



presents...

FRANCESCO PIEMONTESE | Piano

Tuesday, May 21, 2019 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

BACH

(arr. Busoni)

Prelude in E-flat Major, BWV 552

Nun komm der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659

Cantata No. 140: "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme"

BACH

Italian Concerto, BWV 971

Allegro

Andante

Presto

BACH

(arr. Kempff)

Siciliano from Flute Sonata in E-flat Major, BWV 1031

BACH

(arr. Busoni)

Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 552

INTERMISSION

DEBUSSY

Images, Book II, L.111

Cloches à travers les feuilles

Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut

Poissons d'or

RACHMANINOFF

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op.36

Allegro agitato

Non allegro

Allegro molto

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Francesco Piemontesi is represented by Colbert Artists Management
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Hamburg Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco

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ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the San Francisco debut of Francesco Piemontesi.



Francesco Piemontesi appears with major ensembles worldwide: Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, DSO and Berlin Radio Symphony, Bavarian Radio Symphony, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, BBC Symphony, The Hallé, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Danish National Symphony, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Israel Philharmonic, the Orchestra of the Maggio Musicale, the Cleveland Orchestra and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Piemontesi's 2018–19 season features concerto dates with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andrew Manze conducting (*Mozart Piano Concerto No. 19, K. 459*) and the National Symphony Orchestra with conductor Gianandrea Noseda (*Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on Theme of Paganini, Op. 43*). Francesco's recital dates include Great Performers at Lincoln Center playing Bach, Debussy and the original 1913 version of *Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 2*, San Francisco Performances, at Fresno's Philip Lorenz Memorial Keyboard Concerts with an inspired program of Bach/Busoni, Bach/Kempff, Debussy and Rachmaninoff. Piemontesi's European performances include: a J.S. Bach and Schubert recital in Copenhagen, *Mozart's Concerto No. 27* with Sir Roger Norrington and the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen; *Beethoven's Concerto No. 2* with Thomas Søndergård and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in the UK, *R. Strauss' Burleske* with Daniele Rustioni and

Philharmonia Zurich, *Mendelssohn's Concerto No. 1* with Sir Mark Elder and the Hallé Orchestra; *Brahms' Concerto No. 2* in Italy with Pietari Inkinen and the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI; *Unsuk Chin's Piano Concerto* with Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and the five *Beethoven piano concertos* in Lugano with the Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana, Markus Poschner, conducting.

Piemontesi nurtures a special artistic interest in chamber music and collaborates with a variety of distinguished partners. In solo recital, he has appeared in many prestigious venues including London's Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Philharmonie, Zürich Tonhalle, and Vienna Konzerthaus. Francesco's numerous festival performances include the Edinburgh International Festival, Mostly Mozart Festival, Chopin International Music Festival in Warsaw, Lucerne Festival, Austria's unique Schubertiade Festival, and Schleswig-Holstein Festivals.

Francesco Piemontesi has recorded for EMI Classics and signed an exclusive agreement with Naïve Classique.

In 2012, Piemontesi was appointed Artistic Director of the Settimane Musicali di Ascona, located in the district of Locarno in the canton of Ticino in Switzerland.

PROGRAM NOTES

Prelude in E-flat Major, BWV 552

Nun komm der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659

Cantata No. 140: "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme"

Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 552

(all arr. Busoni)

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924) made a number of arrangements of Bach's music for the piano, sometimes amplifying the originals in ways that seemed to him to get at the music's essential character.

The *Prelude in E-flat Major, BWV 552*, originally for harpsichord, was the first piece in the third volume of Bach's *Clavier-Übung* of 1739. The volume opened with a *Prelude in E-*

flat Major (which contains contrapuntal episodes of its own) and concluded with a massive triple fugue, also in E-flat major. Joined together, as Bach surely intended them to be, they became the *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major*. This later acquired the nickname "St. Anne" because of the resemblance between the fugue theme and the old English hymn-tune *St. Anne*. That resemblance is almost certainly coincidental (Bach had probably never heard the hymn, and he never heard his prelude and fugue called "St. Anne"), but audiences will recognize the similarity between the opening fugue subject and the hymn-tune, where it sets the words "O God, our help in ages past."

In tonight's performance, the Busoni's arrangements of the *Prelude and Fugue* are performed as bookends of the first half of the program.

Nun komm der Heiden Heiland is Busoni's 1890 transcription of one of Bach's chorale preludes. The noble, solemn music has been heard in many arrangements, most memorably Stokowski's transcription for orchestra. *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* is the famous fourth movement of Bach's *Cantata No. 140*.

Italian Concerto, BWV 971

Bach greatly admired Italian orchestral concertos. He was particularly attracted to their contrast between solo instruments and orchestral tutti, and he used the Italian orchestral concerto as a model for a keyboard piece that would embody features of a form he admired so much. He called this work *Concerto in the Italian Style* (it has come to be known as the *Italian Concerto*), but this is not a concerto in the sense that we understand that term. Rather, it is a keyboard work based on the structure of the baroque concerto. The outer movements of the *Italian Concerto* show that structure. Both open and close with declarative passages reminiscent of orchestral tutti, while the middle sections offer music of a more soloistic character, broken by occasional "tutti" interjections. The *Andante* is very much in the manner of the slow movements of Bach's own concertos: over an ostinato-like accompaniment in the left hand, Bach spins a long aria-like melody in the right.

Siciliano from Flute Sonata in E-flat Major, BWV 1031

(arr. Kempff)

Wilhelm Kempff (1895–1991), famed for his performances of Beethoven, made this

transcription of the *Siciliano* from Bach's *Sonata in E-flat Major for Flute and Clavier*. Bach remained important to Kempff throughout his life, and he has left recordings of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and of his many transcriptions of Bach's chorale preludes.

Images, Book II, L.111

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862–1918)

In the early years of the 20th century, Debussy's piano music took on a new depth and sophistication. After years of struggle, Debussy had two significant successes: the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* was produced in 1902, and *La Mer* followed three years later. With these achievements behind him—and with a new sense of orchestral sonority derived from composing those works—Debussy returned to composing for piano. He produced the first book of *Images* in 1905, the second in 1907.

Audiences should both take the title *Images* seriously and they should ignore it. It is true that some of these six individual pieces have visual titles and seem at first to proceed from the images they suggest. Yet Debussy's intention here is much more subtle than mere tone-painting: he aims not for literal depiction of the title but for a refined projection of mood, a combination of title, rhythm, and sonority to create an evocative sound-world all its own. Debussy was quite proud of his achievement in this music. When he sent the first set off to his publisher, he wrote: "With no false vanity, I believe that these three pieces are a success and that they will take their place in the literature of the piano, on the left hand of Schumann, or the right hand of Chopin, as you like it."

Book II of *Images* is written in three staves throughout and shows new attention to color. *Cloches à travers les feuilles*

("Bells Heard through Leaves") is meant to suggest the sound of distant church bells heard through a forest on Halloween. It is marked by the sonority of ringing bells and layers of sound at different dynamics; it is a sign of the refinement of Debussy's thinking here that he asks that one passage sound "like an iridescent vapor." *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût* ("And the Moon Descends on a Ruined Temple") has a static quality, and some have heard in this steady chordal progression the play of light from the sinking moon over solitary ruins; that title, though, was suggested to Debussy by a friend after the piece was written. *Poissons d'or* ("Goldfish") is water-music piece, but with a difference: it was inspired not by actual goldfish but by a piece of Chinese lacquer with a goldfish on a shiny black background. Flashes of movement and color leap from out of the rippling accompaniment.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Opus 36

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
(1873–1943)

In 1913 Rachmaninoff took his family to Rome, and—working in a room that Tchaikovsky had once occupied—he sketched two works: a choral symphony based on Poe's *The Bells* and the *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Late that summer he returned to the family estate at Ivanovka, near Moscow, and completed both works. Rachmaninoff's setting of *The Bells* met with success, but the sonata—premiered in Moscow on December 3, 1913—had a cooler reception. Audiences and critics alike found it difficult—reserved, detached, intellectual—and the composer himself came to agree with them: after performing it for several seasons, he withdrew it.

But Rachmaninoff remained interested in this sonata, and in 1931 he revised it,

believing that he had located the source of the problem: "I look at my early works and see how much there is that is superfluous. Even in this sonata so many voices are moving simultaneously and it is too long." Rachmaninoff cut the original version severely, removing altogether passages that he believed "superfluous" and clarifying textures. Rachmaninoff had little success with this version, but another Russian pianist did. Vladimir Horowitz, acting with the composer's approval, created his own version by reincorporating some of the passages Rachmaninoff had excised from the original version.

This concert offers the extremely rare opportunity to hear Rachmaninoff's *Second Sonata* performed in its original 1913 version. The three movements are played without pause, and the movements depend on musically related ideas: themes from the opening *Allegro agitato* reappear in later movements. Listeners who come expecting the big Rachmaninoff "tune" may be disappointed, for this dramatic music makes its case through the logic of its musical argument rather than with engaging melodies. The sonata-form first movement opens with a great downward flourish that leads immediately to the main theme; the more lyric second subject, marked *meno mosso*, arrives in a dotted 12/8 meter. The main theme will reappear in both the wonderful, dark slow movement (*Non allegro*) and the dynamic finale (*Allegro molto*).

Throughout, this music demands a pianist of transcendent skill, able to cope easily with complex technical problems yet still generate the vast volume of sound this sonata demands. Many have noted that this music seems full of the plangent sonority of ringing bells, and this is only natural, given Rachmaninoff's fondness for the sound of bells in general and the fact that he was working on the Poe setting at the same time he wrote this sonata.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger