

21C Music & Piano Recitals

Gabriela Montero

Sunday, January 18, 2026 at 3pm

This is the 1,488th concert in Koerner Hall

Gabriela Montero, piano

PROGRAM

Sergei Prokofiev: *Sarcasms*, op. 17

- I. Tempestoso
- II. Allegro rubato
- III. Allegro precipitato
- IV. Smanioso
- V. Precipitosissimo

Sergei Prokofiev: Piano Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, op. 14

- I. Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Scherzo: Allegro marcato
- III. Andante
- IV. Vivace

Sergei Rachmaninov: Piano Sonata No. 2 B flat Minor, op. 36

- I. Allegro agitato – meno mosso –
- II. Non Allegro – Lento – più mosso –
- III. Allegro molto – poco meno mosso – Presto

INTERMISSION

Igor Stravinsky: Piano Sonata in F sharp Minor

- I. Allegro
- II. Vivo
- III. Andante –
- IV. Allegro

The Immigrant

Silent film by Charlie Chaplin with improvised piano score by Gabriela Montero

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

"I always try and use my programs, composing, and time to illustrate situations or issues that I find pressing and urgent," **Gabriela Montero** told *Voice of OC* (Orange County) four years ago. "I think immigration is very much on everybody's mind, and this program is really designed around the subject of immigration ... The three composers – Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky – knew each other, and they ended up living in the West, in the US. So it is a wonderful way to highlight the incredible contributions of immigrants, and, historically, how they have been interwoven with their political situations at the time ... also the value of us as immigrants, because I'm also an immigrant. So it's a way to bring to today three geniuses of the past who share that in common. And then the summit of the program is the film, *The Immigrant*. It just kind of brings everything together, and then hopefully opens up conversations in the public about the theme of immigration."

Sergei Prokofiev

Born in Sontsovska, Ukraine [now Krasne, Ukraine] April 15/27, 1891; died in Moscow, Russia, March 5, 1953

***Sarkazmi* (Sarcasms), op. 17 (1912-14)**

Piano Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, op. 14 (1912)

Before the ink was dry on either the *Sarcasms* or the Second Piano Sonata, Sergei Prokofiev – still a student at the St. Petersburg and Moscow Conservatories – had already divided the Russian musical world. A Moscow critic huffed that his First Piano Concerto (1911–12) "hardly deserves to be called music," while the *Petersburg Gazette* declared its composer "ripe for the straitjacket." The *Russkiye Vedomosti* critic later observed: "Beneath his fingers, the piano does not sing and vibrate. It speaks in the stern and precise tone of a percussion instrument."

The five ***Sarcasms*** (1912–14) form a compact yet explosive cycle. The first, *Tempestoso*, is a storm in a teacup – percussive, angular, plunging downwards before melting into lyricism, then rebuilding *con gran effetto* to a dying whisper. The *Allegro rubato* toys with question-and-answer fragments and omits a key signature. The *Allegro precipitato* mischievously adds two – with three sharps for the right hand, five flats for the left. Its drive breaks into sobbing (*singhiozzando*) before collapsing in exhaustion. *Smanioso* ("maniacal") explodes in brittle high figures against tense bass growls. The final *Precipitosissimo* begins with a shout for attention, falters, and slips into a mournful lament. In 1941 Prokofiev explained the work's irony: "Sometimes we laugh maliciously at someone or something, but when we look closer we see how pathetic and unfortunate is the object of our laughter. Then we become uncomfortable and the laughter rings in our ears, laughing now at us."

Prokofiev gave the premiere of his **Second Piano Sonata, op. 14**, on January 23, 1914 at his farewell Moscow Conservatoire recital. Already present are the hallmarks of his mature style: clarity of form, rhythmic vitality, and a sharp-edged wit. The opening movement contrasts a vigorous, wide-ranging first theme with a dreamy descending second, both spiced with harmonic bite and sudden key changes. The brief scherzo is motoric and brilliant. A tactile composer who shaped ideas at the keyboard, Prokofiev shows his improvisatory instinct in the slow movement – a sombre rhapsody that swells and fades like an extemporised lament. The finale brings back the drive and wit of the scherzo. In a vivid image of its raw propulsion at Prokofiev's American premiere in 1918, one critic likened the finale to "the charge of a herd of mammoths on an Asian plateau." Yet beneath the pounding surface lies elegance and humour; textures stay lean, almost neoclassical, and the return of the lyrical second theme closes the sonata firmly in D minor – powerful, ironic, and unmistakably Prokofiev.

Sergei Rachmaninov

Born in Semyonovo, Russia, March 20/April 1, 1873; died in Beverly Hills, CA, March 28, 1943

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat Minor, op. 36 (1913 rev. 1931)

Rachmaninov wrote his Second Piano Sonata in 1913 as a virtuoso showpiece for his own recital tours just before the Russian Revolution. He began it in Rome, in the same Piazza di Spagna apartment once occupied by Tchaikovsky, and completed it at his country estate of Ivanovka, where he found solitude – and bred racehorses. Monumental in scale and rich in late-Romantic opulence, the work makes huge demands on the pianist.

Rachmaninov later produced a major revision in 1931, cutting about 120 bars and clarifying the texture. "I look at my earlier compositions and see how much surplus material they contain," he admitted. "Even this sonata has too much unnecessary movement of voices, and it is too long. Chopin's Second Sonata lasts 19 minutes and all has been said."

Like much of Rachmaninov's music – and that of other Russian composers including Stravinsky – the sonata is haunted by the tolling of bells. While in Rome, he was also drafting *The Bells*, his great choral symphony. The sonata plunges into the dramatic rhetoric that defines his style. A short, drooping four-note figure introduced at the outset becomes a motto recurring through all three continuous movements. It shapes the dark, melancholic slow section and drives the finale's frenzied energy, which culminates in a radiant cascade of ringing chords.

Igor Stravinsky

Born in Oranienbaum [now Lomonosov], nr. St. Petersburg, Russia, June 5/17, 1882; died in New York, NY, April 6, 1971

Piano Sonata in F sharp Minor (1903-4)

The piano was Stravinsky's only instrument, the medium through which he thought and composed. He experimented at the keyboard much as Prokofiev did – testing textures, harmonies, and sonorities before committing them to paper. He began lessons at nine and later studied with a pupil of Anton Rubinstein. Yet he never sought virtuoso status in the salons of St. Petersburg. "Each note that I write is tried [on the piano], and every relationship of notes is taken apart and heard on it again and again," he told Robert Craft. Stravinsky composed orchestrally at the piano, and his piano writing often sounds almost orchestral in colour and weight.

By 1903, while nominally studying law, he had begun a full-scale piano sonata. "I was constantly confronted by many difficulties, especially in matter of form," he later recalled. Two weeks of intensive study with Rimsky-Korsakov persuaded the older composer to give him three years of weekly tuition, lasting until Rimsky's death in 1908. The Sonata in F sharp Minor, completed under his guidance, shows Stravinsky's effort to master large-scale structure before moving on.

Its commanding first movement, grandly rhetorical yet lyrical, is followed by a playful Vivo scherzo whose central trio has hymn-like calm. The final two movements flow together – an agitated Andante and a spirited Allegro finale. Long believed lost, the Sonata resurfaced after Stravinsky's death and was published in 1974, nearly 70 years after its 1905 premiere by its dedicatee, Nikolai Richter.

Charles Spencer (Charlie) Chaplin

Born in London, UK, April 16, 1889; died in Corsier-sur-Vevey, Vaud, Switzerland, December 25, 1977

Charlie Chaplin and Music – a timeline

Few artists united image and sound as instinctively as Charlie Chaplin. Long before spoken dialogue entered his films, he shaped scenes as if they were musical scores – guided by rhythm, timing, and emotional contour. Music was his earliest creative language, and *The Immigrant* (1917), performed here with live, improvised accompaniment, offers an early glimpse of that gift: a silent comedy framed by melody, tenderness and irony, where Chaplin's musical sense drives both humour and pathos.

Early years: Born in 1889, Chaplin grew up in London's music-hall world. By his teens he had taken up the violin and cello, practising obsessively for hours each day. Both instruments were restrung for left-handed playing, and he carried them on tour, even on trains.

Rising success: During his first North American tour with Fred Karno's troupe (1910–12) he continued practising whenever possible. Two years after his first film in 1914, he became the best-known entertainer in the world, signing a record 1916 contract with Mutual worth \$670,000 a year.

Music and *The Immigrant* (1917): Although silent, *The Immigrant* reveals Chaplin's growing musical imagination. He shaped the film around melody and movement, recalling that a wistful old tune had inspired its mood of yearning and irony. His instinct for phrasing and atmosphere was already that of a composer. As a director, he shot 90,000 feet of negative, editing it down to a 2,000 ft two-reeler.

1920s onward: From *The Kid* (1921) through *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936), Chaplin took increasing control of his scores. With the arrival of sound, he created original music for every feature from *City Lights* to *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967), later adding soundtracks to earlier silents. His music, touched by echoes of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Debussy, Grieg, and Brahms, blends lyric warmth with bittersweet nostalgia. He borrowed from the best!

Legacy: Over more than 50 years, Chaplin composed about 900 minutes of film music and more than two dozen songs – an extraordinary feat for someone unable to read or write notation. His final score, completed at 86 for the 1976 reissue of *A Woman of Paris*, crowned a lifetime of creative dialogue between image and sound.

- Program notes copyright © 2026 Keith Horner

Gabriela Montero

Piano

Gabriela Montero's visionary interpretations and unique compositional gifts have earned her critical acclaim and a devoted following worldwide. Anthony Tommasini wrote in *The New York Times* that "Montero's playing had everything: crackling rhythmic brio, subtle shadings, steely power ... soulful lyricism ... unsentimental expressivity." Renowned for her rare ability to improvise, she brings audiences into the creative process in a way unmatched among classical pianists today.

The 2025-26 season sees Montero in residence at London's Barbican Centre, featuring the UK premiere of her piano quintet *Canaima* with the Calidore String Quartet, her debut with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and a new recital program, *Iberia*, celebrating Spain's rich influence on the piano repertoire. She has previously held residencies with the São Paulo, Prague Radio, Bournemouth, and Basel symphonies, and at the Rheingau Festival.

Recent highlights include debuts with Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, Munich Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France, and Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin; tours with the City of Birmingham and Prague symphonies; duo performances with Martha Argerich; and acclaimed performances of her *Latin Concerto* with the San Francisco, Dallas, and New World symphonies, the BBC Scottish Symphony, and the Swedish Radio Symphony, among others. In 2025 she was commissioned by the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition to compose *Rachtime* for all 30 competitors.

Montero has appeared with the Chicago Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Boston, Cleveland, and Philadelphia orchestras, and other leading ensembles across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australasia. As a recitalist she has performed at Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Vienna Konzerthaus, Berlin Philharmonie, Sydney Opera House, the Philharmonie de Paris, and at major festivals including Salzburg, Lucerne, Edinburgh, Ravinia, and Gstaad.

An award-winning recording artist, her discography includes Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 coupled with her own *Ex Patria*, which won a Latin Grammy, as well as the *Billboard*-topping *Bach and Beyond*, and her 2019 release featuring the *Latin Concerto* and Ravel's G Major Concerto.

Winner of the 4th International Beethoven Award, Montero is also a committed human-rights advocate, honoured by Amnesty International, the Human Rights Foundation, and the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent. Born in Venezuela, she studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where she is now a Fellow, and from 2024 serves as the Jonathan and Linn Epstein Artist in Residence, and piano faculty member at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Montero also maintains an ongoing artist residency and international concert series at the Prager Family Center for the Arts in Easton, Maryland.

Gabriela Montero made her Royal Conservatory debut on November 25, 2018.