

# Programme Notes

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**Préludes 9 and 16 from ‘24 Préludes’, Op. 11****Scriabin (1871–1915)***No. 9 in E: Andantino**No. 16 in B-flat minor: Misterioso*

Scriabin entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1889. In 1892—unlike his classmate, a young Rachmaninoff—he was refused permission to graduate a year early, prompting him to leave, without graduating, to pursue a career as a professional pianist. Despite his success as a concert pianist, which continued throughout his life, this was not to be his last encounter with the Moscow Conservatory—he returned in 1898 to take the post of Piano Professor, a post he held for five years.

The *24 Préludes* were published in 1896; they were written between Scriabin’s two periods at the Moscow Conservatory whilst he toured Europe as a pianist. Much of Scriabin’s early music was inspired by Chopin, whom Scriabin greatly admired; in particular, these *préludes* are clearly influenced by Chopin’s *24 Préludes* (Op. 28), with corresponding *préludes* written in the same key and having similar lengths.

The two *préludes* presented today, written in Moscow, demonstrate the compositional versatility Scriabin displayed, even at a relatively young age. *Prélude 9* is a calm, lyrical piece, almost waltz-like—one can immediately hear the influence of Chopin. *Prélude 16*, however, is somewhat sinister and markedly less conventional—bars contain either five or four beats, to suit the phrasing.

**Sonata in C minor (‘Pathétique’), Op. 13****Beethoven (1770–1827)***Grave; Allegro di molto e con brio**Adagio cantabile**Rondo: Allegro*

Beethoven’s ‘Pathétique’ sonata was published in 1799 during what is referred to as his early period. At this time Beethoven was living in Vienna, supported by many generous patrons including Prince Karl Linchnowsky, to whom this sonata is dedicated.

Beethoven’s early sonatas were written not only for artistic but also for pragmatic reasons. As a performing pianist, Beethoven sought to push the boundaries of the ‘forte piano’ which was, at the time, still undergoing rapid development, having only been in popular use for around sixty years. Many of Beethoven’s sonatas worked to the extremes of the tonal range of the instruments of the day, and made full use of the dynamic range available, characteristically adjoining loud and soft sections to further accentuate the contrast.

It has been suggested that the form for the Pathétique sonata was inspired by a piano sonata published two years earlier by Dussek (opus 35, number 3). Both pieces are written in C minor, and the slow movement of Dussek’s piece is marked ‘patetico’, perhaps giving an insight into Beethoven’s naming of the piece. The Pathétique is one of only two piano sonatas that Beethoven named himself; the other being the sonata of opus 26 ‘Les Adieux’ or, as Beethoven preferred, ‘Das Lebewohl’.

The first movement of the sonata is prefaced with a Grave section, a feature commonly found in symphonic works but never before used in a piano sonata.

Sixteen bars later it makes way for the main section, in sonata form; it returns twice, albeit briefly, poignantly punctuating the movement.

The second movement, in rondo form, provides relief from the mental anguish of the first. The opening cantabile section, in a major key, is twice displaced by themes set in minor keys; both times it prevails, bringing the music back to its original, tranquil, mood.

The Rondo returns to the home key of C minor. Despite this, it presents a playful atmosphere, totally unlike that of the first movement; it isn't until the final moments that the mood of the opening returns.

### **Etude in B-flat minor, Op. 4 No. 3**

**Szymanowski (1882–1937)**

Karol Szymanowski was a Ukrainian-born Polish composer. In his earlier works, he took a great deal of influence from his compatriot Chopin; he later discovered French romantic music and, inspired by Scriabin's later works, experimented with atonality.

The four etudes of opus 4 are amongst Szymanowski's earliest compositions: they were published in 1902, just one year after he began his studies with Zygmunt Noskowski at the State Conservatory in Warsaw. The third etude was one of Szymanowski's first successes; soon after the work's publication it was played by the patriotic Polish pianist Ignace Paderewski as he toured Europe.

Four, repeated, minor chords set a plaintive tone at start of the piece. The two-bar opening theme which follows is developed throughout the piece, reappearing many times. The mood of the piece becomes increasingly agitated and dejected, reaching an emotional climax before falling back to the original mood. All is not lost, however, and solace is found in the closing bars.

### **Prelude and Fugue No. 16 in G Minor from 'The Well-Tempered Clavier'**

**J.S. Bach (1685–1750)**

In his lifetime, Bach did not enjoy the wide recognition that he has today. His music was regarded as being somewhat 'old-fashioned', written in long-established musical forms. It wasn't until around fifty years after his death, and after much work by Mendelssohn and Bach's children, that the 'The Well-Tempered Clavier', and its successor, earned the reputation as the 'old testament' of keyboard works that they enjoy today.

The Well-Tempered Clavier, published in 1722, is a collation of works written by Bach over the preceding years. Originally, Bach wrote many of the pieces as part of his role as a keyboard instructor; his intention was for the published volume to be used not only for teaching, but also—as is written on the cover – 'for the Pastime of those Already Skilled in this Study'<sup>1</sup>.

The sixteenth Prelude, in G Minor, is a rich, mellifluous, slow-paced movement in the style of an *arioso* (a short, aria-like piece); the four-voice fugue that follows shares a

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<sup>1</sup> English translation by David & Mendel

little in character but is somewhat more masculine, with its emphatic opening subject. Both movements end with a *Tierce de Picardie*—modulating to the major on the final chord.

**‘Général Lavine—eccentric’, no. 6 from ‘Préludes’, Debussy (1862–1918)  
Book II**

Debussy was one of the major proponents of French ‘impressionist’ music, a movement which started to develop towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He sought a direction away from Wagnerian romanticism and took influence from many different areas; he was influenced not only by fellow composers—such as Erik Satie—but also by poets and artists of the day, with free-verse poetry influencing the structure of his music, and impressionist painting leading towards the unconventional kaleidoscopic harmonies he often employed.

Debussy’s second book of 12 Préludes were published in 1913, each one depicts a given a subject. The inspiration for the 6<sup>th</sup> Prélude was Général ‘Ed’ Lavine, a clown who worked at the Médrano Circus in Paris, whom Debussy first saw in 1912. The piece is marked ‘Dans le style et le mouvement d’un Cakewalk’. Written in two-time, with syncopated right-hand passages over a steady, march-like left hand, it shows clear influence from the ragtime cakewalk style, introduced to Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by John Philip Sousa’s band.

The piece opens with a drum-roll motif, alongside deliberate parallel fifths providing a cacophonous trumpet fanfare; once the stage is set, the performer limps on and the circus act begins. No clown's act would be complete, however, without a series of misfortunes: often, when the music is in full swing, it falls dramatically towards the bass of the piano as catastrophe unfolds. Nonetheless, he is not easily deterred, and after the initial shock quickly recovers and continues triumphantly.