
The Timeless Genius of Chopin, Jiayan Sun,
piano

Music: Faculty Performances

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Recital 4: Program

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Sage Chamber Music Society presents

The Timeless Genius of Chopin

IV. The Complete Preludes, Selected Late and Other Works

Jiayan Sun, piano

Thursday, May 6, 2021

8:00 PM

Sweeney Concert Hall, Smith College



Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Berceuse in D-flat Major, op. 57 (1844)

Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, op. 60 (1845–46)

Mazurka in F-sharp Minor, op. 59, no. 3 (1845)

Impromptu no. 2 in F-sharp Major, op. 36 (1839)

Mazurka in C-sharp Minor, op. 41, no. 4 (1838–39)

Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat Major, op. 61 (1845–46)

Pause

Prelude in C-sharp Minor, op. 45 (1841)

24 Preludes, op. 28 (1836–39)

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A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas and Schubertiade
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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Chopin, you will have noticed during this series of recitals, preferred generic titles. His music is suggestive of love and desire, of sadness and despair, but nowhere will you find, as you might have, “Love me tender” (a phrase some other fellow adopted) or “Candle in the wind.” The titles on this evening’s program might lead you to think that things have been turned upside down: *Préludes* sound as though they ought to open, not close, the proceedings. But Chopin’s *Préludes*, like Bach’s, which Chopin held in his hand as he composed his own, represent a summa. They rightfully come last.

The D-flat Major *Berceuse* from 1845 is the quintessential exemplar of the genre, the lullaby, based on a simple, rocking, tonic-and-dominant harmonic progression, and a series of micro-variations of macro-imagination. Before applying the title *Berceuse* to the new work, Chopin apparently intended to call it *Variantes*. A far more complex piece is the *Barcarolle* in F-sharp Major, though this, too, is based on an undulating rhythmic figure that is suggestive of the undulations of the Venetian gondoliers in whose music the *barcarolle* is said to find its origins.

Like the *Barcarolle*, the *Mazurka* in F-sharp Minor is rich with Chopin’s late harmonic experimentations. But the strongly dance-like triple meter renders the complexities more listener friendly. Despite its minor mode solemnities, the *Mazurka* in C-sharp Minor, composed five years earlier—in a lifetime of only thirty-nine years, five years is not nothing—is rather more straightforward. The *Impromptu* in F-sharp Major, the third of the four *Impromptus* that Chopin composed between 1833 and 1842, suggests the spontaneity of creation that the title implies, but is of course a highly elaborate and highly premeditative composition.

Likewise premeditative is the great *Polonaise-Fantaisie* in A-flat Major, from 1846, one of the composer’s most magisterial works—a *polonaise* (a moderate-tempo dance, in triple meter, with the characteristically stately rhythm of an eighth-note and two-sixteenth-notes on the first beat, followed by four more eighth-notes to fill out the bar) in which Chopin, with great imaginative freedom, turns dance into poetry. Chopin was always drawn to “distant” keys—keys with lots of sharps and flats. Listen closely to the opening three-part announcement of the *Polonaise-Fantaisie*: 1: an A-flat-Minor chord; 2: a C-flat-Major chord; 3: the C-flat-Major chord arpeggiated. The announcement is then repeated down a step. 1: G-flat Major; 2: B-double-flat Major; 3: the B-double-flat Major arpeggiated. Now, the key-signature of *B-double-flat Major* is: You don’t want to know. My very mention of the matter, for many listeners, is irrelevant hot air. But by writing all those flats, Chopin is signaling *to the player* that she or he is flying in rarified air. The flight ends, twelve or thirteen minutes later, as though in a flash

of light: the final sonority, A-flat Major, has the root of the chord not in the bass, as you might expect, but high in the sky.

The C-sharp Minor *Prélude* from 1841 was published separately from the famous group of twenty-four. It is an improvisation of the sort we may be certain that Chopin practiced. He was an experimental harmonist, and enjoyed exploiting the double meanings of chromatic notes and chords, which are like the ambiguous stairwells of M.C. Escher that go up and down at the same time. F-sharp is also G-flat. F-sharp has implications different from those of G-flat. Chopin often came to that kind of “fork in the road.” Rarely did he follow the expected path.

Unlike the complete *Études*, with which Jiayan Sun began his exploration of Chopin, the complete *Préludes*—the genre became autonomous early in the nineteenth century as a testing ground for stylistic “research”—are carefully arranged in music’s “alphabetical” order. They proceed “up” the circle of fifths, from no sharps (C Major), to one sharp (G Major), and on to six sharps (F-sharp Major), which could have been six flats (G-flat Major), then continue from six flats to five (D-flat Major), to four (A-flat Major), and on to one (F Major). Each *Prélude* in the major is followed by one in the “relative” minor (the minor that carries the same key signature as the major). This means that the final *Prélude* is in D Minor: it ends on the lowest D of the piano keyboard—*triple forte*. Let us hope that it resounds as it should! Chopin’s music makes the point abundantly clear: the man was extremely sensitive the quality of his pianos. In this case, working on the Island of Majorca in the company of George Sand, he was able to complete the *Préludes*, in January 1839, only after the arrival there of a fine instrument from the Parisian firm of Camille Pleyel—to whom Chopin dedicated the first edition of the collection. Are the twenty-four *Préludes* meant to be played in one go? Repeated listening suggests to me that the answer to that frequent question is: Yes.

Robert Schumann, one of the first to recognize Chopin’s genius in an 1831 article, “Hats off, gentlemen: a genius!,” wrote in 1839 that the *Préludes* “are strange pieces. I confess I imagined them differently, and designed in the grandest style, like his *Études*. But almost the opposite is true: they are sketches, beginnings of *Études*, or, so to speak, ruins, eagle wings, a wild motley of pieces. But each piece, written in a fine, pearly hand, shows: ‘Frederick Chopin wrote it.’ One recognizes him in the pauses, by the passionate breathing. He is and remains the boldest and proudest poetic mind of the time.”

—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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