

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 9 February 2024  
1.00pm

Andrew Armstrong piano

Aaron Jay Kernis (b.1960)	Before Sleep and Dreams (1990) <i>I. Before • II. Play Before Lullaby • III. Lullaby • IV. Lights Before Sleep • V. Before Sleep and Dreams</i>
Julia Perry (1924-1979)	Prelude for piano (1946, rev. 1962)
William Grant Still (1895-1978)	Three Visions (1935) <i>Dark Horsemen • Summerland • Radiant Pinnacle</i>
George Gershwin (1898-1937)	Rhapsody in Blue (1924)



Our Audience Fund provides essential unrestricted support for our artistic and learning programmes, connecting thousands of people with music locally, nationally, and internationally. We rely on the generosity of our audience to raise £150,000 each year to support this work. Your gifts are, and continue to be, indispensable. To donate, please visit <https://wigmore-hall.org.uk/audiencefund>

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838  
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [wigmore-hall.org.uk](http://wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG  
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



### **Aaron Jay Kernis** Before Sleep and Dreams

It is quite the journey to open one's heart to Aaron Jay Kernis's *Before Sleep and Dreams*, which conjures the magical hour of children's bedtime. As the movement titles suggest, there are many chapters to this nightly ritual. But running through them all we find threads of innocence, luminescence, carefree, unbridled play and the confidence a child has in a parent's unconditional love; and yet we also feel, pulsating through the whole suite, a parent's fears for the future. This concern throbs with intensity, sometimes an aching melancholy (for the reminder of their own childhood? or perhaps acknowledging the inevitable loss of innocence as children must someday leave the nest and confront the harsh realities of the world?), and of course there is the warm serenity and gratitude of a parent's love, throughout. These layers are instantly woven together from the start of the first movement, *Before*. Open octaves begin in the treble, utterly pure, shining with promising light against any imaginable darkness. But the dampers are made to remain lifted a full 15 bars, creating complex effects as the octaves accumulate to swirl, embrace each other, add exquisite warmth - and yet, well before the 16th bar there emerges from the perfumed collage of octaves a sadness, uncertainty. This sort of miraculously crafted complexity of emotion and experience will only briefly and sporadically give way to simpler moments in coming movements. The children's *Play Before Lullaby*, for example, allows itself here and there to launch unfettered into the ecstatic giggles and kinetic frenzy of the moment before returning to the parent's watchful eye. *Lullaby* allows us a deep look into the thoughts and heart of the cooing parent, revealing a darkness of such violent aching that makes all the more heroic the tender song mustered at the surface for the child's sleep without burden. *Lights Before Sleep* is a dazzling display; are the children playing flashlight tag? Or are we seeing the headlights of the cars of grown-ups whizzing down the street outside the house? Or are these stars waiting to play behind the children's eyelids? The final movement, *Before Sleep and Dreams*, gives us at last the chance to allow ourselves, as parents, as stewards of generations to come, hope, gratitude, a sense that everything is just as it was meant to be and we are the lucky ones to have a ticket on this ride.

### **Julia Perry** Prelude

Julia Perry's *Prelude* makes an outsized impression in light of its short duration. To my ear (and heart), it occupies a special space between the music of Thelonious Monk and church music of the American

South. Julia Perry was born in Kentucky, moved to Ohio, then trained musically at Westminster Choir College in New Jersey, as well as Tanglewood, Juilliard, and ultimately with the great Nadia Boulanger in Paris. The *Prelude* played here is of such uncertain tonality that the real constant is the repeated melodic gesture, 2-, 3-, and 4-step descents that try out and live through a variety of harmonic dressings, sometimes sumptuous, jarring, jazzy, spiritual and more. The clangorous final chord is at least as surprising as it is triumphantly conclusive.

### **William Grant Still** Three Visions

Returning to deeper terrain again, William Grant Still's *Three Visions* creates a poignant counterweight to the Kernis suite that begins the programme. Still had a distinctive perspective on death and the afterlife, painted unforgettably in the sounds of these three movements. A terrifying first 90-second journey, *Dark Horsemen*, snatches our perished souls up without warning, dragging us off to our fate beyond this life, we know not where. The sounds of the galloping hooves and shrieking, frightful horsemen are unmistakable here. Lucky for us, we are deposited in *Summerland*, Still's word for heaven. Here is a vision of blissful paradise in the hereafter that lies somewhere between the worlds of *Clair de lune* and Bill Evans's solo jazz piano. The final vision, *Radiant Pinnacle*, takes a step further even, moving into esotericism, a sense of pacing and harmonic movement that is truly in its own world.

### **George Gershwin** Rhapsody in Blue

As Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* turns 100 this year, on 12 February 2024, it was the only way to close this celebration of great American compositions. I love the piece beyond all measure. I'll never forget the first time I walked off stage having performed it: I felt guilty for having spent all that time on stage without mustering a single furrowed brow. It was all just so much FUN! Gershwin famously saw the *Rhapsody* as a 'musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.' Here in the solo version made by the composer, the piano gets to imitate a wailing clarinet and a bass clarinet, trumpets with plungers, and the whole band blaring away on that irresistible Final Act strut. When it's all said and done, it's about the most guilt-free romp one can find!

© Andrew Armstrong 2024

*Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.*