Konstantin Lifschitz, piano

Friday, April 1  |  8 pm  |  The Folly Theater

BACH
Toccata in F-sharp Minor, BWV 910

BRAHMS
Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 9
   Thema: Ziemlich langsam
   Var. I L’istesso tempo
   Var. II Poco più mosso
   Var. III Tempo di tema
   Var. IV Poco più mosso
   Var. V Allegro capriccioso
   Var. VI Allegro
   Var. VII Andante
   Var. VIII Andante (non troppo lento)
   Var. IX Schnell
   Var. X Poco Adagio
   Var. XI Un poco più animato
   Var. XII Allegretto, poco scherzando
   Var. XIII Non troppo Presto
   Var. XIV Andante
   Var. XV Poco Adagio
   Var. XVI

BRAHMS
Ballades, Op. 10
   Andante
   Andante: Espressivo e dolce
   Intermezzo: Allegro
   Andante con moto

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN
Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106 “Hammerklavier”
   Allegro
   Scherzo: Assai vivace; Presto; Prestissimo; Tempo I
   Adagio sostenuto: appassionato e con molto sentimento
   Introduzione: Largo; Fuga: Allegro risoluto

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An ongoing thread running through this season is the emphasis on late works, particularly those of Beethoven and Schubert. Mr. Lifschitz honors that theme by opening the first half of his recital with Bach’s Toccata in F-sharp minor, BWV 910, followed by the mighty Hammerklavier Sonata on the second half of his recital. He complements late Beethoven with two early works by Brahms and a keyboard Toccata by Bach. Uniting all of his selections is a sense of improvisation and fantasy that manifests itself in strikingly different styles.

**Toccata in F-sharp Minor, BWV 910**

*Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)*

A superlative organist, harpsichordist, and clavichordist, Bach wrote extensively for all keyboard instruments of his era. His works divide into two principal categories: pieces clearly composed for organ (i.e., with a pedal part) and ones for two manual instruments. Most of those in the latter category are playable on the modern piano, an instrument Bach would surely have loved had he lived to know how it would evolve. Best known are the 48 Preludes and Fugues of *The Well-Tempered Klavier* and the two- and three-part inventions. Connoisseurs value the Italian Concerto and Chromatic Fantasy & Fugue, each a one-of-a-kind work that is among Bach’s greatest masterpieces (which is saying a lot). The Partitas, English Suites, and French Suites also are among the greatest works of their kind ever written.

Few keyboard players, on the other hand—let alone audiences—know Bach’s seven toccatas. All are comparatively early, probably dating from Bach’s years in Mühlhausen or Weimar (ca.1707-1714). The term toccata comes from the Italian verb toccare, ‘to touch.’ (Similarly, cantata comes from cantare, ‘to sing,’ and sonata comes from suonare, ‘to sound’ or ‘to play’ [an instrument].) Toccatas were flashy keyboard works designed to show off virtuosity with rapid passage work, arpeggios, and dramatic figuration. In the early 18th century, toccatas tended to be free, multi-sectional pieces with at least one fugal segment.

Because Bach combined a free, improvisatory style so ingeniously with the more stringent contrapuntal discipline, the toccatas are the pinnacle of his early writing for keyboard without pedal. Stylistically, they are consistent with his contemporaries’ toccatas: sectional and rhapsodic works whose successive movements vary in mood and texture. The contrasting sections often lead directly one to the next, and are not intended to function as self-contained movements.

F-sharp minor is a singular choice of tonality; it was a key rarely used before the 19th century; though in tonight’s program, it will play a major role in not only The Bach Toccata, but also the Brahms variations and the Adagio movement of Beethoven’s Hammerklavier. Bach takes full advantage of the chromatic potential of this key. His Toccata opens with a meandering prelude that leads to an elaborately ornamented Adagio. The first fugue follows, marked Presto e staccato. The subject is distinctive: nine detached, descending scalar eighth notes. The counterpoint that unfolds is not dense, often simply adding parallel thirds or sixths.

An extended bridge in arpeggiated figures effects the next transition. Bach repeats his sequential figure more than 20 times, using it to touch briefly on many key centers before arriving at the second fugue. Notated in 6/8 time, it nevertheless has the feeling of a French chaconne because it unfolds at such a stately pace. The subject is now distinctly more chromatic, and Bach eventually expands the working out of the fugue to four parts. This is the grand culmination of his Toccata.

**Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 9**

*Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)*

In June 1853, on the occasion of Robert Schumann’s 43rd birthday, Clara Schumann presented her husband with her latest composition. She had written a set of piano variations based on the second of Robert’s *Bunte Blätter*, a collection of unrelated short pieces composed between 1838 and 1849, and published in 1852.

That autumn, a young visitor from Hamburg presented himself to the Schumanns in Düsseldorf, bearing a letter of introduction from the violinist Joseph Joachim. Only 20 years old, Johannes Brahms was already a formidable pianist and had written several pieces, including several substantial keyboard sonatas. Both Schumanns were bowled over by Brahms’s pianism and his original music. Robert soon wrote the influential column “Neue Bahnen” (New Paths) in his journal, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, hailing Brahms as the heir to Beethoven. The friendship developed rapidly, providing musical, intellectual, and personal stimulation to all three musicians.
Yet Robert Schumann’s mental state was precarious. Just a few months later, on February 27, 1854, he attempted suicide by throwing himself into the icy waters of the Rhine. He was soon consigned to an asylum in Endenich, near Bonn. That left Clara alone to support six small children – and she was pregnant with a seventh.

As soon as Brahms heard the terrible news, he hastened to Clara’s side in Düsseldorf to provide emotional support. In late May he began composing a set of Variations whose theme was the first of Robert’s *Bunte Blätter*. The choice was deliberate, an homage to Robert, and a solace to Clara. She wrote in her diary that Johannes brought each variation to her as he completed it, “to comfort me.” Late that year, he arranged for Breitkopf & Härtel to publish Clara’s and his variations simultaneously.

In style, musical content, and texture, Brahms’ variations are a tribute to Schumann. In the manuscript, he signed them as both Brahms and Kreisler, a reference to Johannes Kreisler, the fictional hero of several novels by E.T.A. Hoffmann. Brahms identified with Kreisler and used the *nom de plume* ‘Kreisler Junior’ occasionally until 1860. In his Schumann Variations, the two signatures are analogous to Schumann’s Eusebius and Florestan, the alter egos of Schumann’s lyrical/introspective vs. impetuous styles.

Op. 9 divides into two halves of eight variations each. Variations 1–4 remain close to Schumann’s melancholy theme, retaining the same number of measures and the key of F-sharp minor (remember that the work that precedes this on tonight’s program is Bach’s *Toccata* of the same key). Thereafter, they become progressively freer, introducing virtuoso elements, textural intricacy, and harmonic wanderings that render the theme less evident.

The second half of the set is more contrapuntal, featuring four canonic variations. Brahms also explores a wide range of tonalities, including B minor, D major, G major, and G-flat major. References to other works by both Robert and Clara are embedded in the score, most notably, in Variation XIV, where there is a salute to Robert’s ‘Chopin’ movement from his *Carnaval*. The connecting link binding the entire set is the bass line, which hews closely to Schumann’s original throughout, while providing fertile ground for Brahms’s imagination.

**Ballades, Op. 10**

**Johannes Brahms**

Like Beethoven, Brahms was a performing pianist. His early works favor the keyboard. Of his first ten published compositions, six are for solo piano, three are songs for voice and piano, and one (Op. 8) is the Piano Trio in B Major. While these pieces show the influence of Beethoven and Schumann, they also reveal Brahms’s individuality in handling harmony and texture.

Though the Ballades were not published until 1856, Brahms had worked on them since 1853, the year he met Robert and Clara Schumann. Emotionally the early 1850s were a difficult time for Brahms and the Schumanns’. After Robert’s suicide attempt, young Brahms assumed considerable responsibility in the Schumann household. Aware that Brahms was deeply in love with her, Clara leaned heavily on the younger man for emotional support. In his turn, Brahms was torn between his feelings for Clara and deep respect and reverence for his ailing friend Robert. Small wonder that so many of his early compositions reflect volatile mood swings and sweeping romanticism.

These four Ballades are unusual among the early Brahms piano pieces. Nearly everything else he wrote for solo piano in the 1850s was either a large-scale, multi-movement sonata or a variations set. They tend to be technical blockbusters, reflecting Brahms’s formidable command of the keyboard.

The Ballades are cut from a different cloth. Though far from easy, they make greater musical than technical demands on the performer, foreshadowing the intimate psychological closeups of the late piano pieces, Op. 116 through Op. 119. In that sense, the Ballades are an intriguing blend of youthful and mature Brahms, marrying measured thoughtfulness to reckless abandon, seeking balance amid extremes.

Chopin’s four Ballades were surely among his models, but so were the ancient, traditional vocal ballads of folk culture. Biographer Michael Musgrave has written:
"Two features stand out, both concerned with richness of sonority. First, the breadth of spacing, frequently involving octaves in one or both hands in which a third is placed within the extremes – a feature anticipated in Schubert – but especially intensified in Brahms. Secondly, the placing of the melody in the middle parts surrounded by full, and not merely decorative writing in the outer parts, as in the second section of the D Minor Ballade."

Brahms's extensive use of inner-voice melodies lends the set a Schumannesque flavor. (This is particularly true of the last two.) The comparative brevity and free form of each movement is more akin to Schumann than to Chopin.

Only the first Ballade is programmatic. Brahms inscribed the score "After the old Scottish ballad, Edward, in Herder's Stimmen der Volker." The poem is rather grisly, describing Edward's futile efforts to conceal from his mother that he has murdered his father. The remaining three movements have no known literary association.

Brahms unifies the cycle by key centers, progressing from D minor to D major, then from B minor to B major. Interestingly, he labels the third Ballade Intermezzo, a title he would favor in his late piano miniatures; however, its character is the most scherzo-like of the four, having more in common with the later pieces entitled Capriccio than with the Intermezzi.

Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106
"Hammerklavier"
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Let us address the obvious up front: this sonata is a colossus of the piano literature. Its very name is sufficient to strike awe (and possibly terror) into the hearts of pianists. Hammerklavier is the German term for fortepiano; Beethoven adopted the German terminology in part as a reaction against Napoleon’s invasion of Vienna. Italian was a Napoleonic language, and using the German language for his tempo and interpretive markings was a way for Beethoven to assert national pride and identity as the Napoleonic era ended with the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

His Hammerklavier Sonata dominated Beethoven’s days from the earliest sketches in December 1817 through much of 1818. On December 27, 1817, the London firm of Broadwood & Sons sent Beethoven a new, six-octave grand piano. The instrument, autographed by important London musicians such as Johann Baptist Crame and Ferdinand Ries, arrived in Vienna in late spring. With greater expressive capability for altering tone color and volume, this larger, more powerful piano surely affected the last two movements of the new Sonata.

Originally, Beethoven intended to present the Hammerklavier as a gift for Archduke Rudolph's name day, April 17; however, only two movements were complete by that date. Beethoven finished the sonata that summer in the picturesque village of Mödling, south of Vienna. When he sent it to his publishers late in 1818, it bore a dedication to the Archduke.

By this time he was almost totally deaf, and work on the Sonata coincides with the first conversation books, in which his friends and associates wrote their replies to his questions and comments. (Tantalizingly, we only have his colleagues’ comments; Beethoven spoke aloud to them.)

In one of music’s great understatements, Beethoven famously described the Hammerklavier as “a sonata that will give pianists something to do.” Biographer William Kinderman calls it “a pivotal work of the late style.” Another prominent Beethoven scholar, Lewis Lockwood, observes:

"In its technical demands, its scale, and its breadth of expressive content, it is a turning point in Beethoven's third maturity and in the history of the piano sonata."

The Hammerklavier was the largest sonata anyone had yet composed, and would remain Beethoven’s lengthiest. Only three piano sonatas would follow: the trilogy of Op. 109 in E Major, 110 in A-flat Major, and Op. 111 in C Minor; all are more modest in scale, reflecting Beethoven’s tendency toward formal compression in his late works.
About the music

Beethoven’s sketch for the opening gesture is marked “Vivat Rudolphus.” That fanfare and answering theme are a clear salute to his most important patron; they also constitute a classic masculine/feminine dichotomy. Fermatas (pauses) between statements heighten the contrast between the two ideas, before Beethoven reveals the narrative architecture of this grand sonata structure.

Frequent key changes characterize the opening Allegro. After the opening in B-flat major, Beethoven soon moves down a minor third to G major for the balance of the exposition. His development section modulates to E-flat major, a major third lower. In rapid succession, he passes through C minor (a descent of a minor third), then launches into a fugato in E-flat based on the Sonata’s opening motive.

Following the working-out of the fugato, another startling modulation occurs, to the remote key of B major. Those who know music will recognize that, enharmonically, this is yet another drop of a major third. The chains of descending thirds recur throughout the Hammerklavier. Beethoven’s recurrent tonal patterns serve as a broader unifier in the overall composition.

He reverses the traditional order of the inner movements, placing the Scherzo second. (He had done this in the Archduke Trio and would do so again in the Ninth Symphony.) Its motives, clearly derived from the first movement’s opening, cascade down in a series of falling thirds. Beethoven’s intentional distortions of the fanfare are playful. They help to relieve the tension and drama of the opening movement. The structure is a very flexible A-B-A’, modified by changes of key (to B-flat minor in the central section), of meter (switching between 3/4 and 2/4), and tempo (two passages marked Presto). Beethoven’s sense of humor is much in evidence.

The Adagio sostenuto in F-sharp Minor (a third below the home key of B-flat) is the longest slow movement Beethoven ever composed: more than 19 minutes. He returns to sonata form for this glorious meditation, but it unfolds more like variations because of Beethoven’s endless imagination with respect to voicing, texture, and decoration. His dynamic range, exploring many shades of piano and pianissimo, reflects the possibilities of the new Broadwood piano. This is private music, worlds away from the bravura of the opening or the facetious bluster of the Scherzo.

The Largo that opens the finale is a slow introduction but, in its comparative brevity, a striking contrast to the expansiveness of the Adagio sostenuto that has just ended. Once again, Beethoven moves through a series of modulations in descending thirds. The ongoing trajectory of increased tension is all leading to the grand fugue that is the culmination of the Hammerklavier’s entire journey.
This is a fugue of great complexity, beginning with its lengthy subject. Beethoven marks it Fuga a tre voci, con alcune licenze (fugue in three voices, but with some license, i.e. departure from the strict rules of counterpoint). He merges contrapuntal art with the poetry of great music, for example in the chorale-like passage in D major that provides repose midway through the fugue. As in the previous movements, the proportions are oversized. Everything about the Hammerklavier is grand and imposing, intended to make an unforgettable impression. In the hands of a brilliant, determined, and fearless pianist, this take-no-prisoners finale does exactly that.

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2015

A STRANGE PUBLICATION HISTORY

The Viennese house of Artaria issued the Hammerklavier Sonata early in 1818 with a dedication to Archduke Rudolph. When Beethoven sent it to Ferdinand Ries in London for publication, he suggested three possibilities: (1) publish the Fugue on its own; (2) issue the first movement, Adagio, and Scherzo (in lieu of a finale); or (3) publish the first movement and the Scherzo as a complete work.

Such repackaging is very unlike Beethoven, who was meticulous about maintaining the integrity of his compositions. In March 1819, he did authorize the first and second movements, and the fugue to be published separately. Biographer Lewis Lockwood has suggested that he was strapped for cash because of expenses associated with his nephew Karl’s schooling. If so, the alternative publication history was a pragmatic and commercial gesture that Beethoven hoped would generate more income.

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Konstantin Lifschitz was born in Kharkov, Ukraine in 1976. At age five he was enrolled in the Gnessin Special School of Music in Moscow as a student of Tatiana Zelikman. After graduating he continued his studies in Russia, England and Italy where his teachers included Alfred Brendel, Leon Fleisher, Theodor Gutmann, Hamish Milne, Charles Rosen, Karl-Ulrich Schnabel, Vladimir Tropp, Fou T’song and Rosalyn Tureck.

At age thirteen, he presented a landmark recital in the October Hall of the House of Unions in Moscow. In the early 1990s, the Russian Cultural Foundation awarded him a scholarship which afforded him opportunities to perform in Paris, Amsterdam, the Hague, Vienna, Munich, Milan and other prominent European capitals. Vladimir Spivakov and the Moscow Virtuosi invited him to perform with them on a tour of Japan.

In 1994 when he gave his graduation recital from the Gnessin School, his program began with Bach’s Goldberg Variations which were recorded by Denon Nippon Columbia. The recording, released in 1996, was nominated for a Grammy Award and moved critic Edward Rothstein of The New York Times to acclaim Mr. Lifschitz’s performance “the most powerful pianistic interpretation since Glenn Gould’s.” Just one year before that, he had won the German Echo Klassik Award for “European Young Artist of the Year” for his debut recording album.

In addition to performing as a soloist with major orchestras, Konstantin Lifschitz is a dedicated chamber musician, and has performed with such artists as Gidon Kremer, Misha Maisky, Mstislav Rostropovich, Lynn Harrell, among many others. He has also been invited to conduct orchestras such as the Moscow Virtuosi, the Lux Aeterna Orchestra and Gabrieli Choir (Budapest), Musica Viva Chamber Orchestra (Moscow), St. Christopher’s Chamber Orchestra (Vilnius), the Arpeggione Chamber Orchestra (Vienna) and I Solisti di Napoli.

Mr. Lifschitz has more than 30 albums to his credit, many of which have received very high commendations from the international press. In 2015, Konstantin Lifschitz’s new recording of the Goldberg Variations will be released.

He is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in London and has been appointed a professor of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts since 2008.

For more information visit www.konstantinlifschitz

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