



Amy Yang

Saturday, October 22, 2022 7:30 PM

Performance Insights 6:30 pm

Bethel United Methodist Church Hall

Lewes, Delaware

PROGRAM

From *Hommage à Brahms für Klavier*
III. *Engelsflügel 2*

Brett Dean
(b.1961)

[following without pause]

Theme and Variations in E-Flat Major, WoO 24,
“Geistervariationen”

Robert Schumann
(1810-1856)

Theme - Leise, innig (quiet, earnest)

Variation I

Variation II - Canonisch (like a canon)

Variation III - Etwas belebter (somewhat more animated)

Variation IV

Variation V

Polyphonic Field for piano and electronics (2022)

Babcock, Ted
(1992)

Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60

Fryderyk Chopin
(1810-1849)

INTERMISSION

From *Four Impromptus, D. 935, Op. 142*
I. Allegro moderato (F minor)

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

[following without pause]

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 14,
“Concert sans Orchestre”

Robert Schumann

Allegro brillante

Quasi variazioni—Andantino de Clara Wieck

Prestissimo possibile

Program Notes

DEAN

Hommage à Brahms für Klavier (2013)

Brett Dean was born, raised and educated in Brisbane, Australia. He started learning violin at the age of eight, and later studied viola at the Queensland Conservatorium, where he graduated in 1982 with the Conservatorium Medal for the highest achieving Student of the Year. In 1981 he was a prize winner in the ABC Symphony Australia Young Performers Awards. From 1985 to 1999, Dean was a violist in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. In 2000, he decided to pursue a career as a freelance artist and returned to Australia, where his many appointments have included curating classical music programs with the Sydney Festival (2005) and the Melbourne Festival (2009). As a composer and musician, he has been a regularly invited guest to many professional concert stages around the world.

Dean began composing in 1988, initially focusing on experimental film and radio projects as well as improvisational performance. Since then, he has created numerous compositions, mainly orchestral or chamber music, as well as concertos for several solo instruments. Dean's compositional style is known for creating dynamic soundscapes and treating single instrumental parts with complex rhythms. He uses musical extremes, from harsh explosions to near inaudibility. Much of Dean's work draws from literary, political or visual stimuli.

Dean worked on a set of compositions for solo piano paying homage to his composer predecessors, including Johannes Brahms—specifically, to the Brahms represented by his late solo piano music. *Hommage à Brahms für Klavier* was written for Emanuel Ax, and forms a piano tribute in three sections, the outer ones named “*Engelsflügel* (Angel Wings) 1 and 2”, and the central one “*Hafenkneipenmusik*” (Harbor Bar Music). These were intended as independent pieces to be interpolated between the four numbers comprising Brahms’s introspective, late-period Four Pieces for Piano, Op. 119.

SCHUMANN

Theme and Variations in E-Flat Major, WoO 24, “Geistervariationen” (1854)

Also known as the *Ghost Variations*, this is known to be the composer’s last piano work.

On the night of 17 February 1854, Schumann, suffering from severe aural hallucinations, claimed that he heard angels dictating a theme to him. According to Clara Schumann’s diary entries, Schumann immediately wrote down the theme and started writing variations on it. All that survives of this first draft is a single page of music, and so one cannot know if at this stage Schumann completed work on the variations, though it is likely he had not. Then on the afternoon of 27 February Schumann tried to drown himself in the icy Rhine; he was rescued by bargemen who dragged him ashore. The next day he returned to these variations and (it seems) completed them. He sent the work to Clara, but by then she had already left to stay with a friend at the advice of a doctor. Just a few days afterwards Schumann voluntarily committed himself to an asylum in Eendenich, where he would die a little over 2 years later. Clara forbade the publication of the work; it is not known why – possibly it was too personal, or maybe she thought it was not musically up to par with Schumann’s earlier work. It was not until 1939 that the work saw print. *The Ghost Variations* are, like most of Schumann’s late

work, extraordinarily intimate. All the variations adhere closely to the original theme, never quite departing its soundscape, and the original melody is always present.

Given what we know about the circumstances of its composition, it seems that there is no more appropriate ending to a work that also bookended Schumann's life. It is not even entirely certain if the work is complete – Schumann might have ended it where it did because he was unable to write more, or on purely intuitive grounds.

The chorale-style theme, which Schumann reported as having been “dictated by the angels”, was used perhaps more famously in Brahms' 1861 *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op.23* for four hands

TED BABCOCK

Polyphonic Field for piano and electronics (2022) [9']
(1992)

Polyphonic Field is an exploration of piano textures and electronic drones. These elements were combined in an attempt to bridge old and new. The piece features piano arpeggios and a harmonic language reminiscent of the romantic era. The electronic drones work with and against this romantic language, in an effort to portray the composer's relationship to this repertoire. It was written in winter of 2022 and lasts roughly eight minutes.

CHOPIN

Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60 (1846)

This piece for solo piano was written three years before the composer's death. It was one of Chopin's last major works and is often considered to be one of his more demanding compositions.

Drawn from the Italian word *barca* or boat, *barcarolles* were a beloved 19th-century cliché, conceived around the gently rocking romantic songs of Venetian gondoliers. Chopin's *Barcarolle* is anything but that. Working with a broad 12/8 time signature, Chopin's watery undulations begin calmly, but upon their return in the final third of the piece, build like the immense swells of the open ocean—no moonlit canal scene here, but a relentless and dramatic escalation. With its rocking *barcarolle* rhythm and mood, it features a sweepingly romantic and slightly wistful tone

Chopin wrote in a letter of December 1845: “I should like now to finish ... a *barcarolle* and something else I don't know how to name”. Working through debilitating illness and the grinding conclusion of his unhappy relationship with the writer George Sand, Chopin published in the following summer this Op. 60 *Barcarolle*, and the “something else” known eventually as the *Polonaise-Fantaisie*, Op. 61. These were the consecutive towering masterpieces of his final years.

SCHUBERT

Four Impromptus, D. 935 Op. 142 - No 1 in F-minor (1827)

Schubert composed a total of eight *impromptus* in 1827 - all possibly as pieces for himself to play at musical gatherings or soirées. His publisher was initially responsible for calling these now-famous pieces *Impromptus*, with Schubert's permission. The manuscript of D. 935, comprising the second set of four, shows Schubert himself already calling the pieces *Impromptus*, and his intention that these follow the first set as a sequel shows in his numbering them 5 through 8. This set was not published, however, until 1839, eleven years after Schubert's death.

The word *impromptu* suggests spontaneity, and it is possible to imagine Schubert creating these gems as he extemporized at the keyboard, yet their sophistication suggests that considerable thought went into them.

The scope of the D. 935 *Impromptus*, the first in particular, contributed to the delay in their being issued, because publishers wanted shorter, easier, and therefore "more marketable" piano pieces. The opening of the first *Impromptu* sets the tone for an imposing rather than a trifling piece, yet it still manages to sound improvisatory. Two contrasting ideas—one with gentle pathos and one with brilliance—complete its first-theme group, which brings on a tender second theme in the relative major. So far Schubert gives the impression of a sonata form, so much so that Schumann called it "obviously the first movement of a sonata." Schubert then inserts a dreamlike section that might be considered the closing of an exposition, except that it unfolds unhurriedly as an entire piece in itself—in two parts, each repeated; this section has aptly been called a "dialogue without words" because of its exchange between treble and bass.

Completely avoiding a development section, Schubert recaps all of these sections, now grounded in the home key, and concludes with a brief recall of the dramatic opening theme. Despite the piece's nods to sonata form, Schubert imperturbably followed his own muse in designing its large-scale proportions.

SCHUMANN

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 14, "Concert sans Orchestre" (1836 version)

In the summer of 1836 Robert Schumann was pining for his new love, the sixteen-year-old piano prodigy Clara Wieck. Her father Friedrich Wieck (Schumann's erstwhile piano teacher) had arranged a concert tour for her, thinking to break up the romance and avoid acquiring a son-in-law he considered too emotionally volatile and psychologically unstable.

Schumann would not be so easily discouraged, and contrived to have his beloved with him, at least in spirit, by weaving her into the very musical fabric of his *Sonata in F minor*. Clara is represented by a five-note descending scale figure that appears in all movements.

The importance of this motif is underscored by its appearance at the dramatic opening of the first movement *Allegro*, thundering in octaves to the lowest regions of the keyboard. Schumann's expressive passion and almost manic wildness in this movement might well serve to justify his future father-in-law's concerns. Its first theme is both ponderous, with that tumbling-boulder crash of an opening, and flighty, in the rapid

passagework that flows directly out of it. Its lyrical second theme has an equally split personality, proceeding at first in an even succession of quarter notes before turning into a parody of itself. Throughout, the listener's ear is continually kept off-balance by syncopations and phrasing patterns that effectively turn the orienting strongest beat of the bar into the weakest.

In the movement *Andantino de Clara Wieck* there is a sadness to the haunting theme. The first two variations let the theme speak out over the murmurings of voices in the bass below. A strange mood dominates the third variation, that is peppered with constant syncopations. The tragic heart of the movement comes in the final variation, alternating with poetic daydreams and expressions of intimate tenderness.

The final movement, marked *Prestissimo possibile*, contains some of the most insanely scattered passagework in the piano repertoire, inflected with ricocheting syncopations but grounded by regularly recurring passages of songful lyricism. A breathless patter of 16th notes, maintained throughout, gives impetus, forward momentum, and a compelling sense of urgency to this *finale*.

In translation called "Concerto for piano without orchestra", this work was dedicated to Bohemian piano virtuoso and composer Ignaz Moscheles, to whom in a letter Schumann comments "what crazy inspirations one can have". In 1853 Schumann revised the work and added a *scherzo* as a second movement, which the performer could choose to play, or not play.