George Li Plays
Enchanting Rachmaninoff

Saturday, November 23
7:30 p.m., Pantages Theater

Sarah Ioannides conductor
George Li piano

Fanfare for Sam
David Ludwig

Symphony No. 3, op. 90, F major
Brahms
   I. Allegro con brio
   II. Andante
   III. Poco allegretto
   IV. Allegro

6’

33’

INTERMISSION

Piano Concerto No. 3, op. 30, D minor
Rachmaninoff
   I. Allegro ma non tanto
   II. Intermezzo
   III. Finale

George Li

39’

The length of this concert, including intermission, is approximately 108 minutes.

GEORGE LI

Praised by the Washington Post for combining “staggering technical prowess, a sense of command and depth of expression,” pianist George Li possesses an effortless grace, brilliant virtuosity and poised authority far beyond his years. He began playing piano at the age of four and made his first public performance at Boston’s Steinway Hall at the age of ten. Since winning the Silver Medal at the 2015 International Tchaikovsky Competition, Mr. Li has rapidly established a major international reputation and performs regularly with some of the world’s leading orchestras and conductors.

Mr. Li resides in Lexington, MA. He graduated from New England Conservatory Preparatory School, and later earned a dual degree program at Harvard University and the New England Conservatory in 2018. He was the recipient of the 2016 Avery Fisher Career Grant, a recipient of the 2012 Gilmore Young Artist Award, and the First Prize winner of the 2010 Young Concert Artists International Auditions.

georgelipianist.com

PERFORMANCE SPONSORS
ABOUT THE MUSIC

David Serkin Ludwig
Fanfare for Sam
Born: 1974 in Bucks County, PA
Work composed: 2011 (Contemporary Era)

From the composer:

Fanfare for Sam is a tribute to that great American composer, Samuel Barber, a musical hero to me and to so many others that followed in his footsteps (literally) at the Curtis Institute as students.

In thinking of Barber’s contribution to American music, I wanted the Fanfare to reflect a contemporary take on musical tradition; to mix the old with the new. The music begins out of tuning the “A”—the first sound an orchestra makes—like a prehistoric call to order. This sound grows into an explosive moment where a held Bb emerges from the mass, echoing the first note of the Adagio for Strings. As Barber’s work does, my Fanfare returns to that note again and again as a way to re-center the music and introduce each new section of the piece. Following the first held notes are webs of indeterminate patterns and canons with instruments playing in close imitation. Romantic melodies and harmonies give way to big crescendos of brass and percussion; the Adagio on warp ten.

Throughout the piece I wanted to feature each instrumental section of the orchestra as a celebration of all of its many colors and sounds. Fanfare for Sam ends on a big C major chord to honor Curtis, who commissioned and premiered the work, and where Mr. Barber and I—and many other appreciative composers—have had the privilege to call our musical home.

Johannes Brahms
Symphony No. 3
Born: May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany
Died: April 3, 1897 in Vienna, Austria
Work composed: 1883 (Romantic Era)

Johannes Brahms began to mature as a composer during a time when musical classics of the past were becoming permanent repertoire in concert life. This affected his work greatly; he understood that most audiences had come to adore the staples of the classical repertoire, but were still looking for something different enough to offer something new and attractive.

Consequently, Brahms became critical of his own work. He wrote slowly and deliberately, knowing that his reputation as a composer hinged on the quality of his pieces. Brahms waited until he was well into
his forties before daring to bring forth his first symphony in 1876.

Brahms received a boost to his composing career with an endorsement of famed composer Robert Schumann. After Schumann’s death, Brahms remained close with Schumann’s widow, Clara, a pianist and talented composer herself. He valued her musical opinion and would regularly send his new compositions to her.

In Brahms’ third symphony, Clara noticed that the notes F-A flat-F were the top notes of the three chords that open the piece. The three notes are the first letters of Brahms’ motto, Frei aber froh, which translates to “free but happy.” Clara had this to say about the work:

I have spent such happy hours with your wonderful creation... What a work! What a [musical] poem! What a harmonious mood pervades the whole! All the movements seem to be of one piece, one beat of the heart, each one a jewel!

Brahms used his three note motto in all four movements in different guises. It begins the first movement, full of conflict from the start as the A-flat sandwiched between the two F’s shifts the music off of F major (A is natural, not flat), to F minor, where the A is flat. This conflict occurs on and off through the movement, following the F-A-F pattern. The second theme is in A-flat major, and is of a more gentle nature.

In the second movement, the three note motto is within the theme, this time in C major. After the initial theme is played through, a second more passionate theme emerges and ends with the initial theme played very quietly.

The third movement in C minor is in scherzo form, but not in mood. The melody is a sad, gentle dance, with the three note motto found in the accompaniment. The dance continues and progresses to a short coda, and the movement ends quietly with string chords played pizzicato over woodwind accompaniment.

The last movement renews the passion and drama of the first, as the shifting between major and minor mode resumes. Brahms uses his own style of sonata form to present and develop themes that lead to the coda. With muted strings in the background, woodwinds and brass gently move the music to a final unwinding as the three note motto is played one last time.

Sergei Rachmaninoff
Piano Concerto No. 3
Born: April 1, 1873 in Semyonovo, Russia
Died: February 14, 1943 in Beverly Hills, CA
Work composed: 1909 (Romantic Era)

In October 1906, Sergei Rachmaninoff moved with his wife and daughter from Moscow, Russia to Dresden, Germany. A successful composer of two piano concertos, three operas, chamber music, works for solo piano, and several dozen important songs, he was an admired conductor and recognized as one of the great pianists of his—and any—time.

Like all composers who have consuming careers as performers, Rachmaninoff found himself longing for time just to compose. The move to Dresden was an attempt to take himself out of circulation, and he chose the beautiful Saxon capital because he and his wife had become fond of it on their honeymoon four years earlier. Offers to play and conduct continued, and Rachmaninoff decided to accept an invitation to visit the United States. For this tour he wrote and debuted his Third Concerto with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony. Soon after, he played it again with the New York Philharmonic under Gustav Mahler.

In the first measures, we find a quality not usually associated with Rachmaninoff: simplicity. For two measures, clarinet, bassoon, horn, timpani and muted strings set up a pulse against which the piano sings a long and quiet melody, the two hands in unison as in a piano duet by Schubert. It is a lovely inspiration, that melody unfolding in subtle variation, just a few notes being continuously redispersed rhythmically. Once only, to the extent of a single eighth note, the melody exceeds the range of an octave; most of it stays within a fifth, and that narrowness of the gamut contributes to our sense that this is profoundly and unmistakably Russian.

The Third Concerto offers an immense challenge to stamina and endurance for the soloist, with the orchestral passages that frame the Intermezzo being the only moments of respite. Few pianists would agree with Rachmaninoff’s own estimate that the Third Concerto is “more comfortable” than the Second. Moreover, to a degree truly uncommon for a concerto in the big Romantic bravura tradition, Rachmaninoff sees the soloist not merely as someone who can sing soulfully and thunder impossibly, but as an alert, flexible, responsive musician who knows how to blend, accompany and listen.