Like most of the American composers of the first two decades of the twentieth century, Charles Griffes was judged and defined by his contemporaries solely in terms of what was happening musically in Europe. His only piano sonata represents a determination on his part to move out from under the shadow of the Europeans and come up with a work at once abstract and original. Among the new devices he employed was a synthetic eight-note scale, containing more half steps than the major or minor scale. Unfortunately, Griffes’ movement in a new direction was cut short by his untimely death in 1920, just two years after the Sonata was completed.

Albéniz’ Iberia complements the Chopin Barcarolle and the Griffes Sonata in this program in that, like them, it was written late in the composer’s career and represents an apotheosis of his skills. Iberia consists of twelve pieces arranged in four books, and most of the pieces are named after provinces or locales in Andalusia, the southern part of Spain. Almería is a province known for its hot, dry weather, and Triana is the gypsy quarter of Seville. Rondénía, on the other hand, is a dance, a variant of the fandango distinguished by its syncopated rhythms.
PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770–1827)
Sonata in E-flat Major, Opus 7
(1797)

Allegro molto e con brio
Largo, con gran espressione
Allegro
Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso

Frédéric Chopin
(1810–1849)
Nocturne in C Minor, Opus 48, No. 1
(1841)
Tarentelle, Opus 43
(1841)
Barcarolle, Opus 60
(1846)

INTERMISSION

Charles Griffes
(1884–1920)
Sonata
(1918)

Isaac Albéniz
(1860–1909)
Iberia, Book II
(1906)

Rondeña
Almeria
Triana

After winning the gold medal in the first Van Cliburn Piano Competition in 1962, RALPH VOTAPEK has gone on to become a winner in the even more competitive world of professional concertizing. Critics and audiences are united in extolling his artistic maturity, technical proficiency, and easy charm on the stage. He is a favorite soloist with the Chicago Symphony, with which he has enjoyed many repeat engagements, and with the Boston Pops, with which he recorded a Gershwin album under the direction of Arthur Fiedler. In addition to having developed loyal audiences in many cities in the United States, Mr. Votapek plays to sold-out houses on his biannual tours of Latin America. He has performed with similar success in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

A native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Ralph Votapek began his musical studies there, enrolling at the Wisconsin Conservatory at the age of nine. He continued his studies at Northwestern University, the Manhattan School of Music, and at Juilliard, where his teachers were Rosina Lhevine and Robert Goldsband. He presently serves as artist-in-residence at Michigan State University in East Lansing, and has been a juror in both the Van Cliburn and the Tchaikovsky Piano Competitions.

Beethoven’s Sonata in E-flat Major, his fourth piano sonata, is the first to substantiate his unique genius as a composer of works for that instrument. Its first movement, with its long melodic lines and extended thematic development, is grander in scope than any single sonata movement up to its time. The slow movement, with its broken accents, short chords, tense pauses, and sudden juxtaposition of fortissimi and pianissimi, expresses grief in music more dramatically than any of its predecessors. The Rondo is regarded as one of the masterpieces of that form, with its tragically stoic central section and its peaceful conclusion, which resolves all of the conflicting passions of the earlier movements.

Heroism is not a characteristic that one expects to find in a nocturne, which is traditionally a lyrical elegy, suitable to the moods of the night. It is the genius of Chopin, however, that he was able to transform each of the established forms with which he worked, and in his C Minor Nocturne the heroism is unmistakable. After increasing the intensity of the texture in the second section of this three-part work, Chopin does not return to the tranquility of the opening section, as might be expected, but proceeds to an even more intense final section, marked doppio movimento.

The tarantella is a rapid dance of Neapolitan origin which was reputed to have the power to cure the bite of the tarantula. Chopin’s only foray into this form, his Tarentelle in A-flat Major, is a whirlwind of perpetual motion made even more exciting by twice increasing the tempo toward the end.

As is the case with the Tarentelle, the Barcarolle is Chopin’s only piece in that form. As is the case with the Nocturne, Opus 48, the Barcarolle has length, breadth, and brilliance that go far beyond the implications of its title, which leads the listener to expect a lilting song in the style of those sung by Venetian gondoliers. The counterpoint, harmony, and thematic transformations of the work are highly dramatic and foreshadow what was to come later in the music of Liszt, Wagner, and Franck.