

28 October 2024

# NOBUYUKI TSUJII

IN RECITAL



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# WELCOME

Welcome to the final *International Pianists in Recital* performance for 2024, and to this concert, **Nobuyuki Tsujii in Recital**.

Japanese pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii has been blind since birth. Discovering the joy and fun of music at a very young age, his signature method of learning scores gives him an intimate and unparalleled connection to the music he performs.

This extraordinarily gifted musician was the winner of the prestigious Van Cliburn Piano Competition at just 20 years old.

Unstoppable in every sense, his performances have been described by *The Independent* as 'electrifying' and by *The Guardian* as possessing 'irresistible poise and spark'.

In this recital, Tsujii displays the full range of his abilities, from the stormy passage of Beethoven's *Tempest* sonata through to the excitement and expansiveness of Liszt and Ravel and the distinctive jazz influences of Kapustin's Etudes.

This is an energetic and brilliant program built by a generous and supremely confident young pianist.

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 22 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.

I thank you for joining us for the *International Pianists in Recital* series for 2024 and I hope you enjoy this brilliant recital.

**Nyree Vartoukian**  
**Director**  
**Theme & Variations Piano Services**



# 2024 CONCERT SEASON

International Pianists In Recital  
Monday 28 October, 7pm

Concert Hall,  
Sydney Opera House

## NOBUYUKI TSUJII IN RECITAL VOYAGE OF VIRTUOSITY

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN** (1770–1827)

**Piano Sonata No.17 in D minor, Op.31 No.2, 'The Tempest'** (1802)

- i. Largo – Allegro
- ii. Adagio
- iii. Allegretto

**FRANZ LISZT** (1811–1886)

**Years of Pilgrimage, Second Year: Italy**

**Venice and Naples, S162** (1859)

- i. *Gondoliera* (Gondolier's Song)
- ii. *Canzone*
- iii. *Tarantella*

INTERVAL

**MAURICE RAVEL** (1875–1937)

**Minuet on the name of Haydn** (1909)

**Pavane pour une infante défunte** (Pavane for a Dead Princess)  
(1899)

**Jeux d'eau** (Fountains) (1901)

**NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN** (1937–2020)

**Eight Concert Etudes, Op.40** (1984)

- i. Prelude
- ii. Reverie
- iii. Toccata
- iv. Remembrance
- v. Raillery
- vi. Pastorale
- vii. Intermezzo
- viii. Finale

### Pre-concert talk

By Zoltan Szabo in the  
Northern Foyer at 6.15pm

### Estimated durations

Beethoven – 22 minutes  
Liszt – 19 minutes  
Interval – 20 minutes  
Ravel – 14 minutes  
Kapustin – 27 minutes

The concert will run for  
approximately two hours

### Cover image

Photo by Yuji Hori

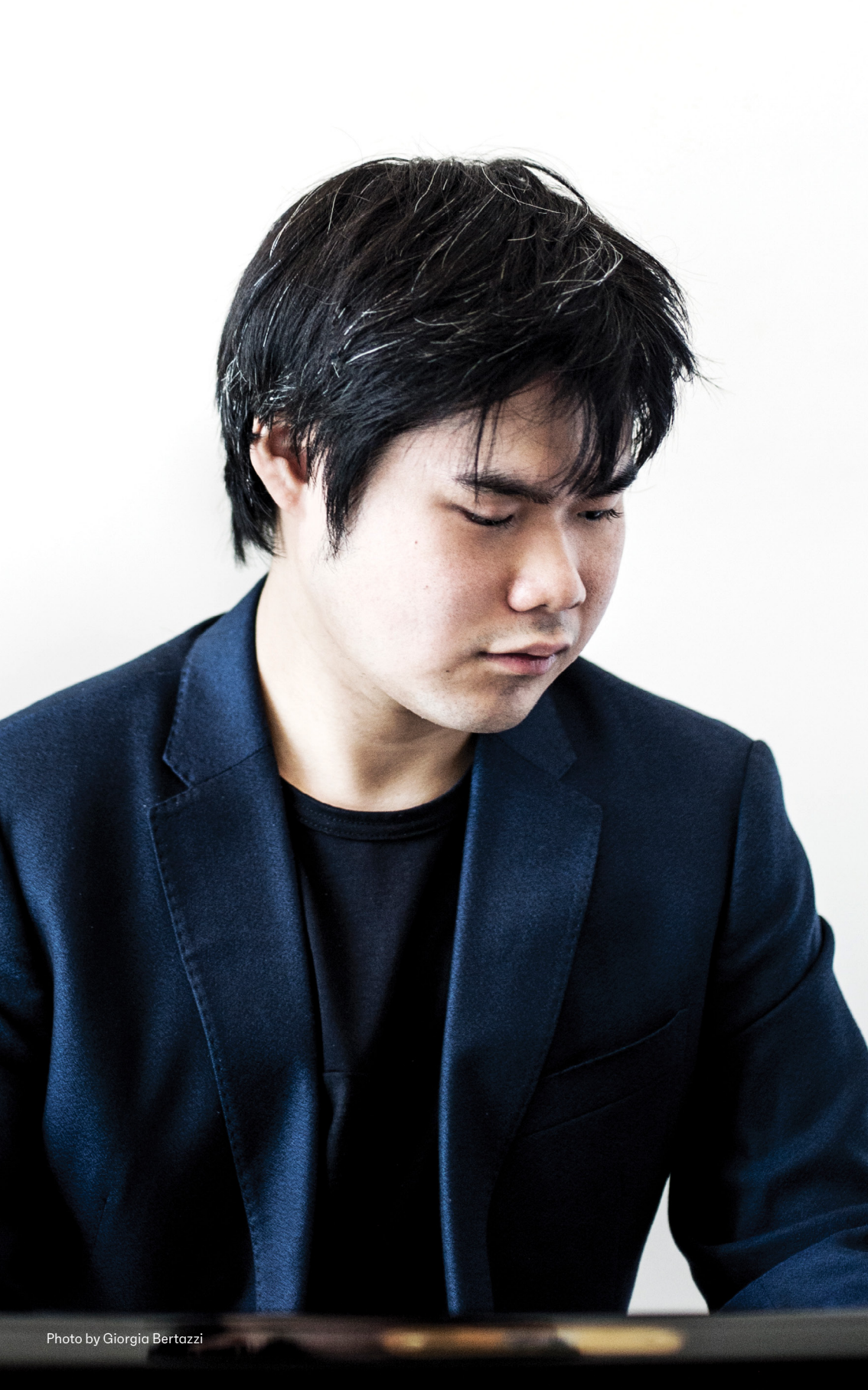
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# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **NOBUYUKI TSUJII** piano

Described by *The Observer* as the ‘definition of virtuosity’ Japanese pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii (Nobu), who has been blind from birth, won the joint Gold Medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2009 and has gone on to earn an international reputation for the passion and excitement he brings to his live performances.

Nobu’s 2024/25 season opens with an extensive concert tour of Japan with Robin Ticciati and London Philharmonic Orchestra. This is closely followed by a solo appearance with Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and subsequent a tour of Australia that sees Nobu appear as a concerto soloist alongside the Sydney, Queensland and Tasmanian symphony orchestras, and in recital at Melbourne Recital Centre and UKARIA Adelaide. He returns to the United States for concerts at Carnegie Hall, Civic Music Association Des Moines, La Jolla Music Society, ANA Honolulu Music Week, and as a soloist with Seattle Symphony Orchestra. European dates include concerti with Bilbao Orkestra Sinfonikoa, George Enescu Philharmonic Bucharest, Orquesta Filarmonica de Gran Canaria and Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and recitals at London’s Southbank Centre, National Concert Hall Dublin, Interlaken Classics, and the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester.

Earlier seasons have seen Nobu appear in concert with leading orchestras worldwide including Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, Philharmonia Orchestra, NHK Symphony, Seattle and Baltimore symphony orchestras, Münchner Philharmoniker, Filarmonica della Scala, Tonkünstler-Orchester Niederösterreich at the Wiener Musikverein, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi and Hong Kong Philharmonic. He maintains a close relationship with Domingo Hindoyan and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom he

performed a sold-out concert at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms in 2023. Notable past collaborations also include the Philharmonisches Staatsorchester Hamburg under Kent Nagano, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra under Klaus Mäkelä, the Mariinsky Orchestra under Valery Gergiev, the NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover under Andrew Manze, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Vasily Petrenko, and BBC Philharmonic under Juanjo Mena. Nobu’s appearances as a recitalist have included performances at prestigious venues worldwide such as Carnegie Hall’s Stern Auditorium, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, London’s Queen Elizabeth Hall, Wigmore Hall and Royal Albert Hall, the Berlin Philharmonie, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, and Singapore Esplanade.

An exclusive recording artist for Avex Classics International, Nobu’s growing album catalogue encompasses the breadth of the piano concerto repertoire. It currently includes Chopin’s Piano Concerto No.2 with Vladimir Ashkenazy and Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Grieg’s Piano Concerto and Rachmaninov’s *Variations on a theme of Paganini* under Vasily Petrenko with Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No.2 with Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No.1 with Yutaka Sado and BBC Philharmonic, Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No.5 with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Nobu has also recorded several recital programs of Chopin, Mozart, Debussy and Liszt.

A live DVD recording of Nobu’s 2011 Carnegie Hall recital was named DVD of the Month by *Gramophone*, as was his latest DVD release, ‘Touching the Sound – The Improbable Journey of Nobuyuki Tsujii’, a documentary film by Peter Rosen.

Nobu’s international tours are supported by All Nippon Airways (ANA) and he gratefully acknowledges their assistance.



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

### Piano Sonata in D minor, 'The Tempest'

When Beethoven left Bonn for Vienna in November 1792, his patron Count Waldstein wrote that he would 'receive the spirit of Mozart from Haydn's hands.' It didn't quite work out that way. Haydn was distracted by his sudden international stardom, and Beethoven wouldn't have been the first young composer to imagine that no-one could teach him anything anyway.

The first of Beethoven's numbered piano sonatas, Op.2, were published in 1796. They are dedicated to Haydn, but as Harold Truscott has argued, the model is the music of Muzio Clementi, who composed the 'first genuine piano sonatas ever written'. From Clementi Beethoven developed a sense of the potential of piano sonority (in which he remained profoundly interested even when physically unable to hear in later life) and a fluid approach to thematic transitions in his opening sonata-form movements. This allows for greater drama than Haydn or Mozart imagined in their sonatas, perfect for a young virtuoso determined to establish himself.

Beethoven could have felt truly established by 1802 – also, by cruel irony, the year he started experiencing symptoms of hearing loss. The 'Tempest', Beethoven's only D minor Piano Sonata, dates from that year, though only got its nickname after his death, so it seems unlikely that he was either nature-painting or thinking of Shakespeare's valedictory romance. Its first movement contrasts slow (Largo) and fast (Allegro) music as Beethoven had done elsewhere, but what is new here is that there is no formal division between these utterly different elements – in other words the fusion of both constitutes the movement's main theme, which can, and does, go in any number of different directions. The otherworldly slow arpeggios and turbulent fast music constantly interpenetrate, creating a new form and dramatic shape, and as the movement progresses it is notable how



Portrait of Beethoven c.1804 by Joseph Willibrord Mähler (1778–1860).

important the device of unaccompanied recitative, miming the rhythms of speech rather than song, and complete with Baroque dotted rhythms, becomes. And of course the recitative prefigures a similar moment, in the same key, in the much later Ninth Symphony, where the baritone sings 'O friends, not *these* tones...'

As in the 'Moonlight' Sonata and elsewhere, Beethoven transfers and transforms material across movements. The Adagio is full of the first movement's arpeggio figures and dotted rhythms, though as William Kinderman points out the tonality is more stable and the overall context is 'brighter, warmer'.

The finale has a relentless texture also derived from the first movement's repeated arpeggio figures, with a simple rhythmic offset to create headlong motion. As Kinderman goes to note, this momentum 'sweeps away the rhetoric of dialogue characteristic of the previous movements. Intimate, speech-like accents are left behind here.'

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

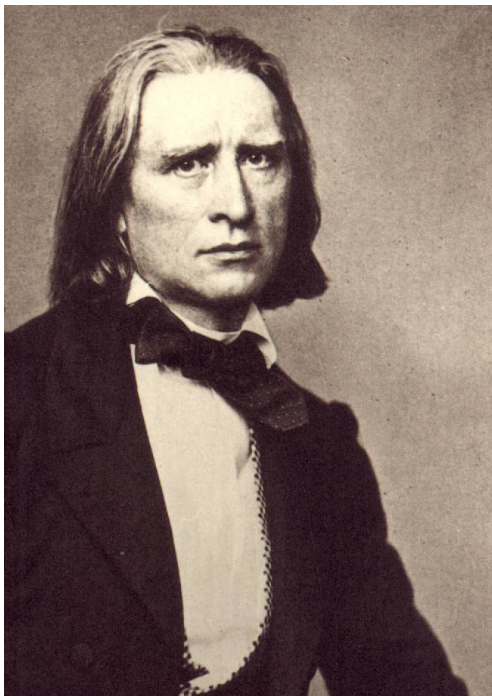
Beethoven's friend Ferdinand Ries told a story of how Beethoven began playing this Sonata at a Vienna soirée, on which occasion he made a mistake and 'struck with his whole hand all the crotchets...it sounded as if the piano were being cleaned out.' Having been hit over the head by the Princess Liechtenstein 'not exactly gently', he started again and played 'inimitably'.

## FRANZ LISZT

### *Venice and Naples, S162*

Liszt's stellar career as a virtuoso, and his effective invention of the solo recital, is generally thought to have started in 1839. It is then that he began performance tours that took him as far afield as Ireland and Turkey (and pretty much everywhere else in between), playing a staggering amount of what we now call the 'standard repertoire'. Much of his composition during this phase was based on the music of other composers. This provided Liszt with a wealth of repertoire and meant that he could bring otherwise unavailable music to a wider audience. His transcriptions of songs by Schubert and Beethoven, for instance, ensured their wider currency in a way that recording and broadcasting does in our own time. On tour in 1840 he wrote a set of four pieces that evoked 'Venice and Naples' (S159), but in 1859 reworked some of its material for a new set of three pieces, *Venezia e Napoli*, S162, which he published as a supplement to the second, 'Italian', volume of his *Années de pèlerinage*.

The pilgrimage was hardly religious, but was a means of escaping the scandal in Paris caused by his relationship with the Countess Maire d'Agout. Nevertheless, Liszt's 'years of pilgrimage' provided the opportunity for shortish musical snapshots, laying the foundations for the descriptive miniatures cultivated by Schumann, and later Debussy and Ravel.



A photo of Liszt in 1858, taken by Franz Hanfstaengl (1804–1877).

Both versions of *Venezia e Napoli*, like much of Liszt's earlier music, freely elaborate that other composers. The opening 'Gondoliera' is based on a then-popular song in the Venetian dialect, also set by Beethoven, 'La biondina in gondoleta' (The blonde girl in the little gondola) by the Cavaliere Giovanni Battista Peruchini. Liszt, naturally, adds glittering liquid textures to this simple barcarolle. The 'Canzone' is also a gondolier's song, though this time with more sinister overtones, as its tune 'Nessun maggior dolore' (There is no greater sorrow) is the song of the gondolier from Act III of Rossini's *Otello*. Naples is represented by the final 'Tarantella' – in popular myth, a frenetic dance used to dispel the poison of a tarantula, though more likely one that originated in Taranto. The melody used here comes from a dance by Guillaume Louis Cottrau.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

In some exasperation, Ravel once asked a friend, ‘Doesn’t it ever occur to those people that I can be “artificial” by nature?’ He was responding to the criticism that his music was more interested in technique than expression. There is some truth in the charge: Stravinsky described him – affectionately – as the ‘Swiss watchmaker of music’, and Ravel’s stated aim was indeed ‘technical perfection’.

Ravel’s works are frequently, exquisite simulacra of existing styles and forms. In *Le tombeau de Couperin*, twentieth century piano music pays a genuine homage to the baroque suite and keyboard style of the earlier French master. In *Gaspard de la nuit* he famously set out to write his version of Lisztian piano music, wryly suggesting that he ‘might have overdone it’. His *Shéhérazade* songs evoke a typical early-20th century view of Asia where orchestration and subject matter relate directly to Russian music, especially that of Rimsky-Korsakov.



A 1907 photograph of Maurice Ravel by Pierre Petit.

## *Minuet on the name of Haydn*

Archaic dance forms are central to Ravel’s output and in 1908 he was one of several French composers – including Debussy, Dukas, d’Indy and Widor – to compose a short work in honour of the centenary of the death of Haydn for the *Revue musicale de la Société Musicale Indépendante*. Each work used a kind of cipher of Haydn’s name (along the lines of the many pieces based on BACH or Shostakovich’s signature DSCH): here ‘Haydn’ is spelled B natural–(H in German)–A–D–D–G. In addition to the musical cipher, Ravel, of course, pays tribute to Haydn in using the form of the minuet; this not always respectable but eventually courtly dance provided the basis for any number of movements in his symphonies and chamber music. The music is not, however, ‘à la manière’ of Haydn (Ravel did write pastiches ‘à la manière de’ Emmanuel Chabrier, François Couperin and Alexander Borodin). This little minuet is full of his characteristic added-note chords (sevenths and ninths) and unexpected sidesteps to distant harmonies.

## *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (Pavane for a Dead Princess)

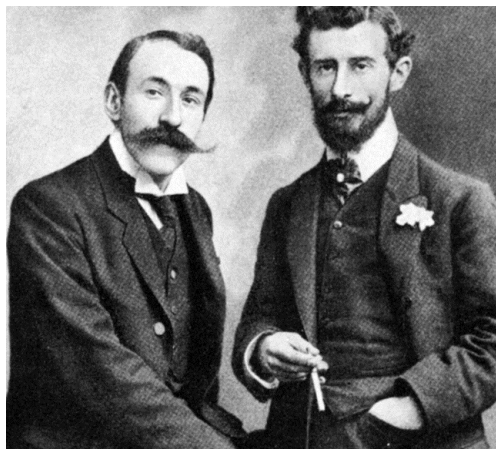
Like *Bolero*, the *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was a work about which its composer was hugely ambivalent. Both works had immediate and widespread success, which was, of course, to Ravel’s advantage; but neither work could be said wholly to represent Ravel’s individual musical personality. Ravel certainly felt that the piece was ‘too flagrantly’ indebted to the style of Chabrier, and in later years complained of the work’s ‘poor form’.

It was composed in 1899 as a solo work for Ricardo Viñes, a Catalan pianist to whom Ravel had been a close friend since they began studying at the Conservatoire a decade before, and Viñes premiered it at the Salle Pleyel in 1902. Viñes would premiere a number of Ravel’s works, and on occasion was the dedicatee; the *Pavane*,



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

however, was dedicated to the American-born Princesse Edmond de Polignac, originally Winaretta Singer, an heiress to her father's sewing-machine fortune. Given Ravel's lifelong love of automata and other machines, it is somehow fitting that Ravel should frequent her salon, and that she receive the work's dedication.



Ravel and pianist Ricardo Viñes

One reason for the *Pavane*'s instant success was that it is within the technical reach of non-professional pianists; another was its romantic title. A somewhat exasperated Ravel insisted, in later life, that the title grew largely out of his love of alliteration; it was a matter of some annoyance that he had to spell out, first, that, in Spanish, *infanta* refers to a princess of particular rank, who need not have been a child, or *enfant*. Moreover, as Ravel had on occasion to point out, it is not a funerary dance for a dead princess. A pavane is, of course, a stately dance much loved in the courts of Renaissance Europe. Ravel's piece, as it were, imagines the elegant dance of a princess of that time; it is the memory on an era that is now irretrievably passed.

Here, the Renaissance dance is evoked in its stately rhythm, with diatonic melody and a simple accompaniment whose occasional flourishes at the end of phrases suggest the lute or guitar. The piece's ABACA form corresponds to that of any number of Renaissance-era fantasias, but

the harmony - with its chords of the seventh and ninth on strong beats (as we have noted in the 'Haydn' menuet and will hear again in *Jeux d'eau*) - is pure Ravel.

For all his ambivalence, Ravel contributed to the piece's popularity by playing it himself on numerous occasions (in a determinedly non-elegiac manner) and in 1910 scored it for an orchestra of Mozartian dimensions plus harp, a version immediately heard in Paris and London. Given the delicate clarity with which the piece remembers a lost time, it is no surprise that author Marcel Proust wanted it played at his funeral.

## ***Jeux d'eau* (Fountains)**

As the 20th century dawned in Paris a number of like-minded young men formed a club called the Société des Apaches - taking theirs from the contemporary criminal gang of the same name. They argued about new trends in the arts and philosophy and attended performances of new works *en masse*. Among the members were composers Maurice Ravel and Florent Schmitt, and several writers. Symbolist poetry was immensely important, and in two works from this Ravel used superscriptions from the Symbolist poet Henri de Régnier. One of these, *Jeux d'eau* has been described as Ravel's first true piano masterpiece, and, like the *Pavane*, its success became something of an annoyance.

Ravel is no more an impressionist than Debussy was, it's true that both composers delighted in the musical depiction of water. (In fact some years after *Jeux d'eau* appeared Ravel was accused of imitating Debussy, but was able calmly to point out that in 1902 Debussy was yet to write the pieces that Ravel is supposed to have stolen from.) *Jeux d'eau*'s epigraph from Régnier describes 'the river god laughing at the water that tickles him.' Ravel somewhat unhelpfully described the piece as 'based on two themes, like the first movement of a sonata' when really the effect of the piece is of constant flux, with glittering cascades of sound.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN

### Eight Concert Etudes, Op.40

Born in the Donetsk province of present-day Ukraine, Nikolai Kapustin came to maturity in the years of the Khrushchev 'thaw'. Kapustin showed early promise with a piano sonata composed at the age of 13, and, his talent recognised, concentrated on music from primary to tertiary level, entering the Moscow Conservatory to study piano in 1956. His teacher there, Alexander Goldenweizer, represents a link to the pre-Revolutionary age of Russian music, as he was a friend of Tolstoy and classmate of composers such as Scriabin, Rachmaninov and Medtner. But Kapustin, while at the Conservatory, developed an interest in jazz (as subversive in its way as 'formalism', the term by which Soviet officialdom denoted contemporary Western art music). By the 1980s, when he gave up concert performance to concentrate on composing, Kapustin's music was heavily inflected with jazz idioms though, as he was at pains to point out, 'I was never a jazz musician... I'm not interested in improvisation – and what is a jazz musician without improvisation?' And, we might add, his piano writing in particular is as deeply infused with the tradition of Russian pianism – Rachmaninov and Scriabin in particular, as well as displaying familiarity with the kind of jazz influence that we find in composers as different as Debussy and Ravel, Michael Tippett and Samuel Barber.

That said, the concert etudes Kapustin composed in 1984 are full of varying types of jazz idioms, and as etudes they could well be described as transcendental. Each requires a dizzying level of virtuosity from the performer, who must negotiate intricate rhythmic and metrical games, often at high speed, with frequent and rapid changes of register in the left hand and fully-voiced harmony in the right.



Nikolai Kapustin. Photo © Peter Andersen, Schott Music

The very fast **Prelude** sets this agenda, where driving patterns in the left hand (often sounding the bass note on the strong beat and then a chord on the weak) and emphatic syncopations in the right. The moderato **'Dream'** provides some contrast with a constant rippling two-part ostinato in the right hand with barcarolle-like figures rising and falling in the left. The **Toccata** might nod to Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*, as it is driven by repeated-note ostinatos that pass from voice to voice, as explosive syncopated chords burst out above and below.

The slower pace of the **Larghetto** is expressed in the slow regularity of the rich chords stated, at first, by the left hand, above which the right noodles an impossibly ornate tracery; these relations are occasionally swapped. **'Shuitka'**, or 'raillery', is certainly humorous, essentially a 12-bar boogie buried under a typically sophisticated surface. The **Pastoral** sixth etude is busier than one might have expected, a kind of speeded-up ragtime.

The **Intermezzo** has what writer Distler calls an 'easy lope' and 'dismaying tunefulness' that Kapustin casts in brilliant, but extremely difficult, figurations. The **finale** seems to concentrate elements of the faster predecessors: relentless passage work, mainly in the left hand, with richly chromatic harmony and acrobatic cross-rhythms above.

**Gordon Kerry © 2024**

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