

Sunday | April 23 | 3pm
Symphony Hall

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Evgeny Kissin piano

J.S. Bach Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

W.A. Mozart Sonata No. 9 in D Major, K. 311
Allegro con spirito
Andante con espressione
Rondo. Allegro

Chopin Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44

INTERMISSION

Rachmaninoff Selected short works for piano
Romance, Op. 21, no. 5 "Lilacs"
Prelude in A minor, Op. 32, no. 8
Prelude in G-flat Major, Op. 23, no. 10

Selected Études-tableaux, Op. 39
No. 1, Allegro agitato in C minor
No. 2, Lento assai in A minor
No. 4, Allegro assai in B minor
No. 5, Appassionato in E-flat minor
No. 9, Allegro moderato: Tempo di marcia in D Major

This evening's program will run approximately 90 minutes, including intermission.
The second half will be performed without pause.

Mr. Kissin appears by arrangement with IMG Artists, New York.
Mr. Kissin records for Deutsche Grammophon.

An Aaron Richmond Recital

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

By Bach's time, a rich compositional tradition had already developed around the "fantasy," a form which, by that time, had accumulated a variety of associations. Bach brought together the different meanings and various traditions that had been associated with the term previously. In the 16th and 17th centuries, fantasy (or "fantasia") meant a strict imitative polyphonic single movement work, but by the 18th century, that version of the form was slowly disappearing. Bach probably wrote this Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue around 1720, when he was in Cöthen, but we now know it in a revised version that he crafted around 1730, when he was in Leipzig. It has always received special respect and admiration.

One of the favorite keyboard pieces of the time was the prelude accompanied by a relatively strict fugue, but Bach and his contemporaries were rapidly adopting a freer style, a kind of unrestrained solo improvisation on the keyboard, as he said, "fantasizing on the instrument." Bach and the keyboard virtuosos for whom he was writing solidified the use of the term "fantasy" to carry the new meaning. In a few cases, Bach labeled the prelude "fantasy" because he could give a looser form to the music, allowing his imagination to take flight very much as it might have if he were actually improvising.

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903, is the composition musicologists most usually cite when they are trying to define the idea of composed improvisation that Bach used.

This Fantasia combines virtuosity with daring innovations into richly expressive chromatic harmonies. It is called "chromatic" because the music wanders far from its home key of D minor, as Bach displays his pleasure in exploiting the new freedom of a tempered system of tuning, which was still novel at the time. The Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue quickly became one of Bach's most popular works. It was widely circulated in manuscript during his lifetime (sometimes as two separate pieces). Bach's contemporaries greatly admired the harmonic daring in the writing, and they were eager to explore the possibilities of the new expressive world it opened to them.

The whole composition has a three-part structure. The first is a toccata-like section developed by a contrast of scalar passages which include brilliant runs and a chorale, which uses broken arpeggio chord patterns. The second section Bach called "recitative." In it, he appropriated the style of the Neapolitan School of opera in which the voice part was not accompanied for the most part but rather punctuated periodically with isolated chords at appropriate places in the text. Bach's "recitative" here includes ornamented, highly expressive melodies and concludes with chromatically descending chords placed over a sustained note in the bass. This remarkable section with its intensely chromatic elements, which create a feeling of tense agitation and desperation, releases that tension when the music resolves in the final measures, creating a sense of clarity and peace.

The three-voice fugue forms the third and final part of this composition. It is built from a long melodic subject whose salient feature is its rising and descending chromatic line. It ends with a magnificent coda. This energetic and expressive fugue makes many demands on the performer.

With its large dimensions and, for Bach, its freer, more relaxed form, it is quite unique among Bach's music.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Sonata No. 9 in D Major, K. 311

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Sonata in D Major, K. 311, published in 1782 as Op. 4, no. 2, is one of two piano sonatas he composed in Mannheim in November 1777, while he was touring with his mother. Mozart may have written the sonata for the two Freysinger girls whom he had met in Munich and mentioned in letters to his cousin in Augsburg. Their father had been a fellow student of Mozart's father.

In this work, Mozart includes aspects of the Mannheim style, particularly its sharp dynamic contrasts. For both the first and second movements, Mozart was also influenced by Haydn's contribution to sonata form. Here Mozart's keyboard writing also displays an orchestral influence, which is distinctively different from that of the typical keyboard style of the day.

The sonata has three movements. The first, *Allegro*, opens with a theme that feels orchestral in conception and very confident sounding, with a flourish in the right hand and chords in the left. The secondary theme, by contrast, sounds more like a keyboard solo and is delicate in comparison to the first in its use of chromatic appoggiatura. It uses Alberti bass figures with their arpeggiated chords and a theme made up of scale-like figures. The effect of rhythm is accentuated in the development where Mozart slowly increases the intensity then writes an unexpected pause in the center followed by a dramatic dynamic contrast. The recapitulation takes on an unusual mirror image with the second theme appearing first, then the first theme, and, in the end, a short coda even introduces new material.

The second movement, in G major, *Andante con espressione*, begins with an elegant theme, which is later embellished. In a kind of rondo form, the contrasting material comes back for a recapitulation, as does the initial theme. Here again Mozart uses sudden and large dynamic contrasts.

The final movement, a Rondo, *Allegro*, is full of energy. Alfredo Casella, an Italian composer, compared its principal theme to that of Beethoven's Violin Concerto. The contrasting second episode features a cadenza passage at its end that embraces three different tempos. The rondo theme returns as the sonata comes to its end.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)
Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44

The polonaise was originally a stately court dance or a royal ceremonial march that a French king, who sat on the Polish throne in the 16th century, introduced to Poland. In the 18th century, when the Saxon Germans were the kings of Poland, the polonaise became a popular dance in the West, but in the hands of the 19th-century Polish composers, it became a musical symbol of their people's struggle for independence from foreign rule. It evolved into an instrumental work completely independent of its dance origins. Many composers besides Chopin wrote polonaises; among them Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Weber, Wagner, and Liszt, yet Chopin is the composer inseparably linked with the polonaise, and it was he who idealized it as a kind of national classic.

The polonaise usually is written in a moderate triple meter and is characterized by its general lack of upbeat as well as its repeated rhythmic figures. It has a distinctive rhythm made up of an eighth note and two sixteenths followed by four eighth notes (ed: think TA-tee-tee-TA-TA-TA-TA).

Chopin composed his very first polonaises when he was only seven years old. By that time, the form had acquired a general structure, one not especially Polish in reference; later, when Chopin was no longer in his native Poland, his mature polonaises became symbols of Polish nationalism for him and for his countrymen. Chopin had composed nine polonaises before leaving Poland; he returned to the form over the course of his life, developing its style and perfecting its form. Liszt observed that the energetic rhythms of Chopin's polonaises "thrill and galvanize the torpor of our indifference."

Poland was in the news in Paris in 1830 because of its attempted rising against Russia and Russia's suppression of it; consequently, things Polish were enjoying considerable popularity in France just at the time when Chopin gave the form a new level of complexity and expression. James Gibbons Huneker called the body of Chopin polonaises "heroic hymns of battle," but while many do breathe a militant spirit, they are not solely battle cries; the melancholy, poetic Chopin constantly peers through.

In 1840 and 1841, Chopin composed Polonaise, Op. 44, and dedicated it to Madame La Princesse Charles de Beauvau née de Komar. In it, he definitely makes the polonaise a powerful expression of national feeling. It is an extended work, built of long, elegant musical statements. In a letter about publishing it, Chopin wrote, "It is a kind of Fantasy in the form of a Polonaise." It is the first of the three polonaises in which Chopin completely casts off any dance-like qualities and allows the polonaise to be a free fantasy. According to Liszt, this polonaise marked the "lurid hour that precedes a hurricane," while John Ogdon saw it as having a "Goya-like intensity," yet the main theme possesses the anticipated traditional polonaise character: loftiness, dignity, and a sense of the heroic. The melodies, presented in octaves, are commanding. In the contrasting middle section, Chopin utilizes another Polish dance, a mazurka, in place of the expected trio, in a unique fashion. Liszt called its mood idyllic and said it seems to "spread forth the scents of marjoram and mint."

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Selected short works for piano

Romance, Op. 21, no. 5 “Lilacs”

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, he 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.

“Lilacs,” composed in 1902, was one of Rachmaninoff's most famous songs. He transcribed it for solo piano in 1914; in its piano version, it became enormously popular in Russia. “Lilacs” has both freshness and the sincerity of expression characteristic of Russian folk melodies.

One of Rachmaninoff's admirers, a lady who was able to remain anonymous, had the unusual and charming idea of paying continuous homage to Rachmaninoff by organizing a bouquet of white lilacs to be either positioned on the stage or presented to the composer after a performance whenever or wherever he appeared in concert, not just when “Lilacs” was on the program.

Prelude in A minor, Op. 32, no. 8

In 1910, Rachmaninoff composed his second set of preludes: Thirteen Preludes, Op. 32. They are harmonically bolder than those in Op. 23, his first set, and the piano writing is more original as well as more diverse in expression and length. In the earlier set, the influence of Chopin is evident and strong, but by the Op. 32 set, it has receded considerably. Each of Rachmaninoff's preludes is a separate, complete self-contained work. Rachmaninoff's Thirteen Preludes, Op. 32, are representative of the subtler and more harmonically mature style that the composer had reached in his middle years. As a result, these works are generally more complex and original in their design than the earlier preludes of Op. 23.

By combining the preludes from three different opus numbers, Rachmaninoff eventually constructed a grouping of twenty-four works with an underlying stylistic unity, systematically using all the major and minor keys, although he did not arrange them in any progressive order. This device put him in a direct historical line with Bach and Chopin, who had both written similar series.

Rachmaninoff also used the music of Tchaikovsky, his countryman, as a model and inspiration for his own music's melodic power and rich, characteristic Russian sound. Each complex work exhibits a wide expressive range and invention that is often melodically memorable as well as dramatic. When first performed, these preludes often attracted the listener's attention because of their Russian character

and melodic lines as well as their characteristic rhythmic stamp. Each has a distinct theatricality; with Rachmaninoff, the preludes become miniature dramas, and as a result, many annotators try to explain them with programmatic interpretations that Rachmaninoff did not intend. Rachmaninoff, aware of these tendencies, strongly insisted that his works be accepted as absolute music.

No. 8 in A minor, *Vivo*, was composed on August 24, 1910. A confident piece, it can project playfulness, yet some, like critic David Fanning, assert that it has a feeling of being driven, as if it has “the wind at its back and the rain swirling around it.”

Prelude in G-flat Major, Op. 23, no. 10

European music was an evident influence in Rachmaninoff’s music in the Op. 23 Preludes, composed in 1903, as a set of ten. Just prior to beginning the Op. 23 Preludes, Rachmaninoff composed Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22, a conscious tribute to the master composer. Rachmaninoff’s Op. 23 fits the mold Chopin established for the prelude: a composition expressing a distinct mood or emotion.

No. 10 in G-flat Major is the last prelude of the set as well as its shortest and simplest. It has the character of a stately elegy. This very melodic and subtle work does not have a climactic passage, a distinctive feature that by this point had become almost an expected “signature” of Rachmaninoff’s style.

Selected *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 39

The *étude-tableau* (“study picture”) is a kind of etude of Rachmaninoff’s own invention; his two groups of pieces in this idiosyncratic genre have been understood as the culmination of the 19th-century tradition of composer-pianists writing virtuoso compositions. One of Rachmaninoff’s biographers, Oskar von Riesemann, called these brief *tableaux* “majestic al fresco pictures.” Each is a musical evocation of a pictorial or narrative idea, and each presents a brief, musical image like a tiny symphonic poem whose subject is the composer’s secret. Rachmaninoff hesitated to reveal the programs, saying, “I do not believe in the artist disclosing too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what they most suggest.” Nevertheless, he did finally reveal the secret of some of them.

Rachmaninoff wrote his first set of *Études-Tableaux* (Op. 33) in mid-August of 1911. He seems to have invented the title but not the form; Haylock posited the theory that Liszt’s *Transcendental Etudes* were forerunners to the Rachmaninoff works. Rachmaninoff said he found these short works difficult to compose, 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.”

Compared to Op. 33, the idiosyncratic, imaginative *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 39 is a collection that is larger and more expressive. Composed from September 1916 to February 1917, it was Rachmaninoff’s last opus composed in Russia; it premiered in St. Petersburg on February 21, 1917. Its composition was impacted by the events that roiled Russia in those years: World War I and the rise of communism, which led to the violent October Revolution in 1917 that forced the composer to go into exile. Eight of the nine pieces in the grouping are in a minor key. They are longer, more

developed, and more challenging than those of the earlier Op. 33 series, but they are equally poetic, and their psychological imagery is more evident. They are characterized by greater development and a poem-like nature. In addition, they are more wide-ranging and technically more complicated than the earlier etudes. In the tradition of the etude, each is a study of a particular pianistic idea. Robert Matthew-Walker, a biographer of Rachmaninoff, wrote that the *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op. 39, embody a hidden set of variations on Rachmaninoff's idée-fixe, the *Dies Irae*, whose melody comes from the liturgy of the requiem. The requiem text describes the Day of Judgment, when all souls must account to God for their sins. Parts of the plainchant are quoted directly in each of the pieces. Rachmaninoff, in describing the opus, called the works "virtuosic in the extreme." They demand unconventional hand positions, immense physical strength, and energy from the player.

Etude No. 1, in C minor, *Allegro agitato*, is, as its marking reflects, agitated in feel. It is filled with extraordinary dynamism but seems to end in a feeling of desperation. Matthew-Walker finds the tragic and powerful Etude No. 2, in A minor, *Lento assai*, extraordinarily difficult. A strong contrast to the previous etude, this sedate yet atmospheric work, has three themes, the third of which is based on the *Dies Irae* chant, which Rachmaninoff uses here as an ostinato throughout the piece. To assist Respighi in his orchestration of this work, Rachmaninoff gave this etude the subtitle "The Sea and Seagulls."

Etude No. 4, in B minor, *Allegro assai*, is a study in repeated notes and staccato chords. A somewhat march-like work with shifting meters, it might even be thought of as a scherzo-like intermezzo. It is quite different from the more intense, dramatic other pieces in the opus. It has been conjectured that the quality of grotesqueness often attributed to it refers to its hidden programmatic nature.

Etude No. 5, in E-flat minor, *Appassionato*, one of the best-known pieces of the opus, has a somber character, with large, dark chords and an elegiac melody. A grand work, composed in February 1917, it is the last piece Rachmaninoff wrote before leaving Russia. In some ways, it is the culmination of the whole cycle, because it expresses the composer's anguish and the dark foreshadowing of catastrophe, making it epic in mood for a work of its scale. A powerful theme made up of a long and expressive melody is played against thick full-bodied chords in the main section, while the contrasting middle section features a yearning melody accompanied by widespread arpeggios. The build-up to the return of the main theme is highly effective, and the etude concludes with an extraordinarily powerful climax. Overall, this piece is one of Rachmaninoff's most brilliant works for the piano.

The energetic Etude No. 9, in D Major, *Allegro moderato: Tempo di marcia* is, according to Rachmaninoff, an "Oriental march." The only piece in the cycle in a major key, the etude is driven by rhythmic momentum. It begins with the sound of church bells striking; the bell sound yields, at the center, to a dance-like theme, to be followed by a sound that is quite reminiscent of the initial church bells. Little by little, the piece becomes a powerful and brilliant display of joyous sound.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Evgeny Kissin piano

Evgeny Kissin's musicality, the depth and poetic quality of his interpretations, and his extraordinary virtuosity have earned him the veneration and admiration deserved only by one of the most gifted classical pianists of his generation and, arguably, generations past. He is in demand the world over, and has appeared with many of the world's great conductors, including Abbado, Ashkenazy, Barenboim, Dohnanyi, Giulini, Levine, Maazel, Muti, and Ozawa, as well as all the great orchestras of the world.

Mr. Kissin was born in Moscow in October 1971 and began to play by ear and improvise on the piano at age two. At six years old, he entered a special school for gifted children, the Moscow Gnessin School of Music, where he was a student of Anna Pavlovna Kantor, who has been his only teacher. At age ten, he made his concerto debut playing Mozart's Piano Concerto K. 466 and gave his first solo recital in Moscow one year later. He came to international attention in March 1984 when, at the age of twelve, he performed Chopin's Piano Concertos 1 and 2 in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory with the Moscow State Philharmonic under Dmitri Kitaenko. This concert was recorded live by Melodia, and a two-LP album was released the following year. Given the astounding success of this recording, Melodia proceeded to release five more LPs of live performances in Moscow over the following two years.

During the 2022/23 season, Mr. Kissin returns to with the Vienna Philharmonic with Jakub Hrůša, the London Symphony and Sir Simon Rattle, the Hamburg Philharmonic and Kent Nagano, and the Warsaw Philharmonic and Andrey Boreyko, among others. In January, he embarked on a recital tour of Europe with Renée Fleming performing a program of Schubert, Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Duparc in Vienna's Musikverein, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Lucerne's KKL and Milan's La Scala. The two artists take the same program on a tour of North America in May, stopping at the Kennedy Center, Chicago, the Gilmore Festival in Michigan, and at Carnegie Hall. Mr. Kissin also tours North America with a solo recital program featuring works by Bach, Mozart, Debussy and Rachmaninoff, traveling to Chicago, Toronto and Carnegie Hall in addition to today's Boston recital. On May 21, he performs at a gala concert at Carnegie Hall honoring the centenary of Andrei Sakharov—physicist, humanist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner for championing universal human rights, disarmament, and peace, in whose name the European Union established the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. For this performance he will be joined by violinist Maxim Vengerov, cellist Steven Isserlis, and the Emerson String Quartet, among other star artists.

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