



ARTIST
SERIES

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano

Beethoven the Avant-gardist

Tuesday, Nov. 19, 7:30 p.m.

Program

“VI. L'alouette-lulu” from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*

Olivier Messiaen
(1908-1992)

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2 (“Moonlight”)

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

I. Adagio sostenuto

II. Allegretto - Trio

III. Presto agitato

“V. La chouette hulotte” from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*

Olivier Messiaen

— Intermission —

Fantasia cromatica, SwWV 258

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck
(1562-1621)

Shadowlines

George Benjamin
(b. 1960)

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101

Ludwig van Beethoven

I. Etwas lebhaft, und mit der innigsten Empfindung. (“Somewhat lively, and with innermost sensibility.”) Allegretto, ma non troppo

II. Lebhaft, marschmäßig. (“Lively, march-like.”) Vivace alla marcia

III. Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll. (“Slow and longingly.”) Adagio, ma non troppo, con affetto

IV. Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit. (“Swiftly, but not overly, and with determination.”) Allegro

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Program notes

By Marc Shulgold

Catalogue d'oiseaux Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

The French composer Olivier Messiaen loved nature—he was drawn to its wonders, its beauty, and, most of all, its birds and their varied songs. He'd load up a pack and head out on expeditions to listen to and notate the melodies of birds in every province of France. Between 1956 and 1958, he created a Catalogue of Birds, choosing one species from each of 13 provinces. But these are hardly note-for-note transcriptions for piano. Far from it. Using his compositional style employing chord clusters, dramatic pauses and a wide variety of keyboard colors and dynamics, Messiaen aimed to capture each bird's environment—the landscape, the changing hours and temperatures of the day and how they affected the mood of each piece. Yes, there are bird calls (usually heard as chirps and trills at the upper range of the piano), but they are hardly the focus. Here, we sample two of those pieces: L'alouette-lulu (Woodlark) and La chouette hulotte (Tawny Owl), both dark and mysterious. The 13-part work was premiered in April 1959 by his wife Yvonne Loriod. Fun fact: Lorient is the French word for oriole.

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2 ("Moonlight")

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Sandwiched between the two Messiaen pieces is a familiar favorite—in its way, as revolutionary and original as the French works surrounding it. Written in 1801 and published the following year, the "Moonlight" sonata is the second of two sonatas designated Op. 27. Each is titled *Sonata quasi una fantasia* (Sonata in the manner of a fantasia)—a radical departure from conventions of the day. Much to Beethoven's dismay, the second of the two achieved instant popularity with the Viennese, causing him to grumble about his latest hit, arguing that Op. 27, No. 1 wasn't too bad either. Those familiar with the traditional structure of a sonata will understand why the composer chose the unusual title: Rather than a fast-slow-fast order, the "Moonlight" begins with an *Adagio Sostenuto*, unfolding in an unending stream of gentle arpeggios and a simple melody.

It does suggest a soft, nocturnal feel—one that inspired a poet named Ludwig Rellstab to attach the now-inseparable nickname in his 1832 review. That's a fair description, until the following two movements erase any visions of the moon over Lake Lucerne (as Rellstab had suggested).

The short, skipping *Scherzo*-like second movement slides away from thoughts of evening romance, and jumps headlong into the furious *Presto Agitato*, an explosive movement that is pure Beethoven at his most dramatic and unpredictable. Even a second, more relaxed theme can't hold back the unstoppable energy of those angry, ascending arpeggios. Just as Messiaen wrote his *Catalogue* for his loving wife Yvonne, Beethoven dedicated this sonata to Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, a 17-year-old student with whom the composer was hopelessly smitten. Another attractive young woman would receive that honor for this evening's final work, Beethoven's Sonata No. 28.

Fantasia cromatica, SwWV 258 in dorian mode

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621)

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck was one of Europe's most respected and influential organists, composers and teachers at the turn of the 17th century. Living his entire life in Amsterdam, where he served as organist in the Oude Kerk (Old Church), Sweelinck welcomed a steady stream of students, mostly from Germany. He also kept busy repairing and restoring organs. This *Fantasia cromatica* is one of several he composed, and their brilliance and originality inspired composers to try their hand at the new-born concept of a free-flowing *Fantasia*. (We already heard Beethoven's take on that concept).

Though written for organ, this work is easily transferred to a single-keyboard instrument, such as clavichord, harpsichord or, in this case, the piano. The Dorian Mode reference is to one of several alternative scales used by composers as building blocks for different-sounding music. Sweelinck wrote a number of keyboard works based on the various modes, which are simply eight-note scales rooted in a different step of the do-re-mi scale. Each is played by starting on the designated note (in this case, D) and playing the next seven white keys only. The Dorian is a minor-key mode, and so has a dark, meditative

sound that is instantly apparent here in the Fantasia's opening descending chromatic scale. You can also sample the Dorian's somber qualities in more recent pieces set in that mode—the Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby*, Simon and Garfunkel's *Scarborough Fair* and (no joke) Jimi Hendrix' *Purple Haze*.

Shadowlines

George Benjamin (b. 1960)

A much-honored English composer, Benjamin has direct ties to another pair of names on tonight's program. At age 16, he became a composition student of Olivier Messiaen in Paris, later studying piano with the composer's wife Yvonne Loriod. In an interview with musicologist Thomas May, Benjamin noted Messiaen's "... Huge impact on me. He was a great force of inspiration, and a wonderfully enthusiastic and generous teacher. Messiaen opened up so many new avenues for me and changed my mind—and my ear, above all."

The other name connected with George Benjamin is tonight's pianist, Pierre-Laurent Aimard. *Shadowlines* was written for Aimard in 2001, through a commission from new-music's devoted patron, Betty Freeman. Aimard premiered these "Six Canonic Preludes for Piano" two years later in London. The composer has described the work as "a sequence of pieces, all canons in different ways." In its 15 minutes, these half-dozen miniatures unfold without breaks, moving from an improvisatory prologue through four contrasting miniatures and ending with "a simple and gentle epilogue," as the composer described it. Traditionally, a canon is built on a simple musical line that is often rooted in a single chord, which will be repeatedly re-introduced without variation (as in *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*).

That said, in Benjamin's piece, the structure of a canon is almost invisible—which perhaps explains the work's unusual title. For listeners, *Shadowlines* emerges more as six challenging explorations of a piano's possibilities. Benjamin visits the keyboard's upper range in the second prelude; turns untamed and slightly menacing in the third; challenges the pianist's ability to manage the keyboard's highest and lowest areas simultaneously in the stormy fourth; and, in an expanded fifth prelude, uses a deep, recurring bass line under music of unexpected intimacy.

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

"A series of impressions and reveries." That's how Beethoven described this work, at least according to his semi-reliable friend Anton Schindler. That does, however, nicely capture the magically subdued, often dreamy flow of Op. 101—a piece often identified as the first keyboard composition of Beethoven's so-called Late Period. It was sent for publication, though not yet completed, in July 1816, and published the following year, with a dedication to Dorothea Graumann (more on her later).

Defying the current popularity of sonatas that started with a bang, here the opening is gentle and filled with emotion, reflecting the composer's subtitle, "Rather lively, with the warmest feeling." This seemingly conversational tone, with its slight pauses and changes of direction, shows how Beethoven, now all but totally deaf, was finding new ways to share his deepest feelings through music. A "Lively, restrained march" follows, pointing ahead to much of Schumann's energetic piano writing. What follows is a yearning *Adagio*, featuring a lovely reprise of the opening movement's gentle theme—a surprising touch, but perfectly placed, soon leading directly into the robust final movement. Even here, one senses a determined avoidance of the power and fury found in his earlier sonatas. Another unexpected episode is a formally constructed fugue that, again, appears with a welcome naturalness. Since this work is heard after Benjamin's "Canonic Preludes," mention should be made of some subtle canonic writing in Op. 101's second and fourth movements.

Finally, we return to this work's dedicatee, Dorothea von Ertmann (née Graumann, 1781-1848), an outstanding pianist, a student of Beethoven's and, it's believed, one of his crushes. She's the subject of an endearing anecdote, in which she was serenaded by her teacher with an hour of improvisation following the death of her only child in 1804. "We will now talk to each other in tones," Beethoven reportedly told the grieving mother. Significantly, Ertmann went on to become a first-rate interpreter of her dear friend's compositions. "She grasped intuitively even the most hidden subtleties of Beethoven's works," wrote Schindler, "with as much certainty

as if they had been written out before her eyes.” In a series of public concerts, she created a renewed excitement for the sonatas that helped continue the composer’s presence in Viennese life. Beethoven’s biographer, Alexander Thayer, noted that Ertmann was considered by “all contemporary authorities” as, “if not the greatest player of these works, at least the greatest of her sex.”

About the performer

Deemed an “extraordinary visionary” by the Washington Post and a pioneer artist renowned for his revelatory insights, **Pierre-Laurent Aimard** was awarded the prestigious 2017 International Ernst von Siemens Music Prize in recognition of a life devoted to the service of music. Aimard is widely acclaimed as a key figure in the music of our time and has had close collaborations with many leading composers, including György Ligeti, whose complete works for piano he has recorded. He has also worked with Karlheinz Stockhausen, George Benjamin and Pierre Boulez, who appointed Aimard, aged 19, to become the Ensemble intercontemporain’s first solo pianist. Praised by The Guardian as “one of the best Messiaen interpreters around,” Aimard has had a close association to the composer himself and with Yvonne Loriod, with whom he studied at the Paris Conservatoire. Recent seasons have included the release of Messiaen’s opus magnum *Catalogue d’oiseaux* on Pentatone, which was honoured with multiple awards including the prestigious German music critic’s award “Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik.” Aimard has also performed the world premieres of piano works by Kurtág at Teatro alla Scala; Carter’s last piece *Epigrams*, which was written for Aimard; Sir Harrison Birtwistle’s works *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless* and *Keyboard Engine for two pianos*, the latter of which received its London premiere in autumn 2019. An innovative curator and uniquely significant interpreter of piano repertoire from every age, Aimard has been invited to direct and perform in a number of residencies, with ground-breaking projects at New York’s Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, Konzerthaus Vienna, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Alte Oper Frankfurt, Brussels’ Palais des Beaux Arts, Lucerne Festival, Mozarteum Salzburg, Cité de la Musique in Paris, Tanglewood Festival and Edinburgh Festival, and was artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 2009

to 2016. He performs throughout the world each season with major orchestras under such conductors as Esa-Pekka Salonen, Peter Eötvös, Sir Simon Rattle and Vladimir Jurowski.

Aimard’s 2019-20 program focus, “Beethoven and the Avant-Garde,” is a tour de force of pianistic discoveries that transcends traditional boundaries. In this unique and very personal take on Beethoven’s legacy, developed in response to the composer’s 250th anniversary year, Aimard juxtaposes Viennese Classic with compositions of the avant-garde to reveal surprising cross-references. This season sees Aimard present the project in concerts as part of Berliner Festspiele at Philharmonie Berlin, Philharmonie de Paris, Tokyo Opera City, Southbank Centre and on tour in the United States. Together with Gürzenich Orchestra and François-Xavier Roth, Aimard tours Europe with their “New Academy Concerts” series, created in the spirit of Beethoven’s Academy soirées in which the legendary modernist, humanist and musical revolutionary presented his own creations to the Viennese public. Aimard takes both Beethoven projects to London as part of his ongoing three-year residency at Southbank Centre. In recital, Aimard pairs the two mightiest and most transcendental piano sonatas in music history: Ives’ “Concord” sonata (which Aimard recorded and for which he received a Grammy award) and Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” sonata. This season, Aimard is also resident at Casa da Música, performing works by Messiaen and Dufourt, along with Murail’s piano concerto *Le Désenchantement du Monde*, which he premiered with Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and for which he received the 2017 Gramophone award. He returns to Berliner Philharmoniker, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, to mention but a few.

Through his professorship at the Hochschule Köln, as well as numerous series of concert lectures and workshops worldwide, Aimard sheds an inspiring light on music of all periods. During the 2008-09 season, he was an associate professor at the College de France, Paris, and he is a member of Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste. In 2015, Aimard launched a major online resource called Explore the Score, centered on the performance and teaching of Ligeti’s piano music in collaboration with Klavier-Festival Ruhr. pierrelaurentaimard.com