Paul Berkowitz
works by Mozart, Poulenc, and Schubert

Friday, October 29, 2021 | 7:30 pm
Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall, UC Santa Barbara
A Note from the Artist

“I am excited to present my first recital in two years, following the closures of the Covid-19 pandemic, to open the 2021-22 concert season for the Department of Music.

“The program opens with the two rondos for piano of Mozart, both short one-movement works, but very contrasting in character. The D-major Rondo K.485 is a quick, bright classical movement with the peculiarity that every appearance of a theme, in every key – expected and unexpected – is the same theme heard at the very beginning of the piece or, occasionally, a variant of it. The A-minor Rondo K.511 is a very different matter: while not long either, it is one of the more profound of Mozart’s works for piano, its main theme of a reflective and melancholy nature in a rare (for Mozart) minor key, and which develops through chromatic counterpoint to an intense and elaborate coda to conclude.

“The centerpiece of the recital is the set of 15 Improvisations by the 20th-century French composer Francis Poulenc, written over 1932-59. These works are virtually unknown and unplayed outside France. They are a major personal discovery for me, not dissimilar to when I discovered the sonatas of Schubert when I was a teenager. What first strikes the listener is the quirky, ‘ironic’, highly inventive character of the many fast pieces in the first group of 10 improvisations (1932-34), showing the passing influences prevalent in Paris of the 1920s and 30s including, I’d think, Stravinsky and perhaps Prokofiev, and similar to Poulenc’s many works for woodwinds. But pure, beautiful melodies keep welling up, in the tradition of the mélodie française of Fauré, Duparc, Debussy and Ravel, as well as transformative, revelatory modulations in the harmonies. These are distilled in the final three improvisations from 1958-59, which seem influenced by the more popular chanson tradition, exemplified in the final 15th Improvisation dedicated to the chanteuse Édith Piaf. I imagine I can detect a touch of Charles Aznavour in the melancholy 13th as well. The collection as a whole, which Poulenc encouraged to be seen as a set by his cumulative numbering, was one of the few works for piano he remained happy with in later life, and represents a significant contribution to the literature for piano. In years to come, when asked what I managed to do over the Covid shutdown, my reply will be ‘I learned the Poulenc Improvisations.’

“The recital concludes with the great G-major sonata of Schubert, D.894, from 1826, the last before his final three sonatas of 1828. It was one of only three sonatas (out of 11 completed, plus another 10 incomplete) that Schubert managed to publish, but not before the publisher, evidently worried about its appeal and chances for sales, changed its title to Fantasie. The first movement is unusually broad, contemplative, meditative even, marked ‘Molto moderato e cantabile’ (Very moderate and singing). There follows an Andante slow movement, then a minuet rather than scherzo, with a music-box landler for a Trio, and a bubbling Allegretto rondo to conclude. Although every movement contains a dramatic, stormy section, generally somewhere in the middle, the work as a whole seems a study in all the forms of happiness: serenity in the first movement, warmth in the second, a precious delicacy in the Trio of the third, and a vivacious, playful contentment and delight in the fourth. It feels like a good piece to go out on after the difficult period we’re just coming through now.”

- Paul Berkowitz
Program

Rondo in D major, K.485 (1786)
Allegro
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Rondo in A minor, K.511 (1787)
Andante

Fifteen Improvisations for piano
10 Improvisations, FP 63 (1932-34)
1st Improvisation in B minor: Presto ritmico
2nd Improvisation in A flat major: Assez animé
3rd Improvisation in B minor: Presto très sec
4th Improvisation in A flat major: Presto con fuoco
5th Improvisation in A minor: Modéré sans lenteur
6th Improvisation in B flat major: A toute vitesse
7th Improvisation in C major: Modéré sans lenteur
8th Improvisation in A minor: Presto
9th Improvisation in D major: Presto possible
10th Improvisation in F major
   “Éloge des gammes” (Eulogy of scales): Modéré sans trainer

2 Improvisations, FP 113 (1941)
11th Improvisation in G minor: Assez animé
12th Improvisation in E flat major
   “Hommage à Schubert”: Mouvt de Valse à 1 temps

2 Improvisations, FP 170 (1958)
13th Improvisation in A minor: Allegretto commodo
14th Improvisation in D flat major: Allegretto

Improvisation, FP 176 (1959)
15th Improvisation in C minor “Hommage à Édith Piaf”: Très vite

Intermission

Sonata in G major, D.894 (Op. 78) (1826)
Molto moderato e cantabile
Andante
Menuetto: Allegro moderato
Allegretto

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

***

Presented by the University of California, Santa Barbara Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
in the College of Letters and Science and the UC Santa Barbara Department of Music

UC SANTA BARBARA
About the Artist

Paul Berkowitz has recorded the complete Piano Sonatas of Schubert for Meridian Records to worldwide acclaim. He was described by the Sunday Times (London) as being “in the royal class of Schubert interpreters” and his CD recordings of the Last Three Schubert Piano Sonatas were included among the same newspaper’s Records of the Year. His recording of Schumann’s Kreisleriana was selected by BBC Radio Record Review as the best of all available recordings. He has also released a series of three CD recordings of Brahms Piano Music. BBC Music Magazine reviewed Vol. II commenting, “…praise to Meridian, which has in the Canadian pianist Paul Berkowitz an artist who isn’t shy of taking on the kind of repertoire traditionally the preserve of more internationally high-profile artists. Rightly so, for he has a voice, a musicality, a bigness of pianism distinctively his own...his integrity is commanding, his stylistic authority convincing and his refusal merely to play the notes impressive.”

Mr. Berkowitz recently recorded the Schubert Impromptus, Moments Musicaux, and other repertoire as the final two volumes of his 9-CD cycle of major works for piano by Schubert for Meridian, which he began in 1984. The two new CDs are available in the US at naxosdirect.com/labels/meridian-records-ltd-5571. All earlier volumes are being reissued along with the two new recordings as Schubert Piano Works Vols. 1-9.

Mr. Berkowitz, a native of Montreal, Canada, is a graduate of McGill University and of the Curtis Institute, where he studied with Rudolf Serkin. He lived in Britain for 20 years appearing frequently at the Queen Elizabeth and Wigmore Halls and on the BBC, as a soloist with major orchestras in Britain and Canada and at music festivals in Belgium, Denmark, England, Scotland, France, Italy, and Spain. Mr. Berkowitz left the Guildhall School of Music in London, where he had been a professor since 1975, to join the music faculty at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1993, where he is Professor of Piano and served as Chair of the Department of Music 2007-12. He has been invited to present master classes at major conservatories, universities, and festivals, and his students have won prizes in numerous competitions, including the BBC Young Musician of the Year (Thomas Adès), the International Piano Competition Palma d’Oro in Italy, the Bradshaw and Buono International Competition in New York, and the Los Angeles Liszt Competition, and have gone on to have concert and academic careers of their own in Europe, North America, and Asia.