

Christopher's Classics - Series XXVIII 2023

Duo Enharmonics



Beth Chen (piano), Nicole Chao (piano)

performing Piano Music for Four Hands

Presented by
Sunday Classics Inc

Elizabeth Ball Trust



Thursday, May 4th, 2023, 7:30 PM
The Piano, 156 Armagh St, Christchurch

The busiest lives deserve beautiful music.

Programme

J. S. Bach (1685-1750) arr. Kurtág - *Gottes Zeit ist die aller beste Zeit*
(*God's time is the very best time*)

Schubert (1797-1828) — *Fantasy in F Minor D. 940*

Ravel (1875-1937) arr. Garban - *La valse*

Interval

Psathas (1966-) - *Fragment*

Rachmaninov (1873-1943) - *Six Morceaux Op.11*

Strauss (1825-1899) arr. Anderson - *Blue Danube Fantasy*

New Zealand classical music team **Duo Enharmonics** is energising and redefining classical music through their virtuosic and emotionally thrilling programmes. The "unanimity of feeling" that one reviewer notes arises from their shared musical vision, which is seen in their harmonised physical gestures and heard in their remarkably synched sonic utterances. Their physical and musical gestures are saturated with subtleties of nuance only made possible after years of full-time duo partnership.

Following their Master's degrees, Nicole Chao and Beth Chen each had independent performing careers, finding success in national and international concerto and solo competitions. In 2017 they formed Duo Enharmonics, and began ongoing collaborations with members of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, New Zealand String Quartet, and Orchestra Wellington. The duo's repertoire includes all major works for piano duet and duo, including orchestral transcriptions, and spans music from the baroque period through to the contemporary.

Duo Enharmonics strive to bring classical music to ever wider audiences. Initiatives include their Front Row Classical Series (house concerts), and outreach activities such as school concerts and charity concerts. Their self-produced music videos of four-hand music and their "behind-the-scenes" clips spread their appeal.

Programme Notes

J. S. Bach arr. Kurtág *Gottes Zeit ist die aller beste Zeit*

The introductory music to Bach's funeral cantata *God's time is the very best time* lives up to the title: although only a couple of minutes in length, the music seems to extend blissfully into eternity. The continuous gentle rhythms and simple melodic motifs assure our sense of safety within the heavenly sound world. Delicate imitative dialogue between the two upper voices (in the primo part) suggests caressing and tenderness, inviting us into a space of unconditional understanding. Heaven is heard as a place where all can find solace, and this feature is beautifully channelled in György Kurtág's transcription for piano. Meaningfully, the primo player overlays her arms, creating a poignant image of the cross.

Schubert *Fantasy in F minor D. 940*

The Fantasy in F minor is one of Schubert's masterpieces of 1828, the final year of his life. While the improvisatory aspects of the work are emblematic of the fantasy genre, Schubert employs the four-movement sonata as a frame for the work. The four movements proceed without breaks, through an allegro, a slow movement, a scherzo, and finale.

The haunting opening melody of the first movement is one of the most beautiful that Schubert wrote. Over a rocking accompaniment, the repetitive back and forth between two melodic notes becomes hypnotic, creating a beautiful sense of nostalgia. This contrasts with the second theme of unrelenting force and steady, funereal-like rhythms.

The slow movement begins with long trills and obstinate double-dotted rhythms, creating a stately sense of ceremony, and pointing to the Baroque genre of the French overture. This music is contrasted with a beautiful second theme of singing quality, demonstrating Schubert's skills as a song writer.

The third movement scherzo offers contrast through lively dance rhythms and imitative melodic strands between the two parts. While a trio section in the major mode offers some pastoral relief, most of the movement remains in the minor mode. This, combined with the orchestral impulse, means the serious nature governing the Fantasy is largely maintained.

At the finale, we return to the opening theme of the Fantasy before a fugue overtakes the movement. Having built to a dramatic climax, the music suddenly stops, exhausted. The opening theme of the work makes an utterly devastating last return, before a final cadence of despair.

Throughout the Fantasy, the first movement's poignant opening theme returns several times. Schubert's mastery of thematic repetition lies in his ability to make major and minor versions of a theme sound worlds apart. He also considers the immediate or large-scale context of every thematic return, ensuring each is imbued with significance.

Ravel arr. Garban *La valse*

While *La Valse* is best known in its orchestral version, the four-hand version is no less intense. The work is based on the glittering genre epitomised by Johann Strauss Jr.—the Viennese waltz. Ravel's *La valse*, though, plays with our expectations of what a waltz should be, with the opening bars providing the first ominous sign; the whirling and groaning in the bass is full of harmonic ambiguity, and tiny fragments of melody present and vanish. At certain points in the piece, we are provided with the elegant, suave, and charming features that typify the ballroom dance. Once they appear, however, those features dissolve. Through dissecting features of the waltz, Ravel dismantles the genre.

Written soon after World War I, this deconstructivist work points to the collapse of Europe's glorious heyday. Windows into the refined tradition of the waltz suggest a nostalgia for the elegance of simpler times, while the violent aspects of the music reflect Ravel's deep revulsion for the horrors of war. Some effects might be heard as the sonic landscape of war itself: terror-ridden, descending glissandos suggest falling bombs. In the final measures, the music obsessively circles round repeating motifs in a giddy whirl of terror.

Psathas *Fragment*

In *Fragment*, we inhabit an idyllic space. The work comprises two main elements: gentle chords resemble soft reverberations that appear and vanish, while crystalline melodic tones shine above in luminous beauty. Much of the allure of this work arises through Psathas's deep knowledge of how melodic resonance is enriched through the pedal, and through the spacing of accompanying chords. The hues of the harmonies perhaps point to a crisp, fine autumn morning. And the gentle crescendo and decrescendo of each set of chordal reverberations are like delicate impulses of wind. The bell-like melodic tones can be heard as glinting swords of sunlight penetrating a forest canopy.

Rachmaninov *Six Morceaux Op. 11*

- I. *Barcarolle*
- II. *Scherzo*
- III. *Thème russe*
- IV. *Valse*
- V. *Romance*
- VI. *Slava*

Six morceaux is an early work, completed not long after Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory, but the six pieces already demonstrate many of the traits the composer will become famous for—particularly his mastery of dramatic melody.

In the haunting *Barcarolle*, Rachmaninoff creates a seamless, long melody from one small motif. The stylistic features of the *barcarolle* genre—based around the undulating rhythms of the Venetian gondola—feature at several levels. The opening eight bars, for example, form one

wave as the pitch contour gently ascends and descends with rising and falling dynamics. The whole piece is a larger wave, the middle section featuring dazzling effects in the primo's upper register, suggesting fireworks or an inner ecstasy.

The playful Scherzo features passages of incessant rhythmic drive and spiky textures that foreshadow aspects of Prokofiev's style. A contrasting section appears twice, consisting of a pleading, faux-romantic motif, followed by a cheeky, scuttering response.

Thème russe offers varied presentations of a Russian folk song. One of Rachmaninoff's greatest skills, as evidenced here, is his ability to maintain intensity of drama through small variations in melodic repetition. Often given romantic impetus through new chromatic murmurings underneath it, the melody sings itself into a state of perpetuity, ending with a proud declamation of the song.

Valse is made up of several contrasting melodies of different moods and styles. In the opening, one can hear the elegance and charm of the Viennese genre, but also the heightened intensity of feeling that comes from Rachmaninoff's favourite technique of circling back and forth chromatically between melodic tones.

Nowhere is this propensity for chromatic circling more evident than in the Romance. From the smallest, but most intense of building blocks—chromatically ascending and descending threads—Rachmaninoff builds an impassioned song of desperation and sorrow.

Slava, based on a Russian chant, gathers stylistic features of the preceding pieces: restatements of the theme through subtle variation, chromatic murmurings underneath the theme, sparkling fireworks in the primo's upper register, and exalted thematic recapitulations. The piece is set in the ceremonious key of C major, and the evocation of loud church bells augments the sense of majesty.

Strauss arr. Anderson *Blue Danube Fantasy*

Strauss's famous melodies are taken to breathtaking extremes in this arrangement by Greg Anderson, half of the world-famous piano duo, Anderson & Roe. Like the Ravel/Garban waltz, this piece presents the Viennese waltz in a new guise. But while Ravel's work deconstructs the genre and makes a political statement, Anderson's adaptation is more of a fun roller-coaster ride.

The emotions and characters of the piece cross a wide spectrum. There are small moments of sorrow and regret, but the emotions of joy, pride, and elation outweigh all else: this is a celebration of the four-hands genre. The roller-coaster builds in excitement, ending with the most dangerous passages of all, where Anderson instructs the pianists to play "wild and frenzied" and then "with abandon." Theatrics of the arms and bodies abound. As Anderson and Roe write on their website, playing this piece "is the act of dancing, as much as it is the act of making music."

Christopher's Classics Next Concert:

Hyein Kim



performing **Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky,
Shostakovich and Davidoff**

Thursday 18th May 2023, 7:30 PM

at **The Piano** 156 Armagh St.

Tickets: Door Sales: \$40 (students **\$15**) by cash
\$42 (students **\$17**) by credit card/EFTPOS.

On-Line Sales: www.eventfinda.co.nz (all charges to purchaser)

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