

presents...

*Shenson Piano Series*

# VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON | Piano

Thursday, May 9, 2023 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

*Please note, this recital is performed without an interval.*

**GALUPPI**

**Piano Sonata No. 9 in F Minor**  
*I. Andante spiritoso*

**MOZART**

**Rondo in F Major K. 494**

**C.P.E. BACH**

**Rondo for Keyboard in D Minor, Wq 61/4**

**CIMAROSA**

*(arr. ÓLAFSSON)*

**Keyboard Sonata No. 42 in D Minor**

**MOZART**

**Fantasie for Piano No. 3 in D Minor, K. 397**  
**Rondo in D Major**

**CIMAROSA**

*(arr. ÓLAFSSON)*

**Keyboard Sonata No. 55 in A Minor**

**HAYDN**

**Sonata for Piano in B Minor, No. 47, Hob XVI:32**  
*I. Allegro moderato,*  
*II. Menuetto – Trio (Minore)*  
*III. Finale. Presto*

**MOZART**

**Kleine Gigue in G Major K. 574**

**MOZART**

**Sonata for Piano No. 16 in C Major, K. 545**  
*I. Allegro*  
*II. Andante*  
*III. Rondo. Allegretto*

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- MOZART**                      **String Quintet No. 4 in G Minor K. 516**  
*III. Adagio in E flat major*
- GALUPPI**                    **Piano Sonata No. 34 in C Minor**  
*I. Larghetto*
- MOZART**                    **Sonata for Piano No. 14 in C Minor, K. 457**  
*I. Molto allegro*  
*II. Adagio*  
*III. Allegro assai*
- MOZART**                    **Adagio for Piano in B Minor, K. 540**
- MOZART**                    **Ave verum corpus K. 618**  
*(trans. Lizst)*

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Fred M. Levin, The Shenson Foundation**

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**Víkingur Ólafsson** is represented by Harrison Parrott  
South Wing, Somerset House, The Strand, London, WC2R 1LA, UK      [harrisonparrott.com](http://harrisonparrott.com)

Hamburg Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco



## ARTIST PROFILE

*San Francisco Performances presents the San Francisco recital debut of Víkingur Ólafsson.*

Icelandic pianist **Víkingur Ólafsson** has made a profound impact with his remarkable combination of highest level musicianship and visionary programmes. His recordings for Deutsche Grammophon—*Philip Glass Piano Works* (2017), *Johann Sebastian Bach* (2018), *Debussy Rameau* (2020) and *Mozart & Contemporaries* (2021)—captured the public and critical imagination and have led to career streams of over 400 million. His latest album, *From Afar*, was released in October 2022.

Now one of the most sought-after artists of today, Ólafsson's multiple awards include the Rolf Schock Prize for music (2022), *Gramophone* magazine Artist of the Year, *Opus Klassik* Solo Recording Instrumental (twice) and Album of the Year at the *BBC Music Magazine Awards*.

Ólafsson continues to perform as artist in residence at the world's top orchestras, concert halls and festivals, and work with today's greatest composers. In the 2022–23 season he performs with orchestras including Philharmonia Orchestra, Concertgebouw-orkwest, Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Berliner Philharmoniker, The Cleveland Orchestra, London and Bergen philharmonic orchestras, Toronto and Orchestre symphonique de Montréal.

A captivating communicator both on and off stage, Ólafsson's significant talent extends to broadcast, having presented several of his own series for television and radio. He was Artist in Residence for three months on BBC Radio 4's flagship arts program, *Front Row*—broadcasting live during lockdown from an empty Harpa concert hall in Reykjavík, he reached millions of listeners around the world.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### A Bird of a Different Feather Mozart And His Contemporaries

*By Víkingur Ólafsson*

Artur Schnabel famously said of Mozart's keyboard sonatas that they were "too easy for children and too difficult for artists." It probably reflects rather poorly on me as an artist that even as a child I found Mozart's piano music very difficult. In fact, being assigned the *C Major Sonata* misleadingly called the "Sonata facile" (easy sonata) as an eight-year-old piano student led to my first ever encounter with real struggle in music. As early as the fifth measure there were runs of notes I agonized over; runs which, like so much of Mozart, look deceptively innocent on the page but are

strangely difficult in practice. The more I practised, the worse they sounded. My inner turbulence escalated over a few days and reached a boiling point one afternoon when, in an outburst of anger, I grabbed a pencil and scrawled over the whole score. My relief was short-lived, however, as my mother soon discovered the sacrilege that had taken place in our living room. I was duly made to erase all of it, every little scratch. I still have the score, and the scars are still visible on the old pages today, but my relationship with the music is much improved. I have often since wondered: Was it really the scales? Or was I, even at this early age, weighed down by the excess baggage that the idea of Mozart brings with it? Did the inescapably unfavourable comparison I childishly made between my ordinary self and the genius of the "eternal child" Mozart come in between me and the music?

## The Mozart of This Album

Far from the glowing image of the angelic prodigy, the music on this album is mostly by the Mozart of the 1780s, a grown man and a mature composer who in the preceding years had come to know adversity: painful disappointment and humiliation as his attempts at gaining suitable employment came to nothing; loss and grief as his mother passed away during his fruitless and frustrating Paris sojourn; and finally exile and a disinheritance of sorts from not only his home town of Salzburg but from the patriarchal family unit. At the same time, he had spread his wings and set out for freedom as he moved to Vienna and married Constanze Weber, much to the dismay of his father. This is the Mozart who was eager to escape the long shadow of his small former self and prove himself a serious musical force worthy of attention. And this is the Mozart that, at least for a few years, was able to sustain himself as an independent musician in a very contemporary sense, organizing his own concert series at repurposed, off-beat venues, securing the necessary number of subscription holders, writing the music, practising the piano parts, rehearsing the orchestra—even printing the admission tickets.

I find this period of Mozart's life and art endlessly fascinating—in part because his resourcefulness and hard work could not be further from the old *idiot savant* view of Mozart as a helpless, passive vessel of divine genius. Primarily, though, I love this Mozart because of the music itself. During this decade, Mozart was not just a compos-

er but a virtuoso pianist; and, writing for himself in this role, I feel he indulged more than ever in the sublime playfulness that lay at the core of his originality and inventiveness. This is the period when Mozart was not just perfecting the Classical tradition but subtly subverting it, his graceful touch as featherlight as always but the shadows darker, the nuances and ambiguities more profound. And, while he was reaching into the realm of the Romantic future that lay ahead, he enthusiastically engaged with the past, embracing the baroque elements that deeply enriched his music's scope and impact.

## An Echo of the Age

I have chosen to present some of my favourite keyboard works of Mozart in the company of works by a small selection of leading contemporaries. Two of these, **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach** (1714–1788) and **Joseph Haydn** (1732–1809), were closely connected with Mozart in both music and spirit. The other two, **Baldassare Galuppi** (1706–1785) and **Domenico Cimarosa** (1749–1801), were more distant, without significant direct links to Mozart, but belonged to the same ecosystem of 18th-century music. As the centre of musical life in Europe arguably shifted north during the maturation of the Classical style that took place during Mozart's lifetime, the two Italian composers and the two Austro-Germanic ones represent not only different geographies, but the different aesthetic values that coexisted. Perhaps all four provide a chance to calibrate the contemporary ear towards the prevailing ideas, styles and tastes of the times. To me, they offer a kind of echo of the age. It is my hope that this particular context, a mix of the celebrated and the obscure, can slightly alter our psychological attunement, removing some of the baggage we all bring with us as we come to Mozart's music. This is in any case what I set out to do for myself: to approach even the best-known works of Mozart with the same freedom, childlike enthusiasm and spirit of discovery that come with trawling through the almost-never-recorded works of the likes of Galuppi and Cimarosa in search of unknown gems.

## Galuppi and Cimarosa

The album opens with a movement by the Venetian Galuppi, an influential champion of the *galant* style and prolific composer of comic operas, widely celebrated in

this day but largely forgotten outside Italy by the end of the 18th century. The motivation behind reading through his available keyboard music (most of which is undated) came from encountering, many years back, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli's impeccably stylish 1962 video recording of the sunny *C Major Sonata No. 5*. In the *Andante spiritoso*, the opening movement of the composer's *F Minor Sonata No. 9*, an entirely different atmosphere reigns. I found in it a similar elusive combination of darkly polished elegance and apprehensive energy as in the opening measures of Mozart's late *G Minor Symphony*. With its dusky hues, the movement serves as a prelude to the bright *F major* of the *Mozart Rondo K. 494* that follows. Similarly, I have positioned another sonata movement of Galuppi's, the *Larghetto* in *C Minor*, to set the scene with its hypnotic arpeggios before Mozart's *C minor Sonata*.

Although he was born 43 years later, the musical career of the Neapolitan Cimarosa bore many similarities with that of Galuppi. Like Galuppi, he enjoyed great international success with his comic operas (most notably his 1792 opera *Il matrimonio segreto*) and, like Galuppi, he joined a long succession of Italian composers to be engaged for a time at the court of Catherine the Great in St. Petersburg. Following a tip from a friend, I indulged in a similar treasure hunt in the selection of his available keyboard works, unearthing the two "sonatas" (presumably movements from larger works) on this album, the *Sonata in D Minor* and the *Sonata in A Minor*. Both have a lamenting, arioso quality and subtle evocations of Vivaldi in the background. The original scores are written in a rather sparse manner and I have taken the liberty of harmonizing them as I have arranged them for the modern piano.

## C.P.E. Bach and Haydn

Never shy to admit influence, Mozart had affectionate ways of acknowledging his gratitude to both Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach—of whom he famously said, "Bach is the father, we are the children"—and Joseph Haydn, whose friendship he cherished to the point of dedicating a set of six string quartets to him. C.P.E. Bach's *Rondo in D Minor* stems from his collection of six *Clavier-Sonaten für Kenner und Liebhaber* (Keyboard Sonatas for Connoisseurs and Amateurs), written in his late years, 1779–1787, within roughly the same time frame as the Mozart works on this album. I found it an irresistible choice

next to Mozart's work in the same form, as the two approaches are so different—yet imbued with a similarly alluring sense of surprise virtuosity and quick-wittedness. Bach's refreshingly original *Rondo* possesses the hallmarks of the *empfindsamer Stil* (sensitive style)—unexpected diversions, countless twists and turns and articulate changes in temperament. Joseph Haydn was himself no stranger to musical surprise and these same elements are at play in his *Sonata in B Minor*, a riveting work that seems to carry within itself the seeds of Romanticism and at the same time retain a sense of baroque majesty.

## The Works of Mozart

Mozart's variety of surprise is somehow different from anyone else's. Musical expectations are often both met and challenged at the same time with an unanticipated twist; every familiar trope of the Classical style made fresh by some ingenious, subtle invention. That is how I feel when I play the *F Major Rondo K. 494* of 1786. Even the staple Alberti bass underneath is inverted, starting the whole work off on a light, nimble footing, and what may seem simple at first glance proves upon further exploration to be magnificently complex in detail. The amiable main theme is never heard twice in the same way on each of its four outings—not even close. The imagination of the Classical era's most gifted improviser was simply too vivid to allow for mindless repetition. The twists and turns of these twelve measures are too many to list, undeniably minute yet gloriously indispensable.

Mozart's *Fantasia in D Minor K. 397* is another work where his improvisatory brilliance is on full display, its darkly mysterious atmosphere almost like stepping into a state of altered consciousness. The performer has to retain a sense of uncertainty, of traversing into the mist without knowing what comes next, no matter how often the work has been rehearsed or performed. The date of the work has been subject to debate, but is often put at 1782, a year after Mozart's first encounter with the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. It has been suggested that he intended this work as a prelude to an accompanying piece—possibly a fugue. Not entirely convinced by the various ways in which the unfinished *D major* section has been posthumously drawn to a close by other composers and performers, I decided to end the work where the *D minor* section finishes on a dominant chord and lead into an unrelated work: the quick-



paced *Rondo in D Major* K. 485. Mozart the keyboard virtuoso feels very present in this piece, its cheerful character in direct contrast with the preceding *Fantasia*. There is hardly a minor chord to be heard throughout (and then only in what seems like jest). Every possible side of the limited thematic material (there really is only one theme here) is illuminated at some point in this ever-modulating tour de force.

The *Kleine Gigue* K. 574 is a small miracle of ingenuity that seems to take the tragic opening subject of J.S. Bach's last fugue from the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and twist it into a high-spirited and superbly crafted one-and-a-half-minute tribute to the old master. It was written on 16 May 1789 in Leipzig (on Mozart's second detour to the city on his long Berlin trip). To me, none of Mozart's works on this album would have been conceivable without his engagement with Bach's music, introduced to him by his friend and patron, the Dutch-born diplomat and librarian Gottfried van Swieten, early in his Vienna years. But in this small piece, after Mozart had had the chance to improvise on Bach's themes at the grand organ of the St. Thomas Church and leaf through Bach's autographs, their relationship feels personal and intimate.

The *G Minor String Quintet* K. 516 from 1787 was written, along with its sister piece in C Major, for the ensemble of two violins, two violas and cello. Mozart intended to publish the music himself, using a subscriber model as he did in his Vienna concert series. Failing to secure a sufficient number of buyers for the works, he was forced to abandon this plan and the works were in the end sold to a music publisher for a meagre sum. Two years later, his concert series would meet the same fate, as only one patron was willing to subscribe—the aforementioned Gottfried van Swieten. The *G Minor Quintet's* tragic atmosphere has been linked by some to Mozart's dwindling success in Vienna, increasing finan-

cial worries and his father's illness and impending death. The *Adagio* movement in E-Flat major offers a moment of grace and consolation. According to one account (by Austrian composer Maximilian Stadler), Mozart performed the work himself at one point, playing one of the two violas in this quintet, with his friend Haydn playing the other. It is easy to imagine the warmth and kindred spirit of that ensemble. However, the sublime music also lends itself wonderfully to a solo piano transcription, something that has tempted me for years.

Following my encounter with the "*Sonata facile*" K. 545 described above, it would be years before I realized that this sonata was not written by the child Mozart, as I had envisioned. And, far from circumstances of perfect musical happiness, this C Major sonata was in fact written at a time, 1788, when Mozart's fortunes had reversed, as Austria's war with the Ottoman Empire had brought on an economic recession that rendered his concert activities unsustainable. As success in the opera world had yet to materialize, teaching provided a stable source of income for him. It is to this economic necessity that we owe so many of the solo keyboard pieces, including this perfectly distilled work, described by Mozart himself as "a little piano sonata for beginners", which somehow seems to reflect back to Mozart's own beginnings, almost as if recreating happier, simpler times.

If there is a hint of nostalgia in the *C Major Sonata*, the grand, theatrical tragedy of the *C Minor Sonata* K. 457, however, foreshadows the turbulent Romantic era that lay ahead. It is all but impossible to imagine Beethoven writing his "*Pathétique*" *Sonata* without Mozart's *C Minor Sonata* paving the way. There are striking similarities in numerous passages in the opening movement. In the second movement Mozart's third theme, in A-Flat, seems to be the model on which Beethoven based his famous second movement melody, also in

A-Flat. Overall, the work feels strikingly bold in conception, its dynamic contrasts pushing the boundaries of what was yet possible on the ever-evolving keyboard instruments of the day.

The two mediums of string ensemble and solo keyboard were not far apart in Mozart's mind, as evident in his transcriptions of J.S. Bach's keyboard fugues for string quartet, dating back to his discovery of Bach's music. Having allowed myself to transcribe the *Adagio* from the *G Minor String Quintet* for solo piano, I must now conversely admit that the beautifully organized four-part writing of the late *B Minor Adagio* K. 540 has often made me feel as if I were playing a piece for string quartet. Written in March 1788, the *Adagio* balances dark, introspective tension with tender meditation throughout—and the way it resolves into B major at the end feels like forgiveness itself.

In his piano transcription of Mozart's *Ave verum corpus* K. 618 (1791), Franz Liszt allows himself to marvel at Mozart's genius in his 19th-century way. There is a sense of death and transfiguration as the music moves up into the starry firmament of the piano's upper register – Mozart has become an angel of sorts. In one of his incomprehensible compositional feats, Mozart's original choral motet was created in what appears to have been the spur of the moment during his visit to the spa town of Baden bei Wien, where Constanze was staying, pregnant with their sixth child. Mozart had six months to live. He wrote the motet as a present for his friend, the parish cantor, to be performed a few days later at the Mass of Corpus Christi. Intended for a provincial choir and not overly ornate, there is a lucid clarity about its expressive beauty and, despite the swiftness of its creation, every detail seems perfectly thought-through. Two hundred and thirty years on, this music disarms us in a way words can hardly express.