



SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Presents

Andrew Vargas, piano

March 10, 2023

8:30 PM

PepsiCo Recital Hall

Program

Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 784

I. Allegro giusto

II. Andante

III. Allegro vivace

Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

Piano Sonata III (Trinitas)

I. Lento - bold, stark

II. Allegro - punchy, jazzy

III. Andante - majestic, proud

Stephen Hough
(1961-)

Intermission

Variations on a Theme by Vu

Elijah Ong
(1997 -)

Piano Sonata No. 1

Andrew Vargas
(2000 -)

Après une lecture du Dante (*from Années de pèlerinage* - Italie, S. 161)

Franz Liszt
(1811 - 1886)

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelors in Piano Performance.
Andrew Vargas is a student of Dr. Tamás Ungár.
The use of recording equipment or taking photographs is prohibited.

Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 784 - Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828)

Franz Schubert's piano sonata in A minor was written in 1823, the year after Schubert began to acquire symptoms of the illness that would eventually lead to his passing in 1828. In this sonata we can observe Schubert's brooding on death and tragedy in a particularly striking way. For example, it is of importance to note that the work was written in the month of February. In Vienna, the city of Schubert's residence, January is the coldest month of the year. It is only in February that it starts to become slightly warmer than at the beginning of the winter season. This is congruent with the atmosphere emanating from the A minor sonata. One is fully aware that the bitter cold exists – and yet there appears to be a tentative path forward. However, even though there is this expectation, spring never comes in the sonata, and the listener is left wandering in a bleak and snowy landscape, isolated and left to tragic self-reflection.

The first movement opens up with a motif that reminds one of a bleak howling wind, a motif that juxtaposes the emptiest and vaguest of musical intervals, the open fifth, with the most dissonant and most piercing of intervals, the minor second. After this, there is the motif of a lugubrious half note followed by a clipped eighth note. This limping motif reminds one of *Der Leiermann*, *The Hurdy-Gurdy Man*, the desolate character who appears at the end of a song cycle Schubert wrote four years later, the song cycle *Winterreise*. The text of *Der Leiermann* deserves to be set out in full:

There, beyond the village,
stands a hurdy-gurdy player;
with numb fingers
he plays as best he can.

Barefoot on the ice
he totters to and fro,
and his little plate
remains forever empty.

No one wants to listen,
no one looks at him,
and the dogs growl
around the old man.

And he lets everything go on
as it will;
he plays, and his hurdy-gurdy
never stops.

Strange old man,
shall I go with you?
Will you turn your hurdy-gurdy
to my songs?

Was Schubert drawing upon the A minor sonata in his later composition of *Der Leiermann*? As it turns out, the musical content of *Der Leiermann* is remarkably similar to that of the A minor sonata; both are written in the same key, both open with fifths decorated with minor seconds, and both use a sort of awkward limping motif. Whatever the case, the similarities do appear to be more than coincidental.

Moving onwards, the second movement of the A minor sonata at first appears unaffected by the harsh realities of the movement before it. However, this apparent lack of disturbance is periodically interrupted by a murmuring motif that consistently heckles the melody in midsentence. This constant interruption occurring at unpredictable intervals creates a sense of unease throughout the entire movement. Even though the piece ends in the home key, it still feels yet unresolved.

Finally, the work ends with a brisk last movement. Once again in A minor, Schubert seems to be unable to contain himself anymore and moves away from the ruminative atmospheres he established in the first two movements. Flurries of eighth notes fill the texture and interlock with each other in unusual ways; melodic lines bump against each and jostle for attention. These episodes, just like in the second movement, are punctuated by a melody that has

a melodic beginning reminiscent of the interrupting motif of the second movement. Each of these punctuating melodies appears in a different key each time, and its accompanimental figures differ in slight ways each time the melody appears, almost as they want to provide a different and more nuanced commentary on the melody each time it occurs. The piece ends in a fortissimo dynamic, and Schubert ends up at the polar opposite of where he began the sonata. Whereas he began the sonata by wandering, by the end he shakes his fist at the apparent meaninglessness and futility that suffering often appears to contain.

Piano Sonata III (Trinitas) - Stephen Hough (1961 -)

Commissioned by *The Tablet*, a Catholic magazine, *Piano Sonata III* perhaps represents the position modern man finds himself in. In my estimation, this work endeavors to give an edgy, sophisticated, and chic re-examination of the place faith holds in contemporary society. Dogma versus doubt, modernity versus tradition, the sacred versus the profane, faith versus reason – all these are issues the modern man grapples with. Are these irreconcilable binaries or not? Mankind has been through a great deal of existential anguish in the last hundred years, and not only with the two World Wars. The very justifications for belief in rationality have been probed and questioned by Postmodern thought. Because of this, the modern man can find himself intellectually traumatized. The philosophical landscape after Postmodernism often no longer considers the existence of truth, reason, being, and morality as being self-evident and indisputable first principles.

What is the role of religion in all of this? I think this is a primary question the composer considers throughout the work. In this composition, religion is viewed through the lens of serialism, a compositional technique that truly began the modernist movement in music in the 20th century. Through this lens, Catholicism soars above as a dizzying edifice, cold and unmovable, yet somehow attractive. Through this lens, dogma presents itself as an invitation to freedom – and yet the invitation invokes profound terror. As Stephen Hough writes in the foreword to the sonata, the piece is a “symbol of dogma, rules which can liberate or enslave.” Does dogma liberate or enslave? It is perhaps not the place to answer this question here, but what must be noted is that this sonata contains a deep existential conflict that is never quite resolved. Questions are asked but are never answered. The piece ends with the same exact notes it begins

with, and in the end we end up back in the same place we started. Is life the same way, or dare we hope that there is something better?

Variations on a Theme by Vu - Elijah Ong (1997 -)

Elijah Ong's *Variations on a Theme by Vu* is a variation set based on a theme from a horn trio by Patrick Vu. The original horn trio is subtitled "August," and as the name suggests, a summertime atmosphere permeates the entire work.

When I first heard Elijah's variations, I was immediately convinced that I would add it to my repertoire. It is a pleasure to perform this work, and Elijah's harmonic inventiveness is a great joy to explore, both for the performer and the listener.

Piano Sonata No. 1 - Andrew Vargas (2000 -)

Piano Sonata No. 1 is a single-movement work for solo piano. The main aim of this work is to go back to the idea of the single note. What does a note mean and what can one note, in and of itself, represent? This piece aims to cultivate a sort of "musical ascetism" and aims to purge all that is unnecessary from the musical experience.

Après une lecture du Dante (from *Années de pèlerinage - Italie*) - Franz Liszt (1811 - 1886)

"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate (Abandon all hope, ye who enter here)."

– Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, inscription on the gate of hell

Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante*, colloquially known as the *Dante Sonata*, opens up with three trumpet calls spelling out a tritone, the musical interval popularly known as "the Devil in music." If we do a bit of math, there are six semitones within a tritone, so by repeating a tritone three times Liszt is spelling out the number 666.

This ominous symbolism is all too fitting for a work that is based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. However, the *Dante Sonata* does not focus only on infernal themes. Liszt transitions from the *Inferno* into the *Purgatorio*, at which point Liszt wanders into a territory of spiritual purification and suffering. Despite this suffering, there remains a certain hope at inevitable

redemption; it is here that we are privileged to meet the incomparable Beatrice, Dante's lifelong love and ultimate ideal. Towards the end of the piece, Liszt receives a glimpse of the *Paradiso*, a glimpse from afar that moves closer and expands in breadth. The Beatific Vision finally becomes all-consuming, and the piece ends in a blaze of D major.

Liszt's music masterfully serves the vast narrative that Dante constructs in his *Divine Comedy*. Dante's poem is essentially a monumental artistic synthesis of medieval theology and Thomistic philosophy. Liszt proves himself to be a master who is up to the task of creating a musical work that can appropriate such weighty themes.