

Reno Chamber Orchestra presents  
The 20<sup>th</sup> Nevada Chamber Music Festival

Romantic Piano  
Friday December 29, 2023 2:00pm

**Mozart: Sonata for Two Pianos in D major, K. 448**

*Composed: 1781*

*Duration: 24 minutes*

In the early part of his life, Mozart wrote a fair amount of music for two pianists, but usually sitting at a single keyboard. Many of those works were performed by Mozart and his sister Maria Anna, or Nannerl. He likewise wrote a Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat major, K. 365 in 1779 for himself and his sister to play. However, the Sonata for Two Pianos, from two years later, was composed for a performance by Mozart and Josepha von Auernhammer. Interestingly, this was the specific work used in the original study of the Mozart Effect, which suggested that listening to music might improve spatial reasoning skills, reduce the frequency of epileptic seizures, and perhaps even improve IQ scores.

The first movement begins in galant style, with a lighthearted, highly decorated melody being traded between the pianists. A second melody flows peacefully, still with frequent embellishments. Soon the pianists are trading rising scales as the pace quickens again. The development takes on a more serious demeanor, but only very briefly before the recap of the main themes.

The delicate, almost naive main theme of the slow movement unfolds at a leisurely pace, the two pianists answering, sometimes even finishing, each other's phrases. The central section sees the introduction of another serenade-like theme that for a moment takes on a troubled countenance, before the easy motion of the opening theme returns. An amusing, rather playful idea opens the third movement and becomes the repeating refrain of this rondo. Mozart moves effortlessly between charm, elegance, moments of seriousness and hushed lyricism, and exuberance.

**Janáček: *In the Mists***

*Composed: 1912-13*

*Duration: 16 minutes*

Janáček was still little-known as a composer when he wrote *In the Mists*, his last major piano work, at age fifty-eight. He was working as director of Brno's Organ School, and while a little of his music had been performed publicly, most of it – especially the operas that he valued so much – resided in obscurity. Public success waited until the composer was in his seventies, when an infatuation with a much younger married woman led to a burst of creativity. But when he wrote *In the Mists*, Janáček had largely reconciled himself to his obscurity and unhappy marriage. Some authors have wanted to attribute some biographical importance to

the title – Janáček’s belief that he, his music, his emotional stability, were lost “in the mists.”

All four movements of *In the Mists* have somewhat unusual key signatures of five or six flats, and are marked by frequent changes of rhythm. A hint of restlessness marks the first movement, with its haunting main theme. The contrasting middle section heightens the tension, with a chorale-like idea juxtaposed with a series of ascending scales. But overall the mood is subdued, but anxious. Contrast is also a major part of the second movement, as a dignified main theme interacts with a faster, rhythmically unstable idea. The short third movement focuses on a beautiful main theme that works its way through a variety of keys. In the final piece, the music moves unpredictably between ideas of different mood.

### **Scriabin: Piano Sonata No. 4 in F-sharp minor, Op. 30**

*Composed: 1903*

*Duration: 8 minutes*

Alexander Scriabin’s early career parallels that of Sergei Rachmaninoff – they both had piano lessons with the famous teacher Nikolai Zverov, and both attended the Moscow Conservatory. Scriabin also taught there for several years. He won the Conservatory’s Little Gold Medal in piano performance, and he soon became an internationally-known virtuoso. His early compositions were heavily influenced by Chopin, in Chopin-esque forms like nocturne, etude, and mazurka. But with his visionary and dissonant later works like the *Poem of Ecstasy* and *Prometheus*, Scriabin came to believe that his music could have a cosmic, mystical impact.

One of the most-performed of his ten piano sonatas, and one of the shortest, the Sonata No. 4 consists of two movements. The first, marked Andante, starts tentatively with a delicate, mildly dissonant song that slowly builds, becoming more elaborate and passionate. After a short pause, in the faster second movement, Prestissimo volando, the music becomes more tumultuous, with phrases striving upward, then receding, then climbing again, culminating in a powerful climax that refers back to the work’s opening theme. After completing the Sonata, Scriabin wrote a poem that seems to illustrate its meaning. At the beginning, “In a light mist, transparent vapor/Lost afar and yet distinct/A star gleams softly.” Overwhelmed by attraction to the light of the star, the narrator seeks “liberation” in the “Sun of Triumph,” eventually merging with the light – “My self-of-light/I engulf thee!”

### **C. Schumann: Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann in F-sharp minor, Op. 20**

*Composed: 1853*

*Duration: 11 minutes*

Clara Schumann was one of the great pianists of her time, with a career extending over six decades and more than 1,300 concerts. She also composed piano pieces, chamber music, songs, and other works. She married Robert Schumann the day before her twenty-first birthday. They had eight children, and documented their musical lives together in diaries, musical compositions, and more. That connection between them is very much in evidence in

these Op. 20 Variations, which Clara gave to Robert as a 43rd birthday present, just months before his mental breakdown. (Interestingly, their friend Johannes Brahms wrote his own set of variations on the same theme the year after Clara's set, in 1854.)

Robert's theme – the *Albumblätter I*, the fourth piece from his *Bunte Blätter*, op. 99 – is heartfelt and rather somber, with a stately hymn-like movement. The theme is still very recognizable in the first two variations, both of which feature considerable embellishment. A consoling major key emerges in the third variation, but with some harmonic wandering. The theme moves to the left hand, with elaborate sixteenth-note triplet arpeggios in the right hand, in the fourth variation. The figurative dam bursts in the dramatic fifth variation. But the original hymn-like feeling returns in the sixth, with some lovely new harmonies and a call-and-response between the left and right hands. The storm starts to move in again in the seventh and final variation before a magical return of the theme, with references to the previous music, in the work's flowing, delicate concluding moments.

### **Winn: *Three Pieces After William Butler Yeats***

*Composed: 1979*

*Duration: 12 minutes*

James Winn's *Three Pieces After William Butler Yeats* has been presented once before at the Nevada Chamber Music Festival, in 2013. At that time, Dr. Winn was kind enough to provide the following description of his work:

" *Three Pieces After William Butler Yeats* was composed while I was working on my doctorate at the University of Michigan. I was studying with William Bolcom, and it was his suggestion that I try a piano work in the nature of either an etude or a song without words ... This project gave me the chance to explore Yeats' mystical world, without being constrained to find musically expressive equivalents of the complete texts. I chose poetry that covers a wide span of Yeats' career: 'The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes,' an early poem (1885) in a folk vein, albeit a very atmospheric, sophisticated one; 'The Hosting of the Sidhe' (1893), incorporating Yeats' love of Irish legend and the occult (and the only poem from which I borrowed some of the actual speech rhythms); and 'The Magi' (1914), one of the poet's best known works ... 'The Magi' explores the idea that the three kings from the east might have been left unsatisfied by the tragic, ambiguous ending at Calvary, and are still searching for another Incarnation. To express this I tried to combine three of the most sincerely religious musical styles I could find: plainchant, Lutheran chorale settings, and the works of Olivier Messiaen, while avoiding, to the best of my ability, any cadences that would be totally conclusive."

### **Dvořák: *Slavonic Dances*, Op. 72/2, Op. 46/5, 8**

*Composed: 1878, 1886*

*Duration: 12 minutes*

Before the publication of the *Slavonic Dances*, Dvořák was relatively unknown as a

composer. Just barely getting by financially as a violist in Prague's Provincial Theater Orchestra, Dvořák applied for the Austrian State Music Prize, and won it three times in four years (1874, 1876, 1877). Johannes Brahms, one of the members of the Prize committee, became a fan of Dvořák's music and referred him to publisher Fritz Simrock. Simrock published Dvořák's *Moravian Duets* with great success, and requested that he follow those works with some dances. Taking inspiration from Brahms's popular *Hungarian Dances*, Dvořák composed the Op. 46 *Slavonic Dances* for piano four-hands in 1878. They were a big success, and were followed by a second set, Op. 72, eight years later. Those piano originals and Dvořák's subsequent orchestral versions helped spread his fame throughout Europe. Unlike Brahms, who used actual Hungarian folk tunes, Dvořák wrote his own melodies, while making use of traditional dance rhythms from his homeland and other parts of central and eastern Europe.

Op. 72/2 in E minor has the title *Starodávny* (ancient or antique) and takes the form of a Dumka, which traditionally alternates melancholy minor key and extroverted major key sections. Op. 46/5 in A major is a *Skočná*, a "spring dance" that involves hopping and jumping, and Op. 46/8 in G minor is a brilliant *Furiant*.

Program notes by Chris Morrison