



Sheila Rock

# Evgeny Kissin

Thursday 29 March 2018 7:30pm, Hall

**Beethoven** Piano Sonata in B flat major,  
Op 106, 'Hammerklavier'

**interval** 20 minutes

**Rachmaninov** Preludes: Op 23 Nos 1–7;  
Op 32 Nos 10, 12 & 13

**Evgeny Kissin** piano

**Part of Barbican Presents 2017–18**

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Programme produced by Harriet Smith;  
printed by Trade Winds Colour Printers Ltd;  
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# Welcome

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Tonight we welcome back to the Barbican Hall a titan among pianists. Evgeny Kissin surely needs no introduction, having been in the limelight since his teens, progressing effortlessly from prodigy to mature artist.

The first half of the concert is devoted to a single mighty work: Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' Sonata. This came after a creatively difficult period in the composer's life and it abounds with a new-found energy and a complete confidence in working on the grandest of scales, as well

as throwing down a gauntlet to pianists in terms of sheer difficulty and stamina.

Evgeny Kissin pairs this sonata with a selection of Preludes by one of the greatest of all composer-pianists: Sergey Rachmaninov. These begin where Chopin's Preludes left off, expanding them in length and technical intricacy. It promises to be a thrilling evening.

I hope you enjoy the concert.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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# Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

## Piano Sonata in B flat major, Op 106, 'Hammerklavier' (1817–18)

1 Allegro

2 Scherzo: Assai vivace

3 Adagio sostenuto – Appassionato e con molto sentimento

4 Largo – Allegro risoluto

'Beethoven was not a man of the fugue, and he was never less so than in this nightmare – a raw and undigested mass.' So wrote Wilhelm von Lenz in 1855, of the finale of the 'Hammerklavier', demonstrating that even sympathetic commentators could get it wrong. But Beethoven hardly made matters easy, especially when you consider the sheer unpredictability of his musical trajectory and the extremes explored both within pieces and from one to the next. These become even more startling in the late period, with epic works such as this sonata and the *Diabelli Variations* rubbing shoulders with the shard-like *Bagatelles*, Opp 119 and 126.

Unlike so many of the sonata nicknames, 'Hammerklavier' is utterly apposite. Beethoven knew the work was out of the ordinary, even by his standards, describing it as 'a sonata that will give pianists something to do and that will be played 50 years hence'. That turned out to be something of an understatement and it was only in the latter years of the 19th century that pianists really began to embrace it; initially it daunted all but a few, Liszt and Clara Schumann among the exceptions.

But more than that, the 'Hammerklavier' was a musical manifesto. It was not the first time Beethoven had used the piano to remind the world of his presence. He did it to potent effect with his very first set of sonatas, Op 2 and as a whole his piano sonatas offer a comprehensive record of his development as a composer. Writing for his own instrument allowed him to experiment with ideas that would later find their way into symphonies and quartets. Nowhere is that more dramatically demonstrated than in this sonata,

which occupied him for over a year following a creative impasse, and which announced to the world a new-found vitality, a strength and an obsessive quality in building the largest edifices from the most basic of musical blocks (particularly the interval of a falling third, heard initially in the descending fanfare that launches the piece and dominating much of the next three quarters of an hour).

After the fundamentally inward qualities of Opp 90 and 101, this is very much a return to the public arena, a symphony for the keyboard that transforms the heroism of the 'Eroica' Symphony into something far darker and angrier. And the gauntlet that he hurls down at the very outset, with its huge left-hand leaps, is aimed both at audiences and at issuing a caveat to any pianist sufficiently brave (or foolhardy) to attempt this monumental undertaking, with its unprecedented technical and interpretative challenges.

It's also a battle of two keys, B flat major and the very distant B minor (described by Beethoven in a sketchbook as a 'black key'). It's a tension set up in the recapitulation of the first movement, when B minor first intrudes and which is only finally resolved in the finale. The Scherzo, fleeting in timescale but not in force of personality, accentuation or driving energy, parodies the opening idea of the first movement (that interval of a third dominating everything) but even here the composer subverts our expectations, for the wide-slung B flat minor Trio gives way first to a dogged staccato passage and then to a full-blown passage of pianistic recitative that leads back to the Scherzo material. But there's one further shock

in store, for Beethoven suddenly breaks off with hammered B flats interrupted by B naturals, a key he then lingers in, going so far as to present a distorted version of the Scherzo's opening motif in the 'wrong' key. If we'd failed to register the B minor excursion in the first movement, this one is unmissable.

Placing it second was no casual decision, for we need something small-scale (in duration if not force) after the epic opening movement. It's ironic, then, that the composer wrote to his former pupil Ferdinand Ries that the middle movements could be interchanged. Surely he couldn't have meant it, for what is to follow is the longest slow movement to be found anywhere in Beethoven, an Adagio sostenuto movingly described by

Lenz as 'a mausoleum of collective suffering', though it's clear from the additional marking of *Appassionato e con molto sentimento* that the suffering is very much among the living rather than the dead.

Beethoven leads into the finale via an extended eerie improvisation before that mighty fugue that so perplexed Lenz takes over. It is here that the tension between B flat major and B minor will ultimately be resolved. Huge and ferocious, its subject intentionally rugged and delighting in dissonance, the movement threatens to annihilate all in its path and builds to one of the greatest climaxes in the whole of music. Bruckner would have been nowhere without this piece; nor would Busoni.

**interval** 20 minutes

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# Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

## Preludes, Op 23 (1901–3) —

No 1 in F sharp minor (Largo)

No 2 in B flat major (Maestoso)

No 3 in D minor (Tempo di minuetto)

No 4 in D major (Andante cantabile)

No 5 in G minor (Alla marcia)

No 6 in E flat major (Andante)

No. 7 in C minor (Allegro)

## Preludes, Op 32 (1910) —

No 10 in B minor (Lento)

No 12 in G sharp minor (Allegro)

No 13 in D flat major (Grave)

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Sergey Rachmaninov was following in a grand tradition when he composed his Preludes, one that stretched back to Bach and earlier and which also encompassed jewels by Chopin, Scriabin, Busoni and Alkan. In the 19th century the prelude became proudly independent, no longer yoked to a fugue or a suite of dances. But whereas those of Chopin and Scriabin are relatively compact, Rachmaninov was working on an altogether larger scale. He first made his mark in the genre with the youthful C sharp minor Prelude, a work so popular that he came to loathe it; both its popularity and his reaction are understandable. This was followed by a set of 10 (Op 23) and 13 more (Op 32), bringing the total to 24, just as Chopin and Bach had done before him.

Op 23 were written in 1901–3 and follow in the footsteps of the Second Piano Concerto, which had itself been written after an artistic hiatus of some two years caused by the now infamous farce surrounding the premiere of his First Symphony. Musically, these preludes occupy the same lusciously melodious world as that concerto, as Evgeny Kissin demonstrates in the first seven of the set.

Whereas Chopin's Op 28 Preludes range from the accessible to the virtuosic, allowing pianists of a range of abilities to play them, anyone attempting to play Rachmaninov's needs to be an artist of prodigious skills. That is evident even in the slower-moving numbers, such as No 1, where a melancholy melody is set against a uneasy semiquaver accompaniment in the left hand. Though it rises to an impassioned climax at its centre, it ends as it began, *pianissimo*. The B flat major Prelude banishes the mood of introspection with a defiant brilliance. This is set up by ringing arpeggios in the left hand, to which the right hand adds an extrovert theme, full of dotted rhythms and rich chordal textures. Most of the dynamic markings are *forte* or above and the work concludes with an outpouring of double octaves.

The Third offers contrast again, this time harking back to an earlier era of grace with its 'tempo di minuetto', though coloured by Rachmaninov's exploitation of the lower end of the keyboard. This is a Prelude that sounds at times almost playful – a rare quality in this composer. From D minor to D major and a Prelude that consoles, its glorious, arching melody set against slowly swirling arpeggios, to which the composer then adds the

gentlest of counter-melodies. The mood becomes briefly impassioned, but soon sinks back to lyricism once more.

The Fifth, arguably the best-known of the Op 23 set, was also the first to be composed. Despite lasting under 4 minutes, it has a sense of the epic about it, set up by its purposeful marching rhythm, gruffly accented. This is alleviated in the inner section by the most beguilingly beautiful melody, which is all too quickly banished as the march rhythm steals back in and quickly gathers momentum and power. But the composer has a surprise up his sleeve and the piece ends with a quicksilver gesture that is positively Mendelssohnian.

The richly Romantic Sixth Prelude sets a yearning melody (instantly recognisable as being by Rachmaninov) against a trickling, far-reaching accompaniment, and the piece is striking for spending much of its time in the upper register of the keyboard. No 7 is an *étude*-like number, brilliant and fervent, the melody shared between both hands as it emerges from the mass of notes.

By the time of Op 32, composed in 1910, Rachmaninov was at the peak of his powers as a performer, and these Preludes follow hot on the heels of another concerto, this time the Third. The year was something of an *annus mirabilis* for the genre of the prelude, as it was also the one in which Debussy completed his own first set of *Préludes*. Rachmaninov was in huge demand as a practising musician so composition tended to be limited to short bursts whenever time permitted. And that was certainly the case with this set, which was composed in a mere 19 days. In fact three of them (Nos 5, 11 and 12) were written in a single

day. And it is perhaps that speed which partially explains why Op 32 as a whole is particularly organic in its conception, not just in terms of material used but also in the way Rachmaninov frequently pairs preludes in major and minor keys – Nos 3 and 4, in E major and E minor respectively, 6 and 7 (F minor/F major), 8 and 9 (A minor/A major) and 10 and 11 (B minor/B major).

Evgeny Kissin performs three from the set; No 10 is a rarity among the Op 32 Preludes in beginning almost with a sense of stasis. Gradually, a languid *siciliano* rhythm, luxuriantly harmonised, rouses itself into writing hewn from great slabs of repeated chords, creating a great wall of sound (the melody line in the tenor) before subsiding once more. There's a final, achingly poignant curlicue of a phrase and then a descent into silence.

No 12 takes us to more fevered territory, a wide-slung accompaniment setting the scene for another left-hand melody – unmistakably Rachmaninavian in its mix of passion and resignation. After this melody has built to a climax that is almost percussive, its more soulful quality becomes predominant before it dies away, leaving the accompaniment to become ever more diaphanous as it dances off into the ether. The final Prelude, which opens with lusciously rhetorical chordal writing, comes full circle in several respects. For a start, it recalls the C sharp minor Prelude that had begun it all nearly two decades earlier. Then there are hints of previous preludes (such as the puckish dotted figure which recalls No 2, though now stripped of its unease), combined with edgy accelerations culminating in bell-like figuration, and a coda that boldly proclaims the pianist as master of the entire keyboard.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

# About the performer



Felix Broede

Evgeny Kissin

## Evgeny Kissin piano

Evgeny Kissin's musicality, the depth and poetic quality of his interpretations, and his extraordinary virtuosity have earned him considerable veneration. He is in demand the world over, and has appeared with many of the world's leading conductors, including Claudio Abbado, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Daniel Barenboim, Christoph von Dohnányi, Carlo Maria Giulini, Lorin Maazel, Riccardo Muti and Seiji Ozawa, as well as all the great orchestras of the world.

Evgeny Kissin was born in Moscow in 1971 and began to play by ear and improvise on the piano at the age of 2. At 6, he entered a special school for gifted children, the Moscow Gnessin School of Music, where he was a student of Anna Pavlovna Kantor, who has remained his only teacher. At the age of 10, he made his concerto debut playing Mozart's Piano Concerto, K466 and he gave his first solo recital in Moscow one year later. He came to international attention in March 1984 when, at the age of 12, he performed Chopin's two piano concertos in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory with the Moscow State Philharmonic under Dmitri Kitaienko. This concert was recorded live by Melodiya, and a two-LP album was released the following year. During the next two years, several of his performances in Moscow were recorded live.

His first appearances outside Russia were in 1985 in Eastern Europe, followed a year later by his first tour of Japan. In December 1988 he

performed with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic in a New Year's concert broadcast internationally. In 1990 he made his first appearance at the BBC Proms and, in the same year, made his North American debut, performing both Chopin piano concertos with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Zubin Mehta. The following week he opened Carnegie Hall's centennial season with a debut recital, recorded live by BMG Classics.

This season he gives solo recitals in New York, Chicago, Washington, DC and Toronto, in addition to numerous European recitals and orchestral appearances. He also tours Europe and North America with the Emerson Quartet for the first time, with performances in Baden-Baden, Paris, Munich, Essen, Vienna, Amsterdam, Chicago, Boston and at Carnegie Hall.

Musical awards and tributes from around the world have been showered upon the pianist. In 1987 he received the Crystal Prize of the Osaka Symphony Hall for the best performance of the year 1986 (his first in Japan). In 1991 he received the Musician of the Year Prize from the Chigiana Academy of Music in Siena. He was special guest at the 1992 Grammy Awards Ceremony, broadcast live to an audience estimated at over one billion, and became *Musical America's* youngest Instrumentalist of the Year in 1995. In 1997 he received the prestigious Triumph Award for his outstanding contribution to Russia's culture, making him the youngest-ever recipient of that prize. In December 2003 in Moscow, he received the Shostakovich Award, one of Russia's highest musical honours. In June 2005 he was awarded an honorary membership of the Royal Academy of Music in London. Most recently he was given an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the Hong Kong University.

His recordings have also received numerous awards and accolades. Past awards have included the Edison Klassiek in The Netherlands, Grammy awards, and the Diapason d'Or and the Grand Prix of La Nouvelle Académie du Disque in France.

Wed 11 Apr

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