

JAMES AND MARILYN MURDOCK INTERNATIONAL PIANO SERIES

presents

Antonio Pompa-Baldi

MARCH 15, 2025

7:30 PM

Beall Concert Hall



UNIVERSITY OF
OREGON

**School of Music
and Dance**

Program

“Glances on the Divine Comedy” (2021)

Roberto Piana (b.1971)

Part One: Inferno

- I. Mosé
- II. Cleopatra
- III. Cerbero
- IV. Fortuna
- V. Messo Celeste
- VI. Epicuro
- VII. Arpie
- VIII. Penelope
- IX. Lucifero

Ballade No. 2 in B Minor, S. 171

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

INTERMISSION

Suite Bergamasque

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

- I. Prelude
- II. Menuet
- III. Clair de lune
- IV. Passepied

Ravel en Rêve (“Ravel in dream”-world premiere)

Roberto Piana (b. 1971)

Gaspard de La Nuit

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

- I. Ondine
- II. Le gibet
- III. Scarbo

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Program Notes

Program notes by Nikita Istratov

Roberto Piana's *Glances on the Divine Comedy* is a set of 25 pieces, each portraying a character or place from the epic *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. It was composed by Piana in January of 2021. It is divided into three books, each containing roughly a third of the pieces: "Inferno" (containing pieces 1-9), "Purgatorio" (with 10-16), and "Paradiso" (with 17-25). The first book ("Inferno") is being performed today. *Glances on the Divine Comedy* was commissioned by Antonio Pompa-Baldi and is dedicated to him. The following text about "Inferno" is an adaptation of Pompa-Baldi's writing, providing insight into how the pianist formed his interpretation of the work.

The very beginning of the work features Dante's "voice" speaking to the audience. Piana takes the theme of Bach's *Passacaglia and Fuga in C minor* and uses it in retrograde (reverse) form. This leitmotif is heard in slight variation every time Dante speaks.

I. Moses

Moses was initially in Limbo because he lived before Christ, and was rescued by Christ himself, along with the other patriarchs of the Old Testament who believed that the Messiah would come. This piece features Hell, depicted with an explosion of ferocious chords. Piana's writing features many tritones, "the devil's interval."

II. Cleopatra

Cleopatra was a seductress who lived a life of lust, and she was banished for this. After Dante's voice speaks again, we hear Cleopatra herself, melancholy but alluring. The music here is more consonant – almost romantic. The melody in the upper voice leads the listener on an improvisatory, winding path through modulating harmonies.

III. Cerbero

Cerbero is the monstrous three-headed dog that Dante places as guardian of the third circle of Hell. This piece is an almost onomatopoeic depiction of this ferocious animal – a growling, mean, horrible beast. Tremolos, trills, glissandos, and extensive use of the bass register show audience members the fear Cerebro imbues.

IV. Fortuna

This movement is a return to more gentle, retrospective music. Fortuna is the Divine Intelligence who determines all events unexplainable to mere mortals. Though maligned and slandered by many, Fortuna ignores the complaints and tribulations of humans, basking in her own bliss.

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V. Messo Celeste

Messo Celeste is an Angel sent by God as a messenger, to admonish the devils who were trying to stop Dante and Virgil from continuing their journey through the Underworld. It is presented by Dante as an impetuous wind, suddenly blowing in different directions.

VI. Epicuro

Epicuro portrays those souls condemned to damnation because they did not recognize the existence of the immortal soul. It also portrays a conversation between Dante, Farinata, and Cavalcanti. The latter two are among the souls buried in the cemetery where the Epicurean souls are confined. The voice of Dante is heard first, then alternating with those of the other two characters. Farinata's and Cavalcanti's melodies are built on part of Dante's theme. It's as if they cannot comprehend the spiritual message of the Poet, and only fixate on a few of his words, unable to grasp the transcendent meaning of the whole.

VII. Arpie

Arpie (Harpies) are horrible birds with human faces. Dante places them as guardians and tormentors of the suicidal. These damned souls are imprisoned and tied to giant plants. The Harpies eat the leaves but continually wound the prisoners in the process. They peck at the leaves with mechanical regularity, like machines, indifferent to the pain they cause in the process. Piana's writing manifests this with sharp, metronomic staccatos.

VIII. Penelope

Penelope is mentioned in the Divine Comedy by her husband, Ulysses. In her husband's absence, she famously devised tricks to delay her suitors, in order to avoid remarrying. She pretended to weave a burial shroud for her father-in-law. She weaved by day and undid her work by night. This piece portrays her endless weaving, staying internally faithful to her absent husband. Steadiness, faithfulness, and a bit of guile are evoked here, especially at the end, in what sounds like Penelope humming a children's song to herself. Penelope smiles inwardly at herself, feeling content with her dedication.

IX. Lucifero

Lucifero used to be the most beautiful of Angels. However, he betrayed God, was expelled from heaven, and thrown with immense force to the center of the earth. He became a horrible monster. He is depicted by Dante as stuck with the inferior part of his body inside of the perennially frozen waters of Lake Cocytus. Lake Cocytus is the desolate frozen lake of the ninth circle, where those who committed treachery against God are punished most severely. Roberto Piana portrays Lucifer as a malignant creature mangling the Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) Gregorian theme, mocking it and the idea of the Last Judgement. "Inferno" ends with an enigmatic, dissonant chord of minor seconds (E#-F#-G). Aside from constituting a tritone from the initial key of C minor that opened the cycle, the key of F#

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also represents triumph over difficulty, as it came to be codified in most music literature of the 18th and 19th century. As a key that symbolizes the overcoming of a struggle, it is a perfect match to the last words in Dante's *Inferno*: "...e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle" ("and thence we came forth to see again the stars"). Here, at the end of "Lucifero", the F# is impure, stained by the adjacent pitches, reminding us that the journey has not ended, yet. The F# will return at the end of Book II ("Purgatorio"), this time mildly stained by only one minor second, and again at the end of Book III ("Paradiso"), finally all by itself, completely pure.

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) was not only a virtuoso pianist but also a visionary composer whose works feature virtuosic passages, soaring melodies, and immense narrative story arcs. His *Ballade in B minor* (composed in 1853), is a large-scale narrative that defies conventional form.

There are multiple hypotheses for what this piece was programmatically based on. Some researchers have emphasized subtle connections to Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* – not in terms of the literal story but in its portrayal of an inner journey from darkness toward transcendence. The two connections with the greatest traction are with Gottfried Bürger's ballad *Lenore*, as well as with the Greek myth of *Hero and Leander*. Claudio Arrau (who studied under Liszt's pupil), claimed the former as true, stating: "You really can perceive how the journey turns more and more difficult each time. In the fourth night he drowns. Next, the last pages are a transfiguration." From writings, it is clear that Pompa-Baldi, our pianist today, doubts this interpretation. He believes the *Ballade* fits the story of *Orpheus and Eurydice* better. Furthermore, he cites that Liszt composed his *Symphonic Poem no. 4* (titled "Orpheus") at the same time as the *Ballade*. It is certainly possible that, as he says, the repetition of the same material at the beginning in B minor accompanies Orpheus' descent into the Underworld, the crushing diminished seventh chords represent the moment in which Orpheus turns and looks at his wife, and the contrary-motion octaves represent Orpheus and Eurydice being separated precipitously. In this reading, the last note of the piece (an f#!), is the ultimate gesture of Orpheus' resignation.

It is up to the listener to decide what story this piece evokes. The piece unfolds with epic gravitas: its somber, searching opening theme evolves through infernal passages within a hellish landscape. Scattered moments of introspection suggest an arduous climb toward light. The piece's cyclic structure invites listeners to experience it as a personal odyssey – a musical reflection of the human quest for meaning.

This piece was written at around the same time as Liszt's *Sonata in b minor* and shares some similarities with it – from the key to the use of thematic transformation and a mysterious ending. The piece is built around sharp contrasts – the first theme is a void,

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the second is an intimate melody, and the third is more headstrong. These themes are transformed between three main climaxes. The structure of the piece is not a conventional one but broadly contains four sections. The initial exposition is repeated a semitone lower (a common device employed by Liszt) and later develops into a march. The first theme recurs within the four sections, and the second theme is constantly transforming in character and color. Mixolydian passages and pure chromatics are used to great effect throughout.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was born just as Impressionist paintings were starting to come to light and was a major participant in the development of Impressionist music, often utilizing unconventional, modal harmony and the whole-tone scale. He aimed to create music that is “free from themes or motives” and “never returns upon itself.” He believed that French music should “give pleasure” as its primary goal.

To the end of finding a style of music that is distinctly “French,” Debussy studied and revered the great French Baroque composers Jean-Philippe Rameau and François Couperin. Several works in Debussy’s early output are modeled on the Baroque dance suite, and this is one of them. Suite Bergamasque is one of his most famous piano works. Its title references the bergamasque, a rustic Italian dance from the district of Bergamo.

In the *Prélude*, Debussy opens with sweeping gestures and surprising, evocative shifts in dynamics that hint at coming moments of beauty. The next movement, *Menuet*, playfully reimagines the classical dance form, with subtle rhythmic inflections and unexpected harmonic turns. This movement blurs the lines between spontaneity and order, bouncing between the two in truly charming ways.

Clair de lune is the suite’s most celebrated movement. It illustrates the nighttime glow of the moon with pedal tones and gentle, understated modulations. *Claire de lune* was originally titled *Promenade sentimentale*. Both of these titles are names of different poems by Paul Verlaine. Debussy studied and used Verlaine’s poems as inspiration frequently. In this piece Debussy avoids traditional major and minor but maintains a “tonic” key center that elicits a sense of finality. While Debussy’s wavering between keys makes the tonality initially uncertain, the listener gradually understands the tonality of the piece and the very end features a perfect cadence, something that Debussy uses rarely but effectively to conclude his works. Here is a translation of the poem *Claire de lune*, by French poet Paul Verlaine:

Your soul is a rare landscape
with charming maskers and mummers [‘masques et bergamasques’]
playing the lute and dancing, almost
sad beneath their fantastic disguises.
While singing in minor mode

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of victorious love and life in its season,
they do not seem to believe in their
happiness,
and their song mingles with the moonlight.

With the calm moonlight, sad and lovely,
that sets the birds in the trees to dreaming,
and the fountains to sobbing in ecstasy,
the great fountains, svelte among the
marbles.

Finally, the *Passepiéd* captures a lively spirit and has a dance-like energy that interacts with delicate, folk-like melodic elements. The treatment of these elements shows Debussy's ability to "refresh" traditional music. I believe this is a central part of what this Suite is about – Debussy finding a unique sound within the blend of "tradition", both melodically and stylistically, and his refreshing ideas about color and variation.

Pianist and composer Roberto Piana was born in Sassari, Sardinia, in 1971. He studied piano at the Conservatory of Sassari. While maintaining a performance schedule as a pianist, Roberto also often finds himself in the position of a researcher, author, and essayist. In particular, he is interested in the publicization and discovery of lesser-known composers.

Piana also composes piano, vocal, and symphonic music that has been performed in numerous countries and major festivals including the Chopin Festival in Duszynki Zdroj, Poland and the International Russian Music Piano Competition in San Jose, CA. Antonio Pompa-Baldi often works with Piana, and recently recorded his collection of Neapolitan songs for the Steinway & Sons label.

I have learned about this piece through my communications with the composer, but I think it is best that I leave you with the unadulterated writing of the composer himself. This is a rare opportunity to look directly into the mind of a composer, and I encourage you to keep his words in mind as you enjoy the privilege of hearing this world premiere.

"Since I was a child, I have felt an irresistible attraction for the music of Claude Debussy, a love that, over time, has also extended to that of Maurice Ravel. This feeling, strong and unconditional, continues to accompany me today, fueling my musical inspiration. In Debussy I admired the structural freedom, his sophisticated timbres and unusual harmonic progressions, capable of creating nuanced and liquid, almost ethereal atmospheres. In Ravel, however, I found a different fascination: his meticulous attention to detail, the perfect "musical engineering" that makes each of his works similar to a clockwork mechanism. It is

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no coincidence that Stravinsky defined him as “a skilled watchmaker”. The reference to their music is a constant in my output. Sometimes it manifests itself in a subtle and implicit way, while other times it is more explicit. I am thinking, for example, of my “Image d’un faune” (2012), an obvious homage to Debussy, or the “Petite Suite” (2023), in which the reference to Ravel is equally clear.

In June 2024, at the request of my pianist friend Antonio Pompa-Baldi, I wrote a series of variations based on the theme of the seventh waltz from Ravel’s *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*. I titled my work “Ravel en rêve (Variations nobles et sentimentales)”, a personal and intimate homage. One of the elements that I most sought in this composition is elegance—that same elegance that Ravel found in Schubert’s waltzes. I also wanted to capture that characteristic “joie de vivre” that Ravel claimed to pursue with such passion in his music. The piece opens with an introduction of over four pages, where the expressive climate of the variations is evoked but not yet outwardly stated. Ravel’s theme then emerges clearly, followed by a series of four variations, culminating in a brilliant and exuberant coda. The entire structure of the piece reflects a path of liberation: from the initial mystery and shadows, through a musical journey of increasing intensity, to a liberating final climax. The variations are characterized by a contrast of feelings: the clear and reassuring rhythm of the Viennese waltz is contrasted by surreal, dream-like moments, flashes of frenzy and an overwhelming conclusion. The latter, with its explicit references to “La Valse”, pays specific tribute to the sparkling spirit and musical dynamism of Ravel.”

-Roberto Piana

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) redefined the language of piano music with his innovative approach to texture and color. While he is often categorized with others under the general label of “impressionist,” he had a very distinct approach. *Gaspard de la nuit* stands as one of his most audacious works. It was composed in 1908 and was inspired by three of Aloysius Bertrand’s prose poems. These poems are dark and Ravel transfers both the mood and the narrative into musical form. *Gaspard* is far from “empty virtuosity” - its high technical demands are equaled by its structure and compositional construction. The three-movement structure of *Gaspard* has some parallels with Sonata form: Ondine has a two-theme structure, and the three movements of the set are arranged in a fast-slow-fast configuration. Playing them sequentially is a true triathlon for pianists.

The first movement, *Ondine*, features figures that evoke watery scenes. It is about the alluring grace of a water nymph that tempts male passerbys. The stark and contrasting *Le Gibet* follows. This is a truly chilling movement. A constant pendulum-like ostinato emphasizes the passage of time while dissonant harmonies illustrate a man hangs from gallows in front of a red sunset in a bleak, isolated landscape. Finally, *Scarbo*. This “caricature of romanticism” (Ravel’s own description) is arguably the most notorious movement, featuring

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twisting passages and sudden dynamic shifts that capture a mischievous, fleeting nighttime goblin. This scarab beetle-like imp peers out from the shadows, occasionally lunging out and frantically retreating. Dynamics, tempi, and characters are contrasted in jarring, frightening ways. In the end, the goblin retreats and vanishes in sudden depletion: “his body turns bluish, diaphanous as candle wax; his face becomes bluish as a candle-end—which suddenly blinks out.” Each subsequent piece displays an increasingly darker humanoid character and set of expressions. Most fascinating to me is how under all the technical displays present in the piece, Ravel created a set of symbolic cues that weave a narrative. I urge you to read the poems that inspired *Gaspard*, as they may help you see this narrative even clearer.

The repeated B-flats in the second movement, *Le Gibet*, ring throughout the piece like a bell. The poem this piece was based on opens with the line: “What is it - this uneasy sound in the dusk?” The poem eventually concludes that “it is the bell ringing by the walls of a city below the horizon and the carcass of a hanged man reddened by the setting sun.” The landscape this piece summons in my mind has a surrealist tinge to it. Ravel uses dark harmonies throughout the piece that add layers of complexity but ends the piece simply, as he started it. The silence the layers leave in their wake hangs deafeningly over the bell ostinato.

Born and raised in Foggia, Italy, **Antonio Pompa-Baldi** won the Cleveland International Piano Competition in 1999 and embarked on a multifaceted career that continues to extend across five continents. A top prize winner at the 1998 Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud Competition of Paris, France, Antonio Pompa-Baldi also won a silver medal at the 2001 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. With a concerto repertoire including more than 60 works, Mr. Pompa-Baldi regularly performs cycles of all the Rachmaninoff Piano Concertos, the five Beethoven Piano Concertos, both Brahms Concertos and many other established masterpieces of the piano literature, while also championing neglected or lesser-known repertoire, with leading orchestras around the world.

Mr. Pompa-Baldi appears at major concert venues including New York's Carnegie Hall, Cleveland's Severance Hall, Milan's Sala Verdi, Boston's Symphony Hall, Shanghai's Grand Theatre, and Paris' Salle Pleyel, to name a few. He has collaborated with conductors including Hans Graf, Krzysztof Urbanski, James Conlon, Miguel Harth-Bedoya, Theodore Kuchar, Benjamin Zander, Louis Lane, and Keith Lockhart. He has performed with ensembles and colleagues such as Takacs String Quartet, trumpeter Alison Balsom, cellist Sharon Robinson, violinists Ivan Zenaty and Ilya Kaler, and principals of the Cleveland Orchestra, Dallas Symphony, New York Philharmonic, and Juilliard Quartet. Among the many stops on his tours, he performed in Vienna (Austria), London (UK), Paris (France), New York (USA), Auckland (New Zealand), Jerusalem (Israel), Kiev (Ukraine), Cape Town (South Africa),

About the Artist

Poland, Germany, Mexico, Canada, Spain, and many other places around the globe.

In China alone, Pompa-Baldi has toured extensively in the most prestigious venues of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and all the other major cities, and is a regular returning guest at the Lang Lang piano festivals of Shenzhen and Hangzhou. Mr. Pompa-Baldi has recorded 35 CDs to date, for various labels including Centaur Records, Harmonia Mundi, Steinway, TwoPianists, Azica, and Brilliant Classics. Among them, the complete piano and chamber music works of Grieg, the Josef Rheinberger Piano Sonatas, the complete Hummel Piano Sonatas, and CDs dedicated to Brahms, Schumann, Liszt, Respighi, and Rachmaninoff.

For the Steinway label, Pompa-Baldi recorded songs by Francis Poulenc and Edith Piaf, arranged for solo piano, as well as a CD titled "Napoli", which features new piano versions of famous Neapolitan songs, elaborated by Roberto Piana. Among his latest releases are his transcription for solo piano of the Respighi B minor Violin Sonata, and Suites by Debussy, Luca Moscardi and Barber for piano duo. Recorded with his wife, pianist Emanuela Friscioni, this latest album was published with the title "Suite Nothings" by the Steinway label.

Antonio Pompa-Baldi is a Steinway Artist. He is also a Steinway Recording Artist, as well as one of the most prominently featured artists in the Spirio recording catalogue. He is often invited to judge international piano competitions such as the Cleveland, Hilton Head, E-Competition (Minneapolis), BNDES Rio de Janeiro, Chopin USA (Miami) and Edward Grieg (Bergen), among many others. He serves as president of the jury and artistic advisor for the San Jose International Piano Competition since 2005.

Pompa-Baldi is on the Piano Faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he is also Head of the Piano Department. His students have been prizewinners in important competitions such as Marguerite Long, Hilton Head, Isang Yun, and Gina Bachauer. He is regularly invited to teach masterclasses in countless Universities, Music Schools, and Festivals in the US and all over the world, and is honorary professor at various institutions including the Beijing China Conservatory, and the Shenyang Conservatory of Music. Pompa-Baldi is Founder and Artistic Director of Todi International Music Masters. This summer festival takes place every August in the beautiful Italian town of Todi. It features 15 concerts in 15 evenings, with internationally renown guest artists as faculty members, and students from all over the world.



Murdock International Piano Series Season 1 – 2024/2025

featuring
Van Cliburn Competition Medalists

presented by
Oregon Piano Institute
University of Oregon School of Music and Dance

Welcome to the inaugural season of the Oregon Piano Institute, the newest non-profit arts organization in Oregon! OPI will enhance the cultural life of our community by inviting world-class pianists to perform and teach in Eugene. It will also create Oregon's first international piano competition and support University of Oregon students through piano competition grants. Our community needed such an organization for quite a while, and it now became a reality thanks to the generous support of James and Marilyn Murdock. I am very fortunate to work together with a dedicated Board of Directors: Maria Dossin, Andrew Verner, Ruth Seeger, and Amy Bunker. My special thanks to Dean Sabrina Madison-Cannon for her vision and support for this educational and cultural initiative.

If you would like to receive more information about the Oregon Piano Institute, please look for the sign-up sheets available by the doors, or visit our website and sign up online: <https://oregonpianoinstitute.org>

The Oregon Piano Institute was created to share great piano music with a large audience. Thank you for your presence, and please mark your calendars for the next Murdock Series recital, always at 7:30PM in Beall Concert Hall:

- May 28, 2025: Valery Kuleshov (Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Silver Medalist, 1993)

Alexandre Dossin, OPI Artistic Director

The Olympics of Piano

Nikita Istratov

Winning the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in the Soviet Union in 1958 brought American pianist Van Cliburn extraordinary fame. He became a symbol of American artistry and cultural diplomacy above political borders. The Van Cliburn Foundation was formed in 1961 with the mission of creating a world-class classical piano competition in his name. The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition (“the Cliburn”) was inaugurated in Fort Worth, Texas in 1962 and has been held every four years since then. It has become one of the world’s foremost piano competitions, having recognized and supported artists including Olga Kern, Alexei Sultanov, and Radu Lupu. The competition is a launchpad for the future stars of classical music.

Over the years, the Cliburn strengthened its position as a beacon of musical excellence. Above all, the Cliburn — now requiring competitors to prepare three solo recitals and three concerti to be considered for a medal — is an endurance contest. Competitors undergo intense rounds of competition, inspired by the desire to advance further. They must demonstrate not only technical prowess, but also the ability to interpret music with depth and originality. In many ways, a medal at the Cliburn signifies that a pianist has reached the highest ranks of their craft.

The 2024/25 Murdock International Piano Series brings together a select group of pianists who have won medals at the prestigious Competition. This prize serves as a badge of honor conveying their strength at the highest levels of performance. These artists proved their abilities in an extremely demanding environment and now they have the chance to share their artistry in concerts.

Cliburn CEO Jacques Marquis has described the competition as “the Olympics of piano.” The musicians playing at the Murdock series this year can surely be described as Olympians. Hearing a Cliburn laureate perform live is not just an evening of music; it is an experience that connects the audience to the legacy of musical excellence that the Competition represents. These pianists are ambassadors of the competition’s strength and ambassadors of the international piano community. Join us for an unforgettable series of performances and experience firsthand why a medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition is one of the highest honors a pianist can achieve.

Antonio Pompa-Baldi

Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Silver Medalist, 2001

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