

Tong Wang

(she/her)

Program Notes

Mozart's Piano Sonata in G Major, K. 283, is an early work composed in 1774. This charming sonata is well-loved for its youthful and playful character, highlighting Mozart's witty humour and elegant craftsmanship in the outer Allegro and Rondo movements, as well as a graceful lyricism in the middle Andante movement. This concise composition captures the genius clarity of Mozart's writing that is simple yet profound, familiar yet constantly full of surprise and wonder.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) - Sonate pour piano no 2 en si bémol mineur, opus 35 / Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 35

Chopin's magnum opus – the “Funeral March” Sonata, is a masterwork that laments the tragic hero's fate– a work that is epic in its condensed form and filled with the intensity and gravitas of the human pathos. Although titled a “Sonata”, the spirit of this work is that of a ballad -- a story in 4 chapters. The first movement is like an odyssey onto itself. The opening bars with its declamatory descending seventh immediately strike as the tragic fate motif, and the music launches into the drama of a hero galloping on horseback towards his destiny. The second theme introduces us to a vastly contrasting inner world – tender, intimate, perhaps spiritual, and the movement develops through episodes of suspense, mystery, passion, and triumph.

The second movement is a ‘scherzo’ – which means ‘joke’ in Italian. Yet here, Chopin writes a rather demonic joke with a possessed force driving the dance rhythm to syncopated accents on the third beat. The contrasting trio section, however, offers a moment of peaceful sweetness with a simple melody that continuously trails off – as if recalling a faint, bittersweet memory.

The apex of the tragedy is the third movement – the funeral march. Here, we experience the full depth and solemnity of our hero's journey. The arrival of the trio is astonishing – barely audible and distantly singing, the innocence of the melody is as sublime as it is haunting – an innocence and transparency that is heartbreaking in its simplicity, as if a pure piece of childhood happiness is now but a cold damp echo heard from within the tomb.

Finally, the last movement is a strikingly brief and elusive epilogue. A flurry of parallel notes in perpetual motion, chromatic and ambiguous with brief moments of sequences and melodic materials. We're left with only the bleak emptiness of the graveyard after the funeral procession, with the wind rustling over the barren tombstones. Ultimately, whether or not programmatic, this deeply moving work captures the extraordinary intensity and dignity in the human pathos, ‘transfused with pain’.

Alice Ping Yee Ho (n. en / b. 1960) - A Manic Ride Through Lollipop Hell

“A Manic Ride Through Lollipop Hell” is exactly as the title suggests - cute and horrific. This piano suite is written by the Canadian Chinese Composer Alice Ping Yee Ho and draws from the opera “Labyrinth of

Tears.” The story follows the adventures of four magic schoolgirls who enter into the mind “Labyrinth” of one of their friends, Kansa, to save her from a coma.

Within this world, there is a kaleidoscopic array of bizarre, uncanny, and adorably terrifying characters from creepy animated sofas and singing rag dolls to unnervingly bewitching woman-child marionettes. Ultimately, however, this is a story about the beautifully complicated nature of love and friendship. The girls want to understand and help their friend, but they run into the paradoxes of this age-old question: How do we love? How do we love someone who might not be wanting or receptive of that love. When are good intentions not enough? When is love a burden?

The middle movement, “A Sad Lullaby”, is from an especially touching moment when one of the girls sing to Kansa to calm her down from a panic attack, reminding her of the simple ritual they repeat together to find courage - the ritual of tracing the Chinese character for ‘human’ (Rén) three times in her palm. “Human. Human. Human. I see you. I hear you. I feel you.” This scene is a gentle yet powerful reminder to repeat that which gives one courage - something simple, something tangible yet magical, something that grounds us - a touch, a sound, a connection with ourselves and with the present reality.

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) - Sonate pour piano no 1 en fa mineur, opus 6 / Piano Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 6

Like a furious outcry against some unfathomable dark force, some inevitable tragic destiny, Scriabin’s First Sonata in F minor bursts open with a whirlwind of upwardly sweeping exclamations. Breathless, agitated, and impatient, this initial violent gesture suddenly diffuses into a series of inquisitive and hopeful major tonalities accompanied by flurries of glittering, bubbly left-hand textures before melting into an intimate, forlorn second theme full of sensual sighs and waves of spontaneous, surging desire. These intensifying lyrical phrases lead into a coda of triumphant fanfares in the relative major key of A-flat.

The second movement, marked quarter = 40, is a deeply brooding chapter of this tragic epic. Unstable and unsettling, the opening chords create a dreadful sense of anxiety by wandering through unexpected and unresolved harmonies. The looming uncertainty pervades throughout the wearily crawling movement and only in middle section offers a short-lived glimpse of light and repose in D-flat major. Intensely haunting, Scriabin illustrates the uniquely dark and mystical force of his style - a tormented wandering through the ethos, as if lost or trapped in the inescapable, monstrous inner psyche. There is an unshakable force of depression in the undulating chromatic bass of the main theme’s return - perhaps the ancient, haunting fear of death, perhaps the desire for death, perhaps the invisible enemy of the self.

A sudden newfound energy launches the third movement, Presto. The narrative takes a terrifying, frenzied course, galloping rhythmically to its inevitable doom. Syncopated driving triplet octaves in the left-hand bass is pushed forward by a breathless, disjointed, and militaristic melody, again exploding into the impassioned fanfare motifs of the first movement and dramatized by wildly whirling gestures in the right hand. The middle section comes by surprise, recalling the contour of the lyrical second theme of the first movement, before stealthily transitioning back to the main material. Finally, the last statement of the triplet bass pounds relentlessly violently an octave lower in fortissimo sforzando, ultimately bursting at the apex of the Sonata, almost like a scream of madness, of the final howl against the suffering and fated demise. Then, a most deafening silence. A series of exhausted, defeated sighs in descending fifths bring us to the final chapter: the devastating funeral march.

The final movement is remarkable for its unrelenting fateful march, creating the sense of inevitability of death. However, even more astonishing is the trio – a chorale marked pppp, Quasi niente (almost nothing). After surges of struggle against fate, countless cycles of triumph, defeat, lament, tenderness, finally, we arrive at serenity– the distant bells that ring on, barely audible, in a sweet calm, a peaceful sense of acceptance, perhaps relieved, perhaps even grateful, dignified.

Vers la flamme, Op. 72

Vers la Flamme, Op. 72 is one of Scriabin's last works - a brief 6 minute piano "poem" that depicts the mystical transfiguration of the spirit from darkness to light. Growing out of a sparse semitone motif, the work builds through chromatic harmonies, intensifying tremolos, and impetuous rhythmic momentum into a blazing, incandescent climax. Throughout the score, Scriabin uses the markings "with budding emotion", "with veiled joy", and "with increasingly tumultuous joy" to drive the euphoric buildup to a radiant ecstasy. Scriabin himself described the arc of the piece to his friend Leonid Sabaneev as a spiritual journey that moves "from the fog to the blinding light."

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) trans. Guido Agosto (1901-1989) - L'oiseau de feu / The Firebird

Stravinsky's 1910 ballet tells the Slavic folktale of the magical creature, The Firebird. In this version of the story, Prince Ivan goes on a series of adventures that lead him to discover a feather from the Firebird, which he later uses to call upon her help in defeating the evil King sorcerer Katschei and rescue the imprisoned 13 princesses. The three movements of the piano suite take place at the end of the ballet. In the Infernal Dance, the Firebird casts a spell on all of Katschei's subjects and they break out into a horrific, madly possessed dance at the bottom of his castle.

The Berceuse is a lullaby that shows the enchanting and hypnotic rhythm of the harps and the mystical magical character of the Firebird as she spreads her wings and begins to wake everyone from her spell. Finally, the Finale resonates from the distance with a noble solo horn melody, and the theme gradually builds on itself, transforming and elevating in a character of majestic triumph that is both transcendent and deeply moving. The whole orchestra repeats this single thematic material in various rhythmic augmentations and diminutions and climaxes in an exuberant, shimmering light.