

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 9 September 2021 7.30pm

**Jonathan Plowright** piano

**César Franck** (1822-1890)

**Fryderyk Chopin** (1810-1849)

**Jacques Ibert** (1890-1962)

Prélude, fugue et variation Op. 18 (1860-62) *transcribed by Ignaz Friedman*

Nocturne in B Op. 9 No. 3 (1830-31)

Fantasy in F minor Op. 49 (1841)

Histoires (1920-21)

*La meneuse de tortues d'or • Le petit âne blanc • Le vieux mendiant • 'A Giddy Girl' • Dans la maison triste • Le palais abandonné • Bajo la mesa • La cage de cristal • La marchande d'eau fraîche • Le cortège de Balkis*

Interval

**Franz Schubert** (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)

*I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio • IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

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**Franck's** over-ambitious father named his first-born son Caesar-Augustus, and did his best to turn him into the child-prodigy pianist and composer that he could not quite be. At the age of 21, the exhausted young man retired into obscurity until his father forbade him to see his new lady-love, whereupon César pruned his name, moved in with her, and proceeded to turn himself into a great organist. His *6 Pièces*, the most important organ works since Mendelssohn, were published in 1868. The *Prélude, Fugue et Variation* form the third piece. The *Prélude* is one of Franck's most attractive melodies, tempering the grace of waltz-time with 5-bar phrases and hemiola (where the music swings into duple time for a moment). The *Fugue*, marked *serioso*, leads, surprisingly enough, into a variation of itself, which turns out to be a counter-melody to the original tune.

The 18 nocturnes **Chopin** published during his lifetime span the whole of his composing career, from 1830 to 1846. A nocturne is a right-hand melody with a left-hand accompaniment, a device hit on by the Irish composer John Field to demonstrate the beauties of the pianos he was selling. Surprisingly few piano pieces used this texture until the early nineteenth century – eighteenth-century melodies were always breaking off to be developed. Chopin used the nocturne's simplicity to search out strange musical depths. The B major Nocturne, composed in 1831, is one of the more elaborate, with an agitated central section. In the main melody, Chopin enjoys playing with the difference between a dotted note and a note followed by a short rest – the same rhythm, but with the light let in.

The F minor *Fantaisie* of 1841 is one of just three Chopin pieces that end in the 'wrong' key, perhaps an outcome of their improvisatory origin. Unusually, Chopin frames the piece with two types of march – the noble, almost funereal, opening contrasting with the brilliant élan of the end.

**Jacques Ibert** was originally interested in the stage, and drifted into musical education while teaching drama at the Paris Conservatoire. The Great War took him into the Navy, where he won the Croix de Guerre and the Légion d'honneur. In 1919 he won the prestigious Prix de Rome. He returned to Rome in 1937 as the Director of the French Academy, and in the 1950s he was director at the Opéra Comique in Paris. *Histoires*, composed in 1920-21, was commissioned by his publisher.

1828 was the year **Schubert** gave his public concert – just the one, in his whole lifetime. It dropped like a very small pebble into the Viennese musical pool, completely eclipsed by the enormous splash made by Paganini that same week. The receipts were soon spent, and Schubert, in declining health, found himself unable to take an essential holiday

from the early industrial fug of Vienna. In an attempt to find cleaner air, he went to stay with his brother Ferdinand in his new apartment in a developing suburb. He was expecting to die from syphilis; but because the well in Ferdinand's courtyard was not dug deep enough, syphilis found itself in a race with typhoid. On November 4th, deciding his counterpoint wasn't good enough, he embarked upon a course with the noted theorist Simon Sechter. Schubert wrote a few exercises for him (which, amazingly, turned up suddenly in 1969), but on November 19th, at the age of 31, he died.

While he was staying with Ferdinand, he worked on his greatest masterpieces. The last three piano sonatas were composed in September, and the great C major String Quintet soon after. There were the extraordinary Heine settings, and the Rellstab songs, lumped together by the publisher as the 'cycle' *Schwanengesang*; there was the sublimely optimistic cheerfulness of *The Shepherd on the Rock*. His final occupation, on his deathbed, was the correction of the proofs of *Winterreise*, that supreme song cycle that has become one of those iconic works that everyone must hear, regardless of their taste, its reputation taking on a life of its own. A precious autumn indeed.

The very last sonata, in B flat, was for many years the most recorded piano sonata of all. It owes its popularity, apart from the sadness of the circumstances of its creation, to its refinement of all Schubert had learnt in a short life mostly spent sitting at a piano. To take just one example: which child has not revelled in banging the piano's bottom note? – 'the note the cat died on', according to my grandmother. About twenty seconds into his sonata, Schubert sublimates this universal urge into an incredibly disturbing trill on his piano's bottom note. And he gives that trill at least three functions. There's the purely atavistic response to its stylized growl, and its easy recognisability as a recurring element of the movement's formal progress. But Schubert also uses its peculiarly terminal quality to make a formal distinction which, his counterpoint course suggests, was beginning to stir his interest. The bottom-note trill can only be followed by a blank pause before the theme returns for a second attempt. This time, the trill is not on the bottom note, and the theme can blossom into something much more melodic, in the key of the bottom-note-but-one. To what unknowable riches this exploration of the terrain between Theme and Tune might have led, had Schubert lived!

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