GUEST ARTIST CONCERT: STEPHEN RUNGE ACROSS THE WAVES
Tuesday, November 7, 2023
8 p.m., von Kuster Hall
Stephen Runge, piano

Barcarolle (1986)  
Roger Smalley  
(1943-2015)

Barcarolle in G minor, Op. 65, No. 6 (1865)  
Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer, Op. 31, No. 8 (1847)  
Charles-Valentin Alkan  
(1813-1888)

Auf dem Wasser zu singen, D.774 (1823)  
transcription by Franz Liszt in Lieder von Schubert, S.558, No. 2 (1838)  
Franz Schubert  
(1797-1828)

La lugubre gondola, S.200, No. 1 (1882-83)  
Franz Liszt  
(1811-1886)

Barcarolla (from Out of Doors, Sz.81, 1926)  
Béla Bartók  
(1881-1945)

Barcarolle (2013)  
Marc-André Hamelin  
(b.1961)

Wasserklavier (1965)  
Luciano Berio  
(1925-2003)

INTERMISSION

Barcarola in A minor, Op 15 (1910)  
Alfredo Casella  
(1883-1947)

La Barca (from Impresiones intimas, 1911-14)  
El Lago (from Paisajes, 1947)  
Federico Mompou  
(1893-1987)

Tamarit: Barcarolle (1930)  
Agustí Grau  
(1893-1964)

Barcarolle in E-flat major, Op. 71 (1905)  
Mel Bonis  
(1858-1937)

Barcarolle No. 5 in F-sharp minor, Op. 66 (1894)  
Gabriel Fauré  
(1845-1924)

Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60 (1845-46)  
Frédéric Chopin  
(1810-1849)

Join us tomorrow morning at 9:30am in von Kuster Hall for Stephen Runge’s masterclass with current piano students
PROGRAM NOTES

Amid the shimmer of the mirroring waves
the rocking boat glides, swan-like,
on gently shimmering waves of joy.
The soul, too, glides like a boat....
Alas, with dewy wings
time vanishes from me on the rocking waves...
Until, on higher, more radiant wings,
I myself vanish from the flux of time.

These lines by Friedrich Leopold, Graf zu Stolberg-Stolberg, set so memorably to music by Franz Schubert in his famous song Auf dem Wasser zu singen (“To be sung on the water”), compare the soul traveling through life to a boat being carried forward by the waves. Tonight’s program of music from the last 200 years is centered around the barcarolle, a genre which imitates the songs of Venice’s gondoliers, usually in 6/8 time, and with an accompaniment evoking the stroke of the oars and the rocking of the gondolas on the waves. While the barcarolle became an extremely popular form of light music in the 19th century, particularly in amateur salons and opera houses, tonight’s music conveys far deeper emotions, taking the listener on a journey from the sombre darkness of the opening pieces to the “shimmering joy” of the closing works.

British-Australian Roger Smalley’s Barcarolle, written as a 50th birthday gift for his composition teacher John White, is his own transcription of an interlude from his theatre piece William Derrincourt (1977-79). Smalley writes “John White introduced me to the works of many late-Romantic composers including Fauré, Alkan, and Busoni – all of whom wrote Barcarolles – and so it seemed appropriate to allude to their often ambivalent, and slightly sinister, melos and characteristic keyboard textures.” The lilting accompaniment and the prominence of the interval of an octave will be echoed in several other works on tonight’s program.

Charles-Valentin Alkan was one of the 19th century’s most original composer-pianists. He counted Chopin and Delacroix among his friends, but remained an outsider and even a recluse. His extensive output of piano music ranges from large-scale works calling for mammoth virtuosity to tiny miniatures. His G minor Barcarolle is one of several works he contributed to the genre, taken from his third Recueil de chants, modelled after Mendelssohn’s Songs without words. The eighth of Alkan’s 25 Preludes is The song of the mad woman on the sea shore, which must be one of the century’s most disturbing creations with its haunting melody floating above an obsessive accompaniment in the depths of the piano.

In contrast to Alkan’s relative obscurity, Franz Liszt was one of the most celebrated musicians of the 19th century. In addition to his own huge output of original compositions, Liszt was a prolific arranger of the music of others, writing more than 200 transcriptions. One of several arrangements of Schubert songs which ingeniously combine vocal line and accompaniment into music for a single pianist, each of the four verses of Auf dem Wasser zu singen features a different texture, with the melody rising in register from tenor to alto to soprano as the piece progresses.

Most well-known for the extravagant virtuosity of his Etudes, Hungarian Rhapsodies, or the Sonata in B minor, Liszt’s late works are in contrast extremely sparse and experimental, with often radical use of harmony and fragmentary melodic lines. Liszt wrote the two pieces he called The lugubrious gondola while visiting Richard Wagner in Venice in late 1882, inspired by the silent funeral processions gliding along the canals by gondola. Liszt had a premonition that Wagner would die in Venice, and in fact Wagner was dead six weeks later.

Liszt’s fellow Hungarian Béla Bartók was often inspired by nature, most famously in his “night music” style where he imitates the sounds of nocturnal animals and insects. In the Barcarolla from the Out of Doors suite, the regular 6/8 meter is disturbingly distorted, expanding or contracting unpredictably into groups of five and seven. A mere suggestion of the gondolier’s song is heard above a sinuously chromatic accompaniment.
One of today’s most celebrated pianists, Canadian Marc-André Hamelin is also a prolific composer. His Barcarolle, dedicated to fellow pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, retains the traditional rocking accompaniment (and the octaves first heard in the Smalley, here on an almost continuous B-flat), though only the briefest snippets of melody emerge from the texture. After coming to rest on ten tolling B-flat’s in the piano’s lowest register, the work ends with a single unexpected bar of music marked luminoso.

The first half of tonight’s program concludes with the comparative simplicity of Luciano Berio’s Wasserklavier (“Water-Piano”), the first of six short encores written between 1965 and 1990, including one work inspired by each of the four elements. Berio indicates this piece is to be played teneramente e lontano, tenderly and from a distance.

Of all the works heard tonight, Alfredo Casella’s Barcarola adheres perhaps most closely to the traditional barcarolle with its lyrical singing melody and gently rocking accompaniment. The faster middle section evokes a nocturnal serenade, complete with strumming guitar.

The music of Catalan Federico Mompou manages to say a great deal using very limited means. Self-taught as a composer, he aimed “to write works in which nothing is missing and nothing is superfluous”. We return to the image of a boat again in the sixth of the Intimate Impressions, while in The lake from the set of Landscapes, one can sense the rippled surface of the water, but seemingly at a distance or perhaps only in one’s memory.

Like Mompou, Agustí Grau was also a member of the short-lived CIC (Independent Composers of Catalonia). Tamarit, named after the castle and beach town in Catalonia’s Tarragona region, is dedicated to the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes who gave the premieres of many works by Ravel, Debussy, Satie, Falla, and Albéniz. Grau’s preface to the work reads “…where the sea is the bluest and most resplendent is found the castle of Tamarit. The water cradles its solitude with eternal murmurs. The spirit of centuries sleeps in its half-ruined walls; their stones keep in silent reflection the ineffable harmonies which come from the horizon, bringing the clamour of those going toward distant lands.” The central section of the work makes use of folk melodies of Mozarabic origin.

The Barcarolle in E-flat is one the larger works of Mélanie Bonis, who published under the more gender-neutral name “Mel Bonis.” A student of César Franck and peer of Claude Debussy at the Paris Conservatoire, Bonis showed great promise as a teenager but was prevented from pursuing a career in music by her parents and husband. Nevertheless, she returned to composing later in life, eventually writing more than 300 works and gaining considerable recognition as a composer. Her music was performed by some of the most important performers of the time (including Ricardo Viñes), and Saint- Saëns said, “I never imagined a woman could write such music!” She eventually became secretary of the important Société des compositeurs de musique, whose members included Chabrier, Duparc, Fauré, Gounod, Massenet, Offenbach, and Saint-Saëns.

Gabriel Fauré wrote thirteen Barcarolles, spanning the long course of his compositional career and moving from the Gounod- and Chopin-inspired lyricism of the early works to the sparse modernism of the final period. The fifth Barcarolle contains many hallmarks of Fauré’s transitional middle period: a fragmented opening melody, highly chromatic and constantly modulating harmonies, frequent shifting of registers, and use of the piano’s entire range (the range of his music increasingly narrowed in later life as Fauré lost the ability to hear the highest and lowest registers on his way to total deafness). Beginning in an unsettled F-sharp minor, the music moves to a pair of imposing fortissimo climaxes before ending in the radiant sunset glow of F-sharp major. The composer and critic Émile Vuillermoz wrote “Until now the Barcarolle had only sailed on lakes or lagoons. The No. 5 seems to carry us off to the open sea.”

Fauré concludes in F-sharp major, the key of Frédéric Chopin’s sole piece in this genre. In this work, Chopin retains the characteristic song-like melody floating above a lilting compound rhythm, while simultaneously completely transcending the sentimental salon style of so many contemporary barcarolles. The opening theme is one of Chopin’s most inspired, heard mostly in parallel thirds and sixths – perhaps a duetting pair of lovers sailing down a canal? The middle section begins quietly in A major, building in intensity and volume
over an obsessively repetitive rocking accompaniment figure before subsiding into a calmer lyrical melody. A magically hushed transition leads to a suddenly triumphant return of opening theme, its delicate left hand accompaniment figure now thundered out in octaves (again, an important interval in this piece) and followed immediately by a return of the lyrical theme from the middle section, now transformed in a climactic fortissimo. The music returns to calm and quiet in the closing page, possibly bringing to mind again the final words of Stolberg’s poem:

Until, on higher, more radiant wings,
I myself vanish from the flux of time.

Notes by Stephen Runge

BIOGRAPHY

Praised for his sensitivity and versatility, pianist Stephen Runge has been heard from Victoria to Halifax as soloist and collaborative artist. Stephen has been broadcast nationally on CBC Radio Two and La Chaîne Culturelle de Radio-Canada, receiving special recognition as soloist and for his frequent performances of chamber music and art song. In recent seasons he has shared the stage with artists such as violinists Jasper Wood, Andréa Tyniec and Kerry DuWors, tenor David Pomeroy, mezzo-sopranos Krisztina Szabó and Patricia Green, and pianist Adam Sherkin, and has appeared as soloist with the Regina Symphony Orchestra and the Mount Allison Chamber Orchestra. Stephen has recorded all the major works for solo piano by Robert Schumann, an album of solo piano works from 1917, and a recital of English art song with countertenor Daniel Cabena.

Holding a Doctorate of Music in Piano Performance from l’Université de Montréal, Stephen is in demand across the country as teacher, adjudicator, and clinician. He has presented at conferences and workshops on topics such as effective practice methods, performance practices for Baroque and Classical music, and the challenges of teaching popular music. Stephen came to national attention when he was awarded first prize in the piano category of the National Music Festival. Since then he has been the recipient of several important awards, including prizes at the Eckhardt-Gramatté National Music Competition and the International Stepping Stone of the Canadian Music Competition.

Born and raised in Regina, Saskatchewan, Stephen Runge studied with Janice Elliott-Denike before completing a Bachelor of Music degree at the University of Victoria, where he was a student of Dr. Robin Wood and was awarded the Victoria Medal and the Governor General’s Silver Medal upon graduation. Under the direction of Marc Durand, he completed a Master of Music degree at l’Université de Montréal and an Artist Diploma at The Glenn Gould School of The Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. He also studied at the Banff Centre for the Arts with Julian Martin of the Juilliard School, and was a Fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center in Lenox, Massachusetts. Stephen Runge taught at St. Olaf College in Minnesota before joining the Department of Music at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he is currently Head of the Department of Music, Professor of Piano, and Director of Mount Allison Local Centre Examinations in Music. In recognition of his outstanding teaching, research, creative activities, and service, Mount Allison awarded him a Paul Paré Excellence Award in 2010, the J.E.A. Crake Award for excellence in teaching in the Faculty of Arts in 2014, and the Paul Paré Medal in 2020.

For more information, please visit Stephen’s website at stephenrunge.com.

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