Friday, May 11, 2018 at 8pm
NEC's Jordan Hall

Yuja Wang piano

Notes on the program

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
Selected Preludes and Études-tableaux (1903-17)

Rachmaninoff graduated from the piano program at the Moscow Conservatory with honors in 1891, and he capped his composition studies the next year by earning a rare "Great Gold Medal" and attracting his first publishing contract. An early Prelude in C-sharp minor became one of his most recognizable calling cards, and everything seemed aligned for Rachmaninoff to take his place as the leading young composer in Russia. Then disaster struck in 1897, when a botched premiere of his First Symphony created such a bad impression that Rachmaninoff resisted composing anything new for three years, and then only resumed after months of work with a hypnotherapist.

The piano works heard in this grouping span from 1903—a time when Rachmaninoff had bounced back on the strength of his Second Piano Concerto (1901)—to the pivotal year of 1917, when he left his native Russia for the last time. By then Rachmaninoff was most famous as a pianist, and his blistering touring schedule for the rest of his life limited his compositional output, such that only a single work for solo piano followed during his decades of exile.

The Prelude in D Major that begins this set (no. 4 from Opus 23) mines a similar vein to Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, basking in gorgeous lyricism and elegant textures. Moving to the fourth of the nine Études-tableaux (Study-Pictures) published in 1917 as Opus 39, it is clear that these miniatures present ample challenges from a technical perspective, but they are more poetic and fanciful than typical keyboard etudes that isolate a particular skill or process.

Adding to his early Prelude in C-sharp minor and the set of 10 gathered as Opus 23, Rachmaninoff composed an additional 13 Preludes in 1910 to complete the cycle of all 24 major and minor keys. The examples heard here, no. 4 in E minor and no. 10 in B minor, are unusually rich and expansive for the Prelude genre. No. 10 in particular has a sense of programmatic storytelling; Rachmaninoff apparently drew inspiration from a painting titled *The Return* by Arnold Böcklin, the same artist whose work prompted Rachmaninoff's tone poem *The Isle of the Dead.*

Another early Prelude, no. 5 from Opus 23, strikes up a lively march in G minor. This set concludes with one more "Study-Picture" from Opus 39, no. 5 in E-flat minor. A heartbreaking melody and throbbing chords exhibit the signature Romanticism that Rachmaninoff carried forward into a rapidly changing world.

Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915)
Piano Sonata No. 10, Opus 70 (1913)

Nearly a century after his death, Alexander Scriabin remains one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of music. He was an infant when his mother, a successful pianist, died of tuberculosis, and his father left the boy in the care of his grandmothers and an aunt. Those doting women helped shape Scriabin's sensitive and self-centered personality, and his aunt also provided the budding musician his first lessons at the piano. He went on to study at the Moscow Conservatory from 1888 to 1892, where he was a teacher's pet to some of the faculty and a thorn in the side of others. Scriabin's early music honored the piano styles of Chopin and Liszt, but over time his music became increasingly radical under the influences of synesthesia (a sensory link that caused musical sounds and colors to correspond in Scriabin's brain), mystical philosophy, Newtonian optics, and other esoteric factors.

Scriabin composed ten piano sonatas between 1892 and 1913. As traditional characteristics faded away, he developed a highly personal template for the sonata genre, crafting all his late examples in single movements. The Tenth Sonata begins with a slow introduction that ruminates on the themes and intervals that will come to populate the fast body of the form. The most distinctive feature within the fast music is the profusion of trills, perhaps a clue as to why Scriabin cryptically referred to this work as "a sonata of insects."

György Ligeti (1923-2006)
Selections from Etudes, Books 1 and 2 (1985-94)

György Ligeti began composing in a folk-influenced style indebted to his Hungarian predecessors Bartók and Kodály, but in the 1960s, he forged a groundbreaking new technique he dubbed "micropolyphony," an otherworldly sound that figured prominently in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey.* After reaching a fantastical extreme in the 1977 opera *Le Grand Macabre,* Ligeti once again reinvented his style, finding inspiration from sources as diverse as fractal geometry and traditional African polyrhythms. Leaving aside the large masses of sound and sprawling ensembles of the 1960s and '70s, he turned his attention to a texture he had not composed for since 1961: the solo piano. The crisp, process-driven compositions in his first book of Etudes from 1985 marked the arrival of this crystalline new sound, and additional volumes completed in 1994 and 2001 cemented Ligeti's place as a late-blooming giant of the piano repertoire.

The third Etude from Book 1, "Blocked Keys," exploits a technique in which the pianist holds down certain keys with one hand, so that patterns played by the other hand will have gaps when they pass those particular notes. The ninth Etude, published in Book 2, creates its sense of "Vertigo" with persistent, dizzying cascades of descending chromatic scales. The first Etude from Book 1 is titled "Disorder," an effect achieved by restricting the right hand to white keys and the left hand to black keys. The accented rhythmic groupings recall the Eastern European folk dancing that informed Ligeti's earliest music.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)
Piano Sonata No. 8 in B-flat Major, Opus 84 (1939-44)

Prokofiev settled in Moscow in 1936, nearly twenty years after he left Russia in the wake of the October Revolution of 1917. As an expatriate in Europe, he had found himself increasingly at odds with modernist tastemakers; meanwhile, Soviet audiences and authorities proved receptive to the composer's "new simplicity," as he dubbed his developing style. A string of successful film score and ballet commissions finally enticed Prokofiev back to his homeland on a permanent basis, and he entered the stream of Soviet music firmly established as a star.

As World War II engulfed Europe, Prokofiev planned a trilogy of piano works that he dubbed his "war sonatas." He made sketches for all three in 1939, drafting themes for the ten movements that would make up the entire cycle of his Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Sonatas. He finished the project five years later, while staying at a rural enclave where the Soviet government safeguarded esteemed artists.

The Eighth Piano Sonata is more docile than might be expected from a "war sonata," especially the bulk of the first movement, flowing in an *Andante dolce* tempo through undulating counterpoint and pensive cadences. The development section introduces greater agitation and density in a faster *allegro moderato* tempo, while the surprising coda disturbs the calm once more with another burst of aggression.

The central movement, marked *Andante sognando* ("Moving along dreamily"), has a nostalgic, dancing character, like a remembered waltz from a distant past. The relaxed variations clear the space for the *Vivace* finale, with the most brilliant and extroverted music of the sonata. In the wake of brittle, mechanical elaborations of a stubborn rhythmic motive, a mysterious theme from the first movement returns to reconnect the sonata to its unsettled impetus.

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