

**Inside the Concert with Albert Combrink**  
**Dmitry Shishkin Piano Recital 24 June 2023**

**Domenico Scarlatti (1685 - 1757)**

**Sonata K.1 in D Minor / Sonata K.466 in F Minor / K.380 in E Major / Sonata K.319 in F Sharp Major**

Published and called “Keyboard Sonatas”, the 555 works of Italian Baroque composer Domenico Scarlatti are perhaps the most famous and successful examples of works that have migrated from early instruments such as the spinet or harpsichord to the modern concert grand piano. One can explore the sheer volume produced, but also their sustained popularity, given that he was the contemporary of giants such as J.S. Bach, and G.F. Handel, also born in 1685.



Domenico was overshadowed by his famous father Alessandro, a very popular composer and organist at the *Chapel Royal* in Naples. He studied under his father and others such as Francesco Gasparini, and his keyboard virtuosity was soon noted. The problem was that the harpsichord of the time was still an evolving instrument – they varied in size, volume, the styles of plectrum in the mechanism which plucked the strings (even the number of strings and range differed widely from one instrument builder to another). Harpsichord-concertising was impossible: there was no guarantee that the instruments would be able to accommodate the music one intended to learn for concerts in different venues, for example. Not to mention that the instruments were soft in volume, and that audiences would never be big enough to make it financially viable. Pressure was put on the young Domenico to become at least a concert-level organist, as harpsichords were for home use, private entertainment and audible to a handful of people at a time. An organist, at the very least, had a guaranteed full house on a Sunday.

Eventual frustration resulted in a sudden break with his family, and he abruptly moved to Lisbon, where he became Kapellmesiter for King João V of Portugal. More importantly for us, he became the piano teacher of the King’s daughter, the Infanta Maria Magdalena Barbara. She was somewhat of a prodigy and Scarlatti started writing keyboard music for her, but we know nothing else of his time here, as the great earthquake and tsunami of 1719 destroyed the public records building where all the manuscripts and records of his payments and activities had been kept. We pick up the trail again only when the 16 year old Princess was married off to future king Ferdinand VI of Spain and refused to move to Spain unless her “close friend, confidante and music teacher” accompanied her. To squash rumours of an affair, Domenico was given a 16-year old bride!

Over the next 15 years until his death, Domenico wrote what we know collectively as his 555 Keyboard Sonatas. They would have disappeared from history but for the interest of the famous castrato Nicola Broschi, known as Farinelli, who shipped crates of music back to Italy to add to his growing collection of publications to sell off to his fans. Indeed, it is as teaching material that they were first published, and the “*Esercisi per il Gravicembalo*” were used by the great father of formalised piano teaching, Carl Czerni. Alessandro Longo attempted to provide a chronological order, but in 1906 the scholarly work of Ralph Kirkpatrick gave us a more comprehensive collection – hence the L. and K. numbers found in the titles.

**Sonata K.1 in D Minor** - A simple binary piece in two sections, each which repeats, shows some repeated note patterns which could either be the physical effect of playing on a double-manual harpsichord making repeated notes possible, or an imitation of guitar strumming patterns he first encountered in Spain - to his great delight. The quasi jazz-chord structure imply that the piece was improvised, but of course, in the second section, the left hand leaps become exaggerated by a few octaves - a showing off of technique typical for Domenico and decried by his father - that delights both player and audience.

**Sonata K.466 in F Minor** sounds very different on the modern piano than the plucked harpsichord: the two hands can play at different volumes to bring out melodic ideas and use sustain pedal, whereas on the harpsichord it is a less melodic piece which keeps potentially static harmonies in motion by outlining the chords in rolling arpeggio patterns up and down the harmonies.

**Sonata K.380 in E Major** evokes the ceremonial sounds of court, echoing in miniature a courtly ritual complete with hunting horns playing in open 5ths. A surprisingly intimate picture of a hunt, it almost feels like a private conversation between Scarlatti and his young virtuoso student, destined to be in the public eye as Queen when perhaps she was happier behind a musical instrument in the drawing room with her life-long teacher, to whom she referred to as “My Domingo”.

**Sonata K.319 in F Sharp Major** is a courtly Gigue in 6/8 time, with imitative counterpoint between the hands, breaking into trills like ringing bells and surprise flourishes and runs that are the epitome of the Scarlattian frothy keyboard effervescence which has been delighting pianists (and princesses) for three centuries.

## Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683 - 1764)

### Nouvelles Suite de pieces de Clavecin:

#### *Quatrième Suite in A Minor RCT 5 iv Les Trois Mains (The Three Hands)*

#### *Quatrième Suite in E Minor RCT 2 v Le Rappel des Oiseaux*



Only two years older than Scarlatti, Bach and Handel, the Frenchman Rameau is considered one of the most important French composers and theorists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was not known as a keyboard virtuoso but his three volumes of keyboard music has steadily grown in posthumous stature, to the point where some musicologists consider them the pinnacle of French Baroque chamber music, that is - music specifically written for personal use, or the entertainment of an intimate, private gathering. The first works, published in 1706, contain the hallmarks of the Baroque French Suite of the time: hands imitating each other in counterpoint and active dialogue; some more lyrical, reflecting his many years of working with singers; some more dramatic, drawing from his huge successes as an opera composer; some that, like Scarlatti, revel in the sheer virtuosity; and some that are complicated harmonic explorations, reminding us that he was first famous for a treatise on Harmony and that his first opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* flopped as critics found its harmonies “too modern.”

*Les Trois Mains (The Three Hands)* uses a very complex system of handcrossings, giving the aural illusion of three hands playing at the same time. Some feel that it might have been conceived for a two-manual keyboard instrument, but it seems to fit more with the humour of the “character-piece” that Rameau is exploring, that he would set a deliberate challenge for the performer to solve the hand-crossing riddles. The repeated material also invites the performer to add embellishments - and a choice of about ten are specified in writings of the time. Pianists and musicologists make entire careers about arguing which ones to use and where and why.

*Le Rappel des Oiseaux (the Recall of the Birds)* was first published in 1724 under the title *Pièces de Clavecin avec une méthode pour la mécanique des doigts (Harpsichord pieces with a method for finger mechanics)* emphasising their initial use as teaching material rather than the concert works which they are today. *Rappel* can be translated variously in English - *reminder* or *recall* - and is therefore not simply an imitation of birds. The word implies “evocation” and invites the listeners to create their own little imagined scenario. It is not a romantic scene, nor the comic hens depicted in “*La Poule*” - There is something more ‘theatrical’, and dramatic, about Rameau’s music - this is no idyllic country scene. Given that the transparency of the perkily plucked plectrum of the original instrument would have been made from feather-quills, the challenge to translate the sounds of what Rameau described as “musical consonants” (the extraneous noises of the harpsichord mechanism as it plucks and mutes the strings) provide as many challenges to the modern pianist as it adds to the palette with choices of colour, sustaining power and volume.

## Ferruccio Busoni (1866 - 1924)

### Arrangement of Bach’s Chaconne from Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004



Italian composer, pianist, conductor, editor, writer, and teacher Busoni was one of the outstanding musicians in the history of music. From his childhood he was a virtuosic, if occasionally controversial, pianist with a special passion for the works of J.S. Bach. He studied as a child with the greatest teachers of the Vienna Conservatoire, and had a stellar teaching career from Moscow to Boston which filled his time between recitals. A huge tragedy for posterity was when many years of his recordings were destroyed in a fire in the Columbia Records factory, while waiting for issuing as an LP set. He left many influential writings on aesthetics, teaching manuals, analyses of many great works of music, and even considered instruments capable of playing in microtones a century before these became actual musical experiments. His stint in Boston led to an interest in North American indigenous tribal melodies which found their way into his compositions, alongside a vast body of work known as the “Bach-Busoni Editions” which became so famous that his wife Gerda was sometimes introduced as “Mrs Bach-Busoni”.

A *Ciaccona (Chaconne)* is a composition used as a vehicle for variations based on a repeated short sequence of chords with a repeated baseline. It is similar to the *Passacaglia* (for example the aria *When I am Laid* from Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*), except that the melodies and sections of the variations in a chaconne can also be in different tempos.

The Bach-original was written for solo violin, and it is one of the pinnacles of not only the genre, but also stands as a mountain in the works of Bach for its sheer size and depth of conception and execution which forces the violin out of

any limitations of range and expression - literal or imagined. Hence the Busoni transcription is not a mere transposition to a new instrument (as we saw with the Rameau and Scarlatti works), they are a re-orchestration. He conveys the majesty of the opening chords on a large scale, and in traversing 60 variations of a simple bass-theme, creates a landscape that at the same time redefined piano-technique.

The dedicatee Eugene D'Albert refused to perform it, saying the new colours were like touching up an already perfect painting with gaudy new colours, but Busoni wrote in reply: "I start from the impression that Bach's timeless conception of the work already goes far beyond the limits of the violin, so that the instrument he specifies for the performance is simply not adequate."



## Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918)

### Suite Bergamasque (L.75)

1. Prélude 2. Menuet 3. Clair de Lune 4. Passepied

It is easy now to classify Debussy as the main composer of the "Impressionist" style, but at the time, he vigorously rejected the term, as he struggled to find his own voice as a teenager in the Paris Conservatoire, which was as prescriptive and dismissive of certain ideas as it was a melting-pot for those same ideas, given the sheer number of talented musicians that were swimming in an ocean of painters, writers, dancers of exceptional gifts.



He discovered the work of Paul-Marie Verlaine (1844 - 1896) who called himself a *Symbolist*: In poetry, the symbolist procedure, as typified by Verlaine, was to use subtle suggestion instead of precise statement (rhetoric was banned) and to evoke moods and feelings through the magic of words and repeated sounds and the cadence of verse (musicality) and metrical innovation. This seems to be the perfect description for what Debussy was attempting to achieve, but for which he had not yet discovered the tools.

**Clair de lune** (*Moonlight*), the poem written by Verlaine in 1869, inspired Debussy to write the famous piano piece in 1890, and the rest of the Suite soon followed. Debussy also made two settings of the poem for voice and piano accompaniment.

This early in his career, Debussy sought to explore new sounds and techniques in older recognisable forms, and he found these in the dances of the Baroque. The Bergamasque was a rather clumsy and potentially comic dance, which brought with it a sense of carnival, entertainment, and the expectation of a series of entertainments - the perfect concept for a "Suite"

Paris at the turn of the century had also rediscovered the characters of the *Commedia dell'arte* and Pierrot, Pulcinella and Colombina provided stock characters familiar enough to audiences, that radical artistic experiments could be made, while keeping the narrative for an audience to follow. The paintings of Jean-Antoine Watteau inspired both Verlaine and Debussy in their search for a blend between a new language and the expression of emotions with which audiences would be able to identify.



**Prélude (Moderato tempo rubato)** is improvisatory and manages to invoke, in a few short measures, the antiquarian opening of the poem: a fantasy landscape, masks and dances accompanied by lutes, and a hint of sad emotions hidden behind fanciful costumes and disguises.

**Menuet (Andante)** avoids using the Baroque Menuet rhythm at the beginning, and uses light, fluttery embellishments and running scale patterns, that could reveal Scarlatti as a model in its playfulness with its own material. Dramatic flourishes and scales provide some commedia characters juggling past in between the guests before scurrying off into the night on a glistening A Minor scale to the top of the keyboard.



### ***Clair de lune (Andante très expressif)***

The party guests can now take a break from the frenetic jollity with a *Promenade Sentimental* (the original title of this movement). The opening of Debussy's most famous creation is the perfect description of the silvery light of the rising moon languidly dripping over the garden on a magical night where everything is suspended, still and perfect. Rippling arpeggios paint the "sobs of ecstasy" from the fountains. But it is not in its description of fountains and moonlight that the work is uniquely successful – Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* would soon set the standard in waterfountains - it is in essence a symbol of such a perfect time and place that it would defy description in word or image: a masterclass in Verlaine's Symbolism.

Your soul is a chosen landscape  
On which masks and Bergamasques cast enchantment as they go,  
Playing the lute, and dancing, and all but Sad beneath their fantasy-disguises.

Singing all the while, in the minor mode, Of all-conquering love and life so kind to them  
They do not seem to believe in their good fortune, And their song mingles with the moonlight,

With the calm moonlight, sad and lovely, Which makes the birds dream in the trees,  
And the plumes of the fountains weep in ecstasy,  
The tall, slender plumes of the fountains among the marble sculptures

***Passepied (Allegretto ma non troppo)*** draws on the Baroque Court Dance which stems from French Breton, a folk dance with pastoral associations which was adapted for courtly use - light and with exaggerated gestures exploiting the fact that the men were all wearing wigs and high heels, and hence the maximum effect had to be made with the minimum physical effort. The movement was originally called a *Pavane* but since Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Infanta* had become an overnight hit in Paris, Debussy changed the title for publication. It is up to listeners to imagine if they hear the original majestic processional *Pavane* dance of the aristocracy of the original title, or if they hear a pastoral sheep-herder accidentally finding himself transported to the King's garden party of the published title *Passepied*.

### ***L'Isle joyeuse, L. 106 (The Joyful Island)***



The *Fêtes galante* style was a term specifically created by the French Academy in the early 18th century to describe Watteau's paintings of country or parkland parties. It was his way of giving his patrons what they wanted, namely, pictures of themselves, and of giving the Academy what they wanted, namely, pictures on historical or mythological themes. The painting *Le Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère* (The Journey to the Island of Cytheria) is a visual delight: a beautiful landscape, beautiful figures in beautiful clothes, beautiful statuary, and cupids. Cupids everywhere. For the Academy, it seemed to represent a classical scene with mythological overtones. Debussy's piano work gives a decidedly modernist twist to this quasi-mythological theme.

In the summer of 1904, Debussy had an extended affair with Emma Bardac - both were married at the time, and the scandal was draining to both and they fled to the Island of Jersey in the English Channel. On their return, both initiated divorces and the excited and exultant *L'Isle Joyeuse* is a product of the holiday, as was their first child *Chouchou*.

Excited trills arrest the ear into following an excited journey to an island of promised delights. There is a little shepherd tune, not unlike some of the *Children's Corner Suite*. Both themes are tossed about in a rush of increasing excitement until a bustling march blasts forth in sonorous triumph as the piece ends ecstatically.

### ***Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849)***

**Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 / Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53**

Turn-of-the-century Poland was a time of great political upheaval - again. Nicholas I of Russia had ignored the constitution and crowned himself King of Poland, and his brother Grand Duke Constantine unleashed a violent and lethal secret police force, abolishing press freedom, closing universities, murdering or deporting political voices such as the poet Mickiewicz. The final insult was a Russian plot to send Polish troops to France to suppress the "July Revolution", building up pressure till the eruption of the "November Uprising of 1830".

Young Polish officers revolted, soon to be joined by civilians. Although the insurgents were brave and had initial success, Emperor Nicholas I had the numbers and might of the Russian military behind him and crushed the rebellion violently.

This led to the “Great Emigration” - the emigration of thousands of Poles and Lithuanians, particularly from the political and cultural élites, from 1831 to 1870, after the failure of the November Uprising of 1830 - 1831. A large portion of the Polish political landscape was dominated by those who carried out their activities outside of the country as émigrés. Their exile was the result of the Partitions of Poland, which completely divided the lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Habsburg monarchy of Austria. Because of the emigration of political elites, much of the political and ideological activity of Polish intelligentsia in the 18th and the 19th centuries took place outside of the regions of partitioned Poland. Most of the political émigrés based themselves in France.

One such émigré was Frédéric Chopin. Born in a village outside Warsaw, the child prodigy Chopin was already performing his own compositions in Warsaw in his early teens, but settled in Paris at 21, where he spent the rest of his life (only 18 years), but enough to build his reputation as the quintessential Polish Poet of the Piano. He supported himself by selling his compositions and giving piano lessons, in addition to a few “salon” performances. He made subtle and not-so-subtle political statements by including Mazurkas and Polonaises in his programmes, using the folk idioms of his homeland to remind audiences that he was indeed not French, and that the situation in Poland remained dire. He re-invented genres, turning little Waltzes into major concert works and the Ballade – essentially a song-story form, became epic ten-minute monologues of such scale that they are considered among the most important piano works in history.



The Scherzo is another musical form redefined by Chopin. But partly derived from the “joke” movements of Mendelssohn or Beethoven, and preserving the A-B-A structure of the classical “Minuet and Trio”, the Chopin Scherzos completely outgrew their predecessors.

The second in a set of four, the **Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31**, opens with a phrase that has been called a whimper, a temper-tantrum, an angry coiled snake unfurling and ready to strike, or a picture of Chopin throwing his calling card in scorn, at the Parisian audiences who seemed unaware of the situation back in Poland.



Wilhelm von Lenz, who studied the work with Chopin, reported that for the composer “it was never questioning enough, never piano enough, never vaulted (tombé) enough, never important enough” and on another occasion “it must be a charnel house” (a vault or building where human skeletal remains are stored. They are often built near churches for depositing bones that are unearthed while digging graves. The term can also be used more generally as a description of a place filled with death and destruction.)

The work builds to a what can be interpreted as a triumphant conclusion, but the vision is chaotic and the sweep remains violent - the antithesis of the pale Chopin whose reputation is for some based on moon-drenched nocturnes and tender waltzes

### ***Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53 (Polonaise héroïque)***

1848 saw the outbreak, across Europe, of a number of revolutions, beginning in France. The revolutions were essentially democratic and liberal in nature, with the aim of removing the old monarchical structures and creating independent nation-states, as envisioned by romantic nationalism. When Chopin’s lover, the writer George Sand, heard this work she wrote about it with rapture, calling it the embodiment of the French Revolution, “*un symbole héroïque*” and the title stuck.

The French title Polonaise is derived from the Polish *Polacca*, a stately processional dance, performed by couples walking around the dance-floor in a way that can be characterised as military. Chopin wrote 23 concert-polonaises. While clearly emanating the pulse and vigour of the original dance, it is undeniably designed for a concert stage and not for dancing.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dmitry Shishkin is a critically acclaimed Russian pianist who has been highlighted for both his creative and individual approach to music, as well as his brilliant piano skills by the international press. “In his playing we can hear both excellence and playfulness.” He was awarded a silver medal in June 2019 at the prestigious 16th International Tchaikovsky Competition and won the first place prize in November 2018 at the 73rd Geneva International Music Competition where he performed with Orchestre de la Suisse Romande.

Born in Chelyabinsk, Siberia, Dmitry demonstrated an exceptional talent for the piano at a very young age. He performed his first recital at the age of three and orchestra concert at the age of six. He then entered the prestigious Gnessin Moscow School of Music for gifted children in the class of Mikhail Khokhlov, at the age of nine and then attended the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory in the class of Eliso Virsaladze. He has also studied in Sicily at the Vincenzo Bellini State Conservatory in Catania with Epifanio Comis, and in Hannover at Musikhochschule with Arie Vardi.

From a young age, Dmitry has won many competitions, and received numerous awards and scholarships from Russia and abroad. He is a prize winner of such renowned competitions as Busoni in Bolzano (third place prize in 2013); Rio de Janeiro (second place prize in 2014); Chopin in Warsaw (sixth place prize in 2015); Queen Elisabeth in Brussels (finalist in 2016); and the first place prize winner of the Top of the World Competition in Tromsø (2017).

Dmitry currently resides in Switzerland, but performs around the world. Most notably, he has collaborated with the Mariinsky Theatre; State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia, Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra, Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, Staatskapelle Weimar, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra and National Orchestra of Belgium with Marin Alsop. Dmitry’s concert schedule additionally includes festival performances, notably Dubrovnik Summer Festival, Bergen Music Festival, Chopin European Festival, and Brescia Bergamo Music Festival.

