

Sunday, November 5, 2023, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Jean Rondeau, *harpsichord*

Gradus ad Parnassum

Johann Joseph FUX (1660–1741) *Harpeggio* (c. 1730)

Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major,
Hob XVI-46 (c. 1767–70)
Allegro moderato
Adagio
Finale. Presto

Muzio CLEMENTI (1752–1832) Selection from *Gradus ad Parnassum*,
Op. 44
No. 45 – Preludio Andante malinconico
in C minor (1819)

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) Prelude No. 2 in C major, Op. 39 (1789)

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756–1791) Piano Sonata No. 16 in C major,
K. 545 (1788)
Allegro
Andante
Rondo: Allegretto grazioso

Rondo in A minor, K. 511 (1787)

Fantasia No. 3 in D minor, K. 397
(1782, left incomplete)

*This program will be performed without intermission
and last approximately 70 minutes.*



Climbing the Mountain

"I come to you, venerable master, in order to be introduced to the rules and principles of music." So begins *Gradus ad Parnassum* (in the standard translation by Alfred Mann), a theoretical overview of and guide to the art of counterpoint that Johann Joseph Fux (1660–1741) published in 1725, at the apex of his long career. Grove Online deems it "the most influential composition treatise in European music from the 18th century onwards."

The Latin title means "Steps to Parnassus" and refers to a long tradition of instructional reference books intended to guide eager students along the path to gradual acquisition of the practical knowledge necessary to succeed in a particular field, such as learning a language or how to play an instrument—or, in Fux's case, how to compose using the tools of counterpoint (among other topics).

The image of Parnassus anchors such endeavors in the ancient classical tradition: Mount Parnassus was sacred to Apollo as well as one of the locations favored by the Muses. Fux further staked his claim as part of this pedagogical pedigree by publishing his text in Latin (though the ancient language was fast nearing the end of its hegemony as a European *lingua franca*). *Gradus ad Parnassum* belonged to J.S. Bach's library and was used by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, among countless other figures. "Perhaps the craft of composition would really have fallen into decline if Fux's *Gradus* had not set up a standard," remarked Paul Hindemith.

Jean Rondeau brings a contemporary twist to this tradition by arriving at the very 21st-century conclusion that "it's the narrative that drives musical knowledge"—as he puts it in the essay accompanying his album *Gradus ad Parnassum* (released this past spring), from which this recital program is drawn. Cleverly emulating the Socratic dialogue format used by Fux, Rondeau in his album commentary has his alter ego, the

student, explain what attracted him to the famous treatise: "Represented there are themes that are dear to me: practice, constraint, the *Gradus* (the ascent, yes, but also its inverse, the starting over of Sisyphus, his descent), and the architectural concepts that stem from it..."

The young French harpsichordist makes the case for his instrument not from an "early music" perspective of historically informed practice but as an experimenter intrigued by its unacknowledged expressive potential. In the process, Rondeau encourages us to reexamine longstanding assumptions about these canonical composers—and to be open to hearing them in a new context. For the music itself, as his imaginary Parnassian teacher affirms, "never leaves us disenchanting."

Although best known to posterity for his treatise on how to write music, **Johann Joseph Fux** was himself a prodigiously productive composer. He served as Hofkapellmeister to a series of Habsburg emperors in the early 18th century, synthesizing the Austrian and Italian components of Viennese late Baroque style through a vast output of sacred music, opera, and instrumental works.

Harpeggio, composed by around 1730 at the latest and the sole work on Rondeau's program that was apparently written for harpsichord, wriggles free of any hint of doctrinaire rule-making. It is actually the first of three movements that appear side-by-side in Fux's manuscript, where it introduces a fugue in the same key of G major. But in the context of this recital, the piece's toccata-style fantasizing functions as a spirited curtain raiser to an array of composers and styles normally associated with the piano. Characteristic of Rondeau's thoughtful and subtle interventions is the omission of four bars of arpeggiated vamping chords in Fux's score, so that he begins with a scalar "staircase" that vividly encapsulates the image of an ascent.

Fux himself anchored his teaching in a reverence for the wisdom of the past, represented principally by the example of Palestrina. The dramaturgy underlying the program Rondeau has curated involves cross-connections (and also rivalries) between teachers and students who speak to one another across the centuries. **Joseph Haydn** (1732–1809) made up for his lack of formal training in theory and composition by studying the *Gradus ad Parnassum*. The **Sonata in A-flat major, Hob. XVI:46**, displays the confident originality Haydn was cultivating during his years of isolation from the Viennese epicenter at the Esterházy court.

Although he did not develop a dual career as a solo celebrity performer—in contrast to Mozart and Beethoven, who initially established their reputations in Vienna as keyboard virtuosos—Haydn composed at the keyboard, and his catalogue includes a significant number of solo sonatas.

Dating from the late 1760s but not published until 1788, the Sonata in A-flat major—Haydn in fact called it a “divertimento,” continuing to use older-fashioned terms at this stage—betrays the influence of another formative teacher as well. “Whoever knows me thoroughly must discover that I owe a great deal to [Carl Philipp] Emanuel Bach, that I understood him and studied him with diligence,” as Haydn told his early biographer. C.P.E. Bach’s aesthetic of intensified expression through powerful juxtapositions, labeled *empfindsamer Stil* (“sensitive style”)—a musical parallel to the revolutionary insights of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—became associated with the quest for emotional authenticity.

The A-flat major Sonata reflects this sensibility in manifold ways, beginning with the gracefully ornamented and meditative opening theme of the widely ranging first movement. Rondeau’s harpsichord interpretation highlights shifts in color between registers and tonalities as well as quasi-improvisatory disruptions and embarka-

tions. An especially affecting Adagio (in D-flat major, an unusual key choice for the time) retreats inward in wonderfully unpredictable ways, while the wit expected of a Haydn finale propels a highly condensed argument, culminating in a dazzling architecture of rising and falling scales.

Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), a determinative influence on the development of the modern piano, began his career as a harpsichord virtuoso and later became an influential piano manufacturer and publisher who disseminated some of Beethoven’s works. He published his own *Gradus ad Parnassum*, Op. 44, comprising 100 pieces in three volumes (the last appearing in 1826). A summa of his technical knowledge as a composer and pianist, Clementi’s *Gradus* conveys a “lifelong fascination with ‘learned’ procedures,” according to Leon Plantinga. Some of the pieces have programmatically suggestive titles, such as the “Preludio Andante malinconico” in C minor (No. 45), which, like Fux’s *Harpeggio*, Rondeau plays as a self-standing piece, omitting the fugue to which it was originally attached.

As a teacher, Haydn had a famously fraught relationship with the young **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827), but his recommendation to study Fux was taken up: we know that Beethoven owned the German translation of *Gradus ad Parnassum* and made notes from it to teach composition to his own pupil, Archduke Rudolph. But Beethoven began his ascent to Parnassus through close study of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* during his youth in Bonn. A little-known pair of preludes, the **Op. 39 set in C major**, also shows his fascination with Bach at this stage and may have been written for organ. (Young Ludwig was court organist at the time.)

Op. 39 dates from 1789 and was written at the end of Beethoven’s teenage years, before his move to Vienna. (The relatively high opus number reflects the later publication of these preludes in 1803.) Beethoven emu-

lates Bach's systematic approach to tonality in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* but compacts it radically by traversing all 24 major and minor keys within a few minutes in each prelude. The **Prelude No. 2 in C major** is even more condensed than its sibling, moving restlessly from key to key.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91) likely came under the influence of Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* at an early age: his father Leopold, also a teacher, owned a copy and tried to inculcate his own musical values even in his adult son. In any event, in his mature Vienna years he adapted excerpts from Fux for composition lessons he gave to the Englishman Thomas Attwood in 1785–87.

But the approach to Parnassus entails not only patient discipline but the burning ambition that fuels rivalry. Clementi and Mozart engaged in a famous keyboard duel in Vienna in 1781, instigated by Emperor Joseph II, which resulted in a draw, with the prize money split between the two—though Clementi could be said to have emerged the winner insofar as he was open to learning from his admiration of Mozart's uniqueness. "Until then I had never heard anyone play with so much spirit and grace," he later recalled.

For Mozart, as for Beethoven, the piano was his alter ego, the key to his celebrity as a virtuoso when he settled in Vienna. It served both as a means to make a living and as a vehicle for compositional experimentation. Hearing these works on the harpsichord—at least as interpreted by Jean Rondeau—jolts them just enough out of the familiar to evoke a hint of Mozart's search for the perfect balance of means and ends, of form and emotion. The private, domestic sphere of the solo sonata became the receptacle for some of his finest inspirations—even when the apparent purpose was to teach his piano students, as with the **C major Sonata** from June 1788 (K. 545), intended "for beginners," as Mozart himself notated in his personal thematic catalogue.

Scales, so metaphorically apt for the Parnassian journey but also a necessary practical building block, figure prominently in the opening Allegro. Yet, as any student of Mozart comes to know, to elicit such deceptively effortless, Arcadian grace from the keyboard with authentic musical feeling requires remarkable resources. This is perhaps even more so when it comes to making the melody of the Andante "sing" with its full potential. Humor turns out to be indispensable as well for a fully rounded education, as the rondo finale shows by playing with a sophisticated awareness of the most basic issues of coordination.

As Rondeau's alter ego puts it: "[Mozart's] music is so nurturing. It makes us learn how to walk and how to laugh all over again. The adult in us vanishes... all our hang-ups disappear. I don't know why, but when I hear his music, I feel like it had been there all along, somewhere. He just grabbed it."

The **Rondo in A minor** (K. 511) from 1787 transforms a simple ornamental turn—stock in trade for Baroque and Classical composers, normally a passing bit of polish—into a matter of substance, fretted over like worry beads, while the assurance of the elementary scale is undercut by its chromatic inflections.

There is a curious history behind the **Fantasia No. 3 in D minor** (K. 397). It originated early in Mozart's Vienna decade, in 1782, but was left incomplete; an anonymous admirer wrote the final 10 measures of the version that was published after the manuscript was posthumously discovered. At its heart, in the central Adagio section introduced by weighty arpeggiations, is an instrumental aria whose pathos is enhanced by the harpsichord's resonant colors. The turn to D major in the final Allegretto section feels more like a dream of past joy suddenly recalled than a resolution of the preceding grief.

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Described as “one of the most natural performers one is likely to hear on a classical music stage” by the *Washington Post*, **Jean Rondeau** is a veritable global ambassador for his instrument. His outstanding talent and innovative approach to keyboard repertoire have been critically acclaimed, establishing him as one of today’s leading harpsichordists.

Following a world tour of J.S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* that lasted throughout most of the previous season, Rondeau’s relationship with this seminal masterpiece continues into 2023–24, with summer performances at La Roque d’Antheron and Festival de Saintes followed by main season appearances at the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg and the Konzerthaus Dortmund. He also performed the *Goldberg Variations* alongside his new solo program *Gradus Ad Parnassum* on tour in Japan last month, including at Bunka-Kaikan Recital Hall and Sapporo Concert Hall, promoting the eponymous album’s release by Erato earlier in the year. His current North American tour includes performances at the Princeton University Concert Series and the Musée des Beaux Arts in Montreal. Another season highlight is the 10-year anniversary of the ensemble Nevermind, with Rondeau and his fellow founding members touring the music of Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre at venues such as the Philharmonie de Paris, the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, and the Concertgebouw Amsterdam. Other longstanding chamber music collaborations include concerts with Nicolas Altstaedt, also at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, and Thomas Dunford at Wigmore Hall.

Upcoming seasons also include performances of *UNDR*, a new creation inspired by the *Goldberg Variations* and composed by Rondeau in collaboration with percussionist Tancredi Kummer. The work’s premiere at La Grange au Lac d’Evian was described as “explosive” by the national press, resulting in subsequent performances at the Konzerthaus Berlin and Musikfest Stuttgart. *UNDR* represents Rondeau’s latest foray into

the world of new music, following the 2016 premiere of his first original film score for Christian Schwochow’s *Paula* at the Locarno Film Festival and the 2018 world premiere of Eve Risser’s *Furakèla* for solo harpsichord at the BBC PROMS.

Rondeau is signed to Erato, with whom he has recorded several albums championing early music. His latest release of *Gradus ad Parnassum* was called “a triumph” by *Gramophone*, with Rondeau’s playing described as “quietly audacious” in the *New York Times*. His previous album (2022) featured J. S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and was met with international acclaim, with the recording earning a five-star review from *BBC Music Magazine*. Rondeau’s *Melancholy Grace* (2021) was called “soulful [...] varied, [and] wonderful” by the *New York Times*. Earlier projects include his debut album *Imagine* (2015, winner of the Choc de Classica); *Vertigo* (2016, winner of that year’s Diapason d’Or); *Dynastie* (2017), a collection of Scarlatti sonatas (2019); and *Barricades* (2020), recorded with Thomas Dunford, which likewise garnered widespread critical acclaim.

In addition to his engagements as a soloist, recitalist, and conductor, Rondeau is in high demand as a teacher. He has given master classes worldwide, from the Gstaad Academy to the University of Hong Kong, and makes regular return visits to the Juilliard School in New York.

Rondeau studied harpsichord with Blainde Verlet at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris, followed by training in continuo, organ, piano, jazz improvisation, and conducting. He completed his musical training at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. In 2012, he became one of the youngest performers ever to take First Prize at the International Harpsichord Competition in Bruges, aged 21.

Harrison Parrott represents Jean Rondeau for worldwide general management.