

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Program Notes: Master's Piano Recital

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Music
in Music, Performance

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August 2020

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Abstract

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This paper serves to aid in the understanding of the works performed at my Master's piano recital. I break down each piece using historical context, analysis, and points of interest. In this way, it can help people familiarize themselves with the concepts or main points of each piece before listening to them being performed. It is of interest not only to fellow musicians as a listening guide, but also to the lay audience that can have something of significance to grab on to for each piece.

Chapter 1: Bach Prelude and Fugue in B flat Minor, Book II

Bach wrote two sets of prelude and fugues of each major and minor key, totaling forty-eight in all. The title, “Well Tempered Clavier”, refers to the goal of the composition; being able to demonstrate the possibility of writing in all keys at the dawn of equal temperament. The other purpose of this work was for Bach’s pupils to study advanced composition as well as keyboard skills.¹

The Prelude and Fugue in B flat Minor, Book II, is the 22nd one by its numerical order. The prelude is unusual in that it is more contrapuntal than a typical prelude. For this reason, as well as its extended length, it is a rather challenging prelude to memorize and execute. The character is quite introspective and lyrical, with a subject made of eighth and quarter notes. We can divide this subject into two parts; a descending line that spans two and a half bars, and a gentle rising theme with repeated notes. This material then develops into winding passages composed of three voices. As with a regular fugue, there are intermittent episodes after all three voices have come in with the subject, although the two parts of the subject sometimes come in independently of each other, as well as participate in various short strettos. The prelude climaxes at the end, culminating in huge dominant and tonic pedal points, and ending in a *tierce di picardi*.

The fugue is more austere in character, with a determined and inevitable steady flow to the end. The subject of this fugue features half notes and quarter notes in the first half, and a climbing eighth note figure featuring three tetrachords in the last half. This fugue is also challenging because of its length, and because of the sheer amount of strettos present. The form of this fugue is the main point of interest. Like a regular fugue, the subject is introduced in all voices, with an episode that follows. However, after that, there are two two-voiced strettos, spaced apart by a half note, which occurs in the tenor and alto, and then

¹ Malcom Boyd, *Oxford Composer Companions, J.S. Bach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

in the soprano and bass voices. The challenge here is to bring out both voices and maintain clarity in both lines. Interestingly, the spacing of the stretto allows the last half of the subjects to coincide and create double thirds. Another episode follows. The subject is then reintroduced in each voice, but it is inverted, creating a second exposition. The inversion makes the upwards tetrachord passage head downwards instead. This inverted subject then receives the same treatment as the subject, with the appearance of the two-voiced inverted strettos, in soprano and tenor, and alto and bass. After another episode, there is another stretto, but this time, it is a combination of the subject and inverted subject. This stretto is particularly hard to master, because of the differing directions. The climax of the entire fugue is the last stretto, which features all four voices at one time. The soprano and alto play the subject, while the tenor and bass play the inverted subject, forming double thirds going in opposite directions in each hand. The effect is one of grandeur, awash with majestic sound.

Chapter 2: Schubert Sonata in D major D 850 (Gasteiner)

Schubert was a prolific composer of piano sonatas, composing 23 in total. Although Schubert and his contemporaries were firmly rooted in the ideals of the Romantic era, his sonatas retain the form and the absolute music values of the classical era. His sonatas were often compared to Beethoven's, whom he admired. However, while Schubert could never achieve Beethoven's mastery of form, motivic development, and profound understanding of the larger form, he succeeded in "sublimity of tonal range, in graciousness of melody, in the unusual variety of rhythmical schemes and in the exquisite beauty of the pianoforte writing."² The sonata in D major was written during August 1825, while the composer was staying at the town of Bad Gastein. There are four movements in total.

The first movement is in sonata-allegro form, and begins with a grandiose D major chord, followed by exciting eight note chords that sweep upwards to a startling big D minor chord. The first theme is full of "horn sonorities, which is what provides the 'country' feel that has caused commentators to associate the piece with Gastein, where it was composed in 1825."³ This is demonstrated by big chords and dotted rhythms. The second theme (m. 40) is a gentler theme with downward two note slurs, that is still peppered with dotted rhythms. There is a big interruption at m. 48, right after the introduction of the second theme, where it is marked *Un poco più lento*, and fortissimo, consisting of swinging triplets and dotted rhythms, with both hands playing in unison. Afterwards, the second theme continues at m. 55 in the left hand, with the right hand playing gently flowing triplets. The development (m. 95) sees the return of theme one, but startlingly in the remote key of B-flat major. Then, it proceeds to modulate to many unrelated keys, through tumultuous rumbling triplets and forte chords. The dominant preparation (m. 152) begins eleven measures before the

² Kathleen Dale, "The Piano Music," in *The Music of Schubert* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1947).

³ Walter Frisch, "Schubert's Nähe des Geliebten: Transformation of the Volkston," in *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 192-3.

recapitulation, and begins in pianissimo, eventually crescendoing to a rumbling return of theme one (m. 163). Theme two (m. 191) comes in, but in the home key of D major. The coda is marked *un poco più mosso* and is based on the material of the main theme, representing its triumphant return.

The second movement is a lengthy wandering movement that goes through several motivic and emotional transformations. It is marked *Andante con moto*, in the key of A major, and in rondo form. The form is unusual in that instead of the normal ABACA, Schubert writes ABABA, eliminating a second contrasting theme, opting to redevelop the B theme again. Theme A makes up a tender hymn-like section that is introspective but occasionally has bursts of emotion and dynamics. The B theme (m. 41) consists of a long winding climb up to the top, beginning quietly with lilting syncopated eighth and sixteenth notes. At the end of this section at m. 78, there is an eerie series of chords that continually get lower and lower and modulate into more unrelated keys while being unresolved. The effect is one of being lost and uncertain, and maybe a little confused. The return of theme A (m. 84) is in the left hand, with the right hand peppering the melody with little thirty-second note bird calls. The return of the B theme (m. 133) is handled like the first time. However, the set of strange eerie chords found in the first B section is replaced by a build up to the climax of the whole movement, culminating in a blinding C major syncopated chord (m. 165), marked *fff*. The last A section (m. 170) is back to introversion, and melds the two themes together by incorporating the syncopated figure of theme B into the melody of theme A. After the final climactic harmonic shift into G Major (with chordal juxtapositions marked *ff* and *p*) and the return to the tonic with the perfect authentic cadence (mm. 178 – 187), the coda (mm. 187 – 196) restores calm by shifting the melodic line into the low bass, with the dynamic line fading away from *pp* to *ppp*.

The third movement is in scherzo and trio form. The scherzo alternates between a stately dotted rhythm and light-hearted dance in triplets. It is in ABA form. The B section (mm. 50-69), preceded by a modulation into B-Flat Major, features a funky rhythmic impulse. The right hand has dotted rhythms while the left hand has what seems to be a typical waltz figure. However, the stress is on the third beat, giving the effect of syncopation. The trio (mm. 119-190) is contrasted greatly with the scherzo section. chorale style, the harmonic rhythm is fairly slow and static, giving the section a very introspective character. The chords then start modulating from key to key, escalating in dynamics, until the texture reaches a huge cadence in C major at m. 153, when it then immediately dissipates into calmness. There seems to be some significance to the C major climax, as Schubert has now done it in two movements.

The last movement has a pastoral quality and is cast in a more typical rondo form, with ABACA coda. The A section features a staccato ostinato while the right hand has a playful melody with dotted rhythms. The whole effect reminds us of a toy soldier march. The B section (mm. 29-77) is composed of a new theme featuring groups of sixteenth notes and eighth-note triplets alternating with cadential chordal figures, which is followed by running sixteenth notes and staccato eight notes alternating between hands. This section has an aba structure with the climax occurring in part b (mm. 50-65). Although it modulates and progresses, it still preserves the playful character. The return of the A section (m. 78) sees the right hand more embellished, with running sixteenth notes weaving around the melody, instead of the dotted rhythms. The central C section (mm. 104-171)) can be considered a more explorative section, with a completely different tempo, texture, and character. It is set in the subdominant key of G major. This section also has an aba form within it. The a section is lyrical and whimsical, while the b section (mm. 118-143) is dark and stormy. Then, the line eventually arrives back to the A section at m. 172, and we return to the

original character and implicitly the original tempo. This time, the left-hand staccatos are in eighth notes instead of quarter notes. The coda (m. 202), marked *un poco più lento*, is a short section that repeats some of the themes in the last A section, and wraps up the whole piece in a lighthearted and playful manner, with the music gently fading away.

Chapter 3: Liszt Ballade No. 2

Liszt composed this Ballade as an afterthought to the Sonata, which is also in B minor. Liszt himself thought very highly of this composition.⁴ (Hamilton) The Ballade has connotations to the German Gothic ballad, “Lenore”. In it, the young lady Lenore waits for her fiancé, William, to come back from a war in which fellow warriors are already returning home. When she realizes the possibility that her lover was slain, she curses God, which prompts her mother to ask for forgiveness, as such thoughts are blasphemous. At midnight, a shrouded figure claiming to be William knocks on the door and whisks Lenore away on horseback, claiming to head to their wedding bed. Overjoyed, Lenore hops on the horse, but is then terrified at the pace they’re going, to which William replies “the dead travel fast”. At the end of their journey, the couple reaches a graveyard, and “William” is revealed to be death himself, bringing Lenore to rest in William’s grave, for blasphemy against God.

As per Liszt’s style and the trends of the romantic era, the piece is not in a set form. There are certain themes that are introduced, which are then broken down, combined, and transformed as the piece progresses. There are two main themes that alternate between each other. Ballade No. 2 begins with waves of sound in the left hand, like the cold wind. The melody, or theme 1, based on a rising four note natural minor scale from the dominant to the tonic, is heard emerging from the depths. As a point of interest, the left-hand rumbles feature chromatic scales up and down, but begins the piece with the same interval that encapsulates the 4-note rising motif. After the section peaks and disappears, a gentle and innocent love song in the treble area is then heard (theme 2, m. 24). Then, the entire opening that we have heard so far is repeated at m. 36, but at a half step lower, which brings us to the key of B flat minor.

⁴ Kenneth Hamilton, “Early and Weimar piano works”, “Performing Liszt’s piano music” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79-80.

After a pause of silence, the first virtuosic section appears at m. 70, with dotted rhythms and sweeping gestures, reminiscent of urgent horseback riding. This is followed by an unceasing hammering of C sharp triplets in the bass, preparing us to transition to f sharp minor in the next section. This new section, at m. 96, is based on the initial chromatic scales in the left hand, but now it uses broken octaves. It escalates to a dramatic rendition of the main melody, theme 1 in loud chords, with fast arpeggio runs and dotted chords to accompany it. After the energy peaks, it drifts off to a section marked *a piacere*. This short theme, at m. 35, is full of wistfulness and desire. Only the first half of each measure is accompanied, giving it a breathless feel, while the melody has winding turns and intervals that stretch up, reaching for something unattainable. Then, theme 2 comes back in D major at m. 143, with a lilting arpeggiated left hand triplet accompaniment. It repeats itself in G major. This section serves as a warm respite from the darker sections of the piece.

Unrest begins again at m. 162 with the return of the opening material – theme 1 with chromatic runs in the left hand – but this time an overt bubbling over marked *mf*. It slowly escalates until the chromatic scales takes over into loud alternating octaves. It arrives into a climax when forceful triplet chords are interjected with short bursts of the chromatic scale. This second climax dissipates the same way the first one did, with another return of the wistful theme at m. 225, but this time marked *appassionato*. Theme 2 returns at m. 234, this time as chords split in between the hands. It sounds deeper and warmer than previous reiterations, because of the setting in the middle register. It is heard in three different keys, before it enters the beginning of the last section.

We come to B major at m. 254, the parallel key of the home key. A rich songlike theme in the bass is heard. This theme, although not identical to the beginning, is also based on a rising 4 note scale, transforming the dark sounding theme into a warm one. The wistful theme also comes back again at m. 269, but this time with an arpeggiated left hand and in

octaves. Coupled with the marking, *un poco più mosso*, the wistful theme is as insistent as ever, quickening as if the object of desire was near. Thundering pentatonic octaves brings us back to another reiteration of the transformed theme 1 at m. 284, this time triumphant and exalting. Thick chords played with both hands is interspersed with rumbling scales. Then for the last time, the transformed theme 1 is repeated, this time with 4-octave scales running up in the right hand and big chords in the left hand. It is so grandiose, as if the octaves represented ascending to heaven rather than going down to hell. After the action, the love theme appears for the last time, as a heartfelt and tender goodbye.

Chapter 4: McIntyre Butterflies and Bobcats

Butterflies and Bobcats is composed by Canadian composer David L. McIntyre. He grew up in Saskatoon and Calgary and has composed extensively for piano. Although there is no program for this piece, suggested by the title, Butterflies and Bobcats evokes a young bobcat's curiosity about the winged creature. Bobcats are endemic to Canada, and this piece represents hallmarks of the Canadian contemporary music style. This piece was commissioned for the 2004 Eckhardt-Gramattè National Music Competition.

The opening features a floating sixteenth-note figure in the top register of the piano; it is the butterfly, marked *ppp delicatissimo*. The music paints a vivid picture of the butterfly using bubbling quintuplets and sextuplets – a flutter of the wing, as well as high quarter notes occasionally, denoting the butterfly's momentary rest on a flower before it takes flight again. It is then punctured by huge staccato chords in both hands in the lower register at m. 15, signaling the entrance of a rambunctious adolescent bobcat. The passages are flashy and athletic in nature, really evoking the muscularity of a lean and agile young bobcat. Interweaved with this is the butterfly's delicate and out of reach movements, demonstrated by quiet but sparkly passages in the right hand. At measure 73, the word “biting” is seen on the score, as well as staccato dotted rhythms, perhaps hinting at the bobcat snapping its jaws at the butterfly. These figures also display a lot of playfulness by incorporating a lot of staccatos, syncopations, and abrupt changes in register and texture. The huge and startling dynamic contrasts vividly recall the image of a cat stalking and pouncing its prey, missing every time. This section comes to a loud climax and leads the way to the first slow section (mm. 96). The melody here is modal and is reminiscent of Copland. The material is a gentle version of a theme heard at the entrance of the bobcat. After a wistful jazzy ending to the section, another fast section resumes the excitement.

It begins on m. 140 with fast and light passagework, alternating between right and left hands, and loud and soft dynamics. This suggests that the two animals are in a dance, the butterfly fluttering around the bobcat, but just out of reach. The piece takes a frenzied turn when the tempo indication is marked driving with an exclamation mark (m. 160). The main theme returns here, but at a mad dash. The music gets faster and faster, as though the cat is now actively chasing the butterfly instead of playing with it and is worked up to a frenzy. This comes to a climax with another slow section (m. 196). We hear the exact same themes and melodies, but in a grander fashion and in different keys. The final fast section (m. 237) is marked with abandon and begins with triplet figures and hammered out bass notes. It then almost resembles some sort of crazy dance when the meter changes to 3/8. Then, the action drops to a low rumble for quite a long time and builds up to the end. It culminates in the return of the very first butterfly theme at m. 289, but twice as fast. This then swells into an exciting ending, quickly switching between soft and loud, butterfly and bobcat, until one emerges victorious.

Chapter 5: Scriabin Etude in D-Sharp Minor, Op. 8 No. 12

Alexander Scriabin was a Russian composer who greatly looked up to Chopin in his early career. Later, he developed a more atonal sound palette, which coincided with beliefs in his own ideal of mysticism. His etude in D-Sharp minor was written in this first period, in 1894, where he still adhered to romantic traditions of harmony. Marked *Patetico*, the piece is short but intense, encapsulating the brooding and impetuous moods seen in the late 19th century. Comparable to Chopin's "Revolutionary" Etude, "the D-sharp minor Etude has become a warhorse for pianists."⁵ Both etudes show off technical feats the left hand could accomplish, but the Revolutionary etude focuses on runs and arpeggios, while the D-sharp minor focuses on octaves and big leaps.

We hear the main theme, which includes octave leaps, dotted rhythms, and dramatic flourishes, in the right hand in octaves. The B section, beginning at a piano dynamic, has the same bubbly energy as the beginning, but in a more tender form. After this brief respite, we hear the excitement start to build up again to prepare for the return of the A section. After one statement of the main theme, the action starts building up for the climax of the piece, which we can hear over loud repeated chords in the right hand and huge leaps with thundering bass octaves in the left hand. The last few declarations of the first fragment of the main theme are heard, before a climb to the top register, followed by two despondent d sharp minor chords ending the piece.

⁵ Lincoln Ballard, Matthew Bengston, and John Bell Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 56.

Chapter 6: Grieg Piano Concerto

The piano concerto in A minor is the only concerto Grieg wrote, and remains one of his most beloved works, not to mention one of the most popular piano concertos in the literature. In fact, the second movement of this work is frequently heard in popular media, from the 2018 blockbuster, “Red Sparrow”, to the strategy video game, “Civilization V”. It is easy to see why this piece has endured the test of time; the themes are heartfelt and catchy, while incorporating virtuosic flourishes and dramatic entrances.

The famous opening begins with a timpani roll and dramatic entering solo chords that cascade from the top of the piano to the bottom. Then, the orchestra introduces the main theme, which can be separated into two parts. Theme 1a (m. 7) is a folk-like dotted theme in chords, which is heard in in A minor and C major. Then, theme 1b appears (m. 11); it is lush, romantic, restless. The same material is then heard with the soloist, with orchestra accompanying the piano. The bridge (m. 31) is in a totally different character, with a faster tempo and sprite-like staccato figures in the piano. It leads to a preparatory V¹¹ section in C major that leads to the next section. We hear the beginning of the secondary theme (m. 49) in the orchestra, a tender and lyrical melody. The piano comes in right away as theme 2a, but with the melody embellished by free quintuplets and tiptoe triplet chords echoing in the high register. Theme 2b is marked *meno tranquillo* and becomes increasingly excited and passionate. After the climax of the secondary theme, there is an orchestral interlude, before we hear the development (m. 89). Short phrases in the orchestra are accompanied by piano runs. We then hear the first fragment of theme 1b modulating and escalating, before a modified version of the opening theme. We come to the recapitulation (m. 121), which is mostly the same as the exposition, except that the secondary theme is changed to A major. We hear the same rush and quickening of theme 2b, but this time, it leads one of the most famous and biggest cadenzas among piano concerto literature (m. 180). Here, a rhapsodic

section leads us into hushed and murmuring reiteration of theme 1a, but with left hand arpeggios and a low E pedal point. The phrases begin in two bars, then shorten to one, then just fragments, before a dramatic descent into the climax of the entire movement. Huge chords with hammered out bass grace notes of theme 1a are heard, along with sweeping chromatic scales. It is marked *fortissimo*, and really feels like as grand as moving an ocean. Then, we hear theme 1b spelled out in octaves and arpeggios spread between the hands. The orchestra comes in at the end of the cadenza, and for the last flourish, we hear what we began with, the opening theme now in triplets with strong supporting punches from the orchestra.

Movement two begins with a long gentle lullaby in the orchestra in D-flat major. The piano comes in with a free-flowing texture in both hands, with the pulse being obscured by the triplets and quintuplets. The D-flat pedal point continues as the melody gently floats down, then vigorously bubbles up into a blossom in dynamic and register. This repeats in E major (spelled F-flat major). The mood becomes slightly agitated before taking us back to the opening theme, but this time in the piano in triumphant chords representing the movement's climactic point, then slowly subsides.

The third movement starts *attaca* and goes right into intense yet quiet figures in the orchestra, before a huge piano run spans the whole keyboard up and down. Then the first theme establishes itself, as a quirky folk dance in A minor (m. 9). The accents on every beat as well as the pedaling accentuate the rustic nature. Theme 1b (m. 46) is an agitated and athletic series of runs in the right hand. A transitional period (m. 59) follows, which goes through several modulations, and plays around with melodies derived from fragments of theme 1a. We move to the movement's central section with the lyrical theme 2 (m. 140) in the orchestra in F major. This section is extremely contrasted with the first theme. Its dreamy nature offers a breathtaking haven away from the “driving” nature of the rest of the

movement. The piano enters, then joins the orchestra and sings a lush melody supported by sweeping left hand accompaniments and sighing two note chromatic figures in the right hand. This section is heart stirring and has a lot of push and pull, as well as sudden dynamic changes. It culminates in a section marked *agitato e string*. Themes 1a and 1b come back in the recapitulation (m. 230) and are mostly like the exposition. However, this time, at the end of the transitional section, the soloist takes control and plays a series of rhapsodic octaves, which leads to the cadenza. In the coda we hear theme 1a, but it is in 3/4 time and in A major. This alternative whimsical dance leads to a grand transformation of theme 2, with orchestra blasting the melody while the pianist plays huge arpeggios in both hands. This leads to the grand finale, where theme 2 is played in repeated chords in *fff pesante*.

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