



# Evgeny Kissin in recital

Wednesday 6 February 2019 7.30pm, Hall

**Chopin** Nocturnes: F minor, Op 55 No 1  
G major, Op 37 No 2

E major, Op 62 No 2

**Schumann** Piano Sonata No 3, Op 14

**interval** 20 minutes

**Debussy** Préludes – selection

**Scriabin** Piano Sonata No 4, Op 30

**Evgeny Kissin** piano

## Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19

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# Welcome

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A warm welcome to this evening's concert, given by one of the greatest pianists of today. Evgeny Kissin first made international headlines while still in his teens and his journey from Wunderkind to mature artist has been undertaken very much in the public eye.

His sense of musical adventure remains as acute as ever and tonight's programme is a typical mix of composers who are central to his repertoire and newer passions.

He begins with Chopin, with whose music he has been associated for many years. Three nocturnes are followed by Schumann – another longstanding interest – in the form

of his Third Piano Sonata. This was a piece that the composer substantially reworked a number of times in his quest to find the perfect balance of form and content.

Debussy is a more recent addition to Evgeny Kissin's repertoire and he presents eight *Préludes*, vibrant character pieces that exhibit Debussy's extraordinary ear for subtle colourings. Subtle colourings are also a trademark of Scriabin, whose Fourth Sonata, written just a few years before Debussy's *Préludes*, is a miracle of energy and fragility.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

# Fryderyk Chopin (1810–49)

## Nocturne in F minor, Op 55 No 1 (1842–4)

## Nocturne in G major, Op 37 No 2 (1838)

## Nocturne in E major, Op 62 No 2 (1846)

John Field may have invented the nocturne as a Romantic piano genre, but it was Chopin who truly made it soar. Not all of his contemporaries quite appreciated this, however. Ludwig Rellstab, indifferent poet and self-styled music critic, crossly wrote: 'Where Field smiles, Chopin makes a grinning grimace, where Field sighs, Chopin groans; where Field puts some seasoning into the food, Chopin empties a handful of pepper ... if one holds Field's charming nocturnes before a distorting, concave mirror, one gets Chopin's work.' Others showed rather more insight, the American critic Henry T Finck, for instance, writing in 1899: 'Mendelssohn in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Weber in *Oberon* have given us glimpses of dreamland, but Chopin's nocturnes take us there bodily, and plunge us into reveries more delicious than the visions of an opium eater.'

Those reveries may initially appear almost naive in the first of the Op 55 Nocturnes, but the apparent simplicity of its outer sections is far more challenging than it seems – as any piano student who has struggled through it will know – while its more turbulent central part rises to unexpected passion.

The G major Nocturne, Op 37 No 2 is a particularly mellifluous number, once hugely popular among pianists for its lilting barcarolles-like theme, given in sixths and thirds. The mood changes little for the inner section, in which a melody of sublime beauty (even by Chopin's standards) unfolds, calm, confiding, against a simple chordal backdrop. Though the barcarolles-like theme reappears as expected, it is the second melody that has the final word, ending the piece on a note of complete repose.

Chopin's last published Nocturnes, Op 62, were written in 1846, just three years before his death. Nowadays it seems bizarre that they were seriously underrated by his contemporaries: for Jan Kleczyński, an early editor of Chopin's music, the two pieces were evidence of an 'enfeebled creative power', while the composer's biographer Frederick Niecks wrote them off as 'not worth dwelling on'. Perhaps it was the wispily withdrawn opening of No 2 that threw them, a mood that persists through the faster-moving middle section. It is finally warmed, if fleetingly, in the consoling coda and seems to anticipate Fauré's nocturnes in its self-possession.

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# Robert Schumann (1810–56)

## Piano Sonata No 3 in F minor, Op 14

(1834, rev 1853)

**1 Allegro brillante**

**2 Scherzo: Molto commodo**

**3 Quasi variazioni. Andante de Clara Wieck**

**4 Prestissimo possibile**

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In between Schumann's series of character pieces, there are three completed sonatas – No 1 in F sharp minor, Op 11, No 2 in G minor, Op 22 and No 3, Op 14. Each of these works takes a slightly different approach to the challenge of what to do with the sonata, post-Beethoven, but No 3 has a particularly complex history. Much of it was written in 1836, at a time when Schumann was forcibly separated from his beloved Clara. He initially conceived it as a five-movement work, with the addition of two scherzos surrounding a central slow movement that consisted of variations on a theme by Clara. That was in 1834; but by the following year he had excised the two scherzos, apparently at the behest of the publisher Tobias Haslinger, and it was initially published under the designation *Concert sans orchestre*. But Schumann returned to the piece again in 1853, calling it his *Grande Sonate* No 3 and reinstating one of the scherzos, which is placed second.

It is the four-movement version that Evgeny Kissin presents this evening, and it finds

Schumann at his most driven but also with a singularity of vision that is very powerful.

Schumann was not exaggerating when he wrote to Clara that it was 'one long *cri de coeur* for you', a reaction to their enforced separation thanks to the disapproval of her father. Clara's theme is a broadly paced lament, on which Schumann writes four imaginative and far-reaching variations. This is the heart of the sonata not just physically but emotionally too: yet that is not enough, for Schumann also uses an adaptation of her theme – re-imagined with a turbulent energy – to launch the first movement. That energy continues through the Scherzo, which, like the opening of the first movement, is built on a stepwise falling theme, moving from D flat major to the distant key of D major for the sonorous Trio. The finale, too, is a heady combination of restlessness and high emotion that is such a trademark of Schumann's style.

**interval** 20 minutes

# Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

## Préludes, Book 1 (1909–10)

Danseuses de Delphes • Les collines d'Anacapri • Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest • La fille aux cheveux de lin • La sérénade interrompue  
La cathédrale engloutie

## Préludes, Book 2 (1911–13)

Général Lavine – excentric • Feux d'artifice

'There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.' So Debussy famously told his long-suffering composition teacher. But such a pronouncement gives little idea of the meticulousness with which he composed, of the effort that went into creating music that sounds so effortless. For Debussy, the piano was all about illusion – he wanted pianists to imagine they were playing an instrument with no hammers. If his *Préludes* follow in the line of Chopin (a composer he revered), they take the genre in a strikingly new direction, just as he was to do in his *Études*. The placing of the evocative titles at the end of each piece is intentional, supposedly to avoid over-influencing the interpretation. But once you know the title and its inspiration, it's difficult to imagine the piece could be about anything else.

Debussy travels far in his 24 *Préludes* – from which Evgeny Kissin selects eight this evening – not just geographically and historically but in an intermingling of high and low art, too. In the First Book we're offered glimpses of many countries, including Spain and Italy, but we begin in Ancient Greece. There are various theories as to the inspiration behind 'Danseuses de Delphes': was it a sculpture in the Louvre or a reproduction of the priestesses of Diana? It forms a typically restrained opening, the sense of mystery enhanced by the way the melodic line is only gradually revealed.

The fifth *Prélude*, 'Les collines d'Anacapri', is an explosive evocation of the kind of dazzling light peculiar to the Mediterranean, the pianist painting with bold strokes, the locale made more specific by the introduction of a sultry pseudo-Neapolitan folk song. This is the first of several

preludes in which Debussy mingles his own music with fake vernacular.

The temperature drops abruptly in No 7, in 'Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest', which refers to a Hans Christian Andersen tale, *The Garden of Paradise*, where the four winds are dispatched and told to return with stories of what they have seen. Debussy gives Liszt a run for his money in one of the greatest musical storms in piano history.

From landscapes, real or fictional, we encounter the first person on our travels in the most famous number of the set, 'La fille aux cheveux de lin'. The origin is Leconte de Lisle's *Chansons écossaises*, in which our young lass is described in all her pre-Raphaelite beauty. Debussy's portrait, with its harmonious thirds and tenderly plaintive air, give the subject an air of innocence that plays down the eroticism of the original poem. We pay a visit to Spain in 'La sérénade interrompue' (No 9), a country that was an enduring fascination for the composer, even though his experience of it was limited to a few hours spent over the border. As we're serenaded by the pianist-turned-guitarist, the protagonist's performance is twice interrupted by a gently mocking strummed idea – another busker? The idea is actually a quotation from Debussy's 'Ibérie', the second of his orchestral *Images*.

The 10th *Prélude*, 'La cathédrale engloutie', comes closer to programme music than any other in the set. It refers to a Breton legend about the cathedral in the drowned city of Ys, which could occasionally be glimpsed, rising out of the sea through the mists. Debussy's evocations of medieval organum (using parallel-motion fifths), the sound of the cathedral bells, and the deep,

gently swirling waters are uncannily vivid and have about them a sense of awe that borders on the spiritual.

The Second Book of *Préludes* was published in 1913 and is more inward-looking than the First. The textures become ever more complex, however, with the pieces laid out on three rather than two staves.

The sixth of them, 'Général Lavine' is a cakewalk and shows Debussy's genius for buffoonery. It's said to have been inspired by the American clown Ed Lavine, whose talents included playing the piano with his toes – perhaps evoked by the low-lying melody. The set ends with a bang, quite literally: in 'Feux d'artifice' Debussy conjures the spectacular fireworks of Paris's 14th July celebrations, complete with snatches of the *Marseillaise*.

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# Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

## Piano Sonata No 4 in F sharp major, Op 30 (1903)

1 Andante –

2 Prestissimo volando

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Evgeny Kissin ends his recital with one of music's greatest iconoclasts: Alexander Scriabin. He was arguably the first Russian composer truly to make the piano sonata his own and the journey on which he took the genre over barely two decades is an extraordinary one, from late Romanticism to a mysticism entirely his own.

His Fourth Sonata, the first of his 10 numbered sonatas to be written in the 20th century, is arguably his earliest out-and-out masterpiece in the genre. Though there might seem to be an irony in this most outlandish of mindsets conforming to something as traditional as a sonata, in fact it's the structural underpinning that gives his music much of its power. The year 1903 was one of considerable upheaval in Scriabin's life: it saw the death of his patron, publisher and father-figure Mitrofan Belaiev but also his increasing fascination with the philosophies of Nietzsche and the theosophist Madame Blavatsky. A hint of Scriabin's state of mind can be grasped from his own programme for the sonata, which involves a journey to a far-off star, though, as ever, a sense of the erotic is just below the surface, as witness line such as:

'O bring me to thee, far distant star!  
Bathe me in trembling rays,  
Sweet light!

Fortunately Scriabin was a far greater composer than he was a poet. But motifs recur: light, colour, dance, flight, and the sense that the cosmos and the ego are as one. There's an unmistakable aura of longing in the first movement (an effect underlined by his references to Wagner's 'Tristan' Prelude) but just as striking is the way that, by suspending the harmonies, Scriabin imbues the music with the most ravishing luminosity.

The second movement, which follows without a break, demands real fleetness on the part of the player, not just physically but mentally too. The musicologist Leonid Sabaneyev recalled Scriabin demanding: 'I want it as fast as possible, on the verge of the possible ... it must be a flight at the speed of light, straight towards the sun.' Scriabin's jerkily skipping rhythms become ever more airborne, culminating in vibrant repeated chords in which the first movement's main theme reappears. The mood by the end is one of tumultuous, sensuous joyfulness, the sensation not only aural but also visual, as the pianist shows he is 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.

Last season he gave solo recitals in New York, Chicago, Washington, DC and Toronto, in addition to numerous European recitals and orchestral appearances. He also toured Europe and North America with the Emerson Quartet, 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. He has been given honorary doctorates by the Hong Kong University, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Evgeny Kissin's newest release is a disc of Beethoven sonatas on DG. His previous recordings have received numerous awards and accolades, including 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.



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