CAL PERFORMANCES
AT HOME

Streaming Premiere – Thursday, May 13, 2021, 7pm

Beatrice Rana, *piano*

Filmed exclusively for Cal Performances
at Oratorio del Gonfalone, Rome,
on April 6–7, 2021.

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
French Suite No. 2 in C minor, BWV 813
Allemande
Courante
Saranbande
Air
Minuet
Minuet – Trio
Gigue

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
Étude 1 – pour les cinq doigts d'après Monsieur Czerny
Étude 2 – pour les tierces
Étude 5 – pour les octaves

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)
Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20
Scherzo No. 2 in B-Flat minor, Op. 31
Scherzo No. 3 in C Sharp minor, Op. 39
Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Op. 54

Beatrice Rana appears courtesy of Warner Classics.

For more information on Beatrice Rana, visit beatriceranapiano.com.

Management for Beatrice Rana: Primo Artists, New York, NY (www.primoartists.com).

The *Cal Performances at Home* Spring 2021 season
is dedicated to Gail and Dan Rubinfeld, leading supporters of Cal Performances
and the well-being of our artists for almost 30 years.

Note: following its premiere, the video recording of this concert
will be available on demand through June 12, 2021.

Johann Sebastian Bach
French Suite No. 2 in C minor, BWV 813 (ca. 1722)

Keyboard players the world over have cause to be grateful that Bach was a prodigious teacher who liked to write custom-tailored material for his students. Thanks to those hundreds of little fingers learning to play, posterity has been blessed with a legacy of matchless music that serves not only to train the muscles but also to enchant the senses, delight the mind, and move the heart. (And intimidate the lazy.) Amon those pedagogical staples we find two collections of suites, or collections of "stylized" dances—i.e., meant for listening rather than dancing. One set, dubbed the "little" suites by the Bach family, contains suites that skip the traditional concerto-like opening movement. What it was about the "little" suites that led to their eventual rechristening as the *French* suites has been lost to history, but the label appears to have been in general circulation as early as 1762.

Bach produced the French Suites during his years in the tiny principality of Anhalt-Cöthen, where he had found a welcome sanctuary beginning in 1717 after nearly a decade immersed in the toxic politics of the duchy of Weimar. His young Prince Leopold was an ardent music lover whose Calvinist court precluded the writing of concerted sacred music, thus Bach concentrated his energies on those instrumental works that have since become bedrock repertory. The precise dating of the French Suites is, as so often with Bach, difficult to pin down reliably, but at the very least we can assign 1722 as a plausible, if approximate, completion date thanks to an autograph score of the first five suites.

Bach organized his suites around four dances—allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue—with optional *galanterien* such as gavottes, bourrées, minuets, polonaises, and airs inserted between sarabande and gigue. Since suites were popular in both France and Italy, a fair number of dances had acquired distinct national accents, such as the complex French *courante* versus the rambunctious Italian *corrente*. Bach's all-embracing musical culture ensured that he would mix both dialects freely in his suites, along with forms, styles, and idioms drawn from the broad span of European music.

Despite its "stern" minor mode, French Suite No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 813 partakes noticeably of the decorative *galant* manner that was to become just the thing throughout Europe as Baroque gave way to the early Classical. It offers an allemande with intricate and complex rhythms, followed by a second-place courante that reflects Bach's agnosticism concerning dance titles: this is indubitably an Italianate *corrente*, its smooth flow quite different from the rhythmically intricate French version. The sarabande is likewise Italianate, its vinelike melody never coming to rest save at cadences. Two *galanterien* follow: an air that can't help but conjure up thoughts of Bach's two-part Inventions—its rhythms don't suggest any of the era's dances—and an utterly charming little menuet, a late-addition afterthought that can be negotiated by even the youngest of clavier students. The finale is a gigue in the manner of the antique French *canarie*, its short phrases bouncy and almost breathless.

Claude Debussy
***Études,* Book 1 (selections) (1915)**

As the malignant miasma of World War I spread throughout Europe, Claude Debussy was neither a well nor a happy man. He knew he didn't have much time left. Diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 1909, he underwent a grueling operation in 1915 that left him severely weakened and barely able to compose. "For the last three months I've been able to work again," he wrote in October 1915. "I spent nearly a year unable to write music… after that I've almost had to re-learn it."

Nevertheless, in his last few remaining years Debussy produced a series of dazzling creations that encapsulate the concentrated essence of his mature style. Emotionally volatile and tonally opulent, his distinctly feline musical temperament begins to hint at an underlying reptilian menace, suppressed perhaps but palpable nonetheless. That vaguely disassociated persona likely accounts for the late works' relative unfamiliarity—the three chamber sonatas, *En blanc*

Opposite: Beatrice Rana. Photo by Marie Staggat.

et noir for two pianos, and the 12 piano *Études* remain on the outskirts of the repertory, cherished by those willing to make the journey but *terra incognita* to many listeners.

Publisher Jacques Durand had every reason to feel skeptical about Debussy's stated intention to compose a set of piano studies to complement Chopin's landmark *études* of the 1830s. There was no question but that, Chopin notwithstanding, traditional piano studies were drab and cheerless affairs; consider exercise-spinner *par excellence* Carl Czerny, whose soul-shredding mechanistic drills shrivelled budding young talents hither and yon. "You'll agree," Debussy suggested to Durand, "that there's no need to make technique any gloomier in order to appear more serious, and that a bit of charm has never spoilt anything." That was all very well and good, but Durand well knew Debussy's penchant for abandoning projects. He may have considered it just talk, instigated by Debussy's recent editing of Durand's new edition of the complete Chopin *études*.

But Debussy meant it. He fell to work on the *Études* with zeal, keeping Durand up to date on his progress and offering observations about the works as they emerged. He pulled no punches about their gob-smacking technical and musical difficulty. "Apart from the question of technique, these *Études* will be a useful warning to pianists not to take up the musical profession unless they have remarkable hands."

That challenge is far more than physical. These are *études* of the mind, not only of the body, and merely playing the notes will not do; each *étude* presents the pianist with a unique dreamscape, engendered perhaps by some morsel of piano technique (thirds, octaves, repeated notes, ornaments, etc.) but adventuring far beyond such mundane trivialities.

Pour les cinq doigts ("For the five fingers") starts with a droll parody of those horrid old-school finger drills; it's even marked "*après M. Czerny.*" It isn't long before it soars into a near-delirious fantasy, concluding with that opening drill transformed into a shower of pyrotechnics. *Pour les tierces* ("For thirds") might bear a faint resemblance to Chopin's celebrated study in thirds, but while Chopin aims for a glittering diamond necklace, Debussy fashions a string of exquisite black pearls. Finally, *Pour les octaves* ("For octaves") transforms those athletic mainstays of Lisztian piano technique into an intoxicating (and perhaps intoxicated) waltz.

Frédéric Chopin
Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20 (1833)
Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 (1837)
Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Op. 39 (1839)
Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Op. 54 (1843)

"Mozart encompasses the entire domain of musical creation, but I've got only the keyboard in my poor head" lamented Frédéric Chopin. We should all be so lucky as to have such a keyboard in our own poor heads. Nobody mattered more to the history of the instrument than Frédéric Chopin; nobody changed piano writing as much; nobody more enhanced the stature of the instrument, just then coming into its maturity.

Nor was Chopin's imagination restricted to what could be done with 10 fingers on a keyboard. He was among music's supreme harmonists, a composer who re-thought the very function of chords and in so doing imbued Romantic music with unprecedented harmonic color. He brought the lyricism of *bel canto* opera to an instrument that creates its sounds via an act of violence—i.e., whacking a high-tension string with a hammer—and obliged pianists to re-think their entire approach to the instrument in order to play his music successfully.

And yet this most quietly radical of pianists originally aspired to the bread-and-circuses life of travelling virtuosi, where fustian bombast ruled the roost and artistry was an inhibiting encumbrance. He even went so far as to consider studying with the spectacularly superficial Friedrich Kalkbrenner, empty-calorie note-spinner *par excellence* who could have ruined the suggestible young Pole had not horrified parents and teachers intervened.

So Chopin backed off that particular cliff and headed towards his true destiny. His piano compositions are mostly short, save three sonatas and a few sets of variations, but each encompasses its own unique and fully realized cosmos. Chopin never phoned it in.

Chopin's four scherzos date from his peak decade of 1833–43, after he finally abandoned his bid for concert fame but before chronic tuberculosis sapped his creative and physical energy. In using the title *scherzo*, he was reaching back to a Classical-era practice of replacing the usual minuet movement with a supercharged variant that stepped up the tempo, stripped off the courtly polish, and threw in a goodly dose of robust humor. Although Joseph Haydn holds pride of place via certain scherzo movements in his string quartets, it was Ludwig van Beethoven who made the genre really and truly his own. Chopin had Beethoven's models in mind; he retained the overall A–B–A form (more or less) but replaced Beethoven boisterous athleticism with a demonically-tinged angst, reflecting the early Romantic penchant for the Gothic.

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20 dates from an unsuccessful foray to Vienna, where Chopin was making what turned out to be a last-gasp effort to establish himself as a popular piano virtuoso. Physically challenging and emotionally supercharged, the Scherzo confirms that Chopin dwelled in a realm far beyond the effete *salonistes* and their oh-so-trendy devotées.

It begins with what is in effect a primal scream: a sharply dissonant chord in the upper register followed by a guttural bellow down below. What follows is a terrified scramble, jets of notes springing repeatedly upwards before collapsing into roiling surges. Momentary pauses seem like stopping for breath before the chase resumes. A true respite is found in the contrasting middle section that quotes a gently rocking Polish Christmas song, but soon enough the mood of terror returns, and the work ends in cataclysmic fury.

Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 opens in sepulchral menace—"like a house of the dead" according to Chopin—lit by flashes of lightning. Eventually the mood lightens with the arrival of the major mode and a decidedly exuberant demeanor, lyrical and optimistic. The contrasting middle section—by far the longest part of the work—explores a range of affects, from the dignified to the breathless to the effervescent to the heroic; a fascinating weaving in of material from the first section eases the transition to the reprise, leading to a supercharged bravura finale.

Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Op. 39 dates from Chopin's stay in Majorca, Spain with Aurore Dupin, a.k.a. George Sand, with whom he had been having an extended affair. Planned as a escape from the damp Parisian winter, the trip began well enough but soon devolved into an ordeal as Chopin's health worsened—it was at this time he was diagnosed as having tuberculosis—combined with local antagonism over the couple's unmarried state. Eventually they settled in a former monastery at Valldemosa, where Chopin was able to start work on the third Scherzo.

Nothing about the finished work hints at the difficulties of its inception. Among the most complex of Chopin's works, it departs from the usual A–B–A scherzo layout in favor of interleaving the two main ideas—the first turbulent and expressed in thundering fusillades of octaves, the second comprising a noble chorale-like theme interspersed with glittering cascades.

Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Op. 54 offers a happy ending to the set. Written at George Sand's country villa at Nohant, the work reflects the sun-drenched satisfaction of that comfortable summer of 1842. Surrounded by some of his friends, including the painter Delacroix, Chopin wrote with a remarkable freedom, creating a scherzo that channels very little of the demonic but a great deal of the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

—Scott Foglesong

BEATRICE RANA, *piano*

Beatrice Rana has captured the attention of the international classical music world, drawing admiration and interest from concert presenters, conductors, critics, and audiences in many countries.

Rana performs at the world's most esteemed concert halls and festivals and collaborates with conductors including Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Antonio Pappano, Fabio Luisi, Riccardo Chailly, Yuri Temirkanov, Gianandrea Noseda, Jun Märkl, Trevor Pinnock, James Gaffigan, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Lahav Shani, Andrés Orozco-Estrada, Susanna Mälkki, Leonard Slatkin, Kent Nagano, and Zubin Mehta.

During the upcoming seasons, she will debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Bayerische Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester, New York Philharmonic, Deutsches Sinfonie-Orchester, Orquesta Nacional de España, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and Orchestre National de Lyon, and will return to the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and Antwerp Symphony Orchestra. She will also tour with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Vladimir Jurowski, the Wiener Symphoniker and Andrés Orozco-Estrada, and the Philharmonia Zurich and Fabio Luisi.

Rana will play recitals at the Berlin Philharmonie, Carnegie Hall, Lisbon's Gulbenkian Foundation, Barcelona's Palau de la Musica, Lugano's LAC, Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, Madrid's Scherzo Great Performers series, the Gilmore Keyboard Festival, Tokyo's Kioi Hall, and London's Wigmore Hall, among other venues.

An exclusive Warner Classics recording artist, Rana received international acclaim for her recordings of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 and Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 with Antonio Pappano and Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia.

Rana came to public attention in 2011, after winning First Prize at the Montreal International Competition, and in 2013, when she won the Silver Medal and the Audience Award at the 14th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

Born in Italy into a family of musicians, Rana currently lives in Rome, where she continues her studies with her lifetime mentor, Benedetto Lupo. She studied previously with Arie Vardi at the Hochschule für Musik in Hanover.

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