THE SOLO PIANO SERIES

NATALIA KAZARYAN

SUN / OCT 10, 2021 / 4PM
+ AVAILABLE ON-DEMAND

PROGRAM

Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, op. 60 (1845-46)  
Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 2 (1953)  
I. Maestoso; Agitato  
II. Largo  
III. Toccata; Vivo  
Grazyna Bacewicz (1909-1969)

Trois Morceaux pour Piano (1914)  
I. D’un Vieux Jardin  
II. D’un Jardin Clair  
III. Cortege  
Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

Sieben Fantasien, op. 116 (1892)  
I. Capriccio, d minor, Presto energico  
II. Intermezzo, a minor, Andante  
III. Capriccio, g minor, Allegro passionate  
IV. Intermezzo, E Major, Adagio  
V. Intermezzo, e minor, Andante con grazia  
VI. Intermezzo, E Major, Andantino teneramente  
VII. Capriccio, d minor, Allegro agitato  
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Sonata No. 3 (1996-99)  
I. Serenade/Toccata  
II. Interlude  
III. Tango Fantastique  
Emma Lou Diemer (b. 1927)

“one of the best classical concerts of the summer.”
– THE WASHINGTON POST

NATIONALITY: Georgian-American

HOME: Washington, D.C.

NOTEWORTHY: Ms. Kazaryan’s work delves into giving equal voice and platform to female composers and is a strong champion of works by Lili Boulanger and Grazyna Bacewicz that she’s released two albums featuring them. She recently co-founded the organization, Washington Arts Ensemble, that presents innovative chamber music concerts in Washington, D.C. In fall 2021, she appears on the prestigious Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concert Series in Chicago.

WHAT JOB WOULD YOU HAVE IF YOU WEREN’T A PIANIST?
“I would probably be an arts administrator—running a museum or a music organization. Well, I’m doing that now with the Washington Arts Ensemble. Even if I was not a performer, I would still be in the arts as that is where I get most joy and inspiration.”
NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY BILL CRANE

It can be quite unnerving to have catastrophe and a big thrill happen within a couple of days of each other, but that was the circumstance in recent days at PPI. We are sad to report that our originally scheduled “Rising Star,” Kevin Ahfat, had an accident at home in Toronto on September 25 and quite seriously injured his left hand, meaning that he could not record his recital for us for the opening of our 2021-22 season. We have so looked forward to his program, full of wit and virtuosity. (Note: We will still present Kevin some time in 2022, when he has that left hand back at fighting strength.)

Happily, the whole PPI administrative team jumped into action and through a remarkable set of acquaintances and coincidences, we found the perfectly wonderful pianist Natalia Kazaryan, who just happened to have a terrific program up her sleeve. The superbly crafted program that you will hear in this broadcast made me feel like we had won the jackpot!

Natalia has a deep professional and personal commitment to the music of women composers, featuring them often in her very busy concert career. Today, I predict that she will charm us with very favorite pieces of Chopin and Brahms, but lure us as well into rarely-if-ever-heard, wonderful pieces by three composers who definitely should not be overlooked. One is even American!

Here are a few thoughts on today’s music. Welcome to PPI’s 44th season. We are so glad you could join us.

CHOPIN

All of these months into the dreaded Covid pandemic, there is something so comforting, as we begin a new season, to have the very first notes of this very first recital be very much akin to floating gently along calm waters, for, indeed, that is exactly what barcarolles are meant to be. The source is the folksongs of Venetian gondoliers, appropriated into opera, then appropriated into piano works. Most often, piano barcarolles are quite straightforward and stay mostly in that idyllic mood appropriate to a sonic float in a musical canal. Of course, in Chopin’s hands, all the characteristic (12/8 meter, moderate tempo, a gentle ostinato accompaniment, a singing melody) got radically changed. Chopin created a real monument: this is his only barcarolle — although some would note that the G-Major Nocturne really is a barcarolle in disguise — and through its complex formal organization, overt romance with a slight touch of wistfulness, exceptionally chromatic wanderings in the harmonies, and just the overall magnitude of the piece, it takes us on quite a ride. (Uh-oh, another metaphor for the past year and a half.) It is one of his very last compositions and does so much to transform the genre. It remains a constant favorite of pianists and audiences. I like to think of the loud “plunk” of a C-sharp octave in the left hand that opens the introduction as a sincere invitation to sit back gently and be carried away by this grand voyage.

BACEWICZ

If the name Grazyna Bacewicz is not new to you, you are ahead of me in exploring the edges of piano literature and I owe you a drink! That said, I was thrilled to hear this astonishing, thrilling sonata from a Polish/Lithuanian composer and violinist who was supported financially in her early studies by Ignaz Paderewski and who spent time with the famous teacher and pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. With an enviable career as performer, composer, and teacher, including time as the principal violinist of the Polish Radio Orchestra and secret underground concerts during World War II in Warsaw, Bacewicz brought forth a big catalogue of compositions in her short life (dying at 59 of cancer) and I can’t wait to explore more of it.

Not having enough time to get the score and really study the sonata, nor even listen to it several times, I must depend on Natalia’s own comments about this great work: “When I first heard this sonata, it blew me away with its unapologetic power, passion, and force. Dark and stormy in character, the first movement requires vivid imagination and virtuosity. The second movement is a moment of introspection and poetry, though it never ceases in intensity even in the most lyrical passages. The toccata seals the work with an exciting tour-de-force conclusion.”

BOULANGER

Her sister, Nadia, mentioned above, was, as is so well known, an unparalleled influence on musical composition in the 20th century as mentor to pretty much everyone striving to be a composer, but it was Lili who made stellar, recognized achievements, albeit in a very short life, dying at just 24. She was the first female winner of France’s utmost prestigious award in music and other art, the Prix de Rome in 1913, and left a surprisingly large catalogue of works in a variety of forms and instrumentations. Nadia always thought her younger sister was the more talented of the two and, in fact, promoted Lili’s music throughout her life and career. An international foundation continues that promotion and celebration of this extraordinary woman. She even had an asteroid, “1181 Lilith,” named after her at its discovery in 1927 by the Russian-French astronomer, Benjamin Jekhowsky!

Her father was 77 years old when she was born and he died when she was only seven. She spoke openly of her persistent grief at losing her father. It is not hard to hear reflections of that grief and loss in most of her music, including in these three pieces for the piano. “From an old garden,” “In a bright garden,” and “Procession” are evocative and full of adventuresome harmonies. It is not too much, I think, to call them poetic. To my ears, it would be unfair to call this “salon music” as that term nowadays usually connotes something disparaging. This is rare, evanescent music, wherever it might be played.
May I again quote Natalia? – “The first piece D’un jardín claire (‘Of a Bright Garden’) is based on a single melodic line whose fragments appear throughout the piece. The parallel fourths and fifths create the unmistakably French sound world, with the serene accompaniment of the melody evocative of Satie, an episode of calm and contemplation. The second piece, D’un vieux jardín (‘Of an Old Garden’) is another musical episode closely related in style. The elegant melody of the opening measures becomes intertwined in fuller harmonic textures, leading into a series of cascading intervals of fourths that spans every register. The third piece Cortège (‘Procession’ or ‘March’) is a solo piano transcription of a violin and piano duo, written in the same year. The piece, less than two minutes long, is a cheerful and energetic musical episode. Lili gives this piece a positive meaning to the word cortège, ending the morceaux with a jubilant celebration.”

BRAHMS

Musicologists, program annotators, and other fanatics often-times like to refer to opus 116 and opus 118, both favorite sets of fantasies, intermezzi, and capriccios, as coming from the “autumn” of Brahms’s life. But, I don’t like that designation with its faint pejorative whiff as, it seems to me that late in life he distilled his peerless manipulations of concise motives, complicated rhythms, and love of deep registers into shorter, but equally, or even more, powerful works compared to larger forms from earlier times. These “miniatures” are astonishing, whole, profound music that delivers so much oomph in so little time.

The Seven Fantasies are altogether a wonder of musical construction. Brahms seems to have used every compositional means of expression that he ever devised. Here are myriad wonderful moments of the meter being shifted around, of deeply affecting harmonies that exude from his affinity for those bass overtones. Here are delayed resolutions in cadences that make the poignancy of a phrase ache just a little bit more.

Of opus 116, much could be, and has been, said about how each movement is in ternary form (original idea, other idea, back to the original idea), that they are all quite song-like, that, as a whole, Opus 116 quite resembles a piano sonata (the three Intermezzi in the middle standing in for the slow movement, etc.), but I would much rather think about how deeply reflective and personally revealing this set is. Of these pieces, along with the other late works of that time, vis opera 116-119, Clara Schumann remarked, “a true source of enjoyment, everything, poetry, passion, rapture, intimacy, full of the most wonderful effects.”

DIEMER

The incredibly touching songfulness in the paradoxically titled “Serenade/Toccata” that is the opening movement of Emma Lou Diemer’s third piano sonata caught me quite by surprise when I first heard it only yesterday in a recording. Growing up in the country outside Kansas City, I had heard her name, as she is a native daughter, and I vaguely knew that she is an organist, as I am, but I had never looked into any of her compositions (my bad, as the young folks say). It is not easy to admit that, like all too many classical music lovers, most of all men, I had failed to investigate her music. Her plain mid-western name probably has prejudiced many people, preventing them from learning about the immense collection of compositions she has brought forth.

From a distinguished family of educators, musicians, and all-around achievers, Diemer has explored and exploited most all of the corners of musical styles, including having created a highly recognized electronic music program at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where is she a professor emerita. Educated with distinction at Yale and Eastman, and recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship to study composition in Belgium, she has been commissioned to write new music for symphony orchestras, for the carillon at the University of California, Berkeley, for marimba, for organ, for choruses, and on and on.

So, thank goodness that Natalia has brought us this magnificent sonata! It is high time that we piano lovers learn more about Emma Lou Diemer!

That first movement with the odd title has already become a favorite. How does one juxtapose a serenade (beguiling tune, mostly sung in the evening) on a toccata (notes flying all over the place, usually to a triumphant, bombastic ending)? That question will bear more reflection, but in this brilliant composition, Diemer achieves a synthesis that is much more than the sum of its parts, tender and evocative, sonorous enough to seduce even those who worry about adventuresome harmonies.

Enigma and irony, to my taste, are all too facile features of too much contemporary art and music, so often displayed when a creator is, in fact, merely uncertain of what she or he is trying to portray. In so much contemporary music, the listener gets handed a big bunch of "huh?", rather than an actual something that makes the ear or eye want to engage more. In marked contrast, though, Diemer, in her Interlude here, has given us an arousing theme, elaborated marvelously, that intrigues, charms, makes one long to know more. There is no need to imagine a program here (musicologists would bark at me that this is absolute music!), but I think that I will spend a lot of time in the days to come wondering about why this rapturous music moves me so.

The concluding Tango Fantastique much more than lives up to its fun title. Here are well-choreographed, athletic polyrhythms. Here are moments of passion, flashing eyes, perfect steps on the imagined ballroom floor, then the lyric counter-theme singing of the longing heart, and, of course, the thrilling conclusion. Along the way, keyboard pyrotechnics abound, including the left hand dampening strings while the right taps out a tiny, inviting new theme, just for intrigue. Having now listened to the whole sonata several times in 24 hours, I cannot stop thinking about favorite moments in favorite films by Pedro Almodovar, they, too, being marked by such drama, humor, color and complexity. If at the conclusion of this marvelous recital you feel that you just must jump up and dance, do! I’ll be on the dance floor, even some blocks or miles away, with you.

These special virtual recitals are graciously sponsored by Harold Goldstein and Carol Streeter, Maryellen and Michael McCulloch, and Sue Horn-Caskey and Rick Caskey.
From Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, pianist Natalia Kazaryan has been hailed by The New York Sun for her “prodigious ability,” remarking that she “immediately established an atmosphere of strength and confidence.” She is “a marvel among marvels ... fascinating, elegant” (Nice-Matin).

Passionate about programming works by female composers, she recently curated and performed a recital of all women composers at the Smithsonian Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., a performance The Washington Post named “one of the best classical concerts of the summer 2019.” She reprised the program for All Classical Portland (OR), and continues to expand her series of lecture-recitals showcasing works of female composers, including a recent performance with the National Symphony Orchestra to celebrate the centennial of the 19th amendment (women’s suffrage). She also was recently appointed as a board member of the International Alliance for Women in Music.

Her Philadelphia recital debut on Astral’s series in December 2019 included a commission by Alexandra Gardner. Also upcoming is a solo recital for Chicago’s Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concert Series as well as recitals in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.

Ms. Kazaryan recently performed Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra and appeared at the Kennedy Center and the National Gallery of Art. She has given recitals in Detroit, Key West, and in Washington, D.C. on the Smithsonian Steinway Series, and appeared in an all-Messiaen concert at The Church of the Epiphany. She has performed with the Ann Arbor Symphony, and appeared in New York’s Merkin Concert Hall and Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts.

Ms. Kazaryan enjoys an active performing career across Europe. She has appeared in such venues as the Schloss Mirabel in Salzburg, Théâtre des Variétés in Monaco, Auditorio Sony in Madrid, and the Musée Carnavalet and Salle Cortot in Paris. She performs regularly at the Palazzo Tornabuoni in Florence, and has participated in the IMS Prussia Cove Master Classes in Cornwall, England.

Ms. Kazaryan began studying piano at the age of six, and performed as soloist with the Tbilisi State Chamber Orchestra just one year later. A winner of Astral’s 2016 National Auditions, she has also captured top prizes in numerous international competitions, including the Eastman Young Artists International Piano Competition, theh Kosciuszko Foundation Chopin Competition, and the Second New York Piano Competition. In 2012, she was the First Prize winner of the Concours FLAME in Paris and the Second Prize winner of Concours international de piano d’Ile de France.

The first Juilliard student to participate in the Carla Bruni-Sarkozy exchange with the Paris Conservatoire, Ms. Kazaryan studied piano in Paris with Michel Béroff and chamber music with Valérie Aimard. An active chamber musician, she took part in the Ryooichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship, dedicated to collaboration between The Juilliard School, the Paris Conservatoire, and the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien. She later won both a Fulbright Grant and a Harriett Hale Woolley Scholarship to Paris to continue her studies, with a focus on Olivier Messiaen’s Vingt Regards sur l’enfant Jésus.

Natalia Kazaryan studied in the preparatory division of the Tbilisi Music Conservatory with Alla Nakashidze. She holds both a Bachelor and a Master’s degree from The Juilliard School, where she studied under Jerome Lowenthal and Matti Raekallio. From 2013-2015, she studied at the Escuela Superior de Música Reina Sofia in Madrid, under Dimitri Bashkirov, and in June 2014 received a “Sobresaliente” Award from the hands of Queen Sofia of Spain for outstanding work and excellence. She completed doctoral studies at the University of Michigan under Logan Skelton and holds an adjunct piano faculty position at Howard University.