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Michelle Cann, piano

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Program:

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Frédéric Chopin

1810-1849

My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes

Joel Thompson

Totentanz

b. 1988

Lacrimosa

L'homme agenouillé

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22

Alberto Ginastera

Allegro marcato

1916-1983

Presto misterioso

Adagio molto appassionato

Ruvido ed ostinato

Intermission

Piano Sonata in E Minor

Florence Price

Andante -- Allegro

1887-1953

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, S. 514

Franz Liszt

1811-1886

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Program Notes

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Frédéric Chopin
(1810-1849)

By the age of 20 Chopin seemed well on the road to become Poland's national composer – “a second Mozart,” his compatriots called him. But after the collapse of the Polish revolution against Russia in 1830, he went into exile to France, never to return. He settled in Paris where his innovative piano compositions significantly expanded the technical, formal, harmonic, and emotive vocabulary of the instrument. He quickly achieved brilliant success as a composer teacher and pianist, becoming a favorite at the salons of the aristocracy; but he disliked and later avoided performing in public, having neither the emotional nor physical stamina for it.

Among Chopin's innovations were two sub-genres for the solo piano repertory: the mazurka (which he had “invented” while still a teenager) and the ballade. His four Ballades are among the most important of his works. Composed mostly in Paris between 1831 and 1843, they were not written as a set, nor do they follow any common formal structure.

There is some disagreement about exactly what the term “*Ballade*” relates to. Generally described as “narrative” in character, the ballades may be based on the German literary *Ballade*; some scholars believe that they may have been inspired by the ballad poetry of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. Certainly, there is no overt literary reference in any of the four.

Chopin composed the A-flat major Ballade during 1840-41 while he was in the midst of his long-term romance with the novelist George Sand (pseudonym for Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin). One of the few pieces that the composer ever played in public, it consists of three distinct sections each one building in emotional intensity. The first section with its own themes and tightly structured ABA form is separated from the rest of the piece and its motives are never repeated. The remainder of the work is designed around two themes, the first characterized by an almost limping rhythm, the second by florid arpeggios sweeping over the keyboard. In the middle section, these two themes are introduced and, in the final one, elaborately developed to an intense climax that concludes the work.

My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes

Joel Thompson
(b. 1988)

Born in the Bahamas to Jamaican parents and moving to Houston at age 10, American composer educator and choral conductor Joel Thompson studied at Emory University for his M.M. in choral conducting, and a D.M.A in composition at Yale School of Music.

Thompson's best-known work to date is *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, his response to the onslaught of killings of unarmed black men. It premiered in 2015, winning him the 2018 American Prize for Choral Composition.

According to Thompson, the title of this collection, composed in 2019, is from an essay by James Baldwin and a traditional spiritual famously quoted by Martin Luther King Jr. in his "I Have a Dream" speech. Collectively, the composition reflects Thompson's struggle to reconcile his belief in the promise of America and American society while examining systemic failures through the lens of a black composer.

The titles of the three Preludes are, however, deeply embedded in Western musical tradition:

1. *Totentanz* (Dance of Death). A grim, harsh dance, getting frantic and ending with a loud gunshot.
2. *Lacrimosa* (Tearful). a little threnody, responding to what happened above.
3. *L'homme agenouillé* (Man Kneeling), a set of somber variations on *The Star-Spangled Banner*, reflecting the ambivalence of the American dream. In the middle, anger breaks out, but the reflective mood returns, gradually fading into nothingness.

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22

Alberto Ginastera
(1916-1983)

Throughout his career, Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera attempted to find a synthesis between the indigenous music of his native country and the techniques of the twentieth century. His works, especially his ballets, often feature fantastic, mysterious, and magical stories with the symbolism of native Indian and pre-Columbian cultures. In 1958 he embraced serialism, blending it successfully with the rhythms of native traditions.

Born in Buenos Aires to a Catalan father and Italian mother, Ginastera revealed musical ability at an early age. He graduated from the Buenos Aires Conservatory in 1938, but even before graduation, a public performance of the orchestral suite from his ballet *Panambi* brought him to the attention of Lincoln Kierstein who commissioned him to write a ballet

with an Argentine setting for the American Ballet Caravan. With the aid of a Guggenheim grant, he spent 1946-47 in the United States, where he studied at Tanglewood with Aaron Copland, with whom he also forged a close friendship. Returning to Argentina, he organized and became director of the Conservatory of Music and Theatre Arts at the National University of La Plata.

Ginastera composed the Piano Sonata Op. 22 in 1952 for the Carnegie Institute (now Carnegie Mellon University) and the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University). At the time, the composer was using the model of Bartók's short melodic and rhythmic ideas applied to Argentinean folk elements. The Sonata caused a sensation, in large part because Ginastera was able to blend atonality and even 12-tone techniques with a rhythmic drive and expressiveness that was completely accessible.

The opening movement, marked *Allegro marcato*, is pervaded by a thick choral texture, but lively and syncopated rhythms, a dialogue between the right and left hands. It is classic sonata allegro form.

Presto misterioso is the tempo marking for the second movement, a perpetual motion in the form of a scherzo/trio combination. It derives from the Argentinean *malambo*, in which the dancer performs a series of foot movements within a very small area. The scherzo, with its chromatic runs, is reminiscent in character, although certainly not in thematic material with some of the scherzos in Brahms's chamber music. The Trio has more of a Debussy feel to it.

The sense of mystery continues in the *Adagio, molto appassionato*, for while it has to work up to the passionate climax, it creeps pianissimo, first through notes of the open strings of the guitar, then through serpentine chromatic passages.

The final movement, marked *Ruvido ed ostinato* (noisy and ostinato), is a toccata, a centuries-old style associated with rapid fingering and, as here, pecking at a single note. Over the ostinato is the return to the cross-rhythms of the *malambo*.

Piano Sonata in E Minor

Florence Price
(1887-1953)

Florence Price joined the already small field of African American classical composers to become the first African American woman composer to have a work played by a major orchestra. Born into a middle-class family in Little Rock, Arkansas, she received support from her dentist father in addition to early training in piano from her mother. Given the

impossibility of getting a proper musical education in Little Rock, she traveled to Boston, where she earned degrees in organ performance and piano pedagogy.

Rather than remain in a more comfortable northern environment, Price returned to Little Rock and established a teaching career between 1907 and 1927 in two African American colleges. She eventually became head of the music department at Clark College in Atlanta. After her marriage, she moved with her husband to Chicago, where she continued her education in composition. In 1932, she achieved national recognition when she won first prize in the Wanamaker competition for her Symphony No. 1, which was premiered the following year by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Like so many Black composers of this period, Price supplemented her income by playing organ gigs for silent movies and writing choral or vocal arrangements for churches. And like so many women composers, she produced a significant body of art songs. Contralto Marian Anderson featured her arrangement of the spiritual “My soul's been anchored in de Lord” and Price’s own *Songs to the Dark Virgin* with a text by Langston Hughes.

Most of her manuscripts were thought to have been lost, but in 2009 a trove of them were discovered in an abandoned house in St. Anne, Illinois. It turned out that the house had been Price's summer home. The scores and papers now reside at the University of Arkansas.

Price composed the three-movement Sonata in 1932; it won her first prize in the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker Contest ("Rodman Wanamaker Contest in Musical Composition for Composers of the Negro Race"), the same year she also won the contest for her Symphony No. 1. As in many of her works, she – successfully – merged the Black musical tradition of spirituals and plantation dances with the Eurocentric Romantic forms.

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, S. 514

Franz Liszt
(1811-1886)

Although known as one of the iconic figures of world literature, music, and art, Dr. Johannes Faustus was, in fact, a historical personage. Described first in fifteenth-century German sources as an adventurer, scholar, necromancer, cohort with Satan, and dabbler in black magic, he re-emerged a century later in literature and the popular imagination as having sold his soul to the devil in exchange for youth, love, and knowledge – an Everyman gone wrong.

The first masterpiece born of the legend was Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1588), a scion of the medieval English morality play, one of the

first Elizabethan tragedies and a precursor to Shakespeare. Marlowe's tragedy contains the story of Faust's first successful love/seduction, the innocent Margaret, but the playwright later resurrects Helen of Troy as Faust's archetypal paramour, producing the play's most enduring lines:

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

The greatest – and most influential – permutation of the Faust legend was the massive verse-play in two parts by German poet and polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832).

Franz Liszt may have been a devout Catholic, but he was fascinated with the devil. He tried to express the diabolical in numerous works (including *A Faust Symphony* utilizing the first use of a twelve-tone row, and the *Dante Symphony*) but in none more so than in his four Mephisto Waltzes.

In 1860, shortly after composing his massive *Faust Symphony*, based on Goethe's play, Liszt composed a two-movement tone poem for orchestra entitled *Two Episodes from Lenau's Faust*, based on another long dramatic epic poem on the subject by Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850). He immediately set the second episode, "The Dance in the Village Inn," for piano, calling it Mephisto Waltz No. 1. In Liszt's work, Mephistopheles and Faust enter a village inn during a wedding feast. Mephistopheles grabs a fiddle from one of the musicians and strikes up a wild dance, which turns the feast into an orgy. Faust finds a beautiful girl and dances with her into the woods, followed by the sounds of demonic music. Finally, only the song of a nightingale is heard as the couple is "swallowed by the roaring sea of lust." Incidentally, sardonic set pieces for Mephistopheles are a part of nearly every Faust version.

Liszt's music, at an almost hysterical tempo for a waltz, follows the story quite closely, starting with the piling up of perfect fifths in the opening depicting Mephisto tuning his fiddle. A new theme emphasizes the diminished fifth – known in the Middle Ages as *diabolus in musica*, (the devil in music). A beautiful tune at the end portrays the nightingale. Liszt makes short work, however, of the roaring sea of lust, finishing off the piece with a glissando and a loud cadence.

Program notes by:

Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn

Wordpros@mindspring.com

www.wordprosmusic.com

Michelle Cann, piano

Lauded as “exquisite” by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and “a pianist of sterling artistry” by *Gramophone*, Michelle Cann is one of the most sought-after pianists of her generation. Recent engagements include appearances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, The Philadelphia Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the Orquestra Sinfônica Municipal de São Paulo. Her honors include the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and the Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award. In 2024, she was named the inaugural Christel DeHaan Artistic Partner of the American Pianists Association, responsible for artistic oversight of the American Pianists Awards.

Michelle Cann’s 2024-25 season highlights include appearances with the San Francisco Symphony, the Cincinnati Symphony, and London’s Philharmonia Orchestra. She performs collaboratively with the Dover Quartet, the Imani Winds, and cellist Tommy Mesa. Her solo and collaborative recital appearances include the 92nd Street Y, New York; University of Chicago Presents; Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music; Duke Arts at Duke University; the Royal Conservatory of Music; Shriver Hall Concert Series; and Spivey Hall. She also performs a recital as the headline artist at the National Conference of the Music Teachers National Association.

Recognized as a leading interpreter of the piano music of Florence Price, Cann performed the New York City premiere of Price’s *Piano Concerto in One Movement* with The Dream Unfinished Orchestra in July 2016 and the Philadelphia premiere with The Philadelphia Orchestra and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin in February 2021. Her recording of the concerto with the New York Youth Symphony won a Grammy Award in 2023 for Best Orchestral Performance. Her acclaimed debut solo album *Revival*, featuring music by Price and Margaret Bonds, was released in May 2023 on the Curtis Studio label. With soprano Karen Slack she recorded *Beyond the Years*, released in July 2024, featuring 19 unpublished songs composed by Price. She has also recorded two Price piano quintets with the Catalyst Quartet as a part of the quartet’s UNCOVERED series. A champion of emerging talent, Cann and cellist Tommy Mesa recorded *Our Stories*, an album of new works by five living composers of color, which was released in November 2023.

A celebrated chamber musician, Cann has collaborated with leading artists including the Catalyst, Dover, and Juilliard string quartets, violinists Timothy and Nikki Chooi, soprano Karen Slack, and mezzo-soprano J’Nai Bridges. She regularly performs duo piano repertoire with her sister, pianist Kimberly Cann, as the Cann Duo. She has appeared as co-host and collaborative pianist with NPR’s *From The Top*, collaborating with actor/conductor Damon Gupton, violinist Leila Josefowicz, and violinist and MacArthur Fellow Vijay Gupta. Cann’s

numerous media appearances include PBS *Great Performances' Now Hear This* hosted by Scott Yoo and *Living the Classical Life* with host Zsolt Bognár.

Embracing a dual role as performer and pedagogue, Cann is frequently invited to teach master classes, give lecture demonstrations, and lead teaching residencies. Recent residencies include the Gilmore International Keyboard Festival and the National Conference of the Music Teachers National Association. She has recorded lessons for Tonebase, the popular piano lesson platform. She has also served on the juries of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, the Kauffman Music Center International Youth Piano Competition, and the piano competition of the Music Academy of the West.

Cann holds bachelor's and master's degrees in piano performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music, where she studied with Paul Schenly and Dr. Daniel Shapiro, and an Artist's Diploma from the Curtis Institute of Music, where she studied with Robert McDonald. She joined the Curtis piano faculty in 2020 as the inaugural Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies. She is also on the piano faculty of the Manhattan School of Music.