SAN FRANCISCO **PERFORMANCES**

presents...

The Robert and Ruth Dell Piano Series

NATASHA PAREMSKI | Piano

Wednesday, November 13, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

QUINN MASON — **From *New Era Bagatelles*** [San Francisco Premiere]
Flowing slowly

CHOPIN — **Berceuse in D-flat Major, Opus 57**

Sonata No. 2 in B-Flat Minor, Opus 35
Grave: Doppio movimento
Scherzo
Marche funèbre: Lento
Presto

INTERMISSION

PROKOFIEV — **Selections from *Ten Pieces from Romeo and Juliet***
Folk Dance
Scene
The young Juliet
The Montagues and Capulets
Mercutio
Romeo and Juliet before parting

STRAVINSKY — **Three Movements from *Petrushka***
Russian Dances
Petrushka's Cell
Shrovetide Fair

The Robert and Ruth Dell Piano Series is made possible by a gift from Robert and Ruth Dell.

Natasha Paremski is represented by Arts Management Group
130 West 57th Street, Suite 6A, New York, NY 10019 artsmg.com

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ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Natasha Paremski for the fourth time. She made her SF Performances debut in March 2007.

With her consistently striking and dynamic performances, pianist **Natasha Paremski** reveals astounding virtuosity and voracious interpretive abilities. She continues to generate excitement from all corners as she wins over audiences with her musical sensibility and powerful, flawless virtuosity.

Natasha is a regular return guest of many major orchestras, including the, San Francisco Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Oregon Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, among others.

In Europe, Natasha Paremski has toured extensively, appearing with such orchestras as the Bournemouth Symphony, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Tonhalle Orchester in Zurich, and the Moscow Philharmonic. She has given recitals in San Francisco (appearing there again in the 2024–25 season), Seattle, Kansas City, at Ravinia, and abroad in Paris, London, Tokyo, and Buenos Aires. She has appeared at numerous chamber music festivals such as Jeffrey Kahane's Green Music Center ChamberFest, the Lockenhaus, Toronto, Sitka Summer Music, and Cape Cod Chamber Music festivals, to name a few.

The 2024–25 season will find Ms. Paremski appearing with the orchestras of San Antonio, Knoxville, Nashville, Rochester, Duluth, and Tallahassee, among others.

Natasha Paremski was awarded several prestigious prizes at a very young age, including the Gilmore Young Artists prize in 2006 at the age of 18. In 2012 she recorded Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* and Rachmaninoff's *Paganini Rhapsody* with the Royal Philharmonic on the orchestra's label distributed by Naxos.

Ms. Paremski has recorded Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* and Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with the Royal Philharmonic orchestra and Fabien Gabel on the orchestra's label distributed by Naxos. Her first recital album was released in 2011 to great acclaim and was re-released on the Steinway & Sons label.

Natasha began her piano studies at the age of four and then studied at San Francisco Conservatory of Music and at the Mannes College of Music, from which she graduated. At the age of 15 she debuted with Los Angeles Philharmonic and recorded two discs with Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra.

Natasha is based in New York where she is Artistic Director of the New York Piano Society, a non-profit organization that supports pianists whose professions lie outside of music.

PROGRAM NOTES

from *New Era Bagatelles*

Flowing slowly

QUINN MASON
(B. 1996)

Quinn Mason studied conducting and composition at SMU Meadows School of the Arts and at the University of Texas at Dallas; his composition teachers have included Jake Heggie and Libbey Larsen, and he studied conducting with Marin Alsop and Gerard Schwarz. Though he has composed music in many different genres, Mason has felt particularly attracted to writing for the orchestra, and his works have been performed by such ensembles as the San Francisco, Dallas, Detroit, Seattle, and New World Symphonies. In 2022–23 he was the Hartford Symphony Orchestra's Artist-in-Residence.

Mason composed the first two of his *New Era Bagatelles* in 2019 and completed the set four years later, when he added three more. The first performance of the complete set was given in November 2023 by Mark Stevens; at this concert only the first will be performed. The composer has furnished a brief introduction:

"The *New Era Bagatelles* were written for the purpose of exploring the lyrical and technical aspects of the piano, kind of like etudes but more compact. I came up with the title for the pieces because I wanted to write bagatelles that utilized a contemporary style while still being accessible for the listener and performer."

Berceuse in D-flat Major, Opus 57

FREDERIC CHOPIN
(1810–1849)

A *berceuse* is a lullaby or cradle song, characterized by a quietly-rocking accompaniment (to mirror the back-and-forth motion of the cradle) and a gentle melody to soothe the baby and help it sleep. Chopin's *Berceuse in D-flat Major* is one of the most famous examples of the form. In the summer of 1843, the singer Pauline Viardot left her baby at Nohant with George Sand and Chopin while she went on tour. Chopin took great pleasure in the infant, and the *Berceuse* may well be the musical result of that experience.

This is an ingenious piece, built from the simplest materials. The left hand supplies the steady ostinato accompaniment—the rhythm of the first measure is exactly the same throughout this brief piece, and the notes are virtually the same too. The right hand announces the simple little main melody, only four bars long, and Chopin then builds the *Berceuse* on 16 very brief variations on this tune. The mood remains gentle and subdued for the most part, though Chopin cannot resist letting a few of the variations become virtuosic—baby Viardot may have had trouble sleeping through these.

A remarkable aspect of the *Berceuse* is its static harmony. Chopin never changes keys, and each measure begins with the same soft stroke of a deep D-flat. The *New Grove Dictionary* refers to the *Berceuse* as a "harmonic daydream": a mood-piece that goes nowhere harmonically. Yet that is precisely the point of this music, which soothes infants to sleep and—in the process—charms the adults around them.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Opus 35

Chopin was not particularly comfortable with the large forms of the classical period. Although he had written one piano sonata and two piano concertos by the time he was 20, he preferred shorter and less-struc-

tured forms. He never wrote another concerto, though he did compose three mature sonatas: two for piano and one for cello. The *Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor* may not conform strictly to the classical definition of sonata form, but it is an astonishing piece of music, perhaps just because it is so wildly original. Written in the summer of 1839, when Chopin was 29, it offers four radically different movements. The movements are so dissimilar that some unsympathetic critics have felt that this sonata has no unity at all: Schumann said that in this sonata Chopin had "bound together four of his maddest children." Others, however, have found this dramatic sonata totally convincing.

The first movement opens with a three-measure chordal introduction marked *Grave* before the music leaps ahead at the *Doppio movimento* with a main theme built on insistent short phrases and marked *agitato*. Chopin treats this theme in many different ways in the course of the movement. Sometimes it drums quietly in the background as an accompaniment figure; at other points it becomes dramatic and extroverted. The second theme-group is lyrical, and Chopin develops both themes before a superheated coda brings the movement to its dramatic close.

The *Scherzo* falls into several sections. Its opening idea—pounding, driving, exciting—gives way to a waltz-like trio that is as peaceful as the opening had been turbulent. This lovely melody returns at the end to bring the movement to an unexpectedly quiet close.

Many listeners will find they already know the third movement, for it is a funeral march that has become famous on its own (this sonata is sometimes called the "*Funeral March Sonata*"). It was written in 1837, two years before the rest of the sonata, and some believe that its somber tone and sharp contrasts form the unifying principle of the entire sonata. The march moves along darkly over chords that sound like tolling bells—the music is lugubrious enough that it seems to foreshadow Rachmaninoff (who, incidentally, made a famous recording of this sonata). Chopin provides a lyric center section, itself tinged with melancholy, before the grim march returns. This movement was played in an orchestral transcription at Chopin's own funeral in Paris in 1849.

The final movement is the shortest of the sonata—and the most original. Marked *Presto*, it is a blistering perpetual-motion for virtuoso pianist. But what is so unusual is the fact that this flow of triplets, music that seems almost without recognizable theme, is unaccompanied—Chopin simply has the pianist play it in octaves, and the movement rushes to its sudden and explosive concluding chord.

Selections from *Ten Pieces from Romeo and Juliet,* Opus 75

SERGE PROKOFIEV
(1891–1953)

In 1934 the Kirov (now Mariinsky) Theater in Leningrad approached Prokofiev with the proposal that they collaborate on a ballet based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Prokofiev agreed. He completed the score the following summer, just as he was making plans to return to Russia after nearly 20 years in the West. The project, however, came to seem nearly as star-crossed as Shakespeare's young lovers. The first plan had been to give the story a happy ending in which Romeo would rescue Juliet before her suicide—Prokofiev's explanation was that this was a dramatic necessity: "Living people can dance, the dying cannot." Fortunately, this idea was scrapped, but when the Kirov finally saw Prokofiev's score, they called it "undanceable" and refused to produce it. While *Romeo and Juliet* languished in limbo, Prokofiev began to pull out excerpts from the ballet's 52 numbers: he assembled two orchestral suites and conducted them in Chicago and Boston while on tour, and in 1937 he made a suite for piano of *Ten Pieces from Romeo and Juliet*.

In contrast to the orchestral suites, the *Ten Pieces from Romeo and Juliet* preserve the general sequence of Shakespeare's play. On this recital Ms. Paremski plays six of the ten pieces. This set opens with two introductory movements set on the streets of Verona: the jaunty *Folk Dance* (sometimes known as *Street Scene*) and the brief *The Street Awakens* (sometimes known simply as *Scene*). The *young Juliet* captures the energy of the girl with racing sixteenth notes; some wistful interludes along the way, one of them marked *con eleganza*, suggest a depth to her character. Prokofiev piles dissonance on top of dissonance at the beginning of *The Montagues and the Capulets*, and the music forges ahead brutally on the swagger of the rival families. *Mercutio* is a portrait of one of the play's most attractive characters. *Romeo and Juliet Before Parting* is the painfully beautiful music that depicts the final parting of Romeo and Juliet at daybreak. The tender melody at the beginning sets the mood of love, but this music builds to a mighty climax, then fades into delicate (if troubled) silence.

Three Movements from *Petrushka*

IGOR STRAVINSKY
(1882–1971)

In the early 1920s, Igor Stravinsky—one of the greatest orchestrators in history and creator of some of the finest music ever written for orchestra—began to write for solo piano. There were several reasons for this. In the aftermath of World War I, Stravinsky discovered that orchestras that could play huge and complex scores were rare (and expensive). And in any case Stravinsky did not wish to go on repeating himself by writing opulent ballets. But the real factor that attracted Stravinsky to the piano was that he was a pianist and so could supplement his uncertain income as a composer by appearing before the public as both creator and performer; this was especially important during the uncertain economic situation following the war.

While not a virtuoso pianist, Stravinsky was a capable one, and over the next few years came a series of works for piano that Stravinsky introduced and then played on tour. The impetus for all this piano music may well have come from Artur Rubinstein, who asked the composer to prepare a version of the ballet *Petrushka* for solo piano, which Stravinsky did during the summer of 1921. Rubinstein paid Stravinsky what the composer called "the generous sum of 5,000 francs" for this music, but Stravinsky made clear that his aim was not to cash in on the popularity of the ballet: "My intention was to give virtuoso pianists a piece of a certain breadth that would permit them to enhance their modern repertory and demonstrate a brilliant technique." Stravinsky stressed that this was not a transcription for piano, nor was he trying to make the piano sound like an orchestra; rather, he was re-writing orchestral music specifically as piano music.

The ballet *Petrushka*, with its haunting story of a pathetic puppet brought to life during a Russian fair, has become so popular that it easy to forget that this music had its beginning as a sort of piano concerto. Stravinsky said: "I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly en-

dowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggi." That puppet became Petrushka, "the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries," as the story of the ballet took shape, but the piano itself receded into the background of the ballet. Perhaps it was only natural that Stravinsky should remember the ballet's origins when Rubinstein made his request for a piano version.

Stravinsky drew the piano score from three of the ballet's four tableaux. The opening movement, *Russian Dance*, comes from the end of the first tableau: the aged magician has just touched his three puppets—Petrushka, the Ballerina, and the Moor—with his wand, and now the three leap to life and dance joyfully. Much of this music was given to the piano in the original ballet score, and here this dance makes a brilliant opening movement. The second movement, *In Petrushka's Cell*, is the ballet's second tableau, which introduces the hapless Petrushka trapped in his room and railing against fate and shows the entrance of the ballerina. The third movement, The *Shrove-Tide Fair*, incorporates most of the music from the ballet's final tableau, with its genre pictures of a St. Petersburg square at carnival time: various dances, the entrance of a peasant and his bear, gypsies, and so on. Here, however, Stravinsky excises the end of the ballet (where Petrushka is murdered and the tale ends enigmatically) and replaces it with the more abrupt ending that he wrote for concert performances of the ballet suite.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger