

2 CDs



K[NOW]N PIANO

Jimin Oh-Havenith

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JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Prelude in C major, BWV 846 (1722) 2:26

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Aria from Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 (1741) 3:21

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

III. Rondo 'Turkish March'
from Sonata No. 11, K. 331 (1784) 3:29

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Allegro from Sonata No. 16, K. 545
'Sonata facile' (1788) 2:27

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

'Für Elise', WoO 59 (1810) 3:48

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Impromptu in A-flat major, Op. 90/4 (1827) 8:09

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. 27/1 (1836) 6:45

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

'Träumerei' from Kinderszenen, Op. 15 (1838) 2:24

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Romance in F-sharp major, Op. 28/2 (1839) 3:08

FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY (1809-1847)

Andante tranquillo in B-flat major, Op. 67/3 (1845) 2:32

LOUIS MOREAU GOTTSCHALK (1829-1869)

Le Bananier, Op. 5 (1846) 3:07

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

Liebestraum No. 3 in A-flat major (1850) 5:21

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

La campanella, S. 141 (1851) 5:47

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Ballade in B major, Op. 10/4 (1854) 10:20

EDVARD GRIEG (1843-1907)

'Lonely Wanderer' from Lyric Pieces, Op. 43/2 (1886) 2:34

ISAAC ALBÉNIZ (1860-1909)

Prelude from España, Op. 165/1 (1890) 3:48

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Claire de lune from Suite bergamasque, L. 75 (1890) 5:20

SERGEI RACHMANINOW (1873-1943)

Prelude in D major, Op. 23/4 (1901) 5:54

SERGEI RACHMANINOW (1873-1943)

Prelude in G minor, Op. 23/5 (1901) 4:26

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Jeux d'eau, M. 30 (1901) 6:38

ARVO PÄRT (*1935)

Für Alina (1976) 9:30



Familiar works in a new light: piano music from Bach to Pärt

Perhaps the greatest fascination emanating from art is not so much the incalculable wealth of its manifestations and contents, but the form of experience which it enables. How is this to be understood? A comparison with everyday life may help: it consists essentially of the experience and expectation that things repeat themselves and move along those familiar paths that we call a routine. (The French word routine contains the word route, and so it originally means an “experience of the way”). Art, however, leaves familiar paths of perception and experience and enters unfamiliar terrain. Thus, even if we have been familiar with a work of art for a long time, it always allows us to discover new aspects within it (and therefore within ourselves as well), breaking through entrenched patterns of perception and expectation. The American conceptual artist Seth Siegelaub defined art in a way that is as astonishing as it is universal by dispensing with any definition of content and instead focusing on the avoidance of routine: “Art is to change what you expect from it.”

In the world of music, this dynamic is heightened even further when compared to visual arts and literature. Whilst a painting or a novel communicates directly with the recipient, music requires an entity between the work and the listener to bring the work, as notated by the composer, to life – the performing musician, or interpreter who translates it, opening up the way for it to reach the listeners. One might raise the objection that a sound recording is like a painting in a museum or a book in one’s hand, freezing the music in a sense, since the listener can play it again and again without it changing. But one must not forget that for the musician, the performance – whether in a studio or in a concert situation – ultimately remains a snapshot. They would probably see a different side to a piece of music the very next day and, besides, for many musicians the aim is to make the music sound as if it had only just been created. (The perfectionism of musicians such as Glenn Gould, Herbert von Karajan or Carlos Kleiber does not contradict this, but is an expression of a logical paradox – their interpretations aim towards an “eternal moment”; incidentally, in the recording studio, the sound engineer and producer become co-creators, something that is far too often overlooked). Of course, even world-famous works in the field of classical music are exposed to the danger of routine performance or, indeed, routine listening; all too often, their artistic originality is no longer perceived at all, but instead replaced by cliché.

This is where the programme of this CD comes in, as some of the world-famous piano pieces reveal new aspects by being juxtaposed with lesser-known works of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Jimin Oh-Havenith assembles works from 250 years of piano music history, ranging from Bach to Pärt and originating not only from “old” Europe but also (indirectly) from the “new” American world. Her programme opens with works by Johann Sebastian Bach originally written for the harpsichord. (The title, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which Bach gave to his two famous collections, should not mislead us: here “clavier” – German for “piano” in today’s parlance – refers to “keyboard”, rather than a specific instrument). The opening C major Prelude of the first volume could be called the “mother of all piano pieces”, since it seems to refer to the essence of the instrument itself with its steady stream of broken chords. The *Goldberg Variations*, written two decades later, have also weathered the transfer from a two-manual harpsichord to the piano without complaint, although pianists are confronted with numerous passages that are virtually unplayable on a single piano keyboard. The theme, the Aria, develops a particular appeal when played on a modern grand piano, since the performer can create the

Jimin Oh-Havenith

illusion of an endless chant of the richly ornamented melody. The movements chosen by Jimin Oh-Havenith from two world-famous sonatas by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the “Turkish March” from the Sonata in A major, K. 331, and the opening movement from the Sonata in C major, K. 545, written for (supposed) “beginners”, take the listener into a completely different soundworld. They also mirror the instrument for which the sonatas were written: the grand piano with the so-called “Viennese action” presented by the Augsburg organ builder Johann Andreas Stein in 1773 and highly esteemed by Mozart. This action produces a refined sound, often described as “silvery”, which is very difficult to realise on a modern grand piano, whose keys have a noticeably greater depth of touch. Franz Schubert’s piano works were also written for this instrument, but the sonorities of his music seem to stretch beyond its possibilities. In the case of the Impromptu in A flat major, Op. 90 No. 4 (D. 899), intimacy is combined with quasi-orchestral richness, and this tension certainly explains the unbroken fascination with Schubert’s piano music and the challenges it presents to performers. The excellent but unpredictable pianist and ingenious improviser Ludwig van Beethoven, on the other hand, was hardly satisfied with any of his instruments and maltreated them accordingly; only the much more robust and sonorous grand pianos by the London maker Broadwood met with his approval. However, Beethoven’s treatment of the piano in the “earworm” *For Elise*, written in 1810 as an album leaf for a dedicatee who still has not been unequivocally identified, is almost atypical: its rhythmically floating texture is not only reminiscent of Bach’s preludes, but also anticipatory of the romantic character piece.

The majority of the music recorded here was written for the romantic piano, and this is no coincidence. The piano was, in a sense, reinvented during the romantic period: the great Polish pianist Ignaz Friedmann went as far as saying that Chopin (whose works he edited) had “opened up” the piano for the first time, but also “closed” it again immediately. He was referring to Chopin’s achievement, for the first time not only to have recognised the piano’s full breadth of capabilities – i.e. its capacity for *bel canto*, polyphony and orchestral sound – but also to have brought them to perfection. A work such as the Nocturne in C sharp minor Op. 27/1 has therefore become the epitome of piano music *par excellence* for many listeners. However, Schumann’s ingenious *Dreaming* (from the *Scenes from Childhood*, Op. 15) and the melancholy second number of the *Romances*, Op. 28, as well as Mendelssohn’s highly poetic *Songs without words* and also Liszt’s innovative handling of the instrument, which transcended all previous conventions, are equally representative of this. After all, who else would have been able to develop two such different pianistic idioms as in the high-wire act of the etude *La campanella* (The Little Bell) and the noble – unfortunately all too often kitschified – *Liebesträume*!

As a tribute to her first husband, Raymund Havenith, who sadly died young and who was one of the first German pianists to take up the cause for, and record, the great piano music of the Creole-American composer-pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Oh-Havenith has included one of the best-known works by this exceptional nineteenth century musician. It is the irresistible character study *Le bananier* which Gottschalk wrote in Paris in 1846 – where he had been studying privately with Charles Hallé and Camille Saint-Saëns since 1841 – and with which he founded a new, refreshingly cheeky type of pianistic virtuosity, whose manual tightrope acts, however, could only be performed satisfactorily on the new Érard grand pianos equipped with the so-called “double escapement” action.

The following pieces in the chronology of this programme, written between 1854 and 1890, are by composers who were all eminent pianists as well, among them Rachmaninov and Albéniz, two of the greatest virtuosos of the early twentieth century. But their musical aims were very different. Brahms was a classicist who

abruptly distanced himself from his former role model Liszt, going on to write piano music in which the balance between virtuosity and expression had shifted. Having studied at the Leipzig Conservatory (founded by Mendelssohn), Edvard Grieg succeeded in emancipating Scandinavian music in one fell swoop with his Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16. Grieg also managed, with his popular and immediately accessible *Lyric Pieces*, to enthuse whole generations of children and young people to take up the piano. (Incidentally, Grieg supplemented Mozart's "Sonata facile", K. 545, with a second piano part!) Sergei Rachmaninov and Isaac Albéniz also advanced "from the margins", i.e. from Russia and Spain, into the realm of piano music dominated by Germany and France, presenting works whose technical challenges went beyond those of Liszt and Chopin, their respective manual skills no doubt proving advantageous. The fact that their works, despite their enormous virtuosic demands, became popular in the best sense of the word, points to the craftsmanship and artistic originality of these two composers who have often in the past been denigrated "salon composers".

The album concludes with works by Debussy, Ravel and Pärt, representing twentieth century piano music. Claude Debussy – who, according to Béla Bartók, had given back composers their sense of sound – has long been recognised as an important innovator (not only) of piano music. Even though composed as early as 1890, we should count the famous *Claire de lune* as part of twentieth century piano music as Debussy is already treating the piano in his very own and unique manner: he does not use the instrument to "narrate", but creates with it tonal states of being using exceedingly varied nuances. Maurice Ravel, on the other hand, succeeded in creating a masterpiece of the imagination of "water features" with his *Jeux d'eau* of 1901 (inspired by Liszt's *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este* from the third volume or year of the *Années de pèlerinage* of 1877), whose novel virtuosity seems to take the "liquefaction" of the keyboard (and hands) to the extreme.

The sparseness and immobility of the piano piece *For Alina*, written in 1976 by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b.1935), seem like a direct response to the Ravel. After a fifteen year career as an avant-garde composer in the Soviet Union, Pärt broke with his earlier musical language in 1976 and created the so-called "tintinnabuli" (the Latin word for bell or jingle bell) principle, an archaic approach of part-writing, reminiscent of ancient church chant. *For Alina* consists of only two parts, a lower bell voice and a part above it made up just of triads; the parts are rhythmically identical and have only two note durations, one long and one short. In addition, there is the instruction "calm, sublime, listening to oneself", which applies just as much to the listener as to the performer. The refined construction therefore seems as if it were created just in that moment. The sounds approach us as if they had been familiar to us since time immemorial, and yet they possess the magic of experiencing pure presence as only children know it. With the variations on the folk song *Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman*, which Mozart composed in 1781 for his pupil Josepha von Auernhammer and which are included here as a bonus, Jimin Oh-Havenith closes the circle.

Wolfgang Rathert

Translation: Viola Scheffel



Jimin Oh-Havenith



An exceptional sonority and fidelity owed to the text determine Jimin Oh-Havenith's piano playing. Her warm sound, which is always embedded within the rhythmic structure, lets music come alive in all its richness. Synchronicity of sound and rhythm, not arbitrary changes in tempo and dynamics determine the clarity of her interpretation.

Jimin Oh-Havenith was born in Seoul, South Korea. After studying piano with Jin-Woo Chung (Seoul National University) and Aloys Kontarsky (Musikhochschule Köln) she performed as a soloist and recorded for radio and CD, also as a piano duo with her late husband Raymund Havenith (†1993). The pianist taught at the Hochschule für Musik Mainz and the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt am Main. Since 2013 she has been active again as a soloist and has recorded six solo CDs.

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photos:

Fabian Fußler

Natalie Färber (p. 7)

art direction and design:

AB•Design

LC04480

forum@audite.de
www.audite.de

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