MESA ARTS CENTER

CLASSICAL MUSIC INSIDE OUT

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OLGA KERN

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Virginia G. Piper Repertory Theater

Presented as part of the Classical Music Inside Out series

Classical Music Inside Out Artistic Director – Zuill Bailey

Sponsored by: Bill Passey and Maria Silva

Beethoven: Variations on a Theme by Salieri

Schumann: Carnaval

Gershwin: Three Preludes

Gershwin: “Fascinating Rhythm” (arr. Earl Wild)

Rachmaninoff: Six moments musicaux, Op. 16, No. 4, Presto

Rachmaninoff: Études-Tableaux, op. 33 (1914 ed.), No. 8, G Minor

Rachmaninoff: Morceaux de fantaisie, Op. 3, No. 4, Polichinelle

Tchaikovsky: Méditation, Op. 72, No. 5

Scriabin: 8 Études, Op. 42, No. 4, F-sharp Major, No. 5, C-sharp Minor

Balakirev: Islamey

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Ludwig van Beethoven . . . *10 Variations on a Theme by Salieri*
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn; died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Ludwig van Beethoven composed *10 Variations on “La stessa, la stessissima”* from Antonio Salieri’s *Falstaff* (WoO 73), in 1799. This piano work based on a very popular aria from Act II of the opera. The variations, in B-flat major, demonstrate Beethoven’s ability to turn a simple theme into a complex and often humorous piece. Some contemporaries criticized the variations for being too simple, but the work showcases Beethoven’s mastery of thematic transformation.

The work contains a theme first and then ten variations and a coda. Importantly, the piece highlights the connection between Beethoven and Salieri, with whom Beethoven likely took lessons in dramatic composition.

Beethoven dedicated the work to Countess Anna Louisa Barbara de Keglevics (Babette).

Robert Schumann . . . *Carnaval, Little Scenes on Four Notes*, Op. 9
Born June 8, 1810, in Zwickau; died July 29, 1856, in Endenich

In the 1830’s, the first decade of his creative career, Schumann wrote nothing but piano music: three sonatas and a great many informal pieces in which his Romantic imagination took flight. *Carnaval* dates from 1834, the year in which he fell in love with a seventeen-year-old pianist named Ernestine von Fricken, who had come to board with his piano teacher, Friedrich Wieck. Within a few months, the two considered themselves secretly engaged to marry, but by the end of the year, family pressure had separated them. In 1835, Schumann was in love again, this time with Wieck’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Clara (whom he was to marry five years later), and the affair with Ernestine was over. His *Symphonic Etudes*, Op. 13, a set of variations on a theme that Ernestine’s foster father had given him, is one souvenir of the time. *Carnaval* is another. The letters that spell out the name of the Frickens’ hometown, Asch (and are also present in the composer’s name) are the names of four notes of the scale in German. These are the *“Four Notes”* of the subtitle, and they loosely bind together the suite of twenty short dances and tone-pictures that make up this brilliant work.

When it was new, *Carnaval* was considered problematic “modern” music, as difficult for the audience as for the performer. In an essay written in 1840, Schumann expressed his admiration for Liszt’s courage in playing it for the general public, which was confused by the music’s constantly shifting moods. Liszt himself said that the opposition to it came “from musicians and so-called musical experts who were wearing ear-muffs that prevented them from taking in this charming, imaginative music.” It was finally Clara, who grew up to be one of the greatest pianists of the era, who persistently played it everywhere in Europe until it became known, admired and accepted as one of Robert’s greatest works. It is worth noting that although *Carnaval* is now always considered an organic whole consisting of twenty closely interrelated parts, Liszt used to play a selection of his favorite excerpts, and at least a half-dozen of its numbers were published as separate pieces in the mid-19th century.

1) *Préambule* (Quasi maestoso), a grand prelude.

2) *Pierrot* (Moderato), and 3) *Arlequin* (Vivo), in which Schumann depicts figures from the Italian *commedia dell’arte*.

4) *Valse noble* (Un poco maestoso), the name perhaps borrowed from Schubert, whose waltzes Schumann greatly admired. Clara later used to say that her husband danced the waltz “nobly.”

5) *Eusebius* (Adagio) and 6) *Florestan* (Passionato), the personalities created by the schizophrenic composer to represent two sides of his character: one with the spirit of classic restraint and lofty idealism; the other embodying romantic freedom of expression and flight of fancy.

7) Coquette (Vivo) and 8) *Réplique* (L’istesso tempo), a lively flirtation and the response to it, both set at the same tempo.

9) *Papillons* (“Butterflies”) (Prestissimo), a reference to the title of an earlier work, Op. 2, or perhaps to the literary source of its inspiration, a fantastic masked-ball scene in the novel of 1805, *Flegeljahre* (*“Adolescence”*) by the great German Romantic writer known as Jean Paul.

At this point, Schumann reveals the secret of *Carnaval* in three riddles, or *Sphinxes*, letter-and-note puzzles, which he presents simultaneously with their solutions as *lettres dansantes* (“dancing letters”). These were probably not really meant for performance, but pianists generally believe they give useful musical content to an audience. The first riddle consists of the note E-flat -- C-- B--A (whose names, in German, spell S-- C--H-- [um]-- A-- [nn]. In *Sphinx No. 2*, the notes are A-flat-- C--B; or, in German, As-- C--H. The third is made up of the notes A--E-flat--C--B; German for A--S--C--H.

10) *Chiarina* (Passionato) is “*Little Clara*,” (some see No. 9 as perhaps an introductory reference to her youth.)

11) *Chopin* (Agitato), a tribute to the composer whom Schumann had discovered in 1831 and greeted with an essay in which he said, “Hats off, gentlemen! -- A genius!”

12) *Estrella* (Con affetto), an affectionate musical portrait of Ernestine, and

13) *Reconnaissance* (Animato), an expression of gratitude for her love.

14) *Pantalon et Colombine* (Presto), two more characters from Italian carnival comedy. Like Friedrich and Clara Wieck, they are father and daughter.

15) *Valse allemande* (Molto vivace), a German waltz interrupted by 16) an *Intermezzo, Paganini* (Presto), a tribute to the violinist whose extraordinary gifts were so greatly admired by his contemporaries.

17) *Aveu* (Passionato). The title is ambiguous in this context. It is French for “avowal” or “confession” -- of love, for example -- but it is also used in the sense of permission or consent as when granted by parents to young people who wish to marry.

18) *Promenade* (Commodo)

19) *Pause* (Vivo) describes long moments of this evening of carnival dances, which is soon to come to an end.

20) *March des “Davidbündler”contre les Philistines* (“Non Allegro”) is the march of Schumann’s fictional friends, Eusebius and Florestan, and all who join together as disciples of David in the struggle against the aesthetic Philistines of the world. Their processional and the ball (like the one in Schumann’s *Papillons*, Op. 2), come to an end with the recollections of an old German popular song, the *Grandfathers’ Dance*, which, like *Goodnight, Ladies* elsewhere, was a traditional closing tune at such festivities.

George Gershwin . . . *Three Preludes*
Born September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York; died July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California

George Gershwin’s *Three Preludes* are his only known surviving works originally conceived as solo piano pieces. He wrote at least six preludes; there is speculation that there may be more as yet unpublished extant in the Gershwin family archives. At a recital he gave in New York in 1926, Gershwin played five *Preludes*, which were probably these three plus two pieces that he sometimes billed as *Novelettes*. The music that begins the finale of his *Piano Concerto* was originally sketched in 1925 as a *Prelude*.

Gershwin worked over these pieces for a long period of time, and he at last fixed them in final form for publication in 1927. He dedicated them to his friend, Bill Daly, a Harvard-trained musician who was a great help to him in acquiring the craft and the technique he needed to apply his extraordinary natural talent to work in larger musical forms than the popular song.

Each of the three preludes is generally based on a single persistent rhythmic figure, melodically varied and extended. The first and third *Preludes* are quick and jazzy, Allegro ben ritmato e deciso. *Prelude No. 2*, Andante con moto e poco rubato, is blues-derived.

George Gershwin, arr. Earl Wild . . . *“Fascinating Rhythm” from Seven Virtuoso Etudes.*

George Gershwin wrote the song “I Got Rhythm,” with lyrics by his brother, Ira, for the theatrical production *Girl Crazy*, which was first performed at the Alvin Theater in New York on October 14, 1930. Ethel Merman was the first to sing it in the role of Frisco Kate, reputedly holding a high C for sixteen measures while the band continued with the melody.

By the time *Girl Crazy* appeared, George Gershwin had already composed *Rhapsody in Blue, An American in Paris*, and a piano concerto and was an established composer. *Girl Crazy* produced a string of hits: “Bidin’ My Time,” “But Not for Me”, and “Embraceable You.”

Gershwin had a passion for the pentatonic scale, the notes of which can be played on the black keys of the piano. “I Got Rhythm” follows his pentatonic inclination as the song’s first two phrases, first ascending and then descending, grow from this 5-note scale.

Rouben Mamoulian, a stage director, remarked: “I’ve heard many pianists and composers play for informal gatherings, but I know of not one who did it with such genuine delight and verve. George at the piano was George happy. He would draw a lovely melody out of the key-board like a golden thread, then he would play with it and juggle it, twist it and toss it around mischievously, weave it into unexpected, intricate patterns, tie it in knots and untie it and knit it into a cascade of ever-changing rhythms and counter-points. . .. He could play ‘I Got Rhythm’ for the thousandth time, yet do it with such freshness and exuberance as if he had written it the night before.”

Wild created a large number of transcriptions and arrangements for the piano including a set of *Seven Virtuoso Études on Gershwin Songs* (1989), based on favorite songs from the Broadway musicals of George and Ira Gershwin. The seven Gershwin songs for piano solo are “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Oh, Lady, Be Good!” “Somebody Loves Me,” “The Man I Love,” “Liza,” “I Got Rhythm,” and “Embraceable You.” Wild’s arrangements of Gershwin’s songs are not just transcriptions, but elaborate, virtuosic re-compositions of the original, fairly conventional song forms of George Gershwin. They are full of spontaneity and flamboyant bravura and reflect the jazz idiom with the powerful technique and style Gershwin had captured. Wild’s “Fascinating Rhythm” etude, in particular, demands technical prowess from the pianist. Gershwin wrote “Fascinating Rhythm” in 1924; Wild created his arrangement in 1973.

Earl Wild (1915-2010) was invited by six consecutive presidents to perform at the White House, and was the first pianist who performed a recital on American television, as well as presumably the first to stream a live performance over the internet. In addition, he performed worldwide as a virtuoso pianist.

Sergei Rachmaninoff . . . *Moments Musicaux, Op. 16, No. 4 in E minor*
Born April 1, 1873, in Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

Rachmaninoff was one of the most accomplished pianists of his time as well as a composer who represents late Russian Romanticism. In his early works, the influences of Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and other Russian composers of the day are somewhat evident, but his writing soon acquired its individual lyrical character.

In 1897, the young Rachmaninoff suffered a great disappointment in the failure of the premiere of his *Symphony No. 1*, an event that for a time shattered his ambitions for a career as a composer. After a period of depression, he took a post as assistant conductor of a minor opera company, while trying to restore his spirit and regain his hopes, and in the summer of 1898, he began to write again. His *Moments Musicaux* (“*Musical Moments*”), Op. 16, written in 1896, a year after he completed his *Symphony No. 1*, reveals his piano style in a formative period, when he was beginning to write his characteristic yearning themes, on the way to that of the popular *Preludes*, Op. 23.

Moments Musicaux became a popular title after a Viennese music publisher used it in 1828 for a collection of short piano pieces by Franz Schubert. The name indicates no set form or style, but many Romantic 19th century composers appropriated it to designate short, fanciful pieces.

Rachmaninoff’s set consists of six musical moments: No. 4 in E minor, is very fast, Presto; it is improvisatory in nature and requires the playing of a skilled virtuoso. It is turbulent, in three-part form, and displays great contrasts, from very soft to very loud.

Sergei Rachmaninoff . . . *Études Tableaux, Op. 33, No. 8 in G minor*

One of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s earliest memories was that of playing duets at the piano with his grandfather. He was educated at the Conservatories of St. Petersburg and Moscow, and after winning a gold medal for composition, in 1892, he set off on his first long concert tour. He became an extraordinary pianist, an admired composer, and a conductor competent enough to have been offered the direction of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Yet despite his heavy schedule of concert performances, Rachmaninoff found or made the time to write a great deal of music: four piano concertos, three symphonies, three operas, many other works in diverse forms, and a large number of songs and piano pieces. After he left Russia in 1917, the United States became his permanent home. The great melodic power and the rich, characteristically Russian sonority of his music gave him great popularity here as well as in Europe and Russia.

The *étude-tableau* is a form of piano piece Rachmaninoff invented, and his two groups of this idiosyncratic genre have been seen as the culmination of the 19th century tradition of virtuoso composition by composer-pianists. The term *étude-tableau* loosely translates as “picture-study.” One of Rachmaninoff’s biographers, Oskar von Riesemann, called these brief tableaux works “majestic al fresco pictures,” and declared that many of them were inspired by paintings or by nature. Each of the etudes is known to be a musical evocation of a pictorial or perhaps narrative idea, and each presents a brief, musical image, like a tiny symphonic poem whose subject is the composer’s secret, although Rachmaninoff hesitated to reveal the programs, saying, “I do not believe in the artist disclosing too much of his images.” He did finally reveal the secret of five of them, however, when Respighi orchestrated them.

Rachmaninoff wrote the first set of *Etudes Tableaux*, or “*Picture Studies*” in mid-August of 1911 and performed the premiere on December 13, 1911. At the time, there were nine pieces, but he only published six under this opus number. He withdrew the fourth in A minor, revised it, and it became Op. 39, No. 6, and the two others in the grouping he never allowed to be published in his lifetime.

Rachmaninoff found these short works hard to compose, saying that they “presented more problems than a symphony or a concerto. . . after all, to say what you have to say and say it briefly, lucidly, and without circumlocution is still the most difficult problem facing the creative artist.”

No. 8, Grave, in C sharp minor, is the final etude in the series. Commentators have often drawn attention to its dramatic and intense introduction. The first of the two sections features a cadenza; the second is contrapuntal.

Sergei Rachmaninoff . . . *Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3, No. 4, Polichinelle*

In the autumn of 1892, he wrote a set of five pieces entitled *Morceaux de Fantaisie* (“*Fantasy Pieces*”), his first publication for solo piano. At that time, he had recently graduated from the Moscow Conservatory, and was poor, depressed, and generally in ill health.

Although it is an early work, the style of *Morceaux de Fantaisie* is characteristic of Rachmaninoff. Just after completing the work, the composer gave a copy of the set to Tchaikovsky, who told Rachmaninoff’s harmony teacher, Anton Arensky, that he was very impressed, especially with the “Prelude” and the “Mélodie.” Before his 20th birthday, Rachmaninoff premiered the pieces in Kharkov on December 27, 1892. He dedicated the whole set to Arensky. (He later revised all the pieces in the set.)

The complete Morceaux de Fantaisie is rarely performed as a whole today. The penultimate piece, “*Polichinelle*” in F-sharp minor, takes its name from the suggestion of Rachmaninoff’s fellow student Mikail Slonov, who came up with its descriptive title. “*Polichinelle*” translates into Punch, and comes from the character in the popular Punch and Judy marionette shows. Punch, an arrogant wife-beater, was a humpback with a big hooked nose. This small-scale virtuosic scherzo is said to depict his enraged appearances, his boasts and his sly threats. The piece is in ternary form, and the critic Baylor has commented that to achieve his effect, Rachmaninoff uses “brilliant chordal fanfares, deep bell-like pedal tones and lightning-fast figurations.”

Igor Ilyich Tchaikovsky . . . *Méditation, Op. 72, No. 5*
Born May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk; died November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Méditation, Op. 72, No. 5, one of a collection of 18 pieces in the opus, was published by Pyotr Jurgensen in September 1893. Tchaikovsky’s works are considered by musicians all over the world as the epitome of Russian music. While he followed Western European forms of technical skill and lyric style, essentially Tchaikovsky is a Russian composer with an emotional Slavic “vocabulary” and yet, some classic tendencies. His music possesses and communicates the complex set of emotions that fired his soul: rapture and agony, gloom and joy alternate in a struggle for expression.

To us, today, Tchaikovsky’s piano compositions often seem to have been buried by the renown of his orchestral and vocal works. Yet in his time, they were highly praised by both von Bülow and Rubinstein; today, however, they are rarely performed although they deserve to be known.

This “*Méditation*, Andante mosso, has a strong Russian foundation and a very contemplative and serene feel; it also has an imposing melody, interesting figurations, and a definite sense of direction. Its cantabile melody yields to a more spirited center section and then when, in the final section, the first theme is recapitulated, it becomes more floridly elaborated.

Tchaikovsky dedicated the short works of this opus to Vasily Safonov, a genuine admirer of his music. After the composer’s death, Safonov would conduct the first official performance in Moscow in December 1893 of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No 6 (Pathétique)*, just a few months after the Op. 72 pieces were published.

Alexander Scriabin . . . *Méditation, Op. 72, No. 5*
Born January 6, 1872, in Moscow; died there, April 27, 1915

Although the music Scriabin composed had a very different character than that of his countryman, Rachmaninoff, the two became friends in childhood and studied piano with the same teacher. Scriabin’s works for the piano, generally considered avant-garde or decadent when he wrote them, include ten piano sonatas and many collections of short piano pieces that display his extraordinary creative imagination.

Scriabin traveled back and forth between Russia and Western Europe (and in 1906 1907, the United States), working as a pianist and composer and attempting to expand the borders of music in several directions. He experimented with the musical materials themselves, such as harmony and form; with external considerations that could affect music, such as theosophy and other mystic religious beliefs of Indian or other Asian origin; and with the direct translation of tone into color. After 1907, he became more radical in his appropriation of unusual scales for his music.

For a long time, many musicians dismissed Scriabin’s works as aberrations foreign to the mainstream of European music. They were thought to be strange, difficult, extravagant compositions that attempted to overlay ideas from Asian philosophy, literature and art on to music. Serge Koussevitzky, both Scriabin’s benefactor and conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 to 1949, was one of the few who often performed Scriabin’s orchestral music. In the 1960’s, however, the new interest in Asian mysticism began to be reflected in more frequent performances of all of Scriabin’s music.

In his early piano works, Scriabin emulated Chopin and Liszt as composers for the piano, combining elements of expressivity and virtuosity that he found in their music with hints of the advanced musical language that he would later develop. Like them, he wrote many etudes, or studies, works in which the composer concentrates on one or more technical problems of performance, but with such intrinsic musical interest that they become concert pieces rather than just practice exercises.

In addition to two freestanding etudes, Scriabin composed twenty four *Etudes* in three sets: Op. 8, published in 1894; Op. 42, in 1903, and Op. 65, in 1912. The earliest grouping, Op. 8, illustrates the young Scriabin as he was developing, still influenced by Chopin and Liszt, but also making his own voice ring through these short works as he begins journeys on the new paths that he would later regularly tread.

Scriabin’s third period is represented by the *Eight Études of Op.42*, which were composed almost ten years after the *Op.8*. These compositions reach diverse nuances of depth and intricacy. Op. 42 does not only focus on piano techniques, but also on rich colors and song-like melodies. Opus 42 shows signs of Scriabin’s new and completely individual harmonic experiments. Representing Scriabin’s style as a Russian composer, these etudes are extremely compelling in emotional depth, and at the same time, they are noble and delicate.

Étude No. 4, in F sharp Major, is placid and serene, and Scriabin gives it a delicate air. It is full of cross-rhythms with different meters in each hand. The rhythm makes the sweet bitterness of the melody come out with more intensity.

Etude No. 5, in C sharp minor, is the most famous of the *Op. 42* etudes. Marked Affannato (breathless), this etude is filled with struggles, hope, and regrets with a stormy mood and dark sonority. Feeling colossal, there are undulating sounds and ones that create the sense of large booms. Overall, the tone is one of rebelliousness and daring, giving the etude has a rousing effect.

Mily Balakirev . . . *Islamey*
Born Jan.2, 1837 in Nizhny-Novgorod; died May 21, 1910 in St. Petersburg

Mily Balakirev organized a musical group that became known as the Balakirev Circle, whose aim was to make a cause of Russian music of a national character in order to combat the profusion of imitations of classical German compositions, which at that time seemed dominant in Russia. Simultaneously, he founded the Free Music School in St. Petersburg and gave concerts there of works primarily written by Russian musicians. The dream of uniting all Slavic nations under Russian influence animated Balakirev and other musicians of his time.

Balakirev became fascinated with the quasi-oriental melodies and rhythms of the Caucasus in the eastern area of Russia during several trips he made there. In 1869, he wrote an “oriental” fantasy for piano, entitled *Islamey* that he based on themes he collected there during his travels. The work is mostly a Kabardian dance from the north of the Caucasus. In its slow section, it also includes a Tartar melody from the Crimea that Balakirev presumably heard an American actor sing when he visited Tchaikovsky’s house in Moscow. Although the subtitle of the piece is “*Oriental Fantasy*,” Balakirev used that term in the sense of eastern Russia, not the Far East or the Orient, as it was then known.

Rubinstein, who was the first to perform the technically demanding work at one of the Free Music School Concerts, remarked, “I am working, poor wretched fellow that I am, at your piece, which fills me with terrible delight, and for which I thank you; I shall certainly play it at my concert in Moscow; but it is so difficult that few will cope with it; I want to be one of those few.” Through it, Balakirev’s name became known throughout Europe in the 19th century; both Rubinstein and Liszt also played it frequently in many cities.