

Christian Blackshaw at the Pinnacle of Romanticism

WEDNESDAY

8

JULY
8:00 P.M.

ÉGLISE DE
SAINT-ALPHONSE-
RODRIGUEZ

PROGRAM

› **PIOTR ILITCH
TCHAIKOVSKI** (1840-1893)
THE SEASONS, OP. 37A – 40'

Presented by

 Desjardins

INTERMISSION – 20'

› **FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN** (1810-1849)
FOUR MAZURKAS, OP. 24 – 11'

› **FRANZ SCHUBERT** (1797-1828)
IMPROMPTUS, D. 899 – 28'

ARTIST

Christian Blackshaw, piano

PROGRAM NOTE

PIOTR ILITCH TCHAIKOVSKI (1840-1893)

THE SEASONS, OP. 37A (1875-1876)

Tchaikovsky succeeded in every genre — symphonic, concertante, ballet, opera, string quartet, song — but also in his works for solo piano, of which *The Seasons* forms the most important collection. A St. Petersburg monthly had commissioned from him a piano piece for each month of the year 1876. Tchaikovsky submitted his new scores to his occasional publisher, associating each piece with a mood characteristic of its month. Nos. 1 and 12 — January: *By the Fireside* and December: *Christmas* — are the only ones written for a domestic setting, the other ten pieces clearly conceived to evoke outdoor activities (*Song of the Lark* [3], *Harvest* [8], *The Hunt* [9], and so on). *The Seasons* is a thoroughgoing Romantic collection, possessing all the hallmarks of the style: writing by turns tender and impassioned, vivid evocation of situations and feelings, freedom of construction, and — of course — expressive melodies from the hand of one of the great masters of the art. The Schumannian influence is palpable in *By the Fireside* [1] and *Song of the Lark* [3]. Elsewhere one finds a genuine exuberance: scenes of popular life in *Carnival* [2], fanfares and gallops in *The Hunt* [9], sturdiness and sleigh bells in *Troika* [11]. And then Tchaikovsky's natural bent for lyrical inwardness works wonders in the *Barcarolle* [6] and the *Autumn Song* [10]. His pen dazzles throughout with its generosity, its fluidity, its capacity to explore everything from intimacy to fever!

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

FOUR MAZURKAS, OP. 24 (1835-1836)

Chopin's piano output — immensely rich, expressive, and varied — rests on the principle of an analogy between music and language, between vocal line and form. Chopin is thus the true heir to the *bel canto* of Bellini, for he never wrote an opera and few vocal works. He composed fifty-seven mazurkas — a traditional Polish dance in triple time, with the accent displaced onto the weak beat and a singing character everywhere present. Each of the mazurkas is chiselled like a precious stone. The Op. 24 set comprises four. The first, in G minor, is by turns melancholy and rhythmic, and explores the contours of *rubato* — that singular practice of making the tempo fluctuate, sometimes infinitesimally, sometimes markedly, to achieve an expressive effect and an ambiguity now regarded as characteristic of Chopin himself. The second, in C major, sets a steady bass line against a fluid, weightless melody; a central episode in D-flat has the two hands alternate playfully. The third, in A-flat major, is animated and full of contrasts. The fourth, in B-flat minor, is striking in its innovations. The chromatic, syncopated introduction already sets the tone of a veiled, inward, subtle atmosphere. Fever then arrives in dotted motifs... before, in the central section, Chopin sought to create the illusion of a mixed choir, asking that the keyboard be brushed delicately. The coda is splendid in its ever more pronounced slackening, to the very edge of silence...

PROGRAM NOTE

(Suite)

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

FOUR IMPROMPTUS, D. 899 (1827)

Schubert composed his Impromptus in 1827, just after Winterreise (D. 911), that catalogue of every sorrow. Writing the Impromptus was, for him, something of a release. He had by then spent fifteen years composing his six hundred lieder, and no one had a surer command of the short form. The Impromptus may be thought of as songs without words, for the bass line in the left hand supports the melodic thread of the right — or, at times, the reverse. They sing of drama, of freedom, of open air, with remarkable Romantic accents. The first Impromptu, in C minor, opens on a sombre fortissimo chord... A melancholy theme follows, and the atmosphere thickens into the rhythm of a funeral march... Then come long pedal points, rising quavers, tragic cries of appeal — we are in the fullness of Romanticism! The second Impromptu evokes the flow of water, fleeting time, the freedom of a lover's feelings. All peace is decidedly fugitive, as the anguished central episode tells us. The third is a nocturnal hymn, punctuated by rippling figures and sustained by a warm melody — an eternal page that enchants the heart! The fourth, in A-flat major, is singing, then light, and at last almost ceaselessly breathless. The bass grows radiant, in the register of the human voice, beneath cascading arpeggios. A central section expresses desolation and a deep anguish — we are close here to Chopin... Then the return to A-flat brings a serene conclusion, though still within the same nostalgia.

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