

Program Notes for Justin Bird's Piano Recital

Sunday 3pm Mt Albert Baptist 24/07/2022

The **Tocatta and Fugue in D minor**, BWV 565, (1704) is a piece of organ music written by **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685 - 1750). Despite guesswork, there is not much that can be said about the first century of the composition's existence other than that it survived that period in a manuscript written by Johannes Ringk without any date. The first publication of the piece was in the Bach Revival era in 1833, thanks to Mendelssohn. Familiarity with the piece was enhanced in the second half of the 19th century by a fairly successful piano version by Carl Tausig, but it was not until the 20th century that its popularity rose above that of other organ compositions by Bach. That popularity further increased after its inclusion in Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (in Stokowski's orchestral transcription), until eventually this composition became the best known work of the eighteenth-century organ repertoire.

Ferruccio Busoni (1866 - 1924) was a maestro Italian pianist who revolutionized piano transcription. He had a great reverence for Bach, edited all his keyboard works, and transcribed many of his works for piano solo. At the time, Busoni's transcriptions were both popular and controversial, but his enduring success is manifest in the fact that his name has become inextricably linked with Bach. The opening flourishes of the Tocatta sound like an organist testing the bellows of the organ, then listening, and repeating through the different registers. It was quite common to begin in this way, just in the same way most keyboard suites begin with an improvisatory prelude. The third stave of notes originally written for the feet to play on the organ is masterfully worked into the piano transcription, creating a demanding part for the pianist. Other subtleties involve reflecting differences in the timbres of the organ stops with dynamic differences in the piano. The freeness of the fugue's construction is like its toccata, and may have originated in improvisation. The conclusion diverts back to the wildness of the toccata, and in Busoni's transcription – it roars.

Franz Liszt (1811 - 1886) was a Hungarian composer, pianist and teacher. As a pianist he had no equal, and as a composer he suggested to a younger generation of musicians the new course that music was to take. **Sonetto del Petrarca 104** (1846-9) is inspired by the poetry of Italian Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca, and all three of the Sonetto's are concerned with love, in one form or another. Originally conceived as songs for piano and high tenor voice, Liszt later recast them as solo piano works. His extreme sensitivity to Petrarch's original text allows him to beautifully capture the atmosphere and sentiment of Petrarch's words, though they do not take their cues directly from the text. Rather, they reflect Liszt's own response to the poetry in the same way as earlier pieces in the Italian *Années*, 'Spozalizio' and 'Il penseroso', convey the composer's response to a painting and a sculpture by Raphael and Michelangelo respectively.

The 'Sonetto 104' is perhaps the most passionate, agitated and dramatic of the three, based on the Sonnet *Pace non trovo* ('I find no peace....' see below). In it, the poet ponders the confused state love has put him in. Enthralled to his lady, he feels imprisoned yet free, he burns with love, yet feels he is made of ice: in modern psychological parlance, a true state of 'limerence' (a life-altering and passionate love or infatuation for someone, often unrequited). Reading the original text, one has a sense of the protagonist caught in an emotional 'trap' of his own making: while wallowing in the contrasting and sometimes painful emotions, he is also enjoying them. There are moments of calm contemplation, shot through with soaring climaxes and intense agitation, the surprising harmonies emphasising the protagonist's confused state of mind.

*I find no peace, but for war am not inclined;
I fear, yet hope; I burn, yet am turned to ice;
I soar in the heavens, but lie upon the ground;
I hold nothing, though I embrace the whole world.*

*Love has me in a prison which he neither opens nor shuts fast;
he neither claims me for his own nor loosens my halter;
he neither slays nor unshackles me;
he would not have me live, yet leaves me with my torment.*

*Eyeless I gaze, and tongueless I cry out;
I long to perish, yet plead for succour;
I hate myself, but love another.
I feed on grief, yet weeping, laugh;
death and life alike repel me;
and to this state I am come, my lady, because of you.*

Gabriel Fauré (1845 - 1924) was a French composer, organist, pianist and teacher who wrote in many genres. These include songs, chamber music, orchestral pieces, and choral works, but his compositions for piano include some of his best known works. Fauré's music has been described as linking the end of Romanticism with the modernism of the second quarter of the 20th century. When he was born, Chopin was still composing, and by the time of Fauré's death, jazz and the atonal music of the Second Viennese School were being heard. He led the Paris Conservatoire from 1905-20 where he radically changed the administration and curriculum for the better, modernizing and broadening the range of music taught. By his last years, he was recognised in France as the leading French composer of his day. An unprecedented national musical tribute was held for him in Paris in 1922, headed by the president of the French Republic. Outside France, Fauré's music took decades to become widely accepted, except in Britain, where he had many admirers during his lifetime.

Fauré's major sets of piano works are thirteen nocturnes, thirteen barcarolles, six impromptus, and four valse-caprices. These sets were composed during several decades in his long career, and display the change in his style from uncomplicated youthful charm to a final enigmatic, but sometimes fiery introspection, by way of a turbulent period in his middle years. Much of Fauré's piano music is difficult to play, but is rarely virtuosic in style. The composer disliked showy display, and the predominant characteristic of his piano music is a classical restraint and understatement.

Works like the **Nocturne No. 4 in Eb, Op. 33/1 (c.1875)** are very different to Fauré's contemporaries Debussy or Ravel. He greatly admired the music of Chopin though, and his nocturnes follow Chopin's model, contrasting serene outer sections with livelier or more turbulent central episodes. The composer's son Philippe commented that the nocturnes "are not necessarily based on rêveries or on emotions inspired by the night. They are lyrical, generally impassioned pieces, sometimes anguished or wholly elegiac."

Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828) was an Austrian composer and despite his short lifetime, left behind a vast oeuvre. **Drei Klavierstücke D. 946**, (Three Piano Pieces) were composed just six months before his early death. They could have been intended as a continuation of the sets of four impromptu series he had begun in 1827 (opp. 90 and 142), but did not appear in print in Schubert's lifetime. Not until 1868 were they first published, edited by Johannes Brahms. The first in Eb minor was originally written with two trios, the first in B major, and the second in Ab major. Schubert crossed out the second in his autograph, but Brahms – who edited a lot of Schubert's music - included it in his edition, and it will be included in this performance.

Alexis-Emmanuel Chabrier (1841 – 1894) was a French Romantic composer and pianist. His bourgeois family did not approve of a musical career for him, and he studied law in Paris and then worked as a civil servant until the age of thirty-nine while immersing himself in the modernist artistic life of the French capital and composing in his spare time. From 1880 until his final illness he was a full-time composer. His lack of academic training left him free to create his own musical language, unaffected by established rules, and he was regarded by many later composers as an important innovator and a catalyst who paved the way for French modernism. Writing at a time when French musicians were generally proponents or opponents of the music of Wagner, Chabrier steered a middle course, sometimes incorporating Wagnerian traits into his music and at other times avoiding them. Chabrier was associated with some of the leading writers and painters of his time. Among his closest friends was the painter Édouard Manet, and Chabrier collected Impressionist paintings long before they became fashionable.

In 1880, while on a convalescent holiday at the coastal resort of Saint-Pair (near Granville), Chabrier composed what were to be called **Pièces pittoresques**. César Franck, at their premiere in 1881, remarked that those present had "just heard something exceptional. This music links our own time to that of Couperin and Rameau". **Menuet pompeux** (Pompous Minuet) - despite some complicated rhythms and hypermeter - shows Chabrier looking backward rather than forward. If the minuet is more like an Auvergnat dance, the G major middle section trio is a nod to the 18th century.

The son of a bookseller, publisher and writer, **Robert Schumann** (1810 - 1856) was a German composer, pianist, and influential music critic. Schumann left the study of law, intending to pursue a career as a virtuoso pianist. His teacher, Friedrich Wieck, a German pianist, had assured him that he could become the finest pianist in Europe, but a

hand injury ended this dream. Schumann then focused his musical energies on composing. In 1840, Schumann married Clara Wieck, after a long and acrimonious legal battle with her father, Friedrich, who opposed the marriage. A lifelong partnership in music began, as Clara herself was an established pianist and music prodigy. Schumann suffered from a mental disorder that first manifested in 1833 as a severe melancholic depressive episode. What is now thought to have been a combination of bipolar disorder and perhaps mercury poisoning led to "manic" and "depressive" periods in Schumann's compositional productivity. Until 1840, Schumann wrote exclusively for the piano, and was known for infusing his music with characters through motifs, as well as references to works of literature. Two of them "Florestan" and "Eusebius," come from fantasy names that Schumann gave to different sides of his own personality. Florestan was Schumann as bold and impetuous; Eusebius, the introspective and dreamy side of the composer's imagination. These qualities are apparent in the Kinderszenen you'll hear today.

In 1938, Schumann wrote 30 movements for **Kinderszenen** (Scenes of Childhood) but chose 13 for the final version – most of which I'll be playing today. He told his wife Clara that the "thirty small, droll things", were inspired by her comment that he sometimes seemed "like a child". He described them in 1840 as "more cheerful, gentler, more melodic" than his earlier works. The section titles were only added after the completion of the composition, and Schumann described them as "nothing more than delicate hints for execution and interpretation"

1. Of Foreign Lands and Peoples
2. A Curious Story
3. Blind Man's Bluff
4. Pleading Child
6. An Important Event
7. Dreaming
9. Knight of the Hobbyhorse
10. Almost Too Serious
11. Frightening
12. Child Falling Asleep
13. The Poet Speaks

Frederic Chopin (1810–1849) was born in Poland to musical parents. Growing up in Warsaw Chopin became a child prodigy, performing his first concert at age seven. In early childhood he was prone to illnesses; in fact for most of his life, Chopin suffered with poor health. When Chopin released his Op. 10 Etudes to Europe in 1833, a climate full of pattern-heavy exercises that catered to the growing amateur population of pianists, they arguably became the first collection of studies or etudes to offer music that suited the stage. Angela Lear writes "Each etude is as much a study in expression and emotional dynamic as pure technique and far transcends the basic didactic objective of dealing with a principal technical difficulty."

Chopin's etudes for the piano consist of three sets published during the 1830s. There are two collections of twelve, Op. 10 (1833), and Op. 25 (1837), and *Trois Nouvelles Etudes* (1839). Because Chopin revised his music compulsively, his works took months or years to write. Most of his manuscripts carry no dates probably for this reason. He began the Op. 25 set soon after publishing his first collection, and the last of this which I'll be playing today, harkens back to the first with a similar style of figuration.

William Bolcom (born 1938) is an American composer and pianist with a musical voice that expresses a broad array of forms and a remarkable melding of traditional classical compositional styles with more populist idioms in American music, from ragtime to cabaret to Rodgers and Hart. His remarkable eclecticism has earned him world renown. Bolcom himself has recorded more than 40 albums as a piano soloist, accompanist and chamber music performer. His recordings and innovative rags helped revive ragtime piano music, and his George Gershwin LP was the Record of the Year in 1973. He won the Pulitzer Prize in music in 1988 for his "Twelve New Etudes for Piano" and his compositions have been recorded by many illustrious artists and first-rate orchestras. He taught composition at the University of Michigan from 1973 until 2008, and is considered one of America's greatest living composer.

William Bolcom's father was a wonderful dancer, and when his father died Bolcom wrote a sweet tribute called **The Graceful Ghost** in 1970. This marvelous piece was first published separately in 1970, then as part of a suite of two other rags from the same time frame in *3 Ghost Rags* in 1981. You can hear another rag of Bolcom's called Brass Knuckles recorded by Justin on his website.