

Ajero Family Piano Recital

Nio Ajero · Olivia Ajero · Mario Ajero

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer



Ludwig van Beethoven

The Ajero family pianists have become a favorite of the Sugarmill Music Festival, now in their third year performing with us. Those of you who were with us last year will remember how Antonio “Nio” Ajero braved a storm to continue playing Chopin’s *Revolutionary Étude* without interruption. Nio was also joined by his sister, Olivia, and father, Mario, for piano six-hands arrangements of Joplin and Debussy. Mario and his accomplished children, Nio and Olivia, will again give another tremendous recital this afternoon, including music by Beethoven, Debussy, Chopin, and others, to open the second day of our Third Annual festival.

Our program begins with the Piano Sonata in D minor, Op. 31 No. 2 by **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**. This sonata is one of three belonging to the Opus 31 set which Beethoven composed in the summer of 1802 while at Heiligenstadt. Beethoven had relocated to this village on the outskirts of Vienna at the recommendation of his doctor to rest and hopefully regain his hearing away from the noisy sounds of city life. Despite the public success his music was finding, the previous few years had grown increasingly difficult for Beethoven as he was realizing, for the first time, how quickly his hearing was deteriorating. He feared that his hearing might not improve and also that he—someone who society assumed that, as a musician, should possess better hearing than most

anyone else—would be exposed as increasingly deaf. It was at Heiligenstadt, as he finally came to terms with his hearing loss, that he produced the famous “Heiligenstadt Testimony.” Here, he confessed, among other things, that “I was not far from ending my own life—only Art, only art held me back. Ah, it seemed impossible to me that I should leave the world before I had produced all that I felt I might.” Addressed to his brothers, this letter was never sent and instead discovered among the composer’s own papers after his death twenty-five years later.

The Sonatas of Opus 31 are a product of this critical moment in Beethoven’s life, and they demonstrate a renewed will to experiment with form and reach deeper into artistic expression. Like the preceding Opus 27 Sonatas which are subtitled *Quasi una fantasia*, they incorporate freer, fantasy elements into the sonata-principle design, deriving their forms largely from the musical materials themselves. All three movements of the D-minor Sonata are linked motivically, with the slow, ascending arpeggio which opens the Sonata proving to be of particular significance. Unlike many sonatas prior, the D-minor also shifts the expressive weight from the first movement into a continuing narrative which has been described as a progression from sublime in the first movement, to sentiment in the second, and synthesis in the third. The subtitle, *The Tempest*, has been associated with the D-minor Sonata for most of its history, but it is not authentic to Beethoven. Although the music is appropriately stormy, a programmatic connection to Shakespeare’s play of that name should be dismissed: as the British musicologist Donald Francis Tovey remarked, “People who want to identify Ariel and Caliban and the castaways, good and villainous, may as well confine their attention to the exploits of Scarlet Pimpernel when the *Eroica* or the C-minor Symphony is being played.”

In the first movement, marked *Largo – Allegro*, long spans without cadential closure give the impression of perpetual transformation. Scholars have debated which materials constitute the first and second themes, but it is noteworthy at least that the introductory arpeggio is the first element addressed in the development. The development, albeit, is quite short, moving into the recapitulation with little hesitation. Beethoven maintains a sense of tonal ambiguity through much of the

recapitulation, only confirming the tonic key with a strong cadence toward its end. The second movement, *Adagio*, begins with an echo of the slow introduction to the first movement. It follows sonata principle much more willingly than its predecessor, although it leaves out a development section, instead favoring a brief retransition to the recapitulation. A triplet motive in the low bass register grounds much of the movement with a treble melody flowing freely above. The third movement, *Allegretto*, features a circular, swirling motive. Our attention is constantly shifting between this swirling motion in the foreground and a slower melody taking place in the background. The Sonata ends almost inconclusively when the swirling motion stops and sound itself seems to fade away.

The importance of **Claude Debussy (1862-1918)** as the first composer to break with traditional tonality is sometimes overlooked in light of the pure beauty and wonderful imagery of his music. For Debussy, the route away from tonality came through the usage of medieval modes, non-traditional scales, extended harmonies, parallel motion, and, more generally, a vocabulary chosen for the way it sounds rather than its conventional harmonic function. Debussy's six-piece suite, *Children's Corner*, was written in 1908 and dedicated to his daughter, Claude-Emma or "Chou-Chou," who was three at the time. The technical demands they make of their pianist show the pieces to be not children's music, but music which touches on the fascinations of childhood. Boredom while practicing "adult music," nurturing a favorite toy or doll, observing snowfall on a cold day, watching with curiosity the actions of unfamiliar persons—these are the subjects on which *Children's Corner* reflects. They are also memories which we, adults, see renewed on the faces of children around us. The English movement titles can be traced to Debussy's Anglophilia as well as the fact that Chou-Chou's governess, Miss Gibbs, was from England. The suite was premiered on December 18, 1908 at the Cercle Musical in Paris by the American pianist Harold Bauer.



Claude Debussy with his daughter

The first piece is called *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*, a reference to the sometimes stale piano method book written by Muzio Clementi a hundred years prior. Its rapid arpeggios suggest Clementi's manual, but there are interludes where the mind of the young student wanders-off and she plays something else completely. The second piece, *Jimbo's Lullaby*, depicts a toy elephant, rocked to sleep by a young child. The tender melody suggests the child's singing, though something rambunctious later in the piece might express an unwillingness on the part of the child to actually go to sleep herself.



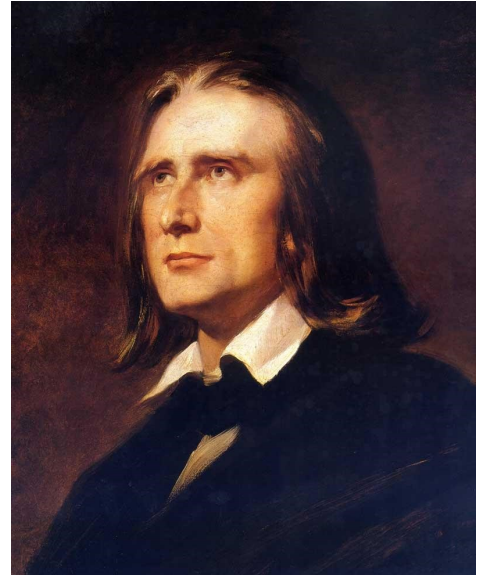
Dmitri Shostakovich

Serenade for the Doll is full of happiness and excitement: dancing motives suggest that the doll might be a ballerina or at least has an active social life. In *The Snow is Dancing*, the persistent sixteenth-note figures suggest the constancy of the snowfall. Through the child's eyes, snowfall is not just a natural occurrence but something quite magical. In *The Little Shepherd*, a solo melody, perhaps played by a shepherd boy on a pipe, is contrasted with a rustic dance; this exchange happens three times. The sixth and final piece, *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, jests with a dance genre of African-American origin. Debussy likely encountered the cakewalk at a minstrel show he saw in 1905 while on holiday to England. Not exclusive in its parody, the piece's slower middle section also contains several brief quotations from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was a highly controversial figure in his lifetime, regarded by many as the Soviet Union's most-talented composer but also regularly criticized for disregarding Party guidelines for music. Declared a war hero with works like the *Leningrad Symphony*, written during the siege of that city, Shostakovich was again condemned almost immediately after the war when his projected victory symphony—the Ninth—turned into more of a dance hall romp. It was, thus, during a period of four years when his music could neither be performed nor new works published that Shostakovich wrote the cycle of *Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 87. These pieces, which were composed between October 1950 and February 1951, find their models in Johann Sebastian Bach's

forty-eight preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and also Frédéric Chopin's *Twenty-Four Preludes*, Op. 28. Like Bach, Shostakovich has written a prelude and fugue pair in each of the major and minor keys, but, like Chopin, his ordering of pieces has followed the circle of fifths progression. This afternoon, we hear the Prelude and Fugue No. 15 in D-flat major. The Prelude, marked *allegretto*, echoes the improvisatory nature of this genre as it introduces several themes which are varied as the movement progresses. Its irony prefigures the near-panic of its Fugue partner, now accelerated to *allegro molto*. Although the Prelude had maintained its tonal rootedness, the four-voice Fugue is less cooperative: its subject already utilizes eleven of the possible twelve pitch classes and additional chromaticism ensues.

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. Liszt's 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 F minor is the tenth in the set of twelve *Transcendental Études*, published in 1852 and dedicated to Czerny. Unlike the études of Chopin which were written for the student, Liszt wrote his many études to demonstrate the prowess of the virtuoso; 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: rapid runs, tight spacings between hands, and, conversely, an insistence on octaves and other wide intervals make this a piece from which much can be learned. The formal construction has elements of fantasy with its several different ideas circling around. A melody, presented in right-hand octaves high in the treble, enters about a minute into the piece with a darker answer soon coming in the left hand through pounded chords.



Franz Liszt



Frédéric Chopin

It was with some reluctance that the Polish-born composer and pianist **Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)** came to resettle in Paris in September 1831. With help from Liszt, Chopin was soon adopted by Parisian high society and began giving intimate recitals at the fashionable *salons* and teaching piano to private students. The Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1 is the first of two selections we hear by Chopin. The composer wrote some twenty-one nocturnes between the years 1827 and 1846; this, the thirteenth piece in the series, was written in 1841 and published that same year. A nocturne is a piece which suggests some poetic vision of the night, but formally the genre is quite free. The Irish pianist-composer John Field created the first nocturnes, making idiomatic use of the piano's sustaining pedal to give his pieces the lyricism of vocal music; Chopin, an admirer of Field, continued this trend. In the present nocturne, a wandering, minor-key melody in the A section is contrasted with a chordal, C-major theme in the B section before a return to C minor closes the piece. The second piece we hear by Chopin is his Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Op. 39. Chopin composed four scherzos for solo piano, defining the genre as an extended virtuoso work in a quick triple meter comparable to his ballades. The C-sharp minor Scherzo dates from 1839.

An arrangement for piano six-hands of *The Stars and Stripes Forever!*, the famous march by American bandmaster **John Philip Sousa (1854-1932)**, closes this afternoon's recital by the Ajero family. This march, a symbol of our country at home and abroad, is the official national march of the United States of America. It is second only to *The Star Spangled Banner* itself among this country's patriotic tunes. Sousa composed this march in 1896 and introduced it with his band in Philadelphia on May 14, 1897. So favorable was its reception that, immediately, a Philadelphia newspaper exclaimed, "It is stirring enough to rouse the American eagle from his crag, and set him to shriek exultantly while he hurls his arrows at the aurora borealis." Sousa composed a total of 135 marches; aside from this, his most popular march, others include *The Washington Post*, *The Liberty Bell March*, and *Semper Fidelis*. His compositions also include fifteen operettas (he had hoped to become the American equivalent of Gilbert and Sullivan), songs, and suites. For twelve years from 1880 to 1892, Sousa led the United States Marine Band and, afterwards,

created a band in his own name which he led for nearly four decades until the year before his death. His band toured ceaselessly, playing hundreds of concerts each year, visiting towns large and small across the United States and also travelling to Europe on several occasions. Sousa himself became a symbol of the young nation, matched in innocence and brash energy.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a graduate student pursuing his master's degree in musicology at the University of Louisville where, in April 2017, he was awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, Louisiana following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." From 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria, and since that time has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He recently shared this research in March 2018 at the American Musicological

Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting in Asheville, North Carolina. Also a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into compositions which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His compositions have been performed at the Sugarmill Music Festival and New Music on the Bayou.

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