

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Albert Combrink takes us *Inside the Concert* with notes on the programme

Introduction

Olga Kern's career has been closely associated with the music of Sergei Rachmaninoff, a composer-pianist who stands as one of the high points of Russian pianism. He lays claim to both the title "Romantic" through the rich melodic depth of his homeland and the 19th Century, and "Modern" in that he lived to the Second World War, creating some of the most enduring music of the 20th century. .

In tribute to the 150th birthday of Sergei Rachmaninoff, Kern presents a programme of his solo works spanning from his ultra-romantic early works, to the more modernist later etudes, culminating in the great Second Piano Sonata. She introduces two more phenomenal composer-pianists: Schumann and Gershwin. Schumann's Carnival was of tremendous importance to Rachmaninoff as a performer: he recorded it no less than three times. Gershwin was a deep admirer of Rachmaninoff and his huge technical demands provides a pallet-cleanser before diving into a darker second half.

The daughter of two pianists, and the great granddaughter of an opera singer (from Kharkiv , Ukraine) who was accompanied at the piano by Rachmaninoff himself, Olga Kern has made a huge international career for herself since winning the First Prize at the First *International Rachmaninoff Competition* when she was only 17. Rachmaninoff also featured prominently in her programmes for her historic win in the 2001 *Van Cliburn International Piano Competition* – the only woman winner in 50 years. Over the last 20 years, Olga Kern has performed all 4 Rachmaninoff piano concertos as well as the Rhapsody on the theme by Paganini in a two-evening concert event at venues all over the world, including South Africa with Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

3 Études-Tableaux

The two sets of Études-Tableaux are later works by a composer who had already written a formidable amount of popular piano music. He deliberately set the technical bar beyond the "competent professional", attempting to write music of extreme physical and musical difficulty. They were intended to be "picture pieces", essentially "musical evocations of external visual stimuli". Rachmaninoff did not disclose what inspired each one, stating: "I do not believe in the artist that discloses too much of his images. Let [the listener] paint for themselves what it most suggests."



1. Op.39 No. 9 in D Major – Allegre moderato Tempo di Marcia (*moderate, Marching tempo*)

The heroic march-motif with its repeated-note patterns which became a trademark in his Preludes and Concertos, rides on Late-Rachmaninoff harmonies, creating a dramatic sweep with orchestral scope. The ABA structure is concise and allows little space for variation.

2. Op.33 No. 8 in G Minor – Moderato (*moderate pace*)

A nocturnal song of mourning is conjured with a sparse arpeggio figure, introducing a Chopinesque melody, reminiscent of the Nocturnes. Slight modal inflections hint at memories of Russian Orthodox chants. The middle section unexpectedly conjures up cadenzas built on alternating hand patterns which remind of the Debussy Etudes published just a few years earlier.

3. Op.33 No. 5 in E Flat major – Non Allegro (*not too fast*)

Nicknamed "The Snowstorm", this Étude counts as one of the hardest of the set to play. Filigree finger-work can transform from tinkling snowbells to a thundering avalanche. Rhythmic propulsion remains relentless until the unexpected Will-o'-the-wisp ending.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Carnaval, Op.9



Composed in 1834, *Carnaval* was conceived, published and performed as one piece, the *Carneval, scènes mignonnes sur 4 notes pour Piano. Op. 9* (Carnaval, tiny scenes over four notes for piano, Opus 9). It consists of 21 short pieces representing masked revellers at Carnival, a festival before Lent. Schumann gives musical expression to himself, his friends and colleagues, and characters from improvised Italian comedy (*commedia dell'arte*). He dedicated the work to the violinist Karol Lipiński.

Inspired by a set of Variations on a *Sehnsuchtswalzer (longing waltz)* by Schubert, which had received a rather lavish orchestral treatment by Ludwig Schunke, a close friend of Schumann, the composer set out to create a more intimate set of variations. The project soon bored Schumann, but he used the opening of the abandoned original set of variations as a tribute to the recently departed Schunke in a new work: 21 pieces connected by recurring motif rather than formal variations on a pre-existing melody. Found in each movement, are one or more of the following Musical Cryptograms:

A, Eb, C, B – German: A–Es–C–H (the Es is pronounced as a word for the letter S)

Ab, C, B – German: As–C–H

Eb, C, B, A – German: as Es–C–H–A

The first two spell the German name for the town of Asch (now Aš in the Czech Republic), in which Schumann's then fiancée, Ernestine von Fricken, was born. The sequence of letters also appears in the German word *Fasching*, meaning carnival. In addition, *Asch* is German for "Ash", as in Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Lastly, it encodes a version of the composer's name, Robert Alexander Schumann. The third series, S–C–H–A, encodes the composer's name again with the musical letters appearing in Schumann, in their correct order.

Schumann and his friends seem to be attending a re-imagined Ball or Carnival in late 17th Century Italy, inhabited by the colourful world of the *Commedia dell'arte*. Characterized by masked "character-types", *commedia* encouraged improvisational theatre and colourful masks and costumes.

1. Prélude (Ab major)

The Prélude is one of the few pieces in the set not explicitly organized around the A–S–C–H idea. It was taken from the incomplete *Variations on a Theme of Schubert*. The theme was Schubert's *Sehnsuchtswalzer*, Op. 9/2, D. 365. Dramatic and heroic, it sets the work up as a large-scale dramatic statement of high virtuosity.

2. Pierrot (Eb major)

This is a depiction of Pierrot, a character from the *commedia dell'arte*, commonly represented in costume at a ball. His character in contemporary popular culture - in poetry, fiction, and the visual arts, as well as works for the stage, screen, and concert hall - is that of the sad clown, often pining for love of Columbine, who usually breaks his heart and leaves him for Harlequin.

3. Arlequin (Bb major)

This is a depiction of Harlequin. His role is that of a light-hearted, nimble, and astute servant, often acting to thwart the plans of his master, and pursuing his own love interest, Columbine, with wit and resourcefulness, often competing with the sterner and melancholic Pierrot. He later develops into a prototype of the romantic hero. Harlequin inherits his physical agility and his trickster qualities, as well as his name, from a mischievous "devil" character in medieval Passion Plays.

4. Valse noble (B♭ major)

A slow, lyrical waltz, inspired by Clara Schumann's *Valse Romantique Op.4* providing a brief intermezzo between the *Pierrot/Arlequin* couple and the Eusebius/Florestan couple to follow.

5. Eusebius (E♭ major)

"The Dreamer" is a character-name Schumann took from a Jean Paul novel, to name his poetic and introvert side.

6. Florestan (G minor)

Depicting the composer's fiery, impetuous side. Schumann quotes the main waltz theme from his earlier work *Papillons*, Op. 2 (1831), in this movement.

7. Coquette (B♭ major)

By reversing the rhythms of the Harlequin, Schumann deftly draws a sketch of a flirtatious girl.

8. Replique (B♭ major – G minor)

A 'reply' to the coquette seems like a little Coda that got lost somewhere else and its quotations of the "Coquette" rhythms leaves much space for playful interpretation and creation of mood.

Sphinxes

This consists of three sections, each consisting of one bar on a single staff in bass (F) clef, with no key, tempo, or dynamic indications. The notes are written as breves or double whole notes. The pitches given are the notes E♭C B A (SCHA) and A♭C B (AsCH) and A E♭C B (ASCH). Many pianists and editors, including Clara Schumann, advocate for omitting the Sphinxes in performance. Rachmaninoff insisted on performing it.

9. Papillons (B♭ major)

Not related to his earlier work of the same name, the running passages give a musical picture of butterflies, flitting through three variations in under half a minute.

10. A.S.C.H. S.C.H.A. (Lettres Dansantes) (E♭ major)

A fast, syncopated dance tune is repeated with little or no variation. Neither of the themes in the title appear in the music itself! Despite the title, the pattern used is As–C–H.

11. Chiarina (C minor)

A depiction of the future Mrs Schumann, Clara Schumann, at the time still the 15-year old Clara Wieck. Variations on a dance melody with an agitated rhythm was a secret code between the two. While still engaged to Ernestine von Fricken, he was falling in love with Clara, the daughter of his music teacher.

12. Chopin (A♭ major)

Schumann was a fine pianist and studied and respected the works of some of his colleagues, and Frédéric Chopin was an early discovery. Chopin did not return the admiration and was not a fan of this little homage. He felt that the "faux Nocturne" was an insult and a parody. This one minute of music cemented the gulf between the two great pianist-composers.

13. Estrella (F minor)

Depicting his current love, his fiancée Ernestine von Fricken, a very short ABA structure ends emphatically, creating a dramatic little Mini-Coda to the love triangle presented by numbers 11-13.

14. Reconnaissance (A♭ major)

Exceptionally difficult to play because of repeated thumb-notes, the musical cryptogram suggests the piece depicting Schumann and Ernestine as the characters unmasked and, by implication, recognizing each other at the ball.

15. Pantalon et Colombine (F minor (ends in F major))

Pantalone, the old, greedy and lecherous merchant, is pursuing the saucy, petty servant Columbina (from the *Commedia dell'arte*.) Originally, women were not allowed to act out these roles on stage, but Colombina was allowed to provide comic and carnal interest in the dances and

suggested seductions in between theatrical scenes. It appears to be almost a parody of the previous number with which it is paired.

16–17. Valse allemande – Paganini (A♭ major – F minor – A♭ major)

A German waltz, with an evocation of Niccolò Paganini in the middle, 16 and 17 are actually a single piece in ABA form. Paganini was, of course, the big virtuosic inspiration to pianists and many pianists paid homage to his abilities in this way.

18. Aveu (F minor – A♭ major)

Literally translated as “a confession of love” Schumann revered to this as a “vow”.

19. Promenade (D♭ major)

Two dancers at the ball occasionally need a break, and arm-in-arm, take a walk around the dancefloor – stately and formal, but without the intricacies of dance-moves.

20. Pause (A♭ major)

Not only is there no Pause, the music is fast and loud. A short introduction and a quote of the first section *Préambule*, leads into the final piece without a... “pause”.

21. Marche des “Davidsbündler” contre les Philistins (A♭ major)

Quotations from a number of the previous sections fleetingly reappear; the *Großvatertanz*, identified by Schumann in the score as a “Theme from the 17th century” and intended to represent those holding to old-fashioned, outdated and inartistic ideals (i.e., Philistines) is quoted from his earlier work *Papillons*, Op. 2. Near the end of the piece, there is also a quotation of a theme from the last movement of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)



3 Preludes

1: *Allegro ben ritmato e deciso (fast, well rhythmic and decisive)*

2: *Andante con moto e poco rubato (At a walking pace, with movement and a little freedom of tempo)*

3: *Allegro ben ritmato e deciso (fast, well rhythmic and decisive)*

Fascinating Rhythm

Unbelievably, the *Three Preludes* written in 1926, represent the sum total of the solo piano music Gershwin published in his lifetime. A set of 5 was premiered, and many scholars have claimed to find the “lost Prelude”, but be that as it may, a projected set of 24 Preludes - à la Bach, Rachmaninoff and Chopin - never materialised. Packed with character, their pointy harmonies and jagged rhythms were incomprehensible to their original audience. It defined the modern Jazz sound, but at the time, was dismissed as artless and talentless noise. His songs from his shows have been transcribed by many pianists, with Earl Wild's *The Gershwin Songbook*, featuring *Fascinating Rhythm* being regarded as the standard virtuoso challenge.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

The spirit of Chopin and Mendelssohn floats through much of Rachmaninoff's early works for the piano: he was a famous interpreter of their works.

Moment musical Op.16 No. 4 bears resemblance to Chopin's *Etude Op. 10 No. 12* in the taxing left hand figure playing throughout. Furthermore it looks, sounds, and feels as if it were an improvisation on Chopin's Prelude in G major (Op. 28, No. 3).

Barcarolle Op.10 No.3 uses the “Song without Words” model of Mendelssohn while creating string-like shimmerings in the right hand, before darting off into a busy, rippling river, far removed from the grandeur of the Chopin model.

Polichinelle Op.3 No. 4 is a character piece, based on the Commedia dell'arte character Pulcinella from which Punch (from Punch and Judy) derives. It is in ternary form (ABA), beginning and ending with a fast section that gives way to a slower, lyrical melodious passage in the middle.

3 Preludes Op.32

Prelude Op.32 No. 5 in G Major - With consoling lyricism over an uneven but undisturbing quintuplet Rachmaninoff creates one of those quietly moving passages which has made him such a favourite.

Prelude Op.32 No. 10 in B Minor - Rachmaninoff references his childhood experiences with the Bells and Chants of the Russian Orthodox Church

Prelude Op.32 No. 12 in G Sharp Minor - surprisingly intimate for the number of notes it requires, the work is a mark of the genius that the composer was, employing such a range of colours and textures from the instrument.

Piano Sonata No. 2 Op.36 (Second Version, 1931)

1: *Allegro agitato (lively and agitated)*

2: *Non allegro (not fast)*

3: *Allegro molto (moving faster)*

One of the largest and hardest Piano Sonatas ever written, Rachmaninoff's Second Sonata was conceived in 1913 when he was living in Italy following a period of burn-out caused by trying to keep three careers going: performing, conducting and composing. Both his daughters contracted typhoid fever and he was unable to complete the sonata for months while he travelled around Europe and back to Russia to consult with doctors. When he premiered the piece in Moscow it was well received, but he felt that it needed a trim. Other projects took precedence, and it was only in 1931 that he could set aside time for this project. 6 minutes was edited from the original and it is mainly the cuts that distinguish the two works. Pianists are still in disagreement as to which version is best, and some have presented a mixture of the two (Kocsis, Horowitz etc).

A stormy and romantic work, composed after Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and the first serial experiments of Schoenberg, Rachmaninoff writes a massive work- symphonic in concept and execution- and one of the great 20th Century piano works. Rachmaninoff presents his trademarks: pianistic power and musical muscle. These are as convincing here as in his piano concertos, with which the sonata shares some large-scale formal design features: a fast middle section in the 'slow' movement and a glorious apotheosis of lyrical melody at the end of the last movement with prominent features of his 2nd and 3rd piano concertos.

ABOUT THE ARTIST:



With a vivid onstage presence, dazzling technique, and keen musicianship, pianist Olga Kern is widely recognized as one of the great artists of her generation, captivating audiences and critics alike. She was born into a family of musicians and began studying piano at the age of five. At seventeen, she was awarded first prize at the Rachmaninoff International Piano Competition, and in 2001, she launched her U.S. career, winning a historic Gold Medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition—the only woman in the last 50 years to do so.

A Steinway Artist, Olga is a laureate of several international competitions. In 2016 she was Jury Chairman of both the Cliburn International Amateur Piano Competition and the first Olga Kern International Piano Competition, where she also holds the title of Artistic Director. In December 2021, Olga was Jury Chairman of the 1st Chopin Animato International Piano competition in Paris, France. In coming seasons, she will continue to serve on the juries of several high-level competitions. Olga frequently gives masterclasses and since 2017 has served on the piano faculty of the Manhattan School of Music. Also in 2017, Olga received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor (New York City). In 2019, she was appointed the Connie & Marc Jacobson Director of Chamber Music at the Virginia Arts Festival.

Olga has performed with many prominent orchestras, including the St. Louis Symphony, Pacific Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Detroit Symphony, and the National Symphony Orchestra (Washington, D.C.), as well as Czech Philharmonic, Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala, Pittsburgh Symphony, São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, Iceland Symphony, Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie, Tokyo's NHK Symphony Orchestra, and Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra. She was also a featured soloist on U.S. tours with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in 2018 and 2022, and during the 2017–2018 season, she served as Artist in Residence at the San Antonio Symphony. Highlights of the 2021–2022 season included performances with the Austin Symphony, Palm Beach Symphony, Milwaukee Symphony, Santa Rosa Symphony, Greensboro Symphony, Madison Symphony, New Mexico Philharmonic, Concerto Budapest Symphony Orchestra, and Academia Teatro alla Scala. She appeared as a soloist on a U.S. tour with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine and performed recitals in Savannah, Sunriver, Huntsville, Fort Worth, Carmel, and Minneapolis as well as in Portugal, Poland, and Sweden. In the 2022–2023 season, she appeared with the Dallas Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony, Orquesta Filarmónica de Gran Canaria, Ireland's National Symphony Orchestra, and Colorado Symphony. She performed recitals at the Minnesota Beethoven Festival and the International Piano Festival of Oeiras as well as in Brno and Mariánské Lázně, Czech Republic; Virginia Beach; Chicago; and San Francisco. In the 2023–2024 season, she performs Rachmaninoff's four piano concertos and Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini with the Austin Symphony and with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, appears with the Czech Philharmonic on a nation-wide telecast, and tours South Africa and Asia.

In 2012, Olga established the Kern Foundation "Aspiration," which supports talented musicians around the world. Olga's discography includes a Harmonia Mundi recording of the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and Christopher Seaman; her Grammy-nominated disc of Rachmaninoff's Corelli Variations and other transcriptions; and Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 with the Warsaw Philharmonic and Antoni Wit. Other notable releases include Chopin's Piano Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3, and SONY's release of the Rachmaninoff Sonata for Cello and Piano with Sol Gabetta. Olga released a new CD in 2022 on the Delos label of Brahms and Shostakovich quintets with the Dalí Quartet.

The Olga Kern International Piano Competition is honoured and privileged to have been recently chosen to be a part of the prestigious World Federation of International Music Competitions. Olga's iconic dresses are designed by Alex Teih(New York) and her jewellery designed by Alex Soldier(New York).