

CMNZ presents

NOCTURNES





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in the dark night of the soul.
Clarinetist **Jonathan Cohen**
joins the celebrated **NZTrio** for a
meditative journey through one of
Messiaen's earliest masterworks.

Composed and premiered
whilst Messiaen was interned at
a prisoner of war camp during
WWII, this evocative work
transcends time and space, and
is filled with the jubilant song of
birds flying free from captivity.

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CMNZ presents

QUARTET FOR THE END OF TIME

18 – 30 June

CMNZ presents

NOCTURNES

with **Jian Liu**

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Programme notes by Hamish Robb

Senior Lecturer in Musicology at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington



The **Wellington** concert is being recorded for later broadcast by **RNZ Concert**.

Tēnā tatou

We continue our 2021 Season with Nocturnes. Fabulous pianist, educator and friend of CMNZ, Jian Liu sets off on a journey of exploration of well-known and lesser-known nocturnes.

This beautifully crafted programme truly spans the life of the musical form. From Irish composer, John Field, known as the composer of the first ever nocturne and who led the way for Chopin, through Poulenc, Britten and Joio to works by New Zealand composers Dame Gillian Whitehead and Leonie Holmes.

We are grateful, as always, to our supporters for enabling CMNZ to bring live musical experiences to centres around Aotearoa.

The use of the Public Trust Hall is made possible through the generosity of Maurice and Kaye Clark.

As we remain alert to the ever-changing pandemic landscape around the world, please be reassured that Chamber Music New Zealand will follow Government guidelines to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for all of our concerts. Your health and well-being, and that of all our artists is our primary concern.

Thank you for coming to this concert. Sit back, and allow Jian Liu's evocative Nocturnes to wash over you.

– The CMNZ team



Jian Liu [Piano]

Internationally celebrated concert pianist, chamber musician, and educator, Dr. Jian Liu, has performed and taught throughout Europe, Asia, and North America. His artistry has taken him to some of the most prestigious concert halls, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Steinway Hall in New York; Sprague Hall and Woolsey Hall of Yale University; and Paul Hall of The Juilliard School; and as a featured soloist with orchestras including Symphony Orchestra of National Philharmonic Society of Ukraine, China National Symphony Orchestra, Phoenix Symphony Orchestra, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, Orchestra Wellington,

Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, and Yale Philharmonia. Jian has also been a prize-winner at Horowitz and Missouri Southern international competitions and has performed at Auckland, Idyllwild, Beijing, Lausanne, and Krakow music festivals.

A passionate performer, Jian is equally committed to education. Having served for four years on the faculty of the Yale Department of Music, he is currently Programme Director of Classical Performance and Head of Piano Studies at Te Kōkī New Zealand School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington.

Nocturnes

In the darkness and stillness of the night, our senses are opened up to mystery and beauty otherwise unnoticed; through silence and open space, more is heard and felt. This was certainly thought to be true in the nineteenth century, a time of romantic longing for the “unheard”, “unseen”, and “in between”. In music, these qualities were sought through the unique nature and sound of the piano. The “singing” piano came to life as much through the mind as it did through real sound. As a non-sustaining instrument offering little sonic reaction to a performer’s continued agency between attack points, the piano relies largely on the pianist’s and listener’s inner, imagined sounds. The mystery and wonder of the “singing” melodic line—enriched by images of the night—thus became the essence of the piano nocturne.

While the term “nocturne” had been used earlier, the specific genre of the dreamy nocturne for piano solo

was a romantic invention. It was considered a type of “character piece” or “piano miniature” (short pieces intended to evoke particular moods, other examples including preludes, waltzes, impromptus, and songs without words). Unlike many nineteenth-century genres defined by form, the nocturne was defined by character, evoking moods and feelings of night time. Nocturnes were intimate, dreamy, wistful, mysterious, melancholic, nostalgic, and sensual.

The reputed inventor of the nocturne was John Field, an Irish-born composer. But it is Frédéric Chopin who is held up as the undisputed master of the genre. The musical characteristics of the nocturne suited Chopin’s shy and sensitive nature. There are several nineteenth-century accounts of the exquisite sounds Chopin produced with his intimate performing style, and of the imaginative (inner) sounds he induced in the minds of his listeners.

The nature of the nocturne also perfectly suited performances in the salon—Chopin’s venue of choice.

Another defining quality of the nocturne—the seamless blurring of vocally-inspired melody with idiomatic pianistic figuration—stems largely from Chopin’s compositional style. He was inspired by the long and sustained lyrical phrasing of the bel canto singing he heard in European opera halls, and aspects of his melodies often assume a Bellini-like quality. But his melodies also suggest a rich variety of different vocal registers and nuances within a single phrase—often achieved by quickly exiting ranges through rapid, light notes. Such sonic filigree perfumes the melodic air, especially in melodic repetitions, often allowing the composer to maintain one overall mood within a section.

Other defining features typically include a feeling of improvisation; an attention to silence and space; a contrasting middle section of often faster music; a clear separation of hands and their functions (the right hand playing a clear, vocally-inspired melody, and the left hand playing an arpeggiated, undulating accompaniment more instrumental in nature); and a fine attention to resonance and colour, often achieved through widely spaced registers.

All of the pieces on tonight’s programme feature some or all of these qualities. While some of the Nocturnes revel in nocturnal bliss, others explore the more mysterious or even sinister sides of night time.

GILLIAN WHITEHEAD

Lullaby for Matthew

JOHN FIELD

Nocturne No 6 “Cradle Song”

The first two items on the programme are lullabies. Whitehead’s poignant piece bears many similarities to the romantic Nocturne. It features elegantly simple phrase structure, careful use of resonance and registral space to evoke the night, and thematic variation and decoration. From a gentle sleep, we are overtaken by restless, fitful dreams, before the peace of dawn approaches.

John Field was the first composer to ascribe the title “Nocturne” to a short piano piece. A piano student of Muzio Clementi, his pianism and compositions caught the attention of the major composers in Europe, including Chopin. Field’s style fuses classical and romantic styles with ease; one can simultaneously hear Mozart and Chopin. This nocturne opens in a delightfully simple manner, like a child’s music box. After opening that box, we gently sort through the trinkets and treasures within, recalling the events and emotions associated with each, before final reflections and the gentle closing of the lid.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Nocturne in F-sharp Major, Op 15, No 2

LEONIE HOLMES

Nocturne for Piano

Chopin and Holmes’ nocturnes feature fine attention to colour, register, and luminosity.

Chopin’s Op 15, No 2 is written in the otherworldly key of F-sharp major, evoking a blissful scene when opening like an arabesque. The middle section—with its quicker pace, insistently repeating dotted rhythm, and two-note pleading figures—builds in anxiety. When the opening melody returns decorated for the final section, the middle section seems like a bad dream. The nocturne ends with one of Chopin’s favourite techniques—the music bathes in its own luminous resonance of F-sharp major through the repetitive spinning out of melodic figures. One can hear Chopin’s dual Polish-French heritage in this piece in the rich romanticism of Polish music and the perfumed reveries of French music.

Tonight’s programme note for Holmes’s piece is a poem written by her friend, Marnie Barrell:

[over]

*Midnight empress, feather-soft moth
spreads her stately robe.
Twin-plumed crown towers over alien eyes,
her blank stare haunting as an ancient ikon.
She shivers into life, rising on delicate feet,
flings open dusty velvet sleeves, grey as a sigh,
shot with gold and nightshade purple.
She falls into the lifting whisper of night air,
sweeps unchallenged through her hushed domain.*

– Marnie Barrell

EDVARD GRIEG

Notturmo, Op 54, No 4

ALEXANDRE TANSMAN

Four Nocturnes

Both the Grieg and Tansman nocturnes feature sudden, evocative shifts of harmonies, suggesting finely nuanced shades of colour or night breeze.

In the Grieg, the improvisatory feel is typical of a nocturne: we move from rich, *cantabile* lines to moments of pure harmonic shimmer that resemble the perfumed air of the French style—all enriched with luxurious harmonic changes that bring to life the finest of night’s sensations.

Tansman’s four pieces are even more mysterious with their sudden harmonic shifts and surprises taking place within a very quiet dynamic range, enhancing our harmonic sensitivity. Each of the four nocturnes are very short scenes or studies of colour—we might even call them “nocturnettes”.

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

Nocturne from *Six Piano Pieces*, R44

LOWELL LIEBERMANN

Nocturne No 4

The Respighi and Liebermann nocturnes feature melodic or accompanimental ostinatos (repeating figures).

In Respighi’s nocturne, the ostinato is a harmonic shimmer, providing a reflective “surface” for the bright melody that shines forth with calming beauty. This offers a meditative feel to the outer sections of the piece, while the contrasting middle section presents drama and virtuosity. Overall, the layering of different textural planes helps to construct a luxurious night time soundscape.

In Liebermann’s nocturne, the ostinato is a four-note hypnotic pattern. Alongside his intensely melodic style, he utilises unusual scales, sometimes drawing on polytonality (the use of two or more different coexisting tonalities). This is disturbing, haunting music, in part created through an uncanny mix of major and minor, often simultaneously. The piece builds to a terrifying climax. One might describe this piece as a depiction of psychological disturbance. Sparkling bird-call figures only further the sense of an ominous night.

FRANCIS LOULENC

Nocturne No 1

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Notturmo

The nocturnes by Poulenc and Britten are a pairing of contrast. Poulenc's nocturne is innocent and enthusiastically present; Britten's is more introverted, atmospheric, and mysterious.

Poulenc's recognisable traits shine forth, including the elegance of the childlike melodic contour of the main theme and the modernist twists that keep listeners smiling. His style is neither serious nor light, but something delightfully in-between.

Benjamin Britten opens this nocturne as if in a dream: a soft but luminous melody floats over deep bass notes and an undulating inner accompaniment. A quick repeated-note figure infuses the texture, and we become aware of the presence of woken life. In the cadenza, birds sing and animals scurry along the forest floor. The piece finishes with notes to be "silently pressed down before the pedal is released," thus undampening the strings and allowing the most gradual blurring from sound to silence.

CLARA WIECK-SCHUMANN

Nocturne, Op 6, No 2

ROBERT SCHUMANNIn der Nacht, from *Fantasiestücke*, Op 12

In this marriage, we come to another contrast. Wieck-Schumann's nocturne is romantic bliss; Schumann's piece is a restless storm.

Wieck-Schumann's nocturne perfectly encapsulates the glorious essence of the romantic nocturne: the wandering, yearning melody; the expressive upward melodic leaps preceded by small turning or crouching figures (listen for the preparatory up-back-down-back turns before the large leaps up); the faster minor-key middle section of growing anxiety; and the pulling out of all the stops in the emotionally climactic moments.

"In der Nacht" ("In the night") is perhaps the highlight of Schumann's set of eight pieces, *Fantasiestücke*. With its surging, violent melodic figures, this is an exploration of the more sinister side of night time—it is a nightmarish depiction of ghostly swirl. There are happier, calmer moments, to be sure. (Both of Schumann's alter ego pen-names—the dreamy and introspective Eusebius and the impassioned, fiery Florestan—make their presence felt). Overall, this piece bears similarities to the romantic genre of the minor-key, dramatic, impassioned etude.

BÉLA BARTÓK

“The Night’s Music”, from *Out of Doors*

NORMAN DELLO JOIO

Nocturne in E Major

Both Bartók and Dello Joio’s pieces are atmospheric. Bartók’s is eery, and the Dello Joio is more present and relaxed.

Bartók’s “The Night’s Music” is a depiction of Hungarian village nights. Out of timeless, nocturnal vibrations [presented through quiet cluster chords], we make out the croaking and chirping of frogs, crickets, and cicadas. In the middle section, a folk-like melody, presented in wide open registers, ushers in an eerie hint of human presence, and we hear dance rhythms. While Bartók listens *to* the sensory elements of the night, Dello Joio muses *through* the night in this wistful, meditative improvisation of jazz-inspired, meandering melodic lines.

SAMUEL BARBER

Nocturne, Op 33

FRANZ LISZT

Nocturne No 3 from *Liebesträume*

Barber’s and Liszt’s nocturnes feature similar textures, with clear melodic lines and arpeggiated accompaniments underneath—but the characters contrast.

Barber’s melody is at times haunting, at times rhapsodic. The large melodic leaps create a sense of luxurious, romantic indulgence, and remind us of Barber’s art song writing. Romantic arpeggiated harmonies fuse with twentieth-century atonal approaches [12-tone technique] in the melody. However, one barely notices the 12-tone component. The piece moves towards a dramatic and virtuosic climax before ending as it began.

Originally a song also composed by Liszt, *Liebesträume* No. 3 [literally: “dreams of love”) is a transcription for piano that has entered into the hearts of piano lovers around the world. The piece is based on Ferdinand Freiligrath’s poem “O lieb, so lang du lieben kannst” [“Oh love, so long as you can love”). In the opening, the rich, mid-range “vocal” line is enveloped and illuminated by the bass beneath it and the arpeggiated figurations above it. Light and virtuosic cadenza sections take us into different dream [or waking] states as the melody is passed into different registers.

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