



Sunday | December 11 | 3pm | NEC's Jordan Hall

Seong-Jin Cho piano

G. F. Handel Suite No. 2 in F Major, HWV 427
Adagio
Allegro
Adagio
Allegro (Fugue)

Handel Suite No. 8 in F minor, HWV 433
Prélude
Allegro (Fugue)
Allemande
Courante
Gigue

Johannes Brahms Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24
Aria
Variation 1
Variation 2: *Animato*
Variation 3: *Dolce*
Variation 4: *Risoluto*
Variation 5: *Espressivo*
Variation 6
Variation 7: *Con vivacità*
Variation 8
Variation 9: *Poco sostenuto*
Variation 10: *Energico*
Variation 11: *Dolce*
Variation 12: *Soave*
Variation 13: *Largamente, ma non più*
Variation 14: *Sciolto*
Variation 15
Variation 16: *Ma marcato*
Variation 17: *Più mosso*
Variation 18: *Grazioso*
Variation 19: *Leggiero und vivace*
Variation 20: *Legato*
Variation 21: *Dolce*
Variation 22
Variation 23: *Vivace e staccato*
Variation 24
Variation 25
Fuga

INTERMISSION

Continued

Brahms

Selections from 8 *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76

1. Capriccio in F-sharp minor
2. Capriccio in B minor
4. Intermezzo in B-flat Major
5. Capriccio in C-sharp minor

R. Schumann

Symphonic Etudes, Op. 13

Theme: *Andante*

Etude 1 (Variation 1): *Un poco più vivo*

Etude 2 (Variation 2): *Andante*

Etude 3: *Vivace*

Etude 4 (Variation 3): *Allegro marcato*

Etude 5 (Variation 4): *Scherzando*

Etude 6 (Variation 5): *Agitato*

Posthumous Variation IV: *Allegretto*

Etude 7 (Variation 6): *Allegro molto*

Etude 8 (Variation 7): *Sempre marcatissimo*

Posthumous Variation V: *Moderato*

Etude 9: *Presto possibile*

Etude 10 (Variation 8): *Allegro con energia*

Etude 11 (Variation 9): *Andante espressivo*

Etude 12 (Finale): *Allegro brillante*

Today's program will run approximately two hours, including intermission.

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Suite No. 2 in F Major, HWV 427

Suite No. 8 in F minor, HWV 433

Although George Frideric Handel is now best known for his vocal music, the German musical polymath was one of the great keyboard virtuosos of the Baroque era, maybe only bested by Bach. Like all the top tier of Baroque composers, Handel was a stellar improviser who could create deeply complex, layered polyphonic works extemporaneously from very simple material. His manuscripts for his harpsichord pieces prove this: many of them are simply chords with no ornamentation notated. From these blueprints the composer would craft something like what will be performed in this evening's program. Only upon publication and mass printing would Handel enumerate the details of what these pieces should look like in the hands of the lesser non-Handel. The result is a partial view of how the composer might have improvised over these forms and, centuries on, we can hear Handel freshly realized as the quick-thinking genius he undoubtedly was.

In 1720, Handel published his iconic so-called 8 Great Suites for harpsichord, of which the Suite No. 2 in F Major, HWV 427, and the Suite No. 8 in F minor, HWV 433, are two sterling examples. The standard form for a Baroque suite is four movements centered around traditional dances, the Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue. Handel, however, was generally more varied in his keyboard compositions, adding to, subtracting from, or doing away with these structures altogether. For the Suite No. 2, Handel trusts in his own formal imagination, structuring the four movements Adagio, Allegro, Adagio, and Allegro, effectively Slow, Fast, Slow, Fast. For the Suite No. 8, Handel concludes with an Allemande, a Courante, and a thrilling Gigue, but begins first with an Adagio and Allegro. The pieces also showcase Handel's typical but nonetheless startlingly adventurous orchestration skills, writing as no one else could to showcase the variety of colors a keyboard can communicate and foreshadowing the ambitions of many great Romantic composers like Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, and Liszt.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24

Johannes Brahms was part of a group of Romantic composers that prominently included Clara and Robert Schumann and prized classical forms over the modernist rule-breaking aesthetic of Wagner and Liszt. The "War of the Romantics," as the conflict is often called, was fought mainly on the front of published compositions. Part of the younger generation of Romantics, Brahms was the wunderkind of the conservative movement, enthusiastically branded as quasi-Messiah by Robert Schumann. His Handel Variations is one of the prime examples of the more conservative philosophy and is generally considered one of the great compositions of any kind of the Romantic era. Even Wagner, an uncompromising

apologist for the modernist aesthetic, had to admit that “One sees what still may be done in the old forms when someone comes along who knows how to use them.”

Throughout the piece, Brahms cleverly evokes a sense that the listener is pitched firmly in two different eras. In the original statement of Handel’s theme, almost every note is adorned as a Baroque harpsichord player would render them. From then on, the piece often strongly suggests the rhythms of common Baroque dances while adventurously mining his contemporary and idiomatic musical language.

The piece, while written beautifully and imaginatively for the piano, is to a large extent an exercise in form. Each of the 25 variations cleaves closely to the form of the original theme, with two short, repeated sections. Various ideas exist on why Brahms structured the order of variations how he did. Critics attempt to lump them together into sets, sometimes in pairs. There is no consensus here, though what all agree on is that there seems to be some scheme. The listener will find that variations often oscillate in opposing patterns, between major and minor, between legato and staccato, between frenetic and contained. Often, the original theme will seem nowhere to be found, and yet the music will seem like a variation, nonetheless. This is partly because Brahms, like many composers of the past, placed great emphasis on the bass in music. The bass voice, he found, provided as important a function as the soprano melody and gave a theme its soul. The character of Handel’s original theme is then maintained without constant obsequious reference to its melody by evoking its bass. Compellingly, the variations are also iterative, varying each other as they progress as much as they vary the original theme.

The piece ends prominently, almost arrogantly with a lengthy fugue that grandly sums up Brahms’ compositional ambitions. While not strictly a variation, the composer derives the fugue’s theme from the beginning of the Handel theme. This new theme becomes the source of the most virtuosic material of the entire piece. More Bach than Handel, Brahms stretches, flips, turns upside down, and generally squeezes the new theme for all the life it has, producing a climax that puts a firm exclamation point on one of the finest pieces for piano of its time.

Brahms

Selections from *Klavierstücke*, Op. 76

Brahms naming this collection of pieces *Klavierstücke*, or Piano Pieces in English, seems uncontroversial, but the implication here is a clear statement against the late Romantic fashion of what’s known as program music, instrumental music that represents a greater narrative. Brahms was not wholly against music that referenced outside themes, but his output has a strong preference for what is called absolute music. To composers with Brahms’ conservative bent, this was the ideal mode of composition, the kind used by such monumental figures as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Any layer of extra-musical content applied on top of the piece would only obscure the true aspect and strength of the composition itself.

Brahms' *Klavierstücke*, Op 76, are beautiful examples of piano miniatures, small, standalone pieces that form a kind of musical menagerie when collected together. The eight pieces are of two types: four are capriccios, or short pieces with an improvisatory nature, and four are intermezzi, or standalone character pieces that are often lyrical in nature. From this afternoon's program, numbers 1, 2, and 5 are capriccios, while number 4 is an intermezzo. The pieces form pairs in typical Brahms fashion. Number 1, intense and forward pushing, is offset by the more tender and genteel number 2. In numbers 4 and 5, the pattern is reversed, with the ease of number 4 giving way to tension in number 5. Brahms' obsession with form and structure here helps illuminate each piece by creating context, causing the listener to reflect that the menagerie is the point.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
Symphonic Etudes, Op. 13

Robert Schumann was a paradox of a composer. In his life and art, he seemed to balance on a thread between contradictions. He was a great supporter of the community of composers around him, of young talent and of those who supported his fiercely defended critical ideals, yet he was in life mostly a loner who invented an imaginary society of composers in lieu of any real group of friends. He had major mood swings, perhaps from what we would call bipolar disorder today, and oscillated between periods of fanatic productivity and melancholic introspection. He was also a defender of classical ideals and forms whose music seemed more interested in exploring the very modern precept that content dictates form. It would be easy to choose just one of these perspectives to analyze Schumann from, but this would be an incomplete portrait. He was all these things, a fully fleshed, deeply complex person who tried to lead the life of a quintessential Romantic, passionate and obsessively art-forward.

Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*, Op. 13, is as enigmatic as the composer himself. Notoriously difficult to perform, the composition has a history of alterations and additions that makes it just as difficult to pin down conceptually. The piece began as a challenge to write variations on a theme by Baron von Fricken, an "amateur," as Schumann referred to him in the first title of the work, though additional movements from later publications do not follow the form of variation. The titling of the work as well was relatively chaotic, having changed many times over the course of its composition and publication. At one time, it directly referenced Schumann's imagined dueling creative forces, the outgoing Florestan and the introspective Eusebius, who provided a frame and creative outlet for the composer's mood swings. The two were eminent members of Schumann's imagined society, the *Davidsbund*, and, with their sophisticated compositions, heroically triumphed over the ignorant pop culture Philistines. The imaginary creators' imprint can still be seen throughout the *Etudes*.

The changing nature of the piece has meant that the order of the variations is dictated by the performer, making it difficult to summarize as a large-scale piece. What remains consistent in every performance is Schumann's characteristic sound world, his aesthetic that unifies formal competence, virtuosity, and pure emotion.

While most movements do vary the original theme, this is merely a jumping off point. Unlike the Brahms, which often feels more like a formal exploration than a pianistic one, the Symphonic Etudes are fundamentally about the idiosyncrasies of the piano. The movements are highly structured, but the scaffolding feels like it buckles under the weight of texture and color. Sublime is the correct descriptor here—though the piece is demanding to both performer and listener, all anyone can do is be in awe of Schumann’s music.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

With an innate musicality and overwhelming talent, **SEONG-JIN CHO** has established himself worldwide as one of the leading pianists of his generation and most distinctive artists on the current music scene. His thoughtful and poetic, assertive and tender, virtuosic and colorful playing can combine panache with purity and is driven by an impressive natural sense of balance.

Seong-Jin Cho was brought to the world’s attention in 2015 when he won First Prize at the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw, and his career has rapidly ascended since. In January 2016, he signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon. An artist high in demand, Cho works with the world’s most prestigious orchestras including Berliner Philharmoniker, Wiener Philharmoniker, London Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Conductors he regularly collaborates with include Myung-Whun Chung, Gustavo Dudamel, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Andris Nelsons, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Simon Rattle, Santtu-Matias Rouvali, and Esa-Pekka Salonen.

Highlights of Seong-Jin Cho’s 2022/23 season include performances of the Brahms piano concerti at Festspielhaus Baden-Baden with Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Yannick Nézet-Séguin. He notably returns to the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks with Zubin Mehta, to the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Andris Nelsons, and performs the world premiere of Thierry Escaich’s new piano concerto with the Czech Philharmonic and Semyon Bychkov. A highly sought-after touring soloist, Cho embarks on several international tours, including those with the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle to Japan and Korea, with the Dresden Staatskapelle and Myung-Whun Chung in Dresden and in Korea. He also performs with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, touring throughout Germany in Spring 2023.

An active recitalist very much in demand, Seong-Jin Cho performs in many of the world’s most prestigious concert halls including the main stage of Carnegie Hall, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Berliner Philharmonie, Konzerthaus Vienna, Prinzregententheater München, Suntory Hall Tokyo, Walt Disney Hall Los Angeles, Festival International de piano de la Roque d’Anthéron, and Verbier Festival.

During the coming season he is engaged to perform solo recitals at Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Hall, Alte Oper Frankfurt, Liederhalle Stuttgart, at Laeiszhalle Hamburg, Berliner Philharmonie, Musikverein Wien, in addition to today's Boston recital debut, and he debuts in recital at the Barbican London. Cho also returns, three times this season, to Japan where he first appeared in recital performances in Nagoya, Tokyo, and Yokosuka in August 2022.

Seong-Jin Cho's most recent recording is of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 and Scherzi with the London Symphony Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda, released in August 2021 for Deutsche Grammophon. He had previously recorded his first album with the same orchestra and conductor featuring Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 as well as the Four Ballades. His solo album titled *The Wanderer* was released in May 2020 and features Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasy, Berg's Piano Sonata Op. 1 and Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor. A solo Debussy recital was also released in November 2017, followed by a Mozart album with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Yannick Nézet-Séguin in 2018. All albums have been released on the Yellow Label and have garnered impressive critical acclaim worldwide.

Born in 1994 in Seoul, Seong-Jin Cho started learning the piano at age six and gave his first public recital at 11. In 2009, he became the youngest-ever winner of Japan's Hamamatsu International Piano Competition. In 2011, he won Third Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow at age 17. From 2012-15 he studied with Michel Béroff at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris. Seong-Jin Cho is now based in Berlin.

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