

Thursday, December 8, 2022, 7:30pm
Zellerbach Hall

Seong-Jin Cho, *piano*

PROGRAM

George Frideric HANDEL (1685–1759) Suite in F major, HWV 427 (1720)
Adagio
Allegro
Adagio
Allegro (Fugue)

HANDEL Suite in F minor, HWV 433 (1720)
Prélude
Allegro [Fuga]
Allemande
Courante
Gigue

Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897) *Variations and Fugue
on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24 (1861)
Aria
Variation 1
Variation 2. Animato
Variation 3. Dolce
Variation 4. Risoluto
Variation 5. Espressoivo
Variation 6
Variation 7. Con vivacita
Variation 8
Variation 9. Poco sostenuto
Variation 10. Energico
Variation 11. Dolce
Variation 12. Soave
Variation 13. Largamente, ma non più
Variation 14. Sciolto
Variation 15
Variation 16. Ma marcato
Variation 17. Più mosso
Variation 18. Grazioso
Variation 19. Leggiero und vivace
Variation 20. Legato
Variation 21. Dolce
Variation 22
Variation 23. Vivace e staccato
Variation 24
Variation 25
Fuga

INTERMISSION

COVID-19: Masking is required inside the auditorium, and is strongly recommended, though not required, for indoor lobby/waiting areas as well as outdoor spaces. Up-to-date vaccination is strongly recommended, though not required for entry. The latest information on Cal Performances' COVID-19 safety policies is available at calperformances.org/safety.
Photographing and/or recording this performance is strictly prohibited.



BRAHMS Selections from *Eight Klavierstücke*,
Op. 76 (1871/78)
Capriccio in F-sharp minor
Capriccio in B minor
Intermezzo in B-flat major
Capriccio in C-sharp minor

Robert SCHUMANN (1810–1856) *Symphonic Études*, Op. 13 (1834)
Thema: Andante
Variation 1: Un poco più vivo
Variation 2
Étude 3: Vivace
Variation 3
Variation 4
Variation 5
Variation IV from Posthumous variations
Variation 6: Allegro molto
Variation 7
Variation V from Posthumous variations
Étude 9: Presto possibile
Variation 8
Variation 9
Finale: Allegro brillante

Seong-Jin Cho records exclusively for Deutsche Grammophon

Support for Seong-Jin Cho is provided by Fred Levin, The Shenson Foundation.

PROGRAM NOTES

George Frideric Handel

Suite in F Major, HWV 427

Suite in F minor, HWV 433

Somewhat overshadowed by the popularity of Bach's keyboard suites, Handel's set of suites for harpsichord published in 1720—now known as the *8 Great Suites*—deserve more attention from today's major keyboard artists, whether they play the harpsichord or the piano. Renowned for his operas and other vocal works, Handel was also celebrated in his day for his virtuosity on both harpsichord and organ. During his early years in Italy before he moved to London in 1711, Handel participated in a legendary contest on these instruments with rival virtuoso Domenico Scarlatti at the Roman palace of Cardinal Ottoboni; the judges considered the two to be equals on the harpsichord while Handel was awarded the palm for his organ skills.

In 1719, a publishing house in Amsterdam issued several of Handel's suites in a pirated, corrupted edition, for which he received no money. His anger spurred him to publish these eight suites the next year in an edition that corrected and refined the Dutch versions, as well as added new suites of extraordinary quality. Handel's publication was an immense success, selling briskly throughout England and Northern Europe. Seong-Jin Cho has chosen two of the eight suites to open his concert, linking them with Brahms' *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, based on a theme from a later Handel suite and written a century and a half later.

While Bach adhered to the standardized French dances in his suites, Handel chose a more eclectic path. None of his suites follow the same pattern: some—like the Suite in F minor—include dances, and others—like

the Suite in F major—omit them in favor of more abstract movements. All show Handel as a sophisticated cosmopolitan, drawing freely on his international experiences in Germany, Italy, and England.

Dispensing with the standard French overture and dance movements, Suite No. 2 in F major follows the Italian sonata form of slow–fast–slow–fast. And the style of each of these movements is very Italianate, beginning with the rather vocal, elaborately embellished first Adagio. This is followed by a brilliant, nonstop Allegro and then, moving to D minor, a beautiful, poignantly expressive Italian opera aria in miniature. In the final Allegro, Handel shows off his contrapuntal mastery in a fugue built around a spirited repeated-note theme. Beginning as a fugue for three voices, it later adds a fourth.

In five movements that include three of the formal French dances, Suite No. 8 in F minor is the last and perhaps finest of the “Great Eight.” Its slow, majestic Prélude prominently uses the double-dotted rhythms of the French overture, but is much freer and more meditative in style. Its sensitive chromatic coloring adds to its magic. The following Allegro is another fugue; Handel enriches its clear-cut theme with full chords and Romantic-sounding octaves in the left hand. Then we move on to the French dances, beginning with a relaxed, genial Allemande. Then a Courante pursues its rolling, cheerful course with canons spinning between the right and left hands. More canonic imitation animates the closing Gigue, whose musical elegance produces a movement far superior to the usual bouncing dance.

Johannes Brahms

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24

In an era when the study of music history was still in its infancy, Johannes Brahms collected original editions of 18th-century

scores and poured over the music of Handel and Bach to find technical models and inspiration for his own work. In the second volume of Handel’s Suites for Harpsichord, published in 1733, he found a suite in B-flat major that contained a charming Aria with five variations. Since Brahms loved the theme-and-variations form (he was indeed the finest composer of variations after Beethoven), he decided to create his own transformations of the Aria’s theme as a major work for piano. Consisting of 25 variations and capped by a majestic fugue, the *Handel Variations*, composed in Hamburg in 1861, became his greatest variations work and some would argue his greatest piano piece.

First we hear the Aria theme pretty much as Handel wrote it, with plenty of Baroque trills and flourishes. Throughout his long chain of variations, Brahms chose various elements from this theme to develop into music spanning a marvelous range of characters and moods. At the midpoint comes the rich, earthy Variation 13 in Brahms’ beloved Hungarian gypsy style. It is followed by the fast, fiery Variation 14; together they make up a traditional slow–fast Hungarian dance in the style of the composer’s *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. Variation 22 is in the tinkling style known as the “music box” because it imitated the cunning mechanical toys so popular during the 18th century. The bold, sharply accented Variation 25 brings the Aria theme back into view and is followed by the work’s climax: an elaborate and dazzling fugue with a subject derived from Handel’s theme. In this spectacular finale, Brahms pays homage to the grandeur of Baroque music by demonstrating his mastery of its ultimate contrapuntal form.

Brahms

Selections from Eight Klavierstücke, Op. 76

As soon as his career was well-established, Brahms sought out beautiful rural retreats in which to do his summer composing. In the

late 1870s, he found a particularly inspiring one in the town of Pörschach on the mountain-rimmed Wörthersee in southern Austria. Here, he wrote to a friend, “the melodies are so abundant one must be careful not to step on them.” Both the Second Symphony and the Violin Concerto were born in Pörschach, and Brahms also created a more intimate work here: the *Eight Klavierstücke*, Op. 76, which musicologist Mark Mandarano calls “his first instrumental masterpieces in miniature.” Its opening Capriccio in F-sharp minor had already been composed in 1871 and was joined by the other seven pieces in 1878.

In these concentrated pieces, the composer set aside the obvious virtuosity of his earlier sonatas and variations and focused more on the ebb and flow of feeling, a palette of subtle tonal colors, and the refined musical procedures that would characterize most of his late-period works and especially his keyboard miniatures of the 1890s. In the words of biographer Malcolm MacDonald, they are “the first harbingers of Brahms’ later manner, in which fewer and fewer notes came progressively to stand for richer and richer substance.”

Opus 76 is divided between four capriccios and four intermezzos. More extroverted and dramatic in character, the capriccios serve as a framework opening and closing the work. By contrast, the intermezzos are gentler and more introspective, providing, in MacDonald’s words, “a pause for thought.” Seong-Jin Cho has chosen four movements that encapsulate this dichotomy, with the Capriccio in C-sharp minor—the work’s impressive centerpiece—now becoming a powerful conclusion.

The opening Capriccio in F-sharp minor demonstrates Brahms’ signature technique of taking a short motive and then varying and developing it to create an entire piece. MacDonald describes it as “turbulent and atmospheric, wrung from an obsessive *agitato* four-note motive that Brahms wreathes

in ever-changing windswept figurations.” The second Capriccio, in B minor, is much lighter and more playful. Every element in its pattering dance-like melody is intricately varied, and a buried inner voice eventually emerges into the foreground to guide the music through a striking chromatic rise and fall at the end.

The tranquilly flowing second intermezzo (No. 4) manages to cleverly avoid establishing its key of B-flat major until near the end of the piece.

The fifth piece, the Capriccio in C-sharp minor is, in Mandarano’s words, “the stormy center of gravity...a concentrated knot of intensity” for the work. Here Brahms’ love of clashing cross rhythms is the energy source for music that gyrates between meters of 6/8 and 3/4. Mandarano describes its finish as “a rhythmic fusillade.”

Robert Schumann Symphonic Études, Op. 13

In 1834, the 24-year-old Robert Schumann fell in love with a pretty adolescent pianist, Ernestine von Fricken, a student of his piano teacher—later to become his father-in-law—Friedrich Wieck. Though they became briefly engaged, the romance only lasted a few months before Schumann broke it off. But it inspired two of Schumann’s finest early works for piano: the famous *Carnaval* and the somewhat less well-known *Symphonic Études*.

Early in his career, Schumann had created two alter egos for himself expressing the conflicting sides of his personality: “Florestan”—representing his more assertive, risk-taking, and extroverted characteristics—and “Eusebius”—for his more introverted, dreamy, and poetic nature. Schumann saw these two personas as both internal and external to himself; in a diary entry, he described them as “two of my best friends.”

Florestan and Eusebius are prominent characters throughout *Carnaval*’s programmatic miniatures, but they also influence the

more abstract *Symphonic Études*. In fact, at one time Schumann actually called this piece “Studies of Orchestral Character by Florestan and Eusebius.” Stylistically, this is a hybrid work mingling two distinct forms: the keyboard étude championed by Chopin and the theme and variations. Schumann described the étude as a piece that “must develop technique or lead to the mastery of some particular difficulty.” And indeed, the *Symphonic Études* dramatically stretches early-Romantic piano technique and is among the most challenging of all Schumann’s music to play. It is “symphonic” in the sense that it calls upon an almost orchestral range of colors from the piano.

This work also comprises a series of variations on a melody created by Ernestine’s father, Baron von Fricken, an amateur flutist and composer. But here Schumann gives himself a very free rein in developing his variations. In Bernard Jacobson’s words, “they remodel the theme in a much freer manner, often making important changes in phrasing and harmonic structure. They are, in fact, miniature tone poems.” And they are also a series of character studies, incorporating both the Florestan and Eusebius personalities, although predominantly the former.

Surviving the collapse of his relationship with Ernestine von Fricken, the *Symphonic Études* were completed in 1836 and first published in 1837. In this first edition, Schumann omitted several variations he’d composed, mostly in a more inverted Eusebian style. However, in 1852, when he was revising many of his earlier works, he restored them; Cho has chosen to include two of these variations in his performance.

Von Fricken’s theme is a solemn, almost funereal march with melodic lines following a mournful descending shape. In Variation No. 1, this theme receives a very contrapuntal treatment in a livelier tempo. No. 2 is one of the longest, most fully developed varia-

tions, rhapsodic and predominantly Eusebian in mood, but with little explosions of passionate feeling. No. 4 returns to the theme’s march character, now played with very strong accents. The airy scherzo of No. 5 is followed by the fourth of the 1852 variations. Here the right hand is rhythmically free, often conflicting with the left hand’s steady tolling pattern. Though it opens gently, this variation encloses moments of unexpected intensity.

In No. 6, the opening theme emerges in the foreground, but now with a much bolder, more urgent character. No. 7 is a forceful, propulsive variation very much in Florestan mood. Cho then inserts another of the 1852 variations: a dreaming interlude whose liquid arpeggios in the right hand pour down over a syncopated left hand accompaniment. After the non-variation Étude No. 9, a whirlwind scherzo, comes one of the most fascinating of the variations, No. 8, which mimics the grand style of the Baroque French overture loved by Handel and intensifies it with glissando swirls.

The Allegro brillante finale departs completely from what has come before by launching a new theme in honor of William Sterndale Bennett, the piano virtuoso to whom Schumann dedicated this work. Because Bennett was English, Schumann used a theme from Marschner’s opera *Der Temppler und die Jüdin*, which is based on Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, and it too is given a variations treatment. In its final minute, don’t miss its startling harmonic modulation—one of the highlights of this marvelously unpredictable work.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2022

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.

With an overwhelming talent and innate musicality, **Seong-Jin Cho** has made his mark as one of the consummate talents of his generation and most distinctive artists on the current music scene. His thoughtful and poetic, assertive and tender, virtuosic and colorful playing can combine panache with purity and is driven by an impressive natural sense of balance.

Seong-Jin Cho was brought to the world's attention in 2015 when he won the First Prize at the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw. In January 2016, he signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon. An artist high in demand, Cho works with the world's most prestigious orchestras including the Berliner Philharmoniker, London Symphony Orchestra, Münchner Philharmoniker, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Orchestre de Paris, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Conductors he regularly works with include Myung-Whun Chung, Iván Fischer, Jakub Hrůša, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Antonio Pappano, and Esa-Pekka Salonen.

Highlights of Cho's 2021–22 season included debuts with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig with Alain Altinoglu, Bamberger Symphoniker with Andrew Manze, and Mozarteumorchester with Jörg Widmann. He returned to the LA Philharmonic and New York Philharmonic, each under their respective music directors, as well as Orchestre National de France with Cristian Măcelaru and Konzerthausorchester Berlin with Christoph Eschenbach. A highly sought-after touring soloist, Cho embarked on several international tours, including those with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and Semyon Bychkov as well as Philharmonia and Santtu-Matias Rouvali.

An active recitalist very much in demand, Seong-Jin Cho performs in many of the world's most prestigious concert halls including the main stage of Carnegie Hall as part of the Keyboard Virtuoso series, Con-

certgebouw Amsterdam in the Master Pianists series, Berliner Philharmonie Kammermusiksaal, Suntory Hall Tokyo, Walt Disney Hall Los Angeles, Festival International de piano de la Roque d'Anthéron, Verbier Festival, Gstaad Menuhin Festival, and Rheingau Musik Festival. This season he gives debut solo recitals at Wigmore Hall London, Konzerthaus Vienna, Prinzregententheater Munich, Liederhalle Stuttgart, Auditorium Rainier Monte-Carlo, and Konserthus Stockholm.

Cho's first recording with Deutsche Grammophon was released in November 2016, featuring Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 as well as the Four Ballades with the London Symphony Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda. A solo Debussy recital was released in November 2017, followed in 2018 by a Mozart album with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Cho's latest album on the Yellow Label, titled *The Wanderer* and released in May 2020, features Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy, Berg's Piano Sonata Op. 1, and Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor. All albums won impressive critical acclaim worldwide.

Born in 1994 in Seoul, Seong-Jin Cho started learning the piano at the age of six and gave his first public recital aged 11. In 2009, he became the youngest-ever winner of Japan's Hamamatsu International Piano Competition. In 2011, he won Third Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow at the age of 17. From 2012–15, he studied with Michel Béroff at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, and he has been mentored by Alfred Brendel. Seong-Jin Cho is now based in Berlin.

For more information on Seong-Jin Cho, visit www.seongjin-cho.com

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