

Min Joo Yi, *Piano*

"El Albaicín," from *Iberia Suite*

Isaac Albéniz
(1860-1909)

Carnaval, Op. 9

Préambule
Pierrot
Arlequin
Valse noble
Eusebius
Florestan
Coquette
Replique
Papillons
A.S.C.H. S.C.H.A. (Lettres Dansantes)
Chiarina
Chopin
Estrella
Reconnaissance
Pantalon et Colombine
Valse allemande - Paganini
Aveu
Promenade
Pause
Marche des "Davidsbündler" contre les Philistins

Robert Schumann
(1810-1856)

-- INTERMISSION --

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35

Grave - Doppio movimento
Scherzo
Marche funèbre: Lento
Finale: Presto

Frédéric Chopin
(1810-1849)

Concert Suite from *The Nutcracker*

March
Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy
Tarantella
Intermezzo
Trepak (Russian Dance)
Tea (Chinese Dance)
Andante maestoso (Pas de deux)

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky
(1840-1893)
arr. Mikhail Pletnev

Sunday, Aug. 27, 2023
7:00 PM
Klavierhaus NYC

PROGRAM NOTES

"El Albaicín," from *Iberia Suite*

I. Albéniz

The *Iberia Suite* by Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) comprises four books, each containing three movements. These twelve movements are each titled after different regions, events, or dance forms of the Iberian peninsula. Examples include "Lavapiés" named after a district of Madrid, "Fête-dieu à Séville" inspired by Seville's Corpus Christi Day procession, and "El Polo" which captures the essence of the *flamenco palo* dance form. Each movement showcases distinctive dance rhythms and forms such as the *fandango*, *zapateado*, and *jota*, with vivid guitar-like accompanimental figures throughout. The *Iberia* suite as a whole is one of the most prominent illustrations of Spanish Impressionism with its impressively colorful evocations of the Andalusian spirit. It is also notable for its technical difficulties, as acknowledged by a *New York Times* writer in 1988: "There is really nothing in Isaac Albeniz's *Iberia* that a good three-handed pianist could not master, given unlimited years of practice and permission to play at half tempo. But there are few pianists thus endowed."

Albeniz composed "El Albaicín" in 1906, the inaugural movement of the third book of *Iberia*. This piece draws its name from the Gypsy quarter of Granada, which even in the present day features dramatic Islamic influence stemming from its historical 13th and 14th-century Moorish reign. These include characteristic geometric art, slender pillars, and tessellated tilework displayed throughout the iconic Alhambra fortress and Generalife garden complex. The movement commences with a pianissimo evocation of a flamenco guitar, employing single alternating staccato notes that mirror the technique of using the thumb and index finger to pluck guitar strings. A subtle use of the pedal yields an *estompé* effect, simulating the gradual fading of the plucked notes. This theme eventually expands to an openly passionate main theme, a lively dance reminiscent of the flamenco *bulerías*. The intricate, uneven cobblestone streets that weave through the hilly terrain are audibly depicted through the irregularly studded chordal harmonies spanning wide registral leaps across the keyboard, as well as through the overlapping narrow lines between the hands. Interlaced within the movement are three disjointed renditions of a melancholy, chant-like *copla de cante jondo*. Translating to "profound song," it is known as the oldest form of flamenco singing and even considered as the purest, characterized by its free form and deeply moving nature. The poignant coda combines fragments of the main theme with the tender sentiment of the *copla*, and crescendos to a final jubilant burst of the main theme.

Carnaval, Op. 9

R. Schumann

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was known for his penchant of writing musical jokes, anagrams, and puzzles into his music, and his Op. 9 *Carnaval* is no exception. As he wrote himself, "deciphering my masked ball will be a real game for you." Consisting of 21 kaleidoscopic and short character pieces, this collection is thematically unified by a four-note theme, as revealed in *Carnaval's* subtitle *Scènes mignonnes sur quatre notes* (Little Scenes on Four Notes). Only a few movements are not, including the *Préambule*, which rather derives from a theme found in Franz Schubert's variations on a waltz (*Sehnsuchtswalzer*, Op. 9/2). Having discovered this theme in 1827 and dissatisfied with what he viewed as an overly heroic arrangement of the theme by his friend Ludwig Schuncke, Schumann wrote his own collection of "variations" to do justice to his own intimate and tender vision. As revealed in the "Lettres Dansantes" movement, the recurring motif is ASCH, though this manifests in three unique ways throughout the

music: A-Eb-C-B (in German spelled as A-Es-C-H); Ab-C-B (in German As-C-H); and Eb-C-B-A (Es-C-H-A) ("Es" being used as a homonym for the letter "S"). These can be further viewed in the enigmatic "Sphinxes" movement, appearing as blocks rather than notes on staff paper with all three aforementioned forms of this motif, and which is not intended for performance. The first two of these spelled out his then-fiancée Ernestine von Fricken's hometown of Asch, Germany. The word "asch" also translates to "ash" (as in Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent), as well as occurs in the German word for carnival, "Fasching." Finally, ASCH serves as a sort of musical signature for Schumann's name (Robert Alexander **S**chumann), as does the third spelling of the motif ("S-C-H-A," the correct order of their appearance in his last name **S**chumann).

Each of these pieces represents masked revelers at the Carnival festival before Lent, among which include representations of himself, his friends and colleagues, and characters from Italian *commedia dell'arte* (improvised comedy). The juxtaposed "Eusebius" and "Florestan" movements signify the composer's two alter-egos, with Eusebius as the calm and dreamy character, and Florestan as the passionate, impulsive side. Schumann also pays homage to the two composers Frederic Chopin and Niccolò Paganini with movements imitating traits of their respective compositional styles. "Chiarina" represents Clara Wieck herself, who he would go on to marry. The piece wraps up with a relatively long final movement, depicting King David's march with his men against the Philistines ("Davidsbündler") while incorporating summary quotations from many of the preceding movements as well as the *Grossvater Tanz*, a 17th-century theme that Schumann intended to represent those holding on to outdated modes of inartistic ideals. Perhaps as a self-deprecatory jab at himself, these outdated modes are shown in "Florestan," "Papillons," and "Davidsbündler March" movements, which contain quotations of themes from his earlier work *Papillons*, Op. 2. Despite the Carnival's position as one of the major virtuosic hallmarks in standard piano repertoire, the greatest challenge is to fulfill the composer's own vision to express the full range of humanity in the work.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35

F. Chopin

Of Frédéric Chopin's (1810-1849) three piano sonatas, the second is considered one of the greatest contributions to the piano sonata literature despite being written at a time when the piano sonata form was in relative decline. The sonata revolves around its renowned third movement, a funeral march composed as early as 1835 (generally accepted as 1837), and which served as the catalyst for the shaping of its surrounding movements by 1839. The first movement is in modified sonata form, opening with two weighty measures featuring a striking diminished seventh leap in the bass, an important recurring motif throughout the movement. The breathless and *agitato* first theme in B-flat minor, followed by the contrasting melodic *sostenuto* second theme in D-flat major, together form the exposition of the first movement. Both themes and the introductory motif merge three-way in the climax of the development section, and the recapitulation only reprises the second theme while omitting the first. The second movement is a furiously insistent scherzo with a calm, lyrical trio section in the middle, and contains many stylistic elements that suggest the rhythms of a transformed mazurka. The third movement, the funeral march for which the sonata is often nicknamed, features two nearly identical iterations of a solemn procession in B-flat minor, divided by a serene nocturne-like melody in D-flat major halfway. Concluding the sonata is a short *perpetuum mobile* movement written in quiet rippling unison of the two hands, which pianist Anton Rubinstein compared to "wind howling around the gravestones." Its relative atonality and brevity render it one of the most enigmatic and perhaps futuristic works he ever wrote, deviating so far from his signature style that it resonates more with the compositional aesthetics of the 20th century than the 19th.

Perhaps due to the sonata's unconventional structure, this composition faced criticism as a prime example of Chopin's limited grasp of the sonata form. Even Robert Schumann, who otherwise held great admiration for Chopin's compositional brilliance, remarked that Chopin had simply assembled "four of [his] maddest children under the same roof." Nevertheless, the piece has endured with popular appeal in both classical and non-classical realms. It inspired Sergei Rachmaninoff's own second piano sonata in the same key of B-flat minor, and also left its mark on genres like jazz through Duke Ellington's "Black and Tan Fantasy," as well as electronic dance music with deadmau5's "Ghosts 'n' Stuff." The third movement march is also often performed at funerals worldwide. Notably, it was played at Chopin's own funeral, as well as during the state funerals of prominent figures like John F. Kennedy, Sir Winston Churchill, and Queen Elizabeth II.

Concert Suite from *The Nutcracker*

P. I. Tchaikovsky/M. Pletnev

Written in 1892 as the last of three ballets he composed, **Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky's** (1840-1893) *Nutcracker* is loosely inspired by E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King." This fairy tale follows a girl who battles the malevolent Mouse King to rescue a nutcracker, which subsequently springs to life. Together, they encounter a diverse array of vibrant characters in a wintry fantasy wonderland. While writing the ballet, Tchaikovsky encountered the celesta instrument in Paris on a trip returning from the opening of Carnegie Hall, and immediately recognized it as the "voice" of the Sugar Plum Fairy character. Interestingly, the first performance of the ballet was widely criticized for its lackluster scenery and costumes, the inadequate performance of the ballerina cast as the Sugar Plum Fairy, and the uninspired choreography by an assistant rather than by Marius Ivanovich Petipa, the principal choreographer of the Imperial (Mariinsky) Ballet who had just fallen ill. Unfortunately, Tchaikovsky himself never had the pleasure of witnessing the resounding success of his *Nutcracker* during his lifetime. Despite its initial failure to captivate critics, the *Nutcracker* ballet has withstood the tests of time and became a classic staple of the concert hall and ballet production repertoire in the Christmas season and beyond, following the triumphal success of George Balanchine's version in the 20th century.

The celebrated Russian concert pianist Mikhail Pletnev (b. 1957) has arranged several notable concert suites for piano based on ballets beyond the *Nutcracker*, including those of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* in 1978 and Sergei Prokofiev's *Cinderella* in 2003. Pletnev chose to incorporate seven excerpts of the *Nutcracker* into this concert suite for solo piano, ranging from the instantly recognizable "Sugar Plum Fairy" and "Trépak" numbers, to the seldom-heard "Tarantella" danced by the Sugar Plum Fairy's Cavalier that is often cut in modern staged productions. Pletnev's particular arrangement of movements deviates significantly from the original ballet's sequence. When reordered, the correct sequence is as follows: movements 1 (March), 4 (Intermezzo), 6 (Chinese Dance), 5 (Trépak), 7 (Pas de deux), 2 (Sugar Plum Fairy), 3 (Tarantella). These specific reordering and excerpt choices create a condensed, cohesive narrative centering around the Sugar-Plum Fairy and her Cavalier as the primary leads, opening with the grandiose 1st-movement "March," then swiftly introducing the lead characters in the 2nd and 3rd movements. This heightens the impact of their final dance together, the "Pas de deux" highlighted as the weightiest movement of this 7-movement suite. The 4th movement intermezzo is also reordered to serve its original purpose both in the suite as in the ballet, as a midpoint transition depicting the characters' "Journey through the Snow."