
The Timeless Genius of Chopin, Jiayan Sun,
piano

Music: Faculty Performances

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Recital 2: Program

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Sage Chamber Music Society presents

The Timeless Genius of Chopin

II. The Complete Ballades, Selected Mazurkas, and the Second Sonata

Jiayan Sun, piano

Thursday, March 4, 2021

8:00 PM

Sweeney Concert Hall, Smith College



SMITH COLLEGE

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Ballade no. 1 in G Minor, op. 23 (1835)

Mazurka in C Minor, op. 56, no. 3 (1843)

Ballade no. 2 in F Major, op. 38 (1839)

Mazurka in E Minor, op. 41, no. 1 (1838–39)

Mazurka in B Major, op. 41, no. 2 (1838–39)

Ballade no. 3 in A-flat Major, op. 47 (1841)

Mazurka in A-flat Major, op. 59, no. 2 (1845)

Ballade no. 4 in F Minor, op. 52 (1842)

Pause

Sonata no. 2 in B-flat Minor, op. 35 (1839)

Grave – Doppio movimento

Scherzo – Più lento

Marche. Lento

Finale. Presto

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

On Jiayan Sun's first Chopin recital, in December, we heard the *Études*—complete, all twenty-seven that Chopin composed. On this evening's recital we shall hear, with other items, the *Ballades*—complete, all four that Chopin composed. On the third recital, we shall hear the complete *Scherzos*. On the fourth, the complete *Préludes*. These four categories, complete, form concert feasts of fine proportions. The complete *Mazurkas*, however, would be a festival of riches overripe. They are wonderfully varied, but all fifty-one of them in one go? Probably not. The complete *Nocturnes*, too, of which there are twenty-one, are too filling for one evening's refectation. As for the three *Sonatas*: we shall hear the second this evening and third the next time around. The first—a work of Chopin's youth—is more than a curiosity. But other items press more.

Why “ballade”? At the turn to the nineteenth century, the word applied to songs of a popular character, usually strophic in form. In the eighteen-twenties, the word was taken up by the poets, and by the composers of the Romantic Generation upon whom the Lieder of Schubert were at the time making a strong impression. Chopin is the first to apply the term to a purely instrumental work. The four *Ballades*, composed between 1836 and 1843, are innovative, single-movement structures that turn on a variety of melodies presented in contrasting tempos and contrasting keys. The music flows forth with Chopin's remarkable pianistic figuration, always suggestive of improvisation, always the product of careful premeditation. (In December 1841, at a concert sponsored by the Duc d'Orléans, the then heir to the throne of France, the third item on the program was a “*Ballade composée et exécutée sur le piano par Monsieur Chopin*”; the seventh, an “*Improvisation sur le piano par Monsieur Chopin.*”) Like the “sonata form,” whose foundations lie upon a conventional pattern of keys, their establishment, distancing, and recurrence, these *Ballades*, too, take shape from their tonal underpinnings—but the logic of their ordering is one of Chopin's own. The first *Ballade*—whose second principal theme you will recognize, it is one of his blockbuster tunes—begins and ends in the same key. So too, do the third and (after an introduction) the fourth. The second begins in F Major and ends in A Minor. (In the “common practice” period, such a metamorphosis is rare.) Here, as everywhere, Chopin causes the piano to *sing*: his secret—unlike the sound of the voice, the sound of the piano, as soon as you strike the note, begins to decay—is to provide intervening notes sufficient in number to give the allusion of melody sustained. Chopin's intervening notes are the essence of his art; they are perfect; their elaborate patterns of interlaced lines form continuities that match the lyricism of the Pastas (Giuditta), the Rubinis (Giovanni Battista), the Grisis (Giulia), and the other great singers he admired.

If the word “ballade” is curious, the word “mazurka” is not. As a relative of the waltz, this “Slavic” dance became popular after the Revolution of 1830, and, in a stylized form, a staple of the musical salon. Chopin, with whose name the category is synonymous, wrote *Mazurkas* from the beginning of his career to the end. All are in ternary meter, all feature chiseled melodies marked by dotted rhythms and accents on weak beats. Some, such as the A-flat-Major *Mazurka*, Op. 59 No. 2, are extroverted and openly dance-like. Other, such as the C-Minor *Mazurka*, Op. 23, are subtle and mysterious. Vladimir Horowitz made a recording of the C-Minor *Mazurka* in 1989, not long before he died, in November of that year.

Death, it is a commonplace to say, has provoked some of the most profound music that we have. You know or know of the great *Requiems* of Mozart, Berlioz, Verdi, Brahms, and Fauré. You may be less familiar with others, by Ockeghem, Cherubini, Bruckner, and Britten, which, it has been snarkily said, are equally worth dying for. This evening, Jiayan Sun gives pride of place to another work associated with death, the B-flat Minor Sonata, known as the sonata “with the funeral march,” in as much as the third movement—music you know, music that the autographs tell us generated the rest of the work—is indeed marked “Marche funèbre.” Or, I should say, *was* marked “Marche funèbre.” Because, between the initial and definitive printings of the sonata, Chopin *removed* the word “funèbre.” He did so, according to Jeffrey Kallberg, the leading American Chopin scholar, in order to maximize the distance between his composition and the funeral march (also from 1840) that opens Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*—because Chopin was the opposite of a Berlioz fan! This amusing hypothesis is far-fetched, I think, and not only because another fellow who was no slouch, Richard Wagner, thought of Berlioz’s *Symphonie funèbre* as one of the great monuments of contemporary French music. More likely, Chopin wished to distance himself from that other celebrated composer of funeral marches, Ludwig van Beethoven, who, in his Piano Sonata Op. 26, which Chopin knew, and his Third Symphony, the “Eroica,” established forever the prototype of the genre. Unlike Beethoven, however, who, in the “trios” of his marches, portrayed another heroic aspect of his “hero,” Chopin, in his middle section, by means of a melody that is absolutely simple and absolutely symmetrical, portrayed a kind of universal sadness that will gently break your heart.

—Peter Bloom

Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities, Emeritus

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Praised by the *New York Times* for his “revelatory” performances, and by the *Toronto Star* for his “technically flawless, poetically inspired and immensely assured playing,” pianist **Jiayan Sun** has performed with the Cleveland Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, the Chinese and RTÉ (Ireland) National Symphony Orchestras, the Fort Worth and Toledo Symphony Orchestras, the Toronto and Aspen Concert Orchestras, the Suwon Philharmonic Orchestra, and he has conducted from the keyboard the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His performances have been broadcast by the BBC, the RTÉ, China Central Television, and classical music radio stations in North America. He has performed at and participated in the Verbier Festival, the Gstaad Menuhin Festival, the Klavier-Festival Ruhr, the Aspen Music Festival, the Sarasota Music Festival, and PianoTexas. Under the mentorship of Sir Andrés Schiff, he was invited to give a number of solo recitals in Europe as part of Schiff’s “Building Bridges” project for the 2017–2018 season.

Jiayan Sun has been awarded prizes at major international piano competitions, including third prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition, second prize at the Dublin International Piano Competition, fourth prize and the audience prize at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, first prize at the inaugural CCC Toronto International Piano Competition, and others. Playing early keyboard instruments and studying historical performance practice have played a significant role in his musical activities, with critically acclaimed appearances with the American Classical Orchestra in Alice Tully Hall.

Hailing from Yantai, China, he received Bachelor’s, Master’s and the Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from The Juilliard School under the tutelage of Yoheved Kaplinsky and Stephen Hough. His other mentors include pianists Malcolm Bilson, Richard Goode, Robert Levin, and harpsichordist Lionel Party. His devotion to the art of composition led him to study with the composer Philip Lasser. As the Iva Dee Hiatt Visiting Artist in Piano at Smith College, he presented Beethoven’s complete piano sonatas in chronological order in the 2018–2019 season. In the last season, he presented the project “Schubertiade” in a series of eight recitals at Smith College, exploring Schubert’s major piano, chamber, and vocal works.

For more information, please visit www.jiayansunpianist.com.



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