not only his contemporaries but also late 19th- and early 20th-century critics. Yet his use of the term was by no means arbitrary. In general, Chopin was committed to genre as a compositional control, a force for conformity and stability. Like the four ballades, the four scherzos really do belong together. In all four, he reinterpreted the element of contrast at the heart of the conventional genre, building the central formal contrast into the detailed substance. This is clear from the opening paragraphs of all four scherzos, where fragmentary motives are presented with calculated discontinuity, something far from common in Chopin. As to what follows, all four follow a more or less complex ABA form, and all four are in the requisite triple time, but in other respects their overall characters are very different.

The simplest in construction is No. 1 in B minor (c.1833), in which a popular melody (almost certainly based on the opening phrase of a Polish carol) is enclosed within an impassioned figuration. Schumann's reaction has become legendary: 'How is gravity to clothe itself if humour wears such dark veils?' The most complex is No. 2 (1837), where the ternary design is overlaid by elements of sonata form, including thematic dualism and sections of developmental character. Yet despite the powerful contrasts and expressive differentiation between the themes, the B flat minor *Scherzo* is a closely integrated work, with clear links between the outer sections and the middle section. No. 3 in C sharp minor (1839) is as close to Liszt as Chopin ever comes, both in the bravura octave passages of the outer flanks and in the delicate washes of colour that decorate the trio, a 'hymn' in the tonic major. This hymn passes smoothly into the reprise, and since the material of the outer sections and the middle section interweaves the distinctive tripartite design is strategically blurred. In No. 4 in E (1843) Chopin returns to the simple ABA outline of the first *Scherzo*, but the construction is much more refined in the later work, and the character utterly different, as calm and benign as No. 1 is troubled and fervent. In this fourth *Scherzo* Chopin lays out spacious, relatively self-contained paragraphs, maintaining interest over a lengthy time span through a delicate juxtaposition of contrasts. The effect of these contrasts is all the more striking in that it has little to do with drama and opposition, and everything to do with the weighting and placement of essential formal components.

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