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RECORDINGS



LEON McCAWLEY  
PIANO RECITAL

BACH/LISZT · BEETHOVEN · CHOPIN · FRANCK

Leon McCawley's programme of piano music from the 19th century opens with a work that emanated from music composed more than 100 years earlier. Liszt's recomposition of six of J.S. Bach's Preludes and Fugues for organ dates from the years 1842–50. Catalogued as S.462 in Liszt's output, these profoundly insightful works were, as Leslie Howard has said, the first of the many Bach transcriptions made by great pianists from the mid-19th century to our own times. As such, they became a major influence – as did so much of Liszt's piano music – on many later artists, owing to their exploitation of the different inherent qualities of the piano "in a way that simply playing Bach's harpsichord and clavichord pieces on the piano seldom produces".

The resultant transformation from one keyboard medium to another proved inspirational to Liszt's contemporaries and successors – and, of course, made Bach's organ music more readily available to other musicians. However, such has been the rise and success in the last 80 years or so of period performance practice of music from the 18th century, that the original nature and qualities of Liszt's pioneering transcription work have been in danger of being overlooked.

The first in the set of six is **Liszt's transcription of Bach's A minor Prelude and Fugue, BWV 543**, and in it Liszt demonstrates his profound respect for the original music – through the linear Prelude as its essence of movement is transformed into the Fugue. Liszt's transcription carries with it the suggestions of a practical veneer of a church acoustic in subtly adding octaves and, at what might be termed the second middle entry, a genuine respect for the sheer compositional genius of the original as refracted through the developed piano keyboard.

The Prelude, in quasi-linear arpeggiated chords, flows with a natural fluency that profoundly influences the subject matter of the four-voiced Fugue, the music in the relatively rare pulse of 6/8. What is also rare is the tonic minor ending; such unusual features must have fired Liszt's own creative imagination to produce this magnificent tribute from one great composer to another.

The **Andante favori** is a relatively rare piece in Beethoven's output, in that it was originally intended to be the slow second movement of his Piano Sonata No.21 in A minor (known as the "Waldstein"). It was withdrawn, after a colleague's initial criticism claimed the movement was too long. Somewhat surprisingly, we may feel, Beethoven accepted the comment, furnishing the "Waldstein" with a shorter introductory movement instead. But he did not discard his original music, and – unusually in his output – it was published separately the following year. According to Carl Czerny, arguably Beethoven's most famous pupil, the title by which it is known was coined by the composer himself, the *Andante favori* being a favourite work with audiences at his later public performances.

It is sometimes claimed that the music is a depiction of Beethoven's love for Countess Josephine von Brunsvik. While this may or may not be true, the warmth and depth of feeling within the music cannot be denied; it speaks with an expressive spirit that is profoundly human.

Leon McCawley's programme continues with the aforementioned "**Waldstein**" **Sonata**, one of the undoubted masterpieces from what is usually termed Beethoven's "middle period". It was composed during the summer months of

1804, the subtitle derived from the work's dedicatee, Beethoven's friend and patron Count Waldstein. The Sonata itself contains aspects of the composer's burgeoning strength and creative mastery, not only in technical demands but also in creative organic vigour, Beethoven's juxtaposition of keys a third apart lighting a fire of creative tonal imagination that never left him.

It begins with a phrase of pulsating repeated chords, rounded off with a falling figure of five notes, which leads in the most unexpected fashion to the key of E for the serene second subject. This appears first in block chords and is then repeated under decorative triplets. A long and brilliant cadential passage follows, exploiting the piano's range and expressive power, at length introducing the development section, in which Beethoven concentrates largely upon the falling figure. Rumbling bass semi-quavers and scraps of rising scales return to the reprise of the first subject with a brief harmonic detour.

The second subject, having made its first appearance in the mediant, returns in the equally distant key of the sub-mediant but slips unobtrusively into the tonic C major for its decorated repetition. The movement concludes with a highly extended coda – almost as if Beethoven had wished to investigate further the developmental aspects. The end, eventually, is full of heightened bravura.

We have mentioned the substitution of the original slow movement (now the separate work *Andante favori*); Beethoven's replacement is much shorter – an Adagio that is specifically labelled an "Introduzione", all of it derived from a remarkably well elaborated three-note figure. It forms a point of repose between

the first movement's energy and the open-air freedom with which the finale begins. In this movement, Beethoven's evolving signature fundamental of "keys a third apart" comes into its own truly for the first time in his piano music. The scale and expressive content of this finale are truly enthralling before it ends with an extended, quasi-developmental coda in which the rondo theme is repeated again and again in different keys and decorated with quiet trills before the exultant close.

The two works by Chopin that follow each inhabit aspects of the composer's contemplative nature – certainly more prevalent in his creative character than in that of many of his contemporaries – with the exception of Schumann, perhaps.

Chopin's **Berceuse**, composed in 1843–4, was originally titled *Variantes*, but such variations as this initial title implies are not so individually identifiable as to warrant the name. The work is rather a series of short continuous contemplations upon a simple, nocturne-like theme, each arising organically from its predecessor. The textural originality of the work is remarkably adept and invariably moving.

Chopin's **Barcarolle** followed in 1845–6. The key is F sharp major, and it has been claimed that the work is a pianistic reflection on the Venetian *barcarola* song genre. This may be true, for although Chopin never visited Venice, he could have encountered a similar atmosphere during his time in Mallorca in 1838–9. Whatever the inspiration, the nature of the music, as an early-evening study recollecting the manner of Italianate *bel canto* through the tracery of ornamented lines as the paradigm of early genuine Romanticism, shows the work's technical and expressive demands raising the music's significance to a high level of feeling.

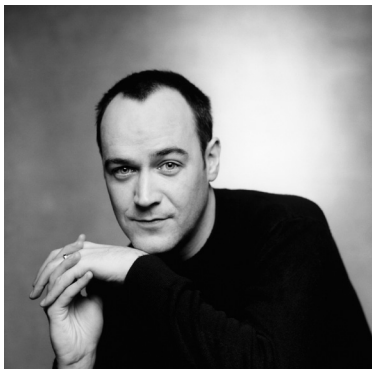
César Franck, whose organ works Liszt regarded on a par with the masterpieces of Bach and who avoided the demonstrably virtuosic and sensual in his music, began his career, through the demands of his father, in the role of piano virtuoso. That career, however, proved unsuccessful, even after the family moved to Paris from their Belgian hometown of Liège, where César and his brother had studied at the Royal Conservatory. Looking to the example of the young Franz Liszt, César's father forced him to practise continually and to compose diverting little piano pieces à la mode, even after they were living in Paris. After seven years, during which the young virtuoso–composer never quite managed to carve out a secure niche for himself in the Parisian musical world, Franck père finally conceded defeat insofar as public performances were concerned.

In the four decades following his abandonment of a career as piano virtuoso, César Franck composed some of his greatest works for orchestra, for chamber ensembles and for the organ. In piano concertante and piano solo works such as *Les Djinns*, Symphonic Variations, the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue and the Prelude, Aria and Finale, he showed that great piano music could be both technically and musically demanding. It was Franck's love for the music of Bach that led him to compose the **Prelude, Chorale and Fugue** in 1884. It was first conceived as a prelude and fugue, doubtless initially inspired by daily practice and even more so by the contemporaneous performances of Marie Poitevin, a young virtuoso pianist who was at that time taking the Parisian music scene by storm. She included in her recitals works by Bach, which were then still relatively unknown in France and not yet considered staples of the piano repertoire. In adding the Chorale, Franck enlarged the work into a form that for him would be more expressive and encapsulate a deeper level of utterance.

The Prelude opens with a theme in which the germinal motive is stated in accented notes. After this toccata-like introduction, the “hidden” theme makes its appearance in phrases characterised by abrupt pauses and almost brutal affirmations. The cadenza-like arpeggio writing dominates the rest of the Prelude and leads directly into the Chorale by means of a subtle modulation from B minor to E flat. The Chorale is a noble melody whose rich progressions and broken chords roll like elaborate waves from the keyboard. The Fugue theme, after an ominous introduction of Beethovenian stamp, goes through a series of inversions, augmentations, diminutions and, of course, strettos, and recalls aspects of the Prelude – another “cyclical” personal signature – before the coda modulates to the triumphant relative major of the Prelude: a vivid B major.

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“One of today’s most impeccably musical pianists.”  
*International Piano*, January/February 2021



© Sheila Rock

Praised for his unfailingly communicative playing, British pianist **Leon McCawley** has been delighting audiences worldwide since winning, in 1993, First Prize in the International Beethoven Piano Competition in Vienna and Second Prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition. His many concert performances and extensive discography have established him as a pianist of great integrity and variety, bringing freshness and vitality to Classical, Romantic and 20th-century repertoire. McCawley’s

2024 release *Natural Connection* for SOMM Recordings is no exception: “This scintillatingly varied recital combines sensuous virtuosity, compelling charm and musical probity. Highly recommended.” (*Gramophone*, February 2024).

An acclaimed exponent of Mozart, he has performed and recorded (Avie Records) the complete cycle of Mozart piano sonatas in winning interpretations: “There’s absolutely no vanity in his playing. In his hands the Mozartian oeuvre emerged with striking vividness” (*International Piano*). Notable recital appearances in past seasons include: Wigmore Hall (where he is a regular performer and was artist-



in-residence in the 21/22 season), four invitations to International Piano Series at London's Southbank Centre, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Mexico City's En Blanco y Negro Piano Festival, New York's Lincoln Center, Singapore International Piano Festival and Piano Visions series at Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. He can frequently be heard on BBC Radio 3 both in performance and interview, with recent broadcasts including *In Tune*, Wigmore Hall Lunchtime Series and *Performance on 3*.

As a concerto soloist, Leon has performed with many leading British orchestras including the BBC Concert, BBC Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National and Ulster Orchestras, Bournemouth and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestras and Royal Northern Sinfonia. He has made several appearances at the BBC Proms, which have been televised on BBC Four. Further afield, McCawley has made concerto appearances with, amongst others, Cincinnati, Dallas, Fort Worth, KBS (Seoul), RTÉ National and St Petersburg Symphony Orchestras, Malaysian and Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestras, Philadelphia Orchestra and Orquesta Sinfónica del Principado de Asturias, and has worked with conductors such as Sir Mark Elder, Paavo Järvi, Domingo Hindoyan, Andrew Litton, Sakari Oramo, Sir Simon Rattle, Robin Ticciati and John Wilson.

Leon studied at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester with Heather Slade-Lipkin before continuing his studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia with Eleanor Sokoloff. He also received invaluable guidance from Nina Milkina in London.

As a collaborative musician, he has performed at many prestigious concert venues including BBC Proms Chamber Series, BBC Radio 3 Lunchtime Series at Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh, Brighton, Cheltenham, Edinburgh, Galway, Lofoten (Norway) and Westport international festivals. Recent chamber music partners have included the Simply Quartet, Michael Collins, Nicholas Daniel, José Franch-Ballester and recitals with baritone Roderick Williams.

Leon has appeared as juror and adjudicator at many competitions including The International Edvard Grieg Piano Competition, BBC Young Musician, Royal Over-Seas League Competition, Feis Ceoil (Dublin) and Les Étoiles du Piano International Competition in Roubaix, France. He has given masterclasses all over the world, most recently at Amalfi Coast Music and Arts Festival in Italy, Festival Internacional de Piano de Málaga in Spain and Chetham's International Piano Summer School in Manchester.

McCawley's discography includes, on Avie Records, a double disc of Schumann Piano Music (Editor's Choice in *Gramophone*); The Complete Piano Works of Hans Gál (also a *Gramophone* Editor's Choice); and The Complete Mozart Piano Sonatas (awarded a Diapason d'Or); Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* with Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and City of London Choir/Hilary Davan Wetton (Naxos Records); Vaughan Williams's Double Piano Concerto with John Lenehan and Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Martin Yates (awarded 5 stars by *BBC Music Magazine*) and Stanford's Piano Concerto in B flat with Royal Northern Sinfonia/Martin Yates (both on Dutton Epoch); and 11 albums on SOMM Recordings that include Chopin Piano Music; Barber Piano Music (Critics' Choice in *Gramophone*);

Brahms Piano Music (Classic FM CD of the Week); Schumann Piano Music; Rachmaninoff Complete Preludes; Haydn Sonatas and Variations (awarded a Diapason d'Or); Schubert Piano Music; three further volumes of Haydn Sonatas and the aforementioned anthology album of nature-inspired piano works titled *Natural Connection*.

Leon McCawley has been professor of piano at London's Royal College of Music since 2008. He is married to the painter Anna Paik.

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# LEON McCAWLEY

## P I A N O R E C I T A L

transc. Franz Liszt 1811–1886

**Prelude and Fugue in A minor, S.462/1**

after BWV 543 by J.S. Bach 1685–1750

- |   |         |      |
|---|---------|------|
| ① | Prelude | 3:12 |
| ② | Fugue   | 5:47 |

Ludwig van Beethoven 1770–1827

- |   |                               |      |
|---|-------------------------------|------|
| ③ | <b>Andante favori, WoO 57</b> | 8:58 |
|---|-------------------------------|------|

**Piano Sonata No.21, Op.53 "Waldstein"**

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| ④ | I. Allegro con brio                           | 10:37 |
| ⑤ | II. Introduzione: Adagio molto                | 3:28  |
| ⑥ | III. Rondo: Allegretto moderato – Prestissimo | 9:50  |

Frédéric Chopin 1810–1849

- |   |                          |      |
|---|--------------------------|------|
| ⑦ | <b>Berceuse, Op.57</b>   | 4:38 |
| ⑧ | <b>Barcarolle, Op.60</b> | 8:37 |

César Franck 1822–1890

**Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, M.21**

- |   |  |      |
|---|--|------|
| ⑨ | Prelude: Moderato                      | 4:31 |
| ⑩ | Chorale: Poco più lento – Poco allegro | 6:15 |
| ⑪ | Fugue: Tempo I                         | 7:09 |

**Total Duration** **73:06**

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7 & 8 August 2025

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