Antonio "Nio" Ajero

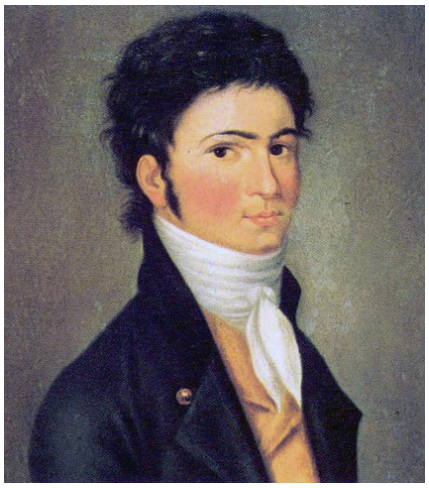
Gold Medal Piano Recital

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata in A major, Op. 2 No. 2

Ludwig van Beethoven was still a young man when he arrived in Vienna in November 1792 prepared to study with the aged master Joseph Haydn. Although back in Bonn Haydn had praised Beethoven for the potential he saw in him, now as teacher and pupil, the two found little common ground. Whereas Haydn fervently upheld the rules of social etiquette and expected his student to do the same, Beethoven cared little for established values and frequently rebelled against them. Likewise, in his music, Haydn displayed a similar respect for the rules of harmony and for the order of Classical form – in fact, he had been the one who had established many of these guiding principles over the many decades of his long career. Beethoven instead looked to the freedom of his imagination and saw music as a means for creative expression. Originally Beethoven's desire had been to study with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart whose music had greatly inspired him, but alas Mozart had died less than a year before Beethoven's arrival in Vienna. Even though his patron Count Ferdinand von Waldstein had suggested that the genius of Mozart might be passed to Beethoven via Haydn, their differences proved too great and Beethoven soon sought study with others.



Ludwig van Beethoven, c.1800

Nonetheless, when Beethoven published his *Three Piano Sonatas, Opus 2* in 1796, he dedicated the works to his former teacher Haydn. Was this simply a nod to the man widely acknowledged as the world's greatest living composer, or was it something more personal? Already the three sonatas show Beethoven reaching far beyond either Haydn or Mozart's aspirations for the piano sonata. For these predecessors, sonatas always had a pedagogical component of some sort; for Beethoven though, the sonata is foremost an artistic vehicle. These new sonatas were to be his showpieces for – in the years between his studies with Haydn and the publication of the sonatas – Beethoven had gained considerable recognition across Vienna as a pianist, and now had many influential patrons including the arbiter of musical taste Baron Gottfried van Swieten. There is also a new appreciation for counterpoint, something Beethoven would have explored through his studies with Johann Albrechtsberger and Johann Schenk. Additionally, Beethoven expands the form of the sonata by adding a minuet movement to the first sonata and scherzo movements to the second and third. On the contrary, the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart often had only two movements and never had more than three. In successive sonatas, the differences between Beethoven's works and those of Haydn and Mozart become even more pronounced as the elements of form, harmony, dynamics, and most importantly emotional expression are fully explored.

The Piano Sonata in A major heard this afternoon is the second of the three sonatas Beethoven included in his Opus 2. The A major Sonata is also the second of Beethoven's thirty-two mature piano sonatas, although he had previously composed several early piano sonatas while still living in Bonn. The Second Sonata is in four movements, beginning with an *Allegro vivace*. Though customary in its fast tempo and sonata-allegro format, the first movement still offers several surprises, including an unusual change of keys at the beginning of the central development section. The second movement is paced at *Largo appassionato*; the music has the stateliness and nobility of a hymn tune. The added *Scherzo. Allegretto* follows; the repeated scherzo section opens with a certain sprightliness whereas the intervening trio is tense and dramatic. The concluding *Rondo. Grazioso* has a beauty and tranquility all its own, although its mostly pleasant mood is occasionally interrupted by a more frustrated variation. Perhaps these emotional shifts are really a foreshadowing of the great music still to be written by the promising, young Beethoven.

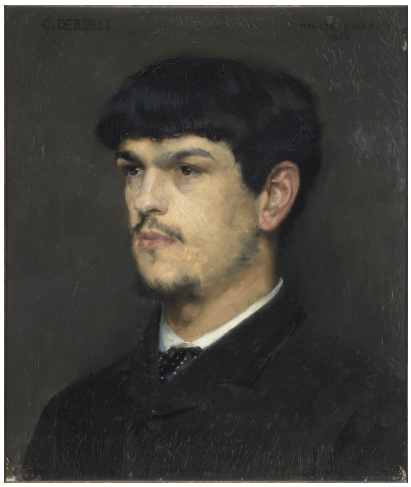
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Clair de lune from *Suite bergamasque*, L 75

Jardins sous la pluie from *Estampes*, L 100

The French composer Claude Debussy should be correctly considered the first musical Modernist. Although his music might not sound Modern to most casual listeners today, his compositions were the earliest to break with the principles of functional tonality which had guided composers as far back as the late seventeenth century. Although not yet atonal, they begin to achieve the stasis so vital to Modern music which later composers like Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, John Cage, and Pierre Boulez also sought to establish. For

Debussy, the route away from traditional tonality came through the usage of Medieval modes; non-traditional scales, whole-tone as well as pentatonic; extended harmonies built with ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths; parallel motion and symmetrical designs; and, in general terms, a vocabulary chosen for the way it sounds rather than the way it had previously functioned in Western music. In summary, the musicologist Eric Salzman wrote "Debussy was the first composer to substitute successfully another set of values, a musical thought based on symmetrical patterns and structures with a highly weakened directional motion and thus a very ambiguous sense of tonal organization." Unlike the Romantics – his contemporaries with whom he is often grouped – Debussy allowed colors to guide his compositional decisions even when those decisions defied the established values of traditional tonality.



Claude Debussy, 1884

For the casual listener though, all of this is often overshadowed by Debussy's interest in depicting scenes from nature and everyday life. With a different vocabulary albeit, many Romantics had created their own florid depictions – part of the confusion that all too commonly leads to Debussy being called a Romantic or, for that matter, an Impressionist like his contemporaries in the visual arts. This afternoon we hear two of Debussy's most beautiful depictive pieces. *Clair de lune* depicts, as its title implies, moonlight. One of Debussy's best -known compositions, *Clair de lune* was written in 1890, and is the third of four movements in his *Suite bergamasque*, although often excerpted. *Clair de lune* was inspired by a poem of the same name by Paul Verlaine and, particularly it seems, its closing lines "With the calm moonlight, sad and lovely, which makes the birds in the trees dream, and makes the fountains sob with rapture, the tall, slim fountains amongst the marble statues." Not an easily forgettable image, Debussy would also set the poem's text to different music as part of his 1891 songs *Fêtes galantes*.

In the second piece *Jardins sous la pluie* (*Gardens in the Rain*), Debussy depicts the patter of rain through fast-moving arpeggios. A change of keys towards the end seems to suggest the return of the sun to banish the rain. *Jardins* was written in 1903 and is the final of three compositions included in his set *Estampes* (*Prints*). The other two works are more exotic in their depictions – oriental pagodas and the Spanish evening – and Debussy once remarked of the set "When you don't have any money to go on holiday, you must make do by using your imagination!" His *Estampes* are by that logic musical postcards.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Étude in F major, Op. 10 No. 8 *Sunshine*
Preludes, Op. 28: Nos. 15 *Raindrop* & 16 *Hades*

It was with some reluctance that the Polish-born pianist and composer Frédéric Chopin came to resettle in Paris in September 1831. Almost a year earlier in November 1830, he had left Warsaw hoping to make his career in Vienna, but had not found happiness there. Although at first he had similar difficulties establishing himself in Paris, Chopin was soon adopted by Parisian high society and began giving intimate recitals at the fashionable *salons* and teaching piano to private students. Just as Chopin excelled as a pianist in quieter settings, he excelled as a composer when writing in smaller forms. Whether the night pieces called nocturnes or the study pieces called études; the polonaises or mazurkas inspired by Polish folk music; the charm of the waltzes or the poetry of the preludes – Chopin was most comfortable writing in these condensed sound realms. In fact, he is one of the few composers whose reputation rests on smaller forms. This afternoon we hear one of Chopin's best loved études and two of his most memorable preludes.

Chopin composed a total of twenty-seven études: twelve each are contained in his Opus 10 and 25 sets, and another three called the *Trois Nouvelles Études* were written specially for Ignaz Moscheles' compilation *La Méthode des méthodes*. The Opus 10 études were written between 1829 and 1832; published the following year, they were dedicated to his friend, the piano virtuoso Franz Liszt. The Opus 25 études were begun immediately after the Opus 10 and published in 1837; they were dedicated to Liszt's mistress, Countess Marie d'Agoult. Unlike many composers who had previously written études, Chopin brought his full artistry to these short study pieces while still addressing many of the technical problems faced by those learning piano. As a result, they have become favorites of aspiring pianists as well as audiences. This afternoon, we hear the Étude in F major, Op. 10 No. 8. Due to its rich colors, this étude has been nicknamed *Sunshine* (and appropriately follows Debussy's *Gardens in the Rain*). Here the technical problem addressed is the independence of hands as the left hand is required to play the main melody while the right hand must play fast-moving arpeggios.


Frédéric Chopin

Chopin wrote twenty-six preludes, twenty-four of which he published as his Opus 28. Prior to Chopin, a prelude was always followed by another piece of music whether a fugue, an instrumental suite, or an opera; on the contrary, nothing

follows Chopin's preludes. Chopin, however, was a great admirer of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and it was the preludes of this collection that served as Chopin's model as he wrote his own preludes. Chopin wished to capture the sense of poetry he found in Bach's preludes, and titled them preludes to reinforce their similarities. Like Bach, Chopin also composed one prelude in each of the twenty-four major and minor keys, although Chopin chose to order his preludes according to the Circle of Fifths rather than by ascending half-steps like Bach. The Prelude No. 15 in Db major has been nicknamed *The Raindrop* due to the insistent rhythmic figure in the left hand which sounds like the gentle drizzle of rain; certainly there was much rain that winter at Majorca in 1838 when Chopin composed the majority of his preludes. The Prelude No. 16 in Bb minor gives a different impression with its fast-paced fury – one which Hans von Bülow thought was characteristic of Hades.

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." As series director of the successful Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series Nachtmusik von BrainSurge, both of which Jackson will remain active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. Jackson has in fact written program notes for many of Central Louisiana's key music presenters, including the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, Arts Council of Central Louisiana, and Northwestern State University. He also blogs at MusicCentral where he shares concert experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. Jackson has followed classical music around the world, including trips to Colorado's Aspen Music Festival and the BachFest Leipzig in Germany. As a composer, he has worked to integrate a modern vocabulary into established classical forms in ways that are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His four -movement Suite for solo guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 and has also been aired on public radio. In fall 2016, Jackson will begin graduate studies at the University of Louisville with the ultimate goal of earning his doctorate in musicology.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.