




# Prelude to Dawn

BRUCE  
LEVINGSTON



BACH  
BRAHMS  
RIHM

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- 1 BACH-BRAHMS Chaconne in D minor, BWV 1004 (for left hand) 17:27
  - 2 RIHM Prelude № 1 (from *Sechs Preludes*) 3:35
  - 3 Prelude № 2 (from *Sechs Preludes*) 5:33
  - 4 BACH Prelude in E-Flat major, BWV 998 2:57
  - 5 Fugue in E-Flat major, BWV 998 6:24
  - 6 Allegro in E-Flat major, BWV 998 2:46
  - 7 BACH-BUSONI Chorale Prelude, BWV 645 (*Sleepers, Awake*) 3:43
  - 8 BRAHMS-BUSONI Chorale Prelude, Op. 122, № 10 3:24
  - 9 BRAHMS Theme and Variations in D minor, Op. 18 b 15:35
- TOTAL TIME 61:30

During the surreal existence of this past year, I found myself drawn closer than ever to Bach. His music brought much solace and peace. Bach has long been an inspiration to musicians, especially Brahms and Rihm. These three German masters represent a thoughtful dialogue that has spanned four centuries. Their intimate musical landscapes resonate with this pensive, solitary time.

Some works, like Brahms' wistful chorale prelude, "*Herzlich tut mich verlangen*" (Op. 122, No. 10), reflect the delicate twilight between life and death. Others, like the glorious Chaconne and joyous Prelude, Fugue and Allegro deny defeat. Perhaps the most timely work is Bach's "*Wachet auf*" (*Sleepers, Awake*). Its memorable chorale, written during the Plague in Germany, was composed by a pastor to comfort his fearful congregation. In Bach's hands, its noble spirit and soaring themes herald a celebration of life.

Together, these pieces recall the shadows and fragility of our world, but also the possibility for its regeneration — and a new dawn.

NOTES BY BRUCE LEVINGSTON



# Chaconne in D minor (from BWV 1004)

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)**

Arranged for left hand alone by Johannes Brahms

The Chaconne is the fifth and final piece of Bach's Partita No. 2 for Violin, BWV 1004. Composed between 1718 and 1720, countless artists have been inspired by this seminal work. The music of Bach was experiencing a renaissance in Europe when Brahms transcribed it in 1877. In a note to Clara Schumann, Brahms wrote:

"The Chaconne is, for me, one of the most wonderful, incomprehensible pieces of music... a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I could picture myself writing, or even conceiving, such a piece, I am certain that the extreme excitement and emotional tension would have driven me mad.... In one way only I find, can I devise for myself a greatly diminished but comparable and absolutely pure enjoyment of the work – when I play it with left hand alone!"

In the same letter, Brahms told Clara that "I wrote it out only for your sake!", but cautioned her of its technical difficulty: "...don't strain your hand unduly! It demands such a great deal of tone and power! ...make the fingerings practical and comfortable." While Brahms changed the register of the pitches to make them playable in the left hand and added octave doublings and richly arpeggiated chords, the arrangement retains its violinistic character. Yet Brahms' words to Clara do suggest he expected performers employ the full range of a piano's sonority.

Bach's Chaconne is a dance, but, in the words of Bernard Chazelle, "a grieving dance." It has been suggested he wrote it as an act of mourning following the death of his first wife. Certainly the music touches a chord of universal pathos rarely encountered in any other work of art. Within its sixty-four variations, sorrow, joy, humanity, heroism – as well as love and loss – are expressed in a singularly profound and eloquent voice.

## Two Preludes (from *Sechs Preludes*)

WOLFGANG RIHM (1952–)

Rihm composed these preludes early in life. His affinity and affection for Bach and Brahms were already evident. Two decades on, Rihm would compose his delightful *Brahmsliebewalzer*. In his Prelude No 1, he offers a modern perspective on the chorale prelude, fusing rapid ostinato arpeggios with bold, proclamatory octaves reminiscent of organ pedaling. These vivid moments are twice interrupted by plaintive, chorale passages of sustained tones in discourse with starkly open intervals and chords. The second Prelude, a touching lament, presents a solemn processional, accented by aching chromaticism and echoes of doleful, tolling bells. A swift spectral passage unexpectedly appears before vanishing into the ruminative final bars. In both works, Rihm explores the dark, sonic landscapes that characterize much of his later music while paying homage to his fellow countrymen and forebears.

## Prelude, Fugue and Allegro, BWV 998

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

The lyrical Prelude, Fugue and Allegro was likely composed between 1735 and 1740, when Bach encountered a leading lutenist of his time, Silvius Leopold Weiss. The music shares some of the improvisatory nature of the contemporaneous Well-Tempered Clavier Bk. II. Landowska wrote that this lute-harpsichord work is of “incomparable beauty... every note rich in meaning.” Its movements are set in E-flat major, a key some have suggested symbolized the Trinity for Bach, and notably mirrored in his choice of three movements.

The pastoral opening Prelude, songful in nature, culminates in a marvelous suspension before quietly returning to its opening material. A stately fugue follows which is interrupted by a graceful interlude – rare in Bach’s oeuvre – in which the subject emerges throughout ornate passagework. The fugue returns – unaltered – yet happily transformed by its journey. A delightful gigue closes the set with spirited figurations pirouetting over a jocular, leaping bass.

## Chorale Prelude, BWV 645 (*Sleepers, Awake*) (*Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*)

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)**

Arranged by Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924)

The Italian pianist Ferruccio Busoni based his 1898 transcription on Bach's organ arrangement of a chorale from his *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, BWV 140. The central theme of this cantata is based on a Lutheran hymn by Philipp Nicolai, a 16th century German pastor who composed the work during the Plague to console his frightened people. A century later, Bach united Nicolai's motif with his own to produce this beloved prelude. Employing a sonorous bass and richly detailed ornamentation, Busoni forges a bridge between different generations breathing new life into this Baroque work while maintaining the spirit of its original.

## Chorale Prelude in A minor, Op. 122, No 10 (*Herzlich tut mich verlangen*)

**JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)**

Arranged by Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924)

Brahms wrote his Chorale Preludes for Organ in the summer of 1896, following the death of his dear friend Clara Schumann. His own health in steady decline, these works would be his last. Brahms composed his haunting Chorale Prelude No 10 around a theme – also used by Bach – from a German hymn by Leo Hassler. The opening lines “I yearn from my heart for a peaceful end” reflect the work's elegiac tone. In Brahms' organ version, Hassler's theme is placed in the pedals serving as a Cantus Firmus. Brahms presents this laconic motif not as “song with accompaniment,” but a subtle grounding for the expressive counterpoint he weaves around it. The autumnal chiaroscuro paints a tone of bittersweet resignation with the hushed closing chord arriving as a final exhalation of breath – and life.



## Theme and Variations in D minor, Op. 18 b

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

Following a first-hearing of the String Sextet in B flat major, Op. 18, Clara Schumann implored Brahms to arrange its second movement for the piano. He obliged with the Theme and Variations in D minor, sending it to her as a birthday gift on September 13, 1860. The emotionally charged music reflects a turning point in Brahms's life and career. Having experienced a series of losses and disappointments, Brahms poured his feelings into this compelling work. Romantic ardor and classical rigor, adroitly combined, signal a new period of artistic growth and maturity for the composer.

The Variations open with an austere, brooding theme developed with unhurried grandeur. The six ensuing variations reflect the composer's deep appreciation of Bach and his innovative use of the form. Each variation is related, yet distinct: the first is restless and searching; the second, defiant and rhythmically urgent; the third is impassioned with sweeping scales flowing beneath expressive chords. The fourth, moving into the major key, is majestic and expansive; the fifth reveals a tender vulnerability foreshadowing *Ein deutsches Requiem*. The final variation, returning to the minor key, serves as a ghostly coda. Its theme, now somber and fragmented, enters a gentle dialogue with itself. In the final moment, radiant, prayer-like chords shine a serene light on the poignant return and close in the major key.



## Arrangements, Transcriptions, Tempi, Voicing

All but two works on this album were composed for instruments other than the piano. The Bach pieces were originally written for lute, violin, and organ, and the Brahms for organ and string sextet. Bach and Brahms were both frequent arrangers of their own works. Each viewed the art of transcription as a means to ensure their work transcended any one instrument.

Bach subtitled his Prelude, Fugue and Allegro (BWV 998): “pour la Luth. o Cembal.” Likely composed with the lute in mind, he nonetheless conceived it as playable on the keyboard. Transferring a work from one instrument to another requires sensitivity to differing timbral mechanisms. One instrument may allow for the comfortable realization of a piece, while another may require certain accommodations.

In BWV 998, the technique of a lutenist may influence the choices of tempo and phrasing made by a keyboardist. The same principle holds true in Busoni’s arrangements. The organs played and heard by Bach and Brahms influenced their voicing choices and, in turn, those made in the Busoni arrangements. Through careful attention to each instrument’s sound, the character is maintained, even if the means to express it changes.

In the piano arrangement of Brahms’ Variations, Op. 18 b, an additional interpretive question is raised. In the manuscript of the solo piano version – located in the Library of Congress – a tempo indication appears which is notably absent in the string version. Brahms writes “largamento” (slow, broad tempo) at the beginning of the first variation. Why this decrease in tempo following the opening Andante, and why only in the piano version? Reading his letters, one is struck by how frequently Brahms remarks upon what is “playable” in his works and arrangements.

Brahms recognized that to enable artists to perform this arrangement fully, a modification in tempo was required. The unorthodox piano writing includes grandly arpeggiated chords, complex voicings and rapid, anticipatory grace notes. By reigning in the tempo, Brahms permits a meaningful representation of his ideas, while allowing the work to stand distinct from its original setting. With his gift to Clara, Brahms ensured that this work was, indeed, transcribed, and even more – transformed.



## BRUCE LEVINGSTON

Bruce Levingston has appeared in concerts throughout the world regularly performing in prestigious venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. Known for his “extraordinarily nuanced palette” and “mastery of color” (*The New York Times*), he is a leading champion of new music. Many of today’s most prominent composers have written works for him and his world premiere performances have received acclaim.

Levingston’s solo recordings have also garnered critical praise. *The New York Times* named his album, *Heavy Sleep*, one of the *Best Classical Recordings of the Year* calling it “exquisite.” *Gramophone* praised his “masterly textural control” and “colorful, compelling pianism,” and *The American Record Guide* wrote that “Levingston is a pianist’s pianist.”

Noted for his “innovative and glamorous programming” (*The New Yorker*), Levingston has worked and performed with some of the most gifted artists of our time including composer Philip Glass, actor Ethan Hawke, dancers Alessandra Ferri and Herman Cornejo, Colin Jacobsen, Eric Jacobsen and Brooklyn Rider, and choreographers Jorma Elo, Russell Maliphant and

Wayne McGregor. Levingston is founder and artistic director of the music foundation Premiere Commission, which has commissioned and premiered over sixty new works.

Levingston has collaborated with numerous prominent cultural institutions on programs related to art, music, film and dance including American Ballet Theatre; Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum of Art; Alliance Française/French Institute; the Aspen Institute and Aspen Music Festival; Rooftop Films; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

A native of the Mississippi Delta, Levingston is a forceful advocate for civil and human rights. He performed a special world premiere for the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and co-commissioned and premiered the oratorio, *Repast*, based on the life of civil rights figure Booker Wright. He is also author of *Bright Fields: The Mastery of Marie Hull*, a comprehensive survey of the life and work of the Southern artist. Levingston is the Chancellor’s Honors College Artist in Residence and Holder of the Lester Glenn Fant Chair at the University of Mississippi. He resides in New York City and Oxford.

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