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Sunday, October 29, 2023, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Michelle Cann, *piano*

REVISED PROGRAM

Frédéric CHOPIN Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major, Op. 47
(1810–1849) (1840–1841)

Joel THOMPSON *My Dungeon Shook:*
(b. 1988) *Three American Preludes* (2022)
Totentanz
Lacrimosa
L'homme agenouillé

Alberto GINASTERA Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22 (1952)
(1916–1983) Allegro marcato
Presto misterioso
Adagio molto appassionato
Ruvido ed ostinato

INTERMISSION

Florence PRICE Sonata in E minor (1932)
(1887–1953) Andante – Allegro
Andante
Scherzo: Allegro\

Franz LISZT *Mephisto Waltz* No. 1, S. 514 (1859–1860)
(1811 - 1886)

Michelle Cann appears by arrangement with the Curtis Institute of Music.

Frédéric Chopin

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major, Op. 47

A “ballad,” according to the *Random House Dictionary*, is “a simple, narrative poem of popular origin, composed in short stanzas, especially one of romantic character and adapted for singing.” The term was derived from an ancient musico-poetic form that accompanied dancing (“ballare” in medieval Latin, hence “ball” and “ballet”), which had evolved into an independent vocal genre by the 14th century in the exquisitely refined works of Guillaume de Machaut and other early composers of secular music. The ballad was well established in England as a medium for the recitation of romantic or fantastic stories by at least the year 1500; it is mentioned by Pepys, Milton, Addison and Swift, often disdainfully because of the frequently scurrilous nature of its content. The form, having adopted a more refined demeanor, became popular in Germany during the late 18th century, when it attracted no less a literary luminary than Goethe, whose tragic narrative *Erlkönig* furnished the text for one of Schubert’s most beloved songs. Chopin seems to have been the first composer to apply the title to a piece of abstract instrumental music, apparently indicating that his four Ballades hint at a dramatic flow of emotions such as could not be appropriately contained by traditional Classical forms. (Such transferral of terms between artistic disciplines was hardly unknown during the Romantic era. Liszt, the first musical artist in history with enough nerve to keep an entire public program to himself, dubbed his solo concerts “musical soliloquies” at first, and later gave them the now-familiar designation, “recitals.” —“How can one recite at the piano?” fumed one British critic. “Preposterous!”) Brahms, Liszt, Fauré, Grieg, Vieuxtemps and Frank Martin all later provided instrumental works with the title Ballade.

In the Ballades, “Chopin reaches his full stature as the unapproachable genius of the

pianoforte,” according to Arthur Hedley, “a master of rich and subtle harmony and, above all, a poet—one of those whose vision transcends the confines of nation and epoch, and whose mission it is to share with the world some of the beauty that is revealed to them alone.” Though the Ballades came to form a nicely cohesive set unified by their temporal scale, structural fluidity, and supranational idiom, Chopin composed them over a period of more than a decade. He once suggested to Robert Schumann that he was “incited to the creation of the Ballades” by some poems of his Polish compatriot Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), whom he met and played for in Paris around 1835. The English composer and author Alan Rawsthorne noted, however, that “to pin down these Ballades to definite stories is gratuitous and misleading, for in suggesting extra-musical connotations the attention is distracted from the purely musical scheme which is . . . compelling in itself and completely satisfying.” Rather than obscuring the essential nature of these pieces, the apparently opposing views of Schumann and Rawsthorne lead directly to the very heart of Chopin’s achievement: the near-perfect melding of Romantic fantasy and feeling with an Apollonian control of form and figuration. By no other composer in the history of the art has the delicate balance between emotion and intellect been so finely achieved as by Chopin—heart and head are weighed perfectly in his, the most precisely calibrated of all musical scales.

The Ballade No. 3 (A-flat major, Op. 47), one of Chopin’s best-loved creations, was composed during the quiet and happy period he spent with George Sand in Paris in 1840–1841. The work was said to have been derived from Mickiewicz’s “Ondine,” which Laurent Cellier paraphrased: “On the shores of a lake, a young man pledges fidelity to a young girl. Doubting the faithfulness of men, despite the protestations of her lover, she disappears and returns in the bewitching form

of a water sprite. As soon as she tempts the young man, he succumbs to her charms. To expiate his sin, he is dragged to the bottom of the water and condemned to a breathless pursuit of the sprite, whom he can never catch.” Irving Kolodin wrote of the A-flat major Ballade that “a certain underlying strength may be overlooked in the seductive appeal of its soft-contoured surface. Feminine it may be said to be also, but only if the female in question is possessed (as more than a few have been known to be) of a whim of iron.”

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Joel Thompson

My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes (2022)

Joel Thompson, born in the Bahamas in 1988 before moving with his family to Houston when he was 10 and then to Atlanta, discovered classical music from his parents’ record collection as a youngster. He also developed an interest in medicine and took classes in both disciplines when he entered Emory University, but eventually settled on music as his major and completed a Bachelor of Arts before earning a master’s degree in choral conducting at Emory. Thompson first focused his career on conducting and education, but has increasingly turned to creative work; he is currently completing a doctorate in composition at Yale and serving as Composer-in-Residence for the New Haven Symphony. Thompson has established his reputation with works, which often include voices, that have been performed by orchestras, ensembles, and choruses across the country. He was a Composition Fellow at the 2017 Aspen Music Festival and School, where he studied with Grammy Award-winning composers Stephen Hartke and Christopher Theofanidis and received the 2017 Hermitage Prize. With Valerie Coleman and Jessie Montgomery, he was one of three Black composers commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in September 2021 to

develop new works in collaboration with the Lincoln Center Theater.

Like many creative artists of his generation, Thompson deeply concerned with—and deeply affected by—today’s most unsettling social and racial issues, a cause he has espoused since he was introduced to the writings of James Baldwin when he was in college. Thompson came to national prominence with his 2014 choral work *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, whose movements set to music the dying words of seven unarmed Black men. In 2019, he composed the string quartet *In Response to the Madness*, for which he “had to ingest all the major news stories of the day. The result is a stream-of-consciousness response to the political mayhem, the massacres, the climate, and our seemingly futile attempts at trying to make things better. It is essentially a scream into the void—or perhaps into the mirror.” *breathe/burn: an elegy* for cello and orchestra, written in memory of Breonna Taylor, followed the next year. The trauma of the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis and the worldwide protests that followed inspired from Thompson *To Awaken the Sleeper* for orchestra, with a narrated text on the words of James Baldwin, and the piano triptych *My Dungeon Shook*.

My Dungeon Shook was commissioned in 2022, with funding assistance from the University of British Columbia, by pianist Benjamin Hopkins, who premiered it on October 30, 2022 at the Yale School of Music and discussed the work in the doctoral dissertation he was completing at UBC at that time. There Hopkins wrote:

My Dungeon Shook is Thompson’s musical protest of and personal reaction to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery [February 23, 2020, Brunswick, Georgia] and George Floyd [May 25, 2020, Minneapolis] and capture his feelings surrounding that summer of protests and outrages. The set takes its title from James Baldwin’s ‘My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hun-

dredth Anniversary of the Emancipation' in *The Fire Next Time*. The essay references the spiritual *Free at Last*, famously quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King in his 'I Have a Dream' speech. Baldwin's essay is both a deeply personal message to his nephew and a commentary on racism in America.

In a paragraph that could have easily been written this year, Baldwin wrote, 'Neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive [my country and my countrymen], that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.' Like the Baldwin essay, Thompson's preludes are, he said, 'a reflection on issues of identity and culture, and the cognitive dissonance that arises between the ideals of this country and the reality of this country and are a reflection on my experience in the devastating summer of 2020.'

My Dungeon Shook is made up of three short movements for solo piano—"Totentanz" ('Dance of Death'); 'Lacrimosa' ('Tears,' referring to the weeping of the Virgin Mary at the death of her son on the Cross); and 'L'homme agenouillé' ('The Kneeling Man'). Each prelude contains musical references to the initials 'GF' and the second spells out 'AHMAUD' in musical letters. I think as a whole the piece represents Joel's struggle to reconcile his belief in this idea of the promise of America and American society. It looks at large systematic failures from the perspective of a Black composer. It is deeply personal.

Alberto Ginastera

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22

Alberto Ginastera, among Argentina's most well-known and widely performed composers, was the outstanding creative figure in South American classical music following the death of Villa-Lobos in 1959. Ginastera's career was divided between composition and education, and in the latter capacity he held posts at leading conservatories and universities in Argentina and at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. His musical works, many written on American commissions, include three operas, two ballets, six concertos, 11 film scores, eight orchestral

works, various vocal and choral compositions, and much music for chamber ensembles and piano.

Ginastera divided his works into two stylistic categories. The first ("Nationalism") includes his music before the mid-1950s, which displays overt influences of Argentine musical traits and themes. He modeled the rhythms and melodies of these works on the folksongs and dances known as *musica criolla*, though he seldom used literal quotations. This nationalistic music is imbued with the symbolism of the indigenous peoples, the *pampas*, and the "gauchesco" tradition, for which he became the leading musical spokesperson. Ginastera's second style ("Neo-Expressionism") began around 1958 and encompassed most of his later compositions, works characterized by such modernist devices as polytonality, serial writing, use of quarter-tones and other micro intervals, and an extension of instrumental resources. All of this technical jargon might sound rather imposing, but these techniques lend the music a power of expression reinforced by expert craftsmanship that is always tantalizing to the ear and cogent in its expression.

Ginastera's Piano Sonata No. 1 was composed for the 1952 Pittsburgh International Contemporary Music Festival on commission from the Carnegie Institute and the Pennsylvania College for Women, and premiered in Pittsburgh on November 29, 1952 by Johana Harris. The work, dating from the full efflorescence of the composer's nationalist period, is imbued with the spirit and idioms of his native Argentina, "introducing in the thematic texture rhythmic and melodic motives whose expressive tension has a pronounced Argentine accent," according to the composer. The first of the work's four compact movements is angular, percussive and vibrantly (if irregularly) rhythmic. The second is a mysterious, scurrying scherzo, ceaselessly in motion. The Adagio frames the passionate outburst of its central section

with sparse, bell-tone arpeggios in slow motion at beginning and end. The finale is a rough, fiery dance that draws its intensity from a characteristic Latin rhythmic pattern alternating duple and triple note groupings.

Florence B. Price
Piano Sonata in E minor

Florence B. Price was a musical pioneer—one of the first African-American students to graduate from the New England Conservatory of Music, the first African-American woman to have a symphonic work performed by a major American orchestra, the first winner of the composition contest sponsored by the progressive Wanamaker Foundation.

Florence Beatrice Smith was born in 1888 into the prosperous and cultured family of a dentist in Little Rock, Arkansas, and received her first piano lessons from her mother, a schoolteacher and singer; Florence first played in public when she was four. She later also took up organ and violin, and at age 14 was admitted to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where she studied with George Chadwick and Frederick Converse, two of their generation's leading composers, wrote her first string trio and a symphony (now lost), and graduated in 1907 with honors for both an artist diploma in organ and a teaching certificate. She returned to Arkansas, where she taught at Arkadelphia Academy and Shorter College before being appointed music department chairman at Clark University in Atlanta in 1910. She returned to Little Rock two years later to marry attorney Thomas J. Price, and left classroom teaching to devote herself to raising two daughters, giving private instruction in violin, organ, and piano, and composing.

In 1927, following racial unrest in Arkansas that included a lynching, the Price family moved to Chicago, where Florence

studied composition, orchestration, organ, languages, and liberal arts at various schools with several of the city's leading musicians and teachers. Black culture and music flourished in Chicago—jazz, blues, spirituals, popular, theater, even classical—educational opportunities were readily available, recording studios were established, the National Association of Negro Musicians was founded there in 1919, and Price took advantage of everything. She ran a successful piano studio, wrote educational pieces for her students, published gospel and folksong arrangements, composed popular songs (under the pseudonym VeeJay), and performed as a church and theater organist. Among her many friends were the physician Dr. Monroe Alpheus Majors and his wife, organist and music teacher Estelle C. Bonds, and Price became both friend and teacher to their gifted daughter, Margaret. In 1932, Price and Bonds (then just 19) won respectively first and second prize in the Rodman Wanamaker Foundation Composition Competition, established to recognize classical compositions by Black composers, Price for her *Symphony in E minor* and Piano Sonata and Bonds for her song "Sea Ghost." The performance of Price's *Symphony* on June 15, 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Frederick Stock, was the first by a major American orchestra of a symphonic work by an African-American woman. Price continued to compose prolifically—three more symphonies and two more piano concertos, a violin concerto, chamber, piano and organ pieces, songs, spiritual arrangements, jingles for radio commercials—and received numerous performances, including her arrangement of the spiritual "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord" that Marian Anderson used to close her historic concert at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC on April 9, 1939. Florence Price died in Chicago on June 3, 1953.

Price received her first wide recognition when her *Symphony in E minor* won the Overall Prize in the Wanamaker Competition in 1932 and was performed the following year by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in conjunction with the city's International Exposition. Price also won First Prize in the Solo Instrument Category with her *Piano Sonata in E minor*, which she duly premiered at Kimball Hall in Chicago on July 1, 1933, just two weeks after the CSO had performed her *Symphony in E minor*. The sonata became part of her regular recital repertoire, and she included it on the program of her works that she was invited to perform on July 30, 1933 at the Illinois Host House at the Exposition, the highest honor for an Illinois composer that year. The score remained unpublished, however, and was not generally available until Dr. Rae Linda Brown, as part of her three decades of rediscovery, research, editing, and advocacy preparing her groundbreaking biography of Price (2020), convinced G. Schirmer to issue it in 1997.

"The *Sonata in E Minor*," wrote Linda Holzer in her 1995 doctoral dissertation on the piano music of Florence Price, "is unique for the solo piano repertoire of its time in that it is a synthesis of elements of Negro folk music with elements of 19th-century virtuosic Romanticism within sonata form." Holzer here identified one of Price's most characteristic procedures and greatest creative gifts—the ability to maintain the lyricism of her highly melodic themes within the developmental procedures necessary to sustain a large, abstract form—a type of composition she shares, perhaps surprisingly, with Franz Schubert, who pioneered the technique.

The sonata opens with a dramatic introduction to the first of the exposition's three themes: a marching melody, a folk-like strain in a brighter key, and a flamboyant closing theme. The first two are elaborated in the development section and all three recapitulated

to round out the movement. The *Andante* is based on a lovely melody in the mood of a hymn but with the gentle syncopations of a gospel tune. The movement is formed around two returns of that poignant theme separated by episodes of greater intensity and animation. The finale is really two distinct movements played without pause. The first is a scherzo in the quicksilver manner of Mendelssohn with a dreamy trio at the center with echoes of Rachmaninoff (who created a sensation when he played his Second and Third Concertos with the Chicago Symphony in January 1932, the year of Price's sonata). The Scherzo elides directly to the closing movement, based on a nimble, infectious theme, which would have made a fine banjo tune (if it wasn't already inspired by one), that supports a symmetrical rondo form: banjo tune (A)—a lighthearted syncopated episode (B)—(A)—a playful passage (C)—(A)—(B)—and a powerful coda built on (A).

Franz Liszt

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, S. 514

The legend of Faust was an integral part of the German Romantic sensibility, especially in the timeless telling of the tale by Goethe, and it was this version that inspired Liszt's symphony on the subject in the mid-1850s. The *Mephisto Waltz* of several years later, however, was spurred by Liszt's reading of the story's 1836 adaptation by Nikolaus Lenau. Lenau (1802–1850) was, like Liszt, of Hungarian birth and German sympathy. He spent most of his unhappy life in Austria, writing works that reflected the extreme pessimism that was an important component of the full florescence of the northern Romantic movement. Beside much lyric poetry, he wrote several long narratives, including one on Don Juan (which inspired Strauss' tone poem on that topic) and another on Faust, this latter a succession of tableaux or "episodes" over 3,000 lines long.

It was one of these tableaux that inspired Liszt's *Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke—Mephisto-Walzer (Dance in the Village Inn—Mephisto Waltz)*, composed in 1859–1860 for orchestra and arranged soon thereafter for piano. (Liszt wrote a second *Mephisto Waltz* for orchestra in 1880–1881 and a third one for solo piano in 1883.) The prefatory excerpt from Lenau that Liszt placed at the head of the *Mephisto Waltz* No. 1 reads, in part:

“*Village Inn. A Wedding. Music and Dancing. Mephistopheles (peering through the window, to Faust):* Choose one of the girls as your partner and join the *melée*.

“*Faust:* That girl over there enchants me. It must be immeasurably sweet to press oneself to those soft sensual lips that swell with yearning and make one lose all thought of self.

“The leader of the band gives Mephistopheles his fiddle. As the seductive music rings out all are caught up in a whirl of bacchantic revelry. Faust and his brunette drive their way through the dance in ecstasy. He fondles her little hands, stammers vows of love, and leads her out through the open door, still dancing, and across the meadows and into the wood. Intoxicated by passion, they are swallowed up in the roaring sea of their delight.”

Steamy stuff, this, and it is mirrored with disturbing fidelity in Liszt's brilliant music. It is not necessary to follow intimately the progress of the *Mephisto Waltz* in order to appreciate its association with the action of the poem. It is sufficient to know that, following the rustic opening, there are two main themes that are transformed throughout the work into various diabolic countenances.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lauded as “exquisite” by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and “a pianist of sterling artistry” by *Gramophone*, **Michelle Cann** has become one of the most sought-after pianists of her generation. She made her debut in 2021 with the Philadelphia Orchestra and has recently performed concertos with the Cleveland Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Orquestra Sinfônica Municipal de São Paulo, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the symphony orchestras of Atlanta, Baltimore, and Cincinnati. Highlights of Cann's 2023–24 season include appearances with the Charlotte, Hawaii, Indianapolis, Québec, Sarasota, and Winnipeg symphony orchestras, and recitals in New York City, Portland, Beverly Hills, and Denver.

Recognized as a leading interpreter of the piano music of Florence Price, Cann performed the New York City premiere of Price's Piano Concerto in One Movement with The Dream Unfinished Orchestra in

July 2016. Her recording of the concerto with the New York Youth Symphony won a Grammy Award in 2023. Her acclaimed debut solo album *Revival*, featuring music by Price and Margaret Bonds, was released in May 2023.

Cann was the recipient of the 2022 Sphinx Medal of Excellence, the highest honor bestowed by the Sphinx Organization. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in piano performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music and an Artist's Diploma from the Curtis Institute of Music. Cann joined the Curtis piano faculty in 2020 as the inaugural Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies, and she joined the piano faculty of the Manhattan School of Music in 2023.

Listen to Cann's *Revival* solo album by scanning the QR code below using the camera on your mobile phone. More information at Curtis.edu/revival.