



# Celebrity Series of Boston

**Sunday, October 28, 2018 at 3pm**

**Symphony Hall**

**Emanuel Ax piano**

## **Notes on the Program**

**Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

***Two Rhapsodies, Opus 79***

In his early years, Brahms composed large-scale and powerful piano works, like the early sonatas and the Variations on a Theme of Handel. But by the late 1870s, his piano writing changed character completely; for the rest of his life, his solo piano works are smaller in scope, individual pieces (though often grouped into sets) that are “philosophical miniatures,” in the words of one Brahmsian. He often agonized over what to call individual pieces in these sets. For a slightly earlier set of eight piano pieces, Opus 76, he had settled on “intermezzi” and “capriccios” as the characteristic titles.

Though at first in some doubt about the two pieces that make up Opus 79, he eventually settled on “rhapsody,” though these are far more tightly constructed than the word might imply, and seem closer in spirit and character to Chopin’s ballades than to Liszt’s Hungarian rhapsodies.

The first of the rhapsodies, in B minor, contrasts dramatic and explosive outer sections with a gentle lullaby in the B-major middle section. But the outer sections at least hint at the world of sonata form in having two distinct thematic subjects as well. The second rhapsody is in G minor with a very condensed exposition of the material; its harmony is at first roving and unsettled. The second subject has the character of a funeral march, and it contributes a tolling inner pedal on the dominant which will ultimately demand the return to the home key later on (and will reappear in the coda as well), to preside over the tragic dissolution of the thematic ideas.

**George Benjamin** (b.1960)

***Piano Figures***

A busy composer, pianist, and conductor, George Benjamin studied with Olivier Messiaen for three years in his mid-teens and was reportedly his teacher’s favorite student. He undertook further studies at King’s College London with Alexander Goehr. He has composed three operas with librettist Martin Crimp, all of which have found success, but most of all the second, *Written on the Skin* (2012) has attracted wide acclaim.

He has composed largely for orchestra, though his interest in opera has grown over the years, and he has become a leading conductor of contemporary operas, as well as a successful composer for the theater. He has been a highly influential teacher at the Royal College of Music and, since 2001, professor of composition at King’s College London. He has also had a regular connection with Tanglewood since 1999.

He composed *Piano Figures* in 2004 on a commission from the Établissement public Salle de Concerts Grande-Duchesse Joséphine-Charlotte—Philharmonie Luxembourg. Pierre-Laurent Aimard gave the first performance in Luxembourg on May 18, 2006.

As the title implies, the work consists of a series of (ten) short movements of varying characteristic types. The movement titles give ample suggestion of the character of each piece (suggesting, as they do, some of Schumann’s works for young players).

The composer has written: “Most of the 10 movements are technically fairly easy—some of them very easy—and therefore they can be played by children. At the world premiere in Luxembourg (May 2006) the work was played twice—by a group of children (all trained, over months, by Aimard) and then by Aimard himself. *Piano Figures* is the source for most of the material for my orchestral ballet *Dance Figures*, premiered in Chicago in May 2005.”

**Robert Schumann** (1810-1856)

**Fantasiestücke, Opus 12**

Strange as it may seem to us today, when Schumann's music lies at the heart of the Romantic era and seems so richly, intimately expressive, he was regarded in his own day almost as the wildest of radicals. His piano music was exceedingly difficult to play (so home pianists would not buy it), and yet it did not have the brilliant élan of the virtuoso showpieces by lesser composers, whose works might bring the house down in a public concert, however vapid the music was.

In 1845 Franz Brendel wrote a sympathetic critical review of the smaller Schumann piano works that had been published by then, including his Opus 12, pointing out that many pianists gave up on the works after playing through them once, yet it took a closer study to reveal their "deeper spirit." In fact it was the "subjective" quality of Schumann—those elements of extremely personal expression that most appeal to us—that turned off early soloists and audiences. It was through performances by his devoted fiancée and later wife Clara, in private performances for musical connoisseurs, that these works first began to make headway. (Knowing this, we can understand a little more easily why Clara's father was so opposed to Schumann as a prospective husband for his daughter.)

Schumann wrote the eight pieces of the *Fantasiestücke* in the spring and early summer of 1837. For publication in February 1838, he added descriptive titles to each piece, as he had done with some of his earlier works. These often stood in the way of the acceptance of music, because many believed that he thought up the sequence of titles first, then wrote the music as a kind of "fill-in-the-blanks" exercise. Schumann himself insisted that the opposite was true; only after completing a piece did he come up with a title for it, inspired by the music itself. Certainly for the *Fantasiestücke*, the titles are entirely apt. And the title of the work as a whole evokes a volume by E.T.A. Hoffmann, a collection of essays and tales entitled *Fantasy Pieces in the Manner of Callot*. This refers to the master printmaker Jacques Callot (c. 1592-1635) who chronicled the life of his time in both realistic and fantastic images.

The eight numbers in the *Fantasiestücke* are longer, more self-contained than the sometimes very abrupt sections of a cycle of fragments like *Carnaval*, and thus the work found readier early acceptance than *Carnaval* or the *Davidsbündler Tänze*.

*Des Abends* ("At evening") is marked with one of Schumann's most characteristic performance indications, "Sehr innig zu spielen" ("To be played very intimately"). What must have flummoxed early pianists who looked at the score was the fact that the meter is 2/8, and yet Schumann has written it in such a way as to make it sound in *triple* meter. He was always fascinated by the interplay between duple and triple, and he found inventive ways to play with the opposition. *Aufschwung* ("Soaring") is exultant and elaborately laid out in a sonata-rondo pattern. *Warum?* ("Why?") is filled with tender questions in its melodic phrasing. *Grillen* ("Whims") is capricious and unpredictable, though it, too, is laid out as a sonata-rondo.

*In der Nacht* ("In the Night") is the most elaborate number of the set. After completing the music, Schumann heard in it the story of Hero and Leander—in which Leander swims the Hellespont nightly to be with his love Hero, who lights a torch to show the way. This romantic image—and its connection with Clara, the woman he hoped to marry—made this movement Schumann's favorite. *Fabel* ("Fable") tells a lively story with a slow "Once upon a time" opening that returns at the end to suggest "happily ever after." *Traumens-Wirren* ("Dream Confusion") is light-fingered and virtuosic almost throughout, while the closing number, *Ende vom Lied* ("End of the song") evoked, for Schumann, a cheerful wedding and a funeral knell at the end.

**Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937)

**Valses nobles et sentimentales**

As with so many of his other orchestral works, Ravel wrote the "Noble and Sentimental Waltzes" first for piano, probably with no particular intention of orchestrating them at all. The work was first performed by Louis Aubert in May 1911 without an announcement of the composer's name. Speculation as to the author's identity ranged from Satie to Kodály. Once the composer's name was revealed, Ravel was prevailed upon by Mlle Trouhanova's ballet company to orchestrate the work for the dance. He did so very quickly, and *Adélaïde, ou Le Langage des fleurs* had four gala performances at the Théâtre du Châtelet in April 1912 (on a program with Dukas's *La Péri* and d'Indy's *Istar*). After a revival in 1916, the ballet failed to hold the stage; this is not, perhaps, surprising, since it

was laden with a silly scenario in which a flirtatious prima donna presents a series of flowers (symbolizing some emotion or characteristic) alternately to her suitors, the noble duke and the amorous Loredan. The musical score stands firmly on its own without the dubious benefit of the narrative elements, and it has become firmly established (both in its original piano version and in orchestral dress) as a concert piece.

Probably more than any other dance or rhythmic pattern, the 3/4 lilt of the waltz characterizes the nineteenth-century and romanticism. Certainly from at least the time of the Congress of Vienna in 1815 until World War I, the waltz was the dance craze that dominated Europe and America, first as a somewhat scandalous new dance that caused fathers to worry about their daughters' purity (it was, after all, the first social dance in which the partners assumed an embrace position), eventually as a familiar and well-loved dance for the elders, while the younger fry turned to something else that was newly scandalous in its turn. The occasional waltz songs of an Offenbach, the strings of waltzes conceived by both the elder and the younger Johann Strauss for dancing in Viennese cafés and wine gardens of mid-century, the vibrant ballet waltzes of a Tchaikovsky, were becoming, by the beginning of the present century, slow waltz songs in charming Ruritanian operettas, meltingly sentimental but wondrously evocative when properly used (for example the principal waltz song in Lehár's *The Merry Widow* or Victor Herbert's "Kiss me again," in *Mlle. Modiste*).

Ravel's suite of waltzes is an amazingly objective summary of the waltz tradition, a *jeu d'esprit* that probably had no further aim, when first conceived, than taking the waltz medium almost as "found object" and working with it as a modeler with his clay. This intention is signaled by the epigraph that Ravel put at the head of his score, drawn from Henri de Regnier: *Le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d'une occupation inutile* ("the delicious and ever-new pleasure of a useless occupation"). The score alternates faster and more vigorous waltzes (presumably the "noble" ones) with slower and more evocative movements ("sentimental"). The opening waltz is unusually acerbic in harmonic character (especially for a genre so associated in the public mind with sugary harmonies); Ravel makes use of appoggiaturas and added dissonances of the seventh, ninth, and eleventh to reduce the sugar content considerably. No. 2 is more fragile, featuring a delicate little melody. The third has a broader swing, with rhythmic patterns often extending over two bars in the manner of Tchaikovsky. No. 4 continues this broader rhythm but in more animated fashion, more in the style of a Viennese waltz. It has hints of the raciness of the later Viennese operettas. The fifth waltz is slower, more delicate, essentially an interlude. No. 6 is extremely fast and harbors rhythmic complexities in its written-out alternations of 3/2 and 6/4 meters (a kind of rhythmic shift often employed in waltzes, but rarely notated explicitly). Ravel himself regarded No. 7 as one of his finest creations. It begins tentatively and blossoms into a charming freshness of melody that builds to an exhilarating climax. Such an ending virtually requires a coda. Ravel's Epilogue casts one more retrospective glance in slow waltz style with imaginative and evocative orchestral coloration. This *envoi* is a final sophisticated tribute to the long waltz tradition—a tradition that Ravel himself was to destroy with the violent satire of *La Valse* in less than a decade.

**Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849)

*Mazurkas, Opus 50* (1841-42)

The mazurkas of Chopin are eloquent proof of the idea that even the simplest and most stereotyped musical genre, a simple dance pattern, can, in the hands of a genius, lend itself to astonishing variety of mood and temperament. These half-hundred miniatures may be tentative or exuberant, light-hearted or angry, delicate or fierce. And they may range in length from less than a minute to more than five minutes—the length of a serious sonata movement. But they capture vividly the "Polish" element in Chopin's work and exhibit the refinement, polish, and balance of his musical imagination.

**No. 1 in G Major** is a lively *Vivace* that accentuates the mazurka's characteristic dotted rhythms and foot-stomping emphases. The main theme contrasts with two others, the first a brief contrasting phrase in the relative minor. After a recurrence of the main theme, a new contrast sounds darker, with the melodic motion moving to the left hand while the right accompanies. A brief move to the still darker area of E-flat leads to a coda of more tranquil mood, combining fragments of what we have already heard.

**No. 2 in A-flat Major, Allegretto**, is in a far gentler strain, its rocking introduction leading us to expect a lullaby. And, in fact, when the first theme gets underway, it sounds more like a delicate waltz than an athletic mazurka. The middle section returns to the mazurka rhythm, but still in a subdued dynamic (don't wake the baby!) until about ready to return to the earlier mood.

**No. 3 in C-sharp minor** is a remarkable work, rich in material. There are no fewer than four different musical ideas in the first part of the dance (the “A” section of a basic ABA pattern: the first eight bars offer a canon (strict imitation) between the right hand and the left. This runs into a straightforward waltz theme. That whole section is repeated; then a new idea—now a real mazurka rhythm—appears with straightforward harmonies. But after another eight bars, the fourth theme—sustained, with rich harmonic suspensions—takes over. A few repetitions of the opening motif leads to the B section, which is in a broader, simpler, waltz-like mood, with a melodic line that goes up and down like a large wave. The opening section returns almost verbatim. But Chopin evidently felt that so many contrasting ideas needed more working-out, so he appended a coda that is longer than the entire main section, and intertwines all of the motifs heard earlier in new guises, ending with several repetitions of the opening canonic figure over reiterations of the home key. The mood is deeply nostalgic, and profoundly Polish, filled with nostalgia for his distant native land.

### **Frédéric Chopin**

#### **Andante spianato et Grande polonaise brillante in E-flat Major, Opus 22**

Not long after completing his two piano concertos—both works completed before he had turned twenty-one—Chopin wrote another brilliant showpiece for piano and orchestra in the form of a Grand Polonaise in E-flat, composed while he was still in Poland, between September 1830 and July 1831. Soon after that, he moved to Paris, where he settled for the rest of his life (barring occasional visits and short stays elsewhere). There he developed his mature style, which was not so consciously “showy” but rather developed deeper connections between the melodic and harmonic elements of his pieces, and usually in smaller forms.

Before performing the *Grande polonaise*, he created a dreamy pastoral for solo piano that he called *Andante spianato* (the unusual second word means “level” or “even”) and connected it to the earlier unperformed showpiece by means of a brief linking passage to move from the key of the *Andante* to that of the *Grande polonaise*.

The solo opening is a kind of idyll, mostly built of rippling figures in 6/8, but with a more chordal central section in 3/4. None of this particularly appealed to the Paris audience at the premiere, who were out for brilliance and flash. These Chopin provided in the *Grande polonaise*, which was much liked. But Chopin himself realized that the general run of Paris audiences had little interest in the music he wanted to write, so the concert on April 26, 1835, was essentially the end of his public concertizing; for the rest of his life he mostly performed in private salons of cultivated people who could appreciate what he had written. He never performed this early work again. Later pianists, who (unlike the Parisians in 1835) are taken with the delicacy of the *Andante*, have often played Opus 22 as a solo work to present both the quietly internal side and the flashy extroverted Chopin in a single piece.

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