

**Program Supplement**

# Hanzhi Wang, *accordion*

Sat, Feb 1 / 4 PM / Hahn Hall

## About the Program

### **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750):** Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004 (arr. Ferruccio Busoni)

Bach, his wife Maria Barbara, and their several children spent nearly a decade in Weimar, where he served the court of Duke Ernest Augustus I. Though successful in this post, tensions built between the duke and the high-strung Bach. Bach repeatedly attempted to resign before the exasperated duke had him temporarily jailed for “obstinacy.” His troubles continued when Maria Barbara died unexpectedly. Bach, who had been traveling, learned of her death upon returning home weeks after the funeral. Less than two years later, the widowed Bach married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a young soprano. It is during this tumultuous period that Bach composed his sonatas and partitas (three of each) for solo violin. The Chaconne, the fifth and final movement of the second partita, soon came to be performed as a discrete bravura showpiece.

Ferruccio Busoni’s lifelong association with Bach began with his parents. Busoni began piano lessons with his mother at age four, but his father soon took charge of his musical education. His tutelage included an intense study of Bach, even though German music was little regarded in a country largely under the sway of Italian opera and Neapolitan song.

As a young man, Busoni attended a performance of Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in D major for organ. Afterward, a pupil suggested he arrange it for piano; a week later Busoni played an arrangement for her from memory. This first Bach transcription set him on a path that came to define the rest of his career. Busoni continued to transcribe the works of other composers until his death (his last was of Kurt Weill’s song cycle *Frauentanz*), though his love of Bach continued to hold sway. Busoni published over thirty volumes of Bach’s music, editions primarily composed of keyboard works including *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *Goldberg Variations* as well as chamber pieces.

The Chaconne held a particular fascination for Busoni. Over a period of more than twenty years, he wrote four separate piano transcriptions of the work as well as an unpublished arrangement for orchestra. Busoni completed the first transcription in 1892 while living in Boston. He dedicated it to Eugen d’Albert, a former pupil of Franz Liszt’s whose own Bach transcriptions were said to rival Busoni’s. D’Albert found Busoni’s transcription “excessive” and never performed it, so Busoni premiered it himself.

The chaconne likely originated in the New World before colonizers brought it to Spain in the sixteenth century. As it spread across Europe, it took on the distinct characteristics of various national traditions, echoing nationalistic stereotypes in each. In Italy, the chaconne, or ciacconna, was more volatile and rhapsodic, while in France it assumed a more stately and controlled character. Bach's combines the pomp of the French chaconne with the busy passagework of the German style. Like most eighteenth-century chaconnes, the Chaconne consists of variations over a repeated harmonic progression in a triple meter.

As in the original, Busoni commences with a straightforward presentation of the four-bar theme. He approaches transcription not as mere copying but as an opportunity to exploit the piano's full capabilities. The transcription includes flashy passagework idiomatic to the piano, including rapid octave runs in the style of another admirer of Bach's, Franz Liszt. While Bach's manuscript eschews instructional markings, Busoni lends his own sensibilities, adding numerous tempos, dynamics, and expressive markings, such as the instruction "quasi tromboni" in the chorale-like middle section. Following the chorale, the music slowly builds, climaxing in one last rhapsodic outburst before a last restatement of the theme.

### **Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757):**

Sonata in D Minor, K. 9

Sonata in C Major, K. 159

Sonata in G Major, K. 146

Domenico Scarlatti was born in Naples, the sixth child of Alessandro. Known for his vocal music, especially his operas, Alessandro groomed his son to follow in his footsteps. Though Domenico did not share in his father's success as an opera composer, he displayed prodigious talent as a harpsichordist. His abilities took him across Italy, including Rome, where he crossed paths with the Portuguese ambassador to the Vatican. This initial connection with Portugal would prove pivotal. Several years later, Scarlatti moved to Lisbon to serve as harpsichord instructor to Maria Magdalena Bárbara, the preteen Infanta. When Bárbara married Fernando VI, heir to the Spanish throne, Scarlatti joined her in Madrid, where he spent the rest of his life as her tutor.

While in the service of the royal family, Scarlatti struck up a close friendship with another court musician: the castrato Farinelli, one of history's most famous singers. Unlike Scarlatti, whose post included typical duties such as instruction and performance, Farinelli performed a most unusual task. At the insistence of Queen Elisabetta Farnese, Farinelli sang arias to cure her husband, King Philip V, of his melancholy and ease him to sleep. For nearly nine years Farinelli spent each night singing at the king and queen's bedside. After Philip's passing, Fernando and Bárbara ascended to the throne, keeping Farinelli in their employ.

Scarlatti composed most if not all of his 555 keyboard sonatas while in Bárbara's service. In the last fifteen years of his life, he compiled them into two massive collections. One legend states that Bárbara and Farinelli agreed to pay off Scarlatti's gambling debts in exchange for putting the sonatas on paper, as most of them had only ever been performed as improvisations. After Scarlatti's, Bárbara's, and Fernando's deaths, Farinelli returned to Italy, taking the volumes with him.

Like most of Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas, these are set in a binary structure; traditionally, each of the two sections is repeated once. In many of Scarlatti's sonatas, including these three, the second part contains more adventurous harmonic exploration. The first sonata is sprightly and delicate. The music moves smoothly between minor and major keys, a stylistic feature common in the vocal music Scarlatti grew up hearing in Naples, including works by his father. The sonata in C major, a cheery dance, advances with an insistent drive. The final sonata is the most spontaneous of the three. In both halves, the bass accompaniment sometimes drops out entirely, highlighting a rhapsodic unfolding in the treble clef.

## **Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764): “L’Egyptienne,” “La Livri,” and “Le rappel des oiseaux” from *Pièces de Clavecin***

Unlike Bach, Scarlatti, and other contemporaries, Rameau published only a handful of volumes of keyboard music. With this relatively small output, Rameau influenced both his contemporaries and future generations of composers. In addition to his keyboard music (mostly for the harpsichord), he left significant legacies in music theory and opera. His *Treatise on Harmony* quickly made Rameau one of the most discussed musicians of the Enlightenment. Within his own lifetime, Rameau became known as the “Newton of Harmony,” and his ideas formed much of the foundation of contemporary harmonic theory. At age fifty, Rameau premiered his first opera, *Hippolyte et Aricie*, igniting a storm of controversy over the music’s complexity and so-called “Italianate” affectations.

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw an explosion of pieces written for harpsichord, particularly in France. Rameau published his *Premier Livre de Pièces de Clavecin* in 1706; it would be nearly twenty years before he would publish a second.

“L’Egyptienne” (modern editions change the spelling to “L’Egytienne”) is the final piece in Rameau’s *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin*. In Rameau’s time, égyptien(ne) typically referred not to Egyptians but to gypsies. The music dances forward, a capricious whirlwind of dramatic intensity. Domenico Scarlatti may have visited Paris around the time Rameau began composing the *Nouvelles Suites*; later works by both composers suggest a mutual borrowing of keyboard techniques.

*Pièces de clavecin en concerts* would be Rameau’s final collection of harpsichord compositions. For the remaining two decades of his life he turned his creative energy almost exclusively toward staged works, especially opera. The pieces in this collection, unlike his earlier harpsichord suites, were written for a small ensemble to include violin or flute and viola da gamba, though Rameau wrote that “these pieces, played on the harpsichord alone, leave nothing to be desired.” The origin of the rondo “La Livri” remains a mystery, though its plaintive, descending melody has led to speculation that Rameau wrote the piece as a tombeau.

“Le rappel des oiseaux” (“Conference of the Birds”) appears in *Pièces de Clavessin*, Rameau’s second collection of harpsichord pieces. The set shows a significant departure for Rameau: while his earlier harpsichord works – and those of his contemporaries – were primarily associated with dance, the majority of *Pièces de Clavessin* consists of character pieces. Here, Rameau imitates the twittering of birds in the treble while the bass provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The piece may have been inspired by his friend Louis Bertrand Castel, a Jesuit who discussed with the composer the study of birdsong.

## **Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998): *Revis Fairy Tale***

The year 1985 proved to be one of extreme significance for Russian composer Alfred Schnittke. Recently turned fifty, he premiered several significant works including a string trio and three concertos. In March, Mikhail Gorbachev became the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost (“openness”) loosened restrictions on Soviet artists and allowed for greater dissemination of their work, including Schnittke’s, to Western audiences. That summer Schnittke had his first stroke, an attack so severe that for several minutes he was declared clinically dead. He spent his remaining years in increasingly poor health until a fifth and final stroke took his life.

These events overshadow another Schnittke premiere from that year, of the ballet *Sketches* at the Bolshoi Theatre. *Sketches* is a collection of vignettes based on stories by nineteenth-century Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Years earlier, Schnittke had composed incidental music to a play based on Gogol’s novel *Dead Souls*. Though the Brezhnev government censored the work, Schnittke later reused much of the music. Though Schnittke did not arrange the *Revis Fairy Tale* for accordion, he did have a long history with the instrument: as a teenager, he attempted to compose an accordion concerto, and a picture from that year shows the thirteen-year-old smiling, accordion in hand.

A common stylistic element of Schnittke's music is the quotation of other composers' music. He often inserted these borrowed melodies to create tension and irony. The first movement of the *Revis Fairy Tale* illustrates the early years of Pavel Chichikov, the scheming ex-bureaucrat at the center of *Dead Souls*. The quotation of classical compositions, including Franz Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony, juxtaposes music of child-like simplicity against Chichikov's corrupt nature. In "Officials," Schnittke uses a transposed melody from the overture of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* to satirize bureaucracy, mindless officials scurrying about.

The third movement, a lugubrious Waltz, advances on heavy feet. Sluggish oom-pah-pah rhythms move in a drooping 3/4 meter. The final movement, a spiky Polka, tells the tale of Bashmachkin, the underappreciated clerk from Gogol's short story "The Overcoat." After he loses his coat and dies of hypothermia, Bashmachkin returns as a vengeful ghost who steals others' coats.

### **Edvard Grieg (1843-1907): Selections from *Holberg Suite*, op. 40**

The year 1884 marked the bicentennial of Danish-Norwegian philosopher and playwright Ludvig Holberg's birth. Festivals across Scandinavia paid tribute to the "Molière of the North," and composers were commissioned to write pieces in his honor. When Grieg received his commission he was homesick, in the middle of a creative rut, and had never actually read anything by Holberg. Despite these challenges, Grieg finished the first version of the *Holberg Suite*, for solo piano, and followed with an arrangement for string orchestra. Both were well-received at their premieres, though Grieg was more modest: in a letter to a friend he wrote, "I have arranged that poor *Holberg Suite* for string orchestra. It may sound pretty good."

While Grieg often composed in a fuller Romantic idiom (his composition "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from *Peer Gynt* exemplifies this grandiosity), he wrote the *Holberg Suite* in a conservative style reminiscent of what Holberg might have listened to. To this end, Grieg used French dance forms popular in the eighteenth century.

The suite opens with a graceful prelude. This harmonically simple movement pairs an adventurous, galloping motif with sweet and tranquil themes. The repetitive *gavotte* is split into two sections; in the second, a *musette*, sustained notes mimic the drone of bagpipes. In the final movement, a *rigaudon*, Grieg evokes the sprightly folk songs of the dance hall.

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