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SPRING CONCERTS 2022

Steven Osborne piano

Sunday June 5 2022

From the Artistic Director

Dear Friends:

We are deeply grateful for — and, frankly, feeling a little guilty about — Steven Osborne squeezing this replacement concert into his very full calendar. He was supposed to appear on our stage in the more intimate setting of the Vancouver Playhouse back in mid-February, but the pandemic forced us to reschedule his performance. We thank Steven for his flexibility, and we thank you all for being here despite the changes to the date and venue.

In order for Steven to be with us this evening, he had to take a shuttle bus from Seattle to Vancouver this morning after having played a challenging rarity last night with the Seattle Symphony under Ludovic Morlot: Messiaen's *From the Canyons to the Stars*.

This is the essence of Steven Osborne: from Messiaen to Schubert's last Piano Sonata, which you will hear in his recital this evening, Steven's expansive range of repertoire is nothing less than extraordinary.

We would like to thank Elaine Adair for sponsoring this concert.

We are grateful to the Vancouver Symphony for allowing us to use their concert grand, as the tight turnaround time did not permit us to move our piano from the Playhouse to the Orpheum.

We would also like to thank our Season Sponsor, the Peak Group of Companies, for its wonderful support, and also the City of Vancouver. And, as always, we are most grateful to our Accommodation Partner, the Westin Bayshore, which takes great care of our artists when they are in Vancouver.

Enjoy the performance.

Sincerely,



Leila



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Program

Steven Osborne, piano

Sunday, June 5, 2022 7:30 pm
Orpheum Theatre

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Impromptu No. 1 in F minor D. 935

Allegro moderato

[approx. 11 minutes]

GEORGE CRUMB (1929-2022)

Processional

[approx. 14 minutes]

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Étude retrouvée 4

Étude 7 Pour les degrés chromatiques

Étude 8 Pour les agréments

Étude 9 Pour les notes répétées

Étude 10 Pour les sonorités opposées

Étude 11 Pour les arpèges composés

Étude 12 Pour les accords

[approx. 30 minutes]

INTERMISSION

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Sonata in B-flat major D. 960

Molto moderato

Andante sostenuto

Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza

Allegro ma non troppo

[approx. 40 minutes]

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Steven Osborne piano

Early Life & Education: Born in Scotland, Steven studied with Richard Beauchamp at St. Mary's Music School in Edinburgh and Renna Kellaway at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. He is a Visiting Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, Patron of the Lammermuir Festival, and in 2014 was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Performances: The 2021/22 Season sees Steven as Artist in Residence with the Antwerp Symphony Orchestra, performing Brahms with Elim Chan and Beethoven with Philippe Herreweghe. Elsewhere he performs with the Seattle Symphony, Utah Symphony, Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, Orquesta Sinfónica do Porto, Royal Scottish National Symphony, Bournemouth Symphony, and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

Recordings: Recording plans continue with French repertoire, with 2022 seeing the release of solo works by Debussy, his 32nd CD for Hyperion. A label artist since 1998, his 31 recordings have garnered numerous awards in the UK, France, Germany and the USA including two Gramophone Awards, three Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik Awards and a *Choc* Award in *Classica* Magazine.

Awards & Prizes: Steven Osborne won first prize at the prestigious Clara Haskil Competition (1991) and the Naumburg International Competition (1997). His numerous awards include The Royal Philharmonic Society Instrumentalist of the Year (2013) and two Gramophone Awards. Steven was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to music in the 2022 Queen's New Year Honours.



Photo credit: Ben Ealovega

Steven Osborne is represented by Sullivan Sweetland Ltd., London, UK.

Program Notes

Franz Schubert

Impromptu No. 1 in F minor D. 935

The *impromptu* is just one of a number of small-scale instrumental genres arising in the early 19th century, known under the collective title of *character pieces*. Cultivated by composers in the emerging Romantic movement, these pieces presented a simple musical idea in an intimate lyrical style with the aim of evoking a particular mood or moment of personal reflection, spontaneously experienced and communicated. The eight impromptus that Schubert composed in late 1827 are classic examples of the genre, and indeed are the first pieces bearing the name *impromptu* to establish themselves permanently in the repertoire.

Schubert was a pianist, but he was not a touring virtuoso. His audiences were small, familiar, and local, and pieces such as his *Impromptus* Op. 142 reflect especially well the social setting for which they were composed. One hears in them the sounds of Viennese popular music, dance music in particular, and occasionally the close-position chordal textures of recreational part-singing.

* * *

The *Impromptu in F minor* Op. 142, No. 1 is a simple A-B-A-B-A rondo with a mock-stern 'Beethovenian' introduction featuring jagged melodic gestures and cadences that promise weighty things to come. But instead, we are led into a Schubertian world of gentle pathos and delicate sentiment, framed in the kinds of buoyant, fluttering keyboard textures that tended to 'speak' well on the light-actioned Viennese piano of Schubert's day. A subsequent theme in repeated chords evokes the lilting rhythms of music in the Austrian capital.

The texture of Schubert's B-section is utterly enchanting. He uses rippling arpeggios to create a purling stream of piano sonority in the mid-range of the keyboard, across which velvety dreaming voices in the treble exchange loving phrases with tender baritone echoes in the bass, undergoing wondrous modulation-induced changes in tone colour as they go.

George Crumb

Processional

American composer George Crumb is known for his haunting, mystical, almost surrealist scores that explore unusual instrumental timbres. Crumb's *Processional* (1983) focuses our attention on incremental changes in tone colour by laying down a constant pattern of eighth notes, configured as dense tone clusters, within which a six-note descending melodic line emerges as a principal motive.

The harmonic language is ambiguous, sometimes appearing to be based on the whole-tone scale, at other times traditionally tonal or modal. Like many of Crumb's works, the piece unfolds at a low dynamic level (beginning and ending *ppp*) and its constant pulsing in a sonic space densely saturated with overtones has the hypnotic effect of suspending our sense of time.

Crumb describes the work as "concerned with the prismatic effect of subtle changes of harmonic colour and frequent modulation", while contemporary music specialist Jeffrey Jacob describes the work as follows: "The basis of the piece is a series of repeated chords which very gradually move toward or away from major climaxes. The mesmerizing effect of the chordal repetition is countered by the rising and falling dynamics."

Claude Debussy
Étude retrouvée
Douze Études Livre II

It might appear surprising that a composer such as Debussy should deign to write piano études, a genre associated since the time of Czerny with musical monotony, and since the time of Liszt with Napoleonic-level narcissism and circus-inspired showmanship. Debussy's personal aesthetic emphasized imaginative refinement more than mechanical perfection, and his public persona was light-years removed from the exhibitionist egotism of the Romantic-era virtuoso.

So, his *Douze Études* (1915) are more than mere push-up punishment at pianistic boot camp, the aim of which is to build endurance for when it might be needed in 'real' music. Each is a musical tone poem testing a new kind of pianism, based on fingertip sensitivity and finely filtered pedalling. Each poses problems of sonority and texture that mere digital dexterity alone is insufficient to solve. And each, in the end, challenges the pianist to hit that sweet spot to which all French music tends—charm.

* * *

Debussy's *Étude retrouvée* was 'found' (hence the title) amongst the composer's papers in 1977 and it appears to be a 13th étude which the composer decided not to include in his published set of 12. The chief technical difficulty addressed is that of bringing out scattered fragments of lyrical melody floating atop an absolute riot of shimmering multi-octave arpeggio figurations that at times involve both hands simultaneously.

The second book of Debussy's *Douze Études* begins with *Étude 7 Pour les degrés chromatiques*, a perpetual motion study of playful character featuring a squirrely right-hand scurrying in small 4-note chromatic groupings. Out of this sound-swirl, brief snatches of smooth diatonic melody emerge in the left hand. Unfolding in a constant purr at low volume, it mimics the sensation of changing dynamic levels by means of changes in register and changes in the number of voices active in the texture. Remarkable (for an étude) is the way the piece combines brilliance with lyricism.

Étude 8 Pour les agréments (ornaments) has, in the words of Debussy, "the form of a Barcarolle on a rather Italian sea." And indeed there is a kind of 'watery' feel to the texture, at times reminiscent of the composer's *L'Isle joyeuse*. The 'ornaments' with which this étude's melodic content are encrusted are not just your regular mordents and trills but mostly chordal arpeggios that delicately rain down on their melody notes like sprinklings of sonic mist.

Étude 9 Pour les notes répétées is marked *scherzando*, a mood created not only by its effervescent texture of peppery repeated notes but also by its scampering melodies and quixotic stop-and-go changes of mood, all at a *piano* dynamic level.

Étude 10 Pour les sonorités opposées gets to the heart of the Debussyan sound world. This is an étude more for the ear and pedal-foot than for the fingers, featuring multi-layered sonorities spaced out over as much as five octaves, rich in dark pedal tones low down in the bass to be balanced against iridescent tonal accents high up in the treble and murmuring melodies emerging out of the mid-range.

Étude 11 Pour les arpèges composés is a study in delicacy of touch and subtly nuanced shades of tone-colouring at widely varying dynamic levels. Its tracery of 'composite arpeggios' (multi-octave chord patterns with added tones) is written as grace notes enveloping simple melodic fragments found floating amid the tonal ripples and timbral sparkle.

Bold, exuberant and flashy, *Étude 12 Pour les accords* (chords) seems to be simply screaming with exclamation points. It has been called "a barbarous dance" and indeed it has no shortage of élan with its beastly difficult pattern of wild leaps in opposite directions playing out counter-metrically in duple groups across its triple-metre bar lines. A radically relaxed middle section almost makes you forget what all the excitement was about until the springboard rhythms of the opening slyly work their way back into the texture to end this gymnastic étude as acrobatically as it began.

Franz Schubert
Sonata in B-flat major D. 960

Schubert's last piano sonata, written in 1828 a scant few months before his death, exemplifies in one single work the full range of his gifts as lyric melodist, serious musical dramatist, and refined exponent of the light, dance-besotted musical style of Vienna.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, is typically generous in its bounty of themes. It opens with a softly whispered melody, humbly small in range and accompanied by a repeated pedal tone in the left hand, like a pulsing human heartbeat. This opening theme has a sweet yearning quality that gives it an ineffable, almost nostalgic charm, urging it to burst more fully into song, which it soon does. A second theme introduces a tentative note of worry, but Schubert's constant harmonic wavering between the major and minor modes prevents the emotional tone from becoming downcast. A third theme of a triadic stamp scampers over the full range of the keyboard, in both hands, to re-establish a more directly buoyant emotional tone, disturbed only by a recurring low trill in the left hand that acts as a sectional marker within the movement. The development is where all the drama lies, as Schubert passes his melodic material through a harmonic colour wheel, building to an intense climax that acts as a rare moment of sonic emphasis in the centre of what is, essentially, a movement of delicate shades of nuance.

Much more starkly dramatic is the *Andante sostenuto* slow movement which features an introspective melody in the mid-range of the keyboard, surrounded by sonic 'echoes', both above and below, implying that this lonely plaintive voice is pleading its mournful case in a vast, but empty enclosure. It is hard not to think of the more militant middle section as an attempt to take heart, an attempt that inevitably fails as the opening mood returns to conclude the movement.

The third movement scherzo, *Allegro vivace con delicatezza*, is indeed 'delicate' if judged by the standards of Beethoven's 'rough-house' humour. More typically Viennese in its subtlety, it generates good-natured humour from its frequent changes of register and twinkling grace notes. A steady interchange of material between the hands creates the impression of a dialogue between two real musical 'characters'. The contrasting trio in the minor mode is much more sedate, sitting in the middle of the keyboard and shifting its weight around in gentle syncopations.

Still in a humorous frame of mind, Schubert begins his rondo finale, *Allegro ma non troppo*, with a mock 'mistake'. Starting off in the minor mode, he then 'remembers' that he wants to be in a major key and makes a mid-course correction at the end of the first phrase. This joke of changing dramatic masks from the serious to the comedic is played out frequently during the movement, with intervening episodes of songful respite in between. This is a finale filled with congenial joking of the most sophisticated kind, created by a true Viennese pianistic 'sit-down comic'.

Donald G. Gíslason 2022

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Presenting exceptional artists is made possible by the generosity of our supporters, who make the journey with us throughout the year.

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 couple of years, our supporters have sustained us in ways that we couldn't have imagined, and never have we been more grateful.

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