

Wien (Vienna) was the original title of one of Ravel's most popular instrumental works, *La valse (Poème choréographique) (The Waltz [Dance Poem])*. Initially scored for orchestra, the work was the first composition Ravel undertook during his rehabilitation after being discharged from military service because of poor health. He was seeking a new direction for himself, since his friend and rival Claude Debussy (1862–1918) had recently died and a new group of young musicians (*Les Six*) were emerging and threatening the music leadership in France. Ravel, France's leading composer at that time, wanted to maintain and reinforce his preeminence with *La valse*. By his own account, his reason for composing the work was to pay homage to the waltz king, Johann Strauss the younger, of whose incredible rhythms he was so enamored. Writing about *La valse*, Ravel stated: "I had intended this as a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, which, as it is linked in my mind, gives the impression of a fantastic whirl of destiny. I have given it the setting of an imperial court, about 1855." Ravel and Alfred Casella (1883–1947), one of Italy's prominent composers of that time, gave the first performance of the two-piano version in 1920. The solo piano version heard on tonight's program is remarkably faithful to the orchestral score and has proven to be equally effective. As writer D. P. Stearns reports, "The performance of *La valse*, as transcribed for [solo] piano, is so coloristically alive that one never misses the orchestra."

Program notes by Elmer Booze

*For the convenience of concertgoers
the Garden Café remains open until 6:30 p.m.*

*The use of cameras or recording equipment during
the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that cell
phones, pagers, and other electronic devices are turned off.*

The Sixty-first Season of

THE WILLIAM NELSON CROMWELL and
F. LAMMOT BELIN CONCERTS

National Gallery of Art



2451st Concert

DANG THAI SON, *pianist*

Sunday Evening, 16 March 2003
Seven O'clock
West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

Program

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)	Five Preludes From “Preludes, Book II” (1894)
	Brouillards
	General Lavine-Eccentric
	Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses
	Canope
	Feux d’artifice
Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)	Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1 (1827)
	Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 42 (1840)
	Waltz in D-flat Major, Op. 70, No. 3 (1829)
	Waltz in G-flat Major, Op. 70, No. 1 (1833)
	Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 34, No. 1 (1835)
	(Valse brillante)
	Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 31 (1837)

Intermission

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)	Deux légendes (1863)
	Saint François d’Assise: La prédication aux oiseaux
	Saint François de Paule marchant sur les flots

Federico Mompou (1893–1987)	Three Dances from “Canciones y danzas”
	Canción y danza No. 1 (1918)
	Canción y danza No. 3 (1918–1928)
	Canción y danza No. 8 (1946)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)	La valse pour piano solo (1919–1920)
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The Musician

An emerging figure among the leading international musicians of our time, Vietnamese pianist **Dang Thai Son** was propelled to the forefront of the musical world in October 1980 when he won the first prize and coveted Gold Medal at the Tenth International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland. Since winning the Chopin competition, Dang Thai Son has performed in prestigious venues in more than forty countries around the world. The press has been ecstatic about his talent: “Why haven’t we heard of him before? Dang Thai Son is a superbly accomplished pianist, with a flabbergasting technique and musicianship of a high order. He plays with a seamless legato, brilliant dexterity, and immense power...a musical experience not to be forgotten” (*San Diego Reader*). “He is a pianist of superb discipline and undeniable distinction.... The playing was first-class...a digitally spectacular and musically delirious performance of Ravel’s *La valse*” (*Boston Globe*).

Dang Thai Son studied with his mother in Hanoi and was discovered by Russian pianist Isaac Katz while Katz was on a visit in Vietnam in 1974. Son pursued his training at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory with the renowned pedagogues Vladimir Natanson and Dmitry Bashkirov. Since 1987 he has been a visiting professor at Kunitachi Music College in Tokyo, Japan. He became a Canadian citizen in 1995 and teaches at the Université de Montréal. Dang Thai Son appears at the National Gallery by arrangement with Bureau d’Artistes de Montréal.

Program Notes

Debussy idolized the music of Chopin, particularly his études and preludes for piano, and emulated them in his own sets of études and preludes. Unlike Chopin, however, whose music evoked poetic sentiments contained in his unique world, Debussy, according to his biographer Emile Vuillermoz (1878–1960), “desired to condense into [his] *Twenty-four Preludes* (in two books) the most precious developments in pianistic technique of his age. The short pieces [are]

condensed, 'pure' music, and do not set out to treat any precise subject. Their *raison d'être* rests in the discovery of a rhythm, a color, an atmosphere, or a detail of composition, [the] development [of which] expands into the evocation of climate, setting, or image."

Chopin's *Nocturne, Op. 72, No. 1, in E Minor, Opus Posthumous*, provides the listener with exquisite proof of the well-known adage that Chopin could make the piano sing. The nocturne was the perfect vehicle for him to demonstrate the bel canto style as applied to the piano. Although it is an acknowledged fact that the Irish composer John Field (1782–1837) created the nocturne, the refinement of the genre, with lush harmonic fabric and sumptuous sonorities, is the work of the Polish genius and is without equal. The high opus number and posthumous publication of this nocturne belie the fact that it was written during Chopin's student days, and some musical luminaries have delighted in deriding its content as lacking in genuine substance. As Marina and Victor Ledin pointed out in their study of the nocturnes, however, *Op. 72, No. 1*, had at least one ally in the English musicologist G. C. Ashton Jonson, who declared: "[I] would not willingly exchange it for the whole of Field's works bound in full morocco!"

After his arrival in Vienna in 1829, Chopin heard in the salons the waltzes of Johann Strauss (1804–1849) and Joseph Lanner (1801–1843), in addition to familiar opera excerpts. These works, so popular among the Viennese, did not arouse Chopin's interest or win his enthusiasm. A letter to his father in October 1829 expressed his disappointment: "I have absorbed nothing of a Viennese nature; consequently, I am unable to play waltzes." Ironically, his first waltz, *Op. 70, No. 3*, was written shortly after the letter. Along with his other thirteen waltzes, it leaves for posterity a concept of the waltz that was hailed by Robert Schumann as "of a different character from ordinary waltzes, and bear[ing] the unmistakable mark that only a Chopin could give them." Chopin provided a clue to the real inspiration for his first waltz, hinting it was a young lady by the name of Constantia Gladkowska, whom he described as a "lovely being."

The *Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 31*, is one of six that Chopin wrote (two as movements for his piano sonatas and four that were published separately). Heard frequently in concert, its popularity has been passed from generation to generation by teachers, students, and the general public. Schumann spoke of it as "so tender, so bold, [and] as full of love as of scorn." The opening segment (A) features an extravagant array of thematic material, brimming with ideas of striking originality. Particularly noteworthy is the use of silence as a dramatic device. The trio section (B) unveils a song of unsurpassed beauty, one of Chopin's most sensuous melodies. The opening material (A) returns and leads to a dynamic coda of resounding brilliance.

The year 1863 was a momentous one for Franz Liszt, as he received an invitation from the Pope's librarian to seek spiritual comfort at the Oratory of the Madonna del Rosario. After two years in retreat at the Oratory, he acquired the first of four orders that were obligatory mandates for the priesthood. It was here that the two Saint Francis legends were written, *Saint Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds* and *Saint Francis de Paul Walking on the Waters*. Representing the outcome of his divine meditation and inspiration, these two compositions are a demonstration of Liszt's pianistic colorations. The first produces a miracle of delicate bird sounds using trills and apoggiaturas, and the second features a flood of watery sounds, demonstrating the turbulence under foot during the saint's water crossing.

Folksongs, melodies, and dances native to Spain and his native Catalonia inspired Federico Mompou to compose a set of fourteen short piano pieces with the collective title *Canciones y danzas*. While the melodies retain their rustic flavor, the harmonic and pianistic approaches are modern. *Canción y danza No. 1* was influenced by *La filla del Carmesi*, a popular Catalan melody. *No. 3* is based on a Catalan Christmas song entitled *Noi de la Mare* and is dedicated to Frank Marshall, the teacher of the eminent Spanish pianist Alicia de Larrocha. *No. 8* is a slow waltz and is dedicated to the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes (1875–1943), who helped popularize Spanish music in France.