

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Mariam Batsashvili: Bach & Liszt

Saturday 26 September 2026, 6pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2026/27.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bach Keyboard Concerto in D minor, BWV.974
(transc. from A. Marcello Oboe Concerto in D minor) 9'

Liszt Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel's *Almira*
arr. for piano, S.181 11'

Thalberg Grand caprice on motifs from Bellini's
La Sonnambula, Op.46 12'

Liszt Valse from Gounod's *Faust* transc. for piano, S.407 10'

Interval

Bach Chaconne from Partita No.2 in D minor, BWV.1004
arr. Busoni for piano 15'

Liszt *Après une lecture du Dante – Fantasia quasi sonata*
from *Années de pèlerinage* 18'

Performer

Mariam Batsashvili *piano*

It can be tempting to think of composers in splendid isolation, quill to manuscript, channelling divine inspiration or The Muse. Or if we do think of them in relation to other composers, subtlety can be erased by time; we assume all composers are more-or-less admiring of one another, or happily slot into convenient schools of thought. The reality is of course more complex, with composers seeking inspiration from specific earlier precedents – as ways of learning from others, building on their achievements, or even as a playful exercise. Transcription and arrangement represent a form of tribute, but a confident one, as though to say: 'I admire this material – but I can do something fresh with it'. The composers on this programme, especially Bach and Liszt, often sought inspiration from others, holding their works up to the light, examining them from different angles – and showing us something new in the process.

Bach seems to have learned by doing. His knowledge of music by other composers was gained not simply by listening or even playing their music, but by getting in amongst its nuts and bolts. He immersed himself in their works; during the period from 1737 to 1742 he was particularly diligent, making transcriptions of works by Palestrina, Pergolesi, Caldara, Lotti and Gasparini, among others. But this discipline had started much earlier. Bach had learned concerto technique by transcribing works by Vivaldi and other Italian composers, and in 1715 arranged for solo keyboard an Oboe Concerto that has been attributed both to Vivaldi and to Benedetto Marcello, but which is likeliest to be the work of Benedetto's brother, Alessandro Marcello. The piece opens with an elegant *Andante e spiccato*, a marking that would require the string instruments of the original to play with their bows bouncing on the strings. This effect is translated to the piano through the crisp separation of notes. The central *Adagio* is characterised by a plaintive melody and gently pulsing accompaniment, and the work ends with a vigorous *Presto*.

If Bach had any hankerings to write opera, they were rather stifled by his professional circumstances – although he channelled those instincts into glorious dramatic works such as the *St John* and *St Matthew Passions*. His contemporary Handel, meanwhile, had the opportunity to write operas at a great rate. *Almira* was Handel's very first opera, composed at the age of 19

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

when he was in Hamburg, where it was first performed in 1705. It was a resounding success, but fell into relative obscurity by the 19th century. It is testament to Liszt's knowledge of earlier repertoire that he chose the Sarabande and Chaconne from the opening act as the basis of one of his late 'paraphrases' – the term used for his adaptations of operatic themes. Liszt created the 'paraphrase' for his student, the English pianist Walter Bache, to perform at the Handel Festival; this was Liszt's only arrangement of a Baroque work during this stage of his life.

A sarabande is a slow dance in triple time, while a chaconne is a type of ever-extendable variation form comprising short units, each of which generally ends with a cadence before moving immediately onto the next. The recurring theme is usually restricted to the bassline, and in Handel and Bach's day several European chaconne styles developed. In Liszt's 1879 treatment of Handel's *Almira* Sarabande and Chaconne, the Sarabande dominates and resembles a Bach chaconne in its solemn variations on a recurring harmonic progression, whereas the Chaconne itself, also treated as a set of variations, is more animated. Liszt's previous Baroque arrangement approached Bach's music with a certain reverence, but here he is freer, changing the original order of the two dances (which in Handel's original starts with the Chaconne), as well as adding introductory and developmental passages. The work paved the way for Busoni's lavish approach to the music of Bach, weaving rich, virtuoso textures from more delicate material.

Liszt was initially not a fan of Sigismond Thalberg who, having studied with Hummel, gained a reputation as a salon pianist and proved especially popular in Paris, becoming the foremost virtuoso there. Liszt – feeling competitive, as the Lisztomania craze of the 1840s was yet to take hold – wrote a scathing article in the *Revue et gazette musicale* denouncing Thalberg's compositions. This provoked a spat with Belgian critic Fétis, who championed Thalberg as the greatest living pianist. Berlioz joined in, siding with Liszt. Matters were resolved when Thalberg and Liszt gave a joint recital for the Princess di Belgiojoso, a symbolic reconciliation cemented when, alongside other composers, they agreed to write a variation each for a work called *Hexaméron* as a tribute to the princess. Thalberg's reputation was assured and, like Liszt, he enjoyed huge popularity, becoming part of the tradition of virtuosos who wrote dazzling music for their own performances. His dramatic *Grand caprice* based on motifs from Bellini's recent *La Sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker) is one such work, and one of many by Thalberg based on operatic themes.

Never one to shy away from ambitious subjects, Liszt explored the legend of Faust several times. Gounod's 1859 opera may lack some of the bite of Goethe's tale, but Liszt's transcription cleverly reinjects the fiendish aspects of the story into the *Valse* – alongside moments of exquisite serenity – elevating Gounod's music to become spiritually closer to Goethe's text.

Bach's legendary Chaconne from his D minor Partita for solo violin BWV.1004 has been arranged many times, despite Bach's stipulation that he did not wish for the work's implicit harmonies to be realised. How, though, can a composer resist the opportunity to work with such music? With its 64 variations and two minor-key outer sections framing a major-key central interlude, the Chaconne is longer than the rest of the Partita's movements combined, and its impact has been far-reaching. Brahms wrote: 'the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind.'

Bach's music dominated Busoni's piano lessons with his father, and Busoni's style of playing emerged as a blend of dazzling virtuosity and unflinching grandeur, reflected in the towering textures of his realisation of the Chaconne. The piano's lower register is exploited to produce massive statements of Bach's 'ground bass', the recurring bassline that lays the foundations for this monumental work.

Inspired by literature rather than by another composer, Liszt's *Dante Sonata* (full title, *Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata*) underwent numerous incarnations, and appeared in the second volume of Liszt's travel-inspired *Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année: Italie*, published in 1858. The work was inspired by Victor Hugo's 1836 poem 'Après une lecture de Dante', and began life as a small-scale piece called *Fragment after Dante* composed towards the end of the 1830s. Liszt returned to the piece in Weimar in 1849, developing it into a vividly characterised single-movement sonata that pits devilish chromaticism – including the tritone, long held to be the 'devil's interval' – against a heavenly chorale. The piece ends with a flurry of dramatic textures, a thrilling conclusion that is nevertheless slightly ambiguous; we are left feeling a little unsure as to who has triumphed...

Programme notes © Joanna Wyld 2026

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