

PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

a life more beautiful

PREVIEW
NOTES

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano
Friday, February 23 – 7:30 PM
Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center

PROGRAM

Fantasia in C Minor, K. 475

W. A. Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1785

Duration: 12 minutes

This astonishing Fantasia is probably one of Mozart's most innovative compositions for solo keyboard. Presented in six contrasting sections, it begins with a solemn melodic line in octaves. While its chromatic underpinnings recall the character of Bach's *Musical Offering*, its drama foreshadows Beethoven's C Minor mood. Mozart is able to provoke a sense of inevitability with his use of contrasting ranges, silences, and a descending chromatic bass line. What follows is an oasis of D Major, but the moment is short-lived. A dark and stormy passage is soon unleashed with fast tremolos in the right hand. Mozart eloquently ties together all the vacillating emotions and wandering keys with a recapitulation of the opening section.

Fantasia in C Major, Wq. 59/6

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

Born: March 8, 1714, Weimar, Germany

Died: December 14, 1788, Hamburg, Germany

Composed: 1784

Duration: 8 minutes

CPE Bach was the second surviving son of the great Johann Sebastian, surely the most accomplished improviser of them all. CPE was no extemporiser himself, though he took his music in quite a different direction to that of his father. For the younger man, it was all about directness, simplicity and drama, delivered through big contrasts and high emotions. The C Major Fantasia feels as much a showpiece for its performer's scintillating technique as a display of emotional intensity, colliding together several contrasting

musical ideas—flashy arpeggios, dashing runs, a mischievous 'cuckoo' figure—before an affable tune brings these jostling elements to a calmer conclusion.

Fantasia, Op. 77

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1809

Duration: 10 minutes

Like Mozart, Beethoven was known as a master keyboard improviser. His pupil and fellow composer Carl Czerny later remembered: 'He knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break into loud sobs. After ending his improvisation, he would burst into loud laughter and mock his listeners for the emotion he had caused in them.' His G Minor Fantasia provides a fascinating glimpse into what its composer's improvising skills must have been like. Here, however, Beethoven's freewheeling sense of fantasy is corralled into a much stricter form. The piece might open with a bewildering collection of competing ideas—plummeting scales, beginnings of melodies, quiet meditations, loud interjections—but Beethoven quickly moves on to an unassuming melody and increasingly intricate variations on it. His surely comic sign-off, however, might make you wonder how seriously to take any of it.

Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat Major, Op. 61

Frédéric Chopin

Born: February 22, 1810, Żelazowa Wola, Poland

Died: October 17, 1849, Paris, France

Composed: 1846

Duration: 13 minutes

Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie is, as its name suggests, something of a fantasia on the age-old polonaise dance form from his native Poland. It's debatable, however, how much of its dance inspirations remain (bar some distinctive, repeated-note rhythms early on) and how much the fantasia has taken over. Though its overall shape—two more dance-like outer sections sandwiching a slower, more introspective episode—is clear enough, Chopin takes enormous pleasure in blurring the music's edges by ceaselessly developing his material as the piece progresses, almost as if it's growing and changing before our ears.

Night-Fantasies

Elliott Carter

Born: December 11, 1908, New York, NY

Died: November 5, 2012, New York, NY

Composed: 1980

Duration: 20 minutes

Carter, the pioneering American composer who died in 2012 at the remarkable age of 103, was a mere 71 when he wrote the piece, with the aim of conveying, as he described it, 'continuously changing moods, suggesting the fleeting thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind during a period of wakefulness at night'. But despite its nocturnal inspiration, it's hardly a piece to snooze to: Carter's music is complex, uncompromising but meticulously organized, making inventive use of the piano's sonic possibilities, not least the clangorous, bell-like chords that chime across its sonorous climax.

Fantasia Chromatica, SwWV. 258

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck

Born: May 1562, Deventer, Netherlands

Died: October 16, 1621, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Duration: 8 minutes

Sweelinck is the earliest composer with us this evening. He spent most of his life in Amsterdam, where he was revered for his organ improvisations at the city's Oude Kerk church, and for his pioneering compositions. His Fantasia Chromatica is a polyphonic tour de force, opening with a highly experimental example of triple invertible counterpoint. It is based on a descending chromatic theme that appears throughout the work in different note lengths, accompanied by nearly 20 countersubjects.

The Celestial Railroad, Phantasy for Piano

Charles Ives

Born: October 20, 1874, Danbury, CT

Died: May 19, 1954, New York, NY

Composed: 1925

Duration: 9 minutes

Charles Ives's fantasy 'Celestial Railroad' is the source for the second movement of his fourth symphony. It is a musical depiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Celestial Rail-road." The Hawthorne story is itself a comic trope on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which a group of train passengers follow the route of Bunyan's Christian. Like Bunyan's book, Hawthorne's tale begins with a nameless narrator who falls asleep and starts to dream.