

_ TRANSFIGURATION _

Transfiguration (*noun*)

a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state.

Perhaps the most oft-praised facet of music is its ability to transform. Transfiguring, if you will.

Isolde's famous *Liebested* (Love-Death), the ecstatic culmination point of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, originally bore the title of *Verklärung* (Transfiguration). Be it in Liszt's journey through the inferno and paradise in his *Dante Sonata*, Berg's remarkably 'Tristanesque' *Piano Sonata Op. 1*, or the eroticism and sensual sweep of *Scriabin's Piano Sonata #4*, Wagner's influence was such that the ripples of his contributions had an irrevocable impact on the development of musical history. This is particularly evident in the works on this album.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to a number of people who assisted in the creation of this album. Firstly to Lyle Chan for your sage-like wisdom in guiding me through the early stages of the recording process, to the outstanding team at the ABC (Christian, Andrew, Jason and Maria) for your expertise and for putting up with my regular visits, to the Michael Kieran Harvey Scholarship for financing a significant portion of this endeavour and lastly to my wonderful parents Michele and Aldo for their endless encouragement and support in the weird and wonderful profession that is music-making.



Alex Raineri

VARIATIONS SÉRIEUSES IN D MINOR, OP. 54 (1841)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Felix Mendelssohn gave his audiences what they expected and, as a consequence, enjoyed warm receptions when he travelled abroad. In 1842 he was overwhelmed by the adoration of London audiences which he described in a letter to his mother: 'I played in Exeter Hall before three thousand people who shouted hurrahs and waved their handkerchiefs and stamped with their feet till the hall resounded with the uproar. Add to this the pretty and most charming Queen Victoria, who looks so youthful, and is so gently courteous and gracious, who speaks such good German and who knows all my music so well.'

Mendelssohn and Wagner knew each other in Leipzig and Dresden in the 1840s, although their natures and interests were very different. Wagner once described Mendelssohn as a great landscape-painter with a palette that was unequalled. 'No one else transposes the external beauty of things into music as he does' said Wagner. '*Fingal's Cave*, among others, is an admirable picture. Yet, in spite of all these gifts, he fails to move us to the depths of the soul: it is as if he painted only the appearance of sentiment, and not the sentiment itself.'

However, in his autobiography, Wagner recalled his opinion of Mendelssohn three decades earlier, at the time of his own early and very un-Wagnerian opera *Rienzi*. 'I was conscious then' he said, 'that I couldn't even remotely compare my capacities and achievements as a musician with those of Mendelssohn.' The *Variations* demonstrate why the young Wagner had been so conscious of his own shortcomings in 1841.

ISOLDE'S LIEBESTOD, S.447 (1868)

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) - Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

In Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner found an artistic soulmate of the greatest sensitivity and imagination, and one whose generosity was a constant source of strength. Liszt had the measure of Wagner's achievements as few others did, and at one time he envisaged a new artistic age in which he and Wagner would be the leading spirits, as Goethe and Schiller had been in theirs. In 1860, Liszt told the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein: 'Among our art-comrades of the day there is one name which has already become glorious, and which will increasingly become so – Richard Wagner. His genius has been to me a light which I have followed – and my friendship for Wagner has always been of the character of a noble passion.'

This devotion was sorely tested and indeed almost lost in the mid-1860s when Wagner began an affair with Liszt's daughter Cosima, then married to Hans von Bülow. For eleven years Liszt broke off all correspondence. Wagner's muse during the composition of *Tristan und Isolde* had not been Cosima but Mathilde Wesendonck. Nevertheless, it was the effect of his feelings for Mathilde and then for Cosima that enabled him to become more truly himself and create his greatest works. The ambiguous 'Tristan chord', first heard in the opening bars of the prelude, begins a process crucial to the opera - one of harmonic suspension, as one dissonant chord resolves onto another, and that onto another and so on, only achieving ultimate resolution in the closing bars of the entire work. Thus, the listener is taken on a journey of desire and expectation.

In 1872, when plans were being made for laying the foundation stone of the Bayreuth theatre, Wagner wrote to Liszt one of the most human and moving letters that any man could write to another: 'My great and dear friend,

Cosima maintains that you would not come even if I were to invite you. We should have to endure that, as we have had to endure so many things! But I cannot forbear to invite you. And what is it I cry to you when I say “come”? ... You live before me and within me in perfect beauty, and we are as one beyond the grave itself. You were the first man to ennoble me through his love; I am now wedded to a second higher life through her and can achieve what I could never have achieved alone. If I now say to you “come”, what I mean is: “Come to yourself!” for you will find yourself here. Whatever your decision, you have my blessing and my love!

You live before me and within me in perfect beauty, and we are as one beyond the grave itself. What is this if not the sentiment that lies at the heart of Tristan und Isolde?

PIANO SONATA OP.1 (1908)

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Alban Berg was born two years after Richard Wagner's death, but such was his lifelong passion for Wagner's music that whenever he entered a room with a piano he would invariably head straight for the keyboard and play the 'Tristan chord'. It has been said that Berg's interest in music was first awakened by the enthusiasm of his elder brother Karl who, to their father's annoyance, played *Meistersinger*, the *Ring*, and *Tristan und Isolde* from beginning to end, and sang all the vocal parts - imperfectly but with passion! Tristan haunted many of Berg's works, notably his *Lyric Suite* and the opera *Lulu*. In 1907 he had set to music a poem by Theodor Storm which he dedicated to his future wife, Helene. But on a visit to Prague in May 1925, Alban fell in love with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, the wife of a

wealthy Prague industrialist. He kept his passionate feelings for Hanna secret, but the love and desire he felt for her had an on-going effect on his creative life. His *Lyric Suite* of 1926 was secretly dedicated to her, and on her personal copy of the score are the words: 'For whom and only for whom – in spite of the official dedication – every note of this work was written. My Hanna allowed me other freedoms ... that of secretly inserting our initials into the music. I have written these and much else into the score for you. May it be a small monument to a great love.'

Hidden within Wagner's autograph score of *Act One of Die Walküre* (another story about a man in love with another man's wife) are cryptic sets of initials referring secretly to the composer's infatuation with Mathilde Wesendonck. In a famous letter of April 1858, intercepted by his wife Minna, Wagner wrote to Mathilde, saying: 'Now in the morning I have come to my senses again and am able to pray to my angel with heartfelt emotion, and this prayer is love! And profound joy in this love is the source of my salvation ...'

In a similar vein, Alban Berg would write to Hanna: 'Not a day passes, not half a day, not a night, when I don't think of you, not a week when I am suddenly flooded by a yearning which submerges all my thought and feelings and wishes ... only still shadowed by a grief which rules me more and more, and which has made me a play actor. But believe me Hanna, all this pertains only to this exterior person, the one I have been forced to present to my fellow human beings, one who could never have composed *Lulu*.'

It was a sentiment that the composer of *Tristan und Isolde* would have understood. Berg's *Piano Sonata* was first performed in Vienna in 1911 at a recital of compositions by the students of Arnold Schoenberg. It too is imbued with a quality that one can only call 'Tristanesque'.

PIANO SONATA NO.4 IN F#, OP.30 (1903)

Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915)

Thinly veiled in transparent cloud
A star shines softly, far and lonely.
How beautiful!

The azure secret of its radiance beckons, lulls me...

Vehement desire, sensual, insane, sweet.

Now, joyfully I fly towards you,

Freely I take wing.

Mad dance, godlike play...

I draw near in my longing.

Sea of light, I engulf you.

The music of the *Fourth Sonata* was accompanied by a poem in French (see above). Alexander Scriabin was one of the finest pianists of his day. Initially influenced by Chopin and other romantics like Liszt and Mendelssohn, he fell under Wagner's spell towards the end of the nineteenth century. The impact of Wagner on Russian composers, conductors and musicians was substantial. He visited St Petersburg and Moscow in 1863 and was received enthusiastically by Russian musicians and audiences.

For all his powers of imagination, Wagner had his feet firmly on the ground, but the same could not be said of Scriabin. 'I am God!' he once wrote. 'I am nothing, I am play, I am freedom, I am life. I am the boundary, I am the peak.' On at least one occasion he insisted that he could fly, through the sheer force of his will. In the summer of 1903, the year of his *Fourth Sonata*, the artist Leonid Pasternak, returning home after a short walk, encountered a man who seemed to be quite sober but was perhaps a little touched in the head. He was bounding downhill with great springing strides and flapping his arms like an eagle trying to take off. The eccentric man was

Scriabin who went on to become a friend of the family and a mentor of Leonid's son, the writer Boris Pasternak.

The music of the *Fourth Sonata* was accompanied by a poem in French, in which a superhuman 'God-like' being is enticed by a distant star towards which he flies - and blissfully engulfs. The sonata follows the poem's form in one of Scriabin's earliest attempts to create a state of ecstasy, symbolised by flight, light, colour, erotic desire, dance, and the equation of the cosmos with self.

ANNÉES DE PÈLERINAGE, DEUXIÈME ANNÉE: ITALIE (1837-49) SPOSALIZIO

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

As a young man, Franz Liszt had travelled in Switzerland and Italy, composing what eventually became the first two volumes of *The Years of Pilgrimage*. At that time, he was accompanied by the Countess Marie d'Agoult. Although the Countess was married, her relationship with Liszt produced three children. The second girl, Cosima, would eventually follow this example into a relationship with Richard Wagner and she, in turn, would bear Wagner three children out of wedlock.

Liszt and Marie's children spent much of their early lives with Liszt's mother. When the relationship between father and mother soured, Liszt continued to correspond with the children but he did not see them for eight years. He forbade them from seeing their mother but he encouraged them to correspond with the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein with whom he

had now formed a relationship. Marie, active as a writer and using the pseudonym Daniel Stern, became preoccupied with her social life in Paris and made no effort to see her children for almost five years.

Artists like Liszt and Wagner were able to separate their all too human failings from their ideal visions. Nowhere is this more starkly apparent than with Liszt's noble and beautiful *Sposalizio* inspired by Raphael's serene painting of *The Marriage of the Virgin*. Both the painting and the piano work approach an ideal state of balance, perspective, modesty and restrained lyricism. There is even a hint of the serene atmosphere of Wagner's *Parsifal*, still many years into the future.

APRÈS UNE LECTURE DE DANTE, FANTASIA QUASI SONATA

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

It is likely that the '*Dante*' *Sonata* was conceived on the shores of Lake Como in 1837 at about the time that Liszt's daughter Cosima was born, and where a statue of Beatrice leading Dante is to be found in the gardens of the Villa Melzi. The work was revised and given more elaborate form in 1849 and 1852. It is Liszt's impression of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as seen through the eyes of Victor Hugo. The title is taken from one of Hugo's poems. Harnessing some of Liszt's most exciting musical 'experiments', it employs florid piano writing, chorale-like sonorities and exquisite lyricism. There are frightening depictions of Hell, tantalising glimpses of Paradise, and a magnificent Coda summing up all of the work's thematic material. This extraordinary work heralds the harmonic experiments of the composer's later years.

Alex Raineri _ Biography

Described by Limelight Magazine as “a soloist of superb virtuosic skill and musicality”, Australian pianist Alex Raineri is an active recitalist, concerto soloist and chamber musician.

International performances include tours throughout California, South-East Asia, United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, Germany and Austria. Alex has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3, Radio NZ, California Capital Public Radio, ABC Classic FM and the Australian MBS Networks.

As a concerto soloist he has featured with the Queensland, Tasmanian, Darwin and West Australian Symphony Orchestras, Southern Cross Soloists, Orchestra Victoria, Four Winds Festival Orchestra, Bangalow Festival Orchestra and the Queensland Pops Orchestra. Alex has been the recipient of a number of major awards including the Kerikeri International Piano Competition and Australian National Piano Award. In 2014 he was awarded a ‘Kranichstein Musikpries’ at the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt, Germany.

Alex is the pianist with the Southern Cross Soloists and was the pianist and co-artistic director of contemporary music ensemble Kupka’s Piano (2012-2018). Other notable chamber partnerships include; Andreas Ottensamer, eighth blackbird, ELISION, Sara Macliver, Natalie Clein, Greta Bradman, Teddy Tahu Rhodes, Jack Liebeck, Kathryn Stott, Slava Grigoryan, Brett Dean, Opera Queensland, Expressions Dance Company, and many others.

Alex’s mentors have included Leah Horwitz OAM, Timothy Young, Stephen Emmerson and Genevieve Lacey. He is currently undertaking a Doctor of Musical Arts at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music (Griffith University) and is an alumni and fellow of the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM)

_ ALEX RAINERI _