

Tuesday, April 1, 2025, 7:30pm
Zellerbach Hall

Leif Ove Andsnes, *piano*

PROGRAM

- Edvard GRIEG (1843–1907) Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 7 (1865)
Allegro moderato
Andante molto
Alla Menuetto, ma poco più lento
Finale. Molto allegro
- Geirr TVEITT (1908–1981) Piano Sonata No. 29, Op. 129, *Sonata Etere*
In Cerca Di – Moderato
Tono Etereo in Variazioni – Tranquillo ma deciso
Tempo di Pulsazione

INTERMISSION

- Frédéric CHOPIN (1810–1849) 24 Préludes, Op. 28
Agitato (C major)
Lento (A minor)
Vivace (G major)
Largo (E minor)
Molto allegro (D major)
Lento assai (B minor)
Andantino (A major)
Molto agitato (F-sharp minor)
Largo (E major)
Molto allegro (C-sharp minor)
Vivace (B major)
Presto (G-sharp minor)
Lento (F-sharp major)
Allegro (E-flat minor)
Sostenuto (D-flat major), 'Raindrop'
Presto con fuoco (B-flat minor)
Allegretto (A-flat major)
Molto allegro (F minor)
Vivace (E-flat major)
Largo (C minor)
Cantabile (B-flat major)
Molto agitato (G minor)
Moderato (F major)
Allegro appassionato (D minor)

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Edvard Grieg**Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 7**

When the 22-year-old Edvard Grieg wrote his only piano sonata in 1865 in Rungsted, Denmark, he was just discovering the distinctive Nordic voice that would bring him fame. From the age of 15, he had been steeped in German music and its rigorous technical rules at the Conservatory of Leipzig. But, though Grieg did well at his lessons, he chafed at the rules-based drills imposed by teachers whom he found to be mostly dry and uninspiring.

In 1863, searching for better training, Grieg moved on to Copenhagen to study with Niels Gade, the famous Danish violinist, composer, and close friend of Mendelssohn. But here, too, he discovered Gade—also wedded to German theories—less sympathetic to the new voice he was trying to release. Instead, he found his inspiration from a young Norwegian musician named Rikard Nordraak, who was striving to create a school of Nordic romanticism, drawing on the folk traditions of Norway's music. Today he is best known as the composer of the Norwegian national anthem. He was charismatic and a dreamer, like Grieg himself, and the two became close friends and partners. Nordraak sparked a burst of unfettered creativity in Grieg, including the Piano Sonata in E minor we will hear tonight. As Grieg later wrote, "Through him, and through him alone, light came to me."

The summer of 1865 when the sonata was written was one of Grieg's happiest times. In Copenhagen, he had also met Nina Hagerup, a talented musician with a beautiful soprano voice. They fell in love and that summer became formally betrothed. Thus, Grieg's personal happiness was fueling his work on this sonata. The sonata-form first movement demonstrates his newfound confidence by imbedding his initials EHG (in German notation, H stands for B natural) in the descending first notes of the principal theme. Stated softly at the beginning,

they are soon reprised in forceful octaves. Rachel Hocking identifies the lighter, more rhythmic second theme as resembling a Norwegian *halling* dance. The development section is full of imaginative contrasts in the working out of the two themes.

In C major, the melodious second movement might be a portrait of Nina, Grieg's wife-to-be. It begins modestly, but grows in fervor and excitement. Before its quiet close, Grieg celebrates with a burst of ecstatic descending chromatic scales.

The third movement is a minuet in rhythm only, as if Grieg felt obliged to adopt this Teutonic staple. More energetic than most minuets, it is dominated by a short-long rhythm with the stress on the second beat. This carries over into the gentler trio section, which moves to E major and a new meter. It is, however, enlivened by Grieg's love for harmonies of the seventh, ninth, and beyond.

Opened by a brief introduction, the finale is a spirited sonata form with a highly rhythmic dancing theme brightened by staccato accents. Grieg contrasts it with a smooth hymn-like second theme with modal coloring. A development section that grows in intensity and virtuosity is devoted mostly to the dancing principal theme. The hymnal second theme must wait until the recapitulation, where it leads a decisive modulation from E minor to E major. It grows to a densely chorded proclamation, marked *sempre grandioso*, and, gathering up the principal theme and increasing the tempo to Presto, achieves Grieg's first triumphant conclusion.

Geirr Tveitt**Piano Sonata No. 29, Op. 129, Sonata Etere**

Since his death in 1981, when he apparently believed his career had been a failure, Norwegian composer and pianist Geirr Tveitt's reputation in his homeland has undergone a major transformation. Once spurned by Norway's musical establishment, today his

music is embraced by important artists, including Leif Ove Andsnes. “He was a kind of Norwegian Bartók,” says Andsnes. “He was very much into folk music, and he collected lots of folk music from the western part of Norway—[the musically rich Hardangerfjord region]—where he was from.... The pieces that are most often played in Norway are his folk tunes that are very colorfully orchestrated or written for the piano.”

Andsnes, however, won't be playing Tveitt's folk arrangements; he'll be tackling perhaps the composer's grandest and most important work: the Piano Sonata No. 29, *Sonata Etera*. It was the only piano sonata to survive a terrible fire at Tveitt's home in 1970, which destroyed about 80% of his prolific compositions. “It's very funny that it's called Piano Sonata No. 29,” says Andsnes. “I think it's a reference to Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 29, the *Hammerklavier*.... So I believe this was him playing with numbers and signifying that this is his big piece.... I'm very excited about it. It's a unique piece, and I hope that people outside of Scandinavia will also appreciate it.”

Born in 1908, Tveitt, like Grieg, had his first formal instruction at the Leipzig Conservatory and, also like Grieg, didn't enjoy his time there. He went on to receive the broadest training of any Norwegian musician: studying in Paris with Honneger, Villa-Lobos, and later Nadia Boulanger. He then moved on to Vienna, for lessons with Egon Wellesz, a pupil of Schoenberg. However, Tveitt didn't neglect his own native music and returned to Norway to steep himself in her folk traditions.

Despite his eclectic studies, Tveitt was Norwegian to the core. Following the ideas of Norwegian philosopher Hans S. Jacobsen, he embraced the Neo-Heathenistic movement, which replaced Christianity with the old Norse gods and mythologies. When Jacobsen became a member of the pro-German Quisling government during

World War II, Tveitt—though not at all politically involved—was tainted by association. This, combined with the unorthodox style of some of his works, like the *Sonata Etere*, led the Norwegian establishment to shun him.

After the war, Tveitt resumed his virtuoso piano career. At a warmly received concert in Paris in 1947, he introduced the *Sonata Etere* to a Parisian audience more willing to applaud his experimental keyboard techniques. Its title “Etera” means “ethereal.” Writes Norwegian commentator Hallgerd Aksnes: “It is technically demanding and majestic in scale...covering a wide range of expressions and pianistic styles—from impressionistic, sonorous contemplation; to barbaristic tempestuousness; to neo-classical, tonally skewed elegance, to romantic virtuosity and pathos.”

In “In Cerca Di...” (“In search of...”), the first of the sonata's three movements, we meet the two themes that run throughout this work. The first appears immediately: a repetitive idea that keeps to a narrow range and never changes from steady quarter notes. Soon it is joined by the second theme in the bass, which leaps around within a wide range, is rhythmically and harmonically freer, and both complements and conflicts with Theme No. 1. In keeping with Norwegian folk music, Tveitt uses modes rather than traditional keys. The movement follows an unorthodox sonata form, in which the themes stay essentially the same, but are varied by rhythmic patterns, harmonic shifts, and textures. The overall sonic impression is very percussive. Frequent sustained notes in the bass imitate the drones used in Norwegian music.

The second movement, “Tono Etereo in Variazioni” (“Ethereal Tones in Variations”), is devoted mostly to the second theme. In its arresting opening, the pianist uses his left forearm to produce large tone clusters, which remain depressed throughout the entire Theme No. 2 entrance. This haunting

sound—Katy Hamilton calls it “a halo of ghostly echoing harmonies”—creates sympathetic string resonances with the theme, etched out in staccato, as well as a drone effect. Eighteen fascinating variations follow, each different in tempo, mood, color, and figurations. Later, Theme No. 1 makes a surprise return, delicately played high in the right hand. The movement closes with the return of the shimmering tone clusters and the pointillistic etching of Theme No. 2.

The wild, percussive dance of “Tempo di Pulsazione” provides an electrifying finale. Theme No. 1 returns to dominate this relentless, motoric music. In the score, Tveitt keeps reminding the pianist to keep this driving pulse absolutely steady, without slowing or speeding up, although a more relaxed phase intervenes briefly in the middle. The density and volume of this music progressively increase until reaching *fff possibile* (“as loud as possible”). Then the ghostly tone clusters of the second movement return for an otherworldly close.

Frédéric Chopin 24 Préludes, Op. 28

Frédéric Chopin was one of many great composers who worshipped at the shrine of Johann Sebastian Bach. Studying Bach's scores since childhood, he drew many of his skills in contrapuntal writing from what he learned there. Of all Bach's works, the one he prized most was the *Well-Tempered Clavier*: two sets of 24 preludes and fugues each in all the major and minor keys. Sometime in the early 1830s, he began his own response: the 24 Préludes, which also move through all the keys of classical harmony. However, while Bach's preludes are organized by major keys followed by their *tonic* minors, then rising progressively by half steps (i.e. C major, C minor, C# major, etc.), Chopin's alternate the major key with its *relative* minor, then rise by the harmonic circle of fifths (i.e. C major, A minor, G major, E minor, etc.).

There is yet another major difference between Bach's and Chopin's works. Bach's preludes are followed by fugues and thus employ the prelude's traditional meaning: a short piece introducing a longer piece. Chopin's 24 Préludes do not introduce anything: they are complete, freestanding pieces, though of short duration. The longest are about five minutes in length, the shortest about half a minute. Yet these 24 pieces taken as a whole cover an extraordinary range of moods from serene to tragic, as well as a compendium of keyboard techniques. The true greatness of this work can only be fully appreciated when they are played together.

Chopin's work on this project began at a relaxed tempo, but finished under dire conditions during the greatest physical and emotional crisis of his life. Having recently begun his long affair with the writer George Sand, in 1838 he and Sand decided to spend the fall and winter on the island of Majorca in an attempt to find a healthier climate for the frail composer. Planning to work there, Chopin packed his scores-in-progress as well as a copy of the *Well-Tempered*. He also purchased a new Pleyel piano and had it shipped to the island.

Then things started to fall apart. First the piano got stuck in customs, and Chopin had to make do with what he called a “wretched replacement.” Next, a diagnosis of tuberculosis forced the couple to be quarantined in a remote Carthusian monastery at Valldemosa in the mountains of northern Majorca. Then the weather changed from mild and sunny to cold and rainy. Although Chopin managed to recover his piano and began revising and completing the Préludes, the weather got worse. And in the damp chill of the monastery, Chopin health worsened. Finally, half-dead, he had to be evacuated back to France, but not before he succeeded in finishing the *Préludes* and sending them off for publication.



Living through all this turmoil and suffering, Chopin experienced extreme emotional ups and downs. Some days when he and the weather were better, he was happy and wrote of “everything breathing poetry” in Majorca. But often, as the Polish musician and podcaster Wojciech Oleksiak writes: “His letters would emanate the fear of death and consciousness of his own dashed hopes....These constant fluctuations of emotion are reflected in the preludes and are probably the main factor of them being so varied and sometimes so grave and harmonically uneasy.”

A Closer Listen

“The main feature of the cycle is that it is based on contrasts,” continues Oleksiak. “The preludes are varied in terms of expression (from ecstasy to despair), dynamics (from very quiet to clamorous), tempos (from slow to extremely fast), rhythm (from monotonic to ragged or loose), and color (from warm to rough).”

Chopin scholars have divided the preludes into seven categories, several of which correspond to individual pieces elsewhere in his oeuvre. The first category is “Idyllic,” referring to pieces in the major mode that flow without tension, use a quiet dynamic, and stick to a single theme. The first prelude, in C major, is a fine example. Deploying an ardent, optimistic theme, it ripples and rolls with triplet figurations and lasts just half a minute.

The next category is “Elegiac”: preludes that are in minor keys, have slow tempos, and are highly dramatic, with death looming in the air. With his worsening tuberculosis, Chopin was often obsessed by mortal fears. Preludes Nos. 2 and 4 belong to this group and were written during those grim days in Majorca. In No. 2, in A minor, a darkly tolling, dissonant accompaniment, in which the medieval chant “Dies irae” is embedded, continues throughout; over it, the right hand plays a weary, low-range

melody in single notes. Chopin biographer Alan Walker calls it “one of [the composer’s] most desolate creations.” No. 4, in E minor, is one of the most popular preludes; it has even been quoted in popular music. Its beautiful, yearning melody eventually grows so intense that the tempo speeds up, before sinking back in resignation. Chopin requested this piece be played at his funeral.

“Scherzoidal”: No, it’s not some horrible disease, but a term for pieces in scherzo style, which use fast tempos, triple meter, and are humorous or agitated in mood. A good example is the wild Prelude No. 8 in F-sharp minor, which breaks the set’s early pattern of a quick major-mode piece followed by a slow one in minor. Marked *Molto agitato*, this is one of the most technically difficult to play, with its extreme speed and the juxtaposition of polyrhythms between the hands. Walker quotes Sand’s likening this prelude to “the eagles and vultures circling on the thermal currents around Valdemosa’s mountaintops, the better to swoop on their prey.”

The “Nocturnal” category references the nocturnes that Chopin famously specialized in. Here the best example is No. 15, in D-flat major, often called the *Raindrop* Prelude. This longest and most renowned has an incessant patter of A-flats throughout, which Sand likened to the raindrops pounding down on the monastery roof. (Chopin denied this.) Over them rises a serene and lovely melody in the right hand. Modulating to C-sharp minor, the middle section grows dark, even tragic as dissonant chords battle against the unchanged pattering.

Prelude No. 16, in B-flat minor, is an example of the “Ballad” category. Writes Oleksiak: “The Ballad preludes are very dynamic, explosive, and ‘out of breath’... They are said to represent Chopin’s mortal struggles with his illness.” Marked *Presto con fuoco* and launched by six frenzied chords, this is a vir-

tuoso whirlwind with relentless sixteenth notes twisted by chromaticism. For the pianist, this may well be the most demanding of all the preludes.

The apotheosis of the “Cantabile” or “Singing” preludes is No. 17, in the warm key of A-flat major. It features a soaring, exultant melody reminiscent of the *bel canto* arias of Vincenzo Bellini, one of Chopin’s favorite composers. Both Robert and Clara Schumann proclaimed this their choice of the set.

Rachmaninoff’s favorite prelude was No. 20, in C minor, which he used for his Op. 22 *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*. This is an example of the “Hymnic” category: slow-tempo pieces with the solemn chordal style of a hymn. Played predominantly in low register, this piece requires much hand crossing.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

The *New York Times* calls **Leif Ove Andsnes** “a pianist of magisterial elegance, power, and insight,” and the *Wall Street Journal* names him “one of the most gifted musicians of his generation.” With his commanding technique and searching interpretations, the celebrated Norwegian pianist has won acclaim worldwide, playing concertos and recitals in the world’s leading concert halls and with its foremost orchestras, while building an esteemed and extensive discography. An avid chamber musician, he is the founding director of the Rosendal Chamber Music Festival, was co-artistic director of the Risør Festival of Chamber Music for nearly two decades, and served as music director of California’s Ojai Music Festival in 2012. He was inducted into the *Gramophone* Hall of Fame in July 2013, and has received honorary doctorates from Norway’s Universities of Bergen and Oslo and New York’s Juilliard School.

Two concertos figure prominently in Andsnes’ 2024-25 season. After recent performances of Beethoven’s *Emperor* Con-

And finally, we come to the last prelude, No. 24, in D minor. Marked *Allegro appassionato*, this is the grand summation of the 24 *Préludes*. The key of D minor during that period was often associated with Death. Over the turbulence in the left hand, the right hand hurls out a heroically striving theme that gathers virtuoso embellishments along its way. No matter what he faces, Chopin’s spirit cannot be broken, even as the piano tumbles down to three fortissimo low D’s to complete his journey.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2025

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.

certo with ensembles including the New York Philharmonic and London Symphony Orchestra, he reprises the work with Washington’s National Symphony Orchestra, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Rome’s Orchestra dell’Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and on tour with the Oslo Philharmonic. Similarly, after recent accounts of Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 3 with ensembles including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony, and Orchestre de Paris, Andsnes performs it at Baden-Baden’s Easter Festival with the Berlin Philharmonic, on a North European tour with Italy’s Mahler Academy Orchestra, and with the Rotterdam Philharmonic, Stuttgart Radio Symphony, and London Philharmonic. To complete the concert season, he joins the Czech Philharmonic for Grieg’s Concerto, the Barcelona Symphony for a pairing of Haydn and Franck, and the NDR Elbphilharmonie for Debussy’s *Fantaisie* at the Hamburg International Festival. With this evening’s solo program combining Chopin’s 24 *Preludes* with sonatas by Norwegians

Grieg and Geirr Tveitt, he embarks on an extensive transatlantic recital tour, featuring dates at New York's Carnegie Hall and London's Wigmore Hall. The latter forms part of a season-long residency at the British venue, to which he returns for chamber collaborations with fellow pianist Bertrand Chamayou and with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra (MCO), as the culmination of that group's European tour.

As the MCO's first Artistic Partner, Andsnes has already led the ensemble from the keyboard in two major, multi-season projects. In "Mozart Momentum 1785/86," they explored one of the most creative and seminal periods of the composer's career with live accounts of Mozart's Piano Concertos Nos. 20–24 at London's BBC Proms and other key European venues, as well as recorded ones for Sony Classical. The project's first album, *MM/1785*, was nominated for a 2022 International Classical Music Award, and recognized with France's prestigious Diapason d'or de l'année for Best Concerto Album of 2021. The second album, *MM/1786*, was named one of the "Best Classical Albums of 2022" by *Gramophone*, while the two-volume series won the magazine's 2022 "Special Achievement" Award. This followed the success of "The Beethoven Journey." An epic four-season focus on the composer's music for piano and orchestra, this project took the pianist to 108 cities in 27 countries for more than 230 live performances. He led the MCO in complete Beethoven concerto cycles in Bonn, Hamburg, Lucerne, Vienna, Paris, New York, Shanghai, Tokyo, Bodø, and London, besides collaborating with such leading international ensembles as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, London Philharmonic, and Munich Philharmonic.

Andsnes' discography comprises more than 50 titles spanning repertoire from the Baroque to the present day. He has been nominated for 11 Grammy Awards and his many international prizes include seven

Gramophone Awards. His EMI Classics recordings of the music of his compatriot Edvard Grieg have been especially celebrated and his recording of Mozart's Piano Concertos Nos. 9 and 18 was a *New York Times* "Best of the Year" selection. Andsnes won yet another *Gramophone* Award for Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 with Antonio Pappano and the Berlin Philharmonic. *Leif Ove Andsnes: The Complete Warner Classics Edition 1990-2010*, a 36-CD retrospective of his EMI and Virgin recordings, was released to acclaim in 2023. .

Andsnes has received Norway's distinguished honor, Commander of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav, and in 2007, he received the prestigious Peer Gynt Prize, awarded by parliament to honor prominent Norwegians for their achievements in politics, sports, and culture. In 2004–05, he became the youngest musician (and first Scandinavian) to curate Carnegie Hall's "Perspectives" series, and in 2015–16, he was the subject of the London Symphony Orchestra's Artist Portrait Series. Having been 2010–11 Pianist in Residence of the Berlin Philharmonic, Andsnes went on to serve as 2017–18 Artist in Residence of the New York Philharmonic and 2019–20 Artist in Residence of Sweden's Gothenburg Symphony.

Leif Ove Andsnes was born in Karmøy, Norway in 1970, and studied at the Bergen Music Conservatory under the renowned Czech professor Jiri Hlinka. He has also received invaluable advice from the Belgian piano teacher Jacques de Tiège, who, like Hlinka, greatly influenced his style and philosophy of playing. Today Andsnes lives with his wife and their three children in Bergen. He is Artistic Adviser at the city's Prof. Jiri Hlinka Piano Academy, where he gives a master class to participating students each year.

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