

presents...

## CONRAD TAO | Piano

Friday, October 17, 2025 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

**RACHMANINOFF** Prelude in C Major, Opus 32 No. 1  
Prelude in A flat Major, Opus 23 No. 8  
Prelude in G Major, Opus 32 No. 5

**STRAYHORN** Take the A Train

ARTIST DISCUSSION

**SONDHEIM** In Buddy's Eyes (from *Follies*)

**SCHUMANN** Auf einer Burg (from *Liederkreis*, Opus 39)

**RACHMANINOFF** Étude-tableau in A Minor, Opus 39 No. 2

ARTIST DISCUSSION

**BERLIN** All By Myself

**TAO/  
RACHMANINOFF** Improvisation on Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Var. 15

**ARLEN / TATUM** Over the Rainbow, 1953 recording (transcribed by Conrad Tao)

**RACHMANINOFF** Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Var. 18

**STRAYHORN** Lush Life

ARTIST DISCUSSION

**RACHMANINOFF**

**Daisies**

**STRAYHORN**

**Day Dream**

**RACHMANINOFF**

**Etude-Tableau in C Minor, Opus 33 No. 3**

**INTERMISSION**

**RACHMANINOFF**

**Symphonic Dances, Opus 45 (arr. Inon Barnatan)**

*Non allegro*

*Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)*

*Lento assai; Allegro vivace; Lento assai. Come prima*

**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of  
Robert Goodman and John Bankston**

**Conrad Tao** is represented by Opus 3 Artists

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## ARTIST PROFILES

Tonight is Conrad Tao's San Francisco Performances recital debut. He previously appeared with the Junction Trio in December 2022.



**Conrad Tao** is a pianist and composer celebrated for his boundary-defying artistry as well as his powerful performances of traditional repertoire. Described by *New York Magazine* as “the kind of musician who is shaping the future of classical music,” and praised by *The New York Times* for his “probing intellect and open-hearted vision,” Tao appears regularly as a soloist with leading orchestras and at major venues across the world.

In the 2025–26 season, Tao returns to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as both soloist and recitalist, performing Bartók's *Piano Concerto No. 3* with Karina Canellakis and later presenting a recital program featuring Gershwin song arrangements alongside works by Schoenberg, Strayhorn, Schumann, and others. Recital highlights include debuts at Berlin's Philharmonie and Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, as well as returns to Klavier-Festival Ruhr, and to the Celebrity Series of Boston, and the Seattle Symphony with *Poetry and Fairy Tales*, a program blending works by David Fulmer, Rebecca Saunders, Todd Moellenberg, Brahms, and Ravel.

Tao reunites with Robert Spano for performances of John Adams' *Century Rolls* (San Diego Symphony) and Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety* (Atlanta Symphony). He also joins Matthias Pintscher and the Konzerthausorchester Berlin for Pintscher's *NUR*, and travels to Tokyo to perform Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 17* with the NHK Symphony

and Jaap van Zweden. He makes his harpsichord debut at Princeton University in Patricia Kopatchinskaja's *Dies Irae*.

Recent highlights include his return to Carnegie Hall with Debussy's 12 *Études* and his original composition *Keyed In*, as well as appearances with the San Francisco Symphony and Nicholas Collon, Philadelphia Orchestra and Marin Alsop, Boston Symphony and Dima Slobodeniouk, New York Philharmonic and Jaap van Zweden, and Cleveland Orchestra and Jahja Ling. In 2024, he also toured Europe with the Kansas City Symphony and Matthias Pintscher to mark the 100th anniversary of *Rhapsody in Blue*, with sold-out performances at the Elbphilharmonie, Berlin Philharmonie, and Concertgebouw.

Tao continues performing his own works, including *Flung Out*, an homage to Gershwin, which he played recently at the Aspen Festival, and *The Hand*, a companion to Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, which was commissioned and performed by the Kansas City Symphony. His orchestral work *Everything Must Go* premiered with the New York Philharmonic and later in Europe with the Antwerp Symphony. He also tours *Counterpoint*, his collaboration with dancer Caleb Teicher, and performs regularly with the Junction Trio alongside Stefan Jackiw and Jay Campbell. Additional recent collaborators include vocalist Charmaine Lee, artist Avram Finkelstein, choreographer Miguel Gutierrez, and brass quartet The Westerlies.

Tao's acclaimed recordings include *Voyages*, *Pictures*, and *American Rage* (all on Warner), as well as *the loser* by David Lang, and *Bricolage* with The Westerlies.

He is a recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, the Gilmore Young Artist Award, and a New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Award for his collaboration with Caleb Teicher on *More Forever*.

## PROGRAM NOTES

**Prelude in C Major,  
Opus 32, No. 1**

**Prelude in A flat Major,  
Opus 23, No. 8**

**Prelude in G Major,  
Opus 32, No. 5**

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**  
(1873–1943)

Rachmaninoff wrote 24 preludes in all the major and minor keys. His preludes are

generally brief and unified around a melodic or rhythmic cell; many are in ternary form, with a modified return of the opening material. Some lie within the abilities of good amateur pianists, but most are extremely difficult technically, with the music ranging from the brilliant and exuberant to the dark and introspective. Rachmaninoff did not intend that these preludes should be performed as a set, and he would play only a brief selection of the preludes on his recitals; Conrad Tao opens this recital with three of them.

The brief but ebullient *Prelude in C Major* (Opus 32/1) rides along great washes of sound but comes to a surprisingly restrained close. The *Prelude in A Minor* (Opus 23/8) seems in constant motion throughout and requires quick hand-crossings at moments. It is a virtually a perpetual-motion, with the march-like main theme emerging from whirling cascades of notes. The *Prelude in G Major* (Opus 32/5) is all delicacy—here a limpid melody floats above rippling accompaniment, grows capricious, and finally comes to a shimmering close. Though Rachmaninoff is reported to have disliked Debussy's music, there are moments here that evoke the music of that composer.

## Take the A Train

**BILLY STRAYHORN**  
(1915–1967)

Billy Strayhorn met Duke Ellington when Strayhorn was only 23, and he quickly became Ellington's colleague, arranger, and lifelong friend. Strayhorn was a composer, pianist, and lyricist, and at age 24 he wrote “Take the A Train,” which soon became the signature tune of Ellington's band. That title came from a specific moment: Strayhorn had come to New York City, and when he arrived, he called Ellington to ask for directions to his home in Harlem. Ellington's reply was “First, take the A Train.”

## In Buddy's Eyes from *Follies*

**STEPHEN SONDHEIM**  
(1930–2021)

In Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, which opened in 1971, a group of aging showgirls gathers for a reunion in a crumbling theater where they had performed 30 years before. Their reunion brings nostalgia, but it also re-awakens a web of rivalries, hopes, and disappointments. Sally, one of the

showgirls, has been married—not entirely happily—to Buddy for some years. Their relationship is complex, and “In Buddy’s Eyes” makes clear that she understands the depth of his devotion to her.

## Auf einer Burg (from *Liederkreis*, Opus 39)

**ROBERT SCHUMANN**  
(1810–1856)

Schumann composed his *Liederkreis*, Opus 39, in the spring of 1840, shortly before his marriage to Clara Wieck. *Liederkreis* (that title translates prosaically as “Song Cycle”) sets 12 poems by the German poet Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorf (1788–1857). The seventh song, “Auf einer Burg,” sets what at first seems a most romantic situation, from the stone knight on the ramparts of a castle high above the Rhine to the happy wedding party passing far below and then brings a sting in the final line: the lovely bride is weeping through all this merriment. Schumann’s setting is solemn (the marking is *Adagio*), and the vocal line proceeds above a subdued chordal accompaniment.

## Étude-tableau in A Minor, Opus 39, No. 2

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

Rachmaninoff composed two sets of *Études-tableaux*: Opus 33 (1911) and Opus 39 (1917). *Études-tableaux* means “picture-studies,” piano études that present technical challenges and that are intended to be expressive, but not pictorial. Rachmaninoff does not set out to paint musical portraits here, and in response to a question about what this music depicted, he replied: “I do not believe in the artist disclosing too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what it most suggests.” But when Ottorino Respighi orchestrated five of the *Études-tableaux* in 1930, Rachmaninoff suggested a specific program for the *Prelude in A Minor*, telling the Italian composer that it represented “the Sea and Seagulls.” Certainly the beginning, with its lonely cries above murmuring accompaniment, might suggest that.

## All by Myself

**IRVING BERLIN**  
(1888–1989)

Irving Berlin wrote “All by Myself” on

his own lyrics in 1921, and it became an immediate hit. Aileen Stanley recorded it the following year, and since then it has been covered by countless artists. The text is about being lonely and living in fear of eventually dying alone. Such a text might well be the basis for a very dark song, but Berlin’s snappy, bouncy setting is so captivating that we come away from this song exhilarated rather than depressed.

## Improvisation on *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Variation 15

**CONRAD TAO**  
(B. 1944)

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

In the spring of 1934 Rachmaninoff, then 61, and his wife moved into a villa they had just purchased on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. That summer Rachmaninoff composed a set of variations for piano and orchestra on what is doubtless the most-varied theme in the history of music, the last of Niccolò Paganini’s 24 *Caprices for Solo Violin*. Paganini himself had written 12 variations on that devilish tune, a theme full of rhythmic spring and chromatic tension. Many other composers have written variations on that theme, but Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* may be the finest of them. Variation 15, marked *Più vivo scherzando*, is built on a steady flow of sixteenth notes that go so fast that they seem to tumble over each other. It is a brilliant display piece for solo piano (the orchestra is silent through much of it), and on this program Conrad Tao uses it as the basis for an improvisation of his own.

## Over the Rainbow (after Art Tatum)

**HAROLD ARLEN**  
(1905–1986)

Harold Arlen’s *Over the Rainbow* is an indelible part of the American consciousness. The idea for this song came to Arlen while his wife was driving him to Grauman’s Chinese in Hollywood. Arlen asked her to pull over and stop (in front of Schwab’s Drug Store), and he quickly sketched out the music for a song that became a classic. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy—played by Judy Garland—sings this song while wondering if it might be

possible to find a place where there was no trouble. To a generation of Americans weary of the Depression and on the verge of World War II, the song spoke for the national consciousness. In 1953 the great jazz pianist Art Tatum (1909–1956) made his own version of this song for solo piano. It offers some brilliant writing for piano, and along the way Tatum has some very original ideas about the music that sets the line “Where troubles melt like lemon drops.”

## Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Variation 18

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

The most famous of Rachmaninoff’s variations is the eighteenth, in which Paganini’s theme is inverted and transformed into a moonlit love song. The piano states this variation in its simplest form and then strings take it up and turn it into a soaring nocturne. The variation has haunted many Hollywood composers, and Rachmaninoff himself noted wryly that he had written this variation specifically as a gift “for my agent.”

## Lush Life

**BILLY STRAYHORN**

Strayhorn wrote the words and composed “Lush Life” when he was still a teenager, and this song about burnout and longing has gone on to become one of the classic jazz standards. Originally titled “Life Is Lonely,” it had its first public performance in November 1948 by Kay Davis and Duke Ellington at Carnegie Hall, and it has been covered since then by over 500 artists, including Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, John Coltrane, and—more recently—by Queen Latifa and Lady Gaga. So famous has “Lush Life” become that David Hadju used it as the title of his biography of Strayhorn.

## Daisies

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

We so readily identify Rachmaninoff with bravura works for piano and orchestra—such as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*—that it is easy to overlook the fact that he wrote beautifully for the voice. In the spring of 1916, just before he left Russia (never to return), Rachmaninoff composed his *Six Romances*, Opus 38, which all set



texts by contemporary Russian poets. The third of these songs was “Daisies.” In this poem by Igor Severyanin, the poet looks out over a field of blooming daisies and is amazed by their beauty. It is a brief but haunting song, and today it is more often heard in instrumental arrangements than sung. Rachmaninoff himself arranged this version for solo piano (and recorded it), and Jascha Heifetz arranged it for violin and piano; a video of Heifetz performing “Daisies” is readily available.

## Day Dream

**BILLY STRAYHORN**

“Day Dream” is another song from Strayhorn’s youth. He wrote it in 1939, when he was living in Ellington’s house in Harlem while the Ellington band was touring Europe. The lyrics, by John Latouche, are about being in love, daydreaming about it, and floating on air, but “Day Dream” is now most often heard in instrumental form. Its seductive main theme is perfect for being in love and lost to the world.

## Étude-tableau in C Minor, Opus 33, No. 3

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

The *Étude-tableau in C Minor* is a dark meditation. Rachmaninoff marks the opening *Grave*, and a somber theme unfolds in the right hand over deep growls in the left. A curious feature of this etude is the way its meter changes: the piece begins in 6/4, goes to 5/4, then to 4/4, and then to 3/4 as the music gradually pushes ahead. It rises to a moment marked *Molto tranquillo*, grows agitated, and then subsides to a quiet close.

This etude may sound familiar: Rachmaninoff returned to it in 1926, 15 years after composing it, and used it as the basis for the slow movement of his *Piano Concerto No. 4*.

## Symphonic Dances, Opus 45 (arranged for solo piano by Inon Barnatan)

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1940 at Orchard Point, a 17-acre estate on Long Island that had groves, orchards, and a secluded studio where he could work in peace. There, very near the East and

West Egg of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Rachmaninoff set to work on what would be his final complete work, a set of dances for orchestra. By August, he had the score complete in a version for two pianos, and—because he regarded this as a dance score—he consulted with choreographer Mikhail Fokine, a neighbor that summer. Rachmaninoff tentatively titled the piece *Fantastic Dances* and gave its three movements names—*Noon*, *Twilight*, and *Midnight*—that might suggest a possible scenario. Fokine liked the music when Rachmaninoff played it for him, and they began to look ahead to a ballet production, but Fokine’s death shortly thereafter ended any thought of that. Even by the end of the summer, though, Rachmaninoff appears to have rethought the character of this music. By the time he completed the orchestration on October 29, he had changed its name to *Symphonic Dances* and dropped the descriptive movement titles, and when Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra gave the premiere on January 3, 1941, it was as a purely orchestral composition. Rachmaninoff himself seemed surprised by what he had created, and when friends congratulated him on the energy of this music, he said, “I don’t know how it happened—it must have been my last spark.” Two years later he was dead.

The orchestral version of the *Symphonic Dances* has become one of the most popular of Rachmaninoff’s late works. This concert, however, offers the unique opportunity to hear this music in a version for solo piano. Rachmaninoff’s own version for two pianos has become well-known, but it appears that Rachmaninoff also made a version for solo piano. On December 21, 1940, two weeks before the orchestral premiere, Rachmaninoff played this for Ormandy as a way of helping the conductor prepare for that premiere, and a recording of that session became the inspiration for Inon Barnatan’s own arrangement of the *Symphonic Dances* (the manuscript of Rachmaninoff’s arrangement has not survived). Barnatan has discussed his intentions in making his arrangement for solo piano:

“I started making my arrangement shortly after we went into lockdown. It has been an arrangement I had wanted to do for a long time, and it was further spurred on by a recording I heard of Rachmaninoff. It is a private recording that only came out a few years ago, and in it he plays through almost the entire piece on one piano for Ormandy. It’s an extraordinary document of his playing, and it confirmed my suspicion

that it would sound good on one piano. The two-piano version is written in a way that is quite different from his two-piano suites, and much of it is handed from one piano to the other, so some of it was straightforward, but there are many spots where I had to find creative solutions. I heard a saying that translations are like lovers, they are either faithful or beautiful, but I believe in this arrangement that nothing is really lost, and I love the freedom that being able to play it on one piano gives me.”

The *Symphonic Dances* are remarkable for Rachmaninoff’s subtle compositional method. Rather than relying on the Big Tune, he evolves this music from the most economical of materials—rhythmic fragments, bits of theme, simple patterns—which are then built up into powerful movements that almost overflow with rhythmic energy. Rachmaninoff may have been 67 and in declining strength in 1940, but that summer he wrote with the hand of a master.

As he finished each of his symphonies, Joseph Haydn would write *Laus Deo*—“Praise God”—at the end of the manuscript. At the end of the manuscript of *Symphonic Dances*, Rachmaninoff—perhaps aware that this would be his last work—wrote (in Russian) the simple phrase: “I thank Thee, Lord.”

—Program Notes by Eric Bromberger