

Simon Trpčeski, Wigmore Hall

A Macedonian magician whose still waters run deep

by Jessica Duchen

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No man is a prophet in his own land – except possibly the Macedonian pianist Simon Trpčeski. In the UK he shot to fame upon winning the London International Piano Competition in 2001 and at home he has become a national hero, his efforts rebooting the country's classical music scene and inspiring the building of a new full-scale concert hall in Skopje – even though he is still a mere 35. He is also celebrated there as a popular songwriter. That, though, is a strand he left outside the Wigmore Hall, offering a programme that contained as much dark introspection as it did extroversion.

Putting [Brahms](#) together with Ravel and Poulenc might look like Heston Blumenthal programming: ingredients not traditionally complementary, yet that can, when combined, bring out unexpected slants on familiar territory. As Brahms and French composers found themselves on opposite sides of the late 19th century's Franco-Prussian divide, they are still rarely allowed into the same room, but Trpčeski proved that shared inspirations underpinned them: notably the counterpoint of Bach and Handel and the classicism of Mozart.

Trpčeski is an extremely centred pianist: a first-rate virtuoso without a hint of histrionics. As with great figures of the past, such as the violinists Jascha Heifetz and Nathan Milstein, his face and body language remain undemonstrative while he directs the energy only where it needs to go: into drawing the best out of the music, undistracted. The emotion is all in the sound – and so it should be.

Brahms's Intermezzi Op.117 are an unusual opener. These "lullabies of my sorrows", as the composer termed them, emerged as still waters that ran to immeasurable depths, the melodies smooth and eloquent while inner voices glimmered out of the surrounding darkness. They set a sombre mood that lingered throughout the programme, an intriguing underpinning.

Trpčeski's balance, clarity and suave, supple eloquence took Poulenc's music as seriously as it deserves. The *Variations on a Theme of Handel* show the composer's opposite facet. The closest thing that Brahms ever wrote to Bach and Beethoven's great variation sets, these 25 dazzling contrapuntal and character variations have much in common with both, including a solid footing in the harmonic structure, a kaleidoscopic range of character including numbers that suggest (among much else) a two-part invention, a sicilienne, a musical box and Hungarian Gypsy violin playing. The technical bedazzlements of the mighty final fugue can raise the roof when it is as expertly delivered as this: Trpčeski sailed through its most challenging moments with sparkling, incisive touch and a fulsome tone that never became heavy, taking unmistakable delight in the work's chewy glories.

And so to France, with [*Ravel's Valses nobles et sentimentales*](#); here Trpčeski's irresistible sense of rhythm allied itself wonderfully to his feel for colour. Each of the waltzes had a defined character, the piano tone becoming translucent in a light-filled Mediterranean way – quite different from the opaque *cantabile* of the Brahms intermezzos – and there were high spirits aplenty. Yet when the music ultimately disappeared into silence Brahms's sense of foreboding seemed closer than you might think.

Poulenc's piano music is heard too rarely, especially from pianists who are not themselves French. Trpčeski's well-contrasted selection included 2 Novelettes (1927), the *Novelette sur un thème de Manuel de Falla*, five of the Improvisations and the Toccata from *Trois pièces*. Poulenc's distinctive neo-classicism – like Mozart filtered through absinthe – is evident in the first Improvisation, in B minor, and the impact of both Bach and Prokofiev is clear in the near-pointillist brilliance of the Toccata. The Improvisation No. 15, though, is a delicious *Hommage à Edith Piaf* – 'l'adorable mauvaise musique', as Poulenc termed it. Trpčeski's balance, clarity and suave, supple eloquence took Poulenc's music as seriously as it deserves. Insouciant, yes; flippant, never.

As encores Trpčeski offered first a little-known Ravel Menuet and finally a number that he introduced with an anecdote about how he and his sister used to listen to a recording of it by Céline Dion. It was not the song from *Titanic*, but the Brahms Lullaby.

A recital of such quality should have found the hall bursting at the seams – but pity the musician who turns up at another London venue the day after the Proms begin. For those sweltering through the symphonic sauna in South Kensington, please note that the Wigmore Hall is the proud possessor of a fine air-cooling system and a season that currently has another week to run.