

Program for April 23, 2017
Misuzu Tanaka – Solo Piano

Johann Sebastian Bach
Italian Concerto, BWV 971
I. (No tempo indication)
II. Adagio
III. Presto

Sergei Rachmaninoff
Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42

* * * * * *Intermission* * * * * *

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Piano Sonata in c minor, K. 457
I Molto Allegro
II Adagio
III Allegro assai

Sergei Prokofiev
Piano Sonata No. 2 in d minor, Op. 14
I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Scherzo: Allegro marcato
III. Andante
IV. Vivace

Program Notes

Italian Concerto, BWV 971 by Johann Sebastian Bach

All through his life, Bach learned by copying out works of other composers, among them Vivaldi, Albinoni, Corelli, and Marcello. He was particularly drawn to the concerto grosso and transcribed many by Vivaldi for keyboard. Writing for a two-manual harpsichord gave him the opportunity to distinguish between tutti (full orchestra) and solo passages, indicating them with the words forte and piano. A pianist, having only one keyboard, must do this by changing dynamic level and tone color. This distinction, however, is far from clear-cut all the time, and still requires a great deal of imagination on the part of the player. Often one hand is marked at a different dynamic level from the other.

The opening bars of the Italian Concerto, which could not be more affirmative, are immediately repeated in the dominant key. In the solo passages, the right hand generally takes the role of soloist, with the left accompanying and occasionally adding some more melodic material. The jewel of the piece is the slow movement, marked Andante (so not too slow). A rhapsodical melody of great beauty soars freely over a highly organized and at times sequential bass. This movement is perhaps the closest to its Italian models, although its florid embellishments are completely written out by Bach rather than left to the performer's fancy. To conclude the work, Bach writes a high-spirited Presto, combining all his brilliance at the keyboard with a sense of fun. In the episodes the melodic material jumps from one hand to the other, allowing no let-up whatsoever. Pianists especially tend to let this movement run away completely, forgetting that even in a Presto Bach is agile enough to dance.

Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42 by Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rachmaninoff wrote his Variations on a Theme of Corelli, the only one he composed outside Russia, during the summer of 1931. These variations are his last work for piano solo and he had not composed any original compositions for the instrument since his time in Russia in 1917. 1931 is the same year the composer boldly denounced the Soviet Union, referring to its leaders as "Communist grave-diggers." Stalin banned Rachmaninoff's music as a result; but, recognizing its more appealing and generally less radical nature, rehabilitated it three years later. This work is among the several that were subsequently well received in Moscow.

Rachmaninoff originally thought the theme of his variations was originally composed by Corelli. The theme is La Folia, a Portuguese dance tune which was used by Corelli in 1700 as the basis for 23 variations in his Sonata for violin and continuo in D minor, Op. 5, No. 12. Rachmaninoff wrote 20 variations; however, he wrote in the score the performer may omit certain variations such as variations 11, 12, and 19. Rachmaninoff was drawn to the Dies Irae his whole lifetime and he had an intuitive association with death during his whole life. We can clearly hear the association in this set of variations in D minor, which represents somehow for pianists the swan song of his piano solo works.

Piano Sonata in c minor, K. 457 by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Written when Mozart was at the peak of his worldly success in Vienna, in 1784, this piano Sonata is tragic to the core. During that year, he gave more than 20 concerts of his own works all of which were apparently fully booked: even in our modern “concert industry” era it is quite exceptional for a virtuoso, or even a famous composer-virtuoso, to make 20 successive appearances in a single city. Yet it was just at this time that tragedy, objective and subjective, took a grip on Mozart’s life, finally leading to his death in poverty. The C minor Sonata is the first of a series of tragic works in minor keys, which culminates in the unfinished Requiem of 1791. The C minor Sonata offers a shattering expression of personal anguish, and a new language altogether which set this Sonata at the beginning of an epoch. This is the work which made the deepest impression on Mozart’s direct contemporaries and successors, especially on the young Beethoven.

Out of his 17 sonatas for solo piano, his *Piano Sonata No. 14 in C Minor*, K. 457 is considered one of the most important. It is a good example of sonata form due to its adherence to the standard textbook definition, but also because of its differences and ensuing exploration of forms. From the assertive opening on, the first movement is a sustained cry of protest, yielding at the end to a consoling Adagio movement, one of Mozart’s finest inspirations. But the tragedy in Mozart’s Sonata will not be stemmed by this Adagio. It returns with shattering force in the final rondo in which lamentation, protest, resignation, breathless terror, and despair are constantly interrupted by silences which render the cries vain and hollow. Yet the classical form is not undermined by all this subjective expression.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in d minor, Op. 14 by Sergei Prokofiev

Prokofiev clearly broke from the influence of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin in this piano sonata and laid the groundwork for his highly individual keyboard style. The opening movement begins with a rapid descending theme that is heard twice, each time seeming to crash upon its conclusion. The ensuing theme is the dominant one, a lovely, lyrical, somewhat ethereal, creation also of a mostly descending contour. The development features an exciting buildup, weaving the two themes and climaxing in a powerful statement of the second one. A reprise and brilliant coda close out this movement. The very brief succeeding scherzo movement is lively and spicy, with a rhythmic drive, the kind of wild piano music with which Prokofiev became identified. The third movement is lyrical but dark, with a theme that exudes tension in its constant roiling and harsh climaxes. It alternates with a gentle, descending melody whose mysterious manner brings calm following the two stormy appearances of the main theme. The finale features a playful opening theme and a more driven, almost jazzy alternate one. After the second theme from the first movement is recalled, there follow a brilliant reprise and coda.