

PALIMPSEST

ROB HAO
PIANO

WORKS BY

FRANZ SCHUBERT • FRANZ LISZT

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN • ALISON KAY

ROB HAO • MICHAEL FINNISSY



PALIMPSEST

Rob Hao, piano

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| | Franz Schubert | |
| 1. | Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor, D571 | 8:19 |
| | Rob Hao | |
| 2. | Palimpsest 571 | 3:25 |
| | Frederic Chopin | |
| 3. | Two Nocturnes, op 62: I. B major | 8:47 |
| 4. | Two Nocturnes, op 62: II. E major | 8:19 |
| | Alison Kay | |
| 5. | Piano Etudes: X. Orison II | 2:54 |
| 6. | Piano Etudes: XI. Lullaby for Isabelle | 2:06 |
| | Franz Schubert | |
| 7. | Impromptu in A-flat major, op 142 no 2 | 8:24 |
| 8. | Der Müller und der Bach (transcribed by Franz Liszt) | 6:26 |
| | Michael Finnissy | |
| 9. | English country-tunes: II. Midsummer morn | 5:30 |
| 10. | English country-tunes: VII. My bonny boy | 6:18 |
| 11. | English country-tunes: VIII. Come beat the drums and sound the fifes | 4:00 |

Total Playing Time 64:30

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

The term *palimpsest* is traditionally used to describe a manuscript that has been written over, where traces of the original text remain visible beneath the new. In music, this concept extends well beyond the page. Classical music, in particular, lends itself naturally to this layered form of creation as past and present, or composers and performers continually interact.

At its core, the written score of a piece of music acts as a springboard for a palimpsest. Notated sheet music is not a finished work, requiring the interpretive act of performance to be fully realised. Each performance, then, becomes a superimposition as the performer's understanding and idiosyncrasies are layered upon the composer's notated intentions. A well-crafted score often anticipates and welcomes this openness, offering space for a performer's voice to exist within and alongside the composer's.

The works featured on this recording explore the palimpsestic nature of music in various ways. Some engage directly with existing musical material by reworking or referencing the past through composition. Others are scores that embrace this openness in how they are notated, allowing performers a wide degree of interpretive freedom. But in most cases, both approaches are present, creating pieces that are inherently collaborative - layered, reimaged, and constantly in dialogue with what came before.

Franz Schubert - *Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor D571* Rob Hao - *Palimpsest 571* (2022)

The ***Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor, D571*** is an unfinished fragment composed by Franz Schubert in his early twenties. Only the exposition and the development were completed by Schubert and the manuscript abruptly stops at this point. Despite its incomplete state, the fragment bears many of Schubert's characteristic features - most notably, his fluid harmonic language, undulating between major and minor tonalities.

This sonata is one of many works Schubert left unfinished. Over the centuries, numerous attempts at 'completing' it have emerged, some aiming at stylistic pastiches and others

not. Such endeavours inevitably raise the question: what motivates a completion, and what does it seek to achieve? Often, the presumed aim is to approximate what Schubert himself might have written, and finalise the piece from the surviving material.

However, any historical recreation of a composer is ultimately impossible. The interplay between a composer's personal idiosyncrasies and the broader cultural and aesthetic context in which they lived cannot be fully reconstructed retrospectively. In this light, every completion is, by definition, inauthentic - existing as a fantastical extension rather than a historical recovery.

Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely through this inauthenticity that a different kind of sincerity can emerge. By embracing the distance between Schubert's world and our own, rather than attempting to conceal it, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of his music - not as a relic from the past, but as a living canvas for contemporary performers and composers to interact with.

And with the incomplete fragment of the *D571 Sonata*, ***Palimpsest 571*** is intended as an 'ending', or perhaps a continuation, of Schubert's original work. Gestures, structures and motifs from the original piece have been extrapolated into a new sound world. Although ultimately, it is the desolation and ambivalence that is present in the original Schubert which is transferred.

Frederic Chopin - *Two Nocturnes op 62*

Chopin's final and valedictory pair of *Nocturnes* were written just three years before his death and contain some of his most introspective and accomplished writing. Throughout his life, Chopin often returned to composing nocturnes, greatly expanding the genre first introduced by the Irish composer John Field through exploring the lyrical possibilities of the piano.

In these late works, the two great artistic loves of Chopin - Bach and opera - converge. As with much of Chopin's late writing, there are phenomenally long melodies and harmonically, cadential points are frequently delayed or obscured, giving the melodic lines a sense of endless momentum. In developing and ornamenting these lines, Chopin draws

from his deep admiration with Bach: ghostly countermelodies emerge throughout, and the central section of the E major *Nocturne* features a quasi-canon reminiscent of a Bach two-part invention.

Chopin's approach to structure in these pieces reveals his masterful command of narrative pacing, likely taken from the operatic world. In both nocturnes, the opening sections return at the end, subtly transformed - as if reshaped by the voyage through contrasting middle episodes. These works do not simply return to where they began as one might expect, instead becoming more and more resigned.

Alison Kay - Piano Etudes

X. Orison II

In Orison II, the music is stripped to a bare minimum to alter the experience of the performer and perception of the audience. There is an exploration of resonance, interval and space.

XI. Lullaby for Isabelle

Lullaby for Isabelle plays with ideas of perceived simultaneous temporalities to emulate stages between consciousness and sleep. This work was written for my daughter and contains a reference to one of her favourite lullabies.

Alison Kay, 2025

Franz Schubert - Impromptu in A-flat major, op 142 no 2

The *Impromptu in A-flat major, op 142 no 2* comes from a set of four impromptus which Schubert wrote in 1827, a year before his death. A subtle dance in triple meter, this particular impromptu has the echoes of a sarabande with its gentle accentuations on the second beat. The central section sweeps across the piano, evoking the river-like scenery often found in Schubert's songs.

Franz Schubert - *Der Müller und der Bach* (transcribed by Franz Liszt)

Der Müller und der Bach ('the Miller and the Brook'), is the penultimate song from Schubert's cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*, originally composed for singer and pianist. The cycle tells the tragic story of a young miller who falls in love with a miller's daughter. In this particular song, the narrative reaches a turning point, as the miller, overwhelmed by unrequited love, is implied to have drowned himself in the brook. The brook, given its own voice in the song, offers calm and gentle words in contrast to the miller's despair, expressed by the flowing, central sections in the major. This particular version, transcribed by Franz Liszt for solo piano, maintains the scaffold of the original song but adds many embellishments to represent the original text of the song with the addition of flowing and undulating accompaniments representing the flowing water.

Michael Finnissy - *English country-tunes* (1977/1982-85)

English country-tunes is one of Michael Finnissy's most notorious and uncompromising works. Renowned for its extreme technical demands and its often violent and intense expressiveness, the piece finds its core in the tension between this volatility and the many moments of tenderness and lyricism. In this particular work, Finnissy stays close to home, interrogating ideas around 'Englishness' - particularly in the context of a post-1945 world - while engaging with English folk traditions and the nature of pianistic virtuosity itself.

Transcription plays an important role across Finnissy's output, whether that be resuscitating ancient folk idioms or the deconstruction of Romantic Italian opera (and much more!). As with much of his piano writing, *English country-tunes* also explores the transcription of the human, singing voice onto the piano, drawing on a lineage that includes Chopin's recreation of bel canto and Liszt's reimagining of Schubert's songs.

'Midsummer morn' traverses the terrains of disturbed tranquility. It opens with a sense of nostalgic innocence - in two voices, gradually unfolding, with little to suggest the drama that is soon to follow. This melody is then gradually dismantled as it evolves into a broader, unrecognisable musical texture, and this confronting and shocking transformation of the original theme sits at the extremes of virtuosity and passion with a hyper-Romantic notion of keyboard playing. With each of these outbursts, the original idea of melody returns,

albeit heavily mutated and ornamented. In this way, this particular movement follows a similar structural process to many of Chopin's *Nocturnes*: an expansive, lyrical melody is gradually transformed into new ideas or sections, and then with each repetition of the original idea, it transforms and reveals new territories.

'My Bonny Boy' is a movement of pure monody - a single melodic line. It is based on a traditional English melody, and is reminiscent of the lyrical opening of *Midsummer morn* but explores a different path by slowly modulating through implied harmonies and shapes. The unpredictability of this melody is not dissimilar to Chopin's own melodic writing, in which melodies are continuously shaped and reshaped through unexpected harmonic shifts and rhythmic nuances. This approach enables the composers to create vast and singing lines.

The concluding movement of *English country-tunes*, 'Come beat the drums and sound the fifes', is entirely placed at the extremes of register on the piano - the upper line invoking the fifes and the lower line sounding in a continuous drum-like pattern. With a war-like relentlessness, it's a sinister and confronting finale to the cycle. Although at times this rhythmic drive falters, as if stumbling under its own weight, creating moments of instability within the otherwise unwavering pattern. Despite the spatial distance between the two hands, Finnissy draws them into dialogue through dynamic interplay and shifting densities.

Rob Hao 2025

ROB HAO

Rob Hao is an Australian pianist and composer. His compositions and performances have taken him around Australia, the UK and across continental Europe, with his musicianship having been described as 'absolute stillness' to 'stirring and impetuous' (SoundsLikeSydney). Rob's debut at the Sydney Opera House was detailed as 'full of personality, authenticity and virtuosity' (ClassikOn Australia) and he has since returned as both composer and performer to the Sydney Opera House and the Melbourne Recital Centre, as well as further performances around festivals in the UK, such as Aldeburgh, Manchester Festival of Song and the Beethoven Piano Society of Europe. Rob's work has also been broadcast on ABC Radio National as well as 2MBS Fine Music.

Rob was born in Auckland, New Zealand and raised in Sydney, Australia, where he studied piano with Ransford Elsley and gave his first concerto performance at age 16. He then moved to London and graduated from the Royal College of Music, specialising in both composition and piano where he also won first prize for both disciplines in the Contemporary Music Competition alongside prizes for song accompaniment. He also studied with the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, the Dartington School, the Arnold Schoenberg Centre in Vienna and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group.

Rob's recent compositions have taken inspiration from a variety of musical sources - from sea shanties to Schoenberg (and much more). He was the winner of the High Barnet Chamber Music Festival's inaugural Call for Scores and was subsequently commissioned to compose for the Mad Song Ensemble. Other pieces have been commissioned and performed by standard issue, the Thames Festival Trust and BCMG's NEXT Ensemble.

As a pianist, Rob also has a particular interest in collaborative work and the performance of 20th and 21st Century music programmed alongside the traditional repertoire. In recent seasons he has given regional and world premieres of over thirty works in both ensemble and solo settings.



MICHAEL FINNISSY

Michael Finnissy was born in Brixton (south London) in 1946.

He started composing aged 4 and was self taught until he gained a Foundation Scholarship to the Royal College of Music in 1965, where his principal mentor was Bernard Stevens. Whilst there he secretly planned that his future work would assemble a 'cabinet of curiosities' - an individualised account of world music, representing (with affection and irony) all periods and genres.

His ideology and aesthetics have been influenced by underground and avant-garde cinema: Markopoulos, Brakhage, Jack Smith, Warhol, Pasolini, Jarman and Godard; the painters Hokusai, Cézanne, Degas, David Hockney and Robert Rauschenberg; and composers Erik Satie and Charles Ives.

He served as president of the ISCM/IGNM from 1990 until 1996. His work has also focussed on theatre (vocal and dance) and on non-professional music-making, with CoMA (Contemporary Music for All) and church choirs. He is an Emeritus Professor of Composition at the University of Southampton (UK).



ALISON KAY

Alison Kay (b. 1970) first studied composition with Tom Wilson and James Macmillan at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, continuing with Simon Bainbridge and Edwin Roxburgh at the Royal College of Music, where she won many of the major composition prizes. She gained a Masters degree at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Robert Saxton and has completed a doctorate at Sussex University under the supervision of Martin Butler. In 2004 she was appointed as a professor of composition at the Royal College of Music.

Kay's works are widely performed and broadcast and include music for orchestra, chamber ensemble, ballet, contemporary dance and chorus. Kay's compositions have been featured in performances by the BBC singers, Philharmonia Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra,

IXION, Lontano and Tacet Ensemble amongst others and at the Huddersfield, Spitalfields and Brighton Festivals. Recordings include *Rat Race* performed by the Composers Ensemble on the NMC label and *Two piano études* performed by Stephen Gutman. Notable performances have included *Dragon*, a Brighton Festival commission for the Emperor Quartet and Leon MacCawley and *Flux* written for the New Music Players, played in the BMIC Cutting Edge Series and subsequently broadcast on Radio 3. Kay has also been instrumental in initiating “Junctions: English Music Breaking Formation”, a series of collaborations between classical and traditional musicians. Recent projects have included a series of piano études, a work for the Goldberg project for pianist Rachel Fryer and a chamber work for Patrick Bailey and the Kevo Ensemble.



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Produced and engineered by Adaq Khan

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