presents

YUJA WANG,

piano

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 12

in the Matthews Theatre

The taking of photographs and the use of recording equipment of any kind during performances is strictly prohibited.
THE PROGRAM

Baldassare Galuppi
Sonata in C major, first movement

Bach
Toccata in C minor

Brahms
Intermezzo in A minor Op. 116, No.2

Chopin
Mazurka Op. 67, no.4

Brahms
Intermezzo in E minor, Op. 119, No.2

Chopin
Mazurka Op.30, No.4

Brahms
Intermezzo in C sharp minor Op.117, No.3

Chopin
Mazurka Op.68, No.3

Brahms
Romance in F major, Op.118, No.5

— INTERMISSION —

Scriabin
Sonata No.4 in F sharp major, Op.30

Ravel
Une Barque sur L’Ocean

Berg
Piano Sonata

Federico Mompou
Secreto

Scriabin
Sonata No.5, Op.53

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By David Wright

Liszt’s Big Harpsichord

It took about three-quarters of a century for what a 1711 writer called the “big harpsichord with soft and loud”—gravecembalo col piano e forte, later shortened to pianoforte, and finally piano—to dominate the music world, at home and in the concert hall. But by the last decades of the 18th century, the time of Haydn, Mozart, and the young Beethoven, the musical advantages of the new instrument were clear: leather- or cloth-covered hammers striking the strings instead of plucking them (as in the harpsichord) could produce not just soft and loud, but infinite gradations and colors of tone. Composers began writing bold and expressive music to exploit the pianoforte’s capabilities. (Another name in circulation then, fortepiano, is often used today to denote replicas of those early instruments.)

Most people in the mid-18th century played works such as the sonatas of Baldassare Galuppi and the toccatas of J.S. Bach on the harpsichord. But the rare individual who owned a pianoforte surely found new expressive possibilities in those pieces, as pianists do today. And as did Frédéric Chopin, a devotee of Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, and Mozart who taught their music to his piano pupils in the 1840s.
Chopin’s own great contribution to music was the development of the Romantic character piece for piano, made possible by countless improvements in piano design. Playing his beloved Pleyel and Erard instruments, he beguiled audiences in the intimate recital rooms of Paris with nocturnes, polonaises, and mazurkas.

But concert tours were growing more ambitious, and concert halls larger. A barnstorming virtuoso such as Franz Liszt or Louis Moreau Gottschalk could come to town and entertain the crowd not just with his own compositions but with his piano transcription of a Beethoven symphony or an act of a Verdi opera. Everyone wanted more power, more singing tone, more ability to imitate all the instruments of the orchestra.

The turning point came at the Paris Exposition of 1867, when the American firms of Steinway and Chickering shocked the Old World by taking top honors in the piano competition. Their innovative, superbly engineered instruments immediately became the model for most European (and not much later, Japanese) piano production. The design of a Steinway grand piano has changed little since.

Therefore, where composing new piano music is concerned, it’s Franz Liszt’s world, and we’re just living in it. Johannes Brahms was among the first to give the modern piano a new sound, rich and often deeply autumnal. He called his meditative late piano pieces “intermezzi,” as if he’d written them in the waiting room for the next world.

Alexander Scriabin wrote his early piano works under the spell of Chopin and Liszt, but his own vision of the next world—or of a higher plane of existence in this one—eventually drove him to ecstatic heights at the instrument. His nine piano sonatas, of which we hear the middle two tonight, are significant landmarks along that journey.

Among the composers influenced by Debussy’s novel conception of piano sound were Maurice Ravel and Federico Mompou, who ushered in the 20th century with music of pictorial vividness and quietly personal expression, respectively.

Although tonight’s trip through piano history pauses there, the masters of jazz and pop, along with composers such as Stravinsky and John Cage and today’s avant-garde stars, have never stopped exploring the potential of Liszt’s big harpsichord. Its day is far from done.

Sonata in C major, first movement
BALDASSARE GALUPPI
Born October 18, 1706, in Burano, near Venice
Died January 3, 1785, in Venice

It was common in the mid-18th century for celebrated opera composers to capitalize on their fame by writing keyboard sonatas for the home music market. Although Baldassare Galuppi was admired not just for his operas but for his harpsichord playing, he kept his 130 or so sonatas fairly simple, so as to appeal to amateur players.

Which is not to say he skimped on musical ideas. The soulful arc and colorful harmony of his slow movements seem to have stepped straight out of a superb soprano aria, and his allegros are not shy about challenging the home player with Scarlatti-like brilliance and wit.

Toccata in C minor, BWV 911
JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
Born March 21, 1685, in Eisenach
Died July 28, 1750, in Leipzig

Since there have been keyboard instruments, there have been players eager to put them through their paces, and for these virtuosos the “toccata” has been the genre of choice (eclipsed only briefly in the nineteenth century by the “étude” of Chopin and his successors). The title, derived from the Italian word for “touch”, says it all: this is music that revels in the sheer tactile joy of coaxing music from a mechanism. Speed and agility were part of the genre from the beginning, but Italian composers of the late Renaissance also included sections in vocal-style counterpoint, as if to show that their organs and harpsichords could not only dazzle with scales and leaps, but caress the ear in imitation of a madrigal choir.

Early in the Baroque era, Frescobaldi brought the toccata to a peak of volatile brilliance and expressiveness. As a young keyboard virtuoso, J.S. Bach received the tradition by way of North German masters such as Buxtehude, and of course immediately put his own stamp on it. His dramatic organ toccatas—especially the D minor, famous from Walt Disney’s Fantasia, a hundred horror movies, and a thousand organ recitals—are heard often today, but his seven toccatas for harpsichord, composed when he was in his early twenties, have had difficulty competing for program space with his more “modern” sounding pieces, such as the Italian Concerto.

Not that these toccatas lack drama and variety—far from it. Just like the D minor organ toccata, this C minor piece opens strikingly with an attention-getting single note, emphasized with a down-up “mordent.” A flourish of scales leads to a somber fugue, adagio, which ends in a deeply expressive coda. In maximum contrast, the Toccata concludes with a high-energy double fugue, whose hopping subject is eventually matched with an even livelier countersubject.
Four Mazurkas
FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
Born probably March 1, 1810, in Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw
Died October 17, 1849, in Paris

Like Chopin himself, the mazurka originated in the Polish province of Mazovia. Irving Kolodin has described it as “a dance of encounter and separation, in which the couples trace a prescribed course of exchange and return.” It would not be surprising to learn that the sensitive, fatalistic Chopin saw in such a dance a metaphor for life. His mazurkas are perhaps his most idiosyncratic music, and they often fell on uncomprehending ears; one influential critic lambasted those of Op. 7 for their “ear splitting discords, forced transitions, harsh modulations, and ugly distortion of melody and rhythm.” Besides being literally “offbeat”—stressing the second or third beats of the three four bar—these pieces are primitive, chromatic, asymmetrical in ways that wouldn’t be seen again until the 20th century.

Chopin published his mazurkas in sets, usually of four, occasionally three, and in one case five. The Mazurka in C-sharp minor, the fourth and final piece in the Op. 30 set, is an epic poem in miniature, hinting at important events, seamlessly transforming its initial theme from dark brooding to defiant fortissimo to insouciant dance and back again. The other mazurkas on this program are simpler in design, but evocative nonetheless. They were published after Chopin’s death in 1849, and their dates of composition range from 1830 for Op. 68, No. 3, when Chopin was 20 years old, to 1846 for Op. 67, No. 4.

Four Piano Pieces
JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg
Died April 3, 1897, in Vienna

An implacable perfectionist, Brahms vowed to cease composing at the first sign of failing powers. On completion of his String Quintet, Op. 111, in 1890, although he was only 57 and in robust health, Brahms informed his publisher that the hour had come. He began a thorough housecleaning, destroying unusable manuscripts and polishing others for publication. New stimuli would later lure him out of retirement, but we probably have that housecleaning to thank for the invaluable piano pieces that were published in four sets (Opp. 116-119) during 1892 and 1893.

Not that these were old goods—in fact, only a few of the pieces seem to look back to an earlier Brahms. Rather, reviewing those few items apparently sent the composer back to the instrument for which he had produced sprawling, romantic works in his youth. Composing piano character pieces for the first time in 13 years, Brahms pointed Beethoven-like to the future; as Beethoven’s freedom and subjectivity paved the way for Schumann and Liszt, so Brahms’s compression, counterpoint, and complex rhythms set a precedent for the densely wrought piano pieces of Vienna’s next generation, especially Schoenberg and Webern. Brahms underscored this music’s abstract character by giving it the most offhand, non-descriptive titles he could find: “Intermezzo” for the slow pieces, “Capriccio” for the fast ones. He did permit himself the title “Romance” for one especially warm and lyrical piece, Op. 118, No. 5, in F major.

Sonata No. 4 in F sharp major, Op. 30.
ALEXANDER SCRIBIN
Born January 6, 1872, in Moscow
Died April 27, 1915, in Moscow

Alexander Scriabin always composed like a man possessed. In his early years—when he was still “just” a gifted and progressive pianist/composer, second in his Moscow Conservatory class only to Rachmaninoff—the ghost of Chopin seemed to enter into him, dictating a host of new preludes, nocturnes, mazurkas, impromptus and etudes. The resemblance was uncanny: the highly-colored poetry, the fluid cross-rhythms, the fastidiousness bordering on dandyism, the aching dissonances, the feeling of nerves rubbed raw with sensation. It all seemed not merely to imitate Chopin’s idiom, but to revive his personality, and to carry it several steps further toward—what? Scriabin’s answer, it later turned out, was mysticism, theosophy, a half-mad vision of cataclysm.

Although Scriabin’s tragically early death from an infection was unexpected, one can’t help looking at his life and seeing a single arc from the early Chopin-esque piano works, through the visionary symphonies and symphonic poems, and ending in piano music again, fantastically transfigured. From 1911 to 1914, while attempting to develop a grand multimedia work that would bring together his ideas on the synesthetic relationship between color and musical harmony, he composed many piano pieces, which were gathered into his Opuses 61 through 74.

Actually, Scriabin composed piano music throughout his career; the Fourth and Fifth Sonatas date from the years 1903 and 1907 respectively, during a period when he was intensely involved in composing the orchestral works Le poème de l’extase (The Poem of Ecstasy) and Prométhée, le poème du feu (Prometheus, The Poem of Fire). No other significant composer, Wagner included, so completely identified the erotic impulse with the yearning for spiritual transcendence.

These sonatas are brief as sonatas go, but each strives mightily to expand the range of emotions and ideas the piano can express. The Sonata No. 4 represents a large step in that direction, freeing itself from the constraints of conventional to-
nality to hover in harmonic suspense. The Prestissimo volando follows the Andante without a break and shares thematic material with it. Both movements throb with Lisztian sensuality and yearning. In case we might overlook Scriabin’s identification of the erotic with the mystical, he prefaced this sonata with a free verse poem (originally in French), which begins:

In a light mist, transparent vapor
Lost afar and yet distinct
A star gleams softly,

How beautiful! The bluish mystery
Of her glow
Beckons me, cradles me.

O bring me to thee, far distant star!
Bathe me in trembling rays
Sweet light!

"Une barque sur l’océan," from Miroirs
MAURICE RAVEL
Born March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France
Died December 28, 1937, in Paris

If, as Hamlet says, the actor’s task is “to hold the mirror up to nature,” how much more is this true of the musician, and particularly one who practices the sound chemistry of Impressionism? That label, which Debussy detested, doesn’t stick very well to much of Ravel’s output either, but the collection of five piano pieces titled Miroirs is too richly evocative to be called anything else. The title is plural—not “the mirror,” but “mirrors” or “reflections”—because these images are not fixed or literal, but reflected in the composer’s ever-changing sensibility. The collection dates from 1904-05, the time of Debussy’s first book of Images for piano, and, as Ravel wrote later, “they represent such a considerable change in my harmonic development that even musicians who were accustomed to my manner up to then were somewhat disconcerted.”

“Une barque sur l’océan” (“A Sailboat on the Ocean”) begins as a quasi-minimalist sail over gentle, regular waves of arpeggios. Then a wind comes up, and the waves grow huge and topped with foam. Although fresh air, sun and spray pervade the scene, the massive swells and precipitate descents do not bode well for the barque. At the very end, however, our vessel rights itself and sails blithely on.

Sonata, Op. 1
ALBAN BERG
Born February 9, 1885, in Vienna
Died December 24, 1935, in Vienna

In 1904, a shy, 19-year-old Alban Berg brought Arnold Schoenberg some songs he had composed—“in a style between Hugo Wolf and Johannes Brahms,” Schoenberg later recalled—and was accepted into the master’s theory class. Berg, whose father had died four years before, found a substitute in the demanding, magnetic Schoenberg. He hurled himself into the rigorous course of study, but it wasn’t until nearly three years later that he could write to a friend: “Now, next autumn, comes composition. This summer I am to work hard, partly composing out of the blue (I am making a piano sonata for my own benefit) and partly repeating the counterpoint exercises...” Schoenberg continues the story:

The instruction in composition that followed proceeded effortlessly and smoothly up to and including the Sonata, Op. 1. Then problems began to appear, the nature of which neither of us understood then. I understand today: obviously Alban...had a burning desire to express himself in a way different from the classical form, harmonies and melodies...

The Sonata, then, is a turning point. On the one hand, it demonstrates Berg’s assimilation of tradition, and it proudly wears the warm romanticism of youth. On the other, it is the first of Berg’s adult works composed “out of the blue,” not for a class assignment. By declaring it his Opus 1, Berg signaled the end of his apprenticeship. The relationship with Schoenberg, while remaining filial to the end of Berg’s life, was never quite the same after that.

True to its title, this one-movement work is in sonata form, with identifiable themes in a repeated exposition, an impassioned development rising to quadruple fortissimo, and a much-altered recapitulation. The rules of tonality, however, are little help in getting one’s bearings here; although the key signature is two sharps and B minor is clearly the key at beginning and end, all else is wrapped in layer upon layer of chromatic mist. Berg identifies new themes entering and other structural points by the shifts in tempo carefully indicated throughout the score. The Sonata is a last hurrah for both the architecture of Beethoven and Brahms and the Romantic coloring of Chopin and Wagner; as Schoenberg eventually realized, Berg’s own twelve-tone idiom is right around the corner.
Sonata No. 5, Op. 53
ALEXANDER SCRIABIN

Scriabin first encountered the mystical teachings of Madame Blavatsky in 1905. From then on, his former idol Nietzsche was forgotten, and Theosophy occupied his thoughts daily, as he filled notebook after notebook with musings on the life force, creativity, and the Infinite. Among these was a long piece of free verse he called “The Poem of Ecstasy,” which became the basis for a visionary orchestral work of the same name, begun in 1905. In December 1907, Scriabin wrote a friend from Lausanne, Switzerland to report that the long toil over this work was nearly done, but that despite his physical exhaustion he had already composed another piece: “It is a big poem for piano and I deem it the best piano composition I have ever written. I do not know by what miracle I accomplished it...” His wife Tatyana reported in another letter: “I cannot believe my ears. It is incredible. That Sonata pours from him like a fountain. Everything you have heard up to now is as nothing. You cannot even tell it is a sonata.” Although the principal theme (the one in Presto chords) had come to Scriabin while he was in Chicago on a concert tour, the actual composition of his Sonata No. 5 took just a single week, December 8-14, 1907.

This “miracle” left Scriabin profoundly moved. According to his biographer Faubion Bowers:

He said that for the first time he found a composition outside himself. He saw it as “an image,” a “sound-body” of three dimensions with colors and from another plane. “I am a translator,” he cried...His problem was how to render it from concealment into palpable life, to transfer it into corporeal music without losing its original sensation. He did not want his own shadow to dim its quartz-clear image.

Nevertheless, he could not resist quoting these lines from his “Poem of Ecstasy” in the score of the Sonata:

I call you to life, O mysterious forces!
Submerged in depths obscure
Of the Creator Spirit, timid embryos of life,
To you I now bring courage.

For all their wildness and passion (the initial tempo marking is Allegro impetuoso con stravaganza), these mysterious beings presented themselves to Scriabin in something resembling classical sonata form. The themes, in order of appearance, are: a passage of rumbling, spurting, skyrocketing figures based on the whole-tone scale, which anticipates Debussy’s 1913 piano piece “Fireworks”; a yearning yet indolent melody marked Languido; and an eager, lustful Presto con allegrezza, derived from a phrase of the Languido and perhaps also from the whirling, dancing rhythms and trumpet calls of Debussy’s L’isle joyeuse, composed three years before. After repeating the themes in somewhat altered form, Scriabin develops them in earnest, including a fast, nervous parody of the Languido. Now the music is beginning to spill over its sonata-form banks; the recapitulation is Prestissimo instead of Presto, and the coda (marked vertiginoso con furia, among other things) brings back the Languido theme in triumph, triple-fortissimo, before surging up on a pyrotechnic wave and exploding into nothingness.

YUJA WANG

Critical superlatives and audience ovations have continuously followed Yuja Wang’s dazzling career. The Beijing-born pianist, celebrated for her charismatic artistry and captivating stage presence, is set to achieve new heights during the 2019/20 season, which features recitals, concert series, as well as season residencies, and extensive tours with some of the world’s most venerated ensembles and conductors.

Season highlights include Yuja’s year-long “Artist Spotlight” at the Barbican Centre, where she curates and performs in four distinct events: the first London performance of John Adams’ newest piano concerto ( premiered by her in Spring
2019) titled *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Gustavo Dudamel, which they take to Boston and New York City; recitals featuring cellist Gautier Capuçon and clarinetist Andreas Ottensamer; and she concludes the residency with a solo recital.

In autumn of 2019, she tours China with the Vienna Philharmonic, presenting concerts in Macao, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Wuhan. The beginning of 2020 sees Yuja and Gautier Capuçon reuniting for a recital tour featuring eleven dates presented in Europe’s premiere venues, including the Philharmonie de Paris and the Wiener Konzerthaus. She then embarks on an extensive solo recital tour, appearing in renowned concert halls throughout North America and Europe, including Carnegie Hall, Davies Symphony Hall, and the Het Concertgebouw, running from February to April.

Additionally, Yuja will be the featured soloist with some of the leading orchestras of North America, including the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Andris Nelsons; the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gustavo Gimeno; the San Francisco Symphony, led by Michael Tilson Thomas; and the Philadelphia Orchestra, under the musical direction of Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

Yuja received advanced training in Canada and at Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music under Gary Graffman. Her international breakthrough came in 2007 when she replaced Martha Argerich as soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She later signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon and has since established her place among the world’s leading artists, with a succession of critically-acclaimed performances and recordings.

Yuja was named Musical America’s Artist of the Year in 2017.

---

**Intermusica represents Yuja Wang for worldwide general management.**

Stephen Lumsden, Chief Executive  
+44 20 7608 9911, egoldwin@intermusica.co.uk

Victoria Ford, Associate Artist Manager  
+44 20 7608 9926, victoriaford@intermusica.co.uk

https://intermusica.co.uk/artist/Yuja-Wang