Concrete; Liberation

Piano Senior Recital

Seth Tan

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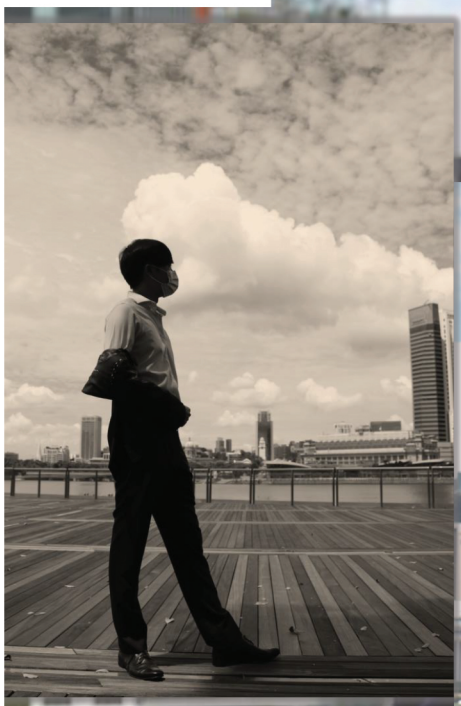
(livestream)



Performing works by

Beethoven | Ravel | Liszt | Rachmaninov | Prokofiev

YST Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music

Concrete; Liberation – Piano Recital by Seth Tan

Programme Notes

BEETHOVEN
Six Variations in F Major, Op.34 (1802)

While perhaps certainly not as commonly represented as his monumental Diabelli Variations or the iconic set of Eroica Variations, the **Six Variations in F Major, Op.34** boasts Beethoven's sophisticated genius in innovation. In fact, this adventurous and almost cheeky set of variations feels like a playground where Beethoven had a lot of fun exploring form, pianistic writing, key colour and mood.

For starters, while the theme is stated in F major, all six subsequent variations are in completely different keys! This is very peculiar considering the structure and key scheme of the typical theme and variation form at that time. Furthermore, Beethoven manages to use the different key colours to bring out different moods, as each variation is also highly contrasting from one another in terms of character. To top it all off, each variation is not static in character, featuring lots of quirky contrasts even within each variation. Thus, a huge palette of characteristic possibilities comes alive within the entire piece as a result. It is almost as if each variation is like quickly sketching a separate piece of art on a page on an easel and then flipping to the next, or even going to an amusement park and experiencing the huge variety of rides one by one.

The **Theme**, marked **Adagio**, is set in a Beethoven **Cantabile**, oozing with cozy charm. Amidst the amiable warmth however there are already moments where the cheeky tendency peeks through. Form-wise the theme itself is already rather lengthy and conceived in an ABA form. This structure, along with the harmonic progression and the phrase construction forming 22 bars would be exactly inherited by every subsequent variation thus resulting in each variation being exactly 22 bars long.

Variation I in D Major immediately kicks off the surprising and cheeky nature of the piece with a complete break in character. Instead of being slow and lyrical like the theme, Beethoven seems to squeeze in as many subdivisions as possible within light electric runs. Coupled with the fact that it is in D Major, it feels almost playfully Mozartean in nature. **Variation II in B-flat Major** transforms the opening theme into a quasi chirpy brass fanfare in compound time, although it is followed by a variety of passages which retain the playfulness of the previous D Major. **Variation III in G Major** follows with an pleasant but teasing Allegretto in easygoing two-part writing, followed by skipping slurs abound in the B section. While form-wise all the variations can be considered mini minuet and trios thus far, **Variation IV in E-flat Major** is formally marked Tempo di Menuetto and starts off serious but quickly falls back to its humorous exhibition. The trio tries again, sounding warm and almost pastorale with the accompaniment in the left hand but once again succumbs to the tease of humour. In **Variation V** stylised as a March, Beethoven pretty much flips the coin of the duality of personality as he manages to transform what started off with charm into his notorious **C Minor** perpetual and more deliberate edge, albeit using the same harmonic progression. The effect of Beethoven's use of direct modulation then shines through as the C Minor is then transformed in an extension slightly resembling that of Mendelssohn's Wedding March where C is revealed to be the dominant of the opening F Major. **Variation VI** then returns to **F Major** and the light-hearted and playful nature of the work finally frolics in its purest form. With both hands prancing around in joyous exuberance, this final Variation and the **Coda** which continues from it feels like a festive celebration to round out all the activity that had ensued. Yet, after a cadenza-like figuration the humble beginnings of the Theme returns, now in **Adagio Molto**, back to its original sincere charm. This time, however, Beethoven milks out every subdivision with flamboyant runs, amassing to a cadenza-like passage before retreating back to its sweet, slightly teasing charm. It says goodbye almost in the manner of "After all, this is me".

Ultimately, through the many personalities centering around charm and teasing nature invoked in this work, it feels as much as an exploration and liberation of the self as it is musical form and character. After all, Beethoven wrote this in 1802, which aside from being a very prolific time of composition for him was also possibly a ground-breaking year of self-discovery as the year also happens to be the beginning of his famously classified "Middle/heroic period". In the same year he also published the set of Eroica variations which perhaps resonates in the canon more concretely, possibly rendering this playful picture book that is the Op.34 Variations out-shadowed.

RAVEL
Une Barque Sur L'ocean from *Miroirs* (1904-1905)

In nature, water can take up many forms. Water can remain practically still and unperturbed, calm and serene as a lake in a forest, quiet ripples merely exuding the beauty of nature as its quietest element. Water can rock in a gentle breeze, the push and pull of tides caressing upon the still edges of a continent's concrete sand, dazzling in a gleam of sunlight. Water can fall victim to the rage of storm, the ocean's waves amassed and crashing over an endless grey horizon in nature's wake as its strongest element.

The tides of water are but controlled by the surges of nature and one can imagine how compounded and experiential the effects will be for an inanimate object such as a boat placed in the mercy of something as volatile and inevitable as the temperament of water. And it is exactly this effect that Ravel wished to invoke in his **Une Barque sur L'Ocean (trans. A Boat on the Ocean)**, the third piece in his set of **Miroirs (trans. Mirrors) (1904-1905).** And perhaps it was the vast possibilities of water which compelled many composers across time to liberate works evoking water. Ravel himself had previously wrote his *Jeux d'eau* (1901), Debussy obviously had countless works about water, even Liszt in a time way before the idea of impressionism came along wrote his *Les jeux d'eau a la Villa d'Este* within his *Années de Pèlerinage.*

While Une Barque sur L'ocean amidst the set of Miroirs sought to capture imagery of scenes in nature, reflecting one if not the greatest of Ravel's impressionistic output, Ravel himself rejected the term Impressionism as a label for his music in general. To him, music was all about the organic craftsmanship first and about the craft he famously wrote, "Whatever sauce you put around the melody is a matter of taste. What is important is the melodic line." Indeed, the melodies featured in Une Barque Sur L'ocean are often simple and spacious but are enchanted by Ravel's flavorful "sauces". Along with a mastery in manipulation of both cascading and chordal texture alike for the piano, Ravel's vastly imaginative harmonic palette utilising extended tertian harmony, unresolved appoggiaturas and suspensions, splashes of whole tone and modal sonorities sometimes harmonised diatonically, mode mixing etc, just to name a few, liberates the endless imaginative possibilities of the journey of the ocean, a boat and a boat on the ocean into music.

LISZT
Hymne à Saint Cécile, S491 (1865)

Franz Liszt requires no introduction. The face of the virtuosic age of music, the man himself treated as King on the musical stage in the age of individualism basking upon the horizon of hall spotlights and the thunderous applause provided by the mere souls of followers in the audience gallery. Centuries down the road now in the age of sensitivity and nuance I know of peers who shake their heads in gross disdain, irking at the mere encounter of the word "Liszt", not because they cannot uphold the technical

responsibilities but because of they seem to hold a concrete impression that his music offers nothing beyond crude flamboyance and fluffy theatrics. But I believe that surely a man of such high prodigal regard too has his moments of introspection as well especially given the duality of individualism so I sought to take on a piece by Liszt which explored his other side.

Liszt was a huge fanatic of the operatic style and arguably a significant portion of his arrangements pertain works from composers such as Richard Wagner and Charles Gounod. **Hymne à Saint Cécile** is a relatively obscure arrangement for solo piano by Liszt of a relatively obscure piece by Gounod of the same name. While Gounod himself wrote an entire mass, **St Cecilia Mass (1855)**, in the name of Saint Cecilia the patron of music and musicians as depicted in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches, Gounod's **Hymne à Saint Cécile (1864)** is a short standalone piece for flexible small chamber settings centering around the violin with harp and accompaniment. At its core, it is a work of tranquil sanctity revolving around a continuous pure and simple melody in roughly an ABA form. In arranging his version for solo piano, Liszt respected and retained the work's purity and expanded on it by repeating each section of the melody but using different melodic registers, accompanimental and countermelodic patterns for the piano to enhance the lyrical quality of the various melodies.

Of course, in typical Liszt fashion of arrangements for the piano, Liszt deviates a little from the original formal trajectory and adds his own signatures variably. In Hymne à Saint Cécile Liszt adds a section marked with much specific caution, **quasi fantasia il canto sostenuto ed espressivo assai**, which descends the work into the quietest moment of the piece where Liszt chooses to reflect on the expressive capabilities of the melody and various remote key colours. Eventually through a series of colourful modulations Liszt then returns to the A section as written by Gounod, but transforms it by culminating to a heroic and epitomally triumphant declaration. While it might seem like a heart-on-sleeve tirade and perhaps over the top at times, Liszt justifies this ending with the remark **con esaltazione**, referring to exaltation, glorification and praise, reminding us on the origin of the work.

While Hymne à Saint Cécile might be an arrangement whom even Liszt had admittedly promptly forgotten, it sits among his diverse collection of around two hundred arrangements for solo piano which reflect the multitude of styles and tastes which influenced and defined what liberated the composer.

RACHMANINOV
Etude-Tableaux in C Minor, Op.33 no.3

Sergei Rachmaninov left behind two sets of Etudes-Tableaux (trans. Study Pictures), two collections of gems amidst his array of high-impact contributions to piano literature. Rachmaninov intentionally did not disclose what he possibly had in mind in each of the pieces, however, leaving it up to the discretion and imagination of players and audiences alike. The first set, Op.33, eventually contained eight pieces and the second, Op.39, nine.

Marked **Grave** and in the key of **C minor**, that one word alone essentially describes the mood of **Etude-Tableaux Op.33 no.3**. The first part of the etude seems to depict a solemn landscape resembling that of a funeral march with a blanket of staunch chords towering like layers of reinforced concrete, sandwiched by bell-like chimes at the top register and sinister rolls at the bottom register. Moving slowly but inevitably, it eventually melts into the second section and what seems to be the meat of the etude, a blissful C Major catharsis, the key in which the work will end despite being titled C minor. If the first part of the etude were to a march of souls motioning towards the inevitable, the second part of the etude would be a slow burn of a mist of spirits settling with the eventual peace in the liberation of afterlife.

Rachmaninov commonly employed the effect of starting a movement in a brooding minor key and then ending it in a dwell on the slow cathartic paradise of the parallel major. He went through this process in many of his subsequent works, such as his Etude-Tableaux in Eb Minor, Op.39 no.5, opening in a dramatically passionate Eb Minor but ending in a tranquil Eb Major and the second movement of his Second Piano Sonata developing with tribulations of E Minor but ending in a sweet, radiant E Major. Another iconic signature of Rachmaninov's drawing out the atmosphere of slow sections with chords shifting slowly, step by step, to achieve a slow, "melting" effect is displayed exemplarily in this work. Moving between the two sections of the etude, Rachmaninov dwells on the note "C", reharmonising it slowly such that the eventual C Major is of utmost gratification. This reminds of the opening of his second piano concerto, although the effect there steers more toward suspense. Later in the C Major is a build-up again featuring lines moving step by step. This time in fact, Rachmaninov even took this section and orchestrated it in the Largo of his Fourth Piano Concerto a few decades later. With so many hallmarks of Rachmaninov's compositional style, the Op.33 No.3 is a true gem.

PROKOFIEV
Piano Sonata no.7, Op.83 "Stalingrad" (1942)

I. Allegro inquieto
II. Andante caloroso
III. Precipitato

> "Approaching this place, [Stalingrad], soldiers used to say: "We are entering hell." And after spending one or two days here, they say: "No, this isn't hell, this is ten times worse than hell."
> -Vasily Chuikov, Military Commander of the 62nd Soviet Army

Sergei Prokofiev published a collection of three "war sonatas", compositional output coming during the peak of World War II after having both seen and experienced the vast array of sentiments associated with war. As composer and citizen of the Soviet Union, he kept a profile resembling almost likening to a double agent - needing to keep up with the façade of victories and celebrations of war as portrayed by the government by feeding its image with his music but at the same time going through the dark and twisted personal experiences of those around him affected by the war. Eventually, the second sonata of the collection, Piano Sonata no.7, was highly revered by the Soviet government, awarding it a Stalin Prize. Of course, for Prokofiev, this was irony at its classiest.

The first movement **Allegro inquieto** is march-like in quality and seems to depict the warzone itself. It begins as if a platoon of marching soldiers wielding bayonets in marching formation are closing in from a distance. Highly dissonant especially in the louder parts of the music, one can imagine the heightened chaos of war where villages rang of gunshots on the ground, incendiaries and explosives dropped from swift air raids from above. However, with how violently dissonant and chromatic the music heats up to especially in the middle section, I cannot help but think it is Prokofiev representing his countrymen in a cry of agony over all the personal losses incurred. After all, the figures in the most dissonant parts reminds me of Chopin's Revolutionary Etude, a work coming from the failed revolution of a country against its ruler. Yet, the chaos is ordered as Prokofiev perhaps mockingly but neatly packaged the work within a traditional sonata allegro form. Proportionately, Prokofiev did not spare making the **Andantino** second subject one of profound introspection and resignation, like a soul begging to be liberated from its shackles.

The juice of sentiment then really lies within the gem of the second movement, **Andante caloroso**, with caloroso being warm. This is quite possibly the peak of Prokofiev's irony as while indeed it begins intimately and warmly with a cozy tune resembling that of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas"

in modern standards, it does not take long before the warmth of life is being siphoned out of the music. There are quiet sections that feel twistedly bone-chilling, almost like whispers of foreboding and grief. There are sections of tonally-jarring outbursts that feel like haunted screams in the face of death. After all, it is the power of the musician to hide one's true intentions behind layers of artistry and later analysts have discovered how discreetly Prokofiev quotes Robert Schumann's Op.39 lied "*Wehmut*" (sadness) in the purportedly caloroso opening theme.

The third movement, Precipitato, is then an explosive rock-and-roll of a finale in the style of a Toccata. In the odd time signature of 7/8, the perpetual rhythmic grouping of "12 123 12" featuring an onslaught of chords and a catchy ostinato drives the very foundation of the movement. Radiating with such high energy to round out the sonata it resembles a celebration at the end of the day to end things with a bang. Although perhaps it might have meant more for the then war-jaded Prokofiev - maybe a façade of a celebration of victory over the war to send a message that everyone is going all out embracing the triumph and that all is good when in reality, he just has no where to go but to "encrypt" all his true feelings within these ten concrete staves of manuscript.