



Tuesday, November 19, 2024, 7:30pm
Zellerbach Hall

Igor Levit, *piano*

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750) Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor,
BWV 903 (between 1717 and 1723)

Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897) Ballades, Op. 10 (1854)
Based on the Scottish ballad “Edward”
in Herder’s *Stimmen der Völker in ihren
Liedern* – Andante in D minor
Andante in D major
Intermezzo. Allegro in B minor
Andante con moto in B major

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92 (1839)
Arrangement for piano by Franz Liszt
Poco sostenuto – Vivace
Allegretto
Presto
Allegro con brio

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Johann Sebastian Bach
Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

Already popular in his own day, Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D minor still reigns as one of his greatest displays of virtuosity and musical daring. Though originally written for the harpsichord, it is today coveted by pianists unafraid of its formidable difficulties. Both Johannes Brahms and Franz Liszt liked to play the Chromatic Fantasy in their recitals. Because of its improvisatory quality and bold harmonic experimentation, scholars believe it was written during his period at the Court of Köthen between 1717 and 1723, probably about the same time he was exploring music in its entire range of 24 keys via the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Citing this work, Arnold Schoenberg called Bach "the first twelve-tone composer."

The Fantasy opens with a brilliant, toccata-like prelude of fleet 32nd-note scales and broken-chord triplets. The figurations are passed rapidly back and forth between the two hands, yet must sound like one unbroken line. From the very beginning, movement by chromatic steps (half-steps) is built into this passagework. Moving to a vocal genre, the second section emotes dramatically in an operatic recitative, while passing through many distant tonal centers. Fortunately Bach inserts plenty of left-hand cadence chords to keep us from getting lost. In the final section, both toccata and recitative elements are merged and, with assistance from a pedal note of D, deliver us safely back to D minor.

A rather long and highly chromatic theme launches the Fugue, and its first and second entries already touch on several keys other than D minor. Yet, far from being a sterile academic exercise in chromaticism, this fugue is playful and light-footed—a merry three-beat dance. Taking inspiration from the Fantasy, it gradually becomes more

relaxed. In the closing moments, it borrows from the toccata genre with grand chords providing a final triumphant flourish.

Johannes Brahms
Ballades, Op. 10

Written in 1854, Johannes Brahms' Ballades (Op. 10) were created at a particularly fraught time in the 21-year-old composer's life. The previous year, he had first met and enchanted Robert and Clara Schumann, Robert prophesying he would become the next great symphonist. In February 1854, Schumann leapt into the Rhine River near their Düsseldorf home, was rescued, and spent the remainder of his life in an asylum. Brahms raced back to the city and for the next three years provided assistance to the distraught Clara and their eight children while serving as an intermediary to Robert. During that time, he fell hopelessly in love with this beautiful pianist, 14 years his senior.

Nevertheless, Brahms' creativity flourished during this time, with the Ballades being the earliest fruit. Since he had already written three piano sonatas, he now turned to shorter piano pieces: indeed, he would devote himself to such miniature keyboard works for the rest of his career. However, the Ballades are formally structured and integrated; their keys of D minor and D major, B minor and B major are closely related while motives are shared between them.

The term "ballade" is derived from literature, referring to the ancient poetic ballad tradition, in which heroic, often very dark tales were sung by roving bards. Much of this bardic poetry flourished in Scotland and the British Islands. Brahms' First Ballade was inspired by "Edward," a Scottish ballad the composer found in German translation in Johann Gottfried Herder's collection *Stimmen der Völker* ("Voices of the Folk"). In this grim ballad, a mother questions her son as he arrives home with



Felix Broede

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blood on his sword. First, he tells her he killed his favorite hawk, then that it was his horse. Finally, he admits he killed his father and then, in a macabre twist, curses his mother, who, it is implied, drove him to do this vile deed.

In a modal-colored D minor, Brahms captures the spirit of long ago and far away in austere music emphasizing hollow intervals of fifths and octaves. In the middle of this ABA form, the music moves to D major and a slightly quicker tempo, propelled by triplet rhythms. The triplets continue into the return of the opening music, and the music gradually fades away, its tale told.

None of the other ballades can be traced to a particular story. In D major, the Second Ballade begins as a gently rocking lullaby, then migrates into the minor for strident, choleric music with hammered chords and conflicting triplet rhythms. Brahms intro-

duces the B major key that will flourish in Ballades 3 and 4 for a feathery staccato section before returning to the angry music (now much tamed), and ultimately the lullaby, bringing this variegated piece to a graceful close.

Moving to B minor, the Third Ballade is a wonderfully eccentric scherzo, which begins as menacing, highly rhythmic music sparked by harsh open fifths in the left hand and syncopation. A much softer reprise takes away most of this scherzo music's sting. It is followed by an eerie trio section with soft chords ringing high in the right hand. When the scherzo returns, it has lost all its menace and closes *ppp*.

In B major, the Fourth Ballade follows a rondo-like structure of contrasting themes. It opens with a flowing three-beat melody atop rippling arpeggios that seems to pay tribute to Schumann. Next comes a slower



section in a new meter marked “with the most intimate sentiment.” Using a Brahmsian texture, its placid melody appears in the tenor voice amid a rocking accompaniment. After a brief reprise of the Schumann theme, the music moves into a richly chorded section that resembles a meditative chorale. The closing section returns to the mellow “most intimate” section for a hushed, dreaming finish.

Ludwig van Beethoven
Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92
Arrangement for piano by Franz Liszt

We tend to rank Franz Liszt as one of the most radical of the 19th-century composers: an innovator who loved to experiment and was a staunch admirer of Richard Wagner’s path-breaking music dramas. However, Liszt was a more multifaceted musician than this, and in fact, his most revered composer was Ludwig van Beethoven. Throughout his life—from the moment in 1823 that the 11-year-old prodigy met and played for this giant of composers and, he remembered, was given a kiss on the forehead for his extraordinary talent—he devoted himself to playing and conducting his idol’s music. And over a nearly 30-year period, he paid his ultimate tribute by transcribing Beethoven’s nine symphonies for solo piano and in the process creating a cycle of the most technically challenging and deeply admired keyboard masterpieces.

In 1837, when he was at the height of his barnstorming virtuoso career, Liszt wrote: “The piano is for me what the frigate is to a sailor, what the horse is for the Arab—indeed more! Up to now, it has been my self, my speech, my life.... In my view it occupies the leading position in the hierarchy of instruments...in its range of seven octaves, it comprises the whole range of the orchestra, and the ten fingers of the human hand are sufficient to reproduce the harmonies which are created by the combined efforts of hun-

dreds of musicians.” That summer, while staying at George Sand’s country estate Nohant, he began his effort to translate Beethoven’s symphonic genius for the piano. By 1839, he had completed his first versions of Symphonies 5, 6, and 7. When he played them on his recitals, they were warmly received.

There the work largely rested until 1863 when the publishing house Breitkopf & Härtel, impressed by the first three transcriptions, commissioned him to complete all nine symphonies. At this time, Liszt was leading a much quieter life in Rome, where he had taken Holy Orders in the Roman Catholic Church and was living in a small cell in a Franciscan cloister. To aid him in his task, he had only a worn-out piano that was even missing the note D! The complete cycle—including extensive revisions of the Fifth, the *Pastoral*, and the Seventh—was published in 1865.

Liszt was a master of transcribing music by dozens of composers: operas, symphonies, chamber ensemble pieces, and songs (esp. Schubert); his catalogue shows some 368 works of this type. However, what he was seeking to accomplish in his Beethoven transcriptions was something much more than a standard piano reduction. Liszt sought instead to convey the total experience of the works. Explains Wolfgang Dömling: “Whenever the orchestral writing is so dense that a transcription note by note would be a hopeless task, Liszt...did not provide a selection, but summarized, reinterpreted the original, taking the risk, when necessary, of creating something new.... His aim was not...a ‘reduction,’ but a representation of the whole.” Liszt added: “I shall think my time well spent if I have succeeded in transferring to the piano not only the grand outline of Beethoven’s compositions, but also those multitude of details and finer points that make such a significant contribution to the perfection of the whole.”

Though Liszt's keyboard technique outstripped that of his contemporaries, he was always concerned about making these Beethoven transcriptions "playable," not only by himself, but by others. In his revisions, he added fingerings, pedal cues, and *ossia* parts (alternate passages that could either simplify or increase the level of difficulty). He also included information on what instrument was playing a passage to aid in achieving the correct tone color. Nevertheless, these are formidable works to attempt in public performance, and only the greatest—and bravest—of pianists, like Igor Levit, choose to tackle them.

Listening to the Seventh Symphony

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is one of the most extraordinary expressions of physical energy and joy in symphonic music. Completed in 1812, the Seventh, in the words of Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon, "transports us into a sphere of laughter, play, and the exuberant release of bound energy." Wagner called the Seventh "the apotheosis of the dance"; it might better be called "the apotheosis of rhythm." Throughout Beethoven's music, themes are as much characterized by their rhythmic patterns as by their melodic shapes or harmonic coloring. Here rhythm is the primary building block: the first, second, and fourth movements are all generated by one obsessive rhythmic figure announced at the opening; the scherzo has two such figures.

Liszt was particularly successful at capturing on the keyboard the vigor and precision of Beethoven's rhythms. The first movement opens with Beethoven's longest

and finest symphonic slow introduction (*Poco sostenuto*), which provides anticipation and a bit of suspense for the delayed arrival of the *Vivace* with its galloping dotted rhythms. Using a wide palette of dynamics from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, Liszt carefully delineates the play of lyrical reverie against full-orchestra intensity. The *Allegretto* is a march theme and variations, which eventually evolves into a fugue. Here Liszt's delicacy and refinement bring out all the beauty of this beloved music. In a whirlwind tempo, the *Presto* third movement is Beethoven's most ebullient and propulsive scherzo; it is contrasted with a calm, ruminative trio section. Liszt could have emphasized the technical bravura of this movement, but instead reveals its quicksilver quality with masterful dynamic shifts between soft and loud. The *Allegro con brio* finale, is a fierce dance of triumph with a pronounced military flavor suited to its era, the Napoleonic Wars. The piano's percussive character intensifies this martial mood. Elaborate passages in octaves, intricate contrary motion between the hands, and the density of the writing make Liszt's version a tremendous feat of virtuosity and stamina for the pianist. Liszt keeps piling on the difficulties, leading to a ferocious triple-forte conclusion that feels as mighty as Beethoven's orchestra.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2024

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 alert and critical mind, pianist Igor Levit places his art in the context of social events and understands it as inseparably linked to them. The *New York Times* describes Levit as one of the “most important artists of his generation,” and the *New Yorker* as a pianist “like no other.” In 2018, he was named the eighth recipient of the prestigious Gilmore Artist Award—recognized as one of the world’s most distinguished music honors. Since the 2022–23 season, Levit has been Co-Artistic Director of the Heidelberger Frühling Musikfestival. And with the Lucerne Festival, he initiated the Piano Fest, which will take place in May 2025 for the third time.

During the 2024–25 season, Levit performs in recital at the Musikverein Vienna, Philharmonie Berlin, La Scala (Milan), Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Concert Hall, and Concertgebouw (Amsterdam) as well as in cities including Naples, Rome, Stockholm, and Évian. For the inauguration of Christian Thielemann’s term as General Music Director of the Berlin State Opera, Levit opened the new season with the Staatskapelle Berlin. Further highlights of his orchestral season include a full Beethoven cycle with the Cleveland Orchestra and Franz Welser Möst as well as a Prokofiev cycle with the Budapest Festival Orchestra and Ivan Fischer. With the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and Sir Antonio Pappano and the Orchestra of the Bayerische Rundfunk and Esa-Pekka Salonen he will interpret the monumental piano concerto of Ferruccio Busoni.

Born in Nizhni Novgorod, Levit completed his piano studies in Hanover with the highest score in the history of the institute. In spring 2019, he was appointed professor of piano at his *alma mater*, the University of Music, Theater, and Media Hanover.

For his political commitment, Levit received the 5th International Beethoven Prize in 2019 followed by the award of the Statue B of the International Auschwitz Committee in January 2020. His 53 Twitter (X)-streamed live house concerts during the Covid lockdown in spring 2020 garnered a worldwide audience, offering a sense of community and hope during a challenging time of isolation. In October 2020, Levit was recognized with the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. In Berlin, where he makes his home, Levit plays on a Steinway D Concert Grand kindly given to him by the trustees of Independent Opera at Sadler’s Wells.

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