

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Pierre-Laurent Aimard: Piano Fantasies

Friday 28 April 2023, 7pm  
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

<b>Sweelinck</b> Fantasia in echo style in dorian & D minor, SwWV.261	4'
<b>Mozart</b> Fantasia in D minor, K.397	6'
<b>Carter</b> Night Fantasies	20'
<b>Chopin</b> Polonaise–Fantaisie in A flat, Op.61	13'
<i>Interval</i>	
<b>Mozart</b> Fantasie in F minor, K.Anh.32 (fragment)	2'
<b>CPE Bach</b> Fantasia in C for keyboard, Wq.59 No.6	8'
<b>Beethoven</b> Fantasia in G minor, Op.77	10'
<b>George Benjamin</b> Fantasy on iambic rhythm	12'

### Performer

Pierre-Laurent Aimard *piano*

*There is a 20-minute interval in this performance which ends at approximately 8.50pm*

Just like Disney's 1940 movie, think of a 'fantasia' and you might imagine something colourful, fantastical, emotional and maybe even unpredictable. Those adjectives all hold true for the keyboard fantasia, eight examples of which fill Pierre-Laurent Aimard's concert across centuries and musical styles. As a form, the fantasia dates right back to the 16th century, and it quickly became a catch-all name for pieces that abandon conventional musical rules, indulging instead in direct expression, intense emotion and high drama, sometimes sounding like they're being made up on the spot (it's no coincidence that many of their composers were also master improvisers). Fantasias became quite a bit better-behaved over time – as tonight's pieces demonstrate – but they never quite lost that original sense of volatility and surprise.

### Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621)

#### **Fantasia in echo style in dorian & D minor, SwWV.261**

Sweelinck is the earliest composer with us this evening. He spent most of his life in Amsterdam, where he was revered for his organ improvisations at the city's Oude Kerk church, and for his pioneering compositions. His *Fantasia* in echo style, composed around 1617, might begin in quite a restrained manner with a distinctive rising theme, but the intricacy of his melodic decoration soon increases, however, before his echo effects really kick in.

### Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91)

#### **Fantasia in D minor, K.397**

Almost two centuries later, Mozart wrote a clutch of keyboard fantasias (we'll discover another one after the interval) that no doubt offer insights into the improvisational skills for which he was so renowned. The D minor Fantasia comes from 1782, and it's not 100% Mozart's own work: he left the piece hanging without an ending, and it's believed to have been completed by fellow composer August Eberhard Müller. It's a brief but potent piece of great drama and emotional depth that unfolds across several sections: an undulating introduction; a limpid, aria-like melody; dashing, showy runs; and a sudden swerve into a brighter, quicker tune in D major to conclude.

### Elliott Carter (1908-2012)

#### **Night Fantasies**

We leap forward two more centuries for *Night Fantasies* by Elliott Carter, the pioneering US composer who died in 2012 at the remarkable age of 103. He was a mere 71 when he wrote the piece in 1980, with the aim of conveying, as he described it, 'continuously changing moods, suggesting the fleeting thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind during a period of wakefulness at night'. But despite its nocturnal inspiration,

it's hardly a piece to snooze to: Carter's music is complex, uncompromising but meticulously organised, making inventive use of the piano's sonic possibilities, not least the clangorous, bell-like chords that chime across its sonorous climax.

## **Frédéric Chopin (1810-49)**

### **Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat, Op.61**

Chopin's 1846 *Polonaise-Fantaisie* is, as its name suggests, something of a fantasia on the age-old polonaise dance form from his native Poland. It's debatable, however, how much of its dance inspirations remain (bar some distinctive, repeated-note rhythms early on) and how much the fantasia has taken over. Though its overall shape – two more dance-like outer sections sandwiching a slower, more introspective episode – is clear-cut enough, Chopin takes enormous pleasure in blurring the music's edges by ceaselessly developing his material as the piece progresses, almost as if it's growing and changing before our ears during the performance itself.

## **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91)**

### **Fantasia in F minor, K.Anh.32 (fragment)**

We return to Mozart for another tantalisingly unfinished fantasia. Just 14 bars exist of his extraordinary F minor Fantasia from 1789 – but what a richness of mood and invention they represent. With abrupt shifts from soft to loud, sweet to threatening, singing melody to anguished harmony, the piece offers a fascinating insight into Mozart's musical imagination. He's known to have devoted a regular early-morning slot to composing in his daily schedule, but also to have scribbled down ideas as and when they came to him. The result was quite a collection of unfinished pieces, which his widow Constanze collected together for publication after his death in 1791, reasoning that 'these marvellous relics would by themselves be an enduring monument to his inexhaustible genius'. It's indeed a piece of remarkably concentrated power, and the fact that it simply stops in mid-flow only adds to its fascinating strangeness.

## **CPE Bach (1714-88)**

### **Fantasia in C, Wq.59 No.6**

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was the second surviving son of the great Johann Sebastian, surely the most accomplished improviser of them all. CPE was no mean extemporiser himself, though he took his music in quite a different direction to that of his father. For the younger man, it was all about directness, simplicity and drama, delivered through big contrasts and high emotions. This was the so-called *empfindsamer Stil* (literally 'sensitive style') that was all the rage in Germany during the middle of the 18th century, and the free-flowing fantasia form was its ideal outlet. CPE's C major Fantasia of 1784 feels as much a showpiece for its performer's scintillating technique

as a display of emotional intensity, colliding together several contrasting musical ideas – flashy arpeggios, dashing runs, a mischievous 'cuckoo' figure – before an affable tune brings these jostling elements to a calmer conclusion.

## **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

### **Fantasia in G minor, Op.77**

Like Mozart, Beethoven was known as a master keyboard improviser. His pupil and fellow composer Carl Czerny later remembered: 'He knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break into loud sobs. After ending his improvisation, he would burst into loud laughter and mock his listeners for the emotion he had caused in them.' His G minor Fantasia comes from 1809, and, like the two Mozart works heard earlier, provides a fascinating glimpse into what its composer's improvising skills must have been like. Here, however, Beethoven's freewheeling sense of fantasy is corralled into a much stricter form. The piece might open with a bewildering collection of competing ideas – plummeting scales, beginnings of melodies, quiet meditations, loud interjections – but Beethoven quickly moves on to an unassuming melody and increasingly intricate variations on it. His surely comic sign-off, however, might make you wonder how seriously to take any of it.

## **George Benjamin (b.1960)**

### **Fantasy on iambic rhythm**

We've heard fantasias on musical forms, on dances, on emotional styles, on echoes, and even on the flux and flow of human thought. We end, however, with a fantasy based on a simple, short-long rhythm.

It was in this very hall that British composer George Benjamin gave his Fantasy on iambic rhythm its very first performance, in February 1986. He had famously been one of Olivier Messiaen's most cherished students (and a piano pupil of Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod), and as such, shares a musical 'parentage' with tonight's pianist, also a much-loved protégé of Messiaen and Loriod. You may detect some of Messiaen's shrill birdsong, as well as Debussy's washes of piano resonance, among the bewildering variety of moods and material near the opening of Benjamin's Fantasy. Near the end, however, as Benjamin himself explains: 'A slow, gentle melody interrupts at a climatic moment and spreads resonantly across the complete range of the piano, before the final build toward a jubilant conclusion.'

**Programme note © David Kettle**

#### **Find out more**

- ▶ Pierre Laurent-Aimard
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Plunge into the kaleidoscopic colours of Rachmaninov and Prokofiev with the piano duo of Pavel Kolesnikov and Samson Tsoy.