

PIANO DEDICATION RECITAL
September 11, 2015 / 8 PM / Loeb Playhouse

Sean Chen, piano

The 2015 DeHaan Classical Fellow of the American Pianists Association

Eric Zuber, piano

2015 Laureate of the Classical Fellowship Awards of the American Pianists Association

PROGRAM

Sonata in B Minor, K. 87
Sonata in E Major, K. 135

DOMENICO SCARLATTI
(1685-1757)

Eric Zuber

Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21/1

JOHANNES BRAHMS
(1833-1897)

Sean Chen

Prelude in B Minor, Op. 32/10
Prelude in G# Minor, Op. 32/12
Prelude in G Major, Op. 32/5
Prelude in B-flat Major, Op. 23/2

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
(1873-1943)

Eric Zuber

INTERMISSION

Etude in Thirds, Op. 25/ 6

FREDERIC CHOPIN
(1810-1849)

Etude in Thirds

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

Sean Chen

L'Isle joyeuse

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

Mr. Zuber

Overture to *Tannhauser*

WAGNER (1813-1883) /
LISZT (1811-1886)

Sean Chen

With respect to the musician and your fellow patrons, we request your participation in the tradition of withholding applause between movements of a selection. To the same end, we also ask that you silence and discontinue use of all electronic devices.

PROGRAM NOTES

Sonata in B minor, K. 87

Sonata in E major, K. 135

by Domenico Scarlatti (Naples, 1685 – Madrid, 1757)

Scarlatti's 555 sonatas form a cornerstone of the repertoire for harpsichordists and pianists alike. In addition to being a veritable encyclopedia of keyboard technique, they also developed, for the first time, some of the key concepts of sonata form (alternation, transformation and recapitulation of themes), laying the groundwork upon which many later generations of composers were to build. The Scarlatti sonatas are miniature masterpieces, now sparkling and witty, now introspective and lyrical. Composed over many years, they were copied into a multi-volume manuscript in Madrid, where the Italian-born composer enjoyed a long tenure as resident composer at the Spanish royal court.

The two sonatas selected to open tonight's recital form an attractive slow-fast pair. The B-minor work is an intensely emotional instrumental aria with a rich contrapuntal texture; the E major is a playful virtuoso piece with frequent hand-crossings and surprising interruptions in the continuous flow of the music.

Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21, No. 1 (1857)

by Johannes Brahms (Hamburg, 1833 – Vienna, 1897)

A remarkably "autumnal" piece by the 24-year-old Brahms, this set of variations carries forward Beethoven's legacy, while at the same time uncannily foreshadowing the tone of Brahms's late intermezzos. The theme itself is of classical simplicity, but its phrases are consistently nine measures long, as opposed to the expected eight. The harmony, too, contains an asymmetrical element: the beginning and the end of the theme unfolds over an unchanging bass note (a so-called "pedal point"), while the middle part involves an unexpected jump into a new key.

This theme, seemingly so straightforward and yet so sophisticated, gives rise to eleven variations, the last one being an extended coda. Each variation introduces a new rhythmical figure, but the basic character remains dreamy and nostalgic for a long time. After a meter change from triple to duple in the lilting variation 7, three minor-mode variations follow as some dark storm clouds gather on the horizon. The music calms down again in the last of the minor variations, preparing the way for the miraculous coda, in which the theme assumes a truly transcendent dimension. One is reminded of the variation movement of Beethoven's last piano sonata (Op. 111) with its famous prolonged trills, but while Beethoven's trills soar in the high register, those of Brahms rumble in the bass and never rise above the middle range, creating an eerie, mysterious atmosphere that persists to the end.

Prelude in B minor, Op. 32, No. 10 (1910)

Prelude in G-sharp minor, Op. 32, No. 12 (1910)

Prelude in G major, Op. 32, No. 5 (1910)

Prelude in B-flat major, Op. 23, No. 2 (1903)

by Sergei Rachmaninoff (Semyonovo, Russia, 1873 – Beverly Hills, CA, 1943)

Rachmaninoff's two major collections of preludes are Op. 23, which contains ten preludes, and Op. 32, which contains thirteen. Together, they cover twenty-three of the twenty-four keys of the classical major-minor system (the early, and perennial popular Prelude in C-sharp minor completes the set of keys).

The B-minor prelude from Op. 32 is the only one for which an extra-musical source of inspiration is known: Rachmaninoff was responding to the symbolist painting *The Return* by the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), to whose work he had also responded in his symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*. In *The Return*, a man dressed in red, seen from behind, walks towards a house in the dark woods, with a bright light in the window. He passes a pool of water in which his image is reflected. Attempting to interpret the painting, a Swiss art historian asked the provocative question: "How can the man return home to the past after all the changes that have occurred during his long period of wandering?"

The slow, halting music suggests the man's tentative steps in the direction of his house. In the central portion of the piece, the massive crescendo and the cascading notes of the ensuing cadenza indicate his conflicted feelings. The somber concluding measures bespeak anything but a happy homecoming.

In the Prelude in G-sharp minor, a vivid accompaniment figure in the right hand is set against a pensive melody in the left. The melody intensifies and reaches a climax before evanescing into thin air.

The pattern is reversed in the G-major piece, where the melody is in the right hand and the undulating accompaniment figures—here arranged in asymmetrical five-note groupings—in the left. The tempo is much slower than in the previous work and the mood is reminiscent of a quiet nocturne. Aside from a single dynamic peak with a loud trill, everything is soft, calm and peaceful throughout.

By contrast, the B-flat major prelude (from the earlier set) is all energy, filled with thundering chords and runs. Even the more subdued middle section moves relentlessly forward; there is no respite at all until the very end.

Etude, Op. 25, No. 6 (1837)

by Fryderyk Chopin (Żelazowa Wola, nr. Warsaw, 1810 – Paris, 1849)

Etude No. 2, "Pour les tierces" ("For thirds," 1915)

by Claude Debussy (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, nr. Paris, 1862 – Paris, 1918)

Chopin's two sets of etudes, with 12 etudes in each set, are true "studies" in the pedagogical sense of the word as they focus on specific problems any aspiring virtuoso must solve. At the same time, they are full-fledged concert pieces whose "musical quality," as one commentator put it, "clearly permits—or rather demands—public performance."

The sixth etude from the second set, in G-sharp minor, is a study in thirds, challenging the right hand to play those chromatically moving parallel intervals smoothly and evenly. The left hand merely provides harmonic support, though at the climactic moment, it too is bitten by the parallel-thirds bug.

Debussy wrote his twelve Etudes, which remained his final compositions for the piano, shortly after preparing a new edition of the Chopin etudes. He paid homage to his great predecessor, but did so in his own inimitable musical style. Like Chopin, he devoted each etude to a specific technical issue. (As he wrote to his publisher, he intended to “prepare pianists to understand better that one can only enter into music with efficient hands.”) Yet, as in the case of Chopin, the musical substance of the pieces goes far beyond mere technique. Debussy’s remarkable innovations include an exceptionally refined piano sound and a harmonic language that stretches tonality almost to the breaking point.

The etude devoted to thirds is an extension of Chopin’s idea, yet it is a great deal more complex harmonically, with many contrasting moods. It ends with some massive chords played *fortissimo* and *con fuoco* (“with fire”)—a long way from the murmuring *piano* with which it began.

L’isle joyeuse (“The Happy Island,” 1904) by Debussy

L’isle joyeuse was inspired by a famous painting by Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), *L’Embarquement pour Cythère* (“Pilgrimage to Cythera”). Cythera is the Greek island where, according to legend, Aphrodite was born. Watteau depicted a succession of couples in various degrees of intimacy; the whole painting is a celebration of love.

There is a direct connection between the painting and Debussy’s biography: the piano piece inspired by *Pilgrimage to Cythera* was written on the “happy island” of Jersey in the English Channel where the composer had eloped with his mistress Emma Bardac, who would later become his second wife.

Debussy expresses the sensuality of Watteau’s painting by depicting several kinds of happy feelings from the sweet idleness of the introduction (“quasi una cadenza”) to the exuberance of the main section and the intense lyricism of the second melody (“undulating and expressive”). The main motif expands to culminate in a powerful climax; the music gets louder and faster until it concludes with a brilliant display of virtuosity.

Overture to *Tannhäuser* (1845) by Richard Wagner (Leipzig, 1813 – Venice, 1883) transcribed for piano (1848) by Franz Liszt (Doborján, Hungary [now Raiding, Austria], 1811 – Bayreuth, 1886)

Franz Liszt always considered it his mission to popularize the works of other composers who were not sufficiently recognized. He did so most effectively by including virtuoso transcriptions of their works in his wildly popular piano recitals across Europe. Among the many composers whose compositions he arranged were J. S. Bach, who had just begun to emerge from many decades of neglect; Schubert, who, recently deceased, was still barely known outside Vienna; and Wagner, a close personal friend whose career Liszt also helped by conducting the first performance of *Lohengrin* in Weimar in 1850, while Wagner was in living in political exile in Switzerland.

The first of what would become many Wagner transcriptions for piano, the Concert Paraphrase on the Overture to *Tannhäuser* was written in 1848, only three years after the opera’s

premiere. Unlike many other arrangements that take considerable liberties with their originals, the present work corresponds note-for-note to what Wagner wrote. It could almost be called a piano "reduction," were it not for the exceptional creativity with which Liszt found pianistic equivalents to Wagner's complex orchestral textures. The overture encapsulates the fundamental dilemma of Wagner's hero, who is tragically torn between the chaste Elisabeth and Venus, the goddess of sensual love. The Overture masterfully combines the two irreconcilable worlds of religion and lust. We abruptly move from the pilgrims' hymn to the delights of the Venusberg and Tannhäuser's paean to the goddess. Even without Wagner's vivid orchestral colors, those contrasting characters come fully alive in Liszt's brilliant piano transcription.

Program Notes by Peter Laki

ABOUT

SEAN CHEN

Pianist Sean Chen is being hailed as a rising star with a "million-volt smile" and a "formidable set of fingers" (Dallas Morning News). In 2013 Chen won the American Pianists Association's DeHaan Classical Fellowship, one of the most lucrative and significant prizes available to an American pianist. He also won Third Prize at the 14th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, becoming the first American to reach the finals since 1997. The 27-year-old American pianist has appeared as soloist with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra under Gerard Schwarz, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin and Miguel Harth-Bedoya, Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, Corpus Christi, New West, Phoenix and San Diego symphony orchestras, and the Suwon City Philharmonic in South Korea. Last season Chen performed in recital at Jordan Hall in Boston, the Dame Myra Hess Series in Chicago, SubCulture in New York City, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and on tour in the Czech Republic.

Highlights of Chen's 2014-15 season included debuts with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra at the Kimmel Center, the symphony orchestras of Hartford, Tucson, Santa Fe, and Carmel, and his return to the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. He appeared in recital in the Steinway Series at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., the Salk Institute in San Diego, Jacksonville, New Orleans, on tour in Hawaii, and with soprano Jessica Rivera in Thousand Oaks, CA. A proponent of the music of our time, Chen has performed new works by Lisa Bielawa, Michael Williams, Nicco Athens, Michael Gilbertson, and Reinaldo Moya. Recent CD releases include an album of Michael Williams's solo piano works on the Parma label, a live recording from the Cliburn competition released by Harmonia Mundi, and *La Valse*, a solo recording on the Steinway label, as part of his American Pianists Association prize. The New York Times praised Chen's "alluring, colorfully shaded renditions" of works by Scriabin and Ravel on the latter, and Los Angeles Music Examiner noted, "Los Angeles native Sean Chen has the rare ability to combine poetic musical sensibilities and dazzling technical prowess."

Born in 1988 in Margate, FL, Chen grew up in the Los Angeles area of Oak Park, CA. His impressive achievements before college included receiving an NFAA ARTSweek award, a prize at the California International Young Artist Competition, the Los Angeles Music Center's Spotlight Award, the Evelyn Vonar Storrs Scholarship, and the Glenn Miller Scholarship. These honors combined with his extraordinary intellect facilitated offers of acceptance by MIT, Harvard, and the Juilliard School. Choosing to study music, Chen earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Juilliard, where he won the 2010 Gina Bachauer Piano Competition, the 2010 Munz Scholarship, and first prize at the 2008 Juilliard Concerto Competition. While attending Juilliard, Chen was the recipient of a notable third-party scholarship: the 2010 Paul

and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans. In competition, Chen won Second Prize at the 2011 Seoul International Music Competition, Third Prize at the 2013 Morocco Philharmony International Piano Competition, Best Performance of an American Work at the 2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition, and he was a semifinalist at the 2012 Leeds International Piano Competition.

Chen received his Artist Diploma at the Yale School of Music in 2014 as a George W. Miles Fellowship recipient, and a student of Hung-Kuan Chen and Tema Blackstone. His former teachers include Jerome Lowenthal, Matti Raekallio, and Edward Francis. He has been featured in a nationally syndicated radio series that chronicled the finals week of the APA's competition, as well as on *From the Top*, American Public Media's *Performance Today*, WQXR (New York), WFMT (Chicago), WGBH (Boston), and WFYI (Indianapolis). The webcast of his April 2013 performance of Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Indianapolis Symphony can be viewed at AmericanPianists.org.

In March 2014 *International Piano* magazine named Chen "One To Watch." He is currently under the management of the American Pianists Association. When not at the piano, Chen enjoys tinkering with computers and composing.

ERIC ZUBER

Hailed as an "irresistibly fluid" and "illuminating" pianist by the *New York Times* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Eric Zuber has established himself as one of the leaders of a new generation of American pianism.

Highly decorated, Mr. Zuber has been a finalist and major prize winner in nine of the world's most prestigious international piano competitions: Honens, Cleveland, Arthur Rubinstein, Seoul, Sydney, Dublin, Minnesota, Hilton Head (Gold Medal) and Boesendorfer (Gold Medal). He was also a recipient of the Gina Bachauer Award and the Arthur Rubinstein Prize for his outstanding achievements by The Juilliard School.

Mr. Zuber has made solo appearances at the Kennedy Center, Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall, Merkin Hall, the Sydney Opera House, Severance Hall and for the International Keyboard Institute and Festival in New York City. After making his orchestral debut at the age of twelve with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, he has gone on to perform with many of the major orchestras in the United States and abroad including the Cleveland Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic, the Indianapolis Symphony, the Minnesota Symphony, the Phoenix Symphony, the Korean Symphony, the Sydney Symphony, and Ireland's RTE National Symphony Orchestra among many others. He has collaborated with many internationally acclaimed artists including Lewis Kaplan, Amir Eldan, Charlie Neidich, Joseph Silverstein, Gerard Schwartz, Johannes Moser, and Amanda Roocroft among others.

In addition to a busy solo and collaborative career, Mr. Zuber is devoted to teaching the next generation of pianistic talent. He is currently serving as Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Memphis' Rudi E. Scheidt School of Music, and has given masterclasses in the United States at Bard College, Shenandoah University and Lawrence University. Internationally, he has taught in China at the Bowdoin/Xian International Music Festival, and in Korea at Yeonsei University and for the Korean Steinway Society.

Eric holds degrees from the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University (B.M., A.D.), the Curtis Institute of Music (Diploma), and the Juilliard School (M.M). His major teachers have been Boris Slutsky, Leon Fleisher, Claude Frank, and Robert McDonald. He is currently pursuing his doctoral degree at Peabody.

