



SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Presents

Yuchen (Vincent) Li, piano

Tuesday, April 28, 2026

5:30 PM

PepsiCo Recital Hall

Program

English Suite No. 6 in D Minor, BWV 811

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685–1750)

Prelude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Double
Gavotte I
Gavotte II
Gigue

Brief Pause

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Music in Piano Performance. Vincent Li is a student of Dr. Enrico Elisi.

The use of recording equipment or taking photographs is prohibited.

Please silence all electronic devices, including watches, pagers, and phones.

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24

Johannes Brahms
(1833–1897)

Aria

Variation I

Variation II. Animato

Variation III. Dolce

Variation IV. Risoluto

Variation V. Espressivo

Variation VI

Variation VII. Con vivacità

Variation VIII

Variation IX. Poco sostenuto

Variation X. Energico

Variation XI. Dolce

Variation XII. Soave

Variation XIII. Largamente, ma non più

Variation XIV. Sciolto

Variation XV

Variation XVI. Ma marcato

Variation XVII. Più mosso

Variation XVIII. Grazioso

Variation XIX. Leggiero e vivace

Variation XX. Legato

Variation XXI. Dolce

Variation XXII

Variation XXIII. Vivace e staccato

Variation XXIV

Variation XXV

Fuga

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Program Notes

Bach's **English Suite in D Minor, BWV 811**, the last of the set as traditionally numbered, is among the most expansive and technically demanding of the English Suites. Its large-scale design, expressive range, and contrapuntal ambition make it one of Bach's most imposing keyboard suites.

The vast **Prelude** occupies nearly half the suite's length on the printed page. It combines the freedom of a prelude with the rigor of a fugue. The opening is improvisatory and dramatic, full of flourishes, ornaments, rich harmonic color, suspensions, and shifting accents. This introductory character eventually gives way to a brilliant **Allegro** fugue of formidable scale. In its rapid figures and relentless momentum, Bach explores the possibilities of invertible counterpoint: musical lines are composed so that they can exchange positions among the voices while continuing to fit together with precision.

The **Allemande** that follows is more inward and flowing. Its lines pass fluidly between the hands in an ongoing exchange, and its small note values create a sense of continuous motion. The **Courante** then introduces a sharper rhythmic energy; its shifting accents and quick gestures produce an almost breathless momentum.

The emotional center of the suite lies in the **Sarabande** and its **Double**. The Sarabande creates a mood of solemn introspection through spare, unhurried writing. The Double offers a luminous counterpart: Bach fully writes out an ornamented version of the movement, enriching the line with delicate flourishes and expressive dissonances while preserving the Sarabande's inward character.

Gavottes I and II provide contrast before the final movement. The first Gavotte is robust and rhythmically incisive; the second, in D major, turns toward a more pastoral world, with its drone bass and simpler character. The return of Gavotte I restores the original key and energy. The suite concludes with a fierce **Gigue**, whose chromatic turns, long trills, and extended pedal points drive the work to a powerful and uncompromising close.

Among Bach's contemporaries was George Frideric Handel, who shared with him not only the same birth year but also the same birth month. In 1733, Handel published his **Suite in B-flat Major, HWV 434**, which contains an **Aria con variazioni**. Nearly 130 years later, this theme inspired Johannes Brahms to compose his **Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24**.

Handel wrote five variations; Brahms wrote twenty-five, followed by a monumental fugue. The work displays Brahms's extraordinary command of variation technique and his deep engagement with older forms. Some variations are contrapuntal, such as **Variation 6**, which features canon at the octave and passages of inverted canon. Others transform the theme through dance character, virtuosity, texture, and color: the siciliana-like grace of **Variation 19**, the brilliant double-sixth writing of **Variation 14**, and the music-box sonority of **Variation 22** all show Brahms's ability to recast the same material in radically different expressive guises.

Especially important is Brahms's treatment of the theme's harmonic foundation. The listener can follow the theme not only as a melody, but also as a structure that Brahms continually reimagines through new bass patterns and textures. Across the variations, one hears smooth chromatic descents, strummed chordal writing, flowing arpeggios and scales, repeated drumbeat figures, and drone-like sonorities. Each transformation preserves something essential from Handel's theme while revealing a new expressive possibility within it.

The concluding fugue, unmistakably indebted to Bach, serves as the culmination of the entire work. Its subject grows from the ascending stepwise motion at the opening of Handel's theme. From this compact idea, Brahms builds a fugue of mounting density, with voices entering in close succession and the subject transformed through inversion and augmentation. The music eventually gathers force over a sustained dominant pedal point, creating a grand architectural climax. Rather than merely closing the set, the fugue gathers the energy of the preceding variations into a final statement of contrapuntal mastery.

When Brahms played the work for Richard Wagner in 1863, Wagner is said to have remarked: "One sees what may still be done in the old forms when someone comes along who knows how to use them." The comment captures the achievement of the piece: Brahms does not treat the past as something static or decorative, but as a living source of invention.