

The Sixty-second Season of

THE WILLIAM NELSON CROMWELL and
F. LAMMOT BELIN CONCERTS

National Gallery of Art



2491st Concert

RUTH LAREDO, *pianist*

Sunday Evening, 28 March 2004
Seven O'clock
West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

The Musician

Hailed as “America’s First Lady of the Piano” (*New York Daily News*), **Ruth Laredo** has a distinguished worldwide reputation as a leading soloist, recitalist, and recording artist. While she is particularly renowned for her pioneering recordings of the complete solo piano music of Rachmaninoff and the complete piano sonatas of Scriabin, her broad repertoire ranges from Beethoven to Barber. For the past sixteen seasons, she has created a large and enthusiastic following for her sold-out series, “Concerts with Commentary,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Laredo has won high praise for her masterful playing and discussions of Brahms, Mendelssohn, Robert and Clara Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Her new video, *Live from the Metropolitan Museum*, celebrates her unique Rachmaninoff performances. A three-time Grammy-award nominee, she was the first pianist ever to record the complete solo works of Rachmaninoff for CBS Masterworks, which earned her the Best Keyboard Artist award from *Record World* magazine and a Grammy nomination.

Born in Detroit and a longtime resident of New York City, Ruth Laredo studied at the Curtis Institute of Music with Rudolf Serkin and made her New York Philharmonic debut under the direction of Pierre Boulez. Her Carnegie Hall orchestral debut took place with the American Symphony, Leopold Stokowski conducting. Ruth Laredo appears at the National Gallery by arrangement with Gurtman and Murtha Associates of New York City.

Program Notes

Schumann’s *Phantasiestücke* (*Fantasy Pieces*), *Op. 12*, are an expressively conceived but loosely knit collection of eight contrasting sketches, dedicated to the Scottish pianist Robena Laidlaw. Fantasy, taken to mean bizarre or incredible imaginings, is evidently not what Schumann had in mind when he chose the word for this title. Writer Klaus George Roy offers another definition: “Fantasy, for Schumann,

was his other world; not an escape-paradise of idle day-dreaming without tangible results, but the artistic reality behind the material façade of daily life.” The moody, introverted, mentally disturbed Schumann took flight into a fantasy world to express himself and his alter ego. In the fantasy world, the contrasting aspects of Schumann’s personality become Florestan and Eusebius—the first a loquacious, lithesome, and impetuous character, the latter quixotic, reflective, and otherworldly. The fluctuation between Florestan and Eusebius in *Fantasy Pieces* is easily discernible. For example, the extroverted Florestan makes his appearance in the vociferous *Aufschwung* (*Soaring*), while the introverted Eusebius surfaces in the more serene, passionate, and self-possessed pieces entitled *Des Abends* (*In the Evening*), and *Warum?* (*Why?*). Schumann’s fantasy was also motivated by an outward driving force, his love for the beautiful Clara Wieck. According to historian Lous Biancoli, the “*Phantasiestücke*, like so much else of Schumann’s piano music of this period, is the poetic and passionate record of a young man in love.”

Dedicated to Count Franz von Brunswick (1779–1849), a cellist and an ardent, well-informed connoisseur of Beethoven’s works, the *Piano Sonata No. 23 in F Minor, Op. 57*, began its embryonic development as Beethoven was working on his opera *Fidelio*. The subtitle “*Appassionata*” is said to have been applied by the publisher, not by Beethoven. Writer Romain Rolland contends that the subtitle is unusual in its appropriateness. “This is, indeed, an impassioned work; the fact that its title has brought it an unusual degree of popularity does not in the least undermine its power or its stature.”

Following the classic sonata-allegro format, *Op. 57* has been described as more traditional in scope and layout than Beethoven’s previous efforts in this genre. The contrast between the rhythmically driven opening theme and the smooth, elegant secondary theme is profound and explosive. These contrasts continue throughout the movement and produce a diversity of moods, with short moments of tranquility followed immediately by an equally brief *fortissimo* deluge. All these features heighten the musical drama, with an added tonal coloration provided by the contralto range chosen for the second theme.

The second movement (*Andante con moto*) has a single mellifluous and dignified theme with a set of four imposing variations. Surprisingly, the last variation does not end on the tonic chord. Instead, there is a jolting dissonance that leads without interruption to the finale (*Allegro ma non troppo*). This last movement relies on the sonata-allegro form, as did the first. However, it takes on the character of a *moto perpetuo*, bringing the sonata to a brilliant and forceful conclusion.

The harmonies and melodies employed in Alexander Scriabin's music spring from chords he built on the interval of the fourth, as opposed to chords built upon thirds, which had been the norm until his time. His "mystical chord" of six notes (C, F-sharp, B-flat, E, A, and D) was derived from these intervals. His *Poème, Op. 32, No. 1*, is lyrically sophisticated, has an impressionistic harmonic palette, and leans toward key abandonment. *Guirlandes (Garlands), Op. 73, No. 1*, is a mystical dance laden with strange harmonic nuances of a prophetic nature that further stretch the tonal center. Proclaimed by some as Scriabin's greatest composition, the *Sonata No. 10, Op. 70*, is a mystical poem that unfolds into a one-movement work. It is highly sonorous, requiring four staves to outline its tonal inscription, and extremely difficult to perform. In the words of John Gillespie (*Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*): "The synthesis of harmonic richness with unexpected metrical designs distills an unusual experience."

The five Rachmaninoff preludes that Ruth Laredo has selected for this program represent three of the composer's distinct writing periods: late adolescence (*Op. 3*, written when he was nineteen years old); young adulthood (*Op. 23*, written when he was thirty-one); and maturity (*Op. 32*, written when he was thirty-seven). The *Prelude in C-sharp Minor, Op. 3, No. 2*, is the most popular of all of Rachmaninoff's preludes. It is a singular work, the only prelude among a group of miniature compositions bound together with the collective title *Morceaux de fantaisie, Op. 3*. The prelude was so popular with Rachmaninoff's audiences that he felt obliged to play it at every concert as an encore and came to consider it a curse. He stated many times, when asked about it, that he wished he had never composed it. *Prelude No. 4 in D Minor, Op. 23*, is expansive, lyrical, and a wonderful example of Russian

melancholy. The three preludes from *Op. 32, No. 5 in G Minor, No. 10 in B Minor*, and *No. 12 in G-sharp Minor*, are indicative of the mature styling Rachmaninoff had achieved by the time he wrote this opus. The synthesis of lyricism with mood changes (redolent in the works of his compatriot Tchaikovsky), colorful harmonic fluctuations, and virtuosic writing in the grand manner of his forebear Liszt garnered for Rachmaninoff an unmistakable personal stamp. For many lovers and admirers of nineteenth-century romantic piano music, Rachmaninoff's compositions remain the epitome of that stylistic period, even though most of them were written after the turn of the twentieth century.

Wien (Vienna) was the original title of one of Ravel's most popular instrumental works, *La valse (Poème choréographique)*. Begun in 1919 and initially scored for orchestra, the work was the first composition Ravel started while on the road to rehabilitation after being discharged from military service due to poor health. He was seeking a new direction, 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 musical 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 the *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), a prominent Italian composer 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