

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 9 May 2022 1.00pm

Gabriela Montero piano

BBC
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2 (1835)

Polonaise-fantaisie in A flat Op. 61 (1846)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Piano Sonata (1924)

I. • II. Adagietto • III.

Gabriela Montero (b.1970)

Improvisations

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Two factors emerge from Gabriela Montero's programme. One is improvisation, illusory or real; the other is the crucial role the salons and their hostesses once played in the promotion of the arts in general and of music in particular. The salons of Paris soon became a fixture in **Chopin's** short life, after he moved there from Warsaw in 1830, aged 20. Here he moved easily among the aristocratic and metropolitan elite, where he was much in demand teaching noble wives and daughters and where the more intimate spaces suited the refinement of the soft-voiced, short-decay Pleyel pianos that flattered his composing and playing style – during his time in Paris as an ex-patriate, he gave only 18 public recitals.

As with his waltzes, Chopin had his first big success with his nocturnes, and his much-loved Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2 (1835) is one of the most ingratiating and inspired of these arias without words. It is generally thought that the word *nocturne* was first attached to solo piano pieces by the Irish composer John Field in the first decade of the 19th Century – the painter Whistler would first use the term in the early 1870s – and Field's nocturnes would have well suited the polite salon ambience. Chopin maintained the relatively simple ternary form, but he elevated, often transcendently, the genre's range and depth. He dedicated the two Op. 27 works to his pupil and frequent salon hostess Countess Teresa Apponyi, the wife of the Austrian ambassador to France. Chopin was a master at concealing structure and craft beneath a seamless flow of lyrical inspiration and magical decoration, to the extent that it can sound improvisational. The second of the Op. 27 pair is a fine example of this, with a *bel canto* melody 'conducted' and caressed by the left-hand arpeggiated accompaniment that holds everything without compromising the generally serene and quiet drama flowing from the right hand.

The same improvisational quality is less pronounced in the great *Polonaise-fantaisie* Op. 61. Chopin wrote the work in 1846, when he was becoming increasingly ill with tuberculosis, and when his relationship with George Sand was unravelling. It was his last extended composition, and it gave him some trouble. Despite its organic feel, he added the famous rhapsodic and improvisational opening at a late stage, and to begin with he referred to the work as a *Fantaisie*, before including the title's *Polonaise*. Starting around seven years old, Chopin wrote about 23 polonaises, but, apart from Op. 61, there are only six for solo piano among the works of his maturity. They embrace patriotism fierce and tender, heroism, ceremonial dance and *marche-militaire* swagger, although the standard polonaise 3/4 metre is hardly suited to marching. After Op. 61's rhapsodic, bard-like opening, Chopin keeps his main theme under subliminal wraps,

its identity continuously changing. A rhythmic fanfare of E flat octaves snaps things into unequivocal polonaise focus, but there is still a strong element of restless development before the music switches into a meditative, slow central section in B major, then back to the opening for an abrupt, aggressive conclusion. The *Polonaise-fantaisie* shows Chopin at his most exploratory in terms of structure and harmonic range, and one can only speculate where this might have led him had he lived longer.

Some 75 years later, **Stravinsky** dedicated his Piano Sonata (1924) to the Princesse de Polignac in gratitude for her hosting the pre-première performance of his Piano Concerto in her salon earlier the same year. Winnaretta Singer, the American heiress to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune, had married Prince Edmond de Polignac in 1893 and established her salon in Paris, which for more than half a century was a central platform for *avant-garde* music. Noted for her colourful private life, she was a formidable philanthropist, but music was her passion. For 50 years, between 1888 and 1939 (she died in 1943), the European cultural elite gathered at her house, and her love for the music of Bach encouraged Stravinsky's embrace of neo-classicism, which had begun in 1920 with *Pulcinella*.

The outer movements of the Piano Sonata are modernist versions of Bach, the first a contrapuntal prelude in conflicting tonalities, the third like a (mainly) two-part invention. The central *Adagietto* is a highly decorated aria suspended over a distinctive staccato accompaniment, nearer to Beethoven than Bach, marking a change of taste in favour of a composer whom the youthful Stravinsky had roundly dismissed. There are few expressive or dynamic directions, while the metronome markings for the two Bachian movements are precise.

Among the audience for a performance of the sonata given by the composer at La Fenice at the 1925 International Society for Contemporary Music festival in Venice were Cole Porter, Toscanini, Janáček, Diaghilev and Schoenberg. Schoenberg is reported to have walked out, and the critic Henry Prunières observed that people wondered why the composer of *The Rite of Spring* was drawn to write a sequel to *The Well-tempered Clavier*.

There is no hint of improvisation in the Stravinsky, but it returns to take centre-stage at the end of this recital. **Gabriella Montero's** affinity for improvisation is well-known, and whatever closes the concert is certain to be an enchanting surprise.

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