Giorgia Bertazzi

Thursday, October 30, 2025, 7:30pm
Zellerbach Hall

Nobuyuki Tsujii, *piano*

PROGRAM

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
arranged by Franz LISZT (1811–1886)
An die ferne Geliebte, Op. 98 (1816)

BEETHOVEN
Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, *Appassionata* (1804–06)
- Allegro assai
- Andante con moto
- Allegro ma non troppo – Presto

INTERMISSION

Piotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)
arranged by Mikhail PLETNEV (b. 1957)
The Nutcracker Suite, Op. 71a (1892)
- March: Tempo di marcia viva
- Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy: Andante ma non troppo
- Tempo di Tarantella
- Intermezzo: Andante
- Trepak – Russian Dance: Molto vivace
- Tea – Chinese Dance: Allegro moderato
- Andante maestoso

Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)
Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat major, Op. 83 (1942)
- Allegro inquieto
- Andante caloroso
- Precipitato

Nobuyuki Tsujii's international tours are supported by All Nippon Airways (ANA) and he gratefully acknowledges this assistance.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
***An die ferne Geliebte*, Op. 98**
arranged by Franz Liszt

As a song writer, Beethoven sits in the shadow of Schumann, Schubert, and the other great Romantic masters of the *Lied* — and also of his own reputation as a titan of instrumental music. As he said, "Whenever I hear music in my inner ear, it is always the full orchestra that I hear. When writing vocal music, I invariably have to ask myself: Can it be sung?" But his attachment to the poetry of his era, especially that of Goethe and Schiller, was deep, and his contributions to the genre significant. As he did in every musical form he tackled, he pushed song-writing beyond the limits of what his contemporaries were doing and in his vocal masterpiece, *An die ferne Geliebte* ("To the Distant Beloved"), created the first fully integrated song cycle.

Composed in April 1816, this is a work of Beethoven's full maturity. The poetry for its six songs was written, perhaps at the composer's request, by Alois Jeitteles, a young medical student and poet involved in Vienna's theatrical scene. It's quite possible Beethoven intended it as an expression of his undying love for his "Immortal Beloved," believed to be the married Antonie Brentano from whom he had separated himself several years earlier to avoid temptation.

This cycle revolves around the theme of love experienced through the beauties of nature. The poet wishes to re-establish communication with the beloved through the medium of the natural world that separates them. The six songs are tightly linked together by brief harmonic and tempo transitions in the piano. In a full-circle conclusion, the final song creates a satisfying apotheosis by returning to the lovely melody of the first song, developing it expressively, and then building it into a faster, more ardent coda.

We tend to rank Franz Liszt as one of the most radical of the 19th-century composers: an innovator who loved to experiment and was a staunch admirer of Wagner's music dramas. However, Liszt was a more multifaceted musician than this, and in fact, his most revered composer was Beethoven. Throughout his life—from the moment in 1823 that the 11-year-old prodigy met and played for this giant of composers and, he remembers, was given a kiss on the forehead for his extraordinary talent—he devoted himself to playing and conducting his idol's music.

Liszt was a master of transcribing music by dozens of composers: operas, symphonies, chamber ensemble pieces, and songs; his catalogue shows some 368 works of this type. Liszt sought to convey the total emotional experience of the work. He approaches Beethoven's original with respect and delicacy. Since there is no need to allow time for the singer's word declamation and breathing, Liszt's solo piano treatment is a little quicker and more rhythmically emphatic. And he skillfully embroiders the lovely figures in Beethoven's accompaniment without smothering their freshness.

BEETHOVEN
Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor,
Op. 57, *Appassionata*

With the completion of his *Eroica* Symphony in 1804, Beethoven entered a new phase of creativity: his heroic period. From then on, his music did not resemble anyone else's; it was radically his own—big in scope, harmonically emancipated, and achieving an emotional intensity greater than that of his predecessors. And this new voice carried over into his more intimate works, especially the two mighty piano sonatas he began writing that same year: the life-affirming *Waldstein* Sonata, Op. 53 and its dark opposite, the *Appassionata* Sonata, Op. 57. Today, the *Appassionata* reigns as one of his most popular sonatas, and it was also one of his personal favorites, until it was bumped by the formidable *Hammerklavier* of 1819. And as we'll learn later, the *Appassionata* and its taut

construction served as inspiration for Sergei Prokofiev's Seventh Piano Sonata of 1942, which closes this program.

This F-minor sonata's title "appassionata" ("impassioned") was yet another work title Beethoven had not chosen himself; it was added posthumously in 1838 by the Hamburg publisher Cranz, bringing out a version for piano duet. Nevertheless, it's an appropriately sales-worthy title for a piece that should more accurately be called "Tragic." "The *Appassionata* is a story of voids, abysses, dashed hopes," writes Jan Swafford in his superb biography *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. "In those years in the middle of his superhuman productivity, holding at bay the gnawing miseries of his health and deafness and his frustrated love for Josephine Deym, incipient despair was Beethoven's most intimate companion. … Now as with all artists, his own suffering became grist for the mill."

In F minor, the first movement seizes our attention immediately, even though it begins quietly. An arpeggio on the tonic swoops downward in two-octave unison, then marches upward and is completed by a little spiraling turn figure. The whole movement will be built from this simple theme. As Michael Steinberg comments: "All the elements of the *Appassionata*'s fiercely forward-thrusting first movement, the thunderous and the lyrical, are powerfully integrated." An ominous drumming motive in the left hand signals the eruption of this theme into anger and violence. Beethoven even uses elements of it to create a noble second theme in A-flat major that briefly offers hope. But this fades away into more turbulence.

The rich and complex development section also begins quietly before exploring both principal themes in a conflict of hope and despair. Finally, the left hand's drumming motive—growing into a hammering ostinato—heralds the recapitulation. And when the noble second theme returns, it is firm and militant in character and in a positive F major, but again cannot calm the fury. An elaborate coda also begins gently before accelerating in speed, fury, and virtuosity. Swafford: "The end is a stride up to the top of the keyboard, then back down to the abyss, and a whispering exhaustion."

In the first movement's many harmonic excursions, the key of D-flat major has been very prominent, and it now becomes the key of the *Andante con moto* second movement, a theme with four variations. Swafford calls D-flat "Beethoven's key of noble resignation." The theme in two halves, both repeated, is hymn-like, solidly chordal, and clings stubbornly to its key. Steinberg: "The variations themselves, cannily designed to provide repose between the agitations of the first and third movements, simply elaborate the surface with figurations of increasing speed." The theme returns, now more exalted, but Beethoven doesn't allow it to finish. A dissonant chord intervenes, followed by a louder dissonance, summoning the finale, the most tragic of the movements.

From swirling scales, a turbulent theme of rushing figures emerges, punctuated by harsh dotted-rhythm interjections. The exposition is broken off impatiently by another dissonant explosion bringing in the development section, followed by the recapitulation. In a surprise move, Beethoven then requires both sections to be repeated, beginning with a reprise of the dissonant explosion.

Of the closing coda, Swafford writes: "Beethoven had an incomparable skill for raising a movement to what seems an unsurpassable peak of excitement or tension, then to surpass it. … In the coda, a weird, stamping dance breaks out, like a maddened attempt at defiance but the whirlwind rises again, more furious than ever, as if it were beating the piano to pieces. With that, the last hope is snuffed out. There ends one of the supreme tragic works in the piano literature: the dark side of the heroic."

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
***The Nutcracker* Suite, Op. 71a**
arranged by Mikhail Pletnev

Tchaikovsky's enchanting *The Nutcracker* Suite offers a bright interlude in this program dominated by two heavyweight sonatas. Nobuyuki Tsujii will play it in a piano transcription created by Russian virtuoso pianist and composer Mikhail Pletnev; Pletnev was the winner of both the Piano Prize and the overall Gold Medal at the 1978 International Tchaikovsky Competition.

The world's most beloved ballet began life as a semi-fiasco at Saint Petersburg's Maryinsky Theatre on December 18, 1892. While we smile with pleasure as the curtain rises on children playing around the giant Christmas tree at Clara's party, sophisticated Russian audiences felt untrained children were a poor substitute for their elegant *corps de ballet*. The first Sugarplum Fairy was a pudgy Italian ballerina, Antoninette dell'Era, incapable of matching the delicacy of the celesta in her famous dance. The critics were unkind: they found Tchaikovsky's music to be "far from his usual high level" and the choreography (by Lev Ivanov replacing an ailing Marius Petipa) to show "no creativity whatsoever."

Fortunately, Tchaikovsky had some inkling before his death in 1893 of how popular this beautiful music was to become. After completing the score in 1891, he extracted his famous concert suite and introduced it at a concert in Saint Petersburg in March 1892.

Pletnev's piano arrangement includes a slightly different selection from Tchaikovsky's orchestral suite. From Act I, we hear the jaunty "March of the Toy Soldiers." The exquisite "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy" features the bell-like tones of the celesta; Tchaikovsky had discovered this new instrument in Paris while he was writing the score and shipped one back immediately to his home. Act II takes place in the Kingdom of Sweets, where the Nutcracker Prince has transported Clara in the sleigh-ride "Intermezzo" ("Journey through the Snow"), the lovely, dreamlike scene that bridges the ballet's two acts. Here we have a series of character dances from different nations, including a bold Russian trepak, a lively Italian tarantella, and "Tea," a humorous Chinese dance. For his final movement, Pletnev includes music not found in Tchaikovsky's original suite: the opening of the grandly romantic "Pas de Deux" for the Prince and the Sugarplum Fairy. Its magnificent descending theme, sung by cellos in the original and accompanied by harp, is one of Tchaikovsky's finest melodic inspirations. Though this is not *The Nutcracker*'s actual closing music, it makes a splendid conclusion for this virtuoso piano suite.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV
Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat major, Op. 83

In 1936, Sergei Prokofiev returned to the USSR after spending nearly two decades in the West. Seductive offers from the Soviets promised a more glorious career for him in his homeland. But by 1939, his rosy hopes were being extinguished as he found he could no longer perform outside the USSR. and that his works would have to follow rules dictated by the Soviet bureaucracy. The precariousness of his situation was brought home in June when his friend the famed stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold—with whom he was about to mount the premiere of his latest opera *Semyon Kotko*—was suddenly seized by the KGB and subsequently shot.

More personal pressures also overwhelmed Prokofiev. That same year, his marriage to his Spanish-born first wife, Lena, collapsed as he fell in love with Mira Mendelson, a young Russian poetess half his age. His passion for Mira, nevertheless, stimulated his composing, for that summer he returned to a genre that had already inspired five major works—the piano sonata. He began composing three of them simultaneously: the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth,

which became known as the *War Sonatas*. Inspiring them was his recent reading of Romain Rolland's *Vie de Beethoven* and Rolland's commentary on Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata. Prokofiev especially noted these words: "No other of [Beethoven's] sonatas shows to the same degree the union of unrestrained passion and rigid logic." In the *War Sonatas*, he determined to combine passion with formal rigor as Beethoven had done.

In 1942, the composer and Mira were evacuated, along with other artists, to Tblisi, the capital of Soviet Georgia. There he completed the Seventh Piano Sonata, which was premiered by the great Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter in Moscow on January 18, 1943. Today, many scholars consider it to be the greatest of all his sonatas. Richter described it powerfully: "With this work, we are brutally plunged into the anxiously threatening atmosphere of a world that has lost its balance. Chaos and uncertainty reign. We see murderous forces ahead. But this does not mean that what we lived by before thereby ceases to exist. We continue to feel and love."

The complex first movement opens with a staccato, wayward theme that seems to embody Richter's description of "chaos and uncertainty." Actually, this is a collection of short melodic and rhythmic themes developing rapidly out of each other. As pianist Boris Berman observes, "in terms of tonal ambiguity, this may be the most extreme of Prokofiev's sonata movements." Two rhythmic motives—a drumming four-note tatoo and later a galloping motive—add to the menace of this militant thematic group. Contrasted against this is the slower (*Andantino*) second theme, marked *espressivo e dolente* ("sadly") and in triple meter. Though it incorporates the drumming motive and the wandering melodic lines of the first theme, it is light-years away: a vision of love and longing for a peacetime world.

Since Prokofiev has already included considerable developmental activity within the exposition section, the development section is not clearly marked off. As Berman comments: "In a dramatic battlefield frenzy of mighty, dissonant chords, different themes from the exposition are churned together." Even the romantic second theme seems sadder here, as if that mood were more difficult to recover. Like the *Appassionata*'s first movement, the aggressive first movement ultimately fizzles out in exhaustion.

In E major, the "warm Andante" slow movement is a heartfelt elegy for those who have died. Opening with a motive of three chromatically rising notes, its principal theme appears in the warmly colored alto range and is nostalgic and tender. However, in the middle section marked *Poco più animato*, a new, more passionate theme builds in power and urgency as it voices anguish over those lost. The piano texture is now immense, almost orchestral. Dissonant bells ring out, a traditional Russian musical symbol of national tragedy. When the mellow opening theme returns, it is haunted by the echoes of these bells.

The finale is a perpetual-motion toccata delivered at a ferocious pace. The meter is the asymmetrical 7/8, often found in Russian folksong. Berman again: "The overall defiant energy of the movement is without parallel in Prokofiev's sonatas." The repeating rhythmic motive is urged on by lashings from a spiky figure in the left hand. Though this battling music briefly eases for a quieter interlude, it soon returns and carries this fight-for-survival music on to an emphatic B-flat-major affirmation.

—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.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Described by the UK's *Observer* as the "definition of virtuosity" Japanese pianist **Nobuyuki Tsujii (Nobu)**, who has been blind from birth, won the joint Gold Medal at the 2009 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and has gone on to earn an international reputation for the passion and excitement he brings to his live performances.

Nobu marked this past summer with two stellar US debuts: with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as part of the Ravinia Festival and with the Cleveland Orchestra as part of Summers at Severance. During the 2025–26 season, he returns to Carnegie Hall twice, once in recital and later with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. In Europe, he will give a long-awaited recital in Munich followed closely by performances of the Grieg Piano Concerto in A minor with conductor Klaus Mäkelä and the Orchestre de Paris. Mäkelä, Tsujii, and musicians from the orchestra will also join forces in a chamber concert to start the week in Paris. Nobu's recital and orchestral repertoire is varied and this season will include Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 with performances in Tokyo, Mexico City, and Oslo.

Previous seasons have included concerts with leading orchestras worldwide, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, Philharmonia Orchestra, the NHK Symphony, the Seattle and Baltimore symphony orchestras, and the Münchner Philharmoniker, Filarmonica della Scala, Tonkünstler-Orchester Niederösterreich at the Wiener Musikverein, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi, and Hong Kong Philharmonic. He maintains a close relationship with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom he performed a sold-out concert at London's Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms in 2023. Notable past collaborations also include the Philharmonisches Staatsorchester Hamburg under Kent Nagano, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra under Klaus Mäkelä, the Marinsky Orchestra under Valery Gergiev, the NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover under Andrew Manze, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Vasily Petrenko, and the BBC Philharmonic under Juanjo Mena. Nobu's appearances as a recitalist have included performances at prestigious venues worldwide such as Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium; the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris; London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, Wigmore Hall, and Royal Albert Hall; the Berlin Philharmonie; Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall, and Singapore's Esplanade.

Nobu's debut Deutsche Grammophon album, released digitally on in November 2024, featured a Beethoven program that paired the towering *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Op. 106 with Liszt's transcription of the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* ("To the Distant Beloved"). His previous recordings with Avex Classics International include Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 with Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin; Grieg's Piano Concerto and Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* under Vasily Petrenko with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra; and Beethoven's *Emperor* Piano Concerto with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Nobu has also recorded several recital programs of Chopin, Mozart, Debussy, and Liszt.

A live DVD recording of Nobu's 2011 Carnegie Hall recital was named DVD of the Month by *Gramophone*, as was his latest DVD release, *Touching the Sound—The Improbable Journey of Nobuyuki Tsujii*, a documentary film by Peter Rosen.