

# Seong-Jin Cho

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 9.40pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

## Programme

**George Frideric Handel** Suite No 5 in E major, HWV430, *The Harmonious Blacksmith*

1. Prelude
2. Allemande
3. Courante
4. Air and Variations

**Sofia Gubaidulina** Chaconne

**Johannes Brahms** *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*

**Johannes Brahms** *Klavierstücke, Op 76*

1. Capriccio in F sharp minor
2. Capriccio in B minor
4. Intermezzo in B flat major
5. Capriccio in C sharp minor

**Robert Schumann** *Études symphoniques*

### **Foot-tapping and emotionally stirring music fills Seong-Jin Cho's time travelling programme as he explores works from Handel to Gubaidulina.**

Handel's keyboard suites are not often played on the modern piano, but for Seong-Jin Cho, this is music which 'comes directly from the heart', making it immediately appealing to the listener. In the E major Suite Handel uses stylised dance rhythms originating in Italy and France, but he moves away from the strict conventions of the Baroque dance suite by omitting the Sarabande and Gigue. Instead, we have a Prelude and two courtly dances – a folksy Allemande and a stately Courante – before an uplifting finale of an Air and five ingenious variations, nicknamed *The Harmonious Blacksmith*, which have given this suite its name. The origins of the nickname are uncertain, but one story goes that Handel was inspired by the rhythmic, ringing beat of the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil while sheltering from the rain at a forge. Whatever the inspiration, this final movement, with its folksy theme, is enjoyably virtuosic with plenty of glittering runs and arpeggios to exercise the player's fingers.

Composed in 1962, Sofia Gubaidulina's Chaconne for piano is a highly expressive work that showcases the composer's distinctive musical language, inspired by classical forms and composers. A chaconne was a Baroque form characterised by a hypnotic repeated bass line (often called a 'ground bass') over which increasingly elaborate variations were written. Gubaidulina adopts many traditional features in her Chaconne which would have been very familiar to Handel, from a sonorous eight-bar theme to an increase in tempo of the accompaniment, moving the initial idea around the registers of the piano, and overlaying a melody in another rhythm. The material develops with great imagination and expression to a point where rapid, rippling melodies contrast with huge smashing chords. The Chaconne exploits the widest range of the piano's sonic possibilities, with crunching dissonances, extreme chord registers, shifting dynamics and moments of quiet lyricism.

Brahms loved Handel's keyboard suites, and his highly inventive *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* is based on a single movement from the Suite No 3 in B flat major. Brahms composed the piece in a matter of weeks in September 1861 and dedicated it to his beloved friend Clara Schumann on her birthday. The work harks back to earlier sets of variations, not least Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and Beethoven's *Diabelli and Eroica Variations*; Cho regards the Brahms work as 'the best variations that have ever been written'.

In the choice of a Baroque theme, the strict organisation of the variations, the range of piano technique and richness of expression, the use of Baroque-inspired ornamentation and counterpoint, and an extended fugue for a finale, Brahms retains – for Cho – 'the idea of Handel'.

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But they also employ more contemporary styles, including a piquant Hungarian rhapsody in Variation 13, and the whole work displays a rich kaleidoscope of contrasting moods and characters, culminating in a monumental fugue.

Seventeen years later, in 1878, Brahms composed the Eight Klavierstücke (Piano Pieces), Op 76. He had written three piano sonatas early in his career, but later he came to prefer smaller, more flexible forms such as capriccios, intermezzos, ballades, scherzos and rhapsodies. Despite their small scale, these piano pieces brim with sensuality, passion and turbulent intensity. From the original set of eight Cho plays Nos 1, 2, 4 and 5: two contrasting Capriccios, the first daring and agitated, the second a jaunty, toe-tapping Viennese dance, are followed by an Intermezzo whose warm lyricism is disturbed by an unsettled middle section, and another Capriccio of swirling, restless cross-currents.

Schumann's *Études symphoniques* exist in a rather confusing variety of versions. First published in 1837, the work was revised and republished in 1852, 1861, and finally in an 1890 edition, overseen by Brahms, who included five more variations cut from the earlier versions. The unifying element is the opening theme, written by an amateur flautist, the Baron von Fricken, guardian of a young woman called Ernestine (who puts in an appearance as 'Estrella' in Schumann's Carnival) to whom Schumann was briefly engaged before he met his beloved Clara. The work was dedicated to Schumann's English friend, the pianist and composer William Sterndale Bennett, who performed it frequently to huge acclaim, but Schumann himself felt it was unsuitable for public performance and urged Clara not to play it. Today, the *Études symphoniques* are considered one of the pinnacles of the Romantic piano repertoire, and a mark of Schumann's creative genius.

Schumann adopted the title 'symphonic' to show the piano's range of orchestral capabilities: woodwind, horns, lower strings, drums and more are all evoked through the timbres and sonorities of the piano. We also encounter the opposing characters of Schumann's creative personality – Eusebius (lyrical, melancholy and introverted) and Florestan (excitable, dynamic and extrovert), in a cascade of rapidly changing moods. The work concludes with a fiery and triumphant Finale, marked Allegro brillante.

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## Performers

**Seong-Jin Cho** piano

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