

69th Concert Series 2022-23



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Jeremy Denk
piano

Sunday, October 9, 2022. 3:00 pm.
Sleepy Hollow High School, Sleepy Hollow, New York

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Friends of Music Concerts, Inc. is an award-winning, non-profit, volunteer organization now celebrating its 69th season of showcasing, right here in Westchester, artists chosen from among the finest in today's diverse world of chamber music. Additionally, our Partners in Education program in the public schools and free student admission to our concerts give young people enhanced exposure to and appreciation of classical music.

In order to help sustain what one of our artists called this “legendary series,” we would welcome people who can join the volunteers listed above, either as Board members or equally valued off-Board committee members. People we are looking for include, but are not limited to, those with writing/publishing production and/or fund development skills. Call us at 914-861-5080 or contact us on our website (see below); we can explore the possibilities together.

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Program

Sonatine

Modéré

Movement de Menuet

Animé

Maurice Ravel

(1875-1937)

Piano Sonata in A minor, K. 310

Allegro maestoso

Andante cantabile con espressione

Presto

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(1756-1791)

Gaspard de la Nuit

Ondine - lent

Le Gibet – très lent sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin

Scarbo – modéré

Maurice Ravel

Intermission

Tocatta in F-sharp minor, BWV 910

(Tocatta)

Adagio

Presto a Staccato (Fuga)

Adagio

(Fuga)

Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685-1750)

Heartbreaker

Missy Mazzoli

(b. 1980)

The Devil's Staircase

György Ligeti

(1923-2006)

Piano Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 110

Moderato cantabile molto espressivo

Allegro molto

Adagio ma non troppo – Allegro ma non troppo

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

Piano by Steinway

Next concert

Sunday, October 15, at 3:00 pm. Sleepy Hollow High School, Sleepy Hollow, New York

Jordan Bak, viola; Ji Yung Li, piano.

Program: Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae*, Op 48; Paul Hindemith's *Sonata for Solo Viola* (1937); Vaughan Williams's *Romance*; Robert Schumann's *Adagio & Allegro*; Johannes Brahms's *Sonata for Viola and Piano in F minor, Op. 120, No. 1*.

Program notes

Sonatine

Maurice Ravel

Ravel is best known for the fancifully titled and wildly colorful descriptive works that he wrote for orchestra and for piano, but there was another strain of development in his music as well: a sometimes severe, classical, elegant strain that includes works he called simply Trio, or Sonata, or something of that sort. This **Sonatine** is one of those. It is an early work whose first movement was composed in 1903 as an independent piece and entered in a competition sponsored by *Weekly Critical Review*, a fine arts and literary magazine. Ravel's close friend, critic M.D. Calvocoressi, who was a contributor to the publication, encouraged him to enter. The entry was to be the first movement, no longer than 75 measures, of a piano sonatina; the prize was to be 100 francs.

Unfortunately, the competition was canceled because of the magazine's financial difficulties. However, it had provided the impetus Ravel needed; two years later he added second and third movements to round off the work. The **Sonatine** was published in September 1905 by Durand in Paris, which offered Ravel a lifetime annuity of 12,000 francs for the right of first refusal for his works. He accepted it; at the time, Durand already had made an identical contract with Debussy.

Ravel dedicated the **Sonatine** to his dear friends Ida and Cipa Godebski. Madame Paule de Lestang gave the world premiere of the work in Lyon, France, on March 10, 1906. It attained great popularity because of its unusual combination of classicism and modernity, difficulty and brevity, and because it filled a real need in the piano repertory. When Ravel himself played this bright, clear work at his concerts, he never lingered over its delicate, expressive movements but preferred to play coolly through them; the great French pianist Alfred Cortot (1877-1972) reported the composer's regret that no one ever played the finale fast enough.

The work as a whole is cyclical, based in essence on a two-note rising or falling figure. It uses the interval of a descending perfect fourth (F-sharp to C-sharp) and its inversion, the perfect fifth, as a recurring motif. Ravel takes this theme, which has been likened to a series of horn calls, and transforms it in the last two movements using a technique that Liszt had refined. The two themes of the classically sonata form first movement, *Modéré*, are derived from them, and its last few measures suggest the first few that are to follow in the second movement. The heading here is *Mouvement de menuet*, the French equivalent of the Italian *Tempo di minuetto* often used by Haydn and Mozart. The slower second theme, in the contrasting central section, is drawn from the very opening measures of the first movement. The finale, *Animé*, a toccata in sonata form, is brilliant and forceful in a way that all the preceding music was not. It is a virtuosic tour de force. It synthesizes everything that has gone before; at the end, Cortot said, "it finally explodes in a flash of lightning."

Piano Sonata in A minor, K. 310

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

In the middle years of his short life, Mozart wrote a number of piano sonatas that once were thought to be musical souvenirs of the long tour that took him from Salzburg to Paris via Mannheim between September 1777 and January 1779. However, new studies of his manuscripts show that some date from the time he spent in Munich during the winter of 1780-1781 for the first performance of his opera *Idomeneo*. It is quite possible that they were conceived in Paris but not set down on paper until Munich. When they were first published in Vienna in 1784, they had undergone further revision.

The introspective **Piano Sonata in A minor, K 310**, was written in Paris in the summer of 1778. It is a strong, stormy work in which the friction of dissonance, the dramatic dynamic contrasts, and the powerful crescendos suggest emotional turmoil. Robert Gutman, author of a well-regarded biography of Mozart, finds that the sonata transforms the "dramatic and melancholy elements of Storm and Stress into a seamless musical expression embodying pain, strife, and even violence, while never begin less than exquisitely consolatory." Alfred Einstein described it as "tragic."

The big, brooding opening movement, *Allegro maestoso*, is followed by a great, expansive, sonata-form movement, *Andante cantabile con espressione*, that takes its time, with calm sections framing a central section that develops its ideas with passionate turbulence. Maynard Solomon, a 20th century biographer of Mozart, contends that here Mozart is inventing "the Romantic mood-piece" which would be used frequently in the following century.

The final movement, a speedy *Presto*, has a dark and restless character, except during a bright episode in the major mode played over a long series of repeated A's. Gutman calls it "a spectral chase of almost unabated intensity, yet a concentration of emotions not without touches of elegiac resignation and serenity." The entire work is exemplary of a new phase in Mozart's music, and has a fresh language of controlled passion found only in Mozart's very greatest works.

Gaspard de la Nuit

Maurice Ravel

Ravel's **Gaspard de la Nuit** is based on three prose poems emphasizing the supernatural that were written by the obscure French Romantic poet Louis Aloys Bertrand (1807-1842) in 1832. They were published in 1908 in the magazine *Le Mercure de France*, where Ravel read them. The mystery, bewitchment, castles, bells, and visions that Ravel found in this essentially impressionistic suite immediately inspired him to compose one of the most difficult works for piano ever written, a demandingly profound musical essay requiring a pianist of great imagination as well as one who has complete technical command of the instrument. Ravel used the pianistic style of Franz Liszt, and created what pianist Alfred Cortot called "one of the most extraordinary examples of instrumental ingenuity which the industry of composers has ever produced."

The nocturnal Gaspard of the title is the Devil. Each of the poems is a story he tells or a picture he draws: of a water sprite, a corpse on the gallows, an evil dwarf. **Gaspard** was premiered in a January 1909 performance by pianist Ricardo Viñes, the man who had introduced Ravel to Bertrand's work.

In the first piece, *Ondine - lent*, where the influence of Liszt's Transcendental Etudes is clear, Ravel portrays the seduction of a mortal man by the water nymph Ondine. As Ravel's biographer Benjamin Ivry put it, she appears "in sparkling foam amid a sparkling melodic line," luring men to their death by drowning. An innocent-sounding melodic line accompanies the piano's water figuration.

The second movement, "*Le Gibet*" (The Gibbet), *Très lent sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin*, a portrait of the gallows, has such formidable textural density that Ravel notated nearly the whole piece using three staves. The words of Ravel's other favorite poet, Edgar Allan Poe, and an extract from the preface of the corresponding Bertrand poem, provide some idea of the musical atmosphere: "It is the bell sounding from the walls of a city far away below the horizon, and the carcass of a dead man hanging from a gibbet, reddened by the setting sun." Ravel's "bells" contain a slow melody, sometimes in parallel chords as well as irregularly-grouped repeated notes. An ostinato bell-like figure that tolls as a pedal point throughout the movement. The movement is quiet, yet sinister.

The final movement, *Scarbo - modéré*, named after a goblin, has some of the most difficult piano music Ravel or any other composer has ever written. Scarbo is a somewhat malicious dwarf from the underworld who horrifies the night and then disappears without a trace. Ravel emphasizes rhythm in this virtuoso display piece, interspersing pauses throughout. Full of rapid repeated notes, arpeggiations, and sudden changes of texture and dynamics, it was well described by Ivry, who says, "Like a Morse code operator gone mad, the pianist raps out Asian sounding groups of high notes. After a great, malignant, hopping dance, there are low echoing notes, and slowly the whirling returns in the best horror film style: 'He's baaaaaack.' The classical tradition of da capo offers an encore within the piece itself. The pianist goes up and down in demented reiteration as Scarbo exults in his own wickedness. The lushness of the end is like the dense final aria in Richard Strauss's *Salomé*, celebrating the erotic triumph of malignancy." After a very loud climax, the music softens as it concludes in impish little speedy notes.

Toccatà in F-sharp minor, BWV 910

Johann Sebastian Bach

In the 17th century the term "toccatà" was widely used as the name for virtuosic keyboard pieces; Bach carried this usage into the 18th century. He wrote two toccatas for organ as showy introductions to fugues, and composed more than half a dozen others as harpsichord pieces. This one, belonging to a group of early works, probably was written in 1712.

Bach's toccatas are loosely assembled compositions whose sections (generally an introduction, some slow music, and a fugue) are almost separate movements, usually played without pause. The **Toccatà in F-sharp minor** is memorable, both for what has been described as the "arch" shape of its five movements, and for its unusual key for Bach's era. Wanda Landowska, one of the most famous harpsichordists of the 20th century, wrote that the toccatas in general seem initially to be "incoherent and disparate," mentioning this toccatà as an example of that. She went on to say that the writing is nevertheless impassioned.

The **Toccatà in F-sharp minor** opens with a rapid fantasia-like section with bravura scalar figures and descending lines, after which there is a slow, expressive, intense *Adagio* section, noble and chromatic, distinguished by a descending chromatic figure. A rapid fugue follows, *Presto e staccato*; its subject is a descending scale with a short cadential trill. This fugue is quite straightforward with no unusual counterpoint, although there are modulations to remote keys. Then comes another *Adagio* section that sounds improvisatory and includes an unusual series of harmonic progressions with an arpeggio-like figure repeated twenty-one times. A second, quite different, and more impressive *Fugue* in three voices is based on a descending chromatic figure which reprises that from the first *Adagio*. The work ends with a closing flourish.

Heartbreaker

Missy Mazzoli

Missy Mazzoli has been called “one of the more consistently inventive, surprising composers now working in New York” (*The New York Times*); praised for her “apocalyptic imagination” by Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*; and referred to, cheekily, as “Brooklyn’s post-millennial Mozart” (*Time Out New York*). Her music has been performed by the Kronos Quartet, Eighth Blackbird, pianist Emanuel Ax, Opera Philadelphia, Los Angeles Opera, Cincinnati Opera, New York City Opera, Chicago Fringe Opera, the Detroit Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, JACK Quartet, cellist Maya Beiser, violinist Jennifer Koh, pianist Kathleen Supové, Dublin’s Crash Ensemble, the Sydney Symphony, and many others.

In 2018 she became one of the first two women to receive a commission from the Metropolitan Opera. That year she also was nominated for a Grammy in the category of Best Classical Composition for her work **Vespers for Violin**. Her opera, **The Listeners**, commissioned by the Norwegian National Opera and Opera Philadelphia, premiered in 2021. Her second opera, **Breaking the Waves**, which had been commissioned by Opera Philadelphia and Beth Morrison Projects and premiered in January 2017, was described as being “among the best 21st century operas yet” (*Opera News*), “savagely, heartbreaking and thoroughly original” (*Wall Street Journal*), and “dark and daring” (*The New York Times*). She is Composer-in-Residence at the Chicago Symphony. She was a visiting professor of music at New York University in 2013; later that year she joined the composition faculty at the Mannes School of Music, a division of The New School.

Mazzoli is an active pianist and keyboardist, often performing with Victoire, a band she founded in 2008 dedicated to her own compositions. Their debut full-length CD, *Cathedral City*, was named one of 2010’s best classical albums by *Time Out New York*, NPR, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. She is also active as an educator and a mentor to young composers. She attended the Yale School of Music, the Royal Conservatory of the Hague, and Boston University.

Mazzoli composed the short work, **Heartbreaker**, for piano in 2013. It was commissioned by the American Pianists Association in honor of the 2013 DeHaan Classical Fellow. She wrote her own note: “As a composer who started her musical life as a pianist, it was unexpectedly difficult to write a short piece for the American Pianists Association’s competition. I wanted to write something virtuosic but something that stood out from traditionally showy ‘competitive’ pieces. My new work, Heartbreaker, is virtuosic in subtle, unusual ways. It requires a virtuosity that is not about playing faster than everyone else, or even about playing more accurately than everyone else, but more about striking a balance between rhythmic precision and the free-wheeling abandon the piece requires.”

Étude No. 13 “L’escalier du diable” (The Devil’s Staircase).

György Ligeti

Hungarian-born composer György Ligeti began his studies in composition at the Music Conservatory in Cluj, Romania. After World War II, he continued his studies at the Franz Liszt Conservatory in Budapest, but left there during the 1956 uprising, settling in Cologne, Germany and working at Westdeutscher Rundfunk. His earliest music is neo-classical, but he soon took up more radical, experimental techniques. The most widely known of his works is **Atmosphères** (1961), which was used in the musical score of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Ligeti’s thirteen **Études pour piano**, composed between 1988 and 1994, are the ultimate achievement of his career and already have become classics. **The Devil’s Staircase**, written in the spring of 1993, is the longest, most dramatic, and one of the most challenging and virtuosic of the group. In it, Ligeti creates the zigzagging chromatic lines that personify his musical devil, ascending to the top of the keyboard with one hand, followed by low chords.

In the liner notes for his 2012 album Ligeti/Beethoven, Jeremy Denk says, “But one stroke of their genius is underappreciated: the way Ligeti celebrates the genre’s perversity, repurposes it into wild, unheard-of art. Drawing inspiration from the etude’s most unpromising attributes – obsession monotony, ad infinitum repetition, mathematical dryness – he fearlessly redeems them.”

Ligeti was especially influenced by visual portrayals of death and the last judgement in the works of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) and Peter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569). In this distinctive work, he also was influenced by the mathematics of fractal geometry. Denk further says, “Ligeti uses the infinite as a continuous reference point. From simplicity, he ranges into unimaginable complexity; he requests the quietest and loudest extremes; he veers off the top and bottom of the keyboard.”

In a spoken introduction to a performance as part of the Bang on a Can Marathon in August 2020, Denk described the work overall as being “terrifying, not a very calm piece, with a weird viral replicating quality.” He drew attention to “the sly element to the devilishness of this piece” and the “quality and sense of jazz through it and to the way it celebrates the joy of playing the piano, with the range of dynamic possibilities and the color possibilities, its beautiful harmonies, the breathtaking passages and the haunting, quiet parts where the scales still climb up, quietly.”

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110

Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven's last decade was a time of extraordinary originality, idiosyncrasy, and invention without parallel in the life of any other composer. Withdrawn, separated from much of the rest of the musical world by the barrier of his deafness, he conceived and wrote a body of music without equal; it sometimes seems as if he had created a new music without roots in history and tradition. In a period of six years, from 1816 to 1822, he composed his last five piano sonatas, the **Diabelli Variations**, the **Missa Solemnis**, **Symphony No. 9**, and his last five string quartets.

To all but the few remaining members of his close circle, Beethoven's new music created bewilderment. In 1824, at just about the time when this sonata reached England, a London critic wrote, "Beethoven's compositions more and more assume the character of studied eccentricity... full of unaccountable and often repulsive harmonies." However, the melodic material Beethoven used - strongly expressive, lyrical, dreamy, even elegiac - made this sonata relatively easily accessible, while at the same time it included forms such as recitative and fugues that daringly expanded the idea of what constitutes a sonata.

The first movement, *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*, a perfect, seamless sonata form, brief and apparently of great simplicity, actually stretches great harmonic distances with a gracious opening phrase that seems perfectly laid out for a string quartet rather than for the piano. The second movement, *Allegro molto*, a minor-key scherzo in duple meter but highly irregular rhythm, makes a strong contrast with the lyrical mood of the first movement. Its second theme resembles a German folk song; in the contrasting central section, the difficult passage-work for the right hand is made even more difficult by the rhythmic displacement of the left hand's single note.

The final movement contains a slow introduction, *Adagio ma non troppo*, followed by a plaintive recitative. A beautiful arioso lament follows. A complex fugue, *Allegro ma non troppo*, comes after the lament. It is a Chopinesque-ornamented version of the lament in a harmonically remote tonality, a mysterious inversion of the fugue in a new key. A long closing section based on the fugue theme returns to the original key of A-flat.

---notes provided by Susan Halpern.

About the Artist

Jeremy Denk is one of America's foremost pianists, proclaimed by *The New York Times* as "a pianist you want to hear no matter what he performs." He also is a New York Times bestselling author, winner of both the MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship and the Avery Fisher Prize, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

This season he again will be performing with orchestras and in recitals across the UK, Europe, and the United States. These dates include a return to Carnegie Hall, playing and directing Bach concerti with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and a multi-concert residency at the Lammermuir Festival in Scotland. An avid chamber musician, he also will embark on a US tour with the renowned Takács Quartet. Last season's highlights included his performance of Bach's Well-Tempered Klavier Book 1 at the Barbican in London, and performances of John Adams's "Must the Devil Have All the Great Tunes?" with the Cleveland Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony, and Seattle Symphony, as well as a return to the San Francisco Symphony to perform Messiaen under Esa-Pekka Salonen.

His New York Times Bestselling memoir, **Every Good Boy Does Fine**, was published earlier this year by Random House to universal acclaim, and was featured on CBS Sunday Morning, NPR's Fresh Air, New York Times Review of Books, and more. *The Guardian* heralded it as "an elegant, frank, and well-structured memoir and entirely resists cliché. A rare feat... it makes the reader care about Denk beyond his talent for playing the piano." His other insightful writing on music has appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *New Republic*, and *The Guardian*.

Denk's latest album of Mozart piano concertos was released in 2021 by Nonesuch Records. Deemed "urgent and essential" by BBC Radio 3, it was featured as Album of the Week on Classic FM, and 'Record of the Week' on BBC Radio's Record Review. His recording of the Goldberg Variations for Nonesuch Records reached No. 1 on the Billboard Classical Charts. His recording of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111, paired with Ligeti's Etudes, was named one of the best discs of the year by The New Yorker, NPR, and the Washington Post, and his account of the Beethoven sonata was selected by BBC Radio 3's Building a Library as the best available version recorded on modern piano. His recording of Charles Ives's two piano sonatas also was featured on many "best of the year" lists.

Jeremy Denk is a graduate of Oberlin College, Indiana University, and the Juilliard School.

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