SOUTHBANK CENTRE 75

Behzod Abduraimov: Stravinsky's Petrushka

Friday 27 February 2026, 7pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Brahms 4 Pieces, Op.119	15'
Czerny Variations on a theme by Rode, Op.33	10'
Liszt Après une lecture de Dante – Fantasia quasi sonata from Années de pèlerinage	18'
Interval	
Debussy Suite bergamasque	17'
Stravinsky 3 Movements from Petrushka arr. for piano	17'

Performer

Behzod Abduraimov *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.
There is a 20-minute interval.

Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

4 Pieces, Op.119

1 *Intermezzo in B minor*
2 *Intermezzo in E minor*
3 *Intermezzo in C*
4 *Rhapsody in E flat*

We begin at the very end, so to speak, with the final piano pieces that Johannes Brahms would compose. At least we think so: during the early summer of 1893, he created several brief keyboard works – which ended up as his Six Pieces for Piano, Op.118, alongside tonight's Op.119 – in his much-loved getaway in the Austrian spa town of Bad Ischl. Those last piano works are among them somewhere, but he may also have drawn on earlier compositions. Whatever the case, there's a distinct sense of autumnal valediction to the 4 Pieces, Op.119, but alongside their evident nostalgia, they show Brahms continuing to peer forward, too. That pioneering spirit is clearest in the opening Intermezzo in B minor, whose apparently endlessly falling cascades of notes and shifting harmonies set conventionally clear-cut notions of key and rhythm into distinctly soft focus. Brahms was aware of the piece's innovations, writing to his close friend and musical touchstone Clara Schumann: 'The little piece is exceptionally melancholic… every bar must sound like a *ritardando* [slowing-down], as if one wanted to suck melancholy out of each and every one, lustily and with pleasure out of these very dissonances!' For her part, Clara adored the piece, calling it 'a grey pearl. Do you know them? They look as if they are veiled, and are very precious.' Brahms follows his misty opener with a more strongly defined Intermezzo in E minor, complete with a brighter waltz version of its nervy opening theme in its brighter middle section. After a cheerful, quicksilver Intermezzo in C, Brahms closes with a complex, muscular Rhapsody that begins heroically in E flat major, but ends in a far stormier, darker E flat minor, bringing his piano music to a defiant close.

Carl Czerny (1791–1857)

Variations on a theme by Rode, Op.33

Don't be alarmed if neither of the composers behind tonight's second piece sound overly familiar. Carl Czerny is probably best known to 21st-century listeners – or, more specifically, pianists – as a hugely influential teacher who produced seemingly endless technical exercises that still torment student hands today. But as well as being Beethoven's most prominent keyboard student, and a valued performer of his teacher's music, he also went on to teach no less a figure than Franz Liszt (whose own approach to piano music we'll encounter next). Czerny even managed to bring these two elemental musical forces together, and to gain Beethoven's blessing of the infant Liszt's abilities with a kiss to the 11-year-old's forehead.

But Czerny was also a popular and hugely prolific composer of concert music, too – pieces that might have slipped into relative

obscurity since their heyday in early 19th-century Vienna, but which still glisten with charm and expert craftsmanship. Sets of piano variations on popular tunes were all the rage at the time, and composers would scour operas and oratorios, symphonies and concertos for tunes they could recast in contrasting moods and textures. Czerny wrote many variation sets of his own, and the theme for tonight's comes from an *Air varié* (itself, ironically, a set of variations) for solo violin and string trio by celebrated French violinist Pierre Rode. Called *La ricordanza* (Remembrance), it is shot through with a sense of restrained nostalgia, which Czerny allows to blossom in his gentle, eloquent, sometimes Chopin-like opening. After five variations that push the innocent melody to ever greater heights of virtuosity and emotional intensity, Czerny finishes back where he started, in music of calm and restraint.

Franz Liszt (1811–86)

'Après une lecture de Dante – Fantasia quasi sonata' from Années de pèlerinage

From Liszt the pupil of Czerny, we turn to the very adult Liszt for tonight's next piece, on a tour across Europe in the 1830s with his lover, the (still married) Countess Marie d'Agoult. The result of those travels would be three books of piano pieces that the composer titled *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage), essentially forming a musical diary of the couple's travels. Tonight's next piece comes from Book 2, devoted to Italy, and Liszt expanded the modest, two-movement piece he first created in 1839 into its final apocalyptic visions a decade later, before publication in 1856. *Après une lecture de Dante* – inspired by reading French writer Victor Hugo's poem of the same name, itself inspired by the great medieval Florentine poet Dante's *The Divine Comedy* – deals with themes of faith and damnation, Heaven and Hell, in music that pushes its pianist to the limits of their technical prowess and of their musical storytelling expertise. Liszt left no specific indications as to what his 'fantasia quasi sonata' was illustrating, but satanic references begin with the ominous falling figures of the piece's dramatic opening, which trace note-to-note intervals known since medieval times as *diabolus in musica* (or 'the devil in music'). A restless, wailing theme has been likened to the cries of souls damned in Hell, while a visionary hymn-like melody – its huge chords separated by pealing, bell-like figures – surely looks upwards towards Heaven. Gentler later episodes are perpetually interrupted by returns of those diabolical falling figures, but the piece ends in brightness and hope – perhaps as Dante and his guide Virgil re-emerge from the Nine Circles of Hell into the joy and optimism of the human world.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Suite bergamasque

1 *Prélude*
2 *Menuet*
3 *Clair de lune*
4 *Passepied*

From a voyage into the depths of Hell, we turn to a 'sentimental promenade' in tonight's next piece – or, at least, that's the title Claude Debussy originally gave to his *Suite bergamasque*'s most famous movement, 'Clair de lune'. He made that name change – and retitled the original Pavane as the closing Passepied – before the Suite's publication in 1905. He had written the pieces, however, 15 years earlier, and though he worried they might not reflect the maturer style of suggestion and sensuality that had brought him fame, his publisher persuaded him to cash in on his new-found notoriety. It clearly worked, and 'Clair de lune' alone surely counts as his best-loved and most-performed creation.

The Suite as a whole draws heavily on Debussy's enormous admiration for a distinctively Gallic musical tradition, stretching back to Couperin and Rameau. 'French music is all clearness, elegance; simple, natural declamation,' he wrote. Simplicity and declamation are both apparent in the almost improvised-sounding opening Prélude, whose beginning (like that of Liszt's piece earlier) harnesses the sonorities and resonances of the piano to striking effect. The Menuet is perhaps more considered than the typical dance form its title suggests, while 'Clair de lune' again exploits the piano's natural sounds to fragile but deeply emotional ends. Debussy dispels that piece's evanescent delicacy with the light, quick closing Passepied.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

3 Movements from Petrushka arr. for piano

1 *Russian Dance*
2 *Petrushka's Room*
3 *The Shrovetide Fair*

Just six years after Debussy allowed his Suite into the world, Igor Stravinsky achieved a breathtaking success with his wildly colourful, grippingly rhythmic score for the Ballets Russes' *Petrushka* at Paris' Châtelet Theatre. (He would have more of a *succès de scandale* two years later with *The Rite of Spring*.) Ever a canny businessman, the composer was keen that *Petrushka*'s music should enjoy a rich and fulfilling life outside the theatre, and composed today's *Three Movements from Petrushka* in 1921 for legendary Polish-born pianist Arthur Rubinstein, keen that the great man should take his music more regularly into his repertoire. Accordingly, he set out explicitly to ensure that his piano reimaginings weren't simply keyboard reductions of his lavish orchestral score. Instead, he not only exploited a broad panoply of distinctively pianistic sounds, but also set his pianist fiendish technical challenges to deliver them, from huge leaps requiring pinpoint precision to multi-finger trills and intertwining layers of melody and rhythm. The result is a dazzling compendium of keyboard fireworks that covers the ballet's main plot points across its three movements. 'Russian Dance' opens with the ballet's most famous tune, as the sinister Magician brings his three puppets – the Ballerina, the Moor and Petrushka himself – to over-excited life. The more introspective 'Petrushka's Room' depicts the unfortunate anti-hero's despair at rejection by his beloved Ballerina. 'The Shrovetide Fair' throws us into the heart of the fairground, with conflicting musics colliding and often intermingling in the hands of the sole pianist. As the fair's tumult reaches almost unbearable intensity it is interrupted by the chase and murder of Petrushka: in the stage version, his ghost will return to mock those he's left behind in the land of the living.

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