

Beethoven,
Franck,
&
romantic
dreams of the
COUNTERPOINT



With
WARREN LEE
&
SYLVIA CHAN
on the piano (2-hands and 4-hands)

6 December 2022 (Tuesday), 7.30pm, St John's Smith Square, London
8 December 2022 (Thursday), 8pm, Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

*A concert in the "Beautiful juxtaposition" series
presented by The Classical Group and as part of
"3 song-inspired pianists".*

Introduction to The Classical Group and the “Beautiful juxtaposition” series

The Classical Group is a registered non-profit launched in 2016 that aims to create original concert programs that enable people to be inspired by the music as well as the poetry and the stories, to be spurred to discover and rediscover works of exceptional musical qualities, and is especially focused on songful and song-inspired music.

The group's new series for 2022 include “Give me my song” - focused on exploring the most personal songs of a trio of composers, a programme that was recently presented by “the 3 song-inspired pianists” - and “Beautiful juxtapositions” that starts with a programme exploring how composers like Beethoven, Franck and others have found ways to rethink, re-imagine and romanticise the counterpoint.

Amongst other series the group has presented is “Reach for the stars” that is inspired by how musicians and artists have reacted to the discoveries in and in some cases presaged scientific developments, as well as the group's much-lauded first concert series, “Hear the song in the music”, which explored the inspiration songs (lieder, melodies, arias, mixed-voice choral works, and others) have provided to composers of piano music.

With the motto “brought together by beautiful music”, the group has a mixed-voice, small-group ensemble which has performed the works of composers ranging from Mozart, Fauré, Brahms and Saint-Saëns to Ešenovalds, Lauridsen and Elder, giving first performances on 2 occasions, and in a number of venues internationally, collaborating also with a number of world-class musicians and solo performers.

“
brought
together
by
beautiful
music”



“

Hear the piano
that
unforgettably
sings!

”



Warren Lee - pianist (*Beethoven and Bach-Busoni Chaconne; 4-hands*)

A Steinway Artist and Naxos Recording Artist whom The American Record Guide pronounces a “first-rate artist”, Warren’s discography includes 10 acclaimed solo and chamber music albums. Hailed by The Straits Times as a musician with “a wonderful sense of colour and impeccably controlled articulation”, his artistry has brought him to five continents, gracing stages of all sizes and forms, from a town hall in Tasmania to Carnegie Hall in New York, ever since his début with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra at the age of six.

Warren’s recent recording of Beethoven’s transcription of his own ballet, The Creatures of Prometheus, was warmly received by The BBC Music Magazine while his most recent Rubinstein recording was called “stunning and imaginative” and voted deezer’s Classical Album of the week.

Devoted to education, Warren is also known for his work conducting and directing choral and orchestral groups especially for a school in Hong Kong that has won wide acclaim and many prizes internationally, while also being an award-winning composer with over 100 works in print. He was made an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 2015, was recipient of the Ian Mininberg Distinguished Alumni Award (Yale School of Music) in 2017, and was also recipient of Hong Kong's Ten Outstanding Young Persons Award in 2012. In addition to these performing and educational activities, he has also been serving as the Head of Global Business Development for Naxos Music Group since 2021.



Sylvia Chan - pianist (*Bach-Busoni Ich ruf' and Franck; 4-hands*)

Sylvia is a singer-pianist who grew up in Hong Kong and the UK, a prizewinning pianist in open competition who performed as a solo pianist and in a duo with cellist Miriam Kirby (The Hague String Trio), including in St John's Smith Square, London, West Road Concert Hall, Cambridge, and recorded as a soloist (Bach, Brahms and Liszt).

She studied with Christopher Elton at the Royal Academy of Music in London while gaining her PhD from Trinity College Cambridge; other teachers include Eleanor Wong in Hong Kong, Hamish Milne in London, and Nigel Wickens (mostly *Lieder, mélodies* and songs) in Cambridge.

Sylvia recently returned to the performing stage after a break of 15 years and finds herself drawn to composers with significant piano and vocal works. Since her "return", she has presented first performances of the works of Ēriks Ešēvalds, Takashi Yoshimatsu and Pauline Viardot; earlier this year, she led the formation - with pianists Warren Lee and Yoonie Han - of a group of three pianists who became known as "the song-inspired pianists".

Sylvia is founder of The Classical Group which has produced concert series focused mostly on solo piano and vocal-piano collaborations, also with a small 8-voice vocal ensemble group, including "Hear the song in the music", "Reach for the stars", and most recently "Give me my song" that tells the inter-connected stories of a trio of composers, with the first concert "Songs and sonnets of travellers: Chopin, Viardot, Liszt".

Away from the concert stage, Sylvia enjoys a career in investment management and technology and company scale-up; she is also author of two books with a third forthcoming, and amongst her recent activities is a project researching into the transferable skills, mindsets and habits of intensively trained musicians to business and professional life. Sylvia enjoys bringing disparate ideas together, connect-the-dots style, dreams about yet-to-be-brought-together concert programmes, and brings her piano, vocal and ensemble training in realizing her musical ideas whether programming and producing or interpreting and performing.

Introduction to the concert programme

This is the first concert in the "**Beautiful juxtaposition**" series and the programme tonight celebrates the piano music of Beethoven, Franck, Busoni and Brahms who offered their re-imaginings and romanticisation of the classic Bachian counterpoint.

The counterpoint - a setting of different melodic lines against each other - is something that Bach pioneered and is known for. It continues to be admired and to inspire later composers including a number of well-loved 18th and 19th century romantic piano pieces.

One of the most famous comes from Beethoven, who had as a young boy already mastered Bach's Preludes and Fugues long before they appeared in print and went on to frequently perform them in Vienna's famous music salons. That all 3 of Beethoven's last piano sonatas incorporated contrapuntal elements is breathtaking (for

Beethoven, the fugue became almost an obsession in the last decade of his life), and the much-loved sonata 30 also happens to have celebrated the 200th year of its publication in 2021.

Franck for his part took Bach's Prelude and Fugue format and not only made it his own but created two three-part, triptych pieces – quasi-sonatas – that are loved by keyboard players: the *Prélude, Choral & Fugue*, a transcendental masterpiece written for the piano and better-known, and the *Prélude, Fugue & Variation* (M.18), written for the piano and with an arrangement for harmonium and piano (the transcription is by Harold Bauer), addition of a third movement in B minor and the in B major and B major.

And then there's romanticized on spectacular Bach's Chaconne Violin Partita by Chaconne itself form of sorts that over an line rather than tune and being an violin repertory,

virtuosic, and awe-inspiring, and Busoni the masterful pianist-and-transcriber fully respecting Bach's original while taking full advantage of the modern piano's manifold possibilities.

The programme

Bach-Busoni	<i>Ich ruf' zu dir</i>
Beethoven	<i>Piano sonata 30, Op.109</i>
Franck (arr Bauer)	<i>Prélude, Fugue & Variation, Op.18</i>
<i>Intermission [20 minutes]</i>	
Brahms (arr. Mandyczewski **)	<i>Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen (no 8 from 11 Chorale Preludes, Op.122)</i>
Franck	<i>Prélude, Choral & Fugue</i>
Bach- Kurtág **	<i>Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit (transcription of the "Sonatina" from BWV 106)</i>
Bach-Busoni	<i>Chaconne in D minor (from Violin Partita no 2 BWV 1004)</i>

harmonium and arrangement for piano (the transcription is by Harold Bauer), addition of a third movement in B minor and the in B major and B major.

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We interweave and balance these two major works for the piano, in B minor and D minor respectively, with two short-though-still-counterpoint-filled 4-hands pieces in major keys, a Bach prelude transcribed by Kurtág and a not-often-heard Chorale Prelude written by Brahms for the organ, amongst some of his last works, and arranged for piano 4-hands.

It is as if these composers created their own and distinctive romantic dreams of the counterpoint; this programme celebrates and shares these beautiful juxtapositions.

Notes on the music

[** = four-hands]

J S BACH (transcribed by F Busoni)
'Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ' (BWV 639)
 (original 1708-17; arr 1894)

The chorale, a hymn setting of religious verse in simple note values, was a central element in Lutheran liturgical practice. Whether sung in unison by the congregation, in four-part harmony by the choir, or artfully refracted into a complex web of contrapuntal lines on the organ as a chorale prelude, it presented the word of God in the vivid pictorial rhetoric of a musical setting.

In a chorale prelude the *cantus firmus* (fixed melody) of the hymn is intoned in long notes against a backdrop of imitative counterpoint in smaller note values, either derived from the same melody, or commenting on it. This distinctive "layering" of different note values throughout a composition was not just a clever musical device but a theological statement about the make-up of the cosmos. It painted an image of God and his "flock" musically: the sustained long notes of the *cantus firmus* symbolising the timeless eternal presence of God in the universe and its chattering contrapuntal accompaniment giving voice to human striving on earth below.

J.S. Bach was a master of the genre and produced dozens of such works. In fact, his earliest surviving works are chorale preludes, arrangements of existing chorales for organ, that date from when he was a mere 15-year-old. He continued to write them as a young man during his first professional posts as organist at Weimar, and the BWV 639 dates from his second Weimar period, appearing in an autograph manuscript that collects 45 of Bach's chorale preludes known as the *Orgelbüchlein*. The musicologist Richard Jones has written:

"Such was the centrality of the chorale in Protestant Germany that a substantial part of the training and activities of the organist and the composer traditionally revolved around it".

Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ was based on a hymn by Johann Agricola first published in 1529, one popular enough to appear in settings by Bach's contemporaries Pachelbel and Buxtehude. The words of the chorale sketch a picture of a doubting man who clings to Christ, while wondering whether he is equal to the task of living in accordance with Christ's word. It is the only chorale in the *Orgelbüchlein* with three voices; never before was Jesus called on so movingly, thought the Dutch author Maarten 't Hart. Busoni transcribed the original chorale prelude for the piano as part of his massive thirty-year project known as the Bach-Busoni Editions, the first of which was published in 1894.

L v. BEETHOVEN

Piano sonata no 30, Op.109
(1821)

One of Beethoven's three "late" sonatas, the Op.109 is quite unlike any other in a number of ways. The first stems from the first movement that has a very short first subject and a second subject immediately following it and in a different metre. Indeed, this movement has puzzled many musicians and is without precedents; Czerny's remarks that "this interesting movement is more of a fantasia than a sonata" is probably close to the mark.

From a performer's perspective, the first movement of the Op.109 probably gives us the finest integration of formal and improvisatory styles adopted by Beethoven, molded into a very tightly compressed, yet smooth sonata form. It is not an easy movement to understand as a sense of great freedom is coupled with the looming absolute order and organization. The first theme radiates an easy-going warmth and leads immediately into the second theme, where the tempo abruptly changes. The development is based entirely on the first subject and consists of one glorious crescendo leading to a most electrifying transformation: the warm and friendly main theme is pounded out *forte* white-hot, at both ends of the keyboard, as if representing heaven and earth. each note piercing us with its extraordinary expressive power.

In the stormy "Prestissimo" second movement that follows the first movement without a break, the stern bass line from the opening theme is the main component of the development section where the original furor gives way to some flowing lyricism before the dark and threatening presence re-asserts itself. As in all Beethoven's piano works in the key of E major, the key remains the same for all movements, with the second movement changing from major to minor which then gives way to the heavenly singing theme of the final movement, serene yet powerful, now back in E major.

The third and final movement consists of an Aria and six variations. The Aria, marked "songful but with most intimate feeling", immediately brings the Goldberg variations to mind by the melody's nature and ornamentation and is famously much longer than the other two movements combined. The theme resembles a sarabande (slow triple metre with a slight accent on the second beat); in his autograph score Beethoven labelled it *Gesang* ("song"), but Schlesinger's edition changed this to *Gesangvoll* ("songful"), perhaps with Beethoven's approval; either way, Beethoven wanted to draw attention to the lyrical, vocal style of the theme. The treatment of the variations is quite free, the descending third being of special importance, and the variations contrast sharply with each other: Variation 1 retains the song-like character of the theme but is more an aria than a chorale, but Variation 2 is light and delicate, while the short Variation 3 is filled with vigorous runs throughout. The flowing lines of Variation 4 run elegantly and gently through each other, entwining themselves gracefully, leaving us unprepared for the esoteric colours and the ecstatic outburst in the second half. Variation 5 is a vibrant and insistent fugato, energetically and relentlessly piling up and storming from one end of the keyboard to the other.

By the time Variation 6 arrives, we are brought back to the original tempo and the theme, but the latter is gradually adorned with increasingly intricate figuration, as if Variation 6 is spawning its own set of variations, with the progression of the variation going from doublets through triplets to doublets in double time and finally reaching the semidemi-quavers, which ushers in a final re-statement (or return) of the theme which now seems cast in a completely new light, after what has gone before. The “search” is over and one finds one’s way back, finally.

It is not known if this sonata was ever performed in Beethoven’s lifetime. However, Franz Liszt started performing it as early as 1830.

C. FRANCK (transcribed by H. Bauer)
Prélude, Fugue & Variation, Op.18
(original 1860-2; arr.1910)

César Franck is a Belgian-born composer, pianist, organist, and music teacher who lived in Paris for most of his life and presided as chief organist at the magnificent Cavaillé-Coll organ in the Church of Ste-Clotilde for many years in the second half of the 19th century. Franck wrote two three-part, triptych pieces – quasi-sonatas - that are loved by keyboard players: The Prélude, Choral & Fugue, written for the piano, as well as the Prélude, Fugue & Variation (M.18), written for the harmonium and the piano and with an arrangement for the organ, with both pieces having a third movement in addition to the Prélude and the Fugue, and both in B minor and with an ending in B major. (There is a third, the Prélude, Aria & Finale, also written for the piano, which is not keyed in B minor!).

Op. 18 is dedicated to his contemporary, French composer and fellow organist Camille Saint-Saëns; the dedication does not imply any portrait, but the balance and clarity of Op. 18 indeed suggests Saint-Saëns’s classical orientation. In addition, the substantial fugue of this piece is clearly influenced by Franck’s thorough study of the music of J. S. Bach. The piece intricately works fugal elements into a classical form and adapts these to the aesthetics of the modern Romantic organ. The haunting and romantic oboe melody of the pastoral Prélude is a typical Franckian theme – with many stepwise progressions, both upwards and downwards, as if running up and down the scale and as if reaching up to the heavens.

It is a lesser-known fact that Franck actually wrote the piece originally for the harmonium and the piano and then transcribed it for the organ. This piano transcription is by the early 20th century British pianist Harold Bauer.

J. BRAHMS (arranged by E. Mandyczewski)**
Es ist ein Ros’ entsprungen (no 8 from 11 Chorale Preludes, Op.122)
(original 1896; arr.1902)

The genre of the chorale prelude, forever associated with J.S. Bach, was for Brahms a means of paying homage to his musical heritage. He followed the conventions of the form, the most important of which was to paraphrase and elaborate upon the lines of pre-existing Lutheran chorale melodies.

The last composition of any composer carries a certain level of mystique, and that is true of these chorale preludes, the only organ works of Brahms to carry an opus number (although he did not assign it). They were written in the summer of 1896 after Clara Schumann’s death (some may have been conceived earlier), and it is highly probable that Brahms was already aware of his own illness at that point. While there is evidence that Brahms intended to prepare them for publication, there is also a recorded statement that they could be seen as more private companion pieces to his *Vier ernste Gesänge* (Four Serious Songs), Op. 121. Like those songs, the preludes are “settings” (albeit wordless) of religious texts--Lutheran hymns and their associated chorale melodies.

The original autograph of all eleven of these preludes was found on Brahms’s desk after his death in 1897. They were eventually edited by Eusebius Mandyczewski and published in 1902. The pieces were of such obvious significance and quality that they were assigned the posthumous opus number 122.

Brahms’s use of counterpoint and harmony show a mixture of baroque techniques with romantic sensibility. The sublimely beautiful No 8 in the set is by far the most well-known as well as being perhaps the most artful in its near-complete concealment (with the constant use of expressive appoggiaturas) of the original and rather familiar chorale melody. The chorale texts appear printed above the melodies in all early editions of the preludes.

Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen (Behold, a rose is blooming).

*Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen
aus einer Wurzel zart,
wie uns die Alten sungen
von Jesse war die Art,
und hat ein Blümlein bracht
mitten im kalten Winter
wohl zu der halben Nacht*

Behold, a rose is blooming
From out a tender root,
Thus in the house of Jesse,
As tell our ancient hymns,
A young and tender shoot
Amid the gloom of winter
Burst forth in wond'rous bloom.

C. FRANCK
Prélude, Choral & Fugue
(1884)

The Prélude, Choral & Fugue was the result of Franck turning again to writing for the solo piano after almost 40 years, and it was to be the most deeply felt and serious work for the instrument to come out of France in the nineteenth century.

Franck's original plan, according to his pupil Vincent d'Indy, was to write a plain Prelude and Fugue, the venerable form made immortal by Bach and neglected since Mendelssohn and a serious alternative to the plethora of popular virtuoso pieces. The decision to include a central section, separate from yet linking the Prelude and the Fugue, came later. In any event, the central section became the emotional core of the work. As for the Fugue, it was as if the rules of counterpoint finally gave the speaker a way to speak of the unspeakable, after the hesitant sobs of the Prelude and the syncopated lament of the Chorale.

The Prelude, in B minor, is written in a harmonic language that is unique to Franck: it is highly chromatic and colourful, and the melody falls on the second note of each set of eight demisemiquavers. The music has moved from B minor to the warmth of the distant key of E flat major for the Chorale, and from the Prelude's falling cascades of demisemiquavers to block chords moving on each crotchet below the melody. An introductory section soon moves to C minor for the actual, hymn-like chorale, and it is here that Franck the organist can be seen.

More Franck the organist and extraordinary colours and modulations in the Fugue leads to a climax where Franck essentially brings together the fugal subject, the chorale melody and the Prelude figuration – all at the same time. Tonality moves to the major, and a dominant pedal point, so beloved of organists, can be found; here, at last, is the longed-for tonic chord of B Major and the chorale melody in it too. Peals of bells and triumphant jubilation bring the journey to an end.

This piece is a wonderful product of Franck the composer for the keyboard who brings to that task his inspirations as well as formidable skills at both the piano and the organ and his vacillations between religiosity and virtuosity.

J.S. BACH (transcribed by G. Kurtág)**

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit (transcription of the "Sonatina" from BWV 106)
(original 1707/1708; arr. 1991)

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit (God's time is the best time of all) is not really a chorale setting, but it is a prelude. It is the introduction to Bach's Actus Tragicus BWV 106, one of the composer's earliest cantatas and originally scored for two recorders, two violas da gamba, and basso continuo. Its subject is the Christian view of death, its mood is one of consolation, with soothing harmony chords in the lower register supporting the plaintive but resigned sighs of two imitative voices above.

György Kurtág, a contemporary Hungarian pianist-composer especially known for icy miniatures and well described by his aphorism that "one note is almost enough", had made the transcription for 4-hands and recorded it with his wife, Márta; the Kurtágs' performance of this piece in the Konzerthaus in Vienna has been called "one of the most beautiful things".

For the pianist in the "primo" part, it is notable that the whole piece is played while having to cross the hands, with the exception of the very last musical phrase of the prelude.

J.S. BACH

Chaconne in D minor (from Violin Partita no 2 BWV 1004) (arr. Busoni)

(original 1717-1720; arr 1893)

The *chaconne* as a musical form has origins in being a dance song but by the time of Bach has evolved into an instrumental variation over an unchanging bass line rather than embellishing a tune; Bach's *Chaconne in D minor*, written when he was in his mid-30s, is lengthy, complex, virtuosic, and awe-inspiring, and has been called "the chaconne to end all chaconnes" and "the greatest structure for solo violin that exists".

It is actually the fifth and last movement of his Partita No 2 in D minor for solo violin (BWV 1004), written between 1717 and 1720 and part of his compositional cycle called Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin, with the Chaconne lasting approximately as long as the first four movements combined. The work is built around a four-bar melodic phrase, reiterated 64 times in myriad variations in both D major and minor: the transcriber is the Italian pianist, composer and conductor Ferruccio Busoni, who took possession of this theme and found new nuances, colours and voice possibilities enabled by changes of and doubling up register(s) that are specific to the piano, building up a colossal arrangement that has been called a "cathedral of sound".

This Busoni transcription has held forth in the pianist's repertoire for more than a century, with the other monumental piano transcription of Bach's Chaconne being Brahms's for the left hand. Historians have speculated that Bach composed the Chaconne after returning from a trip and found his wife (and the mother of seven of his children) Maria Barbara had died; in a letter to Clara Schumann, Brahms famously described the Chaconne thus:

"On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind. If one doesn't have the greatest violinist around, then it is well the most beautiful pleasure to simply listen to its sound in one's mind."

Transcriptions for nearly every instrument have emerged from the organ to the flute to the marimba to two cellos, but the Bach-Busoni Chaconne for the piano has remained in high currency, so famous that someone once called Busoni himself "Mrs. Busoni", thinking that Bach was her maiden name!

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Notes for Cambridge concert

We would like to thank the Master and Fellows of Trinity College for permission to use the Chapel for tonight's concert.

Thank you especially to Professor and Mrs Nick and Jane Kingsbury, and to the Chapel Music Office.

Notes for London concert

In accordance with the requirements of Westminster City Council persons shall not be permitted to sit or stand in any gangway. The taking of photographs and use of recording equipment is strictly forbidden without formal consent from St John's Smith Square. Smoking is not permitted anywhere in St John's. Please ensure that all digital devices are switched off.

Bottled water and drinks purchased in our Footstool Café-bar are permitted in the auditorium – please ask at the bar when ordering for a reusable cup.

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