

Mikolaj Warszynski, piano
Opening Recital
Jewish Studies Week, March 2nd, 2025, Timms Centre

PROGRAMME

György Ligeti (1923 – 2006)

Musica Ricercata (1951 – 1953)

- I. Sostenuto. Misurato. Prestissimo.
- II. Mesto, rigido e cerimoniale
- III. Allegro con spirito
- IV. Tempo di Valse (poco vivace – “à l’orgue de Barbarie”)

Erwin Schulhoff (1894 – 1942)

Etudes de Jazz (1926)

- II. Blues
- III. Chanson

Władysław Szpilmann (1911 – 2000)

Mazurka in F minor (1942)

George Gershwin (1898 – 1937)

Rhapsody in Blue (1924)

The abundance of talented Jewish composers at the onset of the 20th century is indeed astounding, and because of the hostile political landscape of Europe leading up to the Second World War, many of these emerging talents were lost all too soon. The historical significance of Arnold Schoenberg marks a milestone in the development of Classical music during the inter-war period, and his legacy is of lasting importance on the composers of the so-called 2nd Viennese School. Because of his Jewish heritage, Schoenberg, like so many others, needed to emigrate to America to survive. I have selected a recital programme featuring composers of Jewish heritage from Central European countries showcasing varying musical styles from avant-garde to jazz.

György Ligeti (1923 – 2006) was born to a Hungarian-Jewish family, and after surviving life under the Nazis, he had to flee communist Hungary following the 1956 revolution, eventually

settling in Vienna.¹ The ***Musica ricercata*** is a set of eleven pieces for piano. The work was composed from 1951 to 1953, shortly after the composer began lecturing at the Budapest Academy of Music. In it, Ligeti exemplified his intention 'to build a new music from nothing,'² and this work has many modern elements associated with so-called music of the *avant-garde*. The first two movements are in startling energetic contrast: the *martellato* 'hammered-out' opening movement, followed by an eerie meandering meditative 2nd movement. Surprisingly, the first movement, marked *Sostenuto. Misurato. Prestissimo*, uses only the pitch class A in its various appearances across the registers of the keyboard employing syncopations and polyrhythms to maximum dramatic effect. The spooky 2nd movement, marked *Mesto, rigido e cerimoniale* was set as the soundtrack to the Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut*, and this was not the first time the composer collaborated with Kubrick – his composition *Lux Aeterna* being featured in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The 3rd movement *Allegro con spirito* has an exuberant, quasi-bluesy quality and employs a playful juxtaposition of C major and C minor tonality, with tatters of melodic thirds prancing around the keyboard at extreme registers of the keyboard. The 4th movement, an off kilter 'Tempo di Valse', with its running melodic motif bringing to mind Chopin's *Minute Waltz*, is a nostalgic reminiscence of the decadence of the Austro-Hungarian empire, echoing the dystopian harmonic world epitomized in Ravel's *La Valse*.

Władysław Szpilman (1911 – 2000) was a Jewish composer from Poland, who also managed to survive the war, and unlike the majority of his colleagues, was able to make a successful transition to life in postwar Poland, serving from 1945 to 1963 as director of the Polish Radio's Popular Music Department and at the same time continuing a glamorous international performing career. **The Mazurka in F minor**, written during the war, is featured in Roman Polanski's film *The Pianist*, which is based on Szpilman's memoir of surviving the Warsaw Ghetto.³

Erwin Schulhoff (1894 – 1942) was born to a German Jewish family in Prague, and was encouraged by none other than Antonin Dvořák to begin studies at the Prague Conservatory. He then went on to study in Vienna, Leipzig and Cologne, and also served in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War 1. As is the case with many composers born around his time, Schulhoff experimented with the musical trends of his time, much like Szymanowski in Poland and Stravinsky in Russia. He was a chameleon-like composer who experimented with Ravelian Impressionism, Straussian post-Romanticism, Schoenbergian atonal Expressionism, jazz, ragtime, Dadaism, Neoclassicism, Janáčekian nationalism and

¹ <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/resistance-and-exile/gyoergy-ligeti/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musica_ricerca

³ http://orelfoundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the_musical_worlds_of_polish_jews_19201960_identity_politics_and_culture

socialist realism.⁴ When Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938, only emigration could have saved him. As a musician entering the prime of creative powers, he saw his professional options narrowing to a vanishing point. He was eventually transported to an internment camp in Wülzburg bei Weissenberg, in Bavaria, and subsequently perished there in 1942 of tuberculosis.

Schulhoff's **Etudes de Jazz** are a set of 4 pieces composed in 1926. The 2nd piece, **Blues**, with its Jazz-infused Ravelian impressionism, is dedicated to Paul Whiteman, the American bandleader who leapt to fame after commissioning Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The 3rd piece, **Chanson**, continues to imbue a jazz-like ambience infused with a sentimentality evoking Gershwin's song *Summertime*, albeit the atmosphere more broadly depicts a lavish late romantic expressionist decadence.

The American composer **George Gershwin** was born in New York City (1898 – 1937). Gershwin's parents were both Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe needing to flee due to increasing anti-Jewish sentiment in Russia. The family eventually fled Vilnius in Lithuania - at that time a part of the Russian Empire - settling in New York where the original family name of Gershowitz was eventually anglicized to Gershwin.⁵ The young Gershwin left school at age 15 to work as a “song plugger” which helped to kick-start his forays into composition. He eventually moved to Paris, with the intention of studying with Nadia Boulanger, but she refused him, afraid that rigorous classical study would ruin his jazz-influenced style. He subsequently composed *An American in Paris* and returned to New York City and wrote *Porgy and Bess*, his famous opera featuring the hit song *Summertime*. Gershwin moved to Hollywood and composed numerous film scores. He died in 1937, only 38 years old, of a brain tumor.

Rhapsody in Blue is a 1924 musical composition for solo piano and jazz band, commissioned by bandleader Paul Whiteman, and the piece has been interpreted as a musical portrait of early-20th-century New York City in the Jazz Age. The work combines elements of classical music with Jazz and premiered in the Big Apple with Gershwin performing as piano soloist. The famous opening clarinet glissando has become as instantly recognizable to concert audiences as the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The *Rhapsody* dazzles with its syncopated rhythmic vibrancy depicting the metropolitan madness of the Roaring Twenties, and its genuine melodic beauty is colored a deep, jazzy blue that had its origin in the music of African-American spirituals. The *Rhapsody in Blue* celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2024.

⁴http://orelfoundation.org/journal/journalArticle/reimagining_erwin_schulhoff_viktor_ullmann_and_the_german-jewish-czech_world

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Gershwin