

Noble Simplicity and Calm Grandeur

A Piano Recital by Nicholas Williams



The timeless elegance of music's great classical masters, Bach, Handel, Beethoven and more, brought to life on an original 1884 Bechstein piano.

Christ Church Claremont Friday 10 June 7:30pm



PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

Prelude and Fugue in C major
from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, vol. 1

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Sonata in C minor, Op. 13
I. Grave—Allegro di molto e con brio
II. Adagio cantabile
III. Rondo: Allegro

George Frederick Handel
(1685-1759)

Keyboard Suite in G minor
Overture—Andante—Allegro—
Sarabande—Gigue—Passacaglia

Franz Liszt
(1811-1886)

Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel's *Almira*

- intermission -

Franz Liszt

Soirées de Vienne No.6

John Field
(1782-1837)

Nocturne in A major

Muzio Clementi
(1752-1832)

Sonata in B minor, Op.40 No.2
I. Molto adagio e sostenuto—
Allegro con fuoco e con espressione
II. Largo, mesto e patetico—Allegro—Presto

Joachim Raff
(1822-1882)

La Fileuse, Op.157 No.2

Edvard Grieg
(1843-1907)

Wedding Day at Troldhaugen, Op.65 No.6
An den Frühling, Op.43 No.6

Franz Liszt

Hungarian Rhapsody No.11



BIOGRAPHY

Nicholas Williams is a pianist and writer based in Perth, Western Australia. He is passionate about the music, pianos and performance styles of the nineteenth century. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, researching the performing traditions associated with Franz Liszt.

In June 2022, Nicholas will travel to Bern, Switzerland, to attend the “Global Piano Roll Meeting” at the Hochschule für Kunst Bern—an international conference of performers and researchers interested in reproducing piano rolls—where he will be performing as part of a researcher showcase concert. He will then go on to visit historical piano collections in various cities around Europe.

ABOUT TODAY'S CONCERT

“Noble Simplicity and Calm Grandeur”

According to the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), there were two elements that came to epitomise Classical Greek sculpture: a “noble simplicity” and a “calm grandeur.” For Winckelmann, the greatest Greek sculpture, of plain white marble, depicted mythological heroes in the throes of great struggle. While taut muscles or violent gestures may suggest the torment of a struggling figure, their faces show their great strength, through the very simplicity and calmness of expression.

As Winckelmann wrote: “Just as the depths of the sea always remain calm however much the surface may rage, so does the expression of the figures of the Greeks reveal a great and composed soul even in the midst of passion.” It is this contrast, it seems, between power and tenderness, that lends these sculptures their timeless beauty and sense of drama.

In music, similarly, these elements often play against one another. Composers use the contrast between grandeur and simplicity very frequently to create their most emotive and dramatic moments. Liszt was the master of stirring up furious tempests of sound, grand crescendi that lead inexorably towards, not a climax, but a point of repose, of utter simplicity—just when we expect the majesty of trumpets or the thunderstorms of Zeus, we get a single voice, alone in the wilderness, often with a pleading kind of expression. When pulled off effectively, it is an exceedingly dramatic process, that works through deliberately contrasting grandeur with simplicity.

Today's program will explore such contrasts, presenting works that, to me, suggest notions of simplicity and grandeur.

J.S. Bach: Prelude and Fugue in C major (1722)

The famous C Major Prelude from the first volume of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* perfectly expresses tenderness and innocence. Little more than a series of chords in a gentle harp-like pattern, Bach proves that simplicity and beauty are close cousins. It contrasts well with the Fugue that follows it, which is complex and intricate—with many chromatic twists and turns, hinting at a turgid undercurrent, suggesting but never fully revealing a sense of grandeur. Like many of Bach's Fugues, the piece becomes progressively intense—but here it never quite resolves, and he leaves us in an open question.

L.v. Beethoven: Piano Sonata in C minor, Op.13 (1798)

One of Beethoven's great masterworks, this well-known Sonata was given a title by its first publisher: "Grande sonate Pathétique." The term "Pathétique" was intended to signify Pathos, meaning "with great feeling." If any of Beethoven's works might be said to portray grandeur, it would almost certainly be this Sonata, with its famous Introduction: that bold evocation of what in the composer's day was known as the *Stile antico*, the antique style. But it is merely an impression, for he only hints at the distinctive rhythm of the French Overture, a grand Baroque form—when the Allegro starts, it is music of a terrifying tempest, of dark storm-clouds, thunder, lightning and howling winds. The contrast between the sublime grandeur of the first movement, and the beautiful simplicity of the second, to me, expresses the dramatic possibilities of Winckelmann's idea like few other works. It heightens the effect of both movements, and gives an extra dimension to the Sonata as a whole.

The Clementi sonata that features in the second half of today's program offers an interesting comparison. Clementi easily succeeds Beethoven in building up a roaring tempest—but he lacks the deft touch of simplicity.

G.F. Handel: Keyboard Suite in G minor (1720)

Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata is famous for its evocation of the French Overture. Handel, in this comparatively lesser-known keyboard suite, goes further—reproducing a French Overture in all its constituent details, just as one would have heard it in a French opera of the period. In fact, the Overture that makes up the first number of this Suite in G minor by Handel, was actually reused by the composer as the opening to his 1734 opera *Oreste*. It is majestic, grand and bold.

The traditional French Overture form, as used by Handel here, has three main sections: slow, fast, slow. The slow sections traditionally feature the distinctive rhythmic figure that was referenced by Beethoven—the fast section is usually in a fleeting Fugal style. In an authentic setting, like Handel's, one realises why Beethoven's generation might have seen the French Overture as an "antique" style—it is extremely ornate, replete with decorations and embellishments. With gilt and pomp, it is the very definition of old-fashioned grandeur. The remainder of Handel's suite is comprised of a series of dances—Andante, Allegro, Sarabande, Gigue and Passacaglia.

F. Liszt: Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel's *Almira* (1879)

Much like Beethoven, Liszt in this work makes reference to "ancient" Baroque styles. It was written in 1879 for Liszt's student Walter Bache (1842-1888), who asked Liszt for a new piece to premiere at a recital for the Handel Festival in London. The work takes the form of a set of variations on the Sarabande (in G minor) from Handel's first opera, *Almira*. A feeling of noble grandeur permeates the work, which seems to ascend ever higher with each successive variation—before, in true Lisztian fashion, trailing off into an open-ended silence. Then emerges a mighty Chaconne which develops into a fantastic climax—as the Sarabande theme returns in the brilliant splendour of G major.

F. Liszt: *Soirées de Vienne* No.6 (1852)

When Liszt visited the city of Vienna in 1838, to perform a series of charity concerts, the trip marked the beginning of one of the compositional projects for which he still remains famous—his so-called “transcriptions” of the songs of Schubert. While they are known as transcriptions, a term implying a certain kind of literalism, the Schubert-Liszt songs would more accurately be termed “concert arrangements” for Liszt liberally reworks Schubert’s meagre vocal lines and piano accompaniment into fully-fledged piano pieces. Liszt’s nine “waltz-caprices” published under the collective title *Soirées de Vienne*, belong in the same category: these are concert arrangements of waltzes by Schubert. Schubert’s originals are hundreds in number, all very short and simple, suitable for playing at home among friends. Liszt freely selects from the collection and weaves them together with his own fabulously rich and tasteful ornamentation—seeming to evoke, as per the title, a glittering Viennese *soirée* (evening party). Also worth noting is that in a letter of 1875, Liszt rather curiously refers to his *Soirées de Vienne* as “*Wiener Backhendl*”—a kind of fried chicken popular in Vienna.



J. Field: Nocturne in A major (c.1817)

Irish-born John Field (1782-1837) is famous today for one thing: he was the inventor of the “Nocturne”. The genre is strongly associated with Chopin, whose Nocturnes remain wildly popular, while Field’s are mostly forgotten.

Though Field is now relegated to being Chopin’s predecessor—in his day he was among the most famous pianists in the world. Liszt wrote about how for himself, a generation later, Field’s incredible delicacy and pure simplicity was a true beacon of promise, a shining example of what musical romanticism might mean.

It is exceedingly intimate music—playing it, one realises it is wholly unsuited to public performance, better heard and felt by candlelight in one’s own drawing room.

M. Clementi: Piano Sonata in B minor, Op.40 No.2 (1802)

Muzio Clementi (1752-1832), much like his student John Field, is a figure who was better known in his day than ours. In his youth, he was one of the few keyboard players who could rival Mozart in terms of virtuosity—if the accounts of their famous “keyboard duel” of 1781 are to be believed, Clementi was perhaps the better technician. Mozart famously referred to him as “a mere Mechanicus,” implying Clementi lacked taste and sensitivity... One might read a touch of envy in Mozart’s assessment.

Clementi was the kind of man who found tremendous success through his own determination and hard work. In London, he became one of the most influential figures in the musical world, and not just as a pianist and composer.

In 1798, he took over a piano manufacturing company, which soon built high-quality and innovative new instruments that were very well-respected. Not long after, he founded a publishing company, printing music, musical books and a regular music journal. Through his various enterprises, Clementi did much to establish the piano as a cultural phenomenon.

As a composer, he was a gifted innovator who kept abreast with the latest trends and continued to push musical and technical boundaries throughout his long life.

Clementi's Sonata in B minor of 1802 is a startlingly original work. It is dark, stormy and brooding. Both of its two movements present with an imposing grandeur, at once ominous and terrifying. It might be compared with Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata (Op.31 No.2), which was composed around the same time (c.1802). Both works evoke raging tempests, Clementi's arguably more exciting—the soft pedal effects in the first movement are particularly dramatic, and similar to those used by Beethoven. The second movement is even more unusual, with many languid, grotesque twists and tempo changes. It hardly lets up in intensity—difficult for listener and pianist alike. With its many whirling vortexes, this movement often reminds me of the painting *Snow Storm* (1843) by J.M.W. Turner (below), who did not decry the difficulty of his work, writing: "I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like."



J. Raff: *La Fileuse* (1870)

Joachim Raff (1822-1882) is another figure almost entirely forgotten. Whereas Field and Clementi have managed to cling on at the fringes of the musical canon, few musicians today have ever even heard of Raff. In the middle-late nineteenth century, however, Raff was one of the most highly respected composers of operas, symphonies and piano music—often associated with the “New German School” of Liszt and Wagner.

Although it is hardly representative of his output, *La Fileuse* is one of the few Raff compositions that remained famous after his death. It was taken up by a number of prominent concert pianists in the later nineteenth century, perhaps most famously by Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933), who frequently included it on concert programs. Pachmann lived long enough to make recordings—his record of this piece exhibits an inimitable old-world charm and simplicity, that inspired me to add it to my own repertoire.

E. Grieg: Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen (1897)

An den Frühling (1886)

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) is one composer who remains well-loved. Most famous, perhaps, for the music he wrote for Henrik Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt* (1875); the two pieces chosen today are taken from Grieg’s collection of piano miniatures, the *Lyric Pieces*. These pieces are full of character, charm and spirit. “Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen” was written as an anniversary gift for Grieg’s wife—Trolldhaugen was the name of their beautiful country home in Norway. This is another work that, to me, encapsulates “noble simplicity and calm grandeur”: the contrast between the joyous march, building a fantastic sense of anticipation—which stops suddenly, revealing a simple melody, sentimental and nostalgic. The wistful melody of *An den Frühling* carries a similar sense of expectancy, bordering on anxiety—which develops into a song of passion.



F. Liszt: Hungarian Rhapsody No.11 (1853)

In 1838, Hungary was devastated by a treacherous flood, leaving thousands of people homeless. Hungarian-born Liszt was roused with great feelings of patriotism. He not long after became reacquainted with the wild and fantastic music of the Romani people, which he had not heard since his childhood. This led to the creation of the collection of fifteen *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, published in 1853.

Though today they are chiefly thought of as mere show-pieces, Liszt in fact had grand artistic intentions behind these works. The *Hungarian Rhapsodies* were meant as a kind of epic poem, akin to Homer's *Odyssey*, told not through words but through music. Liszt sought to represent the national identity of the Roma, dedicating his work to the "pantheon of world-literature," wishing to make these musical poems accessible to people of all nations and languages.

In 2020, I completed my Master's thesis on Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, studying Liszt's writings and the recordings of his pupils in order to understand how Liszt might have expected these pieces to be played. Since then, I have been experimenting with bringing these ideas to life in my own playing. I will be playing this piece on my trip too, explaining how my research has influenced my own performances.

ABOUT THE PIANO

The instrument I'm playing today is an original C. Bechstein grand piano built in 1884. In the later nineteenth century, the pianos of Bechstein were among the most highly-regarded, particularly as concert instruments. Bechsteins featured prominently upon the stage of many of the world's concert halls.

An instrument very similar to this one still exists today in Liszt's house in Weimar, Germany. That instrument was gifted to him in the late 1870s—in precisely the period when he was writing his “Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel's Almira,” which is the centre-piece of today's concert.

FUNDRAISER

Today's concert is a fundraiser for the study trip I am undertaking in June-July 2022. I will be attending the “Global Piano Roll Meeting” at the Hochschule für Kunst in Bern, Switzerland, in order to meet fellow researchers and perform as part of a performer-researcher showcase concert.

Following this, I will be visiting, together with my partner Eva, historical keyboard collections in Basel, Paris, Ghent, Brussels, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Vienna. The purpose of this is to gain experience and understanding about historical pianos and keyboard instruments.

The funds raised from today's concert will go directly towards accomodation and other travel expenses. If you would like to make a small donation, there will be donation box at the ticket desk.

If you would like to keep updated about the progress of the trip, or my future musical activities, please make sure to join my mailing list and follow my social media pages. See the back page of this booklet for details.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you to Tim for all you have done to help and support Eva and myself over the past few months, and helping to make our trip and today's concert possible.

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Thank you most of all to Eva, my pillar of support, of boundless love and shining inspiration. I could not have done this without you!

If you would like to keep up to date with my musical activities,
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