

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 8 May 2022 7.30pm

Benjamin Grosvenor piano

César Franck (1822-1890)

Prélude, choral et fugue (1884)

I. Prélude. Moderato • II. Choral. Poco più lento • III. Fugue. Tempo I

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

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

Iberia (Book 1) (1906)

Evocación • El puerto • Fête-Dieu à Séville

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Jeux d'eau (1901)

La valse (1919-20)

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As organist at Paris's Sainte-Clotilde for over 30 years, it was inevitable that **César Franck** would be influenced by the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Franck's *Prélude, choral et fugue* of 1884 was the second piece in which he had added a third movement to the prelude and fugue pairing popularised by Bach, following the *Prélude, fugue et variation* for organ over 20 years earlier.

The *Prélude* opens with a Bach-like arpeggiated figuration, but its dark complexity and searching mystery suggest a mood redolent of the neo-Gothic architecture of Sainte-Clotilde. A brief impassioned idea then follows, soon interrupted by a mournful, rising-falling melody. This is explored more fully before the figuration from the beginning returns.

The *Choral* begins as a doleful melody above a steady-treading chordal accompaniment, before reaching the chorale theme proper, a motif of eight widely spread chords recalling the 'bell' motif from Wagner's opera *Parsifal*. This motif returns twice more (the second time at its most magnificent and thunderous). The bell chorale also returns in the following *Fugue* section – ingeniously, it even overlaps with the downwards-twisting fugue theme at one point. Saint-Saëns was not enamoured of the *Prélude, choral et fugue* ('the chorale is not a chorale, nor the fugue a fugue') but he might have acknowledged its popularity, in the way that he had, begrudgingly, after levelling criticisms at Franck's Violin Sonata: 'Still, it has acquired fame: consequently there is nothing more to be said.'

Time and again Clara Wieck, whom **Robert Schumann** later married, was the inspiration for Robert's music and this was true of the eight 'fantasies' that form *Kreislarian*. 'There is a positively wild love contained in some of the movements,' Schumann wrote to her, 'and your life and mine are found there.' Yet he proceeded to dedicate the *Kreislarian* to Chopin. The title relates to ETA Hoffmann's character Johannes Kreisler, the eccentric, idealistic and musically obsessed composer and conductor whose autobiography, in Hoffmann's novel *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, ends up being mixed together at the printers with that of a would-be literary tomcat who has written his own life story.

The sudden shifts between the two stories are reflected by the sharp mood changes across the eight pieces. Unlike in his earlier *Davidsbündlertänze*, Schumann didn't ascribe any of them to either of his contrasting alter egos, the impetuous Florestan and the dreamy Eusebius – but it's clear that Florestan inhabits the more passionate (G minor) movements, and Eusebius the more serene (B flat major) ones. For its range of moods and colours, *Kreislarian* is one of the high points of Romanticism in the piano literature.

Isaac Albéniz lived much of his adult life in France as one of the influx of Spanish musicians who congregated in Paris, including Granados, Falla and Turina, arriving at a time when French composers were themselves trying to capture the exotic sounds of Spain in music.

Iberia is a collection of 12 pieces published in four volumes between 1906 and 1908, almost all of them impressions of Spanish coastal towns, songs, dances or festivals. Especially in the later volumes, they make huge technical demands of the performer. (The Portuguese pianist Artur Pizarro has described them as 'at least as mind-numbingly difficult as Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*.') The first volume, dedicated to Jeanne Chausson, the wife of the composer Ernest Chausson (a pupil of César Franck), opens with 'Evocación'. Influenced by the rhythms of the fandango and malagueña, this is the most reflective and nostalgic piece of the series. 'El puerto' pictures the bustling harbour town of Santa María in the Bay of Cadiz, drawing on the zapateado, a dance that incorporates the clicking of heels. 'Fête-Dieu à Séville' gives a flavour of technical challenges to come in *Iberia's* later volumes. It depicts the Corpus Christi day street celebrations in Seville during Holy Week, in which a procession carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary is accompanied by singing and marching music.

Though he's yet to turn 30, Benjamin Grosvenor has a long association with the music of **Maurice Ravel**, going back at least 18 years, when he played Ravel's Piano Concerto in G at the final of the 2004 BBC Young Musician competition, aged only 11. Composed in 1901, *Jeux d'eau* was a breakthrough work for a fairly young Ravel (he was 26), inspired, he said, 'by the sound of water and the music of fountains, cascades and streams'. It was first heard at a gathering of the group of composers, writers and artists calling themselves *Les Apaches* ('the Hooligans'). The writer Léon-Paul Fargue remembered, '[Ravel] seemed fuelled by previously unseen fire ... by an array of nuances and undulations that simply belonged to no-one else.' Over 120 years later, *Jeux d'eau* remains a marvel of complex figuration and supple harmony, and is one of the clearest expressions of a central conundrum underlining Ravel's music: that it is only through clarity and detail that the composer's creative imagination can be fully revealed.

La valse is one of a number of Ravel's works tinged with a dark streak (the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand and *Gaspard de la nuit* are others). It was originally an orchestral piece, composed in 1919–20 for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, but it was famously rejected by the impresario, who declared: 'It's not a ballet ... it's the painting of a ballet.' It is a phantasmagoria of waltz themes, a kaleidoscope of mysterious suggestion, wistful nostalgia and outright exuberance. The dizzying whirl threatens to spin out of control near the end, an effect – underlining again that conflict between precision and imagination – that is only possible to bring off convincingly if the pianist is entirely in control.

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