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Program notes: Senior piano recital

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PROGRAM NOTES: SENIOR PIANO RECITAL

By
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PROGRAM NOTES
SENIOR PIANO RECITAL

By Juan Arauco

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

(1873 – 1943)

Prelude in G Major, Op. 32, No. 5
Prelude in D Minor, Op. 23, No. 3



Rachmaninoff at the piano

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born in Russia in 1873. Though his early musical training was primarily inclined towards the piano, beginning in 1889, he started to develop an increasing appetite for composition. It is not until the turn of the century, in 1902, that Rachmaninoff embarked into a larger scale work for the piano, with Variations on a Theme of Chopin Opus 22, based on Chopin's C minor Prelude Opus 28, No. 2. He was primarily interested with textural experimentation, as this piece seeks unity as a whole through an endless voyage of developmental material. In 1903, Rachmaninoff wrote his Opus 23, a set of ten preludes which are quite individualistic. Written after the second piano concerto, all these small pieces have a grandeur core, filled with dramatic melodic lines.

The third prelude, in D Minor, is quite a fascinating one. It has a very martial quality, especially because of its driving rhythm and figuration. The



Rachmaninoff in the early 1900's

opening phrase is reminiscent all throughout the piece, except for the middle section. Despite the tempo marking calling for a “minuet,” a more subtle and elegant type, the character of the music seems to evoke for more manly and brutish manners. The combination of these two is what makes this piece what I like to call “A Cossack’s Waltz.”

Full of energy and rhythmic nuances, this prelude is a fight between bouncy chords and dynamic outbursts. The brief lyrical sections that do occur in this piece are full of orchestral colors, displaying Rachmaninoff’s superb ability to orchestrate. After all, both set of preludes were written after his paramount second piano concerto.

The second set of preludes, the Opus 32, includes thirteen new pieces. Tauter and more refined than the Opus 23 set, some of these suggest a literary or pictorial inspiration, like the famous B minor, which is always said, on the evidence of a single witness, to be based on a painting called “The Return,” even though this prelude was composed long before Rachmaninoff was to live in exile in the United States. The prelude in G Major is not quite so nostalgic, even though its melody evokes a “very distant place.” The theme takes me into an

ethereal voyage. It is a feeling that floats in the clouds without wanting to land at any moment. For just this moment, I feel as though Rachmaninoff was thinking about a celestial place, where everything is exceptionally delicate, just like the different tones that come out of this piece. Both of these preludes are presented

in a simple way, in ABA' form; which means that a middle contrasting section is sandwiched between a section with a theme that takes the opening and comes back at the end, in a slightly



Rachmaninoff's hands, an evidence of his power

different way. Both preludes also have a short coda, and both wrap up the music in a gentle and *pianissimo* manner.

These pieces are a very good introduction to the Opus 109 sonata in E Major by Beethoven, they set the mood for an even greater realm that is lived while listening and playing this major work.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770 – 1827)

Sonata in E Major, Op. 109

Vivace, ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo
Prestissimo
Andante, molto cantabile ed espressivo



Beethoven circa 1819

This sonata has been a very big project for me this year. It is part of the late Beethoven period, which many catalog as his “transcendental years.” Beethoven had gone completely deaf at the time he was composing his late sonata, an amazing fact! The sonata is a testimony of the greatness that music brings to humanity. It has been quite an amazing journey to research about this sonata. I have extracted two experts that summarize the general idea of the piece below. The first set of notes is taken from a program written by pianist Jane Coop, and the second set is taken from the notes of Professor Peter Charleton,

who is a faculty member in the department of physics at the University of Sydney in Australia. The different approaches are remarkable.

By 1820, Beethoven had become a lonely man. His close friends had through one circumstance or another, been separated from him, and those who might have sought his company were deterred by the ever-growing rumors of his difficult and suspicious nature. Ironically, though, his enforced introspection opened still wider the doors of his imagination, so that his works now revealed an insight and beauty approaching the religious. The Sonata Op. 109 was conceived as the first of a group of three, though Op. 110 and 111 were not completed for another three years.

The first movement takes a precedented form in its use of two contrasting tempi, but with an important difference: the usually slow introduction is here a Vivace, followed suddenly by Adagio espressivo. This fantastical second theme is virtually an improvisation, using the full breadth of the keyboard - arpeggios alternating with bare, widely spaced chords.

Beethoven's genius for economy is brilliantly revealed in the tightly-knit second movement. Its excitement comes from not only its prestissimo tempo, but also the essential contribution of each and every note to the polyphonic texture.

The variation movement is one of the most profound and ethereal works in the literature. Its serene theme, already a gem of simplicity in its original form, becomes throughout the variations more skeletal in nature and, at the same time, more florid and highly developed in texture.

The six variations range from a pointillistic outline of the melody, to a flight based on a rising third, to an energetic fugato. The stirring final variation has almost no resemblance to the theme (which is quietly restated at the end), yet it seems to reveal, beneath its heavenly shimmer, the very essence of the entire work.

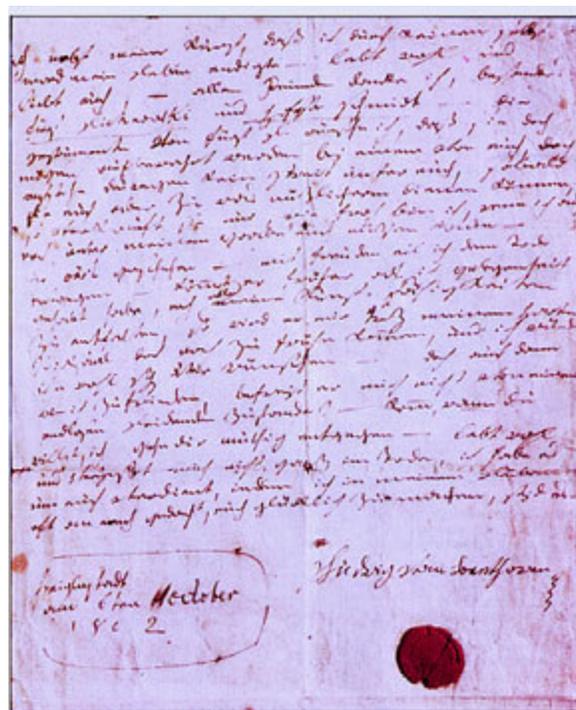
Composed in 1820, the three-movement sonata in E seeks order and consolation at a time when Beethoven's personal life once again drove him within himself to seek peace. An apparent progression of happy notions is utterly shattered by the appearance after only nine bars of the central pivot of the work; a falling semitone. The despondent result is, by resources of power, set aside though it continues to inform the return of the opening which is now questioning and centered on an escape from uncertainty. It fails to progress beyond being a vehicle for the reappearance of those sad thoughts cast in a guise for unifying those opposite experiences set in a chorale that allows the unresolved conflict to steal away.

The third of the major scale drops a semitone to E minor for the middle Prestimisso. Fury reigns unchecked only for a few seconds before both hands join in the soft unison declamation of what seems like a message from a world beyond. As if an ideal has now been set the anger of the double triple-time becomes directed. The stillness that rides, for a time, this galloping energy fades to a violent reprise. This, in turn, is again interrupted by the declamation, now harmonized and carrying a greater power that propels the insistent and violent

reversion of the drama of the first movement. What had been a falling semitone now rises, again and again.

The last movement is a set of six variations; the theme is restated to end the piece, but even more simply. Even in choosing a traditional form, order is thereby restored. The theme has two elements of two bars then elaborated. A fall from a major third takes the semitone below the dominant by the simple device of moving up a full tone and then dropping as the middle triad of B major. This then allows a semitone rise from the sharpened fourth back to the fifth of E. The effect is utter consolation but there is a journey yet to be traveled. The music moves from what seems like a prayer through the embraced waltzing of Variation I and into an echo of the opening figure of the first movement in Variation II. Here unearthly trills foreshadow our direction to a higher plain, a notion not dispelled though repeated on a falling semitone. Some idea, as yet to be grasped, is now dominant. Energy bursts through Variation III to prepare a search in Variation IV for some notion that has not yet been seized by the mind to which it presented itself. A fugue in Variation V leads to a sudden hushed whisper that becomes, in Variation VI, an insistent palpable presence. Some state of consciousness communicates itself on the first clear vision to the composer of what is above turmoil and sadness. For the pianist, and Beethoven was one himself, double trills through two dense pages physically communicate the idea of what is unending. The theme re-emerges, shorn of all that is inessential and we begin to grasp that what was in conflict and torn comes from the same source as this.

It seems amazing to learn more and more about the opinions that people have about this piece. It definitely has some structure; the first two movements are in sonata form, and the last one is a theme and variations. For me, it is the philosophy that goes into the details what makes this sonata more impressive than the structure. Beethoven's usage of the keyboard, always expanding, through far apart registers, and magnificent usage of the trills, has been said to be a way for him to make peace with God, and trying to reach with these some sort of divinity level. The theme and variations seems to do that, after the simple lyrical theme is transformed into almost everything that this earth could offer it musically. The end of the sonata is the most important part, for the performer, after the theme has been restated and the sound has disappeared, because there seems to still exist sound in our minds and in our hearts.



The last page of the Heiligenstadt

**Emma Lou Diemer
(Born 1927)**

Toccata

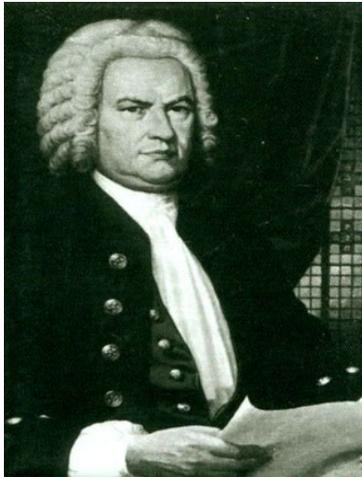


Emma Lou Diemer

Emma Lou Diemer was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1927. She received her education from the School Of Music at Yale University. Toccata is a very lively piece. It has the basic classical structure, where a theme in the beginning is followed by a contrasting section before it comes back to wrap up the piece. What is revolutionary in this piece is what goes beyond the keyboard. Emma Lou Diemer has prepared specific instructions, and there are sections which are played inside the piano. Both in the beginning and the end, the effects consist of damping the strings with the flat of the hand or doing “glissandos” over them with the tips of the nails. In the middle section, the lower register keys are depressed while the music goes on, and the effect of echo gives the impression of ocean waves that fade away. This piece proves to be a very effective piece and a nice break from the stricter forms.

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685 – 1750)

Prelude and Fugue in B Major, BWV 868



Johann Sebastian Bach

Bach is the everlasting king of polyphony. The preludes and fugues were written to defy the current trend (of that time) to play keyboard music in especial keyboard temperaments. Not all the key would sound good under this system, yet it was the favorite of many at the time. It is then that Bach wrote his “Well-Tempered Klavier” book, containing 24 preludes and fugues in all the keys, going in ascending order, proving the excellence of equal temperament, which would allow the composer to write in all keys. What is amazing is that each prelude and fugue is a different world on itself, with a different character, color and rhythm. The prelude and fugue in B Major, BWV 868, comes from the first book (Bach wrote two “Well-Tempered Klavier” books). The prelude is a beautiful improvisation like tune that has various layers of action; the main ones are the one that holds long notes and dissonances, and the one that has fast moving figures. The fugue is a four part fugue, which means that it has four different

voices at the same time. This fugue is a bit unusual, because the answer to the subject is not stated in the development of the piece, just in the opening and the closing sections. This fugue sets the mood perfectly for the Ballade in F Major, the voicing gives the listener and the performer a different perspective on the ballade's chorale section.



Johann Sebastian Bach and his children: The Legacy

**Fryderyk Chopin
(1810 – 1849)**

Ballade in F Major, Op. 38



Fryderyk Chopin

Fryderyk Chopin, or Frédéric, which was the name he adopted after moving to France, might very well be one of the greatest composers that the piano has ever had. He was born in Poland in 1810, and had to move to Paris, France, permanently after the Russian czar put Poland under harsh military rule. Chopin music is pure passion and brilliance. His ballades are among his master pieces. The ballade in F Major is a very unusual one, though. Of the set of four, this is the only ballade that lacks of an introduction; the first theme is played right away. It is a beautiful chorale like section, which in its *sotto voce* casts a charming melody. The section is interrupted by a fast *Presto* section, which many comment to be the “Lighting and Thunder” of the piece. The opening section goes back to being part of the piece after the presto is done. And then again, thunder strikes again. This piece is a play of mood swings and fast character changes, creating drama and solid passion in each note. The end is an *agitato*

coda that brings the performer to total madness. The closing phrase goes back to the chorale section, yet one that has been exhausted. The piece proves to be a contrast in every sense. The key is never settled between F Major or A minor. The fast section cannot make peace with the slow lyrical one. This is the ballade that battles to have an identity. Its struggle is what makes the music come out and sing in a beautiful way.



An evening of music with Chopin