

Programme Notes by John Chen
New Zealand Tour 2018

Suite No 8 in F minor HWV 433

Handel (1685 – 1759)

- I. Prelude: Adagio
- II. Fugue: Allegro
- III. Allemande
- IV. Courante
- V. Gigue

While George Frideric Handel is primarily known for his choral and orchestral works, his keyboard output is no less excellent. Originally published in London in 1720, Handel's eight suites are now staples of the Baroque keyboard repertoire. The basic Baroque suite consisted of an Allemande (a flowing German dance), Courante (an elegant French dance), Sarabande (a slow and suggestive Spanish dance) and Gigue (a lively dance of British origin). Handel here omits the customary Sarabande, but instead opens the suite with a Prelude and Fugue. Unlike Bach, who incorporated fugues into his suite movements but did not usually write fugues as stand-alone suite movements, five of Handel's eight suites contain fugue movements.

The key of F minor, with its four flats, was particularly melancholy in Baroque tuning systems. Accordingly, this suite overall suggests dark and plaintive moods. The Prelude is expansive and grand, filled with ornaments and strong dotted rhythms. The chromaticism in the harmony and the descending melodic lines add to the intensity. The Prelude leads directly into the Fugue through an imperfect cadence. The fugue subject, based on a rising minor scale, conveys a sense of robust energy, intensified when it returns in the bass in octaves and full chords. There are subtle changes in character, such as the lightness and comparative relaxation when the themes return in major keys, but overall the fugue remains dramatic and brilliant.

The dance movements are fairly typical for the period and are full of imitative counterpoint. The smooth and calm Allemande contrasts with the more boisterous Courante. A sprightly Gigue, full of circle-of-fifths harmonic sequences, concludes the suite with vigour.

Sonata No 2 in Bb minor Op 35

Chopin (1810 – 49)

- I. Grave; Doppio Movimento
- II. Scherzo; Piu Lento
- III. Marche Funebre
- IV. Presto

Frédéric François Chopin's first attempt at writing a piano sonata was at the age of 18, and does not demonstrate the compositional expertise of handling the complex sonata-form structures. With the second sonata, ten years later, Chopin more successfully applied the

rigorous Classical form to the emotionalism of his Romantic aesthetic. However, this sonata was not immediately well received by his contemporaries, particularly Schumann, who suggested that Chopin had “simply bound together four of his most unruly children”. Time has however been kind to this sonata, and today it is one of Chopin's most enduringly popular works. This sonata is often referred to as the 'Funeral March' Sonata because of its famous third movement, which was composed two years before the other movements of the sonata.

The first movement opens with a dramatic introductory gesture which recalls Beethoven's final piano sonata. The agitated first subject gives way to a more expressive and luscious melodic second subject. Since the development section concerns itself primarily with the first subject, Chopin chooses to omit the first subject in the recapitulation, instead starting his recapitulation with the second subject in the tonic major. The movement accelerates to a heroic and brilliant close.

The second subject is an intense scherzo in Eb minor, shedding all joking the qualities that the word scherzo originally denoted. Rising chromatic lines add to the urgency and excitement. The inner section introduces a slower and more relaxed melody, a fragment of which returns at the end of the movement.

The famed funeral march has been performed at many funerals of eminent political figures, such as John F. Kennedy and Margaret Thatcher. The obsessive alternating chords and dotted rhythms build up tension and power. The serene central section is similar in mood to Chopin's nocturnes, with its lyrical melody and gentle rising arpeggio accompaniment.

The final movement is one of Chopin's most innovative creations. It is a perpetual motion movement, and very soft throughout with the exception of the final two chords. The pianist's hands are placed an octave apart and play a monophonic line which creates the semblance of harmonic progressions. It has been suggested that the rapidly ascending and descending melodic lines represent the wind, although Chopin himself did not specify any programmatic content for this movement.

Interval

Sonata in Eb minor (1900)

- I. Moderement vite
- II. Calme, un peu lent, tres soutenu
- III. Vivement, avec legerete; Plus lent, mysterieusement
- IV. Tres lent; Anime

Dukas (1865 – 1935)

The French composer, Paul Dukas, was launched to international acclaim in 1897 with what has proved to be his most enduringly popular work, the Symphonic Poem 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'. He followed up this success with the Piano Sonata in 1900. However, despite the sonata's compositional excellence, it is rarely performed today, possibly due to its immense length, technical challenges and complexity.

Dukas's musical style in this sonata demonstrates the influence of his French contemporaries, particularly Faure and Saint-Saens, to whom this sonata is dedicated. Dukas's harmonic language is quite complex, slightly more adventurous than his contemporaries. He uses a lot of chromatic contrapuntal movement, with extended dissonances and delayed resolutions, many of which overlap with following harmonies. Essentially, the harmonic tension and release drive the music forward. Typical of Romanticism are this sonata's extended melodies and overlapping phrases. Texturally, the sonata is even more rich and dense than other late-Romantic piano sonatas, but there are more fragile arpeggiated passages and sections with layered textures that parallel Impressionism. Structurally, this work is very traditional, following the typical four movement sequence and Sonata form in the outer movements. This sonata draws upon many elements of Beethoven's similarly extensive Hammerklavier Sonata, such as the fugal writing in the third movement, and the extended slow introduction to the finale.

John Chen was born in 1986, in [Kuala Lumpur](#) and moved to New Zealand at the age of 11 months. Beginning piano studies in Auckland when he was 3, at age 18 he received his Master of Music from the University of Auckland studying under Rae de Lisle.

He made his official orchestral debut at the age of 15 in 2001, performing Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

John won the Lev Vlassenko Australasian Piano Competition in 2003, where he swept all the special prizes. The following year, 2004, he launched his career by becoming the youngest-ever winner of the [Sydney International Piano Competition](#). In his subsequent concert tour of Australia he performed 31 recitals, making it the longest tour ever undertaken by a classical musician in Australia.

He has since performed and taught across North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

In 2008, John was honoured as the University of Auckland's Young Alumnus of the Year.

He completed an Artist Diploma at Colburn Conservatory in Los Angeles in 2009.

He has performed with most of the major symphony orchestras of Australia and New Zealand, and has made recordings of [Henri Dutilleux](#) and [Claude Debussy](#) for [Naxos](#) and [ABC Classics](#) respectively.

In 2012 and 2014 when John performed for Tauranga Musica he was based in Hamburg where he was Assistant Lecturer in Chamber Music at Hamburg Musikhochschule. During his visit to Zambia on 2 August 2012, John performed at Chengelo School in Mkushi. He loved the country and the people and is still currently teaching at Chengelo School as he was when he last performed for Tauranga Musica in 2016.