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SOCIETY

2023-2024 **SEASON**

WHERE WORDS FAIL  
**MUSIC SPEAKS**

RAFAL **BLECHACZ**

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

7:30 PM Vancouver Playhouse

## MESSAGE FROM OUR ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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Our concerts in 2024 begins with this performance by Rafal Blechacz, a familiar visitor and an old friend of our society. This will be followed by the Vancouver debut of Anna Geniushene, and recitals by the legendary Yefim Bronfman and Canada's own Bruce Liu – surely a star-studded line-up of performances to greet the arrival of Spring!

As always, we strive to present performances by seasoned concert artists as well as outstanding musicians who are at the outset of their artistic journey and musical career. We are confident that you will be moved by the musicianship and pianism of our artists.

The VCS aims to promote cultural interaction among the people of Vancouver, who come from a rich variety of ethnic backgrounds, and to highlight the importance of great music in our lives. We named our Society after the Polish composer Frederic Chopin because of the universal appeal of his music and his acknowledged reputation as one of the greatest composers for the keyboard.

Our society is a member of the International Federation of Chopin Societies, based in Vienna. This connection puts us in touch with some fifty other Chopin Societies worldwide, creating exciting possibilities for inviting international musicians to Vancouver.

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## RAFAL BLECHACZ

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**Sonata in A Major, K. 331**  
**Suite Bergamasque**

**MOZART**  
**DEBUSSY**

*Intermission*

**Variations in B-flat minor, Op. 3**  
**Polonaise-Fantasie in A-flat major, Op. 61**  
**Chopin Nocturne Op. 55, No. 1**  
**Mazurkas, Op. 6**

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*We acknowledge the financial support of*  
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# NOTES

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## **Mozart: *Sonata No. 11 in A major, K. 331***

Mozart's beloved A major Sonata was written in the early 1780s around the time the composer was establishing himself in Vienna. Rather than starting with the usual Allegro movement using sonata form, it begins with a set of six variations on a charming siciliano theme. The middle movement is a Minuet and Trio, the Minuet beginning with an assertive triadic motive to which there is a quiet response; the Trio has elegant hand crossing. The ever-popular Turkish Rondo is the last movement, with a refrain featuring the effects of an Ottoman military band--clattering octaves and jangling grace notes in the right hand, along with left-hand drum-rolls.

## **Debussy: *Suite Bergamasque***

The title of this four-movement suite evokes the elegant evening garden parties depicted in the eighteenth-century paintings of Watteau. The sensual atmosphere and beautiful light of those paintings were inspiration for the poetry of Verlaine, a contemporary of Debussy whose poetry he often set. Although not published until 1905, this is an early work by Debussy, written in 1890 when he was 28. It is grounded in traditional tonality and the French love of dance. Three of the four movements use names found in eighteenth-century dance suites: Prelude, Menuet and the final movement, a delicate Passepied. The famous third movement "Clair de lune" (Moonlight) takes its name from the title of a Verlaine poem which Debussy also set twice as a song, comparing the soul of a beloved to a Watteau landscape with characters dressed in glowing silken costumes dancing beside fountains lit by moonlight.

## **Szymanowski: *Variations in B-flat minor, Op. 3***

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) is considered one of Poland's finest composers, second only to Chopin; like Chopin, he died prematurely of tuberculosis. He grew up in a cultured and wealthy family of the Polish nobility; his early music lessons were with his father. At age 19, he began music studies at the State Conservatory in Warsaw, and it was here, between 1901 and 1904, that he completed this set of variations. The Variations are dedicated to the great pianist Arthur Rubinstein, who became his friend and a champion of his works. Showing late romantic influences from composers such as Richard Strauss and Scriabin, they

begin with a traditional statement of the theme in 4 phrases, melodic and rather gloomy. Twelve variations of highly contrasting character ensue. The dotted rhythms of the Polish mazurka are clothed in unusual chromatic harmonies in Variation 3. A doleful funeral march (in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time) in Variation 8 is followed by a graceful waltz in B-flat major as Variation 9, and then a lyrical Andantino in the exotic key of G-flat major. The final variation is exuberant and virtuosic, Allegro con fuoco.

## **Chopin: *Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat major, Op. 61***

This piece was published in 1846, as Chopin's relationship with Aurore Dudevant (better known by her pen name George Sand) was disintegrating and his tuberculosis worsened. The longest, freest and last of his polonaises, it is a kind of fantasy on the idea of a polonaise, a dance of the Polish nobility which Chopin used throughout his career, usually for brilliant pieces with heroic and nationalistic sentiment.

The introduction opens with the mysterious motive of a falling fourth in dotted rhythm, and four slow arpeggios rise up the keyboard, like the story-teller's harp setting the stage for an epic tale. The rhythm of the dance is established in the left hand, while the right hand introduces the main theme. Rather than using the typical dance procedure of predictable phrase lengths and repeated sections, there is continuous variation with complex harmony and the interplay of many voices. A free ternary form is created by having a slow middle section, lyrical and eloquent, resolving into a cadenza with double trills in both hands. In the return of the first section, all is transformed as galloping octaves build to a grand climax. A pianissimo left-hand trill keeps us on edge up to the final chords.

## **Chopin: *Nocturne, Op. 55, No. 1***

This nocturne from the early 1840s begins with a subdued melody accompanied by a dirge-like march pattern in the left hand. A more emphatic middle section gives way to the return of the first theme which then undergoes a heavenly transfiguration, ending with angelic harp-like ripples in F major.

## **Chopin: *Mazurkas, Op. 6***

The events of the Warsaw Uprising of 1830-31 meant that when Chopin left Poland in 1830, he would never return. These four Mazurkas, his first to be published, were completed shortly after he arrived in Vienna at age 20, no doubt written with a heart full of concern for his home country.

The F-sharp minor Mazurka shows many of the standard features of the genre—repeated sections, snapping dotted rhythms, a stress on beat 3 of the bar, a certain freedom in the rhythm. The C-sharp minor Mazurka begins with a doubled drone, a reference to the original peasant heritage of the dance. The third Mazurka in E major shows good humour in its rumbling bass comments and robust but sophisticated main theme. The set concludes with a tiny Presto in E-flat minor, whirling busily over an insistent bass pedal note.

**Ruth Enns,**  
*Vancouver Academy of Music*  
March 2024



Rafal Blechacz  
*Piano*

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# BIOGRAPHY

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Even though Rafal Blechacz is an old friend of our Society, each of his Vancouver appearances causes both audience members and music critics in search of new superlatives.

The unquestionable winner of the 2005 International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, he has since developed into a thoughtful and mature artist and musician, whose every appearance or recording is eagerly anticipated. In the words of distinguished pianist John O'Connor, "Rafal Blechacz is one of the greatest artists I have ever heard in my life."

A Deutsche Grammophon recording artist, Blechacz's every album has been the recipient of rave reviews as well as prestigious awards. His 2007 recording of Chopin's Preludes achieved platinum status in Poland, and has been honoured with awards by Germany's Echo Klassik and France's Diapason d'Or. He now has a dozen universally acclaimed albums to his credit.

In 2015, at a concert with the Warsaw Philharmonic, Blechacz received the President of the Republic of Poland's medal Cavalier Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta.

We are delighted that Rafal Blechacz has again agreed to share his artistry with Vancouver audiences.

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