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FALL CONCERTS 2021

Tony Siqi Yun piano

Sunday October 24 2021

From the Artistic Director

Dear Friends:

Again, I say WELCOME BACK! This is our first concert back at the Playhouse with our Hamburg Steinway concert grand ready to spring into action once again!

Isn't it strange that a presenter in Western Canada has to watch the finals of the China International Music Competition only to discover that it has been won by a remarkable young pianist from Toronto about whom we had heard nothing?

Tony Siqi Yun was born in Toronto in 2001, and won First Prize and the Gold Medal at the inaugural China International Music Competition in 2019. We're delighted to welcome him to our stage for his Vancouver debut.

Tony's concert is sponsored in memory of Michael Kemble, a long-time subscriber and donor who was a cherished member of the Vancouver Recital Society family.

I would like to thank our Season Sponsor, the Peak Group of Companies, and RBC Foundation and the Paul and Edwina Heller Fund at the Vancouver Foundation, which support our Next Generation Series – the raison d'être of the VRS.

We are grateful to the City of Vancouver for its support and to all of you who have supported us during these uncertain times.

Enjoy the music!

Sincerely,

Leila



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音乐厅内禁止使用手机，禁止拍照，录音，录像。请观众关闭所有电子器材，感谢您的合作。

Program

THE EDWINA AND PAUL HELLER
NEXT GENERATION SERIES

Tony Siqi Yun, piano

Sunday, October 24, 2021 3:00 pm
Vancouver Playhouse

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Chaconne in D minor BWV 1004

(arr. Busoni)

(approx. 15 minutes)

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Chorale Prelude

Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ BWV 639

(arr. Busoni)

(approx. 3 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 15 in D Major Op. 28 (*Pastorale*)

Allegro

Andante

Scherzo. Allegro vivace

Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo

(approx. 26 minutes)

INTERMISSION

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

Réminiscences de Norma S 394

(approx. 16 minutes)

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

**Solemn March to The Holy Grail
from *Parsifal* S 450**

(approx. 10 minutes)

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

The Firebird Suite (arr. Agosti)

Danse infernale

Berceuse

Finale

(approx. 12 minutes)

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in memory of Michael Kemble**

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Tony Siqi Yun piano

Tony Siqi Yun, the First Prize winner and Gold Medalist at the First China International Music Competition, was born in Toronto, Canada in 2001. Tony is a recipient of the Jerome L. Greene Fellowship at the Juilliard School where he studies with Professors Matti Raekallio and Yoheved Kaplinsky.

With playing that combines poetry and elegance, this fiercely charismatic young pianist is already being invited to perform at major venues on the world stage, including upcoming debuts at BOZAR, the Luxembourg Philharmonie, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, NDR Hannover, Leipzig Gewandhaus, and in Weimar.

This young pianist can already look back at an extraordinary concert career. In 2019, he made his debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Yannick Nézet-Séguin in the final round of the First China International Music Competition, and has since been invited to perform with Nézet-Séguin in North America. His outstanding debut with the China Philharmonic Orchestra at the Third Polish Culture Festival led to an invitation to tour with the orchestra in 2015. Yun appeared with the China Philharmonic Orchestra again in the 2018-2019 season including the 2019 CCTV New Year's Concert. In 2018, Yun successfully collaborated with the Cleveland Orchestra at the final round of the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition and won First Prize and the Audience Prize.

As a soloist, Yun has given recitals in North America, Europe and Asia. Highlights include recitals at the renowned Salle Cortot Concert Hall in Paris, Opera & and Concert Hall of CCOM, The Juilliard School, New York's Steinway Hall and at the Heidelberger Frühling Music Festival.



Photo credit: JenniferTaylor

Tony Siqi Yun is represented by Opus 3 Artists, New York, NY

Program Notes

Johann Sebastian Bach **Chaconne in D minor BWV 1004** (arr. Busoni)

The 19th century witnessed a revival of interest in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. But the sound world of the 19th century with its new spacious concert halls and louder, more powerful instruments (played by ego-driven virtuoso performers) flourished at some remove from the tightly focused, spiritually introspective sound world of Bach from the previous century – especially in the realm of keyboard music.

The piano only began to overtake the harpsichord in popularity in the 1770s, a good 20 years after Bach's death, so any work by Bach played on the steel-framed, three-pedalled 19th-century piano, with its wide range of dynamics and tonal colours, was by definition a *transcription*. And in the 19th century, the transcribers were legion.

Each transcriber saw in Bach the figure that most appealed to his own aesthetic outlook. The virtuoso pianist Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924) saw the prototype of the Romantic hero, a moody, solitary figure sitting at his organ, capable of making the great stone walls of Leipzig's Thomaskirche shake and tremble with the force of his musical personality.

It is natural that Busoni should have been attracted to the Chaconne from Bach's Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor, as this work stands at the summit of the violin repertoire, both for the technical challenges it poses for the performer and the crystalline brilliance of its formal design.

* * *

The *chaconne* is a musical form in which a recurring bass line or succession of chords serves as the harmonic foundation for a series of variations that follow. Bach's chaconne opens with a stern and resolute chord pattern in the distinctive rhythmic profile of a sarabande, with emphasis on the second beat of the bar. It presents an evolving set of ever more probing variations on the repeating bass line D C# D Bb G A D given in the first four measures. The extreme variety of textures and moods that Bach manages to create out of this simple 4-bar pattern is the reason for its exalted status within the classical canon.

The work has a rough three-part design, beginning with 33 varied restatements in the minor mode,

19 in the major mode, and finally 12 more in the minor. Busoni's conception of the Chaconne is grandiose in the extreme. He grants himself full licence to take advantage of the sonic resources available on the modern grand piano, even extending those resources to write multiple-register chord spacings more typical of the organ.

While Busoni includes many *pizzicato* and *spiccato* textures that imitate the native capabilities of the violin, his adaptation is exceptionally 'pianistic' in conception. There are, moreover, clear indications that he had orchestral sounds in mind for many of the variations. His evocation of an orchestral brass choir is astonishingly accurate in the *quasi tromboni* variation at the beginning of the major-mode section, as is his imitation of timpani and tubular bells in the variation that follows not long after, with its pulsing low pedal notes alternating with chiming high octaves.

But it is the snarling timbre of the organ and ponderous peal of swaying church bells that takes this work to its conclusion, as Busoni brings the piano's rich low register to bear on the last emphatic statement of the Chaconne's majestic harmonies in its final bars.

Johann Sebastian Bach **Chorale Prelude** ***Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* BWV 639** (arr. Busoni)

The *chorale*, a hymn setting of pious verse in simple note values, was a central element in Lutheran liturgical practice. Whether sung in unison by the congregation, in four-part harmony by the church choir, or artfully refracted into a complex web of contrapuntal lines on the organ as a *chorale prelude*, it presented to the congregation the word of God in the vivid pictorial rhetoric of a musical setting.

In a chorale prelude the *cantus firmus* (fixed melody) of the hymn is intoned in long notes against a backdrop of imitative counterpoint in smaller note values, either derived from the same melody, or commenting on it.

This distinctive 'layering' of different note values throughout a composition was not just a clever musical device but a theological statement about the make-up of the cosmos. It painted an image of God and his flock musically depicted in a hierarchy of spiritual importance. The long-held

notes of the *cantus firmus* symbolized the timeless eternal presence of God in the universe while its chattering contrapuntal accompaniment gave voice to human striving here on earth below.

In Bach's chorale prelude *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* (I call unto you, Lord Jesus Christ) the plaintive chorale melody is clearly heard at the top of the polyphonic texture. In the mid-range of this stratified texture little 16th-note sigh motives of pathos echo in the spaces between the long melody notes while in the bass a steady succession of 8th notes paces out the measure of eternity with infinite patience and sympathy. In Busoni's transcription these bass notes, doubled into octaves and harmonically thickened, add a rich vein of overtones for the pianist's pedal-foot to sift, providing a sonic haze of divine mystery to the quiet gravity of mood characterizing the whole.

Ludwig van Beethoven **Sonata No. 15 in D Major Op. 28 (*Pastorale*)**

The moody and rebellious Beethoven of legend is nowhere to be found in his gentle and understated Piano Sonata in D major Op. 28 (1801). Like the Sixth Symphony (1808) it carries the nickname *Pastorale* for its vivid evocation of the peace and contentment of country life, symbolized, particularly in the opening and closing movements, by the classic tropes of rustic music-making: open 5ths and bagpipe-like drone notes in the bass, melodies simply harmonized with the I, V and IV chords, and a preference for dance-like triple metre.

The sonata opens in just this way, with a soothing timpani-like drone note on a low D that shepherds the opening melody, with its many loving sigh motives, on a lyrical octave descent. Just at the end of the first phrase, however, the melody rises a short distance to end with a little melodic 'flick of the tail'. This little 'tail flick' seems at first to be a throw-away a gesture but gathers significance as the movement progresses, eventually motivating the stormiest section of the development, and serving as a final thought in its closing bars.

The steady pulse of the hushed drone tone on D, repeated more than 60 times, makes the opening almost drowsy-making. The exposition seems to unfold in a placid succession of daydreams, sleepwalking through tonal space in smooth scalar motion from musical thought to musical thought. The only break in mood comes from the occasional sparkling run in the treble, startling the dreamer to sudden alertness...from which he then drifts back into reverie once again.

Eye-opening drama is reserved for the development section, when the major mode turns

to the minor, contrapuntal conflict breaks out, and the long smooth lines of the exposition gradually disassemble into ever-smaller fragments pulling this way and that, like two dogs fighting over a bone – that is, until peace is restored for the recapitulation's calm review of past events and a quiet close.

Having waxed lyrical for much of the first movement, Beethoven foregoes a deeply lyrical slow movement in favour of an enigmatic *Andante* in D minor with a contrasting middle section in D major. A teasing air of mystery hovers over the opening D minor section, reinforced by soft dynamic markings and sudden offbeat accents. The dainty trot of its left-hand staccato at the opening suggests a simple walk in the park, but the minor mode and creeping chromatic lines bespeak an air of concern, especially when in a subsequent phrase a pulsing pedal point in the mid-range refuses to yield to the pleading dissonances above. The major-mode middle section, by contrast, is almost comical in its playful exchange of pleasantries as it alternates stern gestures in the low register with coy, almost flippant triplet responses in the treble. This is Beethoven at his most arch. The closing repeat of the A section features a decorated version of the opening and even a cameo appearance of the B section – in the minor mode this time – but leaves unresolved the puzzling relationship between these two musical personalities.

The appeal of the *Allegro vivace* scherzo that follows is radically simpler. It opens with a succession of four long notes an octave apart, like an orchestra tuning up on the same pitch in different registers. This is followed by its opposite: four little bite-sized cadencing gestures confined to the mid-range. To these contrasts of register and rhythm, Beethoven then adds dynamic contrasts and textural thickenings to concoct a thoroughly engaging 'note salad' to entertain the ear over a vast swath of keyboard real estate. This 'scattered barcode' pattern of musical interest, though, meets its comeuppance in the central Trio section, in which a driven folk-like melody in the minor mode is repeated over and over with wildly different harmonisations.

The most rustic movement of all comes at the end in a lilting *Allegro ma non troppo* finale that, like the first movement, opens with a long drone on a low D and proceeds largely on the premise that sleepy time has arrived in the woods and village green. Although constructed in the surprisingly sophisticated palindromic A-B-A-C-A-B-A structure of a sonata-rondo, it also resembles the first movement in seeking excitement in a development (the C section) dominated by the minor mode and contrapuntal

confrontation. Those nodding off in the audience, however, will be roused from their slumber by the movement's vigorous coda that transforms the opening drone motif into a major cymbal-crashing crescendo.

Franz Liszt **Réminiscences de Norma S 394**

In the 1830s a swarm of pianists descended like a biblical plague on the city of Paris, attracted by the rich harvest of opera tunes produced each year on which to feed when concocting the potpourris, fantasies and paraphrases that were their chief stock-in-trade. Flash forward to the 1840s when Liszt, enthroned as King of the Piano and touring Europe in regal style, astonished the multitudes in concerts that frequently included one of his growing list of paraphrases based on tunes from operas by Mozart, Donizetti and Bellini, including his *Réminiscences de Norma*.

Bellini's *Norma* (1831), best known for its celebrated aria *Casta diva* made famous by Maria Callas, tells the tale of its eponymous heroine, a Druid high priestess in Roman-occupied Gaul who, in a time of popular insurrection, is called upon to choose between her love for the Roman governor and her duty to the gods and to her nation.

Liszt offers a concentrated summary of the dramatic core of the opera by selecting melodies from Act I to evoke Norma's leading role in opposing the Roman occupiers, and from the finale of Act II to represent her selfless renunciation of love, and of life itself, to further the cause of her warlike people.

The work opens with a series of stern chords and martial drumbeats, echoed high above by sparkling arpeggiations, to set the stage for a tale of war on earth and reward in heaven. These musical motifs recur midway through the piece as well to transition between opera's Act I mood of heroic resolve and its tragic outcome in Act II.

Liszt's inventiveness in creating novel pianistic textures in this piece is remarkable, and one can only imagine rows of cross-eyed countesses dropping like fainting goats at its premiere. In addition to scintillating cadenzas shooting up to the high register, and muscular displays of bravura octaves, Liszt offers up generous quantities of the famous 'three-hand effect' pioneered by pianist Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871), in which a clear melody sounds out in the mid-range surrounded by wide-ranging accompaniments above and below. This ever-so-clever piano texture is prominently featured in the second half of the work, where the majority of the most outrageous pyrotechnics are concentrated.

Liszt's treatment of the lyrical *Qual cor tradisti*, with its three simultaneous layers – melody, pulsing chordal accompaniment, and martial triplet drumbeat – has been described by musicologist Charles Suttoni as "one of the most ingenious and sublime pages ever written for the piano."

Franz Liszt **Solemn March to The Holy Grail** **from Parsifal S 450**

Richard Wagner's last opera *Parsifal* is part music drama, part liturgical ritual. It glorifies the religious devotion of a band of Arthurian warriors sworn to seek out and defend the sacred relics of Christendom. Chief amongst the treasures of these larger-than-life heroes is the Holy Grail, variously described in medieval legend as either a cup or plate used by Jesus at the Last Supper, or as the vessel used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch the blood flowing from Jesus' spear-wound at the Crucifixion.

In Act 1 a newcomer to the band, Parsifal, is granted entry to a communion ceremony at which this sacred relic is revealed before the assembled Knights of the Grail. Wagner's reverential music for this scene is mystically exalting but with a disciplined military edge to it, as well.

Wagner's father-in-law, Franz Liszt, attended the premiere of the opera in 1882 and upon his return from Bayreuth composed a poetic evocation of this sacred scene using important musical motives to symbolize its dramatic meaning. The most immediately audible of these is the solemnly treading march motive of two falling 4ths which begins the work and continues as an *ostinato* pattern low in the bass throughout.

In the last half appears the famous *Dresden Amen*, a six-note rising scale figure sung by church choirs in the German state of Saxony beginning in the early 19th century and particularly associated with the city of Dresden, where Wagner had been Kapellmeister. This motive was also used by Mendelssohn in his "Reformation" Symphony No. 5. For Wagner, who wove musical representations of his characters into the fabric of his opera scores, the Dresden Amen represents the Holy Grail itself.

Liszt is not writing a transcription here but rather a kind of free fantasy based on the motivic take-away of the first act of *Parsifal*. The virtuoso grandstanding of his earlier opera paraphrases and *réminiscences* is held largely in check. What emerges is a restrained meditation on the mystery and religious symbolism radiating out from the first great 'reveal' scene in Wagner's evocation of Teutonic greatness in the German nation's past.

Igor Stravinsky
The Firebird Suite
(arr. Agosti)

Stravinsky's score for *The Firebird* was written for Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* dance company, which premiered the work in Paris in 1910. Based on ancient Russian folk tales, it tells the story of the young Prince Ivan's quest to find a legendary magic bird with fiery multi-coloured plumage. In the course of his adventures, he falls in love with a beautiful princess but has to fight off the evil sorcerer Katschei to eventually marry her. The suite presents the culminating scenes of the ballet in a piano transcription by the Italian pianist and pedagogue Guido Agosti (1901-1989), who studied with Ferruccio Busoni and taught Maria Tipo.

The *Danse infernale* depicts the brutal swarming and capture of Prince Ivan by Katschei's monstrous underlings until Prince Ivan uses the magic feather given to him by the Firebird to cast a spell on his captors, making them dance until they drop from exhaustion. The *Berceuse* is a lullaby depicting the eerie scene of the slumbering assailants, leading to the *Finale*, a wedding celebration for Prince Ivan and his princess bride.

Agosti's piano transcription, completed in 1928, is a daunting technical challenge for the pianist. But then again, transcribing Stravinsky's orchestral writing was always going to be a challenge, something like herding cats, because his signature melodic fragments emerge from every corner of the sound range, with tone-colours and timbral qualities outrageously difficult to capture on a single instrument. Many of his trademark sonorities result from widely spaced chord

structures difficult to put within the grasp of the pianist's mere ten fingers.

Most of the piano writing is laid out on three staves in order to cover the multi-octave range of the keyboard that the pianist must patrol. The piano comes into its own in this transcription as a percussion instrument, to be played with the wild abandon with which a betrayed lover throws her ex-partner's possessions off the balcony onto the street below.

Judging from the shocking 7-octave-wide chord crash that opens the *Danse infernale*, it looks like the first item over the railing was a full-length mirror. Agosti captures well the bruising pace of the action, with off-beat rhythmic jabs standing out from a succession of punchy left-hand ostinati constantly nipping at the heels of the melody line. The accelerating pace as the sorcerer's ghouls are made to dance ever more frantically is a major aerobic test for the pianist.

Relief comes in the *Berceuse*, which presents its own pianistic challenges, mainly those of finely sifting the overtones of vast chord structures surrounding the lonely tune singing out from the middle of the keyboard.

The wedding celebration depicted in the *Finale* presents Stravinsky's trademark habit of cycling hypnotically round the pitches enclosed within the interval of a perfect 5th. Just such a melody, swaddled in hushed tremolos, opens this final movement. It is a major challenge for the pianist to imitate the shimmering timbre of the orchestra's brightest instruments as this theme is given its apotheosis to end the suite in a blaze of sonority that extends across the entire range of the keyboard.

Donald G. Gíslason 2021

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COVID-19 has changed a great many things about the way in which we move through the world and interact with one another. Over the last 19 months, our supporters have sustained us in ways that we couldn't have imagined, and never have we been more grateful or more appreciative.

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There are many ways to support the VRS including making a philanthropic gift, sponsoring a concert and/or including us in your estate plans. If you would like more information, please contact us at 604.602.0363.

201-513 Main Street
Vancouver, BC
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Telephone: 604.602.0363

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