

Kai Jie's Piano Senior Recital

29 April 2021 | 7 pm



Featuring works
by Beethoven,
Berg, Prokofiev
and Sibelius

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YST Concert Hall:



Koh Kai Jie Senior Recital Programme Notes

About The Performer

Koh Kai Jie is a final-year undergraduate in piano performance at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. He studies piano with Associate Professor Albert Tiu and conducting with Jason Lai.

As a pianist, Kai Jie has achieved numerous accolades. Most recently in 2020, he attained the first prize in the YST Conservatory Concerto Competition (Piano Category). He also won the second prizes in the Singapore National Piano and Violin Competition (Senior Category) and the Yamaha Piano Competition. In 2013, Kai Jie obtained the ABRSM Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music (LRSM) in Piano Performance (Distinction) and was a High Scorer across all Southeast Asia candidates. He has also worked with eminent pianists Daejin Kim and Noriko Ogawa in public masterclasses in YST Conservatory.

An emerging conductor, Kai Jie formed a chamber orchestra comprising of YST Conservatory musicians, putting up various performances at the YST Noon Recital Series. Most recently in 2021, he conducted the orchestra for rehearsals and public performances of selections from the Tchaikovsky Serenade for Strings and Dvorak Serenade for Wind Instruments. In particular, the orchestra's performance of the Beethoven Coriolan Overture in 2019 was highly commended by music reviewer Dr Marc Rochester, who was "deeply impressed with both the quality of playing [he] drew from the orchestra and [his] insightful interpretation of the Beethoven Overture".

Programme Notes

BERG

Piano Sonata, Op. 1

Alban Berg (1885-1935) was an Austrian composer belonging to the Second Viennese School, which was pioneered by his teacher Arnold Schoenberg. Berg started studies with Schoenberg in counterpoint, music theory and harmony from 1904, and started composition lessons in 1907. It was during this time Berg started to work on his **Piano Sonata Op. 1**, eventually completing it in 1910, serving as a graduation piece at the end of his studies with Schoenberg. While Berg had intended this sonata to be a conventional multi-movement sonata, he lacked inspiration to complete it after only writing the first movement. To this, Schoenberg advised him that perhaps he "had said all there was to say". Berg subsequently published the movement as a standalone work. Through this work, one can see that Berg was learning the art of composition by

first confining himself to the traditional sonata form structure, honing it to perfection. The form is adhered to rather strictly in this sonata with clearly defined sections of exposition, development and subsequent recapitulation with the return of largely similar musical material introduced at the beginning. Although the form is strict, Berg adopts a Wagnerian-like harmonic language, pushing the boundaries of functional harmony by using chromaticism extensively to the point of saturation, even though he retains a clear key centre of B minor. This harmonic language gives Berg the tools to express more complex emotions, taking the listener on a ride from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of despair.

BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Major, Op. 110

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) wrote the **Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Major, Op. 110** in 1821 as the middle of the last three piano sonatas wrote as a set for publisher Moritz Schlesinger. It was early in the same year that he suffered from a rheumatic attack and subsequently jaundice, causing a significant drop in productivity in his compositional output. In these late sonatas, Beethoven takes his musical introspection to the extreme, producing works of immensely dense musical material, giving him the means to explore the full range of emotions. Each movement of this sonata comes from a drastically different world of emotions, transporting the listener from the warmth of the first, to the jest of the second, then plunging into despair and subsequently heroic triumph in the third. However, Beethoven unites all these contrasting emotions using common thematic material, binding these three movements into a story to be told from beginning to end.

The first movement ***Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*** (at moderate tempo, singing and very expressive) opens with the indication *con amabilità*, which means 'amiably'. Indeed, the entire movement radiates warmth through its pleasant simplicity, never at any moment breaking out of this gentle and *gemütlich* (comfortable) atmosphere. Even in the middle development section of the sonata form where emotions usually start to intensify, the music here is, in the words of Charles Rosen, "radically simple". Hence, the amiable character is preserved from beginning to end. In my opinion, this innocent simplicity is perhaps the greatest difficulty of this movement. While this music is *molto espressivo*, being too overtly expressive would easily cause the music to break out of its simplicity.

If the first movement expresses profound levels of subtlety, the second movement ***Allegro molto*** (very lively) expresses a complete lack of polish, breaking out into country dance-like music right from its opening, surprising the listener with explosions

happening almost once every few bars of music. This movement is a *scherzo* (a musical joke), pushing boundaries almost to the point of satire. The music is full of abrupt leaps, especially in the middle trio section, which in my opinion sounds deliberately clumsy, as the music tumbles down in awkward intervals.

After the brief jest of the second movement, the third movement ***Adagio ma non troppo*** (slow but not too slow) takes an unexpected turn, opening with an exploratory recitative which leads into a painful *Arioso dolente* (sorrowful, moanful). A glimmer of hope emerges with a three-voice fugue which opens with rising fourths. After a seemingly optimistic climax, the music gives way to another *Arioso*, this time with more indications from Beethoven – *Ermattet, klagend* (exhausted, plaintive). Indeed, there is a breathlessness to this *Arioso* as the pain felt through the music is intensified. Nevertheless, this struggle against despair is finally defeated with the emergence of yet another fugue, bringing the entire sonata to a rousing heroic end.

-intermission-

PROKOFIEV

Sarcasms, Op. 17

Russian composer **Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)** wrote the ***Sarcasms for piano, Op. 17*** in 1912, while he was going through a period of early experimentation in his compositional style. After his graduation from the composition class of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory in 1909, he was seeking to establish his reputation as a composer and pianist by writing and performing his own works which often featured jarring dissonances and unparalleled virtuosity to shock its audiences. This is evident in each of the 5 movements in the *Sarcasms*. The first movement ***Tempestoso*** is, as the name suggests, wildly tempestuous. It features abrupt contrasts in dynamic levels and textures, although it also features sumptuous and lyrical melodic lines. The second movement ***Allegro rubato*** plays with a starkly different sound world of the piano, with instructions by the composer to play with dryness and without use of the sustaining pedal. The third movement ***Allegro precipitato*** takes the clashing of harmonies to the extreme, with each hand playing in a different key. Sarcasm is particularly exemplified in the fourth movement ***Smanioso*** (restless, agitated), where the middle section rests primarily on one single chord which Prokofiev instructs to be played *fff sempre* (always extremely loud), which causes the music to sound satirical to the point of ridiculousness. The final movement ***Precipitosissimo*** similarly features a wide range of colours produced on the piano using the extremities of register, texture and dynamics. The music ends with constant repetition of a low rumble which augments the opening motif, bringing the movement to a satirical close.

SIBELIUS

Finlandia, Op. 26 (Arr. Sibelius for solo piano)

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) was a Finnish composer who was often recognised for crafting a Finnish national identity through the music he composed. The tone poem ***Finlandia, Op. 26*** is the most notable example of such a work, bearing monumental political significance till this day. Sibelius composed it as the closing piece of music for the *Press Pension Celebrations of 1899*, which covertly supported the journalists oppressed by the growing influence of the Russian Empire, subtly serving as a rallying call for Finland's freedom. While it was originally written for orchestra, the composer arranged the work for solo piano a year later in 1900. The piece opens with an ominous atmosphere with low rumblings, originally written for brass and timpani. This gives the opening an imagery of dark clouds in the distance, foreshadowing the violence to come. The music subsequently breaks out into a martial character with a gunshot-like rhythmic figuration after an extensive chordal introduction. The music eventually settles on a hymn-like melody which starts off calm and quiet, but becomes more and more powerful with each utterance, bringing the piece to a rousing finish. This hymn was eventually reworked by Sibelius as a stand-alone work, named the *Finlandia Hymn*, which eventually became one of Finland's most important national songs till date.