

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 14 March 2022 7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

CLASSIC *f*M Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

Enrique Granados (1867-1916)

Quejas, o La maja y el ruiseñor from *Goyescas* (1909-12)

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

El Albaicín from *Iberia* (Book 3) (1907)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Miroirs (1904-5)

*Noctuelles • Oiseaux tristes • Une barque sur l'océan •
Alborada del gracioso • La vallée des cloches*

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Moment musical in E flat minor Op. 16 No. 2 (1896)

Moment musical in B minor Op. 16 No. 3 (1896)

Moment musical in E minor Op. 16 No. 4 (1896)

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 8 in B flat Op. 84 (1939-44)

I. Andante dolce • II. Andante sognando • III. Vivace

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The programme has been updated since these notes were written.

My thoughts are constantly with the unimaginably brave Ukrainian people, fighting to defend their lives and freedom from Russia's abominable invasion. As a tiny gesture of support, for as long as the invasion continues (and beyond!), I will be learning works by Ukrainian composers and sharing them on social media, and later in concert. Praying that peace may be restored soon in Ukraine.

For this recital, I would like to include Prokofiev's 8th sonata. Prokofiev was born in modern-day Ukraine, but more importantly, the 8th sonata is one of the most humane and profound war-time musical statements I know of. Even though it was composed during a very different war, it - unfortunately - feels fitting to our time.

-Boris Giltburg

Ravel's father was Swiss, his mother Basque and a madrileña. Their son Joseph Maurice was born near Biarritz, close to the Spanish border, and he was raised in Paris. Despite a prickly relationship with the French musical establishment, he became a major figure in the first decades of French 20th-century music. Urbane and metropolitan to the *n*th degree, Ravel had a keen ear for style - Wagner excepted - and, as an almost-half Spaniard, he responded to Spanish influence without remotely fetishising it. The first half of Boris Giltburg's programme includes works by two distinctively Spanish contemporaries, Isaac Albéniz and Enrique Granados, both pupils of the musicologist Felipe Pedrell who guided modern Spanish music into finding its voice.

Granados lived in the shadow of the fallout from the Spanish-American War of 1898, a catastrophe for Spain that marked its collapse as a world power. 18 years later, he was returning home from a hugely successful trip to the USA in 1916 when he and his wife drowned after their boat was torpedoed by a German U-boat. Granados is best known for his ambitious set of *Goyescas* (1909-12), the six piano works inspired by Goya's paintings, in particular his *Caprichos*, of scenes from Spanish life. The fourth, 'Quejas, o La maja y el ruiseñor' ('Lament, or The girl and the nightingale') is the best known of the set. Granados took a Valencian folksong, an unforgettable distillation of Spanish melancholy, and allowed its repetitions to roam the keyboard against a constantly shifting accompaniment, a device much favoured by 19th-century Russian composers. It ends with a trilling cadenza, as it were for the nightingale, which, for some commentators, anticipates the bird music of Messiaen.

Like Granados, **Isaac Albéniz** was a virtuoso pianist, and even as a child performed widely in South America, the USA and Europe. There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that, aged 12, he stowed away on a boat to Buenos Aires, earning his keep as an itinerant performer. Later, and unlike Granados, Albéniz left Spain and during the 1890s lived in London and Paris. He hero-worshipped Liszt both as composer and performer, and was steeped in the music of Debussy and Ravel. Again like Granados, his masterpiece celebrates the nation and psyche of Spain. *Iberia* (1905-8), the last major work in his short life, is a set of 12 pieces in which he rendered the elements of Andalusian and

flamenco music a natural and idiomatic fit for the piano. The seventh, 'El Albaicín', is an impression of the Romani quarter of Granada, one of the great melting-pots of all things flamenco. The sound and style of the guitar is omnipresent - and indeed 'El Albaicín' transcribes brilliantly for the instrument - and the piece alternates between rhythmic vitality and, in the chant-like scraps of melody, a very Spanish and dark languor.

Ravel's *Miroirs* are miniature tone-poems with an epic reach. The titles of the five pieces are not related to each other, and the title of the set as a whole suggests the disjunction between reality and its reflection, and may well be an oblique comment on Debussy's choice of title for his *Images*, the first book of which appeared about the same time. Each piece was dedicated to a member of the Les Apaches, the anti-Establishment Parisian group of artists and intellectuals that flourished in the 1900s, and here included the pianist Ricardo Viñes, a friend from the Conservatoire, and the writer Michel-Dmitry Calvocoressi, who promoted Russian music, particularly that of Mussorgsky.

'Noctuelles' ('Night moths') details with amazing precision the erratic flight of the moths, which for fleeting moments suggests patterns. 'Oiseaux tristes' ('Sad birds') has two layers, the stillness of a thick forest in high summer heat and the song of birds high up in the trees. The slow rhythmic pulse in the left hand sums up an insurmountable lethargy. 'Une barque sur l'océan' ('A boat on the open sea') is a brilliantly imagined water-piece energised by the slapping rhythms of the boat's movement. A sustained crescendo leads to a visionary evocation of the music's two elements. 'Alborada del gracioso' ('The clown's dawn-song') is very much in the spirit of the two pieces by Granados and Albéniz, replete with Spanish harmonic quirks, furious rhythms and plenty of guitar-style figuration. It is the only one of the five pieces that Ravel later orchestrated, although all of them confirm his orchestral agenda when writing for the piano. The last of the set, 'La vallée des cloches' ('The valley of the bells') is a virtuoso realisation of the bells' overtones, and its solemnity has a quasi-religious flavour.

Sergey Rachmaninov was born two years before Ravel, and in his set of six *Moments musicaux* Op. 16 he established his early maturity. He wrote them to recoup some of the money stolen from him on a train journey, having already completed his first symphony - he was yet to suffer its disastrous première (conducted by the drunk Glazunov), which stopped him composing for three years. The title *Moments musicaux* suggests Schubert, the salon and accomplished technique, but here too is distinctly virtuoso territory. The E flat minor second piece is a brilliant *Allegro* with a surging role for the left hand. The third is a like a funeral march, except that the metre keeps breaking down, and its mournful tune suggests Wagner in 'Im Treibhaus' and the opening of Act 3 of *Tristan und Isolde*; and the fourth transcends Chopin in the drama of, say, the 'Revolutionary' or Op. 25 No. 12 studies.

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