

5 September  
City Recital Hall

# YEOL EUM SON IN RECITAL



Presenting Partner

THEME  
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# WELCOME

This year we celebrate two major anniversaries for 37 years of Theme & Variations Piano Services provides quality piano services to Sydney and beyond, and we also celebrate 20 years of partnership with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Throughout the many years we have worked with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra providing our expertise and knowledge from working across Australian's concert stages. It's an honour to have prepared the magnificent Steinway Concert Grand you will hear in tonight's recital by the brilliant South Korean pianist Yeol Eum Son, renowned for her fascinating and meticulously structured programs.

We are extremely proud to present International Pianists in Recital for 2022. This three-concert series that boasts a variety of composers and illustrates each pianist's individual style and interpretation of these classical masterpieces. We're thrilled that the pianos being used are in themselves masterpieces of craft and ingenuity and are delighted that their acoustic beauty will support performances of such brilliance.

Our Willoughby showroom boasts a beautiful range of upright and grand pianos to suit all means and abilities. We have a team of experienced technicians who are dedicated to bringing out the best in every piano – great and small – across our musical community. Our long history with Steinway & Sons has allowed us to work with many notable pianists whose photographs grace our showroom's wall of fame. We invite our Sydney Symphony friends to visit us.

This year's recitals will be truly unforgettable, and we hope you will be thrilled by the pianistic brilliance in this year's program. We look forward to sharing this experience with you and congratulate the Sydney Symphony Orchestra once again for bringing these fine, inspirational artists to our city.



**Ara Vartoukian OAM**

Director, Theme & Variations Piano Services

# YEOL EUM SON IN RECITAL

## VARIATIONS

**JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)**

Andante and Variations in F minor, Hob XVII:6

**PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)**

Theme and Variations in F, Op.18 No.6

**ARVO PÄRT (born 1935)**

*Variations for the Healing of Arinushka*

**CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN (1813–1888)**

*Le festin d'Ésope*, Op.39 No.12

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**CÉSAR FRANCK (1822–1890)**

Prelude, Fugue and Variation in B minor Op.18

**SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)**

Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op.42

**NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN (1937–2020)**

Variations, Op.41

Pre-concert talk by  
Peter Clark in the  
Function Room on  
Level 1 at 6.15pm.

**ESTIMATED DURATIONS**

15 minutes, 12 minutes,  
4 minutes, 10 minutes,  
interval 20 minutes,  
10 minutes, 19 minutes,  
7 minutes

The concert will conclude  
at approximately 8.45pm.

**COVER IMAGE**

Yeol Eum Son  
Photo by Woongchul An

*Yeol Eum Son's performances with Sydney Symphony Orchestra  
have been generously supported by The Berg Family Foundation.*

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# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **YEOL EUM SON** piano

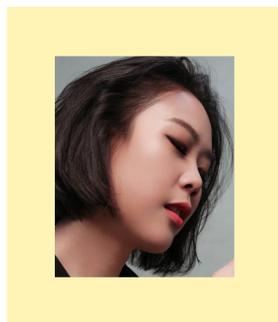
Multi-award-winning South Korean pianist Yeol Eum Son is famed for her power, her poetry and her remarkably perceptive playing. Her graceful and timeless interpretations, crystalline touch and versatile, thrilling performances have caught the attention of audiences worldwide. She is highly regarded as a brilliant virtuoso whose playing has a rare balance between enormous kinetic energy and substantial gravity. Yeol Eum performs all over the world as a recitalist and soloist with orchestras. An avid chamber musician, in 2018 Yeol Eum was appointed Artistic Director of Music in PyeongChang festival, responsible for programming both summer and winter editions at the Olympic site in PyeongChang.

Praised for her eclectic and rich repertoire, ranging from Bach, Mozart, early German and Russian Romantic to Gershwin, Szymanowski, Ligeti and Salonen, Yeol Eum has collaborated with major ensembles and festivals worldwide.

In the 22/23 season, Yeol Eum is Artist in Residence with the Residentie Orchestra in the Hague, and will debut with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony, NDR Radiophilharmonie Hanover, Orquesta Sinfónica del Principado de Asturias and Musikkollegium Winterthur. Beyond Europe, she will debut with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra as well as the Melbourne, Tasmanian and Detroit Symphony Orchestras and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Widely recognised for her interpretation of Mozart's Piano Concerti, Yeol Eum released a highly acclaimed album on Onyx featuring Mozart's Piano Concerto No.21 with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields under the late Sir Neville Marriner, for whom it was his very last recording.

Yeol Eum is Honorary Ambassador of the Seoul Arts Center and her home city of Wonju. A double Second Prize winner of the Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition (2011) and the 13th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition (2009), she was a student of Arie Vardi at the Hochschule für Musik Theater und Medien Hannover, Germany. She holds a degree from the Korean National University of Arts.



Yeol Eum Son,  
photo by Woongchul An

*Yeol Eum Son's performances with Sydney Symphony Orchestra have been generously supported by The Berg Family Foundation.*

# MEET YEOL EUM SON

The acclaimed South Korean pianist discusses when she realised she could be a concert pianist, the fascination of Variations, and her Sydney debut with the Orchestra.

*Written by Hugh Robertson*

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Acclaimed South Korean pianist Yeol Eum Son makes her long-awaited Sydney debut this month, performing Mozart's Piano Concerto No.20 with the Sydney Symphony's former Chief Conductor Edo de Waart, as well as a solo recital at City Recital Hall.

Son first came to international attention in 2004, when she performed Liszt's Piano Concerto No.1 with conductor Lorin Maazel and the New York Philharmonic on their tour of Asia, when she was just 18. Now 36, Son has won a slew of awards at major piano competitions, has an extensive and critically-acclaimed discography, and is greatly in demand in concert halls around the world.

Son began playing the piano at three-and-a-half, and her talent was obvious almost immediately. By 12 she was making her recital debut, by 16 she enrolled in Korea National University of Arts, and by 18 she had recorded her first album of Chopin's Op.10 and Op. 25 Études for Universal Music.

But her meteoric rise wasn't a surprise to anyone, least of all Son herself, who had realised very early on that she wanted to be a professional pianist.

"I really liked it from the beginning," says Son from her home in South Korea, in a rare break from her hectic touring schedule. "The best part was being on stage – I loved to be on stage! I was a very shy kid, but on stage I felt much more comfortable – and I think that was the part that I loved the most."

"Also I loved learning new pieces, and learning new repertoire. Both good things for a concert pianist to enjoy!"

Despite all her years of performing, Son can't quite describe what it is like to be on stage, performing with an orchestra – there remains something ineffable about the experience, something wonderful she can't put into words.



Photo by Jaehyong Park

# MEET YEOL EUM SON

“On one hand you are completely carried away, and you don’t necessarily think. But it’s a unique experience because you are an actor, but also a director. You have to combine those two sides, which is not normal,” she says with a laugh. “And the balance between the two is sometimes very tricky – you have to be outside of yourself, and above yourself, but also totally in the moment with the music.”

“You have to feel everything, but you also have to think very hard about what you are doing. It’s very hard to explain what’s going on! But I think it is magical – it’s not just about one thing, it is about many things at the same time. There are a lot of things going on!”

For tonight’s concert, presented as part of our International Pianists in Recital series at City Recital Hall, Son has crafted a fascinating program based on the form of variations, whereby a composer sets out their central material, or theme, and then offers multiple repeats of that theme, each time altering something about it –melody, rhythm, harmonies, and more.

Son’s program features variations by a diverse range of composers, beginning with Haydn and going all the way through to Rachmaninov, Nikolai Kapustin and Arvo Pärt.

“Variations, for me, is a fascinating form,” says Son. “And in the case of the piano, variations can represent a lot of different sides to the piano – the effects, the sound, and everything that a piano can bring. So I hope that will be fun for audiences to experience how variations have varied over 250 years!”

Remarkably, despite growing up in the same hemisphere, Son’s performances with the Sydney Symphony in September are part of her first tour to Australia – and she is planning on making the most of her time here.

“I have heard so many good things about Australia – the people, the weather, the food, everything. And I was supposed to be there two years ago, but everything was cancelled, and I was worried it would never happen. But thankfully everything came back, and I am really very grateful that it did.”

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# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Most of what we now call the classical forms – sonata design, menuet and trio, rondo – require closure that is provided by a restatement of the original material. Variations, by contrast, are infinitely extensible as long as the composer’s invention and technique holds out. ‘Fate,’ writes the great Beethoven scholar Maynard Solomon, ‘cannot knock on the door in variation form’. This seemingly limitless freedom derives in part from the fact that many composers, including Beethoven, often improvised their variation sets in performance like jazz musicians – often using a currently popular theme – and wrote them down afterwards.

Of course many instance variation sets were less inspired than, say, Beethoven’s ‘Diabelli’ Variations. British music historian Charles Burney wrote at the time of the ‘dull and unmeaning variations of old and new tunes’ that prevailed in the mid- to late 18th century, and praised **Joseph Haydn** for ‘the most ingenious, pleasing and heartfelt’ examples of how variations could be written. Haydn, moreover, pioneered the use of the technique within larger movements, and was probably the first to construct symphonic slow movements this way.

Haydn’s career coincided with enormous advances in the technology of instrument building. His early keyboard works are frequently ‘for harpsichord of fortepiano’, the latter having little of the textural and dynamic variety of later instruments. In fact, Charles Rosen argues that in Haydn’s case ‘the most congenial instruments for many works are not the ones for which they were written but those that were built twenty years later in response to the music’. Certainly the keyboard works of Haydn’s late period require instruments that can provide almost orchestral degrees of difference in colour, tone and volume.

After the death of his long-time employer, Prince Nicolaus Esterházy, in 1790, Haydn ceased being a liveried servant in rural Hungary only to discover that he was world famous, and made two highly successful (and profitable) trips to London where he was accorded rock-star status. Between these trips he composed a number of piano works, including the F minor Andante and Variations



Joseph Haydn

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

in 1793. There is no evidence that Haydn himself played them himself, and unlike Beethoven, he was not known as a recitalist and improviser.

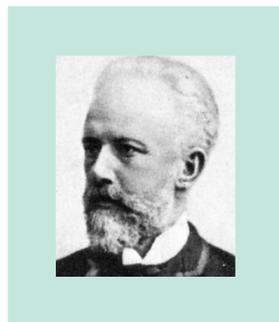
Despite describing it as ‘un piccolo divertimento’ Haydn’s piece is one of rigorous and sophisticated form. An example of ‘double’ or ‘alternating’ variations, it has two themes, one minor and one major, but where Haydn breaks the mould is in concluding the piece with the expected glittering major key coda (a section not strictly varying the theme, but reaffirming its key).

The minor theme is characterised by pervasive dotted rhythms; the contrasting second theme is in F major, harmonised in thirds for extra richness and punctuated by right-hand flourishes. The first minor variation is full of syncopated rhythms, while the first major one uses trills to create the sense of suspended animation that Beethoven also cultivated in his last works. The second variations of both themes offer rippling right-hand flourishes. The unexpected return to the minor key, and the theme’s further elaboration in hammered chords, sudden retreats into soft dynamics, and a passage of highly chromatic chords, makes the music’s dissipation into quiet, short motifs especially dramatic.

**Tchaikovsky** consistently produced solo piano music from as early as 1854 (when he was a teenager) through to the year of his death, 1893. But as he wrote to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck in answer to her questions about composition:

*the instrumentation of a work which is completely thought out and matured is a most enjoyable task. The same does not apply to the bare sketch of a work for pianoforte or voice, or little pieces in general, which are sometimes very tiresome.*

But publishers such as Piotr Jurgensen knew the value of such music, and commissioned Tchaikovsky to write what became his Six Pieces, Op.19 in 1873. The concluding *Thème original et variations* was performed by the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow in Moscow and London in 1874, introducing Tchaikovsky as a composer of solo music to a wider audience.



Tchaikovsky in 1886

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

Tchaikovsky's theme is a simple 16-bar tune made up of four regular phrases, and his 12 variations are a series of character pieces.

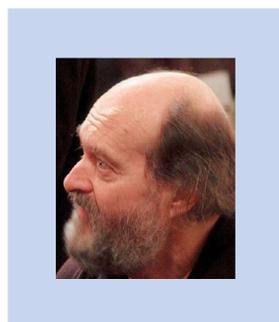
The first four add syncopation, transfer the tune to the tenor register, change the metre to a skipping 3/8 and then explore a texture of high, lightly hammered staccato chords that recalls some of Tchaikovsky's orchestral wind writing. The fifth is a pulsing 'amoroso' piece in D flat, followed by a tensile Baroque-style piece in 9/8, a radical simple chordal passage that suggests Orthodox chant and an episode of Beethovenian bluster. There follows a mazurka, complete with glittering Chopinesque cadenza, a restrained chorale prelude, and a passage that affectionately parodies Schumann in extrovert mode, before a simple lyrical finale variation and a brilliant coda to conclude.

As a young composer in his native Estonia, **Arvo Pärt** at first toed the line of the official Soviet authorities, but from the mid-1960s experimented with contemporary western musical language. His *Credo* of 1968 earned Pärt official disfavour as much for its frankly Christian expression as much as 'decadent' compositional techniques.

In response perhaps to a crisis which was both religious and artistic, Pärt wrote very little between then and the mid-1970s, when he produced a group of works which established his individual voice and international reputation. Coinciding with his formal reception into the Orthodox Church, they display Pärt's newly discovered approach to composition based in extreme simplicity.

What Pärt calls the *tintinnabuli* (from the Latin for bell-ringing) style derives from the use of very simple rhythm, a drone bass, a simple stepwise melody and a superimposed line which sounds the notes of the prevailing harmony's chord.

*Variations for the Healing of Arinushka* is an early example of this kind of piece, composed in 1977 for the composer's daughter who was recovering from an appendix operation. Its theme is derived from a simple short-short-long motif, heard first in the treble and then in inversion with tolling bass notes in the second variation. The third uses slightly richer harmony. Thus far



Arvo Pärt in 2008

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

the music has been in the minor mode; now it moves to the major, with a fourth variation that suggests trumpet-calls. The fifth fully exploits the *tintinnabuli* effects with pinging high notes that echo the faster moving lines below. The final variation turns the theme into groups of three quavers separated by a silent downbeat.

In 1830s Paris, **Charles-Valentin Alkan** was a much admired composer and pianist, and friend of Liszt – who admired his ‘perfect technique’ – and Chopin, with whom he performed on occasion.

Having entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of six, Alkan published his Op.1 in 1828 at the age of 14. A completist, he published a set of Preludes in all major and minor keys in 1847, and a set of Etudes in all major keys a year later. His Etudes in all the minor keys, Op.39, appeared a decade later. Characteristically, the term ‘etude’ is interpreted very broadly – four of the pieces, for instance, make up his full-scale Symphony for piano, and another three form a Concerto. The final piece in the collection is the theme and 24 variations subtitled *Le festin d’Ésope* (Aesop’s banquet). Alkan himself offered no explanation for the title, but it likely refers to the story in which the legendary fabulist Aesop is ordered by his master, Xanthus, to provide a banquet for some leading philosophers, and provides a multi-course meal consisting of tongue – ‘for tongue is the channel of learning and philosophy’ – prepared numerous different ways.

The resemblance to a set of variations is clear. Here Alkan offers the simplest of eight-bar themes which form the basis for a compendium of piano techniques and sounds; for this reason (and for the unusual marking *abbaiente*, or ‘barking’, in the twenty-second variation) some commentators wonder if he was in some cases imitating the animals of Aesop’s fables. One might hear a lion’s roaring in the eighth variation, or birds chirping in the thirteenth. Each variation maintains the eight-bar structure and the tonal centre of E.

‘Barking’ is the direct only animal reference, but Alkan’s markings generally are very specific in terms of technique (‘as light as can be’, ‘without rolling any chord’), emotions (‘prayerful’, ‘with grief’, ‘lamenting’,



Charles-Valentin Alkan, portrait by Édouard Dubufe

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

‘fearless’) or a mixture of both (‘tempestuous’, ‘triumphant, very, very loud’). A number of the variations are given further descriptive headings, such as ‘martial’ or ‘hunt’, and Alkan often refers to other instruments such as bells, trumpets or horns that he wishes the piano to emulate.

Alkan’s perfect technique might have proved a rod for his own back, in that the piece requires huge stamina and physical strength as well as accuracy and a fine ear for sonority, which may have contributed to its relative obscurity. This is nowhere more evident than in the final coda, where Alkan throws the eight-bar pattern to the wind and composes a free and fiendishly difficult development of the theme.

In a 1906 monograph dedicated to his beloved teacher, Vincent D’Indy compared **César Franck** to ‘the modest and admirable craftsmen’ who built France’s cathedrals in the middle ages in a spirit of ‘modesty, simplicity and self-abnegation’. Born at Liège in what is now Belgium, Franck spent much of his life in Paris. He at first seemed destined to become a virtuoso pianist, but found himself temperamentally more suited to the position of church organist and teacher, in which capacity he was lionised by generations of students. It was not until the 1870s, however, that he was appointed to a full-time professorship of organ at the Paris Conservatoire. Franck quietly pursued his compositional interests throughout his life, but it was only when he was about forty that his work began to be noticed.

In 1858 he took a job as organist at the Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde (queen of the Franks, as it happens), a recently-completed neo-Gothic church (the first to be built in Paris). Franck duly provided liturgical music, but like any good organist of his day was expected to improvise, especially at the end of Mass when the clergy and then the congregation leaves the church. Franck’s improvisations apparently attracted attention, and he wrote some of the material down in his 1862 Six Pièces, of which the Prelude, Fugue and Variation is one. He wouldn’t see such success again until later in life, but the Prelude, Fugue and Variation was



César Franck aged 40

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

popular as an organ solo and in arrangements for piano, with and without harmonium. The Prelude is a gently flowing Baroque-like piece in 9/8; after its own rhetorical introduction, the Fugue develops different though not unrelated material, and the final section is a free variation on the prelude.

After Vivaldi, Arcangelo Corelli was the second most influential Italian composer of his generation. Corelli's D minor Violin Sonata, Op.5 No.12 (1700) is based on contrasting movements, each derived from a popular repetitive dance tune (known by the Portuguese name *La folia*) which had been first published by the French composer Lully in 1672. Such a procedure is of course related to the chaconne or passacaglia forms beloved of Handel and Bach, where a more or less literal repetition of the bass line – or as here a series of chords that outline four-bar phrases in triple time – supports a series of variations. *La folia* forms the basis for a considerable number of works from the Baroque through the 19th century – including Liszt's *Rhapsodie espagnole* – to the present day.



Sergei Rachmaninov



Arcangelo Corelli in 1700

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Violinist Fritz Kreisler introduced Corelli's sonata to **Rachmaninov**, who in 1931 produced his last original solo work for piano, the twenty *Variations on a theme of Corelli* (not, apparently, realising that the material was not Corelli's own), and dedicated it to the violinist. Rachmaninov used *La folia* as a musical cell to generate twenty often tiny, but strongly profiled variations. The overall architecture consists at first of a theme and 13 variations in D minor, which is followed by an Intermezzo. This movement – which begins like a Bach toccata and morphs into Lisztian cascades – modulates into the distant key of D flat, from which key the work makes its way, through a further seven variations and coda, back to the original tonality and theme.

The first thirteen variations consist of two cycles of pieces that begin slow and gradually add momentum – the seventh, for instance is marked *Vivace*, after which an *Adagio misterioso* starts the process again, culminating in an *Agitato* movement in the thirteenth. The seven remaining variations re-enact the same process from an *Andante* (a simple reminder of the theme) to the thundering final three in 9/8 time. Like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov uses the technique to create character pieces that refer to extant music while never losing sight of the theme: there is a menuet (Variation III), for instance, and instances where he references works like his *Paganini Variations* (Variation X) and his song 'Sing, Lovely One, I Beg, No More,' Op.4 No.4, (Variation XVII). In the final three Rachmaninov channels the same Schumann sound (and indeed, possibly, piece) that we heard in the Tchaikovsky, while trying to 'erase the theme'. Throughout, he sustains the tension by frequently grouping two or three faster variations in the same speed and metre together. The work concludes with an introspective epilogue as coda.

Rachmaninov himself affected to hate the piece, describing it to his colleague Nikolai Medtner as 'boring' and admitting that he freely left out variations if the audience coughed or was otherwise restive. (He thought it something of a record that he played as many as 18 variations at a concert in New York.) This would rather spoil the architectural effect that the composer seems so carefully to have worked out.

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

Born in the Donetsk province of eastern Ukraine, **Nikolai Kapustin** came to maturity in the years of the Khrushchev 'thaw'. Kapustin showed early promise with a piano sonata composed at the age of 13, and, his talent recognised, concentrated on music from primary to tertiary level, entering the Moscow Conservatory to study piano in 1956. His teacher there, Alexander Goldenweizer, represents a link to the pre-Revolutionary age of Russian music, as he was a friend of Tolstoy and classmate of composers such as Scriabin, Rachmaninov and Medtner. But Kapustin, while still at the Conservatory, had developed an interest in jazz (as subversive in its way as 'formalism', as the Soviets denoted contemporary Western art music), partly through his association with the Mikhalkov family (known for its poets and filmmakers) who introduced him to the much-disapproved-of work of Count Basie, Duke Ellington and others. By the 1980s, when he gave up concert performance to concentrate on composing, Kapustin's music was heavily inflected with jazz idioms, though as he says with pains to point out, 'I was never a jazz musician... I'm not interested in improvisation – and what is a jazz musician without improvisation? All my improvisations are written, of course, and they became much better; it improved them.' The Variations Op.41 date from 1984 and consist of a theme marked 'medium swing' and six variations (with passages marked 'transition' between second and third and third and fourth) with a coda. The blend seamlessly into one another, and despite the composer's protestations, their jazz idiom provides a link back to the origins of variation form in spontaneous improvisation.

Gordon Kerry © 2022



Nikolai Kapustin,  
photo Peter Andersen,  
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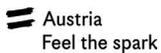
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