
Deutsche Grammophon
BRUCE LIU
LUNARIS
CHOPIN · BEETHOVEN · DEBUSSY · SCRIABIN · CAGE



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FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810–1849)

1 **Nocturne in D flat major** op. 27/2 ..... 6:22
Lento sostenuto

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor "Moonlight" op. 27/2

2 1. Adagio sostenuto 6:17
3 2. Allegretto 2:27
4 3. Presto agitato 6:57

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

5 **Rêverie** CD 76 ..... 4:18

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)
Arrangement: Alexander Siloti

6 **Prelude in B minor** (orig. E minor) 3:13
BWV 855a

AGNES OBEL (*1980)

7 **Tokka** 1:51

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major "Waldstein" op. 53

8 1. Allegro con brio 11:00
9 2. Introduzione. Adagio molto 4:08
10 3. Rondo. Allegretto moderato – 7:32
11 Prestissimo 1:58

FREDERIC MOMPOU (1893–1987)

12 **Glossa sobre "Au clair de la lune"** 1:36
13 **Fantasia sobre "Au clair de la lune"** 2:46

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874–1951)

14 **Little Piano Piece** op. 19/1: Leicht, zart 1:22

GYÖRGY LIGETI (1923–2006)

15 **Étude No. 4: Fanfares** 3:37

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1872–1915)

Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp major op. 30

16 1. Andante 2:50
17 2. Prestissimo volando 4:40

REYNALDO HAHN (1874–1947)

18 **Hivernale** 4:59
No. 52 from *Le rossignol éperdu*

JOHN CAGE (1912–1992)

19 **Dream** 8:34

BRUCE LIU *piano*

BRUCE LIU

LUNARIS

Lunaris – From Dreaming to Transcendence

Bruce Liu talks to Michelle Assay



MICHELLE ASSAY: Let's start with the title of your album, Lunaris.

BRUCE LIU: The idea of *Lunaris* came to me as a word that sounds both familiar and mysterious. The root, "luna", immediately evokes the moon, the night and a certain kind of light that is indirect and deeply intimate. So, for me, *Lunaris* is about a state of being. It describes those hours when the external world becomes quiet and the inner world opens a space for imagination, for sensitivity, and for a different perception of time. *Lunaris* is a nocturnal atmosphere and a space for introspection and quiet radiance.

Do you consider yourself a nocturnal person?

Fun fact: many of my musical ideas actually come to me during my dreams at night, especially during those months preparing for the Chopin Competition. Practically speaking, our profession already pushes us towards the late hours. It's often the only time that silence and concentration, in the sense of timelessness, are possible. The night, for me, is the moment when reflection and creative energy meet.

Does fascination with the night sky go back to your childhood?

Yes, very much. One of my earliest memories is about going to the planetarium with my dad. He'd explain how space was formed and how the world came into being. I remember being completely absorbed by that sense of immensity: the impression of something infinite and suspended in time. In a way this album reconnects me with that childhood perception.

Tell me how you chose the works on the album. Did you start from a few core pieces?

Yes, especially Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata, Scriabin's Fourth Sonata and Chopin. For me, they already formed a nocturnal constellation. From there, other pieces gathered almost organically, by resonance of colour and atmosphere. Some belong to my personal history at the instrument, and others appeared as I searched for new shades of the same world. At one point my producer brought me an image from René Magritte's *The Empire of Light*, and it immediately felt like a visual mirror of the album. The coexistence of night and day, and the space where light can exist within the night, became a very strong poetic key to the concept.

There seems to be a clear narrative that connects the works on the album. Tell me about the journey you take us on.

Indeed, the order follows a very clear inner trajectory, a gradual passage between different stages of consciousness that starts with Chopin's Nocturne and ends with John Cage's *Dream*. It's a journey from the human, intimate world towards something luminous, from earth to inner cosmos.

Why did you choose the specific ***Chopin Nocturne****?*

I was fascinated by the magical connection between D flat, the key of this Nocturne, and its enharmonic C sharp, which is the key of the "Moonlight" Sonata: the same note, the same gravitational centre, but the emotional transformation between them feels like a second creation. This is the very significant point from where the whole journey of *Lunaris* starts.

Of course, the title ***"Moonlight"*** *was not chosen by* ***Beethoven****, and the Sonata is such an iconic piece, so deeply embedded in the popular consciousness - were you not concerned about its over-familiarity?*

That question crossed my mind. But, for me, this was exactly the reason to include it rather than avoid it, because beyond the nickname it's a radical work. The opening movement feels suspended in time, in a way that still sounds modern today. Its sense of distance and inwardness is essential to the narrative of the album. And, when you place this beside Chopin, Debussy or even Cage, you realize how experimental it is in its own way.

You seem to have bypassed some other obvious choices, such as ***Debussy****'s* Clair de lune *or his night-themed preludes. What was behind choosing his early* **Rêverie****?*

For me, Debussy's *Rêverie* has the quality of a very innocent dream. There is a kind of simplicity and directness in its language, and it's almost improvisatory. There's something fragile and suspended, which corresponds to the idea of an inner landscape.

In the context of the album, the arrangement (in B minor) of ***Bach's E-minor Prelude*** *from the first book of* The Well-Tempered Clavier*, by the Russian composer and pianist Alexander Siloti, comes across like an act of purification, with an almost Tarkovskian, weightless quality.*

Indeed. Up to that point in the album the night is still human and intimate. With the Bach-Siloti, everything becomes transparent and impersonal. The harmonic rhythm is extremely slow, and that simplicity creates a different kind of nocturnal space. It's not a poetic or emotional night, but a contemplative one. It's the point where the darkness becomes calm, luminous and purely spiritual.

Another piece with a similar suspended quality is **Tokka***, by the Danish singer-songwriter Agnes* ***Obel****. It looks like she was alluding to the idea of touch, "tocco" in Italian. Is this a strange choice for an album rooted in the so-called classical repertoire?*

Well, I wanted to include a work that belongs to the present time but shares the same suspended relationship to the concept of the sound of silence. The first time I heard *Tokka*, I was really struck by its purity and fragility. The repeating notes create a kind of timeless breathing that is very close to the world of Cage and Mompou.

*With **Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata** there seems to be a turning point in the album. Was your choice informed by the image of Aurora attributed to the sonata?*

What really fascinates me in the "Waldstein" is the sense of propulsion towards light that runs through the whole piece. After so much nocturnal space through the first half of the programme, the "Waldstein" appears like a horizon, a sudden expansion. Especially the Rondo finale. It's not just brilliant – it feels like an illumination, because the writing constantly moves upwards and becomes increasingly radiant. The trills and the repeated notes create a kind of vibration in the air, a very physical sensation. In the context of the album, it does have a pivotal function. Until that point, light is always indirect, interior, nocturnal. But here for the first time it becomes direct and ushers in a moment where the inner world opens up.

*Then there are these late reflections on a French folk song by the Catalan composer Frederic **Mompou**. His **Glossa sobre "Au clair de la lune"** delicately ornaments the familiar melody, while the **Fantasia** seems to drift further into inward contemplation.*

I found these pieces when I was searching for a different kind of moonlight, something extremely simple and fragile, almost outside of time. They felt like a hidden gem. It's music that doesn't impose itself. It exists in a very discreet way and has to be discovered in silence. In an album that moves between very well-known works, it was important for me to have these moments of intimate revelation.

*You have a short excursion to the world of atonality through the first of **Schoenberg's Six Little Piano Pieces**, op. 19. What's the nocturnal connection here?*

For me, this piece is like an expressionist moonbeam: something extremely concentrated that reveals an entire landscape and then disappears. The external world is gone, and what we hear is like a pure, exposed state of the soul. This is how it relates to the concept of *Lunaris* and its journey away from physical reality. In a way, Schoenberg represents the point where everything is reduced to its essence, where night is a state of consciousness. So the function is transformational rather than structural; it's a single point of light in immeasurable space.

***Ligeti's Étude No. 4 "Fanfares"**, on the other hand, is an exhilarating display of rhythmic ambiguity, an almost electrifying night vision.*

Yes, Ligeti for me represents the other side of the night. The music has something of a surreal dream. With all the superimposed rhythms and shifting accents, it creates the perspective of a weird dream, as if lifted from a painting by Dali or even Escher's *Dream*. You know that moment when you're in a dream, when the body is tired, but the mind becomes extremely active? Within the context of *Lunaris*, this piece represents the strangeness of the moon – cold, dark, and with a bumpy texture.

*It feels as if, with **Scriabin's Fourth Sonata**, we again enter a different world. Isn't this a work that aspires towards the light rather than darkness?*

Absolutely. For me, it's one of the most luminous works in the entire programme. It's also a piece I knew and had always wanted to record. So in a way the whole concept grew around it and its trajectory from the darkness towards light. The first movement has the feeling of something remote and suspended, almost like a star seen from far away. The second is a continuous ecstatic ascendance. And let's not forget that the word *Lunaris* also contains the idea of transformation: something that begins in the night and moves towards illumination and away from gravity. Although Scriabin's Sonata is not a nocturnal piece in the traditional sense, it represents that moment when the nocturnal world opens into something cosmic and visionary. It is a passage from dreaming to transcendence.

*Reynaldo **Hahn's "Hivernale"** from his* Le rossignol éperdu *then appears like a poetic oasis.*

Yes, for me it has the quality of a miniature painting, depicting a very delicate winter moonlight. It's one of the moments in the album when the night becomes a scene rather than a monologue.

*There's something simultaneously hypnotic and kinetic about John **Cage**'s 1948 **Dream**, especially as it was originally to accompany Merce Cunningham's choreography. What drew you to this work and to Cage in general?*

Well, in our musician's life we've all played *4'33"* by Cage at some point! Because it requires so much practice, right?! But *Dream* somehow immediately felt like it belonged to the sound-world of this album. There's this absence of rhetoric, in the way that time seems simply to exist, rather than moving towards a goal. After the whole journey of the album, it feels like a place where gravity fully disappears. So I chose it as the final piece because it does not close the journey but leaves it open.

Working on this piece was also a very interesting process. In *Dream* we hear the same material three times. So I really tried to explore the possibilities of sound by using three different keyboards, or more precisely two pianos, one of which has two keyboards. Generally, for me in a concert the element of surprise that comes with the unfamiliarity of the instrument is more a source of joy than discomfort, because the instrument becomes like a partner rather than something that has to be controlled. Whereas in a recording I look for instruments that allow each part of the repertoire to speak in the most characteristic way. Recording somehow allows us to be perfectionist in this sense.

Did the concept of the album in any way shape your approach to the instrument?

I would say yes, but more in the way I listen and let the sound exist. Working on this programme actually made me much more aware of what happens after the attack of the note – of the resonance and the space between the notes. I think I found myself searching for a much wider range of *pianissimo* and for transitions between light and shadow, rather than focusing on contrast in the dramatic sense.

Apart from Magritte, are there other extra-musical inspirations that inform the album and your interpretation?

Indeed. During the whole process of the conception of *Lunaris* I was thinking in very visual terms, and the programme was built as a succession of inner landscapes. Magritte's *The Empire of Light* became the poetic centre. But I was also drawn to other artists who create silence and suspension through light. For example, the nocturnal landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich and some of the interior paintings by Vilhelm Hammershøi, where you can see that the light exists more in the air than on the objects. For me, these are direct reflections of the works I play on this album. As for poetry, I feel very close to the worlds of Baudelaire and Verlaine, where they transform solitude into a space of resonance, and where time slows down. In all this, what matters to me is that the inner landscape becomes infinite.

And, finally, is this a very personal project for you?

Yes, it's a project that reflects something that has been a part of my inner world. It's not only a selection of pieces I love, but it's my attempt at creating a new way of listening and experiencing sound that has grown inside of me. This atmosphere of suspended time, and the coexistence of intimacy and distance, are things I recognize in my daily relationship with the instrument. Many of the works on the album have accompanied me through important moments of life and are connected to my personal history. In a way *Lunaris* is how I imagine sound and experience time at the instrument. On the other hand, I like the idea that, once the recording is out, it no longer belongs to me. Then it will become everyone's night and inner space, and every listener can enter this world in their own way.

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Mixing Engineers: René Möller & Jakob Böttcher
Mastering Engineer: René Möller
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