

ARTISTIC VISION

"The art of virtuosity' reflects an homage to three composers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who were virtuosi on their respective instruments: Niccolò Paganini, Franz Liszt, and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

This period in music history was the golden age for the piano, the 'orchestra in keys'. Improvements in the mechanics of the piano and the refinement of its design combined with new revolutionary compositional techniques, created favourable conditions for the demands of the great virtuosos. On frequent occasions they entered the field of composition. As performers-improvisers they felt composition gave them free expression for their creative ideas.

The first half of the program is dedicated to the violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini. His superb technique and his phenomenal magnetism on stage made him a legend and perhaps the greatest violinist of all time. Paganini developed the polyphonic possibilities of the instrument to their fullest extent and was able to extract sounds and effects from the instrument which were deemed impossible and inconceivable up until then. He personified virtuosity as an art form. Paganini's acrobatics on the violin fascinated Franz Liszt, Frederic Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Johannes Brahms, all of whom composed works based on themes of Paganini.

After hearing Paganini play his *Carnival of Venice* in Warsaw, Frederic Chopin was inspired to write variations on the same theme calling this short charming work, *Souvenir de Paganini*. Robert Schumann transcribed *Twelve Caprices* by Paganini in his Op. 3 and 10 emulating the technical challenges of the violin version on the piano.

Variations on a theme of Paganini by Johannes Brahms are based on Paganini's *Caprice No. 24*. Emotional depth and technical challenges characterize this monumental work.

The second virtuoso-composer of the program is Franz Liszt who was rightfully called the Paganini of the piano and whose extraordinary talent heralded a new era in the development of the piano's repertoire. He achieved a new sonority, letting the listener 'feel the sound'. But he was more than a just superb pianist; he was the perfect paradigm of the 'cultivated' musician, a tireless proponent of program music, where the romantic composer looked for his compositional motif in literature, thus blurring the borders between music and poetry. Three selections from his *Transcendental Studies* are more than just a compilation of revolutionary piano techniques. They are musical poetry: In *Mazeppa* you hear the frantic ride of a dying Cossack tied to his horse, in *Paysage* the colours and whispers

of nature and in *Harmonies du Soir* the tolling of church bells fading into the sunset.

Composer, pianist and conductor Sergei Rachmaninoff drew inspiration from Franz Liszt and despite his great gifts as a pianist, composition was his real goal. His dream was almost terminated by the failure of his *First Symphony*, plunging him into deep depression, which he would overcome by composing *Concerto No. 2 for piano and orchestra*, a jewel of the piano literature. His magnificent *second Sonata*, can easily be called a concerto without orchestra." (Serouj Kradjian)

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“As a starting point for this program, we wanted to ensure that there was a lot of variety. One of our criteria, since Allen plays two different sizes of a saxophone, was to include him playing selections on both the soprano and alto saxophones. We also wanted to include some solo pieces for piano.

As well as being varied in instrumentation, we wanted to play music that was very different historically. The opening piece - Le Basque - was written in the 1600's, the Marcello Adagio is from the 1700's, and works by Piazzolla, DuBois and Glick are from the 20th century. Another part of the reason for our choices is that we took into account the audiences for which we would be playing. Since our Prairie Debut tour took us through some very small communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, a lot of people would have never heard classical saxophone, so we wanted music that was attractive and appealing. We had to consider what we thought would be accessible to the audience. We have also included a few transcriptions. Since the saxophone was invented in 1841, most of the classical saxophone repertoire is relatively recent, so transcriptions make up a portion of the repertoire.

The final variable was the melodic range of the program. The Rachmaninoff is, of course, very romantic music. The Dubois pieces are a really wonderful little set. It's modern music without being abrasive or super avant-garde- it's tuneful and melodic, and has idiomatic writing for the saxophone as well as the piano. It's just good writing. And then of course there is the Glick. We wanted to include music by a Canadian composer, and this is a beautiful sonata. So, there you have it: a great variety of styles, instruments and time periods - we hope you will enjoy the program!” *(Allen Harrington & David Moroz)*