

6 March
City Recital Hall

MARIE-ANGE NGUCI IN RECITAL



Presenting Partner

THEME
VARIATIONS
PIANO SERVICES



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WELCOME

Welcome to the first concert of the *International Pianists in Recital* series for 2023: Marie-Ange Nguci in Recital.

Rising star, twenty-four year old Marie-Ange Nguci, is set to thrill us all with her virtuosity as she performs works by Rachmaninov and Prokofiev in an all-Russian program.

Perfectly suited to such a rich and dazzling repertoire, this young Albanian musician is fast developing a worldwide reputation for her beautifully intense and expressive performances.

All of us at Theme and Variations are very proud to be the Presenting Partner of the 2023 *International Pianists in Recital* series, a year in which we also celebrate 21 years of partnership with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

The Orchestra brings the world's most charismatic pianists to the concert stages of our city, and it is an honour for us to provide specialised piano tuning and preparation of the magnificent instruments on which they perform.

Together, the Sydney Symphony and Theme & Variations offer unsurpassed musical excellence to musicians and audiences alike.

We do hope you enjoy this superb recital.



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MARIE-ANGE NGUCI IN RECITAL

A RISING STAR

MARIE-ANGE NGUCI piano

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873 –1943)

Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op.22

- i. *Theme*. Largo
- ii. *Variation 1*. Moderato
- iii. *Variation 2*. Allegro
- iv. *Variation 3*. (L'istesso tempo)
- v. *Variation 4*. (L'istesso tempo)
- vi. *Variation 5*. Meno mosso
- vii. *Variation 6*. Meno mosso
- viii. *Variation 7*. Allegro
- xi. *Variation 8*. (L'istesso tempo)
- x. *Variation 9*. (L'istesso tempo)
- xi. *Variation 10*. Piu vivo
- xii. *Variation 11*. Lento
- xiii. *Variation 12*. Moderato
- xiv. *Variation 13*. Largo
- xv. *Variation 14*. Moderato
- xvi. *Variation 15*. Allegro scherzando
- xvii. *Variation 16*. Lento
- xviii. *Variation 17*. Grave
- xix. *Variation 18*. Piu mosso
- xx. *Variation 19*. Allegro vivace
- xxi. *Variation 20*. Presto
- xxii. *Variation 21*. Andante
- xxiii. *Variation 22*. Maestoso—Meno mosso—Presto

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1872–1915)

Piano Sonata No.5 in F sharp major, Op.53

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)

Piano Sonata No.6 in A, Op.82

- i. *Allegro moderato*
- ii. *Allegretto*
- iii. *Tempo di valzer lentissimo*
- iv. *Vivace—Andante—Vivace*

NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN (1937–2020)

Eight Concert Etudes, Op.40

VIII. Finale — prestissimo

Pre-concert talk by Sam
Weller in the Function Room
on Level 1 at 6.15.

ESTIMATED DURATIONS

26 minutes, 14 minutes,
interval 20 minutes,
29 minutes, 3 minutes

The concert will conclude at
approximately 9pm.

COVER IMAGE

Valentine Chauvin

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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

MARIE-ANGE NGUCI piano

The 2022/23 season sees Marie-Ange Nguci appear with NHK Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Paavo Järvi, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and Xian Zhang, Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Mihhail Gerts, Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI and Petr Popelka, Bournemouth Symphony under Gabor Kali, Mozarteumorchester Salzburg and Howard Griffiths for a Mozart recording, Kammerorchester Basel under Umberto Benedetti Michelangeli, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse under Robert Trevino and Belgium National Orchestra; as well as recitals at Radio France and Lyon Auditoriums, Lucerne Festival and Oslo Opera.

Among the highlights of the two last season seasons, Marie-Ange Nguci was invited by such major orchestras as Orchestre de Paris, Konzerthausorchester Berlin, BBC Symphony Orchestra at Barbican Hall, Tonkünstler Orchestra for her Musikverein debut, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Barcelona Symphony Orchestra, Symfonieorkest Vlaanderen on tour, Orchestre National de Lyon, Orchestre de Chambre de Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Orchestre National d'Île-de-France, as well as Lille, Bordeaux and Pau National Orchestras, working with first-class conductors: Fabio Luisi, Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, Dalia Stasevska, Pierre Bleuse, Kriistina Poska, Tabitha Berglund and Case Scaglione.

She is invited to prestigious international Festivals and series such as Ravinia Festival in Chicago, Beethovenfest Bonn, Musikmesse Frankfurt, Gstaad Menuhin Festival, Piano à Lyon, International Keyboard Institute and Festival in New York and Festival Musiq'3 Festival in Brussels. In France, she has performed at Bergen international Festival, International Piano Festival of La Roque d'Anthéron, La Folle Journée in Nantes (as well as in Tokyo and Ekaterinburg), Festival Radio France Occitanie Montpellier, Festival La Grange de Meslay, Festival Chopin in Bagatelle, L'Esprit du Piano in Bordeaux and Nohant Festival Chopin.

Her extensive repertoire ranges from baroque, classical, romantic to contemporary. Passionate about the music of our time, she has worked closely with composers such as Thierry Escaich, Bruno Mantovani, Graciane Finzi, Pascal Zavaró and Karol Beffa in preparing her interpretations of their works.

Marie-Ange came to wide public attention in 2018 with the release of her first CD, *En Miroir* on the Mirare label. It featured the piano works of composers best known as organists and improvisers – Franck, J.S. Bach, Saint-Saëns and Thierry Escaich. The recording received the coveted Choc de Classica for 2018 and was warmly praised in the press.

Marie-Ange Nguci was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 13 in Nicholas Angelich's class. She plays organ and cello, and spent a year studying conducting at Vienna's Universität für Musik und Darstellende Kunst.



Marie Ange Nguci
Photo by Caroline Doutré

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Occasionally we need to remind ourselves of how 'new' classical music was in 19th-century Russia. Aristocrats there, as in western Europe, had maintained their own musical establishments but usually with foreign performers, and in the later 18th century societies of amateur music-lovers began presenting public concerts. The operas of Glinka in the 1830s and 1840s brought Russian stories, and language, to the musical stage. But a home-grown musical culture only reached critical mass with the foundation of the great conservatories in St Petersburg, by Anton Rubinstein in 1862, and Moscow, by his brother Nikolai in 1866. Western European piano builders, however, had begun settling in Russia in the early years of the 19th century; both of the Rubinsteins were pianists and helped found the great school of Russian piano technique and the vast repertoire that engendered.

Russian composers in the 19th century had an ambivalent relationship with the music of the west. The group known in English as 'The Five' or 'Mighty Handful' noisily proclaimed their aversion to the techniques of Western — and specifically Austro-German — music in favour of something authentically Russian. One of them, César Cui, wrote in 1909,

We were young and our judgments were harsh. We were very disrespectful in our attitude toward Mozart and Mendelssohn; to the latter we opposed Schumann, who was then ignored by everyone. We were very enthusiastic about Liszt and Berlioz. We worshipped Chopin and Glinka.



Idol of Russian composers, Chopin, photographed by Louis Auguste Bisson in 1849.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Berlioz had been a frequent visitor to Russia, and Liszt and Chopin were attractive to Russian composers as they were both seen as nationalist figures from countries regarded by Austro-Germans as peripheral. (The irony, as Richard Taruskin has noted, of Russians worshipping Chopin is that the composer's revolutionary sentiments were directed squarely at imperialism of the Tsar, not the Kaiser.)

Rachmaninov was born on a large estate near Novgorod, but his childhood was marred by his father's alcoholism. Rachmaninov senior drank away the family fortune, and left his family when Sergei was nine years old. Sergei's mother had to sell the property and move to St Petersburg. His studies were undistinguished there, but in 1885 he moved to Moscow to attend the Conservatory where he studied composition with Sergei Taneyev and Anton Arensky. Unsurprisingly, as a pianist and composer Rachmaninov was steeped in the music of Chopin, and numerous works for piano from the 1880s and 1890s show the influence of the Polish composer in mood and manner, and especially in form with a predominance of nocturnes and mazurkas, preludes and barcarolles. His first large-scale piano piece, composed in 1902 and 1903, was this series of variations on one of the most deceptively simple of Chopin's preludes, his Op.29 No.20. Rachmaninov's work is a set of 22 variations, which explore a dizzying variety of pianistic writing, from over-the-top bravura to carefully wrought counterpoint. The variations fall into three distinct groupings, almost like the movements of a sonata. The first ten are all very short and fast, maintaining momentum through rapid passage work and coming to a loud conclusion at the end of number ten.

Variations 11 to 18 are mainly slow (though No.15 is an allegro scherzando, injecting a moment of galloping energy into the work), with the final four tending to be longer, fast and more fully worked-out before an extended finale.



Rachmaninov in 1900

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Rachmaninov's contemporary and classmate at the Moscow Conservatorium, **Alexander Scriabin** died in 1915 having, sadly, failed in his ambition to create a great work of music and light called *Mysterium*, which he had planned to perform in the Himalayas in order to bring the material world to an end. His interest in the occult had begun as early as 1903 with his *Poème satanique* for piano, and his later orchestral works such as the *Poème de l'extase* and *Prometheus* grew out of the composer's sense of being a prophet or 'theurge'. His later music is obsessed with the supernatural qualities of his 'mystical chord' (an invention that enabled him to explore a quite new and unconventional harmonic language) and, of course, the famous synaesthesia by which he associated musical pitches and keys with specific colours; his *clavier a luce*, or 'keyboard of light' would actualise these visions. Despite the failure of his messianic mission, Scriabin was idolised by elements in Russian artistic circles. Osip Mandelstam described Scriabin's heart as 'a sun burning above us'. Others were less convinced. Rimsky-Korsakov openly mocked Scriabin's 'religious-erotic lunacy' while Rachmaninov was sceptical about synaesthesia. (This didn't stop Rachmaninov from touring a program of Scriabin's work to raise money for the composer's family after his early death.)

Scriabin had entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1888, his audition having been waived on the basis of his already famous virtuosity at the keyboard. Desperately lazy, Scriabin was nonetheless a favoured student and quickly absorbed all he was taught, including a course in polyphony led by Sergei Taneyev. He graduated in 1892, and in 1894 was taken up by the wealthy and influential publisher Mitrofan Belyayev who supported his work in many ways. Scriabin's first major orchestral piece, the Piano Concerto Op.20, appeared in 1896 and in 1898, the year of its official Russian premiere, secured him a professorship at the Moscow Conservatory.



Alexander Scriabin in 1903

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Scriabin held the professorship until 1902 when the spectacular failure of his Second Symphony, jeered by audiences in both St Petersburg and Moscow, led him to abandon teaching and throw himself more and more into composition.

Composed in 1907, the fifth of his ten Piano Sonatas is something of a turning point in Scriabin's style. He described it to a friend as a 'big poem for piano' and headed the score with these lines (in Simon Nicholls' translation):

*I call you to life, hidden strivings!
You, drowned in the dark depths
Of the creative spirit, you, timid
Embryos of life, to you I bring audacity.*

As sonatas go it is relatively short, a single movement of about 12 minutes' duration. It is nominally in the relatively unusual key of F sharp major (Scriabin often cultivated multi-sharp keys until dispensing with key signatures all together) but moves vertiginously through a great number of key centres, and his harmony is always richly inflected. At first bluish it can seem like an improvisation — the explosive energy of the opening gesture quickly descends into quiet languor, but as the piece goes on it seems a mosaic of often radically different materials, some only a bar or two long, the speed and character (often, as we might expect, *ecstatico*, *fantastico*, *con luminezza*) of each meticulously marked. But Scriabin rigorously worked out the proportions of these elements before composing the music, giving it a coherent architecture despite its mercurial character. It is also unified by the recurrence of the opening gesture in the middle and end of the piece — on each occasion transposed, as Nicholls reminds us, to a sharper key than the opening, thus keeping the tension high until the end, of which Taneyev remarked 'This is music which does not finish, but *stops*'.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Scriabin can't be said to have founded a school of composition, though when the young **Prokofiev** sat his final examination in 1909, his teacher the pianist and composer Anatol Liadov complained that 'they all want to be Scriabins!'

That certainly wasn't the case when Prokofiev returned to what was now the Soviet Union in the 1930s, having realised that he couldn't compete with Rachmaninov or Stravinsky in the expat-Russian composer stakes. (Sadly he had to play second fiddle to Shostakovich in Russia.) Prokofiev understood that the Soviet regime had created a large new audience for 'classical music' — and new classical music at that. Nevertheless, in 1949 he was surprised that several of his works, including the Sixth Sonata were 'to be removed from the repertory and may not be played' and that he, Shostakovich, Khachaturian and others had been accused of being 'formalists' who wrote music that was 'anti-people'. The 'Zhdanovshchina', a cultural purge led by the Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov at Stalin's behest, prompted Prokofiev to offer the defence that while music needed to be accessible, the composer had to take care not to confuse simplicity with that which was 'cheap, saccharine, or imitative'.



Sergei Prokofiev, late 1930s



Three 'formalists', Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Khachaturian in 1943, before their denunciation.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The Sonata was begun in 1939 and completed in 1941 and performances by both Prokofiev and Sviatoslav Richter had, admittedly, stunned people with the force of its musical rhetoric. It had been considered a 'war sonata', (as were the Seventh, which had won the Stalin Prize in 1943, and the Eighth) prescient of the Soviet Union's imminent involvement in World War II. Richter himself later wrote of the three that they took him into a 'disordered' world in which 'death and destruction rage before the eyes of people who, nevertheless, find that what makes life worth living continues to survive'.

The first movement is dominated by the clash of simultaneous major and minor tonality, and percussive martial writing. Its first theme includes a short-short-long three-note rhythm whose mocking air pervades much of the movement. A second theme, in C major, offers a glimpse of 'that which makes life worth living' in its gentle lyricism, but soon enough an insistent strutting returns us to the unsettling world of the first theme, which repeatedly emerges as if to disrupt any sense of relaxation. The *Scherzo* begins with a gently trotting rhythm, its staccato chords picking out a vaguely folksy tune. As more extended melodies appear the sense grows of the music's gaiety being forced, though the slightly slower central trio lowers the temperature.

The waltz-inflected slow movement begins with a slow section in 9/8, whose soft dynamics and rocking rhythm are soon undercut by unexpected chromatic sidesteps and semitonal motifs drawn from the first movement's opening gesture. The effect is of instability and underlying sadness that gives way to open grief towards the end.

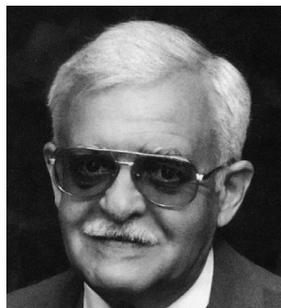
The finale begins comically enough, with emphatic repetitions and deliberate 'wrong-note' harmonies. The energy is briefly stalled by an andante section in which the distinctive motif from the first movement is explicitly recalled and repeated. There are passages of limpid simplicity — some even marked *dolcissimo* — but these are increasingly swept aside by frenetic aggression, and the final A major chord seems very hard won.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Born, like Prokofiev, in the Donetsk province of present-day eastern Ukraine, **Nikolai Kapustin** came to maturity in the years of the Khrushchev 'thaw' after Stalin's death. He 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'), 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, the inordinately prolific Kapustin's music was heavily inflected with jazz idioms though as he was at 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 Eight Concert Etudes, Op.40, date from 1984 and offer a compendium of Kapustin's piano writing. The *Finale* is a blisteringly fast work that shows Kapustin's mastery of both composing and playing, and its jazz idiom is enriched by his intimate knowledge of the music of Prokofiev and Scriabin.

Gordon Kerry © 2023



Nikolai Kapustin

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