

24 June 2024

# ALEXANDER MELNIKOV

IN RECITAL



Presenting Partner



«SYDNEY»  
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# WELCOME

Welcome to the next concert in the International Pianists in Recital series for 2024, **Alexander Melnikov in Recital**.

The warm and inviting surroundings of City Recital Hall are the perfect place to experience Alexander Melnikov, a masterful musician who embodies the full and rich heritage of Russian piano music.

In this recital, we experience his dazzling yet disciplined talent in full flight as he performs music by Schubert, Brahms and Debussy.

With his characteristic emotional honesty and a surprisingly witty edge, Melnikov's performances are revelatory, particularly when playing such highly expressive music as this.

All of us at Theme & Variations are very proud to be the Presenting Partner of the 2024 International Pianists in Recital series, a year in which we also celebrate over 21 years of partnership with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Together, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Theme & Variations offer unsurpassed technical and artistic excellence to both musicians and audiences.

The Orchestra brings the world's most virtuosic pianists to the concert stages of our city, and it is an honour for us to provide specialised piano tuning and preparation of the magnificent instruments on which they perform.

I do hope you enjoy this recital by the remarkable pianist Alexander Melnikov.

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# 2024 CONCERT SEASON

INTERNATIONAL PIANISTS IN RECITAL

Monday 24 June, 7pm

City Recital Hall,

Angel Place

## ALEXANDER MELNIKOV IN RECITAL ROMANTIC MASTERPIECES

**Franz Schubert (1797–1828)**

**Fantasy in C major ('Wanderer Fantasy'), D760 (1822)**

i. Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo –

ii. Adagio –

iii. Presto –

iv. Allegro

**Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)**

**Fantasies, Op.116 (1892)**

No. 1 – Capriccio. Presto energico

No. 2 – Intermezzo. Andante

No. 3 – Capriccio. Allegro passionato

No. 4 – Intermezzo. Adagio

No. 5 – Intermezzo. Andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento

No. 6 – Intermezzo. Andantino teneramente

No. 7 – Capriccio. Allegro agitato

INTERVAL

**Claude Debussy (1862–1918)**

**Preludes, Book II (1912–1913)**

...*Brouillards* (Mists)

...*Feuilles mortes* (Dead Leaves)

...*La puerta del Vino* (The Wine Gate)

...«*Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*»

(‘Fairies are exquisite dancers’)

...*Bruyères*

...*Général Lavine – eccentric*

...*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*

(The Terrace of Moonlight Audiences)

...*Ondine*

...*Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*

...*Canope* (Canopic Jar)

...*Les tierces alternées* (Alternating Thirds)

...*Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks)

**Pre-concert talk**

By Sonia de Freitas in the  
Function Room, Level 1 at  
6.15pm

**Estimated durations**

Schubert – 21 minutes

Brahms – 20 minutes

Interval – 20 minutes

Debussy – 38 minutes

The concert will run for  
approximately two hours

**Cover image**

Alexander Melnikov

Photo by Julien Mignot

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Alexander Melnikov

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## ALEXANDER MELNIKOV piano

Alexander Melnikov completed his studies at the Moscow Conservatory under Lev Naumov. His most formative musical moments in Moscow include an early encounter with Svjatoslav Richter, who thereafter regularly invited him to festivals in Russia and France. He was awarded important prizes at eminent competitions such as the International Robert Schumann Competition in Zwickau (1989) and the Concours Musical Reine Elisabeth in Brussels (1991).

Known for his often unusual musical and programmatic decisions, Alexander Melnikov developed his career-long interest in historically informed performance practice early on. His major influences in this field include Andreas Staier and Alexei Lubimov. Melnikov performs regularly with distinguished period ensembles including the Freiburger Barockorchester, musicAeterna and Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin.

As a soloist, Alexander Melnikov has performed with orchestras including the Koninklijk Concertgebouw Orkest Amsterdam, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Philadelphia Orchestra, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, HR-Sinfonieorchester, Munich Philharmonic, Rotterdam Philharmonic and BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, under conductors such as Mikhail Pletnev, Teodor Currentzis, Charles Dutoit, Paavo Järvi, Thomas Dausgaard, Maxim Emelyanychev and Vladimir Jurowski.

Alexander Melnikov's association with the label harmonia mundi arose through his regular recital partner, violinist Isabelle Faust, and in 2010 their complete recording of the Beethoven sonatas for violin and piano won a *Gramophone* Award. This album, which has become a landmark recording for these works,

was also nominated for a Grammy. Their most recent releases feature Brahms and Mozart sonatas for violin and piano.

Melnikov's recording of the Preludes and Fugues by Shostakovich was awarded the *BBC Music Magazine* Award, Choc de classica and the Jahrespreis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik. In 2011, it was also named by *BBC Music Magazine* as one of the 50 Greatest Recordings of All Time. Additionally, his discography features works by Brahms, Rachmaninov, Shostakovich and Scriabin. Along with Isabelle Faust, Jean-Guihen Queyras, Pablo Heras-Casado and the Freiburger Barockorchester, Melnikov recorded a trilogy of albums featuring the Schumann Concertos and Trios (published in 2015-16) and Beethoven's Triple Concerto (2021). Other releases include a complete recording of Prokofiev's piano sonatas; *Four Pieces, Four Pianos*, released in 2018 and highly acclaimed by critics; and in 2023 his new album *Fantasie – Seven Composers Seven Keyboards* in which he plays pieces on the instruments of their time.

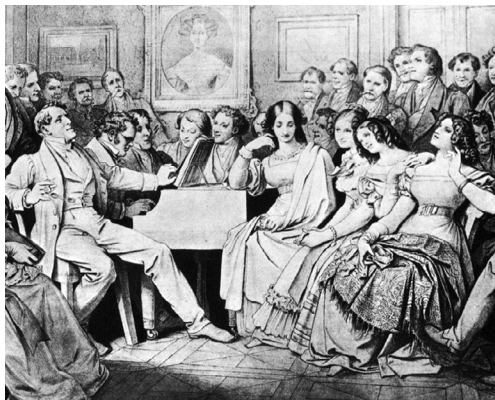
Highlights of the 2023/24 season will be Alexander Melnikov's concert tour to Australia with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, his residency as 'Porträtkünstler' at the Kölner Philharmonie, performances with François-Xavier Roth's orchestra Les Siècles, concerts with orchestras such as the Bayerisches Staatsorchester, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, the Münchener Kammerorchester and the baroque orchestra B'Rock from Belgium, and collaborations with Maxim Emelyanychev, Anja Bihlmaier, Vladimir Jurowski, Nicholas Collon and Osmo Vänskä among others.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO WAS FRANZ SCHUBERT?

Schubert was born in a one-room flat in Vienna where his parents and their five (of 14) children that survived infancy lived. His father, a schoolmaster, placed great importance on music and had Franz, aged seven, audition for the composer Antonio Salieri. Salieri taught him and, from 1808, Schubert was able to attend the Imperial and Royal City College, which had a good orchestra where, as a violinist, he played music by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. In 1813 he took a one-year teaching course, and for three years from 1814 taught as an assistant to his father.

At 19, he had written six symphonies, several string quartets and masses, numerous short solo pieces, begun one of his many doomed operatic projects, and written about 300 songs. Anyone who came to know Schubert's music during his lifetime probably did so by hearing his songs and chamber music performed at private gatherings in the homes of friends known as 'Schubertiades'.



*A Schubert Evening at the Home of Josef von Spaun on December 15, 1826, an 1868 sepia drawing by Moritz von Schwind (1804–1871).*

He heard no public performances of any of his symphonies, but an enthusiastic 'pro-am' orchestra that had grown up around the regular performances of chamber music in his parental household played them, and the Ninth Symphony was workshopped by the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (ancestor of the Vienna Philharmonic) in 1826. The teenaged Schubert wrote some eleven string quartets. He wrote no chamber music between 1816 and 1820, but works such as the 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet, the String Quintet and the two Piano Trios are, like the late piano sonatas and symphonies, works of extraordinary scale, structural intricacy and emotional breadth.

In his last year, 1828, Schubert composed the Fantasia in F minor for piano duet, and the Piano Trio in E flat was published. On 26 March he commemorated the anniversary of Beethoven's death (he had been a torch bearer at Beethoven's funeral the previous year) with the only public concert devoted to his own work during his lifetime, attracting a full house. In November, illness overtook him: on his death bed he made sketches, asked for copies of new novels (including *The Last of the Mohicans*) and heard a performance of Beethoven's C sharp minor quartet Op.131. Delirious for two days, he apparently sang constantly before passing away on 19 November at the age of 31.



Franz Schubert

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## THE WANDERER FANTASY

By 1822 Schubert had begun to receive some of the recognition that his work deserved. The previous year certain songs had been published, and now he was producing larger-scale works such as his Mass in A flat, the first two movements of what we now refer to as his 'Unfinished' Symphony and the Fantasy in C major.

Schubert, in his songs, was drawn to images of what Shakespeare called 'unaccommodated man'. As William Kinderman has noted, 'the protagonist, or Romantic wanderer – who assumes the role of the lyrical subject – is so often confronted by an indifferent or hostile reality.' This is partly a result of literary fashion – German poetry by Goethe and the younger poets who followed him is full of lonely young men wandering in isolated, sometimes sublime, landscapes; we can see the same image in many works by the contemporary painter Caspar David Friedrich.

In 1816 Schubert made the first version of a setting of a poem published as *Der Unglückliche* (the unhappy man) but which he called *Der Wanderer* (the wanderer). Georg Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck charts the familiar story of alienation from home and joy: leaving the people and things he loves, the poet has come from his mountain-home to the sea shore, which he finds cold and lifeless, and realises that happiness is where he is not.

Schubert used elements of his earlier song as the basis for a set of variations when it came time to compose the Fantasy in C major, as he did in works like the 'Trout' Quintet and the 'Death and the Maiden' String Quartet. But the song's material is not restricted to the work's variation set. In fact the work is revolutionary in the way in which Schubert weaves elements from the song throughout the whole work, so that each of the four linked sections begins with a gesture derived from it. A long-short-

short rhythmic motif (known also as a dactylic or canzone rhythm, and one much loved by Schubert in many works) kicks the piece off, initiated a phrase that ends with two strongly sounded chords. The rhythm is derived from the melody of the song (at the point where the poet complains that the sun is cold and flowers limp) and drives the music through its bravura unfolding. In the Adagio variations section the song's melody is heard more clearly. The presto third section, hinted at in the last moments of the Adagio, is a forthright scherzo, and with a pastoral Trio section; its sinuous theme refers to the line 'I wander silent, joyless here' but the pair of chords at the end of the phrases links it to the opening. The opening dactylic rhythm, hammered out as a fugue subject, signals the finale, though Baroque decorum is soon dropped in favour of breathtaking display.

On the face of it, the 'Wanderer Fantasy' looks like a four-movement sonata. The movements, however, are played without a break, and perhaps more importantly they depart from established form in that they do not return to their main keys but often to keys a third away from the 'home' key. The first section for instance begins in C major, but moves so far away from its home key that the Adagio can begin in C sharp minor and end in E. Traditionally minded musicians saw this as a flaw, but in fact it demonstrates how the notion of wandering became a structural element of the piece. As American author and music scholar William Kinderman says 'it seems that the music could have taken a different turn at many points.'

This work was extremely influential on two subsequent composers. Franz Liszt, who made a kind of concerto out of Schubert's piece, also used its tonal freedom and linked or 'telescoped' movements in his epochal B minor Piano Sonata. The other, who incorporated some of these ideas of key relations into his First Symphony, was Johannes Brahms.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO WAS JOHANNES BRAHMS?

Brahms died neither young, nor insane; he was never a liveried servant, nor dependent on aristocratic or royal patronage; he held several music directorships but never for long, and, while a performer of distinction, became increasingly able to support himself on composition. He grew relatively wealthy on the sale and performances of his music, but in Vienna he lived with his piano and collection of music manuscripts and books in a three-room flat for 25 years.

He was born in 1833 in Hamburg, in modest circumstances to a mismatched couple: Christiane and Johann Jakob Brahms a local session-musician. His early promise as a pianist was used to augment the family finances; the 15-year old played dance music in the dockside taverns (read: brothels) of his home town at night while studying by day.

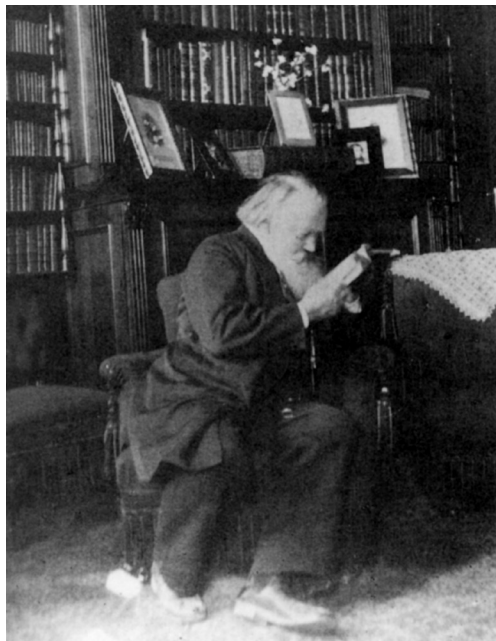
In September 1853 he met two of the most important influences on his life: Robert and Clara Schumann. Robert hailed the

appearance of a major talent, and as Schumann slipped into madness, Brahms grew closer to Clara. He never married.

Brahms settled in Vienna around 1869, where the conservative critic Eduard Hanslick felt he had found in Brahms the embodiment of the classical tradition of abstract music. His earliest works are for piano, some for public performance (though with an eye firmly on his posterity, Brahms destroyed a great many pieces in all genres) and some as studies. The period around the end of the 1850s and into the new decade see Brahms' first 'official' attempts at orchestral music, notably the First Concerto and the First Serenade. In the 1860s, Brahms focused on chamber music, though his mother's death catalysed a major choral orchestral piece: *A German Requiem*.

He suffered stage fright when it came to the symphony, and it is only in 1876 that the First, after many years, appeared. His symphonies, Second Piano Concerto and the two string concertos all date from the period 1876-1887, as do his three Violin Sonatas.

The String Quintet Op.111, dating from 1890, was to have been his last chamber work, but fortunately he made the acquaintance of clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld soon after, inspiring the Clarinet Trio and Quintet. His final works were Bachian chorale preludes, including two based on the chorale, 'O world, I must leave thee'. He died of liver cancer on 3 April 1897.



Brahms photographed in 1897



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## BRAHMS' FANTASIES

Once Brahms got over his Beethoven-induced stage fright and began writing symphonies his output of solo piano music was much reduced until he approached his 60th birthday. In 1892 and 1893 he produced four sets of new works for piano – Opp. 116 to 119, totalling 20 individual pieces. Where once Brahms produced weighty Beethovenian-scaled sonatas here the works are all short and seemingly simple; where Schubert expanded the model of the fantasy into something like a sonata, Brahms returns it to the realm of the miniature.

It has been suggested that some were written for the young pianist Ilona Elbenschütz (the implication being that Brahms was smitten with her) who premiered some of them in London, and later recorded some. At the same time Clara Schumann, with whom Brahms had a life-long if complicated relationship, was unwell and unable to play strenuous music, so enjoyed receiving these shorter pieces from Brahms. But as Jan Swafford has noted, 'they are a summation of what Brahms had learned, almost scientific studies of compositional craft and of piano writing, disguised as pretty salon pieces.'

Three of the seven (nos. 1, 3 and 7) are designated *Capriccio* suggesting a certain spontaneity of form and manner, while the remaining four are *Intermezzi* with again a sense of something improvised to pass the time. Brahms shows a particular liking for the simple ternary form, where a central section contrasting with the music that begins and ends the works, though his invention sees a huge variety of contrasting metres, rhythms, keys and thematic material. 'Internally' there is often contrast that belies the simple nature of the music: Brahms' rhythmic ingenuity, his characteristic tension between two and three beat groupings, and his use of rich string-beat dissonance threaten to tear off the disguise.

## WHO WAS CLAUDE DEBUSSY?

Born near Paris in 1862, Debussy began learning music at the age of seven and by ten years old was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire where he spent, on and off, 12 years studying. Like most of the canonical French composers Debussy applied for the Prix de Rome, failed on his first attempt, was runner-up on his second but, on his third, won. 'My heart sank,' he confessed. 'I had a sudden vision of boredom and of all the worries that inevitably go together with any kind of official recognition.' Nevertheless, in January 1885 he arrived in Rome where he would be accommodated in the Villa Medici, hated it, and spent the bare two-year minimum there.



1913 charcoal drawing of Debussy by Ivan Thiele (1877-1948).

Debussy's credo would become 'there is no theory; pleasure is the law', composing works that explored moments of sensual beauty with no – apparent – urgency to develop a musical argument, but we should be wary of simply assuming that his works are illustrative. And we should certainly avoid comparisons with Impressionism in painting, which after all gained notoriety while Debussy was still young. Like Beethoven in the 'Pastoral' Symphony, Debussy's musical response to the world was one of 'feeling rather than painting'.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

He was more drawn to the literary ideas of Symbolisme, and such works like Stéphane Mallarmé's dreamy *Afternoon of a Faune* would inspire one of Debussy's most characteristic works of erotic languor. One of Debussy's objections to Wagner was that 'symphonic development and character development can never unfold at exactly the same rate'. In *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy allows the text to dictate its own speed. The vocal lines are as simple and fluid as Gregorian chant. The harmony and orchestral writing, honed in such works as the *Prélude à 'L'après-midi d'un faune'* and the *Nocturnes*, responds with infinite subtlety to the emotional fluctuation of the texts.

## THE PRELUDES

While it is easy to trace a 'line of succession' that includes Mozart, Chopin and Debussy, his piano music is indebted to Robert Schumann's, with its similar ability to create music of immediate, allusive and emotional affect. His Preludes are not abstract studies like Chopin's but crystallise a series of images (though Debussy put the titles at the end of each piece, in parentheses). Those of the first book are more conventionally 'poetic' than the second, in which Debussy experiments with a sometimes ironic style.

Book Two dates from 1913 and consists of 12 pieces. *Brouillards* (Mists) creates the effect of mist with rapid figurations that support simple motifs, while in contrast *Feuilles mortes* (Dead Leaves) manages to create a sense of inert sparseness.

Composer Manuel de Falla once sent Debussy a postcard depicting the 'Puerta del Vino', or 'Wine Gate' of the Alhambra palace in the Andalusian city of Granada. (The Spanish name is probably a mistranslation from the Arabic). In this piece we hear guitar-derived sounds, such as the downwards strum, carefully etched habanera rhythms and the use of the 'Moorish' scale.

*Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses* (The fairies are exquisite dancers) according to Eric Frederick Jensen, depicts an Arthur Rackham illustration of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*.



*Fairies of the Serpentine* by Arthur Rackham (1867–1939), painted for JM Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906).

*Bruyères* offers a stark picture of moorland or heath, while Debussy's portrait of Général Lavine, an American music-hall star of the time who has been described as 'a comic juggler, half tramp and half warrior' is in the form of a cake-walk, introduced to Paris in 1899 and reflecting a fascination with African-American dance.

Jensen says that *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (The Terrace for Moonlight Audiences) 'may have been taken from a very matter-of-fact newspaper article on the coronation of George V' but its dreamlike atmosphere is a foil for *Ondine*, an evocation (possibly after Rackham) of the dangerous water sprite.

The title of *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. PPMPC* derives from Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, and Debussy has too much fun with the British national anthem.

The cool and measured *Canope* is named for small funerary urns (themselves named for the ancient city in Egypt), where *Les tierces alternées* (Alternating Thirds) simply describes the animating musical idea of the piece. The Preludes conclude with *Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks) which vividly evokes 'the crackling of rockets, the gradual parabolic descent of stars, the whirring of Catherine wheels...', in pianist Alfred Cortot's memorable words.

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& Michele Bender  
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& Renata Kaldor AO  
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John & Sophia Mar  
Helen Meddings  
& the late Phil Meddings  
In memory of Kevin Morris  
& Des McNally  
Jackie O'Brien  
Andrew Patterson  
& Steven Bardy  
Suzanne Rea  
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Chris Robertson & Kate Shaw  
Sylvia Rosenblum

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A/Prof Winston Liauw  
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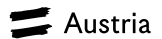
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