Yekwon Sunwoo

Van Cliburn Gold Medalist

Nov. 3, 2017

CU PRESENTS

ARTIST SERIES

Yekwon Sunwoo
Van Cliburn Gold Medalist

Mr. Sunwoo appears by arrangement with the Cliburn.

"His playing was crisp and effervescent, with crystalline trills; in a work that demanded parity, he was an ideal foil."
—The New York Times

"Sunwoo, 28, seems to have music pouring out of his fingers; his musicality and elegance—combined with an economical technique and multiple variations in tone and dynamic levels—are gaining him fans."
—Clavier Companion

"Muhammad Ali's famous quote 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee' came to my mind. This was because Sunwoo employed a very wide range of dynamics, from the softest soft to the loudest loud, in his interpretation. His performance became more effective as it went on, and the finale raised goose bumps."
—Fort Worth Star-Telegram

"...started out in a deceptively unassuming way and then quietly snuck up on greatness: a thoughtful performance of one of the hardest concertos in the repertoire... Sunwoo certainly walked an assured line between these two extremes, offering technical brilliance set off by artistic sensitivity."
—The Washington Post

Program

Sonata in C minor, D.958 — Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
I. Allegro
II. Adagio
III. Menuetto & Trio
IV. Allegro

—Intermission—

Ramble on the Last Love-Duet from Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* — Percy Grainger (1882-1961)

Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 36 (1931 Edition) — Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
I. Allegro agitato
II. Non allegro
III. Allegro molto

La Valse — Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Program Notes

Program Notes by Marc Shulgold

Sonata in C minor, D.958
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

The last year of Schubert's life produced a mind-boggling amount of brilliant music. Truly amazing, considering how ill health—dizziness and terrible headaches brought on after years suffering from syphilis—often made him wish for death. This was 1828, a year after Beethoven had died. The flood of compositions may have been linked to that event, since Schubert had lived his life in Vienna, worshipping the genius of Beethoven but working in near-obscurity, and always in the shadow of the master (incidentally, Schubert was a torch-bearer at Beethoven's funeral). Consider that a dictionary of composers published in 1827 listed five named Schubert—none of them Franz. Whether he felt freed by the absence of Beethoven, or whether he sensed that he was simply running out of time, Schubert produced some of his greatest works in an intense period of less than 12 months (he died on Nov. 19). That stretch produced such monumental works as the Ninth Symphony, the C Major String Quintet, the song cycle Schwanengesang and three remarkable piano sonatas. The first of those, D.958, is set in a dark and brooding C minor—the same key visited by Beethoven in his Fifth Symphony, Third Piano Concerto, "Pathetique" Sonata, the final Sonata Op. 111 and, perhaps most significantly for Schubert, the 32 Variations of 1806. That work opens with a powerful C minor chord, echoed strongly at the start of Schubert's Sonata. And perhaps he channeled the seriousness and unending invention in those Variations. But, to be honest, that's where the similarity ends. In his D.958, Schubert takes us on a journey to a strange, distant world far from anything Beethoven could have imagined. The structure here is organized and disciplined if you look closely—the opening *Allegro* offers the traditional pairing of themes, the first angry and aggressive, the second (sung in E-flat Major) calming and lyrical. Yet each movement unfolds with a spontaneity and an almost stream-of-consciousness flow. There are explosions amid gorgeous melodies, dramatic pauses here and there that startle us like skipped heartbeats, new musical thoughts that arise out of nowhere and shifts in mood and color that could only come from the pen of Schubert. Even the tender *Adagio* suddenly bursts with anguished chords and a sense of helpless confusion that just as quickly evaporates. Curiously, the brief third movement is a *Menuetto*, though its quick tempo (marked *Allegro*) erases any thoughts of dancing this light Viennese favorite. There is an unexpected dance pulse in the brisk finale, which follows the bouncy rhythms of the tarantella—although it teeters dangerously between gaiety and windswept terror. As inescapably brilliant as this and the remaining two sonatas are, all three remained unpublished until 1838, a decade after Schubert's death.

Ramble on the Last Love-Duet from Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*
Percy Grainger (1882-1961)

One of music's most intriguing personalities, Percy Grainger was born in Australia, studied in Germany and England, and lived in the U.S. for the final 47 years of his ever-busy life. He composed plenty of original music, but he's mostly remembered as an arranger of English folk songs and works by other composers. Among the latter was Richard Strauss, whom Grainger knew and admired. Of the German composer, he wrote, "[Strauss] has so amply the vulgarity that Ravel lacks." Setting the final duet from Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*, he crafted a meticulously notated piano transcription over the course of several years, from around 1920 to 1927—the work being interrupted by the suicide of his mother in 1922. The piece was finished in White Plains, New York, around Christmas of 1927, and dedicated "as a Yule-gift to the memory of my beloved mother." Filled with shimmering arpeggios and feathery light passages, the *Ramble* perfectly captures the magical ending of Strauss' opera. It offers a mighty challenge for a pianist, who must observe every suggestion that decorates the musical notes ("Top voice glassy, to the fore," "trumpet-like, as harsh as possible," "slacken slightly," etc.).

Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 36 (1931 Edition)
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

For all their lavish, confident outpourings, the great works of Rachmaninoff conceal the composer's deep-seated insecurities. That lack of self esteem is most famously found in the humiliation he endured after the failure of his Symphony No. 1, a dark period that finally ended with the help of a psychiatrist's post-hypnotic suggestion—leading to the hugely successful Piano Concerto No. 2. All that occurred at the turn of the 20th century. But don't think that Rachmaninoff found clear sailing from then on. After penning his Piano Sonata No. 1 in 1907, he premiered his Piano Sonata No. 2 six years later—and the all-powerful Russian critics were not kind. The composer, shaken once again, shelved the work for 18 years. By 1931, he had fled Russia and its bloody revolution and settled in the U.S., where he turned once again to this last of his two sonatas. In a remarkable bit of self-editing, Rachmaninoff trimmed a full 20 minutes off the piece, also scaling back some of the thicker passages. What motivated him? It's possible that his much-praised concert performances of Chopin's Second Sonata (which Rachmaninoff recorded) inspired him to shorten and clarify Op. 36. That said, some pianists prefer the 1913 original—all 41 minutes of it—while others have turned to Vladimir Horowitz's reworking, which nimbly blended both versions. Certainly, what remains in the 1931 revision heard tonight are numerous pages of fiercely difficult, almost orchestral music. The virtuosity displayed here reminds us of Rachmaninoff's unparallelled pianistic skills. But there are, as well, examples of the composer's lyrical side, heard chiefly in the Sonata's middle section. We say "section," because this work is not cleanly broken up into three "movements." Instead, it unfolds as a single, continuous piece, containing themes that are re-visited during the work's 20 or so minutes. Notice the occasional bell-like sounds, reflecting the composer's love of Russian church bells, or perhaps as a spillover from his choral work, *The Bells*, written concurrently with the Sonata's original version.

La Valse
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Paris in the early 1900s went positively crazy for the ballet—specifically for the exciting Russian company brought to France by Sergei Diaghilev. His Ballets Russes combined the brilliance of such dancers as Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina with groundbreaking music by established European composers, as well as an unknown Russian kid named Igor Stravinsky. Among those contributing scores for Diaghilev's troupe were two prominent Frenchmen, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Paris had been all abuzz during the 1912 season following the premieres (within a week of each other) of Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. The following year witnessed the legendary, riotous unveiling of Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps*—attended by Ravel, who enthusiastically defended the composer against his furious critics. The Frenchman's next contribution to the Ballets Russes came in 1920, and it fared badly. It's a bit odd that, after Diaghilev rejected Ravel's evocation of the waltz titled *La Valse*, Stravinsky sat and listened during the run-through—and said nothing in defense of his staunch ally, much to Ravel's disappointment. At the conclusion of the two-piano reading, Diaghilev remarked, "Ravel, it's a masterpiece, but it isn't a ballet … It's a painting of a ballet." Thoroughly defeated, the composer grabbed his score and left without uttering a word. A promising collaboration ended that day. But *La Valse* would live on in its two-piano setting, as well as Ravel's solo keyboard arrangement and, most famously, in his brilliant orchestration. And, at last, the music became a ballet. In 1928, Ida Rubinstein's company danced *La Valse*, choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska (sister of Nijinsky). It was for Rubinstein's dancers, incidentally, that Ravel composed *Boléro*. In retrospect, Diaghilev was right: The music *is* a masterpiece. It's unfortunate that the Ballets Russes never gave it a chance. Later, Ravel outlined the narrative for this evocative piece, describing a ball in Vienna's Imperial Court of 1855, as dancers slowly emerged through swirling clouds, at last lit by glowing chandeliers. Though lacking the colorful palette of the orchestration, Ravel's solo setting, heard tonight, captures the subtle shades and graceful melodies that magically call up the elegant, long-lost world of Johann Strauss. As the music reaches fever pitch near the end, it seems to abandon the inescapable oom-pa-pa beat of the waltz, becoming an unstoppable, maniacal two-beat pulse—although the 3/4 time signature remains.

About Yekwon Sunwoo

Gold medalist of the Fifteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, 28-year-old pianist Yekwon Sunwoo has been hailed for "his total command over the instrument and its expressiveness" (San Francisco Examiner). A powerful and virtuosic performer, he also, in his own words, "strives to reach for the truth and pure beauty in music," and hopes to convey those fundamental emotions to audiences.

Born in Anyang, South Korea, Mr. Sunwoo began learning piano at age 8. He gave both his recital and orchestra debuts in 2004 in Seoul before moving to the United States in 2005 to study with Seymour Lipkin at the Curtis Institute of Music. He earned his bachelor's degree there, his master's at The Juilliard School with Robert McDonald, and his artist diploma at the Mannes School of Music with Richard Goode. He currently studies under Bernd Goetzke in Hannover. Mr. Sunwoo credits each for their guidance in his artistic development and approach, and honored the late Mr. Lipkin by performing his cadenza during his Semifinal Round performance of the Mozart Piano Concerto in C Major, K 467.

The first Korean to win Cliburn gold, Mr. Sunwoo launches his debut season in 2017-18 with invitations to the Aspen, Grand Teton and Duszniki International Music Festivals. Recitals will take him to Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and Vancouver, and he undertakes a nine-city tour of the U.S. with the National Orchestra of Cuba in the spring. In Europe, Mr. Sunwoo makes his U.K. concerto debut with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Cristian Macelaru, appears in the first full season at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, and performs in Brussels, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Madrid, Helsingborg and across Germany. His appearances in Asia include those in Beirut, Taiwan, Hong Kong and throughout South Korea.

Record label Decca Gold released Cliburn Gold 2017 two weeks after his Cliburn win, which includes his award-winning performances of Ravel's *La Valse* and Rachmaninoff's Piano Sonata No. 2.

In previous seasons, Mr. Sunwoo has performed as soloist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra under Marin Alsop, The Juilliard Orchestra with Itzhak Perlman at Avery Fisher Hall, Houston Symphony Orchestra with James Feddeck, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra with Leonard Slatkin and Nicholas McGegan, National Orchestra of Belgium, Sendai Philharmonic Orchestra and others. He has appeared in recital in Hamarikyu Asahi Hall in Tokyo, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall in London, Radio France and Salle Cortot in Paris, Kumho Art Hall in Seoul, and throughout South Korea, Germany, Switzerland, Prague and Morocco.

An avid chamber musician, his partners have included the Jerusalem and Brentano String Quartets, violinists Benjamin Beilman and Ida Kafavian, cellists Edgar Moreau, Gary Hoffman and Peter Wiley, and pianist Anne-Marie McDermott. He has toured Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama with the Kumho Asiana Cultural Foundation, performed for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's Inside Chamber Music Lectures, and been invited to the Summit Music, Bowdowin International and Toronto Summer Music Festivals.

In addition to the Cliburn gold medal, Mr. Sunwoo has won first prizes at the 2015 International German Piano Award in Frankfurt, the 2014 Vendome Prize held at the Verbier Festival, the 2013 Sendai International Music Competition and the 2012 William Kapell International Piano Competition.

A self-proclaimed foodie, Mr. Sunwoo enjoys finding pho in each city he visits and takes pride in his own homemade Korean soups.

About The Cliburn

Winning the first Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow at the height of the Cold War in 1958 brought Van Cliburn, a concert pianist from Texas, unprecedented celebrity for an American. Cliburn's international victory instilled a fresh sense of artistic pride in many Americans while opening the door to a new era of cultural relations between East and West. The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition was established shortly thereafter to perpetuate Van Cliburn's unique legacy of demonstrating how classical music, in the hands of a master, has the appeal to reach across all borders.

First held in 1962, the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, held every four years in Fort Worth, Texas, quickly established itself as an event that inspires and engages the local community while gracing the international stage. The Cliburn Competition is one of the few musical events in the world to arrange for competitors to stay with host families, often resulting in close, long-term relationships; this has resulted in southern hospitality becoming a singular trademark of the Cliburn Competition.

The Cliburn advances classical piano music throughout the world. Its international competitions, education programs, and concert series embody an enduring commitment to artistic excellence and the discovery of new artists. Established in 1962, the quadrennial Van Cliburn International Piano Competition is widely recognized as "the most prestigious classical music contest in the world" (The Chicago Tribune) and remains committed to its original ideals of supporting and launching the careers of young artists aged 18 to 30. It shares the transformative powers of music with a wide global audience through fully produced webcasts and by providing commission-free, comprehensive career management and concert bookings to its winners. Rounding out its mission, the Cliburn also produces the Cliburn International Junior Piano Competition and Festival for exceptional 13- to 17-year-old pianists (second edition, June 2019), and the Cliburn International Amateur Piano Competition for outstanding non-professional pianists age 35 and older (eighth edition, June 2020).

Over a four-year cycle, the Cliburn contributes to North Texas' cultural landscape with more than 170 classical music performances for 150,000 attendees, through competitions, free community concerts and its signature Cliburn Concerts series at Bass Performance Hall, the Kimbell Art Museum Piano Pavilion and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. It presents 1,000 Cliburn in the Classroom in-school, interactive music education programs for more than 200,000 area elementary students. During the same time period, it garners the world's attention with more than 5 million visits from 170 nations for live concert and competition webcasts; 300 concerts worldwide booked for competition winners; more than 5,000 news articles about the Cliburn and its winners; and regular national radio broadcasts to 245 public radio stations.

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