Carmen's first act Habanera completes the third section (again with subsequent variations), and the fourth act Marche sends the Fantasie into its final section set in rondo form including a coda. Busoni's compositional style reflects many of the late works of Franz Liszt, therefore instigating a venture into the harmonic and rhythmic territories that later became the artistic inspiration of composers such as Webern, Bartók, and Messiaen.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) composed Gaspard de la nuit in 1908. His inspiration came from a poem collection of “gothic fantasies” by the French poet Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841). This highly descriptive literary work contains verses, prose-poems, and drawings related to fantasies of devils, nymphs, nightmares, and death. Ravel declared that in composing Gaspard de la nuit, he wished to write something for the piano that would be more difficult than Balakirev had done in his Islamey. Ravel wished to achieve an extraordinary mixture of remarkable technical demands and sheer poetic vividness. Little did he know that his Gaspard would eventually become known as one of, if not the most technically demanding and virtuosic compositions in the solo piano repertoire. The first movement, Ondine, illustrates a water nymph who seduces her observer deep into an underground aquatic palace. Ravel surrounds her plaintive song with a trace of incomparable luminescence and transparency. Le Gibet, as its title implies, is an impression of a corpse hanging from a gibbet and reddened by the rays of the setting sun. Ravel depicts a horrifying scene at a gallows through the sounding of an insistently repeated B-flat tone symbolizing the ringing of a bell, or death toll, from a village far beyond the horizon. Just as Bertrand's reader experiences vast demonic images in the poetry, Ravel incorporates similar imagery in his Gaspard such as: the scream of the howling wind, the gargled sighs of a hanged man slowly dying, and the deafening buzz of feasting insects. The third and final movement of this monumental work is titled Scarbo in reference to a half goblin-half ghost creature which haunts the bedroom at midnight; laughing in the shadow of the alcove and scratching the silk curtains with his fingernails, only to vanish at the very moment when he seems to actually materialize, hence, we awaken from our nightmare.
Partita No. 1 in B-flat Major, BWV 825
I. Praeludium
II. Allemande
III. Corrente
IV. Sarabande
V. Menuet I; Menuet II
VI. Giga

32 Variations on an Original Theme in C minor, WoO 80

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Intermission

Sonatina No. 6
Chamber Fantasy on Bizet’s Carmen

Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924)

Gaspard de la nuit

I. Ondine
II. Le Gibet
III. Scarbo

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) composed an extraordinary amount of music for the keyboard. During his lifetime, seven major works from his enormous output were published. Four of these seven publications were consolidated into his Clavierübung (Keyboard Practice). Six Partitas make up Part One of the Clavierübung, the first of which you are hearing tonight. Bach used the term Partita interchangeably with Suite and, in some cases, Theme and Variations, each based on the dance music form of the era. Dance music of the Baroque was essentially organized as follows: an opening allemande (serious and in a moderate 2/4 or 4/4 time), courante in triple meter, sarabande in a slow 3/2 meter with a heavy accent on the second beat of each measure, and a final gigue. However, Bach’s dance suites often varied considerably from this basic pattern, therefore creating stylized art music that could not possibly be danced. In 1802, Bach’s first biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel, wrote of the Six Partitas: “This work made in its time a great noise in the musical world. Such excellent compositions for the clavier had never been seen or heard before.”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) composed 32 Variations in C minor in 1806 as he struggled with deafness that had been developing over a period of about eight years. His worsening condition drove him away from performing, therefore forcing him to focus more steadily on his compositions. The original theme is written in the style of a chaconne, with a strong accent on the second beat of a triple meter bar. The variations maintain the metrical and harmonic organization of the chaconne, but are developed through adaptations of tempo, rhythmic structure, and the reorganization of the melodic registration. Concert goes at the time of composition likened the Variations to a Handelian style, while the moments of major tonality render similarities to the chaconne from J.S. Bach’s Violin Partita in D minor. The listener may notice the organization of arpeggios displayed at once in the right hand, transferring to the left and eventually heard in both hands in contrary motion. It is said the 32 Variations inspired Schubert in his Piano Sonata in C minor along with Mendelssohn in his Variations sérieuses in D minor.

Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) composed six sonatinas between 1910 and 1920. The sixth and last of these sonatinas is commonly known as the “Carmen Fantasy”. In this exciting work, selections from Bizet’s opera, Carmen, are elaborated throughout a four-part form. The first section includes the prelude to the fourth act (with subsequent variations), the second section reveals the theme from Don José’s second act aria La fleur que tu m’as jetée,