

# Ajero Family Piano Recital

Nio Ajero - Olivia Ajero - Mario Ajero

## Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Last year at the inaugural Sugarmill Music Festival, we heard Antonio “Nio” Ajero give a stunning recital of piano classics. Since that time, Nio, amazingly accomplished for an eleven year-old, has been featured on NPR’s *From the Top* among other achievements. This afternoon, we have the opportunity to hear Nio once more, this time joined by his talented younger sister Olivia and their father Mario. Olivia actually begins this afternoon’s program with her renditions of an Aria in G major by Baroque composer Georg Philipp Telemann and “Happy Time Jazz” by Martha Mier. This is only the beginning of a wonderful recital presented by this family of pianists!

The career of African American composer and pianist **Scott Joplin (c.1868-1917)** was full of ups and downs. As a young adult, he made money touring with minstrel shows and playing piano both in dance halls and brothels. His breakthrough came in 1899, however, when he published his *Maple Leaf Rag* which takes its name from a dance hall in Sedalia, Missouri where Joplin was employed as a pianist. An estimated 500,000 copies of the sheet music were sold in the first ten years following its publication. According to the risky and unusual contract, Joplin was entitled to a penny per copy which each year gave him the equivalent of a factory worker’s yearly salary from just the one piano rag. Contrary to popular belief, Joplin did not invent ragtime: hundreds of rags were already in print before Joplin ever made his first publication. Joplin inherited the rag’s march meter and syncopated melodies. It was apparently this tendency for syncopated and, thus, “ragged-sounding” melodies which inspired the term “ragtime.” The ragtime pianist would play these syncopated melodies with his right hand while he maintained a steady rhythm in the bass with his left. In addition to the popular success it won, the *Maple Leaf Rag* also set the standard format for successive rags: rags were now to contain four themes rather than just three with the typical layout of these being AABBAACDD. The real accomplishment of the *Maple Leaf Rag* though was that it established the piano rag as an art form, and its use of blue notes and chromatic melodies would inspire composers on both sides of the Atlantic. Its arrangement for piano four-hands heard this afternoon is by Denes Agay.



**Mozart and his family, c.1780 (left to right):** his sister Maria Anna, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and their father Leopold. A portrait of the composer’s mother Anna Maria who died in 1778 hangs on the wall behind them.

For a composer who died at the young age of thirty-five, **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)** was immensely prolific, writing over six hundred compositions while exploring each genre of music that then existed. As the musicologist Alfred Einstein has written, “No species of music current in his time was left untouched by Mozart, none is without a matchless contribution from his pen.” The Sonata in C major, K. 309 is conventionally listed as his seventh of eighteen piano sonatas, although fragments of other sonatas also survive. Mozart composed this work while visiting the Mannheim court in autumn 1777 in hopes of finding better employment than what had been offered the former child prodigy in his native Salzburg. In Mannheim, Mozart was reunited with his friend Christian Cannabich, a composer and director of the

Mannheim orchestra, to whose daughter, Rosa, Mozart gave piano lessons during his stay. The delightful C-major Sonata was written for Rosa; its second movement, in particular, Mozart suggested in a letter home, reflects her character with its playful changes of mood and dynamics which, nonetheless, never lose their poise. Mozart's father, Leopold, wrote back that there was perhaps too much of Mannheim convention in this Sonata, but he appreciated its more original moments.

The Polish-born composer and pianist **Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)** spent much of his adult life working in and around Paris. 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 from which this afternoon's selections are drawn were written between 1829 and 1832. They were published the following year and dedicated to his friend Franz Liszt whose music we will hear later in this program. 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 studying piano; as Robert Schumann remarked, "Imagination and technique share dominion side by side." As a result, they have become favorites of aspiring pianists as well as audiences. The Étude in E major, Op. 10 No. 3 is a study in smooth, *legato* playing as well as appropriate phrasing. While its slow tempo distinguishes it from many, much faster études, the E-major Étude is no less demanding of its performer. The Étude in C minor, Op. 10 No. 12 is often referred to as the *Revolutionary*, and reportedly this piece was the composer's reaction to the failure of the Polish uprising against Russia. This étude is packed with drama, its opening measures including a powerful block chord followed by a rapid descending run. From a technical standpoint, it is the left hand which bears much of the burden in this epic piece.



**Franz Schubert**

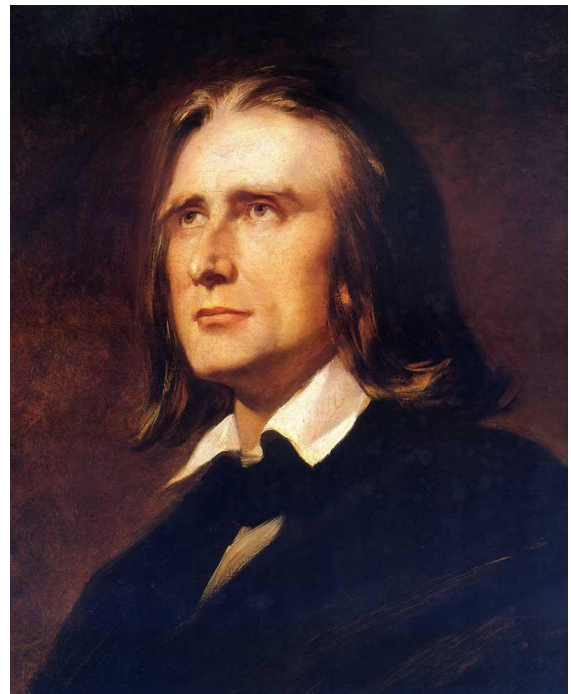
The Austrian composer **Franz Schubert (1797-1828)** was not only an inheritor to the great Viennese Classical tradition of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven but also one of the first Romantics, pioneering many of the expressive, shorter genres that had typically remained an afterthought for his predecessors. Schubert brought new energy to both the *lied* and the character piece for piano, instilling these genres with a melodic brilliance unmatched by any of his contemporaries. Only in his final years, as the young man saw his health declining, did he become a master of the extended genres of the symphony, quartet, and sonata, inspired in this direction by the model of Beethoven. The eight impromptus of Opp. 90 and 142 are among these late works, all composed in 1827. Their title, which seems to imply a spontaneous fantasy of sorts, is misleading: they too are extended compositions, like many of Schubert's late works. In fact, Schubert's publisher Tobias Haslinger gave the earlier set their title "impromptu," appealing to a then popular genre, and only afterwards did Schubert apply this title to the later set. Schumann, in fact, suspected the four impromptus of Opus 142 were originally meant as a piano sonata owing to their cyclic key scheme. The adventurous nature of the

impromptus is confirmed by their choice of relatively uncommon key signatures as well as their daring transitions into remote key areas. The Impromptu in A-flat major, Op. 90 No. 4, is especially adventurous in its development of an initial rhythmic idea and the melody which emerges from it.

The American composer of Polish descent **Robert Muczynski (1929-2010)** spent much of his career in academia, writing many of his compositions in response to commissions and awards. Although he repeatedly shunned the advances of the mid-century avant-garde, he was a highly-respected composer in his day – his Saxophone Concerto, for example, was nominated for a Pulitzer – and his compositions have retained much of that same respect since his death. His 1994 composition *Desperate Measures*, Op. 48 for solo piano appeals to the same Romantic tradition of its neighbors – Chopin, Schubert, and Liszt – with its variations on the music of nineteenth-century violin virtuoso, Niccolò Paganini. Its familiar theme is the twenty-fourth Caprice for solo violin which had previously been quoted by Rachmaninoff in his *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* as well as by Liszt, the so-called "Paganini of the Piano," before that. In Muczynski's *Desperate Measures*, the extreme virtuosity of a Paganini or a Liszt is infused with the biting dissonance of Modernism and the swing of jazz.

The Hungarian composer and pianist **Franz Liszt (1811-1886)** was well-known for his otherworldly virtuosity. Even as a boy, Liszt was receiving the highest acclaim. His Viennese piano teacher, the respected Carl Czerny, refused to accept payment for lessons considering it too much of a privilege to teach the talented child. Beethoven also offered his praise and guidance to

the young pianist. His technique only improved with further studies in Paris, and, by the 1830s when Chopin arrived, Liszt had become a fixture of Parisian society. Liszt's Étude in D-flat major, subtitled *Un sospiro*, is the third in the set *Trois études de concert*, published in 1849. Unlike the études of Chopin which were written for the student, Liszt wrote his many études to demonstrate the prowess of the virtuoso, and Liszt himself, with his innumerable recitals and a fandom to continuously impress, was the chief virtuoso he had in mind. Their ties to the technical nature of the étude tradition are not absent, however: in *Un sospiro*, the grand *arpeggios* which are first played in the left hand become the central attraction for much of the piece. As the piece continues, these *arpeggios* expand and lead to fascinatingly difficult octaves and runs. The tender melody of *Un sospiro* keeps this piece from becoming only a show of extreme virtuosity, as is the case with so much of Liszt's piano music.



Franz Liszt

Our program this afternoon concludes with two pieces by the French composer **Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**, specifically *Minstrels* from his first book of *Préludes* (1909-10) and *Clair de lune* (1890), played in an arrangement for piano six-hands by Greg Anderson. Debussy's importance to music history as the first composer to break with traditional tonality is sometimes overlooked in light of the pure beauty and wonderful imagery of his music. *Minstrels* is one of several pieces written by Debussy inspired by ragtime and the culture of African Americans as interpreted by the popular imagination at the turn of the twentieth century. Debussy is known to have seen a minstrel show in 1905 while on holiday in Eastbourne on the English coast. His *Minstrels*, although less specific in its allusions than say *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, adapts the syncopated rhythms, blue harmonies, and cheery lyricism characteristic of ragtime to the composer's vision for this music. *Clair de lune* (*Moonlight*) 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, especially 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 set of songs titled *Fêtes galantes*.

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**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 remains active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. 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. As a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into pieces which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. In fall 2016, Jackson began graduate studies in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has recently been awarded the Gerhard Herz Scholarship in recognition of his accomplishments. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He also sings with the University of Louisville Chorus and participates in the School of Music Composition Seminar. Learn more about Jackson Harmeyer, his scholarship, and his compositions at [www.JacksonHarmeyer.com](http://www.JacksonHarmeyer.com).