

**TOM BORROW**

**piano**

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)**

**Italian Concerto in F major BWV 971**

[Allegro]

Andante

Presto

(approx. 13 minutes)

**CÉSAR FRANCK (1822-1890)**

**Prélude, Choral et Fugue FWV 21**

Prélude. Moderato

Choral. Poco più lento

Poco allegro – Fugue

(approx. 20 minutes)

Intermission

**ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1872-1915)**

**Sonata No. 5 in F# major Op. 53**

Allegro. Impetuoso con stravaganza

(approx. 13 minutes)

**SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)**

**Variations on a Theme of Corelli Op. 42**

Theme. Andante – I. Poco più mosso – II. L'istesso tempo – III. Tempo di minuetto – IV. Andante – V. Allegro, ma non tanto – VI. L'istesso tempo – VII. Vivace – VIII. Adagio misterioso – IX. Un poco più mosso – X. Allegro scherzando – XI. Allegro vivace – XII. L'istesso tempo – XIII. Agitato – XIV. Andante, con prima – Intermezzo – XV. L'istesso tempo XVI. Allegro vivace – XVII. Meno mosso – XVIII. Allegro con brio - XIX. Più mosso – Agitato XX. Più mosso – Coda. Andante

(approx. 20 minutes)

## Johann Sebastian

### Italian Concerto in F major BWV 971

Baroque music was all about national styles and Bach learned the Italian style by copying out and transcribing the works of composers such as Vivaldi, Albinoni and Torelli during his years of employment in Weimar (1708-1717). It was this knowledge that he applied in composing his *Concerto nach Italienischem Gusto* (Concerto after the Italian Taste) included in the second part of his *Clavier-Übung* published in 1735.

To compose a concerto meant reproducing in some way the textural contrast between the solo instrument (or instruments) and the orchestral tutti, on which the *ritornello* form of the Italian concerto relied for its forward progress. It was for this reason that *Clavier-Übung II* was written exclusively for the two-manual harpsichord with its possibility of creating dynamic contrasts by means of hopping up and down between keyboards. This could be done with both hands at once, or one hand at a time, allowing for a wide range of effects to be achieved.

\* \* \*

The two protagonists in Bach's *Italian Concerto* are clearly audible in the first movement, in which the 'orchestra' which opens the movement is given a fuller more resonant texture by the use of block chords and a wider range of motion in the bass.



The part of the 'soloist' by contrast, is written higher up in smaller note values within a smaller range and occasionally peppered with ornamentation.



The distinction is even clearer still in the slow movement in which the role of the 'orchestra' is given entirely to the left hand.

#### 2. Andante



This movement's ostinato pattern of repeated thirds and long pedal notes is a strangely austere accompaniment to a right hand 'soloist' spinning out long strands of highly ornamented melody.



The *Presto* finale returns to the *ritornello* form of alternation between the louder, fuller texture of the 'orchestra,' obsessed with its dramatic octave leap downwards and swift follow-up run, in continual dialogue with a nimbler 'soloist' more occupied with broken chord passagework and harmonic sequences.

## César Franck

### Prélude, Choral et Fugue FWV 21

César Franck's *Prélude, Choral et Fugue* (1884) is widely recognized as one of the highest achievements of 19th-century French piano writing. That such a work should come from the pen of a musician employed for most of his professional career as a church organist might well be surprising. But Franck's unhappy early career as a young piano prodigy, thrust unwillingly into the public spotlight by an exploitative father, could well have warned him away from composing for the piano when he finally gained his independence as an adult.

Certainly the compositional models for this work, looking back as they do to the polyphonic music of Bach and Handel, served well to distinguish the composer from the roving bands of circus-act piano virtuosi that he had narrowly escaped joining as a youth. And yet the luxuriant palette of infinitely varied piano textures he used in pursuit of his contrapuntal goals set him apart even on the well-worn terrain of the theatrical pianism popular in his time.

The three movements of Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* are played without interruption and linked together by two recurring musical motives.

The first is a two-note 'sigh' motive, a common rhetorical trope from in the Baroque era and familiar in such works as the opening chorus of Bach's cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* BWV 12:

**Chorus**

**Lento**

**SOPRANO**

Wei - nen,  
Weep - ing,

**ALTO**

Kla - gen,  
cry - ing,

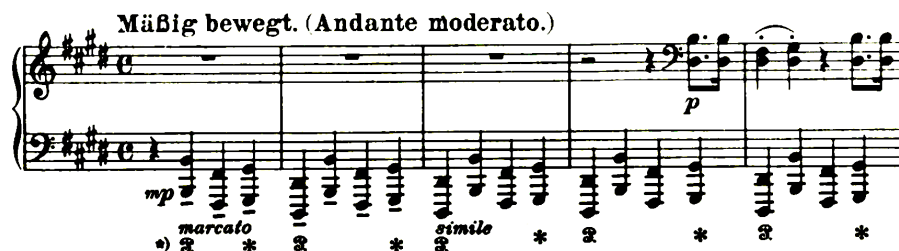
**TENOR**

Sor - gen, Wei -  
sor - row, weep -

**BASS**

Za - gen,

The second is the ‘criss-crossing fourths’ motive which Wagner had used in his recently premiered opera *Parsifal* to represent the tolling of a bell, as exemplified in the opening bars of Liszt’s piano transcription of the opera’s Solemn March to the Holy Grail:



The influence of Bach is signalled first of all in the way that Franck immediately references the famous musical motto ‘B-A-C-H’ (B-flat, A, C, B-natural in German), a variant of which is heard in the opening bar of the *Prélude* as F# - E - G - F#.



The two ‘sigh’ motives in this motto opening pervade the *Prelude* in alternating sections of cascading arpeggio figuration and straightforward chordal statements.

\* \* \*

The ‘criss-crossing fourths’ motive first appears in the *Choral*, announced in the treble in a series of sweeping multi-octave arpeggios, contrapuntally paired with a descending scale down below that evokes the rumbling sonic resonance of the church organ’s bass pedals.



This contrapuntal pairing is also well known from the Baroque, being a variant of Pachelbel’s famous *Canon in D* but with the treble and bass lines reversed.

\* \* \*

The concluding movement is both a contrapuntal and a pianistic showpiece. It opens by meditating mournfully in a series of small sighs that eventually extend down chromatically to take the form of a descending scale.



This meditation then reaches a crisis of emotional intensity for which there is only one possible remedy – a full-on fugue. As Stephen Hough says:

*It is as if a 'fugue', as a symbol of intellectual rigour, was the only way Franck could find a voice to express fully the hesitant, truncated sobs of the Prelude and the anguished, syncopated lament of the Chorale.*

The fugue subject is virtually identical to the movement's opening melodic musings.



And what would a proper fugue be without a few flashy tricks of the trade, like presenting the fugue subject in inversion, against the original version of itself, while an inverted form of the opening B-A-C-H motto chatters in sigh motives (also inverted) in the background?



Crowding on-stage for this ensemble finale eventually comes the 'criss-crossing fourths" motive, dressed in the piano figuration of the *Prélude*'s cascading figurations, following which the swelling momentum of Franck's exuberant piano rhetoric drives this work in B minor to its triumphant conclusion in a gloriously bright and resounding affirmation of B major.

## Alexander Scriabin

### Sonata No. 5 in F# major Op. 53

Early in his career Alexander Scriabin was known as “the Russian Chopin.” As he developed as a composer, however, he moved away from the Romantic style of Chopin to embrace a more mystical, ecstatic conception of music, becoming the first real “crazy man” of classical music. His aesthetic aims were in fact *so* expansive as to hardly fit within the scope of the keyboard, and as he advanced in years his solo sonatas became more and more like seances, channelling mystical forces through the fingers of the pianist.

Long before the arrival of LSD and Dr. Timothy Leary, Scriabin established “trippy-ness” as an aesthetic goal in his music. And in his first single-movement sonata, the Sonata No. 5 in F# major from 1907, we catch him tripping in mid-flight.

Scriabin’s flight plan is filed in the poetic verse standing at the head of the score:

*I call you to life, O mysterious forces!  
Drowned in the dark depths  
Of the creative spirit,  
Embryos of life, I bring you audacity.*

Now, the first thing to know before listening to this work is that it displays an *extreme* volatility of moods, in keeping with mood changes in the cosmic forces that Scriabin feels passing through him as he composes. And these forces seem uncommonly grumpy right off the bat.

\* \* \*

The work opens with a mad rumble at the bottom of the keyboard:



leading to an equally mad scramble up to the highest register.





But then another mood captures the composer's imagination, a bizarrely contrasting mood of sweet pleading combined with the eerie sensation of being in a trance, as Scriabin repeats the same simple motive—a third rocking back and forth—over and over again.



This simple alternation of intervals, when speeded up, will become the inspiration for a kind of jumpy excitement that recurs regularly throughout the sonata.



Such passages create a sense of mounting exaltation as they leap up to a higher register with each repetition and it is in just such a mood of ecstatic frenzy that the sonata ends.

But along the way in this thoroughly 'bipolar' psychological journey, we get to experience that most Scriabinesque of emotions – languid voluptuousness.

This is a musical atmosphere that Scriabin creates by means of his unique approach to harmony, specifically his use of altered dominant 9th, 11th and 13th chords, mostly spaced in 4ths and spread over extraordinarily wide swathes of the keyboard.



It is in these passages, with their overtones swimming languorously in the air, that Scriabin's authentic talent for creating unique piano sonorities is most clearly evident.

## Sergei Rachmaninoff

### Variations on a Theme of Corelli Op. 42

Rachmaninoff's last original work for solo piano, a set of variations on a theme he thought to have been written by Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), was written in 1931. The theme was not, in fact, by Corelli. It was rather a traditional Iberian folk-dance melody, a slow sarabande known as *La Folia* that many other composers had used before, Bach, Vivaldi and Liszt among them.



Rachmaninoff lays bare the tune's repetitive patterning in a starkly simple presentation emphasizing the pathos of the melody's unfolding in a succession of short sighs. What follows is a series of textural variations largely based on the underlying harmonic progressions in the theme. Or rather, *two* sets of variations, separated by an Intermezzo.

The first set comprises Variations 1-13 in which the theme is at first left largely recognizable, its rhythmic outline merely altered within the bar.



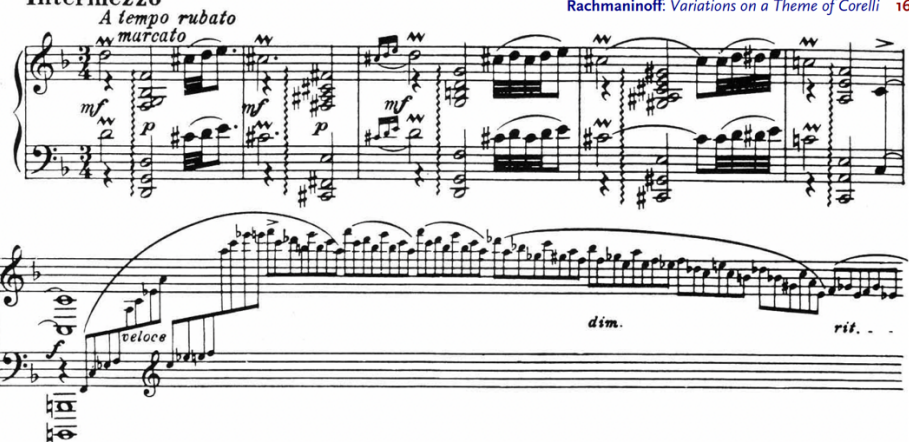
In Variations 5 to 7 a punchier version of the harmonic pattern emerges, followed by another spate of introspection in Variations 8 and 9. Then momentum builds relentlessly from the scherzo scamper of Variation 10 to the aggressive jostling of Variation 13.



At this point Rachmaninoff pauses to regroup, both aesthetically and pianistically. Offering us a kind of champagne sherbet between courses to cleanse the sonic palette, he inserts an intermezzo in a free improvisatory style that alternates mordent-encrusted thematic musings with scintillating washes of sparkling keyboard colour. (Rachmaninoff would re-visit this style of intermezzo in the 11th Variation in his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* of 1934.)



### Intermezzo



Our ears thus refreshed, we begin a second set of variations (14-20), with the theme presented to us once again, only this time in the major mode, lower down on the keyboard, and more richly and darkly harmonized. It is the same melody, but it seems more world-weary now, more resigned than when we first heard it at the work's opening. It seems now to evoke the emotions of an aged individual looking back nostalgically on a life fully lived, but almost over.

This nostalgia, and the eerie emotional state that accompanies it, follows into Variation 15 before the kind of muscular keyboard writing for which Rachmaninoff is known returns. The final variations become increasingly animated until reaching a heaven-storming pitch in Variation 20, in which walls of sound echo back and forth between the lowest and highest registers.



How will it end? Having fired all his big guns, Rachmaninoff then backs away from the tumultuous ending he seemed to be rushing headlong towards. Instead, he drifts off into a mysteriously smoky, darkly chromatic coda that seems to want to escape the harmonic implications of the dramatic low pedal point that implacably tolls the work's end.



There is an intimation of bitterness and resignation that hangs in the air as the final chords of Rachmaninoff's final original piano work fade to the back of the hall, an air of heroic fatalism and mindful regret that may well define the Russian soul better than any words.

Lovers of really dark chocolate will love this ending.

Program Notes by Donald G. Gíslason 2023