



PRESENTS

# PETER SERKIN

## PIANO

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22 | 3 PM  
MERRILL AUDITORIUM, PORTLAND

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## PROGRAM NOTES

by Linda Russell

Peter Serkin appears by arrangement with C/M Artists New York.

Mr. Serkin has recorded for Arcana, Boston Records, Bridge, Decca, ECM, Koch Classics, New World Records, RCA/BMG, Telarc, and Vanguard Classics.

## THREE PIECES, OP. 11

ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG

Mässig

Mässige Achtel

Bewegt

Viennese composer Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951), one of the most decisive influences on 20th century music, was largely self-taught. He worked as a theater conductor in Berlin, but after 1925 his emphasis was on composition and teaching, first in Paris and later in the United States. His relatively few piano compositions are seminal because in these works Schönberg employed new procedures and then extended them to other forms. The character piece of the German Romantic tradition dominated his piano music, but with radical differences. He questioned traditional views of consonance, dissonance, and tonality—eventually completely abandoning the traditional harmonic system and replacing it with the atonal dodecaphonic system.

The landmark *Three Piano Pieces Op. 11*, composed in 1909, is Schönberg's earliest consistently atonal opus and his first steps toward serialism. David Burge states,

There is a traditional scheme of melodic and rhythmic relationships. Further, the essential nature of these recurring melodies is quite simple, and their transformations are clearly affected in the manner of Wagner and the post-romantic symphonists, Mahler and Strauss... Again one asks, why the fearful reaction? The answer must inevitably lie in the harmony.

Schönberg himself did not see himself as radical. In 1949 he wrote,

Most critics of this new style failed to investigate how far the ancient "eternal" laws of musical aesthetics were observed, spurned, or merely adjusted to changed circumstances. Such superficiality brought about accusations of anarchy and revolution, whereas, on the contrary, this music was distinctly a product of evolution, and no more revolutionary than any other development in the history of music.

He defended the concise, yet expressive, music of these three brief pieces in a letter to Busoni:

Away with protracted ten-ton scores, from erected or constructed towers, rocks, and other massive claptrap. My music must be brief. Concise! In two notes: not built, but "expressed!!" And the results I wish for: no stylized and sterile protracted emotion. People are not like that: it is impossible for a person to have only one sensation at a time. One has thousands simultaneously... And this variegation, this multifariousness, this illogicality which our senses demonstrate, the illogicality presented by their interactions, set forth by some mounting

rush of blood, by some reaction of the senses or the nerves, this I should like to have in my music. It should be an expression of feeling, as our feelings, which bring us in contact with our subconscious, really are no false child of “conscious logic.”

In the first piece, we hear traces of an ABA' form with development of the ever-present opening three-note motif or “cell.” Schönberg introduces the second piece with a somber two-note *ostinato* and a gloomy theme above. The piece builds to a passionate climax, followed by a restatement of the opening thematic material. The final piece is Schönberg “at his most avant-garde,” breaking all constraints of traditional language or structure.

## ÉPIGRAPHES ANTIQUES

### CLAUDEDEBUSSY

Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été  
Pour un tombeau sans nom  
Pour que la nuit soit propice  
Pour la danseuse aux crotales  
Pour l'égyptienne  
Pour remercier la pluie au matin

Born into a family of laborers, Claude Achille Debussy's (1862-1918) musical talent soon became evident. Admitted to the Paris Conservatory at age ten, he won medals in solfège, piano, and accompanying, but not for harmony. He was unwilling to accept the established rules of harmony. In 1884 he won the Grand Prix de Rome for his cantata *L'Enfant prodigue*. Around 1888 Debussy befriended a small group of French poets of the symbolist school and artists associated with the impressionist movement. These associations with painters and poets, more than friendships with musicians, contributed to his mature style in which formal structure becomes less important while mood, atmosphere, and color assume special significance. Debussy's music remained relatively unknown, however, until the production of his opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902.

The 1901 Debussy sketched a dozen pieces for chamber ensemble to accompany the recitation of several poems from Pierre Louÿs' collection *Chansons de Bilitis*. In 1914 Debussy reworked six of these pieces as the *Épigraphes Antiques* for piano, four hands; a version for solo piano followed. Typical of his late music, these exotic and atmospheric pieces explore pure sonority with their use of whole-tone scales, chromaticism, modes, fluid rhythms, and rich harmonies. *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été* (For invoking Pan, god of the summer wind), depicting a lazy summer day, opens with a panpipe-like melody. *Pour un tombeau sans nom* (For a tomb without name), a highly chromatic elegy, is followed by *Pour que la nuit soit propice* (For the propitious night), an expressive nocturne. With quick ornamental figures Debussy evokes castanets in *Pour la danseuse aux crotales* (For the dancer with castanets). *Pour*

*l'Egyptienne* (For the Egyptian) conjures up images of the Arabic world. Rapid chromatic figuration in *Pour remercier la pluie au matin* (For thanking the morning rain) paints a picture of a rainstorm.

## **FOUR PIECES FROM JÁTÉKOK**

### **GYÖRGY KURTÁG**

Pen Drawing, Valediction to Erzsébet Schaàr

(...and round and round it goes)

Portrait

The Mind Will Have its Freedom...

Born in Romania, György Kurtág (b.1926) studied at the Budapest Academy of Music where he met his wife Márta, also a pianist. From 1957-8 he studied in Paris with Olivier Messiaen and Darius Milhaud. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kurtág has gained an international reputation, winning numerous awards. Kurtág often holds master-classes in chamber music, and appears with his wife in concerts in which they play selections for two- and four-hands from *Játékok*.

Kurtág began *Játékok* (Games) in 1973 as pieces for children. They developed into intimate miniatures, which are a unique blend of compositional workshop and musical diary. "Single events, banalities, led to reactions that I could translate into music more easily than into words." As of 2007, Kurtág had written seven volumes of *Játékok*. One hears the influence of Milhaud and fellow-countryman Béla Bartók, but there are also pieces in which unique sounds are used: striking the keys with the palm or fist, overtones, glissandos. Kurtág once said, "I keep coming back to the realization that one note is almost enough."

## **SCHERZO (2007)**

### **CHARLES WUORINEN**

New York born composer Charles Wuorinen (b. 1938) began composing at age five and by age twelve decided to become a composer. While a graduate student at Columbia University, Wuorinen co-founded the Group for Contemporary Music which performed the most challenging music of its time. The music of Stravinsky, Schönberg, Varèse, and Babbitt, as well as Indian, Chinese and Arabic music have influenced his compositional style. He received the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1970 for his 32-minute electronic work, *Time's Encomium*. In 2007 the 92nd Street Y commissioned Wuorinen to compose a piece for Peter Serkin. The perpetual-motion *Scherzo* is full of dazzling and whirling colors.

Wuorinen's large corpus (over 250) of significant work, and his willingness to explore in a profound way every important genre of Western music, makes his achievement a powerful compendium

of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century musical thought. A self-described “maximalist,” there is nevertheless a leanness to his music, a sense that not a single detail is superfluous. An innovator professing to care more about “the evolutionary, rather than revolutionary” character of musical progress, his most important contribution may lie in the adapting of the highly sophisticated language of the twentieth century to the grand musical visions of those centuries preceding. (Karchin)

## **POLONAISE IN C MINOR, OP. 40, NO. 2**

**FRÉDÉRIC FRANÇOIS CHOPIN**

Impromptu in Ab Major, Op. 29

From *Trois Nouvelles Études*, No. 2 in Ab Major

Nocturne in E Major, Op. 62, No. 2

The extraordinary musical talents of Frédéric François Chopin (1810-1849) soon became apparent to his parents. In Warsaw he received a sound general education at the high school where his father taught; as a pianist he was almost completely self-taught. This may account for the inventiveness and ingenuity in his approach to the piano, never inhibited by traditional instruction. After graduation from the Warsaw Conservatory, Chopin settled in Paris where he remained for the rest of his life. He soon became the most fashionable piano teacher, and the considerable income he received, as well as his rising fame as a composer, enabled him to withdraw from public performance, which he found distasteful. Between 1836 and 1846 Chopin’s liaison with novelist George Sand (pseudonym for Aurore Dudevant) gave Chopin, in failing health because of tuberculosis, a sense of security and peace of mind that allowed his musical genius to mature.

Chopin devoted himself almost exclusively to composition for the piano. In a period when spectacular and forceful playing was greatly admired, Chopin, though capable of great power, achieved many of his effects through a more subtle and restrained style of playing and composition. The fundamental texture of Chopin’s music is accompanied melody, but with limitless variation and expressiveness. Chopin is considered to be among the greatest harmonic innovators of the nineteenth century, pushing the accepted procedures of chromatic dissonance and modulation into previously unexplored territory. Formally, Chopin preferred the creative possibilities of the character piece, a smaller composition in which a composer evokes a mood, thought, or emotion. Such pieces are usually in a simple form; the ternary (ABA) form is the most common, with a contrasting middle section. Chopin’s compositions range from the strict ternary designs of some of the dances, preludes, and nocturnes to the larger structure of the ballades, scherzi, and polonaises—still with a departure and return, but with the return varied, delayed, shortened, or extended in subtle ways.

It was with a polonaise that Chopin made his debut as a composer at the age of seven. Originally a Polish folk dance, the polonaise would never have become popular internationally if the nobility had not adopted it. In the eighteenth century composers such as J.S. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven stylized the court polonaise. All of their polonaises were overshadowed, however, by the polonaises of Chopin who brought the genre to its height as a piano piece; they became a symbol of his Polish nationalism. Chopin's polonaises range from short early works to large-scale brilliant works designed for the concert hall. Most, however, have characteristics typical of the polonaise: triple meter, *allegro maestoso* tempo, some variant of a basic ABA structure, and the distinguishing rhythm of the polonaise. In *Polonaise in C minor, Op. 40, No. 2* the somber opening chords set the scene for the dark octave theme in the bass. The polonaise rhythm appears in the more tuneful second section.

The impromptus—a name meant to suggest “casual origin in the composer’s mind”—are examples of some of Chopin’s smaller character pieces in ternary form. The principal thematic material in the impromptus is generally based on improvisatory-sounding figuration with simple lyrical melodies providing contrast in the middle sections. Some critics dismiss these works as charming salon music and not among Chopin’s most important works. However, their technical demands and carefree spirit make them a favorite of pianists and audiences alike. Schumann wrote of *Impromptu in Ab Major, Op. 29*: “[This] impromptu . . . is so refined in form, its cantilena is from beginning to end so enclosed in charming figuration; it is . . . so unique an impromptu that it cannot be placed beside any other of his compositions.”

An étude is primarily a teaching piece, a study or exercise, designed as a vehicle for a musician either to improve or to exhibit technical skill. In an étude a composer usually concentrates on one technical problem throughout—for example, a certain type of figuration, octave playing, arpeggios, staccato chords, rapid scale passages, legato playing, etc. Inspired by Paganini’s caprices, Chopin composed two books of twelve études each that form a continuous series, as well as the *Trois Nouvelles Études*. These three études were Chopin’s contribution to a pedagogic work by Moscheles and Fétis entitled *La Méthode des Méthodes pour le piano* (1839). Chopin’s études are character pieces of great technical difficulty with complex harmonies and amazing explorations of the sound capabilities of the grand piano, but are also extraordinarily expressive musical statements. After hearing the études for the first time German critic Rellstab did not know what to make of them and sarcastically advised his readers, “Those who have distorted fingers may put them right by practicing these studies; but those who have not, should not play them, at least not without having a surgeon at hand.” *No. 2 in Ab Major* is a gentle sprightly composition that emphasizes the cross rhythms of triplets against duplets combined with widely spaced broken chords in the left hand.

Chopin took the title and general character of the nocturne from John Field, but imbued his nocturnes with distinct melodies, harmonic innovations, and an original piano style. Most often Chopin composed the nocturnes in a ternary form with the B section a little quicker in tempo and more dramatic in character. The right hand sings the simple lyrical melody, often ornamented upon its return, against a background of arpeggiated accompaniment. In *Nocturne in E Major, Op. 62, No. 2* the cantabile sections contrast with the agitated middle section.

## **SUITE, OP. 25**

### **ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG**

Präludium: Rasch

Gavotte: Etwas langsam, nicht hastig (attacca:)

Musette: Rascher

Gavotte (da capo)

Intermezzo

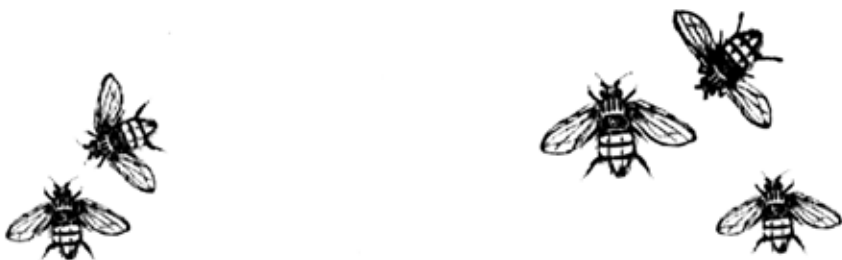
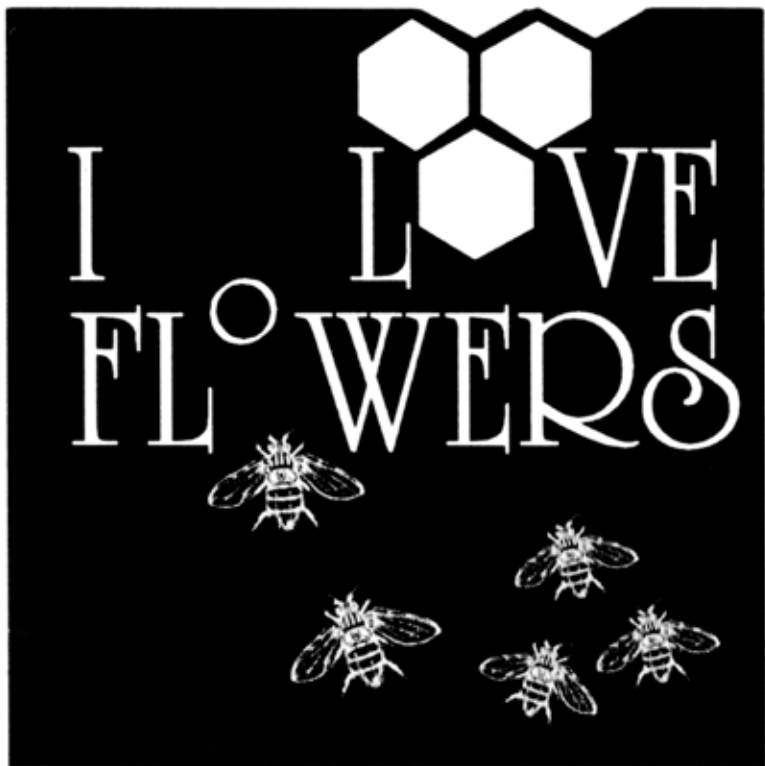
Menuett: Moderato—Trio

Gigue: Rasch

Composed in 1923, the *Suite for Piano, Op. 25*, was Schönberg's first piece composed completely using twelve-tone technique but in the Classical form of a Baroque dance suite. To unify the *Suite*, he used the same tone row (a predetermined series of all twelve notes of the chromatic scale) for each movement. The energetic Präludium is followed by the Gavotte-Musette-Gavotte series. In the Musette Schönberg presented the distorted sound of a bagpipe with a tritone. The Intermezzo provides a calm interlude. A brusque Trio interrupts the more lyrical Menuett. The *Gigue* is a "tour-de-force of deception, a wild gallop strewn with false downbeats, and rhythmic thickets, complicated by myriad intricacies of touch the whole making one of the twentieth century's supremely exhilarating (and ferociously taxing) pianistic obstacle courses." (Hill)

**Linda Russell, an active member of Maine Music Teachers Association, is an independent piano teacher living in Portland with her longtime spouse.**

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