‘Few pianists alive convey the sheer joy and exhilaration of being masters of their craft more vividly and uncomplicatedly than Nelson Freire.’

THE GUARDIAN
NELSON FREIRE
BRAZIL

MONDAY 26 FEBRUARY 2018, 7.30PM
Elisabeth Murdoch Hall

6.45PM
Free pre-concert talk with Kristian Chong

DURATION
One hour & 50-minutes including a 20-minute interval

This concert is being recorded by ABC Classic FM for a deferred broadcast.
Melbourne Recital Centre acknowledges the people of the Kulin nation on whose land this concert is being presented.
PROGRAM

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(b. 1756, Salzburg, Austria – d. 1791, Vienna, Austria)
Piano Sonata No.11 in A, K.331, ‘Alla Turca’
Andante grazioso
Menuetto – Trio
Alla Turca. Allegretto (Rondo)

ROBERT SCHUMANN
(b. 1810, Zwickau, Germany – d. 1856, Bonn, Germany)
Fantasie in C, Op.17
Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen; Im Legenden-Ton
[Utterly fantastically and passionately played; In the tone of a legend]
Mäßig. Durchaus energisch [Moderately. Very energetic]
Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten. [Slowly. Always quiet.]

INTERVAL 20-minutes

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
(b. 1810, Żelazowa Wola, Poland – d. 1849, Paris, France)
Impromptu No.2 in F-sharp, Op.36
Ballade No.3 in A-flat, Op.47

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(b. 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France – d. 1918, Paris, France)
La plus que lente
Children’s Corner: Golliwogg’s Cakewalk

ISAAC ALBÉNIZ
(b. 1860, Camprodon, Spain – d. 1909, Cambo-les-Bains, France)
Iberia Book 1: Evocación
Navarra
It is typically assumed that ‘history’ is a settled matter; that issues relating to the pantheon of great composers, for example, are all permanently engraved in the past. Yet as recently as 2014, history required amendment after manuscript pages of one of Mozart’s most famous sonatas, presumed to have been lost, were discovered in the National Széchényi Library in Hungary. Uncovered was a four-page section of Mozart’s Sonata in A major, K.331, incorporating much of the first movement, the second movement’s entire Minuet and the opening bars of its central Trio section. The discovery made headlines around the world and led publishers to rectify many of the tiny errors that had been propagated since the sonata’s earliest editions.

For most listeners, the discernible differences will be minor: small changes in the first movement to the rhythm of two decorative runs, an altered note in the theme of the Minuet, and the reversion to the major tonality of a subsequent passage which previous editors had shifted to the minor. While we now have an authentic source for much of the work, its date of composition still remains uncertain. Its publication, by Artaria in Vienna, occurred in 1784, and for many years it was thought to have been written as early as 1778. The consensus of leading scholars now, however, places its creation at some point in 1783.

The first movement is unique among Mozart’s keyboard sonatas, as it is not in the typical ‘sonata-form’ layout; rather, it is a Theme with Variations. A lilting 6/8 time signature sustains the opening variations, which are progressively ornamented, before the music shifts to the tonic minor. A subsequent variation includes cross-hand passages, reminding us of the composer’s legendary virtuosity. A highly embellished Adagio episode ensues, before the pace resumes in the final variation and coda. The Minuet and Trio is, on the surface, a model of restraint, yet closer analysis reveals unusual groupings of bars, creating phrases which could make attempts at dancing difficult. Yet it is the final movement for which this sonata is famed: the ubiquitous Rondo ‘Alla Turca’. At the time, Turkey was a cultural fascination across Europe, its oriental touches evident in unusual melodic steps and strident percussive effects. While much of the movement is in the minor tonality, adding to its sense of ‘drive’, it is the thrashing A major sections that propel the sonata to its jubilant close.

Schumann’s great C-major Fantasie is regarded as one of his finest works. It was conceived as a contribution to the creation of a monument to Beethoven, and its original movement titles – Ruins, Trophies, Palms – were intended as direct references, along with a quotation from
Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony. Ultimately, the published version included none of these, and was instead headed by lines from the German poet, Friedrich Schlegel: ‘Through all the tones in Earth’s many-coloured dream, there sounds one soft, long-drawn note for the secret listener’. Letters to Clara, his future wife, reveal that the ‘long-drawn note’ was in fact a reference to her, made more poignant by the realisation that in 1836, at the time of composition, Schumann had been forced to renounce his love for her on the insistence of her father. Indeed, many find a proliferation of hidden ciphers in Schumann’s music, and a passage from the closing page of the first movement can be identified with a phrase from Beethoven’s song cycle, An die ferne Geliebte: meaning ‘to the distant beloved’, a further reference to Clara is established.

The first movement begins with such fervour that Schumann later stated that he considered it ‘one of the most intense things I have written’. While adhering to the traditional ‘sonata-form’ pattern, the central development section, which is marked ‘In legendary tone’, in fact redeployes a subsidiary theme from the exposition, but is so manifestly transformed that it appears new. The second movement is an exultant march, and its almost mythical level of technical difficulty is such that the challenges of the final page are rarely heard unblemished in live performance. Breaking from the typical progression of movements, the slow movement concludes the work. Its unexpected shifts of harmony, evident as early as the second phrase, engender a sense of transcendent mystery, an effect heightened by the near-absence of textural change throughout. In great performances, the effect can be mesmeric and profound.

As the editor of a highly popular journal, Schumann was influential in promoting Chopin’s budding career, famously stating in an 1831 review, ‘Gentlemen hats off, a genius’. Yet as a composer, Chopin developed substantially after his early brilliant-style works, the most significant changes occurring after his near-disastrous holiday with the authoress, George Sand, on the island of Mallorca in 1838. For the following summer, they relocated to Sand’s rural French estate at Nohant, where many of the composer’s mature works were composed. Chopin’s Impromptu in F-sharp major dates from that first summer, and, like his other two works in the genre (and the earlier Fantaisie-Impromptu, published posthumously) it takes the form of a tripartite ‘ABA’ structure, albeit with modifications. The theme is stated over a gentle left-hand ostinato, which leads to a passage of tentative, seemingly inconclusive
chords. Unlike the melodious central sections of his earlier impromptus, here a vigorous march in the style of French opera occurs. At length, the opening melody returns, yet in the unexpected key of F major, before shifting – some would say uncomfortably – back to the home key, where it is embroidered with demisemiquavers. A manuscript sketch indicates that the subsequent return to the passage of tentative chords was an afterthought, further diverging from, yet also enriching, the basic arch-like structure.

Dating from 1841, Chopin’s Ballade in A-flat major was similarly a creation of a summer spent at Nohant. While the title perhaps suggests the free narrative of its literary counterpart, the work is based on the traditional ‘sonata-form’ structure. The opening, self-enclosed theme features detailed counterpoint, a sign of the composer’s growing interest in this aspect of his music. The subsequent two-note falling-octave pattern is an important linking device and leads to a dance-like second subject in the key of the relative minor. A brisk waltz marks the beginning of the development section, which, as with his other Ballades, builds with a sense of power and inevitably, leading to a return of the opening themes, but with their order now reversed.

While Franz Liszt famously preferred the power of pianos manufactured by Erard in Paris, Chopin was disposed toward the refined and velvety tones of those made by Pleyel. Noted for their delicate timbre and light touch, Pleyels directly influenced many French composers and, in particular, Claude Debussy, who also favoured the instruments. While the numerous piano-roll recordings made by the composer can seem disappointing (perhaps due to being replayed on modern instruments), the quintessential importance of tone to his playing is reflected in comments of the pianist, Marguerite Long, who reminisced: ‘How could one forget his suppleness, the caress of his touch?’ The comment seems especially pertinent to a small valse composed in 1910, La plus que lente. Literally translated as ‘more than slow’, the title is not in fact an instruction to play excessively slowly. (For example, compare Debussy’s at-times brisk Welte-Mignon roll from 1913.) Rather, it is an attempt to ‘out waltz’ the popular salon slow waltz, a genre in which Jules Massenet and Erik Satie had found great success. Here, the principal theme is marked by gentle syncopations, its lilting tranquillity amplified by an instruction to play with rubato. Two further melodies are interpolated, although overall textural uniformity negates any sense of contrast, instead evoking an impression of languid timelessness.
A scandal erupted in 1905 when Debussy abandoned his wife to live with the married singer, Emma Bardac, in London. Their child, Claude-Emma (nicknamed Chouchou), was born the same year, and later was the dedicatee of Debussy’s famous *Children’s Corner* suite (1908). The title of the final work, *Golliwogg’s Cakewalk*, can be problematic on two levels: the etymology of the ‘cakewalk’ is obscure and contentious, while use of the term ‘golliwogg’ is now viewed as racist. Despite various claims about the origin of the word, the ‘cakewalk’ was an African American dance-tradition of the southern states, dating from the 1870s. The syncopated 2/4 dance – anticipating both ragtime and jazz – eventually made its way to Paris in the early 20th century, featuring in dancehall revues. The English author, Florence Upton, created the ‘golliwogg’ character for her popular children’s books, a jolly doll recognisable through its black face, red trousers, and frizzy hair. In a modern linguistic setting, this piece should simply conjure a little jazz dance for one of Chouchou’s favourite toys. Yet the humour also has an adult twist, with Debussy’s quotation in the central section of the first notes of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, above which is sarcastically inscribed a direction to play ‘with great emotion’. (After an initial fascination, Debussy famously wrote of Wagner: ‘a beautiful sunset mistaken for a dawn’.)

It is often remarked that the best Spanish music of the 19th century was written by foreigners such as Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov and Bizet. A truly authentic Spanish style developed only slowly, emerging in the early 20th century in compositions by Albéniz, Granados and Falla, all students of the influential composer and musicologist, Felip Pedrell. Isaac Albéniz was the oldest of the three, a precociously gifted pianist who performed throughout Europe in his youth. After a diagnosis of Bright’s Disease in 1900, he returned to Spain to devote his remaining years to composition, creating his *opus magnum* for piano, *Iberia*, between 1905 and 1908. A vast and complex composition, its 12 ‘impressions’ were progressively published in four volumes, and the first piece, *Evocación*, commences in a mood of contemplation. Written in the seldom-used key of A-flat minor, the opening melody evokes Spain through its gentle inflections and ornamental triplet figures, while a later theme develops expansively. The final bars give the sense of improvisation, the pauses and extreme dynamic markings (reaching as soft as ‘ppppp’) lending the music intimacy.

Albéniz frequently referenced the regions of Spain in his music, as with the final piece on the program, *Navarra*. Celebrating the landscape of the north, the work was left incomplete at
the composer’s death in 1909. A pianistic tour de force, it is dedicated to Marguerite Long, and has traditionally been performed with an ending composed by Albéniz’s pupil, Dédéat de Ségérac. The composer’s archetypal soaring melodies (typically played in right-hand octaves) are abundant and emblazoned over a highly complex and ornamented accompaniment. Yet, as with the sonata by Mozart which opened the program, ‘history’ can be a fluid thing: the Canadian pianist, Marc-André Hamelin, recently crafted a new and powerful completion, almost doubling the work’s length in the process. Of course, in dilemmas of choice it is up to the performer, although many will settle for Ségérac’s concluding bars, which offer serenity and inner peace.

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Scott Davie is an Australian concert pianist based in Sydney currently a Lecturer of Piano at The University of Sydney.
Born in Boa Esperança, a small town in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais (Brazil), Nelson Freire is now a universally acclaimed artist. He has received honours and decorations in numerous countries, and regularly collaborates with top class orchestras, conductors and recital halls worldwide. He has signed an exclusive contract with DECCA and his regular recordings have led him to explore the works with a deeper insight and unique creative power.

Freire moved at the age of five to Rio de Janeiro when his parents, impressed by the precocious talent of their son, moved the whole family to the city in search of better music teaching conditions to great fruition. Under the guidance of two outstanding teachers, Nise Obino and Lucia Branco, the young Nelson, aged only 14, could already be considered a great master of the piano.

At the age of 12, as finalist at the first International Piano Competition of Rio de Janeiro, he received a grant from Brazilian president Juscelino Kubitschek and went to study in Vienna under Bruno Seidlohofer, teacher of Friedrich Gulda. At age 19, Freire was awarded the Dinu Lipatti Medal in London and later won 1st Prize at the International Vianna da Motta Competition in Lisbon, which earned him a contract with the agency Conciertos Daniel in Madrid. He then toured most of South America and Spain.
At the age of 23 for his London début, he made a sensation when The Times called him ‘The young lion of the keyboard’. The following year, after his New York debut performance with the New York Philharmonic, Time Magazine hailed him as ‘One of the most exciting pianists of this or any age’.

From then on and for five decades, Nelson Freire has performed in over 70 countries and become a star in the international music world. His recordings have been rewarded with the Diapason d’Or, Grand Prix du Disque, Victoire d’Honneur, Edison Award, Gramophone Award and a Latin Grammy for the album Nelson Freire Brasileiro in 2013.

He has been the recipient of the most prestigious decorations: Citizen of Rio, Knight of the Order of Rio Branco, Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur, Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres, Medal Pedro Ernesto, Medal of the City of Paris, Medal of the City of Buenos Aires and doctor honoris causa from the Music School of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Nelson Freire has performed with many of the world’s major conductors, such as Valery Gergiev, Yuri Temirkanov, Seiji Ozawa, Pierre Boulez, Riccardo Chailly, Charles Dutoit, Eugen Jochum, André Previn, Lorin Maazel, Rudolf Kempe, Rafael Kubelik, David Zinman, Kurt Masur and Sir Colin Davis. He has appeared with the greatest orchestras: the Philharmonics of Berlin, London, New York and Israel, as well with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, the Leipzig Gewandhaus and the orchestras of Munich, Paris, Tokyo and St. Petersburg including the Mariinsky - Vienna, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Chicago and Montreal.


He is regularly invited to be a member of the jury for the most prominent piano competitions such as the Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Van Cliburn.

Fluent in several languages, Nelson Freire has made his home in Rio de Janeiro, his city of predilection, where he returns regularly between tours.
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