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ANDREY GUGNIN, PIANO

Thursday 13 November, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

Sleeping Beauty Suite (excerpts)

Prologue

Dance of the Pages

Andante

The Silver Fairy

Gavotte

The Canary Fairy

Adagio

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky / arr. Mikhail Pletnev

12 Etudes, Op.10

Frédéric Chopin

Interval

Sonata in B minor

Franz Liszt

Please ensure all mobile phones are switched off. Photographs and videos of the performance are not permitted.

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PROGRAMME NOTES

Sleeping Beauty Suite (excerpts)

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky (1840-93)

arr. Mikhail Pletnev (b.1957)

Prologue

Dance of the Pages

Andante

The Silver Fairy

Gavotte

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Adagio

For all his perennial popularity with concert audiences, Tchaikovsky is far less well known as a composer of piano music (the ubiquitous First Piano Concerto being, of course, the notable exception). While renewed interest in such works as the piano suite *The Seasons* suggests that the situation may be changing, Russian pianist-conductor Mikhail Pletnev undoubtedly enriched the repertoire with his skilful, technically demanding yet highly evocative transcriptions of suites from two of the composer's great ballets, *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889) and *The Nutcracker* (1892). For this evening's recital, Andrey Gugnin has chosen seven excerpts from the 11-movement concert suite prepared by Pletnev in 1978.

The selection begins with the most substantial movement, the Prologue taken from the eponymous section of Tchaikovsky's ballet, with its arresting opening and suggestions of commotion within the castle housing the newborn Princess Aurore. Pletnev successfully evokes the gentle character of the benevolent Lilac fairy, and there are some wonderful glissandi in the piano's lower depths, creating a palette every bit as colourful as the ballet's familiar orchestral guise. The perky 'Dance of the Pages', with its twinkling closing bars, is from Act I of the ballet, while the *Andante* is taken from Prince Désiré's vision of Aurore in the Act II *pas d'action*: its main theme contains hints of the impassioned subsidiary theme from the *Andante cantabile* slow movement of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony.

'The Silver Fairy' is another sparkling character piece, this time from the Act III *Divertissement*, while the Act II Gavotte reflects Tchaikovsky's penchant for rococo-style classicism with a twinkle in the eye. Undoubtedly the most enchanting single movement in this suite, however, is the blink-and-you'll-miss-it 'The Singing Canary' from the Prologue's *pas de six*, with all its music-box charm. The selection closes with the raptly beautiful *Adagio*, taken from the final *pas de deux* for Désiré and Aurore, in which Pletnev deploys the full range of the piano's resources to create a scene of swirling ecstasy.

12 Etudes, Op.10

Frédéric Chopin (1810-49)

The 12 studies of Chopin's Etudes, Op.10, represent a watershed moment not just in the composer's career, but in the development of the piano repertoire. Their composition spanned the years 1829-32, and were published in Paris 1833 by Maurice (Moritz) Schlesinger. They thus span the composer's final months in his native Poland, his brief sojourn in Vienna, and his early years in Paris. Furthermore, they can be seen as the moment when he finally took ownership of his instrument in terms of compositional mastery, turning a genre (the piano study) that had hitherto amounted to little more than a form dedicated solely to technical mastery into a vessel for profound musical expression and imagination. As such, they blazed a path along which later composers including Liszt, Debussy and Ligeti would tread, each with astonishing individuality, while still paying notional service to the genre's original purpose, of tackling discrete problems of piano technique in a (more or less) systematic manner.

On paper, and in their published order, the Etudes start in an orthodox enough manner: the first Etude is in the key of C major (what else?), the second in its relative minor, A minor. The next two pairs have a similar relationship: E major/C sharp minor and G flat major/E flat minor, as do Etudes 9-12 (although with the relationship reversed in Etudes 9 and 10): F minor/A flat major and E flat major. However, Etudes 7 and 8 show that Chopin is set on a less didactic trajectory: they are cast in C major (again) and F major.

More importantly, although the individual Etudes can be interpreted as tackling identifiable technical issues – facility in wide-ranging arpeggiation in the first, dexterity on the black keys in the fifth – this is never at the expense of musical invention and development. And although the Op.10 set is less formally expansive than its later Op.25 companion, the metric irregularity of the celebrated third Etude (the so-called ‘Tristesse’) shows that Chopin was not afraid to introduce unusual, even disruptive features to these pieces.

While the first concert studies marginally predate those of Chopin’s Op.10, it is here that, for the first time, technical challenges are matched by musical consistency and sheer artistic variety. The vertiginous virtuosity of the C sharp minor Etude (no.4) and the impassioned sweep of the twelfth Etude (the celebrated ‘Revolutionary’ Study) are perfectly balanced by the deceptive repose of the third, and the radiant spread chords of the eleventh. That these captivating pieces are so much more than mere studies is proven by their firm popularity in the concert hall and on record. They are permanent proof of Chopin’s peerless command of the ‘small form’, and their influence continues to resonate well beyond the confines of the practice room or salon. Chopin dedicated them to the other great pianist-composer of the age, ‘my friend Franz Liszt’.

Sonata in B minor, S.178

Franz Liszt (1811-86)

In September 1847 Franz Liszt, one of the greatest keyboard virtuosos of all time, retired from the concert platform just a month shy of his 36th birthday. His international audiences were bewildered, but he was now able to take up full-time his post as court Kapellmeister in Weimar, a position he had occupied in a part-time capacity since 1842. He now spent more of his time conducting, including (in 1850) the première of Richard Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Even more importantly, he was able to devote his energies — previously expended on extensive touring — to composition. The next 12 years, until Liszt’s departure from Weimar in 1859, represent one of the most productive periods of the composer’s life. Here he wrote all but the last of his 13 symphonic poems, as well as the Faust and Dante symphonies, and revised many of his early piano works (resulting in the *Études d’exécution transcendante* and the first two books of *Années de pèlerinage*). And he also composed his *Grande Sonate pour le Pianoforte*: the Piano Sonata in B minor.

Widely regarded as the outstanding masterpiece in Liszt’s vast output of solo piano music, the Sonata in B minor was written between late 1852 and early 1853, and completed on 2 February 1853 (some sketches for the work date from 1851). Liszt gave almost all of his music some sort of descriptive title, but the Sonata has none beyond the simple genre designation. This has not stopped generations of commentators from trying to uncover a hidden programme. Suggestions range from the autobiographical to the religious and, most frequently, the Faustian, with the characters of Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles projected onto the music to represent (in Claudio Arrau’s words) ‘transcendence, redemption and negation’.

But there is no need to rely on a programmatic interpretation to appreciate the Sonata’s originality and expressive power. It is cast in one continuous movement lasting some 30 minutes, and yet it encompasses, like Schubert’s ‘Wanderer’ Fantasy (with which Liszt was well acquainted), four distinct sections which function, at one level, like the first movement, slow movement, scherzo and finale of a ‘traditional’ sonata layout. At the same time, these sections function at a higher structural level as the exposition, development (slow movement and scherzo) and recapitulation of an overarching sonata form embracing the work as a whole, all framed by a slow prologue and epilogue.

There is much more to the Sonata, however, than a brilliant formal achievement. Liszt uses his technique of thematic transformation to generate the whole musical content from just a handful of motifs, three of which appear on the very first page. His unparalleled mastery of keyboard technique (often verging on the orchestral and operatic), and his gift for exploring potent harmonic byways whilst broadly observing a traditional overriding key scheme, ensure that within the work’s manifest unity there is also abundant diversity. The autograph manuscript vividly demonstrates the care and tenacity with which the composer fashioned this extraordinary work. Originally it was to have finished with a typically grand conclusion, but

in an inspired afterthought Liszt substituted instead a quiet *Andante sostenuto*, reuniting his main themes and bringing the whole Sonata to rest.

The Sonata in B minor was published by Breitkopf & Härtel in 1854, and was dedicated to Robert Schumann — a reciprocal gesture for the dedication to Liszt of Schumann's great C major *Phantasie*, Op.17 (1839). It was given its public première on 22 January 1857 in Berlin by Liszt's pupil and son-in-law, Hans von Bülow, in a concert to inaugurate the first Bechstein grand piano. Reactions to the work from the musical establishment ranged from bafflement to outright scorn. Clara Schumann thought it 'frightful', subsequently expunging the dedication from her late husband's copy. The young Brahms reportedly fell asleep when Liszt performed the Sonata privately to him, and the notorious Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick declared it a 'musical monstrosity'.

A century-and-a-half later, Liszt's groundbreaking music has happily found wider acceptance thanks to many devoted champions, but early on it was Wagner who recognised the Sonata's greatness. Writing to Liszt from a conducting engagement in London in April 1855, he enthused: 'the Sonata is inexpressibly beautiful, great, loveable, deep and noble — just as you are. I was profoundly moved by it, and all my London miseries were immediately forgotten.'

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ANDREY GUGNIN

Moscow-born concert pianist Andrey Gugin is rapidly gaining international acclaim as a passionately virtuosic performer, who possesses an 'extraordinarily versatile and agile technique, which serves an often inspired musical imagination' (Gramophone). In 2020, the BBC Music Magazine Awards named Andrey the winner of the Instrumental category for his recording of Shostakovich preludes and piano sonatas on Hyperion Records. Since winning the prestigious Sydney International Piano Competition in 2016, Andrey has gone from strength to strength in concerts and recordings which exhibit his impassioned interpretations.

In demand as a concert soloist, Andrey has been invited to perform as a guest artist with notable orchestras across the globe, such as the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, Netherlands Symphony Orchestra, Utah Symphony, West Australian Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Andrey has performed on some of the most prestigious stages in the world, including the Musikverein in Vienna, Konzerthaus Berlin, Victoria Hall in Geneva, Carnegie Hall in New York, Abravanel Hall in Salt Lake City, Auditorio Nacional in Madrid, Sydney Opera House, the Grand Hall of the Moscow State Conservatory, Mariinsky Concert Hall, the Louvre in Paris, Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall. Andrey has also appeared at a number of international festivals, including the Verbier, Ruhr Piano, Mariinsky International, Dubrovnik Summer, Ohrid Summer and International Chopin festivals.

As a recording artist, Andrey has published a broad scope of repertoire, ranging from works for solo piano to concertos. His release of Liszt's Transcendental Studies (Piano Classics, 2018) was Editor's Choice in Gramophone. His recording of Shostakovich concertos (Delos International, 2007) was featured in the soundtrack of Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film Bridge of Spies. His most recent disc, Holberg Suite - Ballade & Lyric Pieces, was released in May 2024 with Hyperion.

In February 2024, Andrey won the 'Classic Piano' International Piano Competition awarding him a prize of €100,000 for his final performance of Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto. Further winnings include future performances with the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra and the Armenian State Symphony.

Andrey took his first lessons with Natalia Smirnova, who laid the foundations for his studies with Olga Mechetina, Valery Kastelsky, Lev Naumov, Stanislav Ioudenitch, William Naboré and Vera Gornostayeva.