2021 / 2022 SEASON
THE SOLO PIANO SERIES
LA FIAMMATA
PIANO DUO
LINDA RUAN and CHARISSA VANDIKAS
SUN / DEC 12, 2021 / 4PM
and afterward on-demand at portlandpiano.org

PROGRAM

Rondo in A Major, D. 951  
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Visions de l’Amen  
Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)
   II. Amen des etoiles, de la planete a l’anneau (Amen of the stars, of the ringed planet)
   VII. Amen de la Consommation (Amen of consummation)

Cinq Pieces Pittoresques, op. 34  
Max Reger (1873-1916)
(Five Picturesque Pieces)

The Maze (The Minotaur is there)  
Vassos Nicolaou (b. 1971)

Suite No. 2, op. 17  
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
   III. Romance
   IV. Tarantella

“...The perfect partners-in-crime, they proved to be fascinating to listen to and wonderfully expressive in this work...”
(Poulenc, Concerto for Two Pianos at the 59th Concours de Musique du Canada)

NATIONALITY: Canadian
HOME: Vancouver, BC, and Toronto

NOTEWORTHY: As the Grand Prix Winners of the Canadian Music Competition in 2017, La Fiammata made its orchestral debut with Orchestre de la Francophonie and have gone on to top prizes at the 2019 Suzana Szorenyi International Piano Duo Competition in Romania, the 2018 Northwest International Piano Ensemble Competition in Vancouver, BC, and dozens of other triumphs and awards. The duo just won second prize in Munich’s ARD International Music Competition.

WHAT COMPOSER OR PERFORMER WOULD YOU WANT TO HAVE A SIT-DOWN DINNER WITH AND WHY?
Linda: Clara Schumann - she was a phenomenal woman, and I want to know how she stayed so strong throughout her life in not only as a performer, composer and teacher but also as a wife and mother in a large family.
Charissa: I recently watched the documentary on Hélène Grimaud, “Living With Wolves”, and she seems like such a fascinating and genuine person. Seeing her connection with the natural world and hearing her philosophy surrounding performance certainly provides food for thought. A lot of her ideas resonated with me, and I’d be thrilled to hear more.
While this program differs slightly from what PPI originally announced as La Fiammata's selections for this, our third Rising Stars virtual program, it is still quite full of charm, challenge, and drama. The Schubert and Rachmaninoff selections almost undoubtedly will be familiar to everyone who loves four-handed and two-piano music. It's a good bet that those same folks – I'm one of them – will be pleased to hear the all-too-rarely played Messiaen Amens and to be introduced to the Reger and Nicolaou pieces. There is a lot to embrace in this program, especially some moments of startling dissonance. Charissa and Linda deliver it all with such authority and sincerity.

**SCHUBERT**

In casual conversation about classical music, any of us might say something about the “Viennese masters,” but, in truth, there is only Schubert who was actually born and raised there. We know him as the composer of a whopping amount of music in his very short life, include some 600 songs. Few know that, unusually, and a bit sadly, that for most of his life he never owned a piano! Visits to a friend’s house to play would come after composing at his desk.

Among that huge catalogue of wonderful music that Schubert left for us is a wonderful, big collection of piano duets and four-hands (one keyboard) pieces. (Did he have to have something handy to play with his friend when he went to borrow the piano?) Today’s Rondo, D. 951, comes from the very last year of his life, 1828.

The opening theme proceeds with 16th-notes running along underneath a charming melody. From there, in ways that we always expect from Schubert, many interesting counter themes add interest and balance for the frequent, pleasing return of that great original idea.

**MESSIAEN**

For non-fanatics of the music of Messiaen (I’m on the other team), his exceptional sound-world, with its shimmering, often voluptuous aesthetic, albeit enlivened often by astounding dissonances, can seem unprecedented, other-worldly. Many in today’s audience will know something of Messiaen – his fascination with birdsong, Hindu rhythms, non-metric rhythmic patterns, vivid Roman Catholic faith, time spent in a concentration camp during World War II, etc. – but every listener can profit from just indulging in his often mysterious building of slowly repeated harmonies and extended, ecstatic exposition of ideas. His Visions de l’Amen had its debut in 1943 by the composer himself and his brilliant Conservatoire student, Yvonne Loriod, who was later to become his second wife and great exponent of his dramatic music. In a last-minute decision, the presenting agency for that premier, Concerts de la Pleiade, offered Visions as the sole work on the program to give it a place of honor.

In the score for Visions, Messiaen gave an author’s note, saying that the work takes its inspiration from the French theologian Ernest Hello: “Amen, word of Genesis, which leads to Revelation; Amen, word of Revelation, which is the consummation of Genesis.” The final movement, to be heard today, is dizzying exuberance in its conclusion.

**REGER**

People who follow other keyboard instrument, the organ, probably have more acquaintance with the music of Max Reger than strict pianophiles. Nonetheless, Reger produced an enormous catalogue of music in just over 25 years and the Five Picturesque Pieces are overdue to be heard in Portland.

Reger gets mixed reviews from just about everybody. Some call him successor to Brahms because of his intricate harmony married to a scholarly practice of polyphony, counterpoint, etc. Others afford him a place in the pantheon with Mahler and Strauss as a “late German Romantic,” but often the press has not been kind: “dietetic Franck,” “tuneless Brahms,” “glutinous and enervating.” Such crankiness may be labeled unfair once one has heard today’s Pieces.

The Pieces fill about eight or nine minutes and were composed in Weiden in 1899. Some might think “salon music” about them, but what’s wrong with that? Their easy aural accessibility, without the overly wrought, thick harmonies that mark much of his later music, would be a delight to have in anyone’s living room. There are delightful small surprises to be discovered as one listens to the music proceeding, not to mention music that really does make one want to dance. The quiet ending of the final movement is another surprise.

**NICOLAOU**

It is always fun to discover yet another contemporary composer working away, having laudable successes all over the world. Then, we find out about his or her astonishing list of studies, premieres, compositions, peculiarities, and so on and are left to wonder why we didn’t know about this phenomenon before. Such is the case, for me, at least, with Vassos Nicolaou, who was born in Cyprus in 1971, and living now in Cologne, having amassed a curriculum vitae that makes one’s head spin, including a 2021 residency with the Civatella Ranieri Foundation in Italy. He amply deserves much more being looked into. His catalogue already is gigantic. Unfortunately, no recording of The Maze seems to be available on-line, as I had hoped, so we will all discover it in today’s recital. I can tell you that listening to other pieces from this adventuresome composer let me know that his overall aesthetic is pretty challenging on first listening. Yay! I am so glad that La Fiammata wanted to shake it up a bit today.

**RACHMANINOFF**

In the course of his life, Rachmaninoff experienced radical highs and lows; unparalleled triumphs later in life, but his early career was marked by brutal criticism of his First Symphony in 1897 and Rachmaninoff afterward entered into such a severe depression that he ceased composing for three years, but entered therapy with a hypnotist who was also a pianist. The positive reaction to a December, 1900, performance of two movements from his Second Concerto, dedicated to that therapist, allowed him to re-enter composing. It was right after that despondent period that he composed
the Suite for Two Pianos, Op.17, completed in 1901. Bold, confident, and self-assured, the music is filled with dance and a wide emotional range, always typical of Rachmaninoff. Listeners are rewarded in the Suite several times with his characteristic “big tunes,” the kind of romantic melodies over big chords that make his music so compelling.

The composer himself premiered the work with his cousin and teacher, Alexander Siloti, at a concert of the Moscow Philharmonic Society. One writer said of the moment that it “always remained symbolic of the renewal of life.”

La Fiammata are eager to explore the potential of the piano duo instrumentation while supporting the Canadian voices of their generation. In May of 2019, they won a commission sponsored by the Ontario Arts Council and premiered “density swells upclose in breath” by Canadian composer Julia Mermelstein. They’re honoured to have given among the first performances of works for two pianos and four hands by Vassos Nicolaou, Sebastian Androne, and Stefan Young.

The duo was formed in Toronto where they were both full scholarship students of The Glenn Gould School. During this time, they primarily worked with James Anagnonos of the renowned Anagnonos-Kinton Duo. They have also received coachings from Anagnonos-Kinton Duo, Emanuel Ax, Hung-Kuan Chen, Michael Esch and John O’Conor. Currently, Ms. Ruan studies at the Tianjin Juilliard School with Dr. Xiaoohan Wang and Ms. Vandikas at the University of Montréal with Jean Saulnier and Charles Richard-Hamelin.

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