

# Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

7 May 2023 – 3pm

## MARTIN JAMES BARTLETT

Piano

### PROGRAMME NOTES *by John Woollard*

#### **Domenico Scarlatti (1685 – 1757) - Sonata in E Major, K. 380**

*“The one Vladimir Horowitz loved to play”*

The great Vladimir Horowitz made this sonata almost a household word among pianists. Programmes were conservative in those days, but Chopin’s wish that Scarlatti’s music would be part of a serious pianist’s repertoire came true.

Today, there still exists the lingering controversy over whether to play Scarlatti (as well as Bach) on the piano when it was originally meant to be performed on the harpsichord.

The issue has ramifications for a modern-day pianist, who uses the sustain pedal frequently to enrich sonorities, to “orchestrate” a work, and often to create special effects, as in the realm of impressionism (Debussy and Ravel).

When it comes to Scarlatti, however, some pianists feel tentative about using the pedal, or at least abusing it here and there. For the faster sonatas, it is hard to over pedal, so the matter draws little concern. (In truth, there’s barely time to fuss with the pedal when playing presto, an extremely brisk tempo marking).

In Sonata in E Major, K. 380 there is probably a line to be drawn somewhere in the sand. The piece has a bell-like quality from the outset with the impossibly tricky trills that are immediately echoed. So perhaps a temptation to pedal lightly over the trills to make them shimmer is reasonable. The question remains, where to pedal in the rest of the composition without making it sound like it was born of the Romantic era.

#### **François Couperin (1668 – 1733) - Les Barricades Mystérieuses**

There has been much speculation on the meaning of the phrase “mysterious barricades”, but no direct evidence appears to be available. The harpsichordist Pascal Tufféry has suggested that, in keeping with the bucolic character of other pieces in Couperin’s *Ordre 6ème de clavecin*, the pounding rhythm may represent the stamping of grapes in winemaking (given that the French word *barrique* means ‘barrel’, and *barriquade* was a designation adopted by viticulturalists of the day in France).

In this view, the “mysterious” epithet could allude to the significance of wine in the Mysteries of Bacchus, as well as in the Eucharist.

Claude Debussy, who considered François Couperin to be the “most poetic of our [French] harpsichordists” and an influence on his own piano études, expressed particular admiration for *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*. In 1903, Debussy wrote:

*“We should think about the example Couperin’s harpsichord works set us: they are marvelous models of grace and innocence long past. Nothing could ever make us forget the subtly voluptuous perfume, so delicately perverse, that so innocently hovers over the Barricades Mystérieuses.”*

#### **Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683 – 1764) - Gavotte et Six Doubles**

The Gavotte and Variations in A minor comes from Rameau’s 3<sup>rd</sup> collection of harpsichord pieces published ~1728 under the title of *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin*.

It features a two-part dance melody of small melodic range in simple note values, doled out in even 4-bar phrases over a series of resonant harmonies. These are followed by six doubles (ie, variations in faster note values), the first three of which feature a steady stream of running notes in the treble, the bass, and the mid-range, respectively.

The keyboard fireworks begin in the 4<sup>th</sup> variation when the hands begin a merry chase, ‘shadowing’ each other to perform repeated notes in the octaves on either side of middle C. The last two variations combine repeated notes with arpeggio figurations, increasing the keyboard range covered by each hand to as much as a 13<sup>th</sup>.

With the basic harmonies of the theme doggedly being stamped out in the right-hand while the left-hand juggles bass notes over a wide swath, Rameau ends these variations with a dramatically grander version of his simple gavotte than he began with.

#### **Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937) - Le Tombeau de Couperin (selection)**

The Grave of Couperin is a suite, composed between 1914 and 1917. The piece is in six movements, based on those of a traditional Baroque suite. Each movement is dedicated to the memory of a friend of the composer (or in one case, two brothers) who had died fighting in World War I. Ravel also produced an orchestral version of the work in 1919, although this omitted two of the original movements.

The word *tombeau* in the title is a musical term popular from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, meaning “a piece written as a memorial”. The specific Couperin, among a family noted as

musicians for about two centuries, is thought to be François Couperin “the Great” (1668–1733). Ravel stated that his intention was to pay homage more generally to the sensibilities of the Baroque French keyboard suite, not necessarily to imitate or pay tribute to Couperin himself.

The first performance of the original piano version was given on 11 April 1919 by Marguerite Long, in the Salle Gaveau in Paris. Long was the widow of Joseph de Marliave, to whom the last movement of the piece, the Toccata, is dedicated.

For more information on the artists and on future concerts, please visit [www.wethersfieldchamberconcerts.org.uk](http://www.wethersfieldchamberconcerts.org.uk)

# Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

## Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886) / Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883) - Tristan und Isolde - Liebestod, S.447

Liszt was an adept transcriber of other people's music, including Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1833, and all of Beethoven's Symphonies, Schubert songs, Bach cantata movements, instrumental pieces and countless operatic themes. Operatic fantasies and paraphrases tended to include original material as well as the opera's best-known melodies, such as those found in the *Rigoletto* Paraphrase. But some transcriptions were almost verbatim adaptations for piano, and this is one of them.

Liszt was a skilled orchestrator and conductor himself, honing his skills while Kapellmeister at the court of Carl Friedrich, Grand Duke of Weimar, from 1848-1861. Not only that, but Liszt championed the music of Wagner, conducting numerous operatic performances; he knew

Wagner's style from the perspective of the composer's orchestral sound world.

*Tristan und Isolde* is a musical drama in three acts written by Richard Wagner between 1857 and 1859, and premiered in 1865. Two years after the debut of the work at the National Theater of Munich, Franz Liszt (who was Wagner's father-in-law) made a piano transcription of Isolde's final aria. The piece, called "Mild und leise", was prefaced by Liszt in his transcription with a four-bar excerpt from the Love Duet from Act II, Accordingly, he referred to his transcription as 'Liebestod'. Liszt's transcription (which underwent a revision in 1875) became famous in Europe well before Wagner's opera reached most places.

~~~~~ Interval ~~~~~

## Edward Macdowell (1860 – 1908) - Woodland Sketches, Op. 51

MacDowell was one of the first wave of American composers to travel to Europe to study with the European masters considered the leading lights of classical music. In Paris he was a fellow student of Debussy's. Then he went to Germany and studied piano and composition in Frankfurt.

In Frankfurt, he played the piano in a special performance of Schumann's Piano Quintet when the composer's widow Clara Schumann came to visit the conservatory with Liszt in 1880. Schumann had a genius for little cameos, and

MacDowell was on his wavelength. Perhaps Schumann's *Waldszenen* (Forest Scenes) was a model for *Woodland Sketches*.

Liszt also makes his mark on the Sketches. The year after meeting Liszt, MacDowell travelled to Weimar to play to the great man in his home. Liszt liked him and tried to help him find a publisher for his music. Liszt's famous virtuoso showpiece 'Feux Follets' (Fireflies) was surely an inspiration for MacDowell's 'Will o'the Wisp'.

## Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) - Two Arabesques, L. 66, No. 1

From a pair of arabesques composed for piano by Claude Debussy when he was still in his twenties, between the years 1888 and 1891.

Although quite an early work, the arabesques contain hints of Debussy's developing musical style. The suite is one of the very early impressionistic pieces of music, following the

French visual art form. Debussy seems to wander through modes and keys, and achieves evocative scenes throughout both pieces. His view of a musical arabesque was a line curved in accordance with nature, and with his music he mirrored the celebrations of shapes in nature made by the Art Nouveau artists of the time.

## Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937) - Pavane pour une infante defunte

*Pavane for a Dead Princess* was written in 1899 while the French composer was studying at the Conservatoire de Paris under Gabriel Fauré. Ravel published an orchestral version in 1910. Ravel described the piece as "an evocation of a pavane that a little princess might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court". The pavane was a slow processional dance that enjoyed great popularity in the courts of Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This antique miniature is not meant to pay tribute to any particular princess from history, but rather expresses a nostalgic enthusiasm for Spanish customs and sensibilities, which Ravel shared with many of his contemporaries (most notably Debussy and Albéniz) and which is evident in some of his other works such as the *Rapsodie espagnole* and the *Boléro*.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Martin James Bartlett needs no introduction to Wethersfield Chamber Concerts, this being his third concert for us. His early public success was as the winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 2014. Since Martin first appeared in concert with us back in 2016, he has carved a truly international career out for himself. He is coming back from Texas to be with us today.

In July 2022, Martin was announced as the recipient of the inaugural Prix Serdang, a prize awarded to him by Rudolf Buchbinder that included a recital in the Villa Serdang, Switzerland. The new prize recognises the achievements and career of a young pianist and was chosen by Buchbinder and Thomas Pfiffner, in collaboration with promoters and artists worldwide.

Highlights of Martin's 2022/23 season include appearances at major festivals such as Festival International de Piano de La Roque d'Anthéron, Rheingau Musik and Turku Music festivals, as well as performances with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and a UK tour with the Sinfonia of London under the baton of John Wilson. He also gave recitals in major venues including the Wiener Konzerthaus and The Concertgebouw.

**We hope that you will join us for our concerts next year - on 14 and 28 April, 12 May**