

WUSTL **MUSIC**

Sunday, May 1, 2022 - 7:00 P.M.
E. Desmond Lee Concert Hall, 560 Music Center



Great Artists Series '22:
Seong-Jin Cho, piano

Annual Carlin Event

Program

Pavane pour une Infante défunte (1899)

Maurice Ravel
(1875 - 1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

- I. *Ondine*
- II. *Le Gibet*
- III. *Scarbo*

Maurice Ravel
(1875 - 1937)

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20 (1833)

Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 (1837)

Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Op. 39 (1839)

Scherzo No. 4 in E Major, Op. 54 (1842)

Frédéric Chopin
(1810 - 1849)

Management for Mr. Cho:

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244 5th Ave b222

New York, NY 10001

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Program Notes

Although Maurice Ravel (1875 - 1937) is one of two composers most closely associated with Impressionism in music, neither he nor his contemporary Claude Debussy thought very highly of the label. Ravel once declared that he "never associated the term with music," finding it more fit for the visual arts, while Debussy characterized it as a "term of abuse" in music, poetry, and painting alike. Despite the composers' disavowal, Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin note the term's potential value when applied to their music, for each composer, like the Impressionist painters, "had rebelled against academic routine, and had sought in their art a spontaneous and 'natural' wedding of content and form."

Breaking from routine characterized Ravel's uneasy relationship with the academy, especially during his two stints at the Paris Conservatoire (1889–95, 1897 - 1903). He first entered the Conservatoire as a pianist but was dismissed from classes after not being able to win awards in performance competitions. He turned then to composition after being re-admitted and studied with the composer Gabriel Fauré, but once again he was dismissed due to his lack of competitive success. And in 1905, despite growing private and public support for his compositional style, he was unable to win the *Prix de Rome* for any compositions he submitted to the competition over a five-year period. This struggle with traditional avenues for compositional success led Ravel towards the musical avant-garde.

Written during his time as Fauré's student, Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899) was commissioned by and dedicated to the Princesse Edmond de Polignac. Her salon was a home for the musical avant-garde of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, commissioning works from composers including Darius Milhaud, Erik Satie, Francis Poulenc, and Igor Stravinsky. Its premiere performance (1902) was given by the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, a close friend whom Ravel had met at the Conservatoire. Following the piece's success as a work for solo piano, Ravel recomposed it for small orchestra. Sir Henry Wood conducted the premiere (1911) of the orchestral version.

Despite the title's implications, Ravel claimed the work "is not a funeral lament for a dead child, but rather an evocation of a pavane that a little princess might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court." The pavane, a

processional-like dance genre from 16th-century Italy, influenced Ravel's construction of the *Pavane*. He scores the main theme with an austerity and breadth that bespeaks a courtly processional. As the piece moves through clearly delineated thematic presentations and wistful episodes, a listener can be encouraged to hear Ravel evoking the princess's dance.

Gaspard de la nuit (1908) is a piano suite of three pieces based on poems from an eponymous work by Aloysius Bertrand. Viñes, who introduced Ravel to the work of Bertrand while the two attended the Conservatoire, premiered the piece in Paris in 1909. The work is infamously difficult to play; Ravel described setting out to create "three romantic poems of transcendental virtuosity" and informed his contemporary Maurice Delage that he intended the third movement to surpass Mily Balakirev's *Islamey* in difficulty. Indeed, Ravel lets his romantic tendencies shine through in the work's program and technical demands.

Each movement of *Gaspard* corresponds to a poem in Bertrand's collection. The first movement, *Ondine*, depicts the story of a water nymph calling out to the poem's speaker, beckoning them to her kingdom at the bottom of the sea. As Ravel develops the left-hand melody that represents her call, it begins to blur and overlap with the delicate coloration in the right-hand accompaniment.

The dreamlike quality of the movement stands in contrast to *Le Gibet*, where the speaker finds himself in a desert, overlooking a man's corpse "reddened by the setting sun." Ravel here depicts a piece of the poem's text with a B-flat *ostinato*, which represents the tolling bell the speaker hears in a distant city.

Gaspard culminates in its final movement *Scarbo*, a poem which depicts the mischievous behavior of a small goblin creature of the same name. In this movement, Ravel set out to create "a caricature of Romanticism – an orchestral transcription for piano." This caricature manifests in a myriad of technical demands placed on the performer, such as rapid thirty-second note figurations in the left-hand and double-note scales separated by a major second; the performer must navigate treacherous moments before the piece's end.

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20

From the Italian for “joke,” the term *scherzo* originally referred to a fast, lighthearted composition in triple time that generally served as the third movement of a large-scale work. Chopin’s four *scherzos*, however, are altogether different: these stand-alone virtuoso pieces are characterized not by humor, but by tremendous dramatic intensity. The first of the set, the *Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20*, offers a rare glimpse into the composer’s psyche. In December of 1830, Chopin found himself stranded in Vienna while on the way to Paris. A month earlier, a violent revolution had broken out in Warsaw, robbing the composer of the opportunity of ever returning to his homeland. Separated from his family for the first time, he spent Christmas alone in a state of despair. He took to the piano and poured his innermost feelings into the music of this *Scherzo*.

Two dissonant chords introduce the work’s principal theme—a turbulent jumble of notes marked by a sense of breathless agitation. The middle section, which would normally be called the trio, offers a moment of respite. Here Chopin borrows a tune from a well-known Polish Christmas carol titled *Lulajże Jezuniu (Sleep, Little Jesus)*. A repeated high F-sharp adorns the melody, prompting one biographer to liken it to the shining star that led the three wise men to Bethlehem. The atmosphere of serenity is soon shattered by the return of the piercing chords that open the work, followed immediately by a reprise of the principal theme. The final moments of the piece feature one of the harshest dissonances Chopin ever conceived: a ten-note chord repeated nine times as loudly as possible. The effect is akin to the gnashing of teeth.

Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31

Reviewing the *Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31*, noted music critic James Huneker remarked, “What masterly writing, and it lies in the very heart of the piano! A hundred generations may not improve on these pages.” As early as the late nineteenth century, the piece had become so popular and overplayed that Franz Liszt discouraged his pupils from playing it at his masterclasses. To this day, the *Scherzo* remains one of Chopin’s best-known works. The opening has become iconic. A timid, twice-repeated gesture in the low register is promptly answered by a bombastic motive at the keyboard’s opposite extreme. This material repeats, with minor variations, a total of four times,

subsequently giving way to the first full-fledged theme—a singable melody that soars over an impassioned, fast-moving accompaniment. In the ensuing section, a solemn chorale tune brings the excitement to a momentary halt. Then a spirited waltz takes over, transporting the listener to the ball room. Graceful and restrained at first, the dance becomes increasingly agitated, almost spinning out of control, until reaching a rousing climax. Once enough momentum has built up, the dramatic opening theme returns, followed by a virtuosic closing section.

Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Op. 39

In the winter of 1838-39, Chopin and his lover George Sand travelled to the island of Majorca off the eastern coast of Spain. They had hoped the warm Mediterranean weather would be beneficial to Chopin, whose chronic tuberculosis had already taken a serious toll on his health. Unfortunately, the Majorcan weather was anything but warm, and the composer's delicate condition deteriorated. To make matters worse, the couple endured mistreatment from the locals once word got around about the composer's contagious illness. Nevertheless, Chopin completed several important works in these inhospitable conditions, including the *Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Op. 39*. The piece is dedicated to one of Chopin's favorite pupils, Adolf Gutmann—perhaps on account of several bravura passages in double octaves, which Gutmann had made his specialty.

The work begins with an air of uncertainty, as if posing a series of questions that never receive a satisfactory answer. Then, abruptly, a thunderous passage in bare octaves introduces the principal theme, which returns at various points throughout the piece. The calmer section that follows presents a simple melody harmonized in the manner of a hymn. Each phrase of this richly-voiced chorale is answered by a filigree of notes cascading from the keyboard's upper register. The frenzied closing section presents a climatic recapitulation of the preceding material. The piece ends unexpectedly in the major mode—a suitable conclusion to a piece characterized by wild contrasts.

Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Op. 54

The last of the *Scherzos*, Op. 54, stands out from the rest. Whimsical and lighthearted, it is the only one to preserve the character of the traditional *scherzo*. The work was written in 1843 during a relatively happy period in Chopin's life. His relationship with George Sand flourished, and he got to

spend the summers of 1839-43 at her estate in central France. Like its earlier counterparts, the piece is divided into three large sections, followed by a coda. The principal theme that opens the work bears an air of rustic simplicity and is characterized by the juxtaposition of contrasting textures—passages in long-held notes alternate with playful staccato chords and virtuosic passagework. The middle section offers a marked contrast. Here the melody might best be described as quintessentially “Chopinesque.” Elegant and tinged with melancholy, the music calls to mind the *nocturne*—a genre that has become synonymous with the composer. As the harmonies grow increasingly dissonant, the formerly serene mood turns frantic. Finally, two rapidly oscillating notes signal the triumphant return of the principal theme. A sweeping scale spanning the entire keyboard brings the piece to a resolute ending.

Jorge L. Modolell, Ph.D. Candidate in Musicology, Washington University in St. Louis

This concert is presented as the Annual Carlin Event
with additional support provided by the Missouri Arts Council.



About the Artist



With an overwhelming talent and innate musicality, Seong-Jin Cho has made his mark as one of the consummate talents of his generation and most distinctive artists on the current music scene. His thoughtful and poetic, assertive and tender, virtuosic and colorful playing can combine panache with purity and is driven by an impressive natural sense of balance.

Seong-Jin Cho was brought to the world's attention in 2015 when he won the First Prize at the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw. In January 2016, he signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon. The first recording was released in November 2016 featuring Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 with the London Symphony Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda as well as the *Four Ballades*. A solo Debussy recital was released in November 2017, followed in 2018 by a Mozart album featuring Sonatas K. 281 and K. 332 and the Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor K. 466 with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Yannick Nézet-Séguin. All albums won impressive critical acclaim worldwide. Cho's latest album on the Yellow Label, titled *The Wanderer* and released in May 2020, features Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, Berg's Piano Sonata op. 1, and Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor.

Highlights of Cho's 2021/22 season include performances with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchester and Alain Altinoglu, New York Philharmonic with Jaap van Zweden, Los Angeles Philharmonic with Gustavo Dudamel, and return invitations to the Philadelphia Orchestra with Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the Hong Kong Philharmonic with Jaap van Zweden. The 2020/21 season included his return to the Berliner Philharmoniker with Andris Nelsons and debuts with the Münchner Philharmoniker and Valery Gergiev. Recent orchestral highlights include performances with Boston Symphony Orchestra with Hannu Lintu, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra with Manfred Honeck, Mahler Chamber Orchestra with Jakub Hrůša, and the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra with Jaap Van Zweden.

An active recitalist very much in demand, Seong-Jin Cho performs in many of the world's most prestigious concert halls including the main stage of

Carnegie Hall as part of the Keyboard Virtuoso series, Concertgebouw Amsterdam in the Master Pianists series, Berliner Philharmonie Kammermusiksaal in the Berliner Philharmoniker concert series, Konzerthaus Vienna, Suntory Hall Tokyo, Walt Disney Hall Los Angeles, Prinzregententheater Munich, Liederhalle Stuttgart, Festival International de piano de la Roque d'Anthéron, Verbier Festival, Gstaad Menuhin Festival, and Rheingau Musik Festival. During the coming season he gives debut solo recitals at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées Paris, Festspielhaus Bregenz, Victoria Hall Geneva, and Wigmore Hall.

Born in 1994 in Seoul, Seong-Jin Cho started learning the piano at the age of six and gave his first public recital aged 11. In 2009, he became the youngest-ever winner of Japan's Hamamatsu International Piano Competition. In 2011, he won Third Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow at the age of 17. From 2012-2015 he studied with Michel Béroff at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris and is now based in Berlin.



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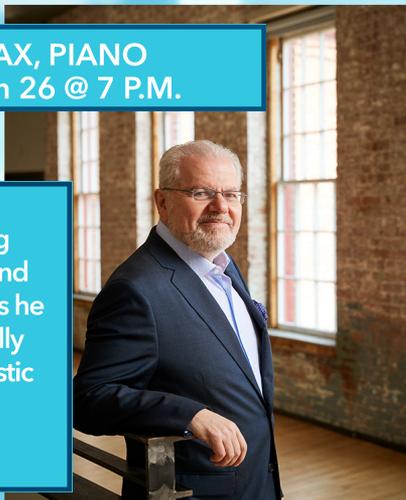
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