

# Evgeny Kissin

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 9.30pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

## Programme

**Ludwig van Beethoven** Piano Sonata No 27 in E minor

1. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck [Vivaciously and with feeling and expression throughout]

2. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorzutragen [Not too quickly and very songfully]

**Frédéric Chopin** Nocturne in F sharp minor, Op 48 No 2

Fantasy in F minor, Op 49

**Johannes Brahms** Four Ballades, Op 10

No 1 in D minor

No 2 in D major

No 3 in B minor

No 4 in B major

**Sergei Prokofiev** Piano Sonata No 2 in D minor

1. Allegro, ma non troppo

2. Scherzo: Allegro marcato

3. Andante

4. Vivace – Moderato – Vivace

**The legendary Evgeny Kissin returns to the Barbican for a typically ambitious programme in which sonatas by Beethoven and Prokofiev rub shoulders with the lyrical beauty of Chopin and the passion of early Brahms.**

The four composers featured in Evgeny Kissin's concert are bound together by the fact they were all prodigious pianists. We begin with Beethoven (1770–1827). The gap between his 27th Sonata (1814) and the previous one (*Les adieux*) was such that it led his slightly panicked publisher to announce in 1815 that this new piece would be particularly welcomed by connoisseurs and amateurs 'inasmuch as nothing for piano by Beethoven [has] appeared for several years.' And this E minor work strikes out in new directions: though he'd written other sonatas of only two movements, this was the first where the last one proceeds at a slower pace than the first, something that was to find full flowering in Beethoven's very last piano sonata.

The opening movement, which lasts a mere five minutes, is all about juxtaposing unlike with unlike; within these confines, the music veers off in all sorts of unexpected directions, Beethoven delighting in such rhythmic trickery that at times you wonder if the bar-line has vanished altogether.

The consolingly gentle second movement has a murmuring quality that seems to prefigure Schubert, while its tendency to occupy the higher regions of the keyboard hints at what is to come in the closing Arietta of his very last sonata. The ending arrives all too soon, simultaneously unassuming yet possessing a quiet joy.

Next, two works by Frédéric Chopin (1810–49), both written in 1841. His nocturnes have suffered more than any other genre from ill-judged performances – very probably because at least some of them are technically within the reach of amateurs and students; Op 48 No 2 is a case in point: it may not look that tricky on paper, but it demands subtlety of the highest order. It's all too easy to make the wispy opening melody overly defined, and the art of keeping time with the left hand as the right hand floats free – an obsession of Chopin's – is never more tested than here.

We slide from F sharp minor down a semitone to the particularly bleak key of F minor for the Fantasy. Chopin could sense that even by his standards it was out of the ordinary: 'Today I finished the Fantasy – and the sky is beautiful, a sadness in my heart – but that's alright. If it were otherwise, perhaps my existence would be worth nothing to anyone. Let's hide until death has passed.'

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Sinister, creeping, unfurling – the bare-octave opening to the Fantasy must count among one of the most disturbing of all his thoughts. From here, he launches into an uncoiling arpeggio that swiftly explodes into a simmering, spitting outpouring of notes. But that is by no means all: from a soaring, radiant melody and a proud march, idea follows idea with a remarkable fecundity, the energy seemingly unstoppable until the return of the spiralling arpeggios, the music finally cut off by two peremptory chords.

Johannes Brahms (1833–97) – a man so awestruck by the legacy of Beethoven that he didn't manage to complete a symphony until he was in his forties – wrote his Four Ballades, Op 10 in 1854, when he was just

21. The first of them has a distinctly morbid theme, taking inspiration from the Scottish ballad *Edward*, which tells of a father's gruesome murder by his son. The music is appropriately austere, remaining sombre even when it turns to the major. The second has a simple song-like melody with a lute-like accompanying idea – perhaps Brahms was thinking of balladeers of old, with the twists and turns of an imagined tale represented by a flow of new ideas. No 3 seems to anticipate a grim Mussorgskian scherzo, as distorted as 'Gnomus' in the Russian's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The bell-like tolling of the middle section seems outwardly calmer, but is it? Finally, we reach a warmer place in the last of the set, nocturnelike in its warmth and with an unbridled flowing melody that Brahms instructed to be played 'with the deepest feeling'.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) wrote his Second Piano Sonata in 1912, when he was barely out of his teens. And he takes a teenage delight in needling authority: with the American critic Richard Aldrich, later writing in the *New York Times*: 'The Sonata, a second one, contains no sustained musical development. The finale of the work evoked visions of a charge of mammoths on some vast immemorial Asiatic plateau ...'

The sonata may fall into a traditional four-movement form, but there tradition ends: the first movement offers a bouquet of typically memorable themes but there's no attempt to develop them, Prokofiev instead re-drawing them with pungently effective harmonies and changes of register. He places the Scherzo second, reusing material from a student exercise four years earlier and which, in its driving, inexorable quality bears similarities with the exactly contemporary *Toccata*. This gives way to a delicately tripping inner Trio before reprising the Scherzo proper. The elegiac slow movement has a particular blend of Russian nostalgia that could almost have come – differently harmonised – from Rachmaninov's pen.

The energy picks up again for the finale, a propulsive and ungainly tarantella, peppered with fanfare-type motifs. At the outset it seems unstoppable, yet it gradually runs out of energy. Prokofiev then adds a masterstroke – a reprise of a lyrical theme from the first movement (something he was to do again in the finale of his Sixth Sonata). However, the movement refuses to calm down, and this melody is quickly shoved aside, the music regaining its earlier energy with a ferocious dance to the close.

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## Performers

**Evgeny Kissin** piano

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