



Sunday, October 27, 2024, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Eric Lu, *piano*

PROGRAM

- George Frideric HANDEL (1685–1759) Suite No. 5 in E major, HWV 430 (1720)
Präludium
Allemande
Courante
Air and 5 Variations on
“The Harmonious Blacksmith”
- Franz SCHUBERT (1797–1828) Impromptus, Op. 142, D. 935 (1827)
Allegro moderato (F minor)
Allegretto (A-flat major)
Theme and 5 Variations (B-flat major)
Allegro scherzando (F minor)

INTERMISSION

- Frédéric CHOPIN (1810–1849) Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op. 64, No. 2 (1847)
- Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60
(1845-1846)
- Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35
(1837 [3rd mvt], 1839 [the rest])
Grave – Doppio movimento
Scherzo – Più lento
March funèbre
Finale – Presto

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George Frideric Handel**Suite No. 5 in E major, HWV 430**

Somewhat overshadowed by the popularity of Bach's keyboard suites, Handel's first set of suites for harpsichord, published in 1720—now known as the “Eight Great Harpsichord Suites”—deserves more attention from today's major keyboard artists, whether they play harpsichord or piano. Renowned for his operas and other vocal works, Handel was also celebrated in his day for his virtuosity on both harpsichord and organ.

In 1719, a publishing house in Amsterdam issued several of Handel's suites in a pirated, corrupted edition, for which he received no money. His anger spurred him to publish these eight suites the next year in an edition that corrected and refined the Dutch versions, as well as added new suites of extraordinary quality. Handel's publication was an immense success, selling briskly throughout Northern Europe.

While Bach adhered to the standardized French dances in his suites, Handel chose a more eclectic approach. None of his suites follow the same pattern; they mix standard dances with Handel's choice of fugues, airs, and character pieces. They show him as a sophisticated cosmopolitan, drawing freely on what he had learned in a career spent successively in Germany, Italy, and England.

Owing partly to its final movement's entertaining theme and variations, the fifth Suite in E Major is the most frequently performed. It opens with an elegant, scene-setting prelude full of trills and rippling sixteenth-note scales, which the player is encouraged to embellish further. Next comes an elegant, flowing Allemande dance, of German origins, in four beats; this one is a contrapuntal dialogue of scales and arpeggios shared between the two hands. A livelier three-beat dance from Italy, the following Courante has an irresistible forward momentum, led by the right hand's almost non-stop sixteenth-note patterns.

The often-excerpted finale is a series of variations on a sturdy, very English tune that is known as “The Harmonious Blacksmith.” Though Handel did not give it that name, it was adopted in the early 19th century, along with apocryphal tales about Handel's encounters with blacksmiths. Others have noted a resemblance to the English folk song “Four Days Drunk.” This is a charming, popular-style melody Handel likely composed himself. After presenting this theme, he spins five variations from it, progressively increasing in virtuosity. Variations 1 and 2 are paired, with continuous sixteenth note first in the right hand, then in the left. Variations 3 and 4 are another pair, in which each hand plays sixteenth-note triplets against a steady four beats; to notate these cross rhythms, Handel uses a bizarre 24/16 over 4/4 meter! All this builds to a whirlwind finish of continuous 32nd notes.

Franz Schubert**Impromptu, Op. 142, D. 935**

Schubert's sonatas show him approaching the piano in full formal dress, tackling the most serious of keyboard genres. His eight Impromptus of 1827, however, show him in more relaxed informal attire, allowing his lyric impulse to dictate form and content. Schubert biographer Brian Newbould calls these works “poetic miniatures”; they are early examples of the loosely constructed short Romantic pieces that Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms would later favor. Even the title “impromptu” was a new one; it seems to have been invented by Schubert's Bohemian colleague Jan Voreisek, who used it in 1822 for a set of short piano pieces in a similarly lyrical style.

There are two sets of these Impromptus, each comprising four pieces. This afternoon, we hear the second set, which Schubert wrote in early winter of his penultimate year: the autograph score is dated December 1827. In the months before he died, Schu-

bert tried frantically to raise cash by selling these and other instrumental works to his publisher Haslinger (who only published two of the earlier Op. 90 Impromptus) and then to the larger firm Schott. Unfortunately, Schott's agent wrote the composer a month before he died that they would not publish them because they were too difficult and serious in style for amateur pianists and asked for something "more brilliant and in easier keys." (In fact, the deep-flat keys of F minor and A-flat major used in this set were a little unusual for that period.) Ultimately, the Op. 142 set was not published until 1839, more than a decade after Schubert's death.

The first Impromptu in F minor is quite lengthy and very episodic in character—a sonata rondo form without a development section. Yet Schubert's lyric inspiration flows so strongly that each of the three major thematic sections moves effortlessly and spontaneously into the next. He opens with a theme of bold dramatic gestures; its descending dotted rhythms and lavish ornamentation give it a Baroque flourish. The dotted rhythms become swirling sixteenth notes, and only as these ease to eighth notes do we hear the second theme: a gentle chordal melody. This melody eventually gains an accompaniment of radiant high arpeggios that provide the link to the final thematic section. Here Schubert creates a pensive dialogue of little three-note phrases between the right and left hands—an extended episode that moves from minor to major and gradually intensifies.

In A-flat major, the second Impromptu opens with a charmingly old-fashioned melody over a simple chordal accompaniment. Dotted rhythms provide it with a firm, decisive character. The trio section is its complete opposite: a swirl of arpeggiated triplets hinting at a melodic theme and with a taste for harmonic roaming.

One of Schubert's favorite melodies—one he originally created for his *Rosamunde* in-

cidental music and also used in his *Rosamunde* Quartet—is the beguiling mix of the third Impromptu's theme and variations in B-flat major. Most of the following five variations are bright and showily virtuosic, but the third variation, in B-flat minor, is turbulent and dramatic with extensive double-octaves writing.

The most original as well as technically challenging is the final Impromptu, which has been likened to a *danse macabre* and the Czech *furiant* dance with its lively two-against-three cross rhythms. Marked *Alllegro scherzando*, it is short in length, but packed with sardonic humor. Schubert scholar Brian Newbould describes its frenzied finish perfectly: "Towards the end of the trio [section] there are some scales, twisting down and up and down again, of extraordinary length and wildness. The *Piu presto* coda culminates in the longest scale of all, a straight sweep down through six octaves—an extravagant end to music of great wit and daring."

Frédéric Chopin

Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op. 64, No. 2

Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60

Both Chopin's well-loved Waltz in C-sharp Minor and his dazzling Barcarolle in F-sharp Major are late works, composed between 1845 and 1847. Despite their brilliance, they were products of a terrible time in Chopin's life, when he was tormented both by his worsening tuberculosis and the gradual breakup of his nearly decade-long liaison with George Sand. Composing became more difficult—it was not unusual for him to spend up to three weeks over one page of music. "I cannot explain why, but I am simply unable to produce anything worthwhile," this perfectionist lamented in a letter to his sister Ludwika.

Chopin's difficulties were exacerbated by the deterioration of his relationship with the flamboyant French novelist Georges Sand, his lover since 1837. Their ardor had long

since cooled, but Sand's sympathetic support and her country house at Nohant in the French countryside, had been critical to his physical, emotional, and artistic wellbeing. Now her grown son and daughter began to meddle maliciously with their relationship, and an innocent Chopin found himself hopelessly caught in the middle. In 1847, Sand abruptly wrote him a devastating letter cutting off their relationship forever. She even sent his prized Pleyel piano back to the manufacturer!

Supported through this abandonment by his many well-placed friends, Chopin continued giving private concerts for them in Paris, England, and Scotland. Among their favorite pieces were the three charming waltzes of Op. 64, ranked today as his finest essays in this dance form. Everyone knows the first, the so-called *Minute Waltz*, but nearly as popular is the sweetly melodious second, the *Waltz in C-sharp minor*. It is made up of two contrasting themes for the outer waltz sections and a slower melody for the middle trio section. Little hesitations characterize the first theme while the slightly quicker second is a continuous swirl of eighth notes. Best of all is the nocturne-like trio melody with its soaring leaps and gentle melancholy. All three themes are exquisitely adorned with chromaticism.

One of the masterpieces of Chopin's late career is the *Barcarolle* in F-sharp major; it is also one of his most challenging pieces both to play and interpret. Popular in 19th-century instrumental and vocal music, the *barcarolle* is a rocking, compound-meter piece inspired by the songs of gondoliers as their boats sway on the Venetian canals. An aficionado of *bel canto* opera, Chopin adored the music of Rossini and Bellini, and so his *Barcarolle* is filled with operatic gestures.

Two richly atmospheric lyrical themes, linked seamlessly by transitional passages of remarkable beauty, form the substance of this piece. In F-sharp major (the rare six-sharps key), the first theme, set over a rock-

ing-waves left hand, is clearly inspired by Italian folksong; at first subdued, it eventually becomes more extroverted and passionate, intensified by trills. A transition leads to the trio section in A major, which enters the world of the coloratura soprano with its upward leaps, trills, and soaring melismas. Toward the end comes a magical moment marked *con sfogato*: another vocal term meaning, in Alan Walker's translation, "let loose" or "freed up." At this, the music launches a bravura treatment of the first theme, with denser chording and more elaborate ornamentation. This passionate apotheosis is cooled by a superb coda ending in a decisive double pair of octaves.

Chopin

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35

Though Chopin had written his first piano sonata in his teens, he suppressed this work and refused to perform it. Therefore, the Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor is actually his first mature creation in this formidable four-movement form that had been glorified by Beethoven. It was mostly written in the summer of 1839 at Nohant during the congenial early period of Chopin's relationship with Sand. However, it had been preceded by a dreadful crisis that nearly killed the composer and may explain why its centerpiece is a funeral march. The year before, Sand had made the foolish decision for the two of them to spend several months in a picturesque old monastery on the Spanish island of Mallorca. Life there was acceptable enough until the arrival of winter: then cold, damp weather exacerbated Chopin's tuberculosis. By February 1839, he was gravely ill and had to be evacuated via two harrowing sea voyages back to France. Only a skilled physician in Marseille was able to save him.

When Chopin finally arrived at Nohant in June, the relief of reaching this asylum stimulated a burst of creative activity. By the middle of August, he had composed the Sonata in B-flat minor. It shows him tack-

ling the sonata form with daring and innovation, making it far from a copy of Beethoven's models.

The sonata-form first movement in B-flat minor opens dramatically with a brief introduction of loud chords in wide-stretching octaves. Then the tempo doubles in speed for the main theme, marked *agitato*: a sea of turbulence. The second theme is its opposite—a calm, noble melody in D-flat major, slightly unsettled by its busy left-hand writing. But this subject has an alter-ego component that powers it back to the volume and agitation of the first theme. There is some controversy as to whether this exposition should be repeated before progressing to the development section (as Eric Lu opts for); some pianists do, some do not.

Wild and impassioned, the development section focuses mostly on the agitated main theme. And since it has been used so extensively, Chopin chooses to begin the recapitulation with the calmer, sustained second theme, now in B-flat major. This gradually builds up to a stentorian, thickly chorded, triple-forte finish.

Initially following the vigor of Beethoven's scherzos, the second movement explores another deep-flats key, E-flat minor. With its staccato repeated notes launching relentless, upward-driving phrases, the main scherzo section bristles with fierce energy; in fact, this movement is the most technically challenging for the pianist. Moving to G-flat major, the much slower trio section brings high contrast with Chopin at his lyrical best, floating a luscious, relaxed melody. Interestingly, after the scherzo section returns, the composer follows it with a brief coda bringing back that lyrical melody.

The "Funeral March" slow movement is this sonata's most famous; it has taken on a life of its own as funeral music, first for Chopin himself, then in orchestral transcrip-

tions for world leaders ranging from John F. Kennedy to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Returning to the B-flat minor key of the first movement, it seems to have been at least partially composed two years earlier in 1837. As Alan Walker writes in his magnificent recent biography of Chopin: "From the moment we hear the solemn tread of its opening chords, we become part of a great processional that conveys us to a world of pomp and circumstance, a place where the spirits of the great and glorious are enshrined." As he did in his previous two movements, in the march's trio section the composer moves into the major mode for a melody of simple, luminous beauty that softens grief.

At only a minute and a half in length, the Presto finale is the most radical of the four movements. Garrick Ohlsson, a master of Chopin's piano music, describes it as "extraordinary, because he's written the weirdest movement he's ever written in his whole life, something which truly looks to the 20th century and post-romanticism and atonality." A perpetual motion never pausing for breath, it sets the two hands racing in parallel octaves without a trace of a theme. And we don't learn what key it's in until the very end when B-flat minor is loudly proclaimed. When new, it bewildered Chopin's contemporaries; Schumann said it "seems more like a mockery than any music," while Mendelssohn commented, "I abhor it!" Today it seems like a revelation—an extraordinary conclusion to one of Chopin's greatest works.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2024

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.



Eric Lu (*piano*) won First Prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition in 2018 at the age of 20. The following year, he signed an exclusive contract with Warner Classics; since then, he has collaborated with some of the world's most prestigious orchestras and been presented in major recital venues.

Recent and forthcoming orchestral collaborations include the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Orchestre National de Lille, Finnish Radio Symphony, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Helsinki Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Tokyo Symphony, and Shanghai Symphony at the BBC Proms, among others. Conductors he collaborates with include Riccardo Muti, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Ryan Bancroft, Marin Alsop, Duncan Ward, Vasily Petrenko, Edward Gardner, Sir Mark Elder, Thomas Dausgaard, Ruth Reinhardt, Earl Lee, Kerem Hasan, Nuno Coehlo, Dinis Sousa, and Martin Fröst.

Active as a recitalist, Lu is regularly presented on stages including the Köln Philharmonie, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Queen Elizabeth Hall London, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Leipzig Gewandhaus, San Fran-

cisco Davies Hall, BOZAR Brussels, Fondation Louis Vuitton Paris, 92nd St Y, Aspen Music Festival, Seoul Arts Centre, Warsaw Philharmonic Hall, and Sala São Paulo. In 2025, he will appear for the seventh consecutive year in recital at Wigmore Hall London. Lu has also been invited for the seventh time to Warsaw's Chopin and his Europe Festival and will debut at the La Roque-d'Anthéron Festival.

Lu's third album on Warner Classics was released in December 2022, featuring Schubert sonatas D. 959 and 784. It was met with worldwide critical acclaim, receiving *BBC Music Magazine's* Instrumental Choice: "Lu's place among today's Schubertians is confirmed." His previous album of Chopin's 24 Preludes and Schumann's *Geistervariationen* was hailed as "truly magical" by *International Piano*.

Born in Massachusetts in 1997, Lu first came to international attention as a laureate of the 2015 Chopin International Competition in Warsaw when he was just 17. He was also awarded the International German Piano Award in 2017, and an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2021. Lu was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2019–2022. He is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, studying with Robert McDonald and Jonathan Biss. Lu was also a pupil of Dang Thai Son.