

ABOUT THE MUSIC

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



William Grant Still (1895-1978)
Incantation and Dance for Oboe and Piano (1942)

When the prolific black American composer died at the age of 83, Still's music of symphonies, operas and ballets, was little known outside specialised circles. He had, however, built up a reputation as a composer of skill and substance and was highly regarded by the American musical intelligentsia. The efforts by his daughter Judith and many others, has brought about a renaissance of this remarkable composer.

An "Incantation" is a series of words said as a magic spell or charm, and the moody piano introduction sets the stage for a spell-caster. Sparse, open piano writing creates a nocturnal mood where the spellcaster can call forth visions and apparitions, coloured more mysterious by unusual intervals, modal modulations and generally avoiding the traditional major or minor scale and arpeggio patterns. The incantation has either caused the listeners to dance, or has called forth a dancing vision: repeated rhythmic chords on the piano lay a playful and sardonic walking beat for the soloist to dance to. A slight hiccup in the walk is soon met by a bird – or chicken? – chirping.

Is it a chicken dancing or is someone imitating the poultry? Given that Still suffered tremendous prejudice as a black musician, a case can be made that the "Dance" harks back to the "Cakewalk" tradition, where groups of slaves would, at get togethers on the plantations, or at church, perform a processional partner-dance, performed with comical formality, which was a safe space for subtle – or not-so-subtle – mockery of the mannered dances of the white slaveholders.

Clara Schumann (1819-1896) **Three Romances for Violin and Piano, Op. 22 (transcribed. for oboe) (1853)**

"Clara has composed a series of small pieces, which show a musical and tender ingenuity such as she never attained before. But to have children, and a husband who is always living in the realm of imagination, does not go together with composing. She cannot work at it regularly, and I am often disturbed to think how many profound ideas are lost because she cannot work them out." – Robert Schumann



Clara Wieck was born in Leipzig to a talented singer mother and a difficult and domineering father who was nonetheless one of the best piano teachers in Germany, who pushed his daughter's musical education to the point where the prodigy, at age 14, gave the premiere of her own composition - a Piano Concerto - with Felix Mendelssohn conducting. By 18 she had become one of the most renowned concert pianists in all of Europe. Robert Schumann was so entranced by her playing as an 8 year old, that he enrolled for music lessons with Clara's father – which in those days involved moving in with your teacher. By 18 he was madly in love with Clara and asked for her hand in marriage. Her father did everything to stop the relationship, including planning a concert tour, but eventually Robert sued him and the courts ruled that the two were free to marry.

Clara was the breadwinner – she had a performing career of 61 years – in addition to being a mother of 7 children, and a busy teacher and concert pianist: these factors made composing strictly a pastime for her. She set new standards of performance that continue to this day, including the playing of recitals and concertos from memory. Robert was most supportive of her compositions, praised them highly, and encouraged her to write more: he even created a composition studio for her in their new home in Düsseldorf, and arranged for his own pupil, the young Johannes Brahms, to babysit the 7 children so that he and Clara could work in peace. She was also a great promotor and performer of chamber music and, for example, gave 238 recitals with the great violinist Joseph Joachim. It was for Joachim and herself that Clara composed the Three Romances Op.22.

“Romance” was a title favoured by Clara and other romantics, for an instrumental work of a tender, sentimental and lyrical character. These works are less excitable than the “Fantasiestücke” by both the Schumann-couple and others that have more dramatic and darker undertones.

1 Andante molto (Very much at a walking tempo) A beautifully sung melody opens the set, with conversational counterpoint provided by the piano. A surprisingly chromatic piano part reveals a composer of poise and sophistication. Even the “Animato” middle section remains tenderly reflective and wistful.

2 Allegretto (fast and lively) – Even though the second Romance starts in the minor key, the instruction is to play “with tender presentation”. The middle section – in a happier major key and mood, is full of playful trills and embellishments.

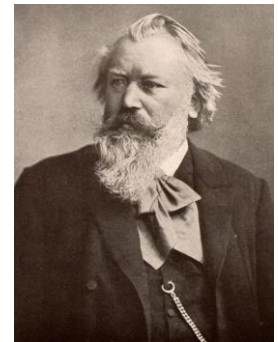
3 Leidenschaftlich schnell (Passionately fast) - builds a long instrumental vocalise over rippling arpeggios that dominate the opening and closing sections, leaving the middle section for harp-like figures and occasional dialogue between the two instruments.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Selections from Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119 (1893)

1. *Intermezzo in B minor*, 2. *Intermezzo in E minor*, 3. *Intermezzo in C Major*, 4. *Rhapsody in E-flat Major*

The last solo piano pieces to be composed by Brahms, the four pieces Op.119 form part of an extraordinary late flowering of creativity, late in Brahms’ life, when he had – to all intents and purposes – retired from the life of a working musician. A chance meeting with the clarinetist Richard Muhlfeld, inspired some of his greatest works, including the Clarinet Sonatas, Clarinet Trio and the Clarinet Quintet.



The pieces were, of course, first given to Clara Schumann to approve, and approve she did, writing in her diary: “It really is marvellous how things pour from him; it is wonderful how he combines passion and tenderness in the smallest of spaces,” While the melancholic vein never totally leaves the stage, there is a Brahmsian presence that casts a warm light on the proceedings: death may be nearer than in earlier years, but sitting next to a warm fire after a successful life and career, also had its joys. Brahms was very self-deprecating in his descriptions of his works, and he presented this set in rather gloomy terms: “Every bar, every note, must sound as in a ritardando, as if one would like to imbibe melancholy from each single passage.” However, an open and honest listening will present us with moments of steely determinations, often cheerful games with inner voices and tongue-in-cheek harmonic tricks.

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Two Fantasy Pieces for Oboe and Piano Op.2 (1889)



Carl Nielsen is often regarded as a modern composer, with his large Symphonic output firmly planted in a 20th Century idiom, yet he was very much a composer of the mature Romantic Era.

1. Romanze (Andante con dolore – At a walking pace, with pain)

Nielsen set out deliberately to exploit the cantabile (singing) quality of the oboe. Falling motives in the oboe over a spare accompaniment creates a reflective atmosphere which not even a few variation patterns in the accompaniment manage to disturb.

2. Humoreske (Allegretto Scherzando – Fast and lively with humour)

A skittish dance in a folk idiom follows with quicksilver changes of mood. Light and tuneful, the two instruments explore modal sounds alternating with more chromatic ideas, giving the work a sense of exploring two moods – one young, playful and teasing, and the other speaking with humour containing the wisdom of the ancients

INTERVAL

Marina Dranishnikova (1929-1994)
Poem for Oboe and Piano (1953)



Published in Moscow in 1953, this dark and moving work remained unknown in the West until discovered in a library in 2003 by Marc Finc who was working on a research project into 20th century Russian oboe music. Little is known of the composer: her father was a conductor, and she had at some point studied oboe with Nadeshda Golubovskaya at the Leningrad Conservatory. The piece is dedicated to Vladimir Kurin, solo oboist with the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, and reportedly this "Poem" is a representation of their tragic love affair.

The piano part is virtuosic and challenging, and the work is an expressive poem requiring the full participation of both musicians – there is no sense here of a soloist and an accompanist. In roughly 9 minutes, 9 key-signatures are covered, with sweeping melodies. Frenetic and passionate music alternates with slower heartfelt passages of great depth and beauty.

Five Metamorphoses after Ovid for Solo Oboe



Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Helen Grime (b. 1981) Leilehua Lanzilotti (b. 1983)

James Austin Smith has created a new "Ovid" Suite based on Benjamin Britten's famous *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* for solo unaccompanied Oboe. Britten was inspired by stories from "Metamorphoses" by Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC – 18 AD) known as *Ovid*. One of the last great Latin love elegists, Ovid was exiled from Rome to a village on the Black Sea, the punishment tantalizingly and cryptically attributed to "a poem and a mistake". The "Metamorphoses" is his magnum opus, chronicling the history of the world from creation to the deification of Julius Caesar, in a mythico-historical framework comprising over 250 myths, 15 books, and 11,995 lines.

1. Pan (Britten, 1951) - "who played upon the reed pipe which was Syrinx, his beloved"

The music of the first metamorphosis echoes the "free-spirited" character of its titular figure: it is written without bar lines, including frequent pauses, making it feel free and whimsically improvisational.

2. Arachne (Grime, 2013)

Taken from the composer's website: (<https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/48565/Arachne--Helen-Grime/>)

'Arachne' is based on Ted Hughes' retelling of the myth in his 'Tales from Ovid'. Arachne, a mortal and master weaver, is challenged to a contest of the goddess, Minerva. Minerva creates a work depicting the Olympian gods and their conquests over humans. Arachne fashions a scene of debauchery showing the Gods raping the deceiving humans. Arachne's weaving is flawless, and Minerva is so outraged that she beats Arachne mercilessly. Arachne is so demoralised that she hangs herself. Minerva takes pity on her and turns her into a spider.

The opening of the miniature depicts Arachne's arrogance and assurance in her abilities. The middle section suggests the weaving contest between Minerva and Arachne. A freer episode attempts to show the violence of Minerva and suicide of Arachne. The quiet, enigmatic ending conveys the metamorphoses where Minerva turns Arachne into a spider.

3. Bacchus (Britten) - "at whose feasts is heard the noise of gagging women's tattling tongues and shouting out of boys"

The god of alcohol and ecstasy inspires a drunken feast of abandoned hedonism.

4. Daphne (Lanzilotti, 2021) – Commissioned by James Austin Smith

Daphne is pursued by Apollo, and, to escape his erotic desire, she turns herself into a tree.

Taken from the composer's website: <https://leilehualanzilotti.com/daphne>

"Daphne's story is one that has fascinated me since the first time I saw Bernini's Apollo and Daphne in person. True to the sculptor's flare for drama, Bernini's marble work recreates the moment Apollo catches up to Daphne as she turns into a tree—leaves sprouting from her fingers, her midsection becoming bark as roots grow out of her toes. This musical work takes fragments from Barbara Strozzi's Che si può fare. In the solo oboe piece, I imagine Strozzi interpreting the Brunacci text through the voice of Daphne: cursed by cupid, slowly having difficulty breathing as she becomes a tree: the gods' answer to her plight."

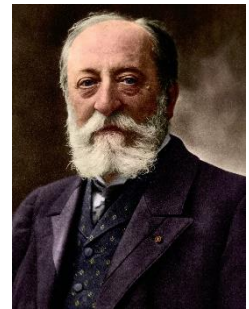
5. Arethusa (Britten) - "who, flying from the love of Alpheus the river god, was turned into a fountain"

Falling arpeggio-figures create a relaxed and flowing image of the quintessential love-object, the nymph Arethusa - turned into a fresh-water fountain.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Sonata for Oboe and Piano, Op. 166 (1921)

A wunderkind and enormously prolific composer, Saint-Saëns is known for colourful, virtuosic and festive works including the Organ Symphony, Carnival of the Animals, and a set of five splashy piano concertos. He also left a huge body of chamber works, developing a more austere style late in his career. Like Debussy and Ravel, one of the composer's last ambitions was to compose a sonata for each of the major instruments. Death caught up with him before he got very far with this project, but the Oboe Sonata is a welcome addition to the repertoire.



1. Andantino (Slightly fast than a walking pace)

A simple call-and-response pattern creates the thematic framework for the entire movement. Intensity and dissonance is created through lengthening some phrases through modulations.

2. Ad libitum - Allegretto - Ad libitum (Free - Fast and Lively - Free)

Call-and-response is again the mechanism used, but the piano seems to be the anchor, allowing the oboe to twirl and dance rhapsodically before a gently rocking pastoral dance in a Sicilienne rhythm. Quasi-pentatonic garlands give the final pages an ancient feel, as if we wandered into a Watteau painting and almost caught a glimpse of Debussy's Faun.

3. Molto allegro (Very fast and lively)

No one would confuse Saint-Saëns for a neo-classical composer, but in this movement he essentially outlines the ideals of the neo-classical movement that would occupy composers such as Poulenc and Stravinsky in Paris between the two World Wars. Clean lines and an obsession with the form rather than the overall emotional aspect of the music, the sonata gallops home with a spring in its step reflecting nothing of the horrors of the War that had barely passed, but, despite the advanced age of the composer, found new enthusiasm in the world outside.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS:

Performer, curator and on-stage host, **James Austin Smith** “proves that an oboist can have an adventurous solo career.” (New Yorker). Praised for his “virtuosic,” “dazzling,” and “brilliant” performances (New York Times), Smith appears regularly at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York City and at leading national and international chamber music festivals, at Carnegie Hall and on tour as Co-Principal Oboe of the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and as an artist of the International Contemporary Ensemble.

As Artistic and Executive Director of Tertulia Chamber Music Smith creates intimate evenings of food, drink, and music designed to engage audiences hungry for singular cultural experiences in New York, San Francisco and Serenbe, Georgia, as well as an annual weekend festival of food and music in a variety of global destinations. He serves as Artistic Advisor to Coast Live Music, a new home for chamber music in the San Francisco Bay Area. He mentors graduate-level musicians as a professor of oboe and chamber music at Stony Brook University and the Manhattan School of Music, and as a regular guest at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

In the fall of 2023 Smith presented *Hearing Memory*, an evening of performance, story-telling and archival film footage documenting a clutch of politically engaged musicians in the former East Germany. Describing the event in the *New Yorker*, Alex Ross wrote, “no less virtuosic was Smith’s running commentary on the East German context. His deployment of videos, including some of musical discussions that he had found in television archives, gave the evening the feeling of a live documentary. For any young performer seeking an alternative to the usual walk-out-and-play routines, this impeccable event could serve as a model.”

In 2024 Smith joins the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center for two national tours, appears as soloist with the Cape Town, Johannesburg and Kwa-Zulu Natal Philharmonic Orchestras, and in recital across South Africa with pianist Luis Magalhães. He presents a weekend festival of music and food in Berlin, Germany with Tertulia Chamber Music, as well as a slate of specially-curated events in New York, San Francisco and Serenbe, Georgia, and joins violinist Livia Sohn in launching Coast Live Music in the hills above Silicon Valley. Summer festival appearances include *Music@Menlo*, the Bridgehampton and Portland Chamber Music Festivals, as well as Bay Chamber Concerts; together with oboist Christian Wetzel he presents *Hearing Memory* in Cologne, Germany, in New York City and at Stony Brook University.

James Austin Smith holds a master’s degree from the Yale School of Music and bachelor’s degrees in political science and music from Northwestern University. He spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar at the Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Conservatory in Leipzig, Germany, and is an alum of Carnegie Hall’s Ensemble Connect. Born in New York and raised in Connecticut, Smith’s principal teachers are Stephen Taylor, Christian Wetzel, Humbert Lucarelli, and Ray Still.

Described as possessing a “wonderfully full sound” (*American Record Guide*) and a “polished, refined technique” (*Allmusic.com*), **Luis Magalhães** has achieved critical acclaim as both a soloist and a chamber musician. Born in Portugal and currently residing in Stellenbosch, South Africa, Luis’s career as a pianist displays the cosmopolitanism typical of successful 21st century musicianship. Luis has played extensively across Europe with recent engagements in Germany, Austria, his native Portugal, Switzerland, amongst others. Beyond Europe, he has appeared on stages in Brazil, South Africa, China, Japan, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and on numerous occasions, the United States. Reflecting his eminence as an artist of global standing, Luis was bestowed the honour of being named a Yamaha International Artist.

Luis is active as a studio musician, and has collaborated with many remarkable recording artists including Frank Stadler (violin), Daniel Rowland (violin), Madeline Adkins (violin), Priya Mitchell (violin), Gareth Lubbe (viola), Julian Arp (cello) Peter Martens (cello), and James Austin Smith (oboe). The recording with Martens, featuring the complete cello sonatas of L. v. Beethoven, was awarded a coveted South African Music Award (SAMA) in 2011, while both violin recordings have received glowing reviews in *The Strad*.

From 2000 to 2021 he formed part of TwoPianists Piano Duo and released four critically acclaimed CDs. This collaboration with the pianist Nina Schumann has been compared to the celebrated Ashkenazy-Previn and Argerich-Freire duos (*American Record Guide*). Furthermore, he has engaged in more frequent duo collaboration with the violinist Alissa Margulis rendering rave reviews.

Luis's further activities in the recording industry include the co-founding of the independent label TwoPianists Records. The result has been both local and international accolades, such as a German Record Critic's Award in 2011. Luis's immersion in the world of classical music recording has extended to the role of producer, to which he brings a wealth of experience as a practicing musician of the highest calibre. As a promoter of classical music in South Africa, Luis is a co-founder of the Stellenbosch International Chamber Music Festival, which has since 2004 become the premier classical music festival on African soil. He is also a co-founder of the biannual Stellenbosch International Piano Symposium. In October 2022, Luis was appointed Artist in Residence at Teatro Circo, Braga, Portugal; and he will be returning to Portugal from June 2024 to continue his musical projects.

Eminent musicianship always leaves a legacy in the form of tuition. Luis himself was a student of maestro Vladimir Viardo at the University of North Texas. He has since gone to teach students who have scooped up major awards and placings in National and International competitions. Luis was awarded a Doctorate in Music in Piano Performance from the University of Cape Town in 2011, and continued his association with university musical life with his appointment to an Associate Professorship at the University of Stellenbosch until June 2024. Luis has also given extensive masterclass tuition including lessons at New York's fabled Juilliard School and numerous universities across Europe, Asia and the United States. As an expert pianist and educator, Luis has also served in the jury of many competitions including the prestigious Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition for Young Musicians.