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# PIERRE-LAURENT AIMARD | Piano

Tuesday, February 27, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

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| <b>SWEELINCK</b> | <b>Echo Fantasia in D Minor, No. 4, SwWV 261</b>    |
| <b>CARTER</b>    | <b>Night Fantasies</b>                              |
| <b>CHOPIN</b>    | <b>Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat Major, Opus 61</b> |

**INTERMISSION**

- |                   |  |
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| <b>MOZART</b>     | <b>Fantasia for piano in C Minor, K475</b>       |
| <b>C.P.E BACH</b> | <b>Fantasia for Keyboard in C Major, Wq 59/6</b> |
| <b>BEETHOVEN</b>  | <b>Fantasia for piano in G Minor, Opus 77</b>    |
| <b>IVES</b>       | <b>The Celestial Railroad for solo piano</b>     |

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**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of James and Kathleen Leak.**

**Pierre-Laurent Aimard** is represented by Harrison Parrott  
South Wing, Somerset House, The Strand, London, WC2R 1A, UK    [harrisonparrott.com](http://harrisonparrott.com)

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## ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Pierre-Laurent Aimard for the third time. He first appeared in March 2011.



Widely acclaimed as a key figure in the music of our time, **Pierre-Laurent Aimard** has had close collaborations with many leading composers including György Ligeti, Helmut Lachenmann, Elliott Carter, Harrison Birtwistle, György Kurtág, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Marco Stroppa, George Benjamin, Pierre Boulez, and Olivier Messiaen.

Aimard is the recent recipient of numerous prizes including Denmark's most prominent music award, the Leonie Sonning Music Prize, which he received in 2022 and was also awarded the prestigious International Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, in 2017, in recognition of a life devoted to the service of music.

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 including for Musikkollegium Winterthur where over the season he celebrated different composers and opened with the complete cycle of Beethoven Piano Concertos. Elsewhere, he has performed ground-breaking projects at Porto's Casa da Musica, New York's Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, Konzerthaus Vienna, Alte Oper Frankfurt, Lucerne Festival, Mozarteum Salzburg, Cité de la Musique in Paris, Tanglewood Festival, the Edinburgh Festival, and was Artistic Director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 2009 to 2016.

His recent release of a new recording of the complete Bartók piano concertos with

Esa-Pekka Salonen and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra is the latest in a series of critically acclaimed collaborations with Pentatone. Following on the heels of *Visions de l'Amen* (2022), recorded with Tamara Stefanovich, Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata & Eroica Variations* (2021), and Messiaen's magnum opus *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (2018) which garnered multiple awards including the prestigious German music critic's award "Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik."

Through his recent 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. He was previously an Associate Professor at the College de France, Paris and is a member of Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste. In spring 2020, he re-launched a major online resource Explore the Score, after several years work, which centres on the performance and teaching of Ligeti's piano music in collaboration with the Klavier-Festival Ruhr.

As part of the 2023–24 season, Aimard continues to give world premieres of new works including Clara Iannotta's *Piano Concerto* for the Acht Brücken Festival in Cologne and the Portuguese premiere of Klaus Ospald's *Se da contra las piedras la libertad*, a work co-commissioned by Casa da Musica, Porto and Cologne's WDR Symphony Orchestra, where it received its World Premiere in 2021. Other works that Aimard has premiered have included Carter's last piece *Epigrams*; Sir Harrison Birtwistle's works *Responses: Sweet disorder and the carefully careless* and *Keyboard Engine* for two pianos which received its London premiere in autumn 2019.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### FANTASIAS

Every aspiring young composer struggles to learn the "rules" of music: the many different forms, a proper harmonic language, the intricacies of counterpoint. It can be a laborious process. It took Beethoven ten years to master sonata form, and Mozart never did feel comfortable writing fugues. But some composers long to escape those rules. They wish to write music not in strict forms but music that springs from inner impulse—the impulse to experiment, to be free, to express something they cannot get at in other ways. The general name for this kind of music is *fantasia*, with its implication of the fantastic, and this evening Mr. Aimard

plays a program of fantasias composed over the span of four centuries. On this program, seven composers step outside the rules and let their music take them where it will. And it will take them to wild, personal, beautiful—and fantastic—places.

### Echo Fantasia in D Minor, No. 4, SwWV 261

JAN PIETERSZOOM SWEELINCK  
(1562–1621)

An almost exact contemporary of Shakespeare, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck spent his entire career in Amsterdam. He learned to play the organ from his father, then became the organist at the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam at 15 and retained that position for the remaining 44 years of his life. Sweelinck was famous in his own day as a performer (he was called "the Orpheus of Amsterdam"), as a composer, and as a teacher—he taught almost all the leading composers and organists in Northern Europe of the early seventeenth century. Sweelinck composed several hundred vocal settings, and he also wrote a number of works for keyboard, including variations, toccatas, and fantasias.

Among his fantasias are several that he called "echo fantasias" because they depend on echo effects—a passage would be played and then repeated in such a way that it seemed to "echo" the original statement. In the score Sweelinck indicated the echo passages by writing them in very small notes. On the organ, it is possible to help sharpen the echoes by playing them on the instrument's various manuals; on the piano, it is up to the performer to provide contrast by playing the echoes at different dynamic levels. The present *Echo Fantasia in D Minor*, which first appeared in 1617 (it may have been written earlier), has become one of Sweelinck's best-known works in this form. As the piece proceeds, the echoes become increasingly varied and imaginative.

### Night Fantasies

ELLIOTT CARTER  
(1908–2012)

In the late 1970s four distinguished American pianists and champions of new music—Paul Jacobs, Gilbert Kalish, Charles Rosen, and Ursula Oppens—jointly commissioned a new work from Elliott Carter. Carter, who had not composed a piece for solo piano since his *Piano Sonata*

of 1946, set to work in November 1978 and completed *Night Fantasies* in April 1980. Over the next two years, all four of the commissioning pianists gave their own premieres, each in a different country: Opens in Bath, England in June 1980; Rosen in Toronto in March 1981; Jacobs in New York City in November 1981; and Kalish in Badenweiler, Germany in November 1982. Since then, the *Night Fantasies* has become one of Carter's most frequently performed and recorded works.

This is a substantial work, spanning over 20 minutes in performance, and we should note that in this case, the title "Fantasies" refers not to a musical composition but instead to random acts of the imagination. In both cases, though, that title implies a certain freedom of expression. In an introductory note in the published score, Carter expounded on the meaning of the title:

"Night Fantasies is a piano piece of continuously changing moods, suggesting the fleeting thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind during a period of wakefulness at night. The quiet, nocturnal evocation with which it begins and to which it returns occasionally, is suddenly broken by a flighty series of short phrases that emerge and disappear. This episode is followed by many others of contrasting characters and lengths that sometimes break in abruptly and at other, develop smoothly out of what has gone before. The work culminates in a loud periodic repetition of an emphatic chord that, as it dies away, brings the work to its conclusion.

"In this score, I wanted to capture the fanciful, changeable quality of our inner life at a time when it is not dominated by strong, directive intentions or desires—to capture the poetic moodiness that, in an earlier romantic context, we employ in the works of Robert Schumann like *Kreisleriana*, *Carnaval*, and *Dauids-bundlertanze*." (Elliott Carter)

As its composer suggests, *Night Fantasies* begins very quietly—the marking is *Tranquillo*. Tempos and meters shift constantly, and Carter's performance markings give some idea of the range of moods he wishes to project: *Fantastico*, *appassionato*, *capriccioso* (this marking appears repeatedly), *chiaro* ("clear"), *collerico*, *intensamente*, *scorrevole* ("flowing"), and at one point *con elequenza*.

## Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat Major, Opus 61

FREDERIC CHOPIN  
(1810–1849)

Written in 1845–6, the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* is one of Chopin's final works—and one of

his most brilliant. A polonaise is a national Polish dance in triple time, characterized by unusual rhythmic stresses; the fact that it is usually at a moderate rather than a fast tempo gives the polonaise a more stately character than most dance forms. Many composers have written polonaises, but the 14 of Chopin remain the most famous, and some feel that this distinctly Polish form allowed Chopin an ideal channel for his own strong nationalist feelings during his exile in Paris.

The polonaise is usually in three parts: a first subject, a contrasting middle section, and a return of the opening material. The *Polonaise-Fantaisie* keeps this general pattern but with some differences: Chopin writes with unusual harmonic freedom and incorporates both themes into the brilliant conclusion—doubtless he felt that he had reshaped the basic form so far that it was necessary to append the "Fantaisie" to the title.

The *Allegro maestoso* introduction is long and rather free, while the first theme group—in A-flat major—is remarkable for the drama and virtuosity of the writing. This makes the quiet middle section, in the unexpected key of B major and marked *Poco più lento*, all the more effective: a chordal melody of disarming simplicity is developed at length before the gradual return of the opening material. The final pages are dazzling—Chopin combines both themes and at one point even makes one of the accompanying figures function thematically as the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* winds down to its powerful final chord.

## Fantasia for piano in C Minor, K475

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  
(1756–1791)

Mozart completed the *Fantasia in C Minor* for solo piano in Vienna on May 20, 1785, and published it jointly with his *Piano Sonata in C Minor*, composed the previous October. Mozart's choice of key and the startling expressive range of these two pieces have reminded many listeners of Beethoven, who was then still a teenager in Bonn: the explosive and sharply-contrasted drama of these pieces seems to foreshadow the sort of music the younger composer would write over the next two decades.

Mozart intended that the fantasy and the sonata could be performed separately, and the *Fantasia in C Minor* is often played by itself, as it is on this concert—it can stand as an independent work rather than simply functioning as a prelude to the sonata. The

*Fantasia* opens with a powerful *Adagio*. The piano's opening figure—in octaves—sets the pattern for the entire work: even within the space of one measure, Mozart has already made sharp dynamic contrasts and moved through unexpected tonalities. Such expressive freedom shows up even more violently at the *Allegro*, where the music rushes ahead ominously. There is a dark urgency to this music, with its powerful accents, clipped phrases, and sudden changes of mood. A brief, gentle *Andantino* leads to a return of faster tempos, and Mozart rounds off this varied work with a return to the music from the very beginning. Again, there are the same changes of mood, the same contrasts of dynamics, the same ornate swells of sound, before the powerful rush up the scale to the concluding C minor chord.

## Fantasia for Keyboard in C Major, Wq 59/6

CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH  
(1714–1788)

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the second son of Johann Sebastian, spent 27 years as court harpsichordist to Frederick the Great, an accomplished flute-player, but he was desperate to get away from the conservative musical tastes of that court. Finally, in 1767, Emanuel did get free of his obligations to the royal court and succeeded Telemann as music director for the city of Hamburg; he would remain in that city for the final two decades of his life.

Emanuel may have been carefully trained by his father, but he wrote a very different kind of music. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Sebastian's complex counterpoint had fallen out of fashion, and there was a movement toward appealing melodies, simplicity of textures, and elegance of expression—we know this as the *galant* style. But Emanuel did not wholly embrace the *galant* style. Instead, he is more readily identified with the *Empfindsamer* style: music that emphasized emotion and expression and that featured color, excitement, and sudden changes of key and dynamics. Emanuel's music became quite free in both form and expression, and in the final decade of his life he wrote a number of fantasias for keyboard (and some for violin).

The *Fantasia in C Major* dates from 1784, only four years before Emanuel's death. This music leaps between different tempos, different moods, different keys, different styles, almost by the instant. It opens with a playful *Andantino* in C major, but after five



measures Emanuel abandons barlines, and the music whips ahead. And just as suddenly it slows down for a flowing *Allegretto* in E minor, set in 2/4. The *Fantasia in C Major* will leap back and forth between these two very different ideas, sometimes interrupted by *Prestissimo* runs. These in turn can stop instantly, and the music will head in a different direction entirely. There will be sudden pauses, instantaneous changes of mood, gentle passages interrupted by impetuous virtuosity, and an almost whimsical approach to expression.

## Fantasia for piano in G Minor, Opus 77

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN  
(1770–1827)

Beethoven established his early reputation in Vienna on his ability to improvise at the piano: before an audience, he would take a musical idea and just play, often for extended periods, improvising on that theme and extending it through a range of expression and forms. Such music is by nature ephemeral: it is made up on the spot and—because it is not written down—inevitably lost. Yet something of Beethoven’s improvisatory style may be sensed in a work he wrote much later and did write down, his *Fantasia in G Minor*. Beethoven completed this work in October of 1809, a year that saw a revival of interest in the piano on his part: during that same year he composed his “*Emperor*” *Concerto* and several sonatas and shorter pieces for keyboard.

“*Fantasy*” is a good title for this piece because in fact it is fantastic: this is music without any specified form that moves from one episode to the next (and from one key to the next) with ease. A basic theme-shape recurs throughout the *Fantasy*, but these are not really variations, because that theme is often abandoned as Beethoven embarks on a series of adventures—one may sense the variety of this journey by noting his tempo markings: *Allegro*, *Poco adagio*, *Allegro ma non troppo*, *Allegro con brio*, *Adagio*, *Allegretto* (to name only some of them). And to say that this music is in G minor is simply wrong, for it is in a dizzying variety of keys. It may begin in G minor, but it stays there for only five measures and soon moves through B-flat major, D minor, A-flat major, D major (and a few more in passing) before finally concluding in the remote key of B major. The episodes are separated by a variety of swirls, runs, and arpeggios, as Beethoven spins a series of separate episodes from his

opening material.

Though this *Fantasy* was written nearly two decades after his arrival in Vienna, listeners may take from it some sense of what the improvisatory style of the young Beethoven was like during those heady early days in his adopted city, when he dazzled the drawing rooms of that city with his abilities at the keyboard.

## The Celestial Railroad for solo piano

CHARLES IVES  
(1874–1954)

Ives was an extremely well-read composer, and he was attracted in particular to the New England writers: Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcott family, and Thoreau. In the years around 1910 Ives began to compose a series of works inspired by these writers, most notably his *Concord Sonata*. The second movement of that sonata is titled “Hawthorne,” and Ives would later rework some of the material from that movement into the second movement of his *Fourth Symphony* and into a work for solo piano inspired by Hawthorne’s short story *The Celestial Railroad*.

Hawthorne’s *The Celestial Railroad*, published in 1843, is a sort of updated and Americanized version of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan’s allegory tells of the character Christian who leaves his hometown, passes such scenes as the Slough of Despond, Valley of the Shadow of Death, and Vanity Fair and eventually

arrives at the Celestial City. Hawthorne’s traveler, however, journeys not by foot but by train and along the way meets a fellow passenger, Mr. Smooth-It-Away. When they reach the point where they must board a boat for the final approach to the Celestial City, Mr. Smooth-It-Away steps aside, saying that he never intended to make that journey. In the story’s shocking conclusion, Mr. Smooth-It-Away erupts in smoke and flames that reveal him as the Devil. A splash of water from the boat’s paddlewheels awakens the narrator, who realizes that it had all been a dream. Hawthorne’s story, a satire of contemporary religion and of materialism, provoked both admiration and dismay among its contemporary readers.

Ives’ *The Celestial Railroad*, about eight minutes long, does not set out to re-tell Hawthorne’s story in music. Instead, it is a work inspired by the events of that tale and should be taken on its own terms, as music. That said, Ives made notes in the published score that seem to suggest certain scenes from Hawthorne’s story, such as “Vanity Fair,” and perhaps we can make out the sound of the chugging train beginning its journey, a passing drum corps, distant bells, and bits of such songs as *Marching through Georgia*, *Nearer my God to Thee*, and *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*. This is music of stupefying difficulty for the pianist, particularly in its complex rhythms, multiple layers, quick changes of mood, and the variety of its sonorities.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger



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