THE VMI DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND FINE ARTS

AND

THE TIMMINS–GENTRY MUSIC SOCIETY

PRESENT

VICTOR SANTIAGO ASUNCION

PROGRAM

Chaconne in D Minor (Arr. Busoni) . . . . . Johann Sebastian Bach

Sonata in D Major (K. 576) . . . . . .Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

1. **Allegro**
2. **Adagio**
3. **Allegretto**

INTERMISSION

Schumann, "Widmung". . . . . (Trans.) Franz Liszt

Mephisto Waltz . . . . . Franz Liszt

Schubert, "Gretchen am Spinnrade" . . . . . (Trans.) Franz Liszt

Waltz from Gounod's *Faust* . . . . . (Trans.) Franz Liszt

JACKSON MEMORIAL HALL, VMI

OCTOBER 15, 2008, 7:45

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH, CHACONNE IN D MINOR (ARR. BUSONI). Like many Baroque instrumental forms, the chaconne began life as a dance—actually, a slow, three-beat dance based on repeated variations of a four-bar phrase in the bass line. Bach used the form only twice—once in the final section of Cantata 150 ("Meine Tage in dem Leide") and, more memorably, in the D minor partita for solo violin where it serves as the powerful, climactic final movement. It's a piano version of the latter that we are about to hear. Jenne and Little describe the piece as "gigantic" and observe that its most distinctive feature, apart from the constantly varied four-bar ostinato bass figure, is its key structure: a harmonic progression from D minor to D major and back to D minor. (In Baroque practice it was usually the opposite: from major to minor to major.)

The length and complexity of the Chaconne have inspired several transcriptions, the most famous of which is that of composer-pianist Ferrucio Busoni. In an effort to adapt it for performance on the grand piano—to make it resonate more fully in the large, modern concert hall—Busoni virtually recomposed the piece. Although purists wince, concert-goers generally find the result moving and powerful.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART, SONATA IN D MAJOR (K. 576). In the spring of 1798, Mozart was facing financial ruin. His concert career was behind him, commissions had dried up, and the costs of his wife Constanza's medical treatments at an expensive spa were mounting. Presuming upon his friendship with fellow Mason Michael Puchberg, he was borrowing steadily, and he had paid at least one visit to the pawnshop. Therefore, when his friend and sometime pupil Prince Karl Lichnowsky offered to take him to Berlin and introduce him to King Frederick William II of Prussia, he accepted. An accomplished cellist with a piano-playing daughter, the Prussian monarch was a promising source of revenue. The trip wasn't, however, very profitable. Mozart returned to Vienna with commissions, as he later wrote, for "six easy keyboard sonatas for Princess Frederike and six quartets for the king." Although he would eventually finish three of the quartets, he never composed the sonatas. Not that he didn't try. In late June or early July following his return he began gestating the first of them, but at 33, having acquired the habit of perfection, he evidently couldn't bring himself to dumb it down for the digitally challenged daughter of the King. Instead, although it promised to put no money in his pocket, he wrote the brilliant and technically demanding D major sonata. As you will hear, it's anything but easy.

More than one listener has heard in the crisp, exhilarating main theme of the first movement and the 6/8 meter that supports it an echo of the trumpet or the hunting horn. "In one form or another," says Charles Suttoni, "this fanfare permeates the whole movement"—a movement in which the *galant* style of the late 18th century, which features a single chord-supported and lightly ornamented melody, is indissolubly merged with the earlier contrapuntal style of J. S. Bach. This fusion of new and old styles is clearly heard in the opening measures where the melody is played straight, repeated, then replayed against a rapid, running figure in the right hand. As Stanley Sadie observes, "There is much contrapuntal working-out in the development and recapitulation to follow." Unusually, despite a brief chromatic lead-in, a couple of shifts into a minor key, and some further manipulations of the opening theme, the brief development section offers relatively little contrast in mood with what preceeds it. As always with Mozart, the recapitulation, which is designed to complete the structural symmetry of the movement, fairly closely resembles the exposition but doesn't replicate it.

By contrast with the opening movement, the slow movement contains no counterpoint, relying for its effectiveness on one clearly articulated and chastely ornamented melody. It opens tentatively with a rising, almost sinister figure in the in the left hand. Following a repeat of this is a graceful,

reflective passage whose serenity is startlingly shattered by a series of emphatic bass notes. Several measures into the movement, the plaintive, deeply affecting melody finally appears. Partly because of the absence of counterpoint, perhaps, we're able to savor to the fullest this lyrical, eloquent expression of what Alfred Einstein calls "deep longing and meditation."

The ebullience of the opening movement returns in the rondo finale. So, too, the frequent forays into intricate counterpoint. Although its unassuming theme lacks the panache of the horn-call that dominates the first movement, it's nonetheless memorable enough to snag our attention whenever it recurs—which, as the rules of the rondo demand, is often. Although she might have managed the slow movement of the sonata, Princess Frederike would surely have found daunting the tricky figurations and swift passage-work into which this movement occasionally erupts. Suttoni goes so far as to call the rondo "a tour de force both as a composition and as a pianistic showpiece." It therefore provides an excellent introduction to the Liszt pieces that will follow the intermission.

INTERMISSION

FRANZ LISZT, TRANSCRIPTION OF SCHUMANN'S *WIDMUNG*. Before the 19th century, "virtuoso" was indiscriminately conferred upon poets, architects, painters, scholars, or musicians—anyone, in fact, who had particularly distinguished himself in the arts or humanities. In Paris in the 1830s, however, it came to be applied solely to certain musicians—mainly performers on the newly perfected seven-octave grand piano whose gobsmacking technical bravura made them superheroes to a middle-class public famished for diversion. Each of these virtuosi had his cult of rapturously adoring fans. Envy was rife, competition was cut-throat, and when some of the more aggressive competitors began challenging their rivals to public piano duels, music-making became something of a blood sport. "Concert-goers watched with relish," says Alan Walker, "as one pianist attempted to outplay another— gladiators of the keyboard locked in combat, fighting it out in the open arena of the concert hall." ("In this corner, Friederich Kalkbrenner, the Bösendorfer mauler—and in this corner, fresh from his victories over Johann Peter Pixis and Sigismund Thalberg, Alexander Dreyschock, the Pleyel Pounder!") Of all the gladiators only Franz Liszt is remembered today by most music-lovers, not so much for the frenzy of adulation that he once inspired as for the music that he wrote to inspire it—fiendishly virtuosic stuff requiring for its full display arms and fingers of spring steel and an uncanny mental agility. Much of this display music assumed the form of either the operatic paraphrase or the transcription of an art song.

Liszt's transcription of Robert Schumann's setting of *Widmung* ("Dedication"), Friedrich Rückert's brief, ecstatic love poem, begins with a sequence of gently undulating broken chords from which the deeply affecting melody—a wordless evocation of the words "You are my heart and soul, my bliss and pain"—gradually detaches itself. Following an emphatic repeat of the melody, a falling arpeggio introduces a second, equally touching melody. After a few measures, this ends in a startling 32nd-note upscale run to the final, richly resonant statement of the original theme. Although Liszt preserves the noble simplicity of Schumann's melodies, he articulates and embellishes them with virtuosic effects—rapidly hammered notes, sweeping glissandi, and bold dynamic shifts—that would have drawn admiring sighs from his Paris audience but might have caused Schumann to wince. (Schumann's wife Clara, who usually shared her husband's opinions, once described Liszt as "a smasher of pianos.")

FRANZ LISZT, MEPHISTO WALTZ. Liszt's fascination with the story of Faust's bargain with Mephistopheles, that suavely treacherous incarnation of Satanic mischief, produced several instru-

mental works, among them the *Faust* Symphony, a handful of piano transcriptions of Faust-inspired compositions by other composers, and four versions of the Mephisto Waltz.

This subtitle of this famous display piece, "Dance in the Village Inn," reveals that the source of its inspiration was Nicholas Lenau's long poem *Faust*, not Goethe's play. It opens with a sequence of menacing bass tremolandi—"a devilish pile of fifths," says Leslie Howard—that quickly swells in volume. Following two repeats of this, the second of them played staccato, there is a brief pause followed by a downscale glissando that catapaults us into the diabolic main theme. Much of what follows defies analysis. It's perhaps enough to say that it's a veritable catalogue of the kinds of virtuosic effects that prompted composer-pianist Anton Rubinstein to exclaim that "compared with Liszt, the rest of us are children!": hammered chords, sweeping arpeggios, long trills, treble figurations, blizzards of swift scalework, and dazzling chromaticism. One of the more memorable effects occurs about halfway through the piece when a tender, unhurried passage suddenly erupts into a series of rapid 32nd- note runs that reach a climax in an icy tangle of notes in the high treble. More than once in the course of the piece the idea of a dance in 3/4 time—even a drunken dance in a tavern led by the mischievous Mephistopheles himself—gets lost in a miasma of virtuosic effects. The work ends on two quick, soft notes.

FRANZ LISZT, TRANSCRIPTION OF SCHUBERT'S *GRETCHEN AM SPINNRADE*. Franz Schubert's setting of Gretchen's soliloquy from Goethe's *Faust*, during which the forsaken woman alternately bemoans her lost innocence and yearns for her lover, is generally regarded as his first truly original art song. Its originality is owing mainly to the fact that, rather than merely supporting the voice part, the piano assumes an active role in the drama—that of the spinning wheel that turns while Gretchen laments. Liszt's transcription, which is about the same length as Schubert's *lied*, is surprisingly literal and self-effacing. Its re-creation in the left hand of the endlessly repeated rising and falling motiv that, as Richard Wigmore says, "at once evokes the rotation of the spinning wheel (with the click of the bobbin) and mirrors every shade of Gretchen's emotions," is almost indistinguishable from Schubert's accompaniment. Moreover, it preserves the arch of Schubert's drama, following closely the fluctuations of tempo and dynamics that register Gretchen's changes of emotion and twice rising to a near-hysterical climax followed by a moment of stunned silence.

FRANZ LISZT, TRANSCRIPTION OF A WALTZ FROM GOUNOD'S OPERA *FAUST*. Liszt wastes little time in leading us to Gounod's big melody. After riveting our attention with two statements of a proclamatory, six-note figure followed by a teasing fragment of the melody, he moves us by restless passage-work to the very top of the keyboard, from which, by a fortissimo leap down the scale, he flings us headlong into his first, full statement of Gounod's exhilarating (and, if you suffer from ear-worms, maddeningly memorable) waltz tune. Shortly thereafter, we hear a spiky elaboration of the tune at the top of the keyboard, an effect of which Liszt was particularly fond, as you're probably by now aware. There follows a lyrical, almost languorous interlude shaped around a new melody—an evocation, perhaps, of the yet-unspoiled love of Faust and Gretchen. The thunderous final return of the main melody and the frenzied Mephistophelean rush to the finish that follows it were clearly meant to knock the socks off of Liszt's groupies.

Victor Santiago Asuncion

His brilliant technique, musical insight, and engaging stage presence have earned Victor Santiago Asuncion a reputation as one of America's finest young pianists. At eighteen, the Philippine-born artist played his debut concert with the Manila Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Sergio Esmilla, and in1999 he played his first New York recital in the Weill Recital Hall of Carnegie Hall. Sub-sequently, as the winner of an award from the National Council of the Arts, he was chosen to perform with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and he has since performed as either pianist or harpsichordist with such orchestras as the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra, the Washington Opera Orchestra, the Washington Bach Consort, and the 20th Century Consort at the Smithsonian Institution. He has performed under the direction of, among others, Harold Farberman, Arthur Weisburg, Enrique Batiz, and James Conlon. A chamber music enthusiast, he has collaborated with such artists as Lynn Harrell, Cho-Liang Lin, Andres Diaz, and the Vega and Emerson String Quartets. During the 2005–2006 season he appeared at Strathmore Hall, the Corcoran Gallery, and Weill Recital Hall. He is a regular guest pianist at the music festivals at Santa Fe and Amelia Island, and, as local music-lovers are well aware, he was for several years in residence at the Garth Newel Music Center in Warm Springs. His performances have been broadcast on WQXR in New York and on NPR's Performance Today. He is also on the artist roster of the Piatigorsky Foundation, a non-profit organization that presents concerts throughout the United States. In 2003, Mr. Asuncion joined the University of Memphis faculty as a teacher of piano and chamber music, and in 2004 was named the university's coordinator of piano.

Next concert:

The Kandinsky Trio
November 12, 2008, at 7:45
Jackson Memorial Hall

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