

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 9 June 2023
1.00pm

Marc-André Hamelin piano

Paul Dukas (1865-1935)

Piano Sonata in E flat minor (1899-1900)

- I. Modérément vite (expressif et marqué)*
- II. Calme, un peu lent, très soutenu*
- III. Vivement, avec légèreté*
- IV. Très lent - Animé*

Marc-André Hamelin (b.1961)

Suite à l'ancienne (2020)

- I. Prélude • II. Allemande*
- III. Corrente • IV. Air avec agréments*
- V. Gavotte et musette • VI. Gigue*

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Paul Dukas was born in the same year as Carl Nielsen, Jean Sibelius and Alexander Glazunov, and a year after Richard Strauss. A fellow student of Claude Debussy at the Conservatoire de Paris and a close friend of his, Dukas enjoyed such success with his orchestral scherzo *L'Apprenti sorcier* (1897) that it began to eclipse his other work, at length becoming irksome to its reticent and bookish creator; aptly though, perhaps, since the tidal wave of its runaway popularity could not be stemmed.

Dukas composed his Piano Sonata in 1899-1900 and dedicated it to Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921). Its existence, or at any rate survival, is noteworthy both on account of its composer's unforgiving self-criticism and because of the long and intimidating shadow cast in France by the piano sonatas of Beethoven: it is notable that not even a piano virtuoso of the stature of Saint-Saëns ventured to write a sonata for his own instrument, though there is no dearth of contemporaneous French sonatas for accompanied solo string instruments. It is all the more remarkable that Paul Dukas was, in the words of Roger Nichols, 'no kind of pianist' himself, and yet the E flat minor Piano Sonata is a work in which drama and passion are conveyed with a virtuoso's understanding of the keyboard and the hands upon it.

The Sonata's opening subject, with its fragmented, restlessly sighing thematic material and its hand-crossings, perceptibly echoes aspects of the *Prélude, choral et fugue* (1884) by César Franck (1822-1890). This theme launches a tempestuous ten-minute movement in which chromatic harmony becomes too labyrinthine to depend on a listener's ability to follow Classical norms of key relationship. Instead, the principal themes are expansively developed in the central stages, before a recapitulation is clearly signalled by the opening music's return. Despite the movement's formal elegance, its uneasily subdued ending portends unfinished business.

The second movement has been held to extend the lineage of Beethoven's great slow movements, its dimensions reminiscent of his 'Hammerklavier' Sonata Op. 106. Beginning in simple *arioso* style and ultimately returning to it after a restlessly expansive intervening journey, this music is swept aside by the torrential onset of Dukas's third movement. This adopts a traditional A-B-A design, but between its stormy outer sections unfolds a much slower and notably enigmatic fugue, often spare in texture and tortuously sidelong in tonal direction. The first three notes of its subject emerge from what feels like an imperfectly recaptured chordal fragment of some forgotten chorale. This idea resurfaces briefly in the movement's closing stages, framed by cryptic silences, before evaporating in the most insubstantial of endings.

The finale opens with a spacious recitative-like introduction before accelerating into a tempo indicated as *Animé* but also 'without haste'. The syncopated motif driving this music is of greater unifying importance than its melodic dimension and permeates the unhurried, nobly aspiring major-key melody introduced soon

afterwards. Again, the movement is in sonata form and this theme duly reappears later in the key of E flat major, the ultimate destination of the work. A satisfyingly integrated statement in itself, the finale registers also as a triumphant synthesis of everything that has gone before.

In 2003 **Marc-André Hamelin** recorded for the Hyperion label a programme of works by the Ukrainian-born composer Nikolai Kapustin (1937-2020), including a *Suite in the Old Style* Op. 28 (1977). The classically-trained Kapustin's touring as pianist with Oleg Lundstrem's Jazz Orchestra led him repeatedly to combine Classical (or Baroque) forms with a jazz idiom. In the words of Jed Distler in his Hyperion booklet notes, Kapustin's *Suite* tapped into 'the rich mother lode of African-American spirituals and Gospel music through the structural contours of a Bach French Suite or Partita, with each movement corresponding to its precise Baroque counterpart'. Harmonic divergences aside, Distler's description fits Hamelin's own *Suite à l'ancienne* well enough for us to think of that work as perhaps in part a tribute to Kapustin's. The virtuoso demands are of the same order and both works acknowledge Baroque precedent in their choice of titles. However, Hamelin allows himself more freedom within the forms, giving us a *Corrente* more in ternary than in binary structure; also an *Air* in whose title the qualification *avec agréments* ('with ornaments', or embellishments) is licence for greater variety and impressionism in the texture than Baroque practice encompassed.

A floridly improvisatory opening *Préambule* leads to a sunnily relaxed *Allemande* in conventional binary form. The *Corrente* is, until its very final bars, a quicksilver *moto perpetuo* of semiquavers (the title 'Toccatina' would be just as apt). The aforementioned *Air* revisits some of the keyboard figuration of the *Préambule*. The ensuing *Gavotte* embraces a whimsical touch of vaudeville in its throwaway phrase-endings. It is reprised in traditional *da capo* fashion after the *musette* - where the quasi-bagpipe drone bass element is refashioned into a shadowy undulation of triplet quavers. The concluding *Gigue* becomes a frenetic kind of 'scherzo-tarantella'. Its alarming technical difficulties are insouciantly incidental to the musical argument and never the mere point of the exercise. Despite this and Hamelin's trademark chordal overtones or passing moments of polytonality, at heart the music is straightforwardly rooted in the key of A major. In keeping with the genre's closed, self-contained forms, the *Suite à l'ancienne* predominantly embraces clearcut harmonic shifts and metrical phrases which the listener can comfortably navigate. Eschewing the Gospel tradition, Hamelin's compositional idiom is here inflected by jazz harmonic language in more oblique, less rhythmically-allusive ways than Kapustin's. While the adage about the sincerest form of flattery may apply, Hamelin is no mere imitator and his own distinctive voice is clearly evident.

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