



CLEVELAND  
CHAMBER  
MUSIC  
SOCIETY

## PROGRAM NOTES

**Garrick Ohlsson, piano**  
**May 7, 2024 – 7:30 p.m.**  
*Disciples Christian Church*

### **Sonata in F major, Op. 10, No. 2** **Ludwig van Beethoven**

*Born: Bonn, 1770*  
*Died: Vienna, 1827*  
*Composed: 1796-98*

Of the three Beethoven sonatas published as Op. 10, the second one, in F, is the lightest, coming between a fiery and passionate C-minor piece (sometimes called the “Little Pathétique”) and a weighty D-major work. Yet this sonata, too, has its share of novelties in store. After a rather simple opening, the first movement continues with quite a few harmonic and rhythmic surprises. The three *fortissimo* notes that end the exposition are used as a springboard for the development section, which is built upon the ingenious transformations of those three notes. The recapitulation starts in the “wrong” key: D major, and reaches the original key of F only after another series of tonal adventures.

The sonata has no slow movement; instead, a scherzo-like Allegretto, in f minor,

stands in second place. The first theme, played by both hands in unison in a low register and then developed in imitation, has a certain aura of mystery to it. The Trio, or middle section, in D-flat major, starts in a subdued *pianissimo*; in an innovative move, Beethoven wrote out the repeats, with some changed harmonies and offbeat *sforzato* accents the second time around. The recapitulation is, once again, written out in full (rather than simply marked *da capo*) with some further variations added to the f-minor melody.

The *Presto* finale begins like a fugue but isn’t really one. Rather, it is a cheerful dance with only a few fleeting serious moments.

## ***Wanderer Fantasy, D. 760 (1822)***

### **Franz Schubert**

*Born: Himmelpfortgrund [Vienna], 1797*

*Died: Vienna, 1828*

*Composed 1822*

One of Schubert's most grandiose piano works, the *Wanderer Fantasy* got its name from Schubert's eponymous song, one of whose melodies served as the starting point for the second of its four interconnected movements. The song was written in 1816 on a text by the minor poet Georg Philipp Schmidt (known after his birthplace as Schmidt von Lübeck). Schmidt had managed to express one of the central feelings of Romanticism, the eternal longing for a distant place ("happiness is wherever you are *not*")—and Schubert's setting soon became one of his most popular works.

From the song, Schubert selected the phrase sung to the words "The sun seems here so cold, the blossoms have faded, life is old; what people are talking is but empty sound, I am a stranger everywhere." The set of variations that follow almost amount to a fantasy within a fantasy. Schubert added a new second part to the melody, weaving in key motifs from other sections of the song. A stormy interlude based on one such motif leads to a nostalgic restatement of the song theme, first in major, then in the original minor key and subsequently in major again. In the next section, the melody is completely buried underneath a cascade of rapid figurations, until the music erupts in one of those desperate outbursts that will become increasingly frequent in Schubert's later music, to subside in a softer, calmer Coda.

But if the second movement of the *Wanderer Fantasy* is extraordinary, it is fair to say that it was actually the first, third, and fourth movements that made music history. All three are based on the same musical idea, an idea not found in the song but sharing a certain rhythmic pattern with it.

Schubert was so fond of this particular rhythm (long-short-short) that it is sometimes called the "Schubert rhythm" (long-short-short). The opening theme undergoes profound character transformations in the course of the work, from resolute to dreamlike; it can serve both as a dance melody and as a fugue subject. This technique inspired many composers later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from Berlioz to Liszt and beyond.

The first movement opens *con fuoco* ("with fire") with a heroic theme that is immediately repeated in a gentler tone. A tiny part of that theme later splits off and takes on a life of its own in a beautiful lyrical melody. The transition to the slow movement is extremely suspenseful. Even more dramatic, however, is the next major shift: after the *pianissimo* ending of the Adagio, the Scherzo bursts in without the slightest warning. This powerful *Presto* includes a gentler middle section, eventually culminating in a frenzied passage filled with fiendish *arpeggios* (broken chords) that lead directly into the thunderous octaves of the final fugato.

Schubert did not have the disposition to write elaborate fugues in a learned style. It was a shortcoming he himself was well aware of, and in the last weeks of his short life, he sought instruction in counterpoint from a teacher named Simon Sechter (who later became Bruckner's teacher). In the last section of the *Wanderer Fantasy*, Schubert quickly abandons counterpoint and crowns the work with a display of virtuosity that surpasses everything heard before.

The *Wanderer Fantasy* is by far of the most technically demanding of all of

Schubert's piano music; the composer, who was a competent piano player but not a concert artist, never played it himself. The work was published almost immediately after it was composed, yet it did not become

widely known until Franz Liszt began to champion it. (In 1851, Liszt made a highly successful arrangement for piano and orchestra.)

## **Convocations**

### **Thomas Misson**

*Born: Hobart, Tasmania [Australia], 1992*

*Composed: 2023*

When Garrick Ohlsson went on an Australian tour in 2023, he premiered a new piece written for him by 31-year-old Thomas Misson, a composer and pianist from Hobart, Tasmania. Misson has described himself on his X (formerly Twitter) page as a “composer, pianist, educator, and YouTuber with a passion for (nearly) all things contemporary classical.” Elsewhere, his work is described as “inspired by psychology, the complexities of nature, politics, the extremes of the human condition and the ever-present imperfection central to it. His music often expresses a desire to reimagine familiar musical tropes in surreal, and blackly humorous ways.”

*Convocations* was commissioned by Paul Kildea of Musica Viva Australia and underwritten by Stephen Johns. Misson had read a review of one of Mr. Ohlsson's performances, where the critic spoke about the pianist's “calmly demanding presence.” The composer explained:

I decided I would channel a piece by Liszt which evokes the same descriptors for me, *Sposalizio* (meaning marriage) from *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). In this piece, Liszt describes Raphael's high-renaissance painting, *Sposalizio*, in musical form. Though some of the motivic and structural scaffolding owes to the Liszt, conceptually and stylistically, the piece has come to resemble something more pluralistic than a marriage. *Convocations* combine the unlikely and disparate elements of the romantic piano giants, modernist styles, an Australian tour, a Tasmanian composer, and an American concert pianist in a congregation that aims to give life to a spiritual soundworld.

### **Variations brillantes, Op. 12 (1833)**

### **Nocturne in B major, Op. 62, No. 1 (1846)**

### **Scherzo No. 2 in b-flat minor, Op. 31 (1837)**

### **Frédéric Chopin**

*Born: Żelazowa Wola, nr. Warsaw, 1810*

*Died: Paris, 1849*

Even though Chopin died before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, we can distinguish an early, a middle and a late period within his oeuvre. The *Variations brillantes* has all the hallmarks of an early work: light in tone but extremely virtuosic, relatively simple in its harmonic language but rather varied in the rapid passagework it contains.

The theme comes from the opera *Ludovic* by a composer who is nearly forgotten today, Ferdinand Hérold (1791-1833).<sup>1</sup> This opera, left unfinished at the time of the composer's death, was completed by Fromental Halévy (of *La Juive* fame) and performed in 1833. Chopin's variations, written the same year, were based on an aria from *Ludovic* that began with the words "Je vends des scapulaires" ("I sell scapulars"<sup>2</sup>).

By 1833, Chopin had been a resident of Paris for two years, and had composed some works that may be counted among the products of his full artistic maturity (the first nocturnes, the first set of études, etc.). In the present Variations, he seems to have revisited the carefree manner of some of the works he wrote when still in Poland. Yet the "new" Chopin is already

Chopin's four scherzos are extended and formally complex works. We are far removed here from the Beethovenian idea of the scherzo, which, more often than not, emphasizes rhythmic and harmonic surprises to provide a respite between weightier movements in a symphony or chamber work. Chopin's scherzos are self-standing compositions where dramatic and lyrical moments tend to clash head-on, with a great deal of passion, suspense and—of course—plenty of virtuosic fireworks. The second scherzo opens with a mysterious *pianissimo* (Chopin wanted it to sound soft and

present at many points, especially in the beautiful slow variation.

As was the custom in such virtuoso variation sets, the work opens with an extensive introduction before the actual theme appears. There are four variations: the first one adds some *legato* figurations (with the notes of the fast passages connected to one another), the second is *staccato* (separate notes in a dance-like rhythm). The emotional *Lento* stands in third place, followed by a *Scherzo* culminating in a dazzling coda.

The nocturne we will hear next is one of the last Chopin wrote, and is a representative of his "late" style. It was published, with a companion piece, in 1846, three years before the composer's death. At this point, the nocturne had been one of Chopin's most important genres for a decade and a half, and its general character had become well established, yet in Op. 62, Chopin went beyond his earlier practice in terms of refinement and sophistication of his piano writing. When the main melody returns after the middle section, it is embellished by an unbroken chain of trills, adding a special radiance to the music.

sepulchral) immediately answered by a *fortissimo*; this dramatic exchange soon yields to one of the composer's most glorious soaring melodies. The middle section appears more stable at first, with a melody that constantly returns to the same note, yet it soon followed by two more dynamic ideas: a melody that is relentlessly forges ahead, more intense with each repeat; and a *leggiero* ("light") section with fast arpeggios in the right hand. The music becomes more and more agitated before subsiding, to prepare the way for the recapitulation and a climactic conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> The overture to Hérold's opera *Zampa* can still be heard occasionally.

<sup>2</sup> A type of religious garment.

At the height of the excitement, Chopin “forgets” to return to the initial key of b-flat minor at the end, and closes the piece

instead in the relative major, D flat—which is only one of the many revolutionary moves in this unique masterpiece.

*-Peter Laki*

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*Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society’s program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.*