

**THE SCARSDALE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
CONCERT SERIES
PRESENTS**

Where Beauty Dwells



Sandro Russo, Piano
Beethoven * Chopin * Liszt
Rachmaninoff * Ravel

Friday, February 12th, 2016

7:00 p.m.

Reception follows

One Heathcote Road
Scarsdale, New York

Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata Op. 81a ("Das Lebewohl")

I. Das Lebewohl. Adagio

II. Abwesenheit. Adante espressivo

III. Das Wiedersehen. Vivacissimamente

Franz Liszt: *Après une lecture du Dante* (Fantasia quasi Sonata)

(intermission)

Frédéric Chopin: Nocturne no. 16 in E-flat major, Op. 55 no. 2

Ballade no. 1 in G minor, Op. 23

Sergei Rachmaninoff-Earl Wild: 2 Song Transcriptions

The Little Island

Where Beauty Dwells

Maurice Ravel: *La valse* (poème chorégraphique)



PROGRAM NOTES

Beethoven composed the piano sonata op. 81a under the influence of the Napoleonic wars. On May 4th, 1809 the imperial family, among them Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's student, patron and friend, decided to leave Vienna and flee to Hungary. On the occasion of his most important patron's departure (Rudolph was a good piano player himself) Beethoven composed a piano sonata. The autograph of the first movement of the sonata bears the following inscription: "The Farewell / Vienna, May 4th, 1809 / on the departure of His Imperial Highness, the revered Archduke Rudolph."

Beethoven called op. 81a "characteristic sonata," referring to it not so much as programme music but more as an expression of his state of mind and feelings with musical means. However, Beethoven always called the sonata itself "The Farewell, absence and return".

(© Beethoven-Haus Bonn)

Après une lecture de Dante (After a reading of Dante) – Fantasia quasi Sonata, is the final piece in **Liszt's** second volume of the *Années de pèlerinage*. It is a piano sonata in one movement that takes its inspiration from *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri's epic excursion through Hell to Paradise. It is not a literal representation of the poet's journey so much as a rendering of the composer's reaction to it. The opening motif is a simple and dramatic statement of the tritone—called *diabolus in musica* (the Devil in music), and a "dangerous interval" since the Middle Ages—which recurs and is developed throughout the piece. The tonic key is D minor, in the 19th century commonly encountered in music relating to death. Alfred Brendel says this downward motif is "a call for the spirits of the damned to rise." An agitated chromatic section is followed, after a restatement of the *diabolus* theme, by an expressive and extended slower section that portrays the torments of the unfortunate adulteress Francesca da Rimini. A beautiful chorale toward the end is in F-sharp major, a key Liszt associated with salvation and redemption. (© Mary Fairchild)

Intermission

The Nocturne Op. 55 no. 2 was written in 1843 and published in August 1844. Niecks wrote of this nocturne:

"The second nocturne (in E flat major) differs in form from the other nocturnes in this, that it has no contrasting second section, the melody flowing onward from beginning to end in a uniform manner. The monotony of the unrelieved sentimentality does not fail to make itself felt. One is seized by an ever-increasing longing to get out of this oppressive atmosphere, to feel the fresh breezes and warm sunshine, to see smiling faces and the many-colored dress of Nature, to hear the rustling of leaves, the murmuring of streams, and voices which have not yet lost the clear, sonorous ring that joy in the present and hope in the future impart."

Chopin composed the four ballades during his twenties and thirties, after he left his homeland Poland. Though Chopin was somewhat inspired by the stories of his native Poland, in particular the poems of Adam Mickiewicz, he wanted listeners to follow their own narrative through his music. The Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23, composed in 1831 during the composer's early years in Vienna, was a reflection about his loneliness in the city far away from his home in Poland, where a war was happening against the Russian Empire's oppression. Robert Schumann commented that, "I received a new Ballade from Chopin. It seems to be a work closest to his genius (although not the most ingenious) and I told him that I like it best of all his compositions. After quite a lengthy silence he replied with emphasis, 'I am happy to hear this since I too like it most and hold it dearest.'"

It could be said that of all **Rachmaninoff's** 'forgotten' works, the biggest sense of shame has befallen upon his many songs. Rachmaninoff composed eighty five songs and, like his piano works, they offer a clear picture of his development as a musician. His seven sets of songs for solo voice span his most prolific period as a composer from 1893 to 1916 and all were written before he left Russia for a new life in the United States in 1917. The texts for most of his songs were chosen from the works of prominent Russian Romantics. The second song of the set, *The Little Island*, written on a Konstantin Balmont text, is captured in a carefully restrained manner that could have easily been overpowered by an overly complex accompaniment. Instead, Rachmaninoff knows to keep the melody gentle and the accompaniment tranquil, depicting the scenes of nature in the text.

Where Beauty Dwells, features a most extraordinary dialogue between the vocalist and pianist. The melody often falls into short phrases which are then picked up and extended by the piano.

Without a doubt, **Earl Wild** is among the most versatile musicians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It could be said that his transcriptions represent not so much an evolution of the genre as a continuation in the very best of the Romantic tradition, looking back as far as Franz Liszt's transcriptions of Schubert's songs. These pieces were not simple arrangements for piano, but display the composer's instincts at every turn.

Earl Wild's transcriptions of Rachmaninoff's songs are essentially new works that are composed using the original songs as a starting point. In making his piano transcriptions, Mr. Wild has deliberately written within Rachmaninoff's style but has freely developed the musical ideas much as Rachmaninoff might have done. (©2004 Christopher Weiss)

La valse (poème chorégraphique), written by **Maurice Ravel** from February 1919 until 1920 (premiered in Paris on 12 December 1920), it was conceived as a ballet but is now more often heard as a concert work. The work has been described as a tribute to the waltz. Ravel described *La valse* with the following preface to the score:

"Through whirling clouds, waltzing couples may be faintly distinguished. The clouds gradually scatter: one sees at letter A an immense hall peopled with a whirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth at the fortissimo letter B. Set in an imperial court, about 1855."

Composer George Benjamin asserted, "Whether or not it was intended as a metaphor for the predicament of European civilization in the aftermath of the Great War, its one-movement design plots the birth, decay and destruction of a musical genre: the waltz."

Ravel, however, denied it is a reflection of post-World War I Europe.

In his tribute to Ravel after the composer's death in 1937, Paul Landormy described the work as:

"...the most unexpected of the compositions of Ravel, revealing to us heretofore unexpected depths of Romanticism, power, vigor, and rapture in this musician whose expression is usually limited to the manifestations of an essentially classical genius."



Biography . . .

Acclaimed for his profound sense of poetry and distinctive style, Sandro Russo has been in demand as a soloist in many venues around the world. He unanimously receives accolades for his sparkling virtuosity and his playing has often been referred to as a throwback to the grand tradition of elegant pianism and beautiful sound. Composer Lowell Liebermann wrote of him, “Sandro Russo is a musician's musician and a pianist's pianist. There is no technical challenge too great for him, but it is his musicianship that ultimately makes the greatest impression. His interpretations reveal a unique and profound artist at work.”

Born in San Giovanni Gemini – Sicily, Mr. Russo displayed exceptional musical talent from an early age. In 1995, he graduated summa cum laude from the V. Bellini Conservatory, and earned the Pianoforte Performing Diploma from the Royal College of Music in London ‘with honors’. Soon after Mr. Russo came to the United States in 2000, he won the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra Concerto Competition, and has ever since performed in such prestigious concert halls as the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Weill and Zankel halls at Carnegie Hall, Salle Cortot in Paris, Teatro Politeama in Palermo and the Konzerthaus Berlin.

His recitals include performances for The Rachmaninoff Society, the Dame Myra Hess series in Chicago, Concerts Grand in Santa Rosa (CA), the American Liszt Society, the Houston International Piano Festival, the Husum Festival of Piano Rarities in Germany and the Chetham's International Piano Festival in Manchester (U.K.), among others.

He has appeared as a soloist with the Slovak Philharmonic in Bratislava, The Jacksonville Symphony in Florida and the Brussels Chamber Orchestra at the opening gala of The Music Festival of the Hamptons in 2008. In July 2008 he gave three highly praised performances of the Rachmaninoff 3rd Concerto in Palermo and he was also the featured soloist with the New York Asian Symphony for a Japan tour.

Sandro Russo's performances have aired on all the major radio stations in the US, the BBC Radio, RAI Radio 3 and the Slovakian TV. His latest recordings, Scarlatti Recreated and Russian Gems – Piano Rarities, released on the Musical Concepts label have received universally critical acclaim.

www.sandrorussopianist.com