Faculty Recital

Bruce Vogt, piano

Spiritual Visions

The final of three solo recitals commemorating the bicentenary of the birth of Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Pre-concert talk at 7:30 pm

Saturday, November 5, 2011 at 8:00 pm
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall
MacLaurin Building
Adults: $17.50 / Students & seniors: $13.50
www.finearts.uvic.ca/music/events

B I O G R A P H Y

Among the elite of Canadian pianists, Bruce Vogt is a unique and dynamic performer. He appears regularly in concert within Canada, but has also inspired audiences in England, the USA, Germany, France, Italy, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, China, and Japan.

Born in Southern Ontario, Bruce completed his initial musical studies with Damjana Bratuz and Anton Kuerti. Later he studied in the United States, England, Switzerland, and Italy, working with a number of celebrated musicians including Gyorgy Sebok, Louis Kentner, Fou Ts’Ong, and Dario de Rosa.

Bruce Vogt’s repertoire is extremely diverse, encompassing music from the sixteenth century to the present. He has consistently championed the music of contemporary composers, and has commissioned and premiered a number of new works by such Canadian luminaries as Murray Adaskin and Alfred Fisher. He is also an enthusiastic and dedicated performer on period instruments; one of his recordings (2003) features music of Robert Schumann performed on a restored 1864 Erard. His other recordings include two volumes of the music of Franz Liszt, which have established for him an enviable reputation as a Liszt interpreter. Two new recordings of the music of Liszt are being released this year in honour of the bicentenary of this great composer. The first CD includes the complete Années de Pèlerinage, Volume II: Italie and selections from the third volume. The second CD includes major works from throughout Liszt’s career, including the powerful Réminiscences de Norma and his ecstatic religious visionary work Bénédiction de Dieu dans le Solitude.

In addition to his career as a piano soloist, chamber musician and recording artist, Bruce Vogt is also Professor at the University of Victoria. Because he sees teaching and working with young pianists and with piano teachers as an important commitment, he makes himself available as much as possible for master classes, workshops, festival adjudications, and lectures.

For information about upcoming performances and other CDs, please refer to brucevogt.com.
Alphonse de Lamartine was a Catholic poet and mystic who was Liszt's spiritual mentor and advisor in his younger years. *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* was inspired by his words below. Lamartine, however, was unhappy with the despairing end to Liszt's composition and so the composer later recast it with a new title, *Pensées de Mort*, and a more affirming conclusion. Many prefer the original form of the work.

These verses are meant for a small number of people only. There are meditative minds, whom solitude and contemplation insensibly raise towards infinite ideas, that is to say — Religion. All their thoughts turn into enthusiasm and prayer, their whole existence is a silent prayer to the Deity and hope; they seek in themselves and in the creation which surrounds them, degrees to raise them to God, expressions and images to reveal themselves to Him, to reveal Him to them! Would that I could in these harmonies assist them!

There are hearts, broken by grief, crushed by the world's neglect, who take refuge in the world of their thoughts, in the solitude of their soul to weep, to expect, to adore; could they be willingly visited by a solitary muse like themselves, find a sympathy in his accords, they would exclaim sometime in listening: we pray with thy words, we weep with thy tears, we invoke with thy song!

(Lamartine: excerpt from Preface to *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*)

Within three years, Liszt lost two of his children. In 1859, his very brilliant son Daniel died of tuberculosis at the age of 19, and in 1862, his eldest daughter Blandine died after giving birth to her only child. From this time onwards, Liszt retreated more into his composing, his teaching and his religious meditations.

Sometime in 1865, Liszt completed Two Legends from Catholic tradition of the lives of saints. The first is based upon the story of St. Francis Preaching to the Birds:

...And as he went on his way, with great fervour, St. Francis lifted up his eyes, and saw on some trees by the wayside a great multitude of birds; and being much surprised, he said to his companions, “Wait for me here by the way, whilst I go and preach to my little sisters the birds”; and entering into the field, he began to preach to the birds which were on the ground, and suddenly all those also on the trees came round him, and all listened while St. Francis preached to them, and did not fly away until he had given them his blessing...

Liszt spent a good part of each year from 1864 on in the Villa d’Este - a 16th-century castle in a park in Tivoli near Rome. It is famous for its ancient cypresses, which became the inspiration for *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d’Este* (To the Cypresses of the Villa d’Este). This work is the first of two threnodies, two ruminations on the ephemeral nature of existence. “For three whole days, in September 1877, Liszt spent every hour of sunlight and as much of night as was made visible by the moon, in admiration of the cypresses. They obsessed his thoughts to the exclusion of all else.” (Sacheverell Sitwell)

The Villa d’Este is even more renowned for its elaborate fountains, which inspired the composition of *Les Jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este*, the most celebrated work from the third collection of *Annaées de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). Busoni called this work “the model for all musical fountains that have flowed ever since” and indeed one hears unmistakably a direct lineage to Ravel and Debussy; truly this work seems to anticipate the evocative world of Impression. However, the works of that later age were pagan, pantheistic, of-the-moment, whereas Liszt’s work has, at its core, a religious mysticism that strives towards eternity. Ravel, at the beginning of his *Jeux d’eau*, quotes from the poet Henri de Régnier: “The river god laughs at the water which tickles him...” Liszt, at the centre of his work, quotes from the Gospel according to St. John: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”

Liszt’s last years were spent teaching and composing. He did nothing to make his compositions known and even discouraged his students from playing them.

Yet there still remain several things for me to say, irrespective as to whether they may be quickly understood or recognized. Sometime when I am no longer of this earth, the rest will find itself. I can calmly await the event while I go on working, and meanwhile composedly expiate my virtuoso reputation with the disapproval my compositions have excited.

But it was not until the enthusiastic endorsement of Bartók and Busoni that these late works were recognized for what they are – a most astounding anticipation of major new paths which music was to follow. In their radical simplicity, obsessive rhythms and strange harmonies, they take the listener to the very brink of tonality.

*Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort* (Sleepless! Question and Answer) was inspired by a poem by Toni Raab which is now lost. Like so many of the late works, nothing is known of the origin of the simple and touching *Resignazione. Impromptu* was written for Liszt’s confidante and correspondent of his last years, Olga von Meyendorff.

The third collection of *Annaées de Pèlerinage* ends with *Sursum Corda*, whose title refers to a portion of the Collect of the Mass: “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.” The work begins lyrically, yet has ultimately an almost tragic power suggesting stoicism and endurance in the face of grief and pain. To Liszt’s contemporaries, its musical language must also have seemed not of this world, with its persistent E pedal tone and its augmented harmonies buttressing towards the end of the work, a whole tone scale.
Liszt's Franciscan Catholicism was a profound inspiration throughout his life, although some have seen an amusing contradiction in the zest with which he lived his secular life. But for Liszt there was no such contradiction: his religious feelings exerted a powerful influence over all his strivings. Indeed, his polemics on behalf of art and other artists and even his love letters typically were expressed in language of religious fervour and conviction. Bénédiction de Dieu dans la Solitude is based on a poem by Lamartine which describes a mystical experience, bringing to the poet a sense of harmony with the universe and a freedom from doubt and despair. In Humphrey Searle's words:

[The music expresses] the feeling of mystical contemplation which Beethoven attained in his last period but which is rarely found elsewhere in music. The touching simplicity of the final passage shows that Liszt, like Beethoven, could express the most sublime thoughts in completely unadorned language.

(Notes by Bruce Vogt)

**Program**

I. EARLY MYSTICISM

Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (1834)

II. NATURE AS HEALER

from Deux Légendes (c.1863)

St. Franciò d'Assòie. La Prédication aux oiseaux

from Années de Pèlerinage, Troisième Année (c. 1877)

i. Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este No 1: Thrénodie

ii. Les Jeux d'Eaux à la Villa d'Este

**Intermission**

III. DARKER VISIONS OF ETERNITY

1. Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort (1883)

2. Resignazione (c. 1877)

3. Impromptu (1872)

4. from Années de Pèlerinage, Troisième Année

Sursum Corda

IV. TRANSCENDENTAL VISION

from Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (1847-52)

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la Solitude