ALEXANDER MELNIKOV, PIANO

Friday, February 22 | 8 pm | The Folly Theater

**SCHUBERT**

“Drei Klavierstüke,” D. 946
- No. 1 in E-flat Minor
- No. 2 E-flat Major
- No. 3 in C Major

**SCHUMANN**

- Thème: Andante
- Étude I (Variation 1): Un poco piu vivo
- Étude II (Variation 2): Marcato il canto
- Étude III (Vivace)
- Étude IV (Variation 3): Alla Marcia
- Étude V (Variation 4): Scherzando: Sempre vivacissimo
- Étude VI (Variation 5): Agitato. Con gran bravura
- Étude VII (Variation 6): Allegro molto
- Anhang Variation IV
- Anhang Variation V
- Étude VIII (Variation 7): Sempre Marcatissimo
- Étude IX: Presto possibile
- Étude X (Variation 8): Con energia sempre
- Étude XI (Variation 9): Con espressione
- Finale [Étude XII]: Allegro brillante

**INTERMISSION**

**SCRIABIN**

Fantasy in B Minor, Op. 28

**PROKOFIEV**

Sonata No. 6 in A Major, Op. 82
- Allegro moderato
- Allegretto
- Tempo di Valzer, lentissimo
- Vivace

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“Drei Klavierstücke,” D. 946  
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Schubert’s last year is often called an *annus mirabilis*. His miracle of productivity in 1828 included a staggering group of masterpieces: the last three piano sonatas, the song cycle on Heine and Rellstab texts known as “Schwanengesang” as well as the glorious “Shepherd on the Rock” for soprano, clarinet, and piano; and the String Quintet in C Major. Schubert also composed several sacred choral works and the three piano pieces that open this evening’s program.

Dating from May 1828, these works are curiosities among Schubert’s shorter pieces. His autograph manuscripts bear no titles (hence the generic *Klavierstücke*, or ‘piano pieces’), and only the first two are even signed. He did not send them to his publisher. Four decades later, Johannes Brahms edited them for posthumous publication – anonymously. He wanted all the credit to go to Schubert.

It seems likely that Schubert’s original intention was to add a fourth piece and issue these *Klavierstücke* as a third set of Impromptus. In formal structure, tonal relationships, and contrasts, they are analogous to the better known Impromptus D. 899 (published as Op. 90) and D. 935 (published posthumously as Op. 142.)

Each piece explores a different national style in at least one of its sections. In the opening *Allegro assai*, set in the unusual key of E-flat minor, a galloping idea dominates the outer sections. Schubert’s stormy, headlong writing has a marvelous abandon. An extended, calmer episode in B major provides a welcome contrast, here reminiscent of a French Romance. Schubert treads a fine line between sentimental and sublime. The entire piece feels like an improvisation, invented on the spot by a pianist/composer whose moods swing as wildly as Robert Schumann’s would a decade later.

Schubert follows with a tender *Allegretto* in E-flat major, whose more complex structure incorporates two episodes. (They are nominally in C minor and A-flat minor – a daunting tonality with seven flats in its key signature – but both episodes feature the tonal meandering that is a Schubertian hallmark.) He opens lyrically, in a barcarolle rhythm suggesting a Venetian aria. He borrowed the 6/8 theme from a chorus in his failed 1823 opera “*Fierabras*.” The interspersed sections are more agitated, with distinctive rhythms and unexpected accents that throw off the pulse.

The set concludes with a C major *Allegro* whose quirky syncopations dominate the texture. Now the flavor is distinctly Hungarian, with a Gypsy abandon in the lurching rhythms. Schubert modulates to the flat second degree of the scale, D-flat major, for a middle section that admits some Austrian grace into the musical mix. One can hear echoes of Beethoven in his “Rage over a Lost Penny” mode in the *allegro* sections, including the brilliant coda. Here again, pre-echoes of Schumann drift through the intervening D-flat major music.
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

“Études symphoniques”: talk about a confusing and ambiguous title. What exactly is this work, a wannabe symphony or a set of technical études? The answer is neither, both, and a set of variations. Even the composer vacillated on categorizing it. He considered calling it “12 Davidsbündler Etuden” and “Etudes in the Character of an Orchestra, by Florestan and Eusebius.” (See sidebar.) When the piece was first published in 1837, Schumann assigned the title Études symphoniques. Fifteen years later he revised it, deleting two variations, rewriting the finale, and altering the title to Études en forme de variations.

Five other discarded variations and an incomplete sixth further complicate the history of this work. (Johannes Brahms salvaged them after Schumann’s death.) Schumann presumably abandoned them either because he felt they disrupted the overall flow and structure, or because their inclusion compromised the variety in tempo and mood between sequential variations.

Some pianists play the posthumous 1862 version, restoring the two variations deleted in 1852, but adopting the more concise finale from that year. Others reinstate the rejected five variations that Brahms rescued. Mr. Melnikov has opted for the 1837 version, interpolating supplemental variations Nos. 4 & 5 between Schumann’s Etude No. VII and Etude No. VIII.

The title “Symphonic Etudes,” by which this work is generally known, communicates both Schumann’s symphonic approach to the piano and the technical difficulty of études. Over the course of the work, its themes transform in a symphonic fashion, a process that is also related to expanded variations. “Symphonic Études” crystallized Schumann’s unusual and original approach to variation technique, which first manifested itself in “Papillons,” Op. 2 and “Carnaval,” Op. 9.

As is frequently the case with Schumann’s piano works, there is an autobiographical connection. He met Ernestine von Fricken in April 1834 and was soon smitten; the couple were secretly engaged for a brief period in the autumn of 1834. Ernestine’s father, Captain Ignaz Ferdinand Freiherr (Baron) von Fricken, was an amateur flutist who dabbled in composition. He sent Schumann a set of variations in the summer of 1834, which Schumann used as the basis of his Études symphoniques.
of 1834, probably orchestrated for flute and piano. Schumann responded with courteous but stern criticism, then inaugurated his own solo piano composition based on von Fricken’s theme.

Thus “Symphonic Etudes” is a complementary work to “Carnaval” (constructed on the musical “spelling” A-S-C-H, the town in which the von Frickens resided) in its connection to Ernestine. Schumann sets forth the theme in a serious, even somber fashion. The dominant motive is a descending arpeggio of four notes outlining an octave and enclosing a triad. In the ensuing variations, sometimes the theme recurs as a melody; elsewhere it functions as a bass line with countermelodies in the treble.

Each variation has two repeated halves. Some proceed attacca to the next segment; others have a clear cadence with a fermata (hold, or stop). Schumann maximizes the shifts in tonality, texture, and tempo. As always in his piano music, inner voices are of paramount importance. Although each variation has its own magic, Variation VII is noteworthy for its Bach-like toccata texture mixed with Romantic trills and harmonies. Variation IX (in G-sharp minor, one of only two not in the home tonality of C-sharp minor) boasts shimmering textures and a soaring Chopinesque melody.

The theme for the triumphal march of the finale comes from “Der Templar und die Jüdin,” an opera that the German composer Heinrich Marschner (1795-1861) based on Sir Walter Scott’s novel “Ivanhoe.” Schumann intended the English reference as a gesture toward his friend William Sterndale Bennett, to whom he dedicated the “Symphonic Etudes” in 1837. The finale presents Schumann at his most exuberant and optimistic. His writing is spontaneous, imaginative, and rhythmically vibrant, like the best of the “Noveletten” (“Short Stories”) or “Faschingsschwank aus Wien” (“Carnival Scenes from Vienna”) movements. At six minutes, it is “Symphonic Etudes” longest segment – most of the variations are about a minute – but a splendid, thoroughly convincing peroration.

“Fantaisie,” in B Minor Op. 28
Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

With the exception of five orchestral works and a piano concerto, Alexander Scriabin composed exclusively for solo piano. Historically, he has often been regarded as the direct heir to Chopin. The connection is particularly evident in Scriabin’s early works, which include mazurkas, preludes, etudes, nocturnes, and other small salon pieces. One can easily discern the influence of Chopin and other Slavic composers – rather than Russian ones – in much of Scriabin’s music.
That is not the case for the Op. 28 “Fantaisie” (1900-1901). This larger-scale piece is far more indebted to Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. The Liszt connection manifests itself in the piano writing: rife with pyrotechnics that include dense textures, abundant octaves and chords in both hands, and extravagant arpeggios filling out textures. One senses Wagner in the heavy chromaticism, subtle harmonic shifts, and a yearning for ecstasy that recalls the passionate waves of sound in the Prelude and Liebestod from “Tristan und Isolde.”

The “Fantaisie” is an important transitional work that shows Scriabin “graduating” from the salon miniatures to the larger-scale keyboard compositions, often with a mystic, ecstatic character. He had a lifelong obsession with philosophy and mysticism that played an increasingly important role in his compositions. The “Fantaisie” is part of his evolution toward the late style that reached its apogee in giant orchestral canvases such as the “Poème d’Extase,” Op. 54 (1905-08) and “Prometheus: Poem of Fire,” Op. 60 (1908-10).

Curiously, Scriabin apparently forgot that he composed the “Fantaisie.” He delayed sending it to his publisher Mitrofan Belyaieff in 1900 and 1901. When Alexander Golveysev played the premiere in November 1907, Scriabin initially denied that he had written it! The “Fantaisie’s” over-the-top, heart-on-sleeve themes and virtuosic demands have made it a favorite of pianists and audiences.

Sonata No. 6 in A Major, Op. 82
Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Of all the composers associated with Soviet Russia, Sergei Prokofiev had the most cosmopolitan background. He fled the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, traveling east across the Asian steppes to Vladivostok, where he embarked for America. Landing in San Francisco, he spent three years traversing some of America’s great cities, including Chicago and New York, before returning to Europe in 1922. He then settled in France, where he lived for 14 years. By the time he elected to return to his homeland, Russia had become the U.S.S.R. and was in thrall to Stalinism.

Prokofiev’s years abroad certainly immersed him in other cultures, yet his music remained strongly Russian in flavor. Like his older contemporary Rachmaninoff, he enjoyed a reputation as a performing pianist as well as composer and conductor. Much of his most brilliant writing lies in his piano works. His nine completed piano sonatas, which span the period from 1907 to 1953, show the development of his style and the continuity of his musical thought.

The sixth, seventh, and eighth sonatas were conceived as a group and sketched in 1939. Initially, Prokofiev worked on them simultaneously, reporting to friends that if his inspiration flagged on one, he could turn to another, thereby using his time more efficiently. “Themes slip away easily, they come and go, sometimes never to return,” he would explain. This triptych of sonatas did not come to fruition at the same time, however. The Second World War intervened, as did several other projects, including a cantata celebrating Stalin’s 60th birthday, the ballet “Cinderella” and the opera “War and Peace.” Prokofiev completed the Sixth Sonata in 1940 and the Seventh in 1942. The Eighth followed in 1944. The three works were published as...
Op. 82, 83, and 84, and are generally referred to as the “War Sonatas” or the “War Trilogy.”

The Sixth may well be Prokofiev’s greatest piano composition. The rough, athletic percussiveness that helped established his reputation as a virtuoso is much in evidence. Yet the romantic and lyric impulses of the Prokofiev ballets also find their way into the sonata. At nearly half an hour, the Sixth is a monster, demanding both stamina and endurance. Its technical requirements are formidable, sometimes gymnastic. Prokofiev had little use for Mozart or Chopin. His indebtedness is to Liszt and to his countrymen Mussorgsky and Rachmaninoff.

Ultimately, however, the sonata sounds like no one but Prokofiev. Vigorous attacks and biting dissonance flavor the opening Allegro moderato. Tone clusters executed by the fist, glissandi, and wide leaps make this movement visual theatre. The march-like, staccato chords of the Allegretto recall Masques from “Romeo and Juliet.” The composer’s instinctive grasp of contrast tempers the sonata’s spikiness. Quieter sections brood, linger, caress the ear with limpid moments that seem impossible in the context of such tension. Prokofiev makes them work.

Tempo di valzer lentissimo is a concession to the Romantic indulgence Prokofiev generally abjured. He begs the question by setting his waltz in 9/8 rather than 3/4, and by venting his restlessness in a free, chromatic middle section. The finale, a sparkling rondo, has elements of moto perpetuo, Bartók’s Allegro barbaro, and Prokofiev’s own “Juliet as a Young Girl.” An episode re-introduces the first movement theme, lending cyclic unity to the sonata and returning for the brilliant close.

_Laurie Shulman © 2012_