



CHRISTINA & MICHELLE NAUGHTON PIANO DUO

SAT, DEC 5
VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

DUKE PERFORMANCES

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CHRISTINA NAUGHTON, PIANO
MICHELLE NAUGHTON, PIANO

PROGRAM

Sonata for Piano Four Hands, FP 8

- I. Prelude
- II. Rustique
- III. Final

Francis Poulenc
(1899-1963)

Andante and Variations in B-flat
Major, op. 83a

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809-1847)

En blanc et noir, for Two Pianos

- I. *Avec emportement*
- II. *Lent. Sombre.*
- III. *Scherzando*

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

*Variations on a Theme by
Haydn, Op. 56b*

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

- Theme. Chorale St. Antoni. Andante
- Variation I. *Poco più animato (Andante con moto)*
- Variation II. *Più vivace (Vivace)*
- Variation III. *Con moto*
- Variation IV. *Andante con moto (Andante)*
- Variation V. *Vivace (Poco presto)*
- Variation VI. *Vivace*
- Variation VII. *Grazioso*
- Variation VIII. *Presto non troppo (Poco presto)*
- Finale. *Andante*

MENDELSSOHN: ANDANTE AND VARIATIONS IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 83A

The genesis of Mendelssohn's sole set of variations for piano duet can be traced to two events. The first came in the summer of 1841, when he was invited to contribute to a Beethoven memorial album. He offered the impressive *Variations Sérieuses*, and, fueled by the experience of writing that piece, produced two additional variation sets within the following month. One was a set on an original theme in B-flat, eventually dubbed Op. 83. Three years later, Mendelssohn made plans for a concert-packed trip to Britain. The itinerary was intense: it included guest conductor, concerto soloist, and recital gigs, all featuring a diverse range of works. It was likely in the service of one such recital that he decided to adapt Op. 83 for piano four-hands, thus rendering Op. 83a. The result, however, was quite a new work. Mendelssohn maintained many of the initial variation impulses, and the overall trajectory, but inserted several new sections among highly modified originals. His guiding principle seems to have been to make full use of the ten extra fingers afforded by the medium; what originated as a rather humble (though not unchallenging) work became transformed into an impressive sonic spectacle.

Perhaps the most significant new aspect of Mendelssohn's revived variation set is his use of call-and-response gestures. The stately theme is presented in sections, each carried by one of the pianists alone. This sets up an intriguing dialogue that never completely fades. A shared sense of discourse is maintained throughout; by the highly virtuosic fifth variation, each player has spent roughly equal amounts of time serving as lead and accompanist. But with the sixth, a funeral march, two things change: there are shifts to a minor key, and a more traditional division of labor between treble melody and bass accompaniment. Over the remaining variations, work is done to ascend from this collaborative and emotional nadir, eventually melting into a reprise of the theme. An intriguing tactic, it elegantly stabilizes the work, and allows for a surprise final variation that closes the set with collaborative panache.

POULENC: SONATA FOR FOUR HANDS

After a childhood spent surrounded by new music and piano lessons, Poulenc finally started composing around the age of eighteen. He

was eager to join the Parisian avant-garde as a full participant, and was welcome, but the First World War intervened. Poulenc was conscripted into service, landing in northern France by the autumn of 1918. With an undiminished zeal for composing, he continued his creative journey using whatever resources were available.

The four-hand sonata sprang out of this laden setting, but, as a response it is quite contrarian. The music is boisterous, full of humor and play, which reflects a drive of Poulenc's to create music for its own sake. So, while it's possible to hear this work as an example of escapism, irony, or satire, its generic title keeps any such readings at arm's length.

A rhythmically and physically assertive Prelude begins the sonata. Perhaps its most fascinating feature is the physical relationship between the two performers. While the second player fills in the middle register with a dissonant repeated chord, the first works (literally) around them, sounding loud punctuating chords and melodies in the high and low registers, simultaneously. These dramatic (explosion-like?) sounds necessitate some correspondingly dramatic choreography. As the first player must reach notes that are blocked by the body of the second, they must decide whether to reach behind or in front of the other player. At other moments, the parts overlap, with the hands being called to occupy the same registral space. Such physical demands stand out because they disrupt the keyboard's ordinarily private space; imagine two people trying to play a single clarinet! In the middle, a sweet solo for the first player reminds us of the typical isolated piano world, but it is eventually superseded by dissonance and an aggressive return to the opening texture.

The second movement, dubbed *Rustique*, takes a completely different approach. It divides the material, keyboard, and labor fairly evenly between the two performers. Poulenc even calls for the music to be played naïvely, which alludes to both the simpler material and choreography. After the first movement's disorientations, the contrast is striking, normalizing, but also a little tongue-in-cheek.

The *Rustique* ends on a tonally ambiguous chord, which is mostly resolved by the opening melody of the *Finale*. Through brazen references to blues and jazz styles, the movement explores a dramatic level in between those of the first two. Its "middleness" is also

reflected in its substance: the melodies are similar to those that came before, and its rhythmic language recalls that of the first movement. Eventually, recollection becomes reality when the Prelude's dramatic chords and crossings return for a reprise. In this new context, though, they suggest yet another interpretation. Jazz and its harmonies did not exactly pass muster with the musical intelligentsia; sounds like the concluding blues chord were often described in racist terms due to their mixing of major and minor tonalities. So, was Poulenc trying to make a political statement? Physical, stylistic, and harmonic transgressions coalesce in a significant way, but, as the sound fades, any meaning is left open to interpretation.

DEBUSSY: *EN BLANC ET NOIR*, FOR TWO PIANOS

While Poulenc's experience of WWI came early in his life, it hit Debussy near the end of his. The elder-statesman of French experimentalism was stricken with cancer, and residing in Normandy during the summer of 1915. This was almost one full year into the war, and Debussy was profoundly displeased with the situation. He openly expressed anti-German sentiments, and composed *En blanc et noir* with political intentions. It is riddled with allusions to other works (often barely discernable), was premiered at a benefit concert for musicians affected by the war, and each of its three movements is prefaced by a loaded literary quotation.

All of this places the music worlds away from his earlier impressionistic works. Though connected in overall style, there is a different complexity at work — one that draws attention to fine details and shades, as subtly reflected by the title. The contrasts of black and white may refer to the keys of the piano, or Debussy's understanding of conflict, but that first word, *En*, is telling. It positions the work as something of a treatise — On White and Black — referring to the colors as separate abstracts, and also as a deeply related pair. Shades of grey permeate the work, perhaps implying a deeper inner struggle than the composer was willing to admit in words.

Prefacing the *Avec empotement* is a quote from the libretto of Gounod's opera *Roméo et Juliette* that refers to the "disgrace" of standing still during a dance. Such intransigence is reflected by Debussy's saturation of the middle register. Most of the material lives

in the center of the keyboard, unaffected by accents from the high and low registers. To keep things animated, the music moves between different textures, including a striking passage of unison writing and an array of arpeggio- and scale-based passages. In the contrasts between these sound-types, from the percussive to the liquid, it is not unreasonable to hear a healthy dose of (French-inflected) Shakespearean drama.

The second movement, initially marked *Lento*, *sombre*, is similarly attuned to overlapping registers, but creates more space for individual melodies to materialize. Those that most clearly emerge from the complex harmonic environment are nationalistic in nature; the Lutheran hymn “*Ein feste Burg*” is featured, and one might detect allusions to “*La Marseilles*.” The overtones are clearly political, as suggested by François Villon’s prefacing quote, addressed to “the enemies of France.”

The concluding *Scherzando* stands apart from the other movements by adopting an overtly narrative form. It’s held together by the recurrence of a two-chord motto, which itself relates to the composer’s earlier choral setting of the movement’s preface, “*Yver, vous n’este qu’un vilain*” by Charles d’Orleans. Winter is cast as a villain, the scene is colored by a flurry of trills and chattering repeated notes, and yet Debussy chooses to end the work on a soft D Major chord. His world may have been in peril, as conflicts raged within and without, but he still let optimism win, quietly.

BRAHMS: VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY HAYDN, OP. 56B

Brahms was a famously late arrival on the orchestral scene. He’d produced two serenades and a piano concerto in the 1850s, while still in his twenties, but then worked exclusively on chamber music as his fame grew over the next decade. The anxiety of Beethoven’s influence was strong, and Brahms carried an acute awareness that expectations for his orchestral writing were high. And so it wasn’t until he turned forty that he finally decided to give it another shot; composed in 1873, the “*Haydn Variations*” became his first orchestral work in fourteen years, and it’s been met with acclaim ever since.

To be fair, writing for orchestra is difficult regardless of whether society has deemed you Beethoven's heir. Brahms knew this, and decided to ease the challenge by playing to his strengths. Variation form was familiar to him: he'd composed several sets, and was an avid student of older music. In fact, that's probably how he encountered the erstwhile arcane theme. The immensely appealing "Chorale to St. Anthony" originated as the second movement of a wind ensemble piece erroneously attributed (or, more likely, purposefully misattributed for the sake of sales) to Haydn. It's the sort of work one finds only after hours of digging through archives in the hopes of finding a treasure. Good thing Brahms was a digger.

But he was also a pianist. Rather than dive right into the imposing staff paper of an orchestral score, he presented himself with the far more familiar space of the keyboard. Combining two pianos gives a composer just about as much range and versatility as the orchestra, especially if you understand the idioms and intricacies of the instrument. Now girded with a comfortable form and format, Brahms got to work. The two-piano version emerged first, and in it we can hear clearly all of the wonderful rhythmic and contrapuntal devices that would later be transferred to the smoother world of the orchestra. As successful as the orchestral version has been, there is a tremendous joy in hearing the original. The piano's transparency and articulation foregrounds the music's textural details, wherein resides much of the music's magic. Syncopations, rhythmic dissonances of twos against threes (and fours and sixes!), imitations, and motivic layerings abound. Even if it's difficult to hear or understand the details, the interactions are palpable.

In this way, the work's approach to sound is married to its form. Variations are all about interaction. A composer poses scenarios to the theme, and observes how it responds. Those responses are then strung together to create the larger work. At every interface something new is revealed, and the trajectory of those reveals gives the piece life. Indeed, to foreground the interfaces, Brahms chose a rather unconventional approach to the form. The piece does not proceed according to older variation norms. It contains three minor-key variations (as opposed to the customary one), there are radical shifts in meter, tempo, and mood, and the finale is itself a set of variations! There, Brahms repurposes a melodic outline of the theme as a ground bass, repeating dozens of times to support a constantly

evolving texture. It's a novel and bold approach that celebrates the theme and encapsulates the wonders we now know it contains.

From a contemporary vantage point, this piece thus delivers an important message. It is a music of revelations — for Brahms, it was the unstopping of his potential; for the true composer of the theme, a dash of unanticipated anonymous immortality; and for us, a reminder that all art can be a wellspring of many-colored discoveries.

CHRISTINA & MICHELLE NAUGHTON

“Indeed, I’m ready to put them on a level with some of the greatest piano duos of our time...They have to be heard to be believed” said the Washington Post of **Christina and Michelle Naughton**. They have captivated audiences throughout the globe with the unity created by their mystical communication, as reported by the Wall Street Journal, in Christina’s own words, “There are times I forget we are two people playing together”. The Naughtons work as a duo was recently recognized in 2019 as they became the first piano duo to receive the Avery Fisher Career Grant presented by Lincoln Center.

Christina and Michelle Naughton’s career was launched in 2009 with a recital debut at Kennedy Center; and an orchestral debut at the Mann Center with the Philadelphia Orchestra, which led the Philadelphia Inquirer to characterize their playing as “paired to perfection”. Subsequently, they began their careers in Europe and Asia; at Munich’s Herkulesaal and with the Hong Kong Philharmonic respectively. These appearances were met with much critical acclaim, with the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* proclaiming the Naughtons an “outstanding piano duo” and the *Sing Tao Daily* responding by the description “Joining two hearts and four hands at two grand pianos, the Naughton sisters created an electrifying and moving musical performance”.

Especially passionate about American 20th century music, Christina and Michelle have immersed themselves in several projects devoted to this theme. 2019’s “American Postcard”, their second album of their exclusive signing with Warner Classics, showcases a variety of 20th century American compositions and commissions by composers such as John Adams, Aaron Copland, Conlon Nancarrow, and Paul Schoenfield. Additionally, they have done several premieres of works

in capacities such as commissions by the LA Phil's Green Umbrella series, a world premiere of John Adams' "Roll Over Beethoven" at NYC's WQXR Greenspace, a European premiere of Paul Lansky's "Shapeshifters" with Solistes Europeens Luxembourg, a weeklong American chamber music residency with musicians of the New World Symphony, and several concerts devoted to 20th century American music at Germany's Klavierfestival Ruhr.

The Naughtons discography features a wide variety of musical styles. Their first album, released on the German label ORFEO in 2012 and recorded in Bremen's Sendesaal; focuses heavily on traditional Classic and Romantic selections. It was praised by Der Spiegel Magazine for "stand(ing) out with unique harmony, and sing(ing) out with stylistic confidence, and described by ClassicsToday as a "Dynamic Duo Debut". In February of 2016 they released their debut record on the Warner Classics label titled "Visions". "Visions", comprised of the music of Messiaen, Bach, and Adams; was shortly after its release chosen as "Editor's Choice" by Gramophone Magazine.

Christina and Michelle have played as soloists with orchestras such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, Hawaii, Houston, Milwaukee, Minnesota, Nashville, New Jersey, North Carolina, San Diego, St. Louis, Virginia Symphonies; the Buffalo and Naples Philharmonics, as well as The Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, St. Petersburg Philharmonic, Royal Flemish Philharmonic (Belgium), l'Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, the Frankfurter Opern- and Museumsorchester, Hamburg Chorus, Kiel Philharmonic, Norddeutsche Philharmonic Rostock, the Netherlands Philharmonic at the Royal Concertgebouw, The Hong Kong Philharmonic, and New Zealand Symphony. Past and future seasons feature collaborations under the batons of conductors such as Stephane Deneve, Edo deWaart, Charles Dutoit, JoAnn Falletta, Giancarlo Guerrero, Emmanuel Krivine, Cristian Macelaru, Andres Orozco-Estrada, and Leonard Slatkin.

Christina and Michelle Naughton are avid recitalists, performing for such notable organizations as Lincoln Center's Great Performers, New York City's Naumburg Orchestral Concert Series (Naumburg Bandshell at Central Park), Carnegie Weill Hall, Rockefeller Evening Concerts, le Poisson Rouge, Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater (Washington Performing Arts), the National Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art

Museum, St Paul's Schubert Club, Los Angeles's Walt Disney Hall, Atlanta's Spivey Hall, Philharmonic Society of Orange County, Chamber Music San Francisco, Houston's Cullen Theater, Fort Worth Texas's Cliburn Series, Cornell Concert Series, Boston's Gardner Museum, Kansas City's Harriman Jewell Series, the Kravis Center and the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach; and in Europe at Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall, Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw, Dusseldorf's Robert Schumann Saal, and Frankfurter Hof.

Frequent guests at festivals around the world, the Naughtons have appeared at American venues such as the La Jolla Music Society, Ravinia Festival, Fortas Chamber Music Festival, Gilmore Festival, Portland Piano International, Grand Tetons Music Festival, and the Virginia Arts Festival. They perform regularly at Germany's renowned Klavierfestival Ruhr, as well as the Rheingau Musik Festival, Dresden's Musikfestspiele, Kissinger Sommer, Bremen Music Festival, France's La Roque d'Antheron Festival (Parc Du Chateau de Florans), Annecy Classic Festival (Bonlieu Scene Nationale) Nohant Festival Chopin, Festival Berlioz La Cote de Saint Andre, Zurich's Tonhalle, and Prague's Strings of Autumn Festival.

The Naughtons have undertaken several international tours. Berlin's Kammermusiksaal, Munich's Herkulesaal, Dusseldorf's Tonhalle, Hannover's Kleiner Sendesaal, Ingoldstadt's Konzertverein, Reutlingen's Freidrich-List-Halle, Pullach's Burgerhaus, Concert Series in Ludwigshafen, and Homburg-Saar Series name some of the venues where their prolific German concertizing has taken place. Recitals throughout China include Beijing's Forbidden City Concert Hall, Shenzhen Concert Hall, and Wuhan's Qintai Concert Hall. Highlights of their extensive work in Latin America include Brazil's Orquesta Sinfonica do Estado Sao Paulo; Colombia's Orquesta Filarmonica de Bogota, Biblioteca de Luis Angel, Medellin's Teatro Metropolitano; Chile's Fundacion Beethoven; Mexico City's Palacio de las Bellas Artes, Puerto Rico's Orquesta de Sinfonica Pablo Casal's Festival, Portugal's Casa da Musica Porto; and Spain's Conciertos de Valencia, Foundation de Juan March (Madrid), Foundation Botin (Santander), Auditoria Teulada Moreira, and Enclave de Camera (Ourense).

Born in Princeton, New Jersey to parents of European and Chinese descent; Christina and Michelle are graduates of the Juilliard School and the Curtis Institute of Music, where they were each awarded the Festorazzi Prize. They are Steinway Artists and currently reside in New York City.



Alsarah talking to students at Durham School of the Arts.

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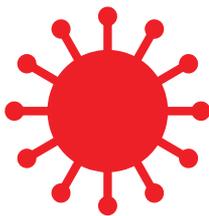
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