

SYRACUSE FRIENDS *of* CHAMBER MUSIC

Wosner-Vonsattel Piano Duo

Shai Wosner
Gilles Vonsattel
March 15, 2025

We thank FLX TAX for its generous sponsorship of this concert

Sonata for two pianos in D major, K448 (1781)

Allegro con spirito
Andante
Allegro molto

W. A. Mozart
(1756-1791)

Barbarina's Cavatina from *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786)

arr. Shai Wosner for piano four hands

W. A. Mozart
(1756-1791)

Fantasy in F minor for piano four hands, D. 940 (1828)

Allegro molto moderato
Largo
Allegro vivace
Tempo I: Allegro molto moderato

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

Sixteen Waltzes, op.39, for piano four hands (1865)

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

***La Valse*, for two pianos (1919-20)**

Maurice Ravel
(1875-1937)

Concert Notes...

Mozart wrote his **D major sonata for two pianos** when he was 25 for Josepha von Auernhammer, a young lady apparently very interested in him. The relationship with Josepha was not destined to endure, but the piece certainly has done so.

To begin the work, the two pianists announce themselves in assertive octaves, followed by a theme of light upward scales that bounces back and forth between them, sometimes overlapping. The movement is like a high spirited, sparkling game of tag. The much slower, lyrical *Andante* follows. Listen for overlapping phrases handed back and forth between the pianos here too, but with a more measured and serene effect. The effervescent and exhilarating *Allegro molto* brings the work to a rousing finish.

Mozart wrote *The Marriage of Figaro* after he settled in Vienna and married Constanze. The couple lived in poverty while Mozart dealt with many obstacles in his professional life. The opera's success was a bright spot during this difficult period. The tale of love, betrayal, and forgiveness won the heart of audiences in Vienna and Prague. So many encores were called for in Vienna that the emperor proclaimed after three performances that only numbers sung by a single person could be repeated.

Tonight we hear Barbarina's cavatina, from Act IV of the opera. A cavatina is a short, simple melody that expresses the emotions of a character. In "L'ho perduta me meschina" Barbarina tearfully searches for a vital but missing pin. Shai Wosner arranged the work for piano four hands.

Schubert lived at a time when classical music was becoming more widely available to the middle class. Some families could afford to buy a piano, and it became fashionable for people to learn to play. When two pianists gathered, they wanted to play together. Also, piano teachers wanted to be able to play duets with their students. So music for piano four hands became popular. Producing such works became a major source of income for young Schubert. Perhaps the most beloved of these is tonight's **Fantasy in F minor**, composed in Vienna in early 1828, a few months before his untimely death.

The four movements of the Fantasy are played without pause. Pay attention to the initial melody in the opening *Allegro*—it will reappear later. A second theme is more somber—this one will recur in the final fugue. The *Largo* section opens with a stormy, tense fortissimo subject. A lyrical melody gives brief respite, but the jagged first theme returns. The mood changes abruptly as the cheerful and lively *Scherzo* begins. Its middle section, a delicate trio, surprises us with a key change to D major. The return to the first *Scherzo* subject serves as a bridge to the work's final movement. The first theme from the initial movement returns, moving from minor to major. Then we hear a magnificent fugue, based on that movement's second subject. The opening theme echoes again briefly, chords evoke the second theme, and the work comes to a somber close.

By 1866, music for piano that could be played at home was even more popular than it had been in Schubert's time. **Brahms's** publisher certainly understood this—he requested a version of the **Sixteen Opus 39 Waltzes**, a piece originally written for piano four hands, for solo piano. Brahms ended up arranging both a full solo version and a simplified one for less expert pianists. All three versions sold well at the time and remain popular to this day. He also arranged five of the waltzes for two pianos; these were published posthumously.

Enjoy the variety of moods elicited by these sixteen brief but affecting pieces. In an 1866 review of the work in the august and somewhat stuffy *Leipziger allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, the writer recommended the work "most warmly to all friends of music. Even in this form, our admirable young master's excellent inventive talent is so conspicuous that one completely forgets the lowly rank of the genre. The various waltzes are of various characters, sometimes showy and fervid, sometimes softly swaying, sometimes tender, sometimes wild like gypsy music—but always original and, in spite of the brevity of the form, rising up stirringly and somehow momentarily." Waltz no. 15 will probably sound familiar to you—I'm pretty sure I've even heard it played on a music box.

By 1906, **Ravel** was telling friends that he wanted to write something in tribute to Johann Strauss, Jr., the "waltz king." He envisioned "a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which is mingled in my mind the idea of the fantastic whirl of destiny." But thirteen years later, when he wrote **La Valse**, Europe had suffered through the first world war. Glittering Vienna had fallen on harder times.

Nonetheless, this is what Ravel wrote in the preface to the published score of *La Valse*: “*Through breaks in the swirling crowds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: one makes out an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd. The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the fortissimo. An Imperial Court, about 1855.*” Many listeners heard something in addition: underlying menace and darkness, a statement about the decay and destruction of previous glory. However, Ravel denied this interpretation.

Ravel wrote *La Valse* as a ballet, commissioned by Serge Diaghilev, founder of the Ballets Russes. He created three different versions of the piece at once—one for full orchestra, one for two pianos, and one for solo piano. The first performance was of the two-piano version (Ravel was one of the performers), and Serge Diaghilev was in the audience. Unfortunately, he did not like the work. That ended the relationship between the two men. Fortunately, it did not deter Ravel from publishing the piece, nor did it prevent audiences from loving it.

La Valse begins mistily, with fragments of melody appearing and fading, gradually building into the main theme. The dance swells into a whirling kaleidoscope of motion that escalates into something restless and unstable, then explodes into a darkly ecstatic conclusion.

--Notes by Beth Oddy

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Pianist **Shai Wosner** has attracted international recognition for his exceptional artistry, musical integrity, and creative insight. His performances of a broad range of repertoire—from Beethoven and Schubert to Ligeti and the music of today—reflect a degree of virtuosity and intellectual curiosity that has made him a favorite among audiences and critics, who note his “keen musical mind and deep musical soul” (NPR’s *All Things Considered*).

Born in Israel, Wosner enjoyed a broad musical education from a very early age, studying piano with Opher Brayer and Emanuel Krasovsky, as well as composition, theory, and improvisation with André Hajdu. He later studied with Emanuel Ax at The Juilliard School, where Wosner is also now on the piano faculty. He is a recipient of Lincoln Center’s Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, and a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award. For more information on Wosner go to shaiwosner.com.

A “wanderer between worlds” (Lucerne Festival), “immensely talented” and “quietly powerful pianist” (*New York Times*), Swiss-born American **Gilles Vonsattel** is an artist of extraordinary versatility and originality. Recipient of an Avery Fisher Career Grant, laureate of the Honens, Cleveland, and Dublin competitions, and winner of the Naumburg and Geneva competitions as well as the 2016 Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award, he has appeared with the Boston Symphony, Tanglewood, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, Gothenburg Symphony, San Francisco Symphony, and Detroit Symphony Orchestra, while performing recitals and chamber music at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Ravinia, Tokyo’s Musashino Hall, Wigmore Hall, Bravo! Vail, Music@Menlo, the Gilmore festival, the Lucerne festival, and the Munich Gasteig.

Mr. Vonsattel received his bachelor’s degree in political science and economics from Columbia University and his master’s degree from The Juilliard School, where he studied with Jerome Lowenthal. He is Professor of Piano at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Gilles Vonsattel is a Steinway Artist. For more information on Vonsattel, go to gilesvonsattel.com.