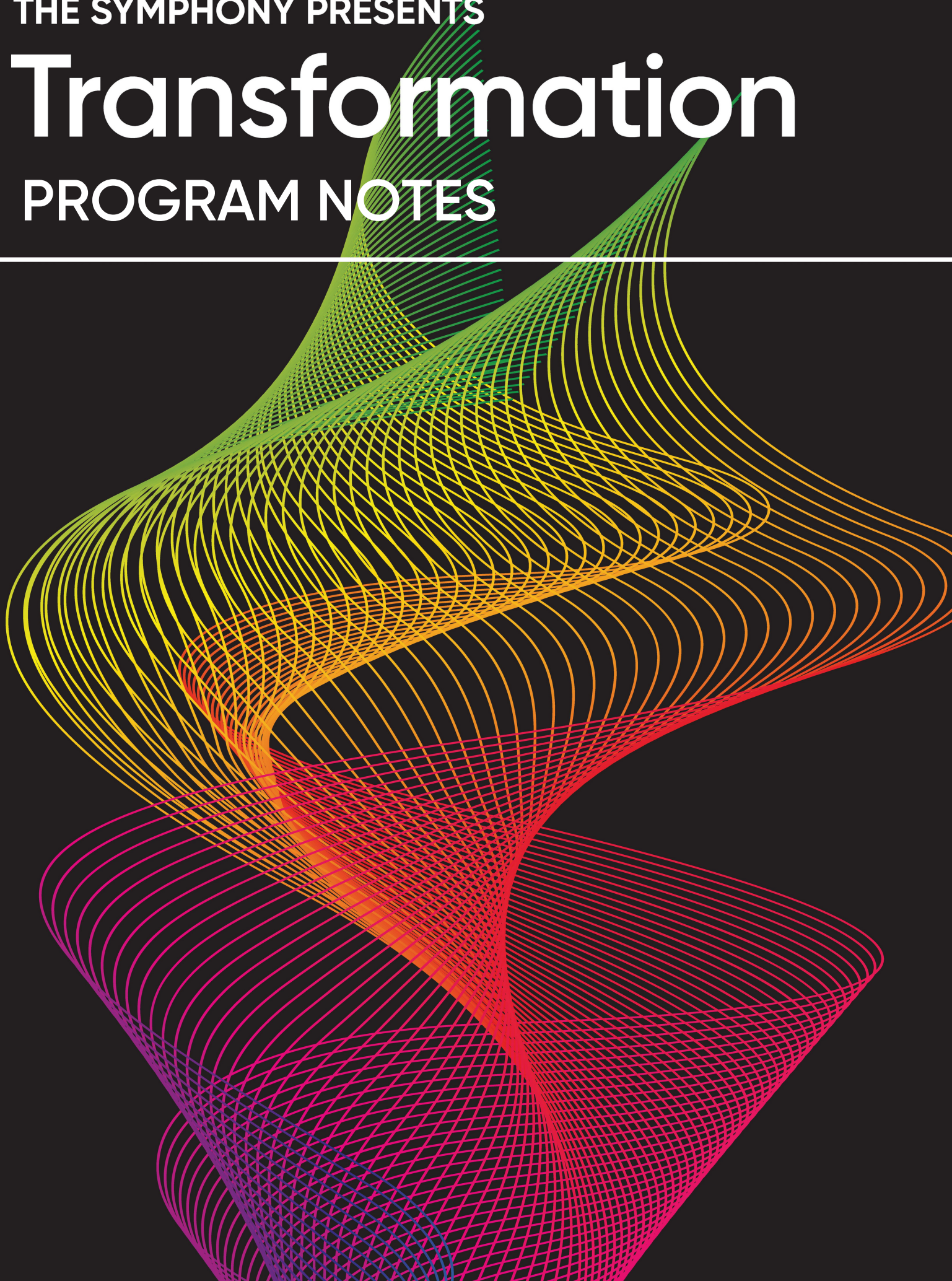


THE SYMPHONY PRESENTS

Transformation

PROGRAM NOTES



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Saturday, February 18, 2023 | 7:30 PM

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by Dan Kepl

There are several kinds of transformation; animal, vegetable, mineral, musical . . . Conductor Nir Kabaretti has set himself the task of illustrating two levels of transcendental experience with four works on the February 18 and 19 concerts. *Variations on a Nursery Song for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 25* (1914) by Hungarian composer Ernst von Dohnányi (1877-1960) opens each concert, and *Boléro* (1928) by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) serves as the final work on each program. These two pieces represent physical/mechanical metamorphoses - simple tunes morphed into complex and imaginative orchestral masterpieces through human intellect and the techniques of composition and orchestration.

Nestled between the Dohnányi and Ravel, a fresh re-thinking of jazz saxophonist/composer Ted Nash's 2021 collaboration with actress Glenn Close, *Transformation: Personal Stories of Change, Acceptance, and Evolution* (2021) In its new incarnation called simply, *Transformation*, together with the tone poem *Death and Transfiguration, Op. 24* (1888-1889) by German composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949). These two works speak through different musical prisms and centuries to mysteries psychological and spiritual about human transition and re-birth. Strauss meditates on the unconscious, mystical transformation, while Nash's Dear Dad, one of four sections in his new *Transformation* suite, is about the conscious, purposeful transition. Together, the four works in this program offer our minds and ears thought-provoking examples of physical and metaphysical change.

The concerts open with Ernst von Dohnányi's *Variations on a Nursery Song for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 25* (1914). The composer's subtitle scribbled on his manuscript score but never published reads, "For the enjoyment of friends of humor, to the annoyance of others," an admonition that is not to be taken lightly about one of the great orchestral brain twisters of the early twentieth century. Dohnányi uses as his creative inspiration the nursery song, *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, a tune that seems in historical retrospect rather whimsical and naïve, a prescient if unconscious farewell to the innocence of antebellum Europe on the brink of World War I.

Born in 1877 in Bratislava, Kingdom of Hungary (now Slovakia), Dohnányi enrolled at the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest at age 17 in 1894, graduating in piano and composition in 1897. After World War I, Dohnányi served periodically over the next 20 years as Director of the Budapest Academy of Music and conductor of the Budapest Philharmonic. Unassailable in matters ethical as well as musical, by 1941 Dohnányi had no choice but to resign his post at the Academy of Music rather than submit to anti-Semitic legislation that denied Jews with musical talent entry. By 1944 when Germany occupied Hungary, Dohnányi had assisted hundreds of Jews to escape the Nazis. German occupation the final blow, Dohnányi disbanded the Budapest Philharmonic rather than fire only the orchestra's Jewish players.

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After World War II the composer and his wife moved to Florida, where they received American citizenship in 1955 while he taught at Florida State University School of Music. He died in New York City on February 9, 1960, just days after conducting Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 with his doctoral student as piano soloist. This concerto had been Dohnányi's signature touring piece as an international soloist in his youth. A sweet way (prescience?) to take leave of the planet.

Variations on a Nursery Song caricatures with tongue-in-cheek compositional guile, several composers with whom late-Victorian, early modern European audiences would have been familiar circa 1914, like Tchaikovsky and Ravel among others. Disguised fragments from these composers' works, or playful parodies of the compositional styles of other composers, have been puzzled carefully by the composer into his eleven variations on the nursery song *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. Finding these sly musical clues, let alone discovering traces of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* in the variations, serves as the composer's gentle last laugh with audience and scholars, alike. *Variations on a Nursery Song*, like Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, are one of the most complex Rubik's cubes in the repertoire.

A virtuoso tour de force for orchestra, the piano "obligato" is in every way but name, a concerto. Keeping in mind, Dohnányi was one of the great piano virtuosos of his time, the piano riffs - amusing, coy, playful, virtuosic - are not to be taken lightly. Continuing Lecturer in Keyboard at UC Santa Barbara's Department of Music, collaborative faculty member at the Music Academy, and Santa Barbara Symphony Principal Pianist, Natasha Kislenko, is the capable soloist for Dohnányi's devilishly virtuoso piano hijinks.

"We wanted to create an evening around the transition from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from hatred to forgiveness," explained Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild Award-winning actress, activist, and jazz lover Glenn Close, during a [video chat](#) in New York City with Los Angeles-born jazz saxophonist and composer Ted Nash in 2019 about their collaboration in words and music, *Transformation: Personal Stories of Change, Acceptance, and Evolution*. Progeny of a well-known family of jazz and studio musicians in Los Angeles, Ted Nash has become one of the most significant jazz composers of the 21st century. He is co-founder of the New York-based Composers Collective and is a long-standing member of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis.

Nash composed the music for *Transformation*, while Close found pertinent texts and stories about transformative experiences she could narrate to "inspire, and basically comfort our audience." The Jazz at Lincoln Center live show was canceled because of COVID, but a CD was released in 2021 of *Transformation: Personal Stories of Change, Acceptance, and Evolution*.

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Two years later, enter Nir Kabaretti and the Santa Barbara Symphony with the composer himself on solo saxophone, joined by the Los Angeles-based Josh Nelson Trio, to perform Nash's new version of *Transformation*, including two new pieces, and the world premiere of Nash's extensive orchestrations. Four segments make up the reincarnated version of *Transformation*. The only piece remaining from the original 2021 concept is *Dear Dad*, a letter from Nash's son Eli to his father, this time fully orchestrated, with sax soloist, jazz quartet, and narrator.

"One of the things I'm going to do with this piece is bend time," Ted Nash explains about the world premiere of his new orchestration for *Transformation*, of *Dali*, a movement from his *Portrait in Seven Shades* composed for Jazz at Lincoln Center a few years back. Focusing on Dali's eponymous canvas, *The Persistence of Memory*, with its melting clocks on a barren landscape, Nash does indeed bend time with his musical interpretation. "Through music, I want people to experience this iconic image in a new way," Nash explained at the time. Now, in its fully orchestrated version, *Dali* dazzles the imagination even more.

The remaining two pieces in Nash's new version of *Transformation*, *Wolfgang's Samba* and *Scriabin Prelude, Op. 11, No. 1*, take existing melodies, in this case, Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* and the *Scriabin Prelude*, and re-imagine them in a jazz/orchestral idiomatic mash-up. "We will go back and forth from full orchestra to a jazz quartet with improvised solos," the composer explains.

Composer, conductor, pianist, and violinist, Richard Strauss (1864-1949), a leading representative of the German late Romantic and early modern periods, had a special knack for tone poems; descriptive musical narratives that tell big stories in one continuously flowing movement. Of his eight-tone poems, the first two, *Don Juan, Op. 20* (1889) and *Death and Transfiguration, Op. 24* (1888-1889) are arguably the most profound. The protagonist in *Don Juan* is a libertine who wills his own death. Yet after its premiere, Cosima Wagner, widow of Richard Wagner (1813-1883) whose operas Strauss learned and loved in his job as assistant conductor in Bayreuth under her sovereignty as heir to Wagner's vision, found the story lacking the high metaphysical ideals of her husband.

Strauss' second tone poem was his answer to Cosima Wagner's high-handed criticism of *Don Juan*. *Death and Transfiguration* depict the psychological travail and journey of a man dying; his thoughts on life and its struggles disturb his peace of mind until he receives deliverance from mortal life by transfiguration "from the infinite reaches of heaven." In four parts woven together as one continuous musical fabric, the composer asks then, as he did 60 years later, using the same *Transfiguration* motif in *At Sunset, from Four Last Songs* (1948), "Is this perhaps death?" A year after *Four Last Songs* and on his own deathbed, Strauss said to his daughter, "It's a funny thing, Alice, dying is just the way I composed it."

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French Impressionist composer Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) wrote a friend in 1924 that he was contemplating composing “a symphonic poem without a subject, where the whole interest will be in the rhythm.” The very idea would have sent the imperious Cosima Wagner into a tailspin. Ravel was a revolutionary thinker and musical innovator as well as a rather sly fellow about his messaging, especially after the horrors of World War I. His tone poem *Boléro* (1928) which closes the concerts on February 18 and 19, is arguably the most successful exercise in sonic erudition in the history of music. Even the composer was amazed at the instant success of the piece. On a more subtle, post-WW I level of cognition, *Boléro* is also a brilliant musical slap in the face of antebellum romanticism, suggesting in its final cataclysmic bars, the end of the old order.

Literally a transformation by volume, *Boléro* begins with a tiny rhythmic figure on snare drum, pianississimo, which never changes over the course of the piece except in heft (added percussion). An alluringly mellifluous tune floats above the steady rhythmic pattern, also never changing but growing slightly larger in volume (orchestration) each time it repeats. An inverse pyramid of orchestral magic is achieved, the lightweight and barely audible rhythmic figure played on the edge of a snare drum, eventually supporting a massive sound structure carefully assembled by adding instruments bit by bit. Like a house of cards, or the end of monarchical Europe, the hulk eventually collapses of its own artificial weight, *Boléro*'s brilliantly chaotic last seconds graphically illustrating the catastrophe.