FACULTY RECITAL

THE FISCHER DUO

NORMAN FISCHER, Cello
JEANNE KIERMAN, Piano

THE COMPLETE WORKS FOR CELLO AND PIANO
BY FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN AND FRANZ LISZT.

Sunday, November 15, 1992
8:00 p.m.
Lillian H. Duncan Recital Hall

RICE UNIVERSITY
PROGRAM

Elégie No. 1 (1875)  
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Romance Oubliée (1880)

Grand Duo Concertant (1832)  
Frédéric Chopin/A. J. Franchomme  
(on themes of Robert le Diable)  
(1808-1849)/(1810-1849)

La Lugubre Gondola (1882)  
Franz Liszt

Polonaise Brillante, Op. 3 (1829)  
Frédéric Chopin

INTERMISSION

Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth (1880)  
Franz Liszt

Elégie - Nach einem Gedicht  
des Fürsten Felix Lichnowsky

Elégie No. 2 (1877)

Sonata in G minor, Op. 65 (1845-46)  
Frédéric Chopin

Allegro moderato  
Scherzo. Allegro con brio  
Largo  
Finale. Allegro

In consideration of the performers and members of the audience, please check audible paging devices with the ushers and silence audible timepieces.  
The taking of photographs and the use of recording equipment are prohibited.
BIOGRAPHIES

Founded in 1971, the FISCHER DUO has delighted audiences with concerts exploring the rich repertoire for cello and piano. The Washington Post described the Fischer Duo’s all-French programming as “intense and totally committed, with a solid understanding of the subtleties of the French style”; the New York Times commented on “a real sense of dialogue in the duo’s ensemble” as well as “a salon-like intimacy and warmth”; and the Boston Globe heralded Norman Fischer’s “boldly imaginative and technically assured skills” and Jeanne Kierman as “equally impressive” and called the duo’s playing of the Elliott Carter sonata “a strongly characterized performance.” In addition to featuring works by the masters, the Fischer Duo has become known for the thematic approach to programming, i.e., all three Brahms sonatas, all-French, and all-American music. They have also uncovered interesting pieces by composers such as Franz Liszt, Victor Herbert, Nadia Boulanger, and Georges Auric and are commissioning new works by composers George Rochberg, Augusta Read Thomas, Robert Sirota, David Stock, and Richard Lavenda. Their compact disc of French masters on the Northeastern label (NR 238-CD) has received rave reviews. This season at the Shepherd School, the Fischer Duo will present the world premiere of George Rochberg’s Sonata-Aria (1992) on January 25 (before they take it on a tour of the Midwest and the East culminating in a recital at New York’s Merkin Recital Hall on March 8).

NORMAN FISCHER is one of this country’s foremost champions of the cello. After completing instrumental study with Richard Kapuscinski, Claus Adam, and Bernard Greenhouse, he first graced the international concert stage as cellist with the Concord String Quartet, a group that won the Naumburg Chamber Music Award, an Emmy, and several Grammy nominations, recorded over 40 works on RCA Red Seal, Vox, Nonesuch, Turnabout, and CRI, and premiered over 50 compositions. In addition to performing the major concerti, Mr. Fischer has premiered and recorded several new scores for cello and orchestra. His chamber music expertise has led to guest appearances with the Juilliard, Cleveland, and Audubon String Quartets, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and Da Camera of Houston. He is also a member of the Concord Trio and Ensemble Pierrot. A devoted teacher and mentor to younger players, Mr. Fischer taught at Dartmouth College and the Oberlin Conservatory before accepting the position of Professor of Violoncello at The Shepherd School of Music. During the summer he is a faculty member of the Tanglewood Music Center.

JEANNE KIERMAN is a leading advocate of the piano as a collaborative instrument. A graduate of Oberlin, the Dalcroze School, and the New England Conservatory, she studied with master pianists William Masselos, Miles Mauney, Victor Rosenbaum, and Menahem Pressler. Ms. Kierman is equally adroit as a collaborator with voice or instrument and is in great demand as a recital partner. For ten years she was the pianist with the New England-based Alcott Ensemble, performing a broad range of chamber music and developing a virtuosity she frequently demonstrates, both on stage as resident and guest artist with various ensembles (including Ensemble Pierrot and the Concord Trio) and in the studio with her students. Ms. Kierman, formerly on the faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory, is now Artist Teacher of Piano at The Shepherd School of Music.
Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt are two giants of 19th-century pianism that forever changed the dimension of piano-playing. They moved to Paris at the same time and were close friends, but their careers took very different paths. Chopin was a reclusive type, turning more towards composition and developing his own brand of pianism. He rarely ventured out onto the concert stage (he only played about 30 public performances), preferring the more intimate setting of the salon. Liszt, on the other hand, was a Hungarian extrovert and played in public as often as he could, reveling in public adulation. The bulk of his compositional output in the early years (when Chopin and he were friends) were transcriptions of other composers' works. Their music for cello and piano on this program, curiously enough, showcases the more extroverted side of the introvert Chopin and the more contemplative side of the extrovert Liszt.

For the two composers who are so closely associated with solo keyboard works, the choice of writing for the cello is an interesting departure and worth comment. For Chopin, it is even more remarkable, since three out of his four extant chamber works are for cello and piano. It is clear that his motivation was out of friendship. Polonaise Brillante was dedicated by Chopin to the Polish virtuoso Joseph Merk, and both the Grand Duo Concertant and Sonata in G minor were written for his close friend and celebrated cellist, Auguste Franchomme. As a result, the works demonstrate the full technical range of the virtuoso cello-playing of the time.

Liszt's interest in the cello seemed linked to his appreciation of the tenor/baritone singing quality of the instrument. His earliest foray into this genre was in 1857 with a transcription of Wagner's "O du mein holder Abendstern" from Tannhäuser, the manuscript of which is now lost. The other examples all date from the last 12 years of his life and are typical of his most mature style — more bare melodic and textural materials and inward emotional content.

Élégie No. 1 was written in 1874 for the memorial service of the Comtesse Nesselrode, and it was originally scored for cello, piano, harp, and harmonium. The Comtesse was a patron of Liszt and a student of Chopin and, according to one source, was known as "the Czar's spy in crinolines." Liszt writes about the work: "Originally it was to have been called 'Lullaby in the tomb,' but later I felt this to be forced, and simply wrote Élégie." This work is in three sections with a unified theme and represents a prime example of Liszt's fascination with semitonal relationships in his late period. Romance Oubliée was originally a song to a poem written by Grand Duchess Carolina Pavlovna in the late 1840s. Liszt writes in a letter from the Villa d'Este in Rome to Olga van Meyendorff: "A publisher has come upon an at least 25-year-old sheet album and wants to publish it. I protest against outdated things, and so I have rewritten the Romance Oubliée, which I here enclose. If it does not displease you, I shall transcribe it." The cello/piano transcription dates from 1880. A tender melody opens, and after a short cadenza, the cello settles into the playing of arpeggios against a chordal backdrop of the piano (reminiscent of similar writing for the solo viola in Berlioz's Harold in Italy).
Paris was the musical Mecca in the first part of the 19th century, and any pianist had to make an impression there in order to have an international concert career. Thus Chopin left his native Poland in 1831 to penetrate the inner circle of the salon and to be seen at the symphony and the opera. The big operatic hit that year was Meyerbeer’s Robert le Diable, and Chopin writes, “It is a huge masterpiece of the modern school in which devils, forming the huge chorus, sing through speaking trumpets, and spirits arise from the grave in groups of fifty or sixty. On stage there is a set, which towards the end, is transformed into the interior of a church brightly lit up... and most remarkable of all, with a grand organ whose sound from the back of the stage is stunning and virtually drowns the orchestra. Meyerbeer has made himself immortal.” In that same year at a party at Liszt’s house, Chopin met the famous cellist Auguste Franchomme. They walked afterwards to Chopin’s apartment where Chopin played the piano, and afterwards Franchomme apparently exclaimed, “I understood him immediately!” It was only natural that the two new friends would collaborate in the composition of the Grand Duo Concertant in the popular opera fantasy genre. Whether Franchomme and Chopin jointly composed this piece or Franchomme merely gave Chopin technical advice on writing for the cello is not clear, but ultimately it seems irrelevant when hearing this charming and witty work.

The hero’s struggle between Good and Evil is the theme of the Meyerbeer opera. Robert le Diable, the son of a sinister fiend and a virtuous noblewoman, is, upon entering manhood, befriended by his wicked father in disguise, who tries to turn Robert to “the dark side.” His mother, anticipating the actions of the fiend, sends Robert several letters from her deathbed, using a virtuous young maid as a messenger. The climax comes as Robert is forced to make his decision. In the Chopin/Franchomme Duo, they make the most of this drama. After an extended piano introduction, the cello enters with Robert’s Romanza from Act I, followed by the Terzetto between the virtuous maid and a chorus of male admirers. (The repeated spondaic E’s are her words “No, No, No, No.”) The Andante cantabile is from Act V when Robert decides to take the path of Good (note the change of mode to major), and concludes with the Act I Terzetto, resplendent with virtuoso flourishes for both cello and piano.

In La Lugubre Gondola, the title refers to a Venetian hearse — a gondola painted and draped in black. This image was particularly striking to Liszt while he was visiting his son-in-law, Richard Wagner, during Wagner’s final illness in Venice. He wrote two versions for piano solo, one before Wagner’s death and one after. It is the second version that Liszt transcribed for cello and piano (his preferred medium) and is one of his most strikingly personal masterpieces. One writer insists that the haunting opening recitative refers to Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. The second theme offers a beautiful cello melody over a piano ostinato which produces unusual dissonances, and the middle dolente section explores alternating major and minor chords revealing an eerie effect of light and dark. The opening motive returns in a climactic appassionato, and the coda brings in a series of slow processional minor chords much like a funeral dirge.

“The polonaise was for the young Chopin what the ‘characteristic’ suite was for the young Schumann — a form into which he could most easily pour his musical personality and instrumental virtuosity,” writes Alan Walker in his book on Chopin. After making some early attempts at writing solo piano polonaises while still in Poland, Chopin sat down to write a more substantial one in 1826: “Here I have writ-
ten an alla Polacca with accompaniment for the violoncello. It is nothing more than a glittering trifle for the salon, for ladies. I wanted Princess Wanda, the daughter of the cello-playing Prince, to learn it. She is still very young, perhaps seventeen, and beautiful; it is a real delight to set her delicate little fingers to rights.” The following year Chopin added a lyric introduction and, having dedicated it to the prominent Polish cellist Joseph Merk (whom Chopin admired greatly), published it in 1831 as Opus 3. In the version being performed tonight, some of the more accompanimental cello figures were augmented to mirror the piano’s virtuosity by Emmanuel Feuermann (1902-1942).

Nonnenwerth was a tiny island in the Rhine River with only a few fishermen’s cottages and a half-ruined convent which Liszt leased as a quiet summertime haven in the years 1841-43 for his children and his lover, the Comtesse Marie d’Agoult. (It was here that the legendary Roland was to have died of love.) After visiting Liszt on the island, the Prince Felix Lichnowsky was inspired to write a poem about Nonnenwerth and its legends which Liszt later set as a beautiful song in 1841. In 1880 he reconstructed a version of Nonnenwerth for cello and piano, which exists only in manuscript.

Lina Ramann, Liszt’s first biographer and dedicatee of the Elégie No. 2, writes in her journal of 1883, “The aged Liszt had wished to write elegies all the time, since his whole existence had become elegy.” In 1877, Liszt wrote this second elegy at the Villa d’Este. Like Elégie No. 1, it is in three sections and 3/4 time, but it takes on the quality of a distant waltz and is not so dark in mood as its predecessor.

Fourteen years after the friendship and collaboration with Franchomme had begun, Chopin turned again to writing for the cello. Instead of composing a work that showcased the virtuosic element of the two instruments in a salon-type work, Chopin chose the most serious idiom—a four-movement sonata. A lot had transpired in those years, a deteriorating love affair and much illness and suffering, but Franchomme’s friendship was steadfast. Little did Chopin know that this Sonata in G minor was to be the last work he would write (1846), the last work he would play in public (1848), and the last work he would hear at his deathbed (1849). The first movement is an extensive sonata form that integrates the two instruments seamlessly both in melodic and accompanimental figurations. The second movement is an energetic Scherzo with a glorious cello melody in D major as its Trio counterpart. Contemporary writers have spoken about Franchomme’s beautiful legato playing. Obviously, Chopin had this as his inspiration when he composed the slow movement—a nocturne in B-flat major. The culminating movement starts in G minor and is brilliantly complex and rhythmically propelling. In the coda, Chopin changes the key to G major, only to surprise us at the very end with a Plagal cadence, as if to say “Amen.”

The Marquis de Custine, a Parisian nobleman and long-time friend and supporter of Chopin, wrote to Chopin after he heard the composer’s final performance, “You have gained in suffering and poetry; the melancholy of your compositions penetrates still deeper into the heart; one feels alone with you in the midst of a crowd; it is no longer a piano, but a soul, and what a soul! Preserve yourself for the sake of your friends; it is a consolation to be able to hear you; in the hard times that threaten, only art as you feel it will be able to unite men divided by the realities of life; people love each other, people understand each other, in Chopin. You have turned a public into a circle of friends; you are equal to your own genius; that says it all.”

— Notes by Norman Fischer