

The Ph.D./D.M.A. Programs in Music

May 21st, 2021 1:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Fifi Zhang, piano

Caténaires (2006)

Elliott Carter
(1908–2012)

Four Preludes (1928)

Andante mystico

Intensivo

Leggiero

Tranquillo

Ruth Crawford Seeger
(1901–1953)

Six Pieces for Piano, Op. 118 (1893)

Intermezzo in A Minor

Intermezzo in A Major

Ballade in G Minor

Intermezzo in F Minor

Romanze in F Major

Intermezzo in E-flat Minor

Johannes Brahms
(1833–1897)

INTERMISSION

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the D.M.A. degree.

French Suite No. 2 in C Minor (1725)

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Air

Mennuet I

Mennuet II

Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685–1750)

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, Op. 83 (1942)

Allegro inquieto

Andante caloroso

Precipitato

Sergei Prokofiev

(1891–1953)

Notes on the Program

“*Caténaires*” is the French word for ‘catenary,’ which could refer either to an overhead cable used to transmit electrical energy, or the curved shape of a flexible chain. Both definitions seem equally suited to this work, written in 2006, whose unfettered energy is dazzlingly electrifying and whose difficulty lies in being able to maintain a gripping intensity throughout the bends and turns of its constantly-curving line. In talking about his process, **Elliott Carter** described: “I became obsessed with the idea of a fast one-line piece with no chords. It became a continuous chain of notes using different spacings, accents, and colorings, to produce a wide variety of expression.” His obsessiveness produced a firecracker of a piece, bursting with playfulness and exuberance.

One of Carter’s major compositional influences was fellow American composer, **Ruth Crawford**. This set of **Four Preludes** was completed in 1928 while Crawford was still a conservatory student in Chicago, her own style at the time reflecting the influence of Alexander Scriabin and his mystical sound world. In the ethereal first prelude, the right hand plays an airy ostinato that is increasingly blended with the rumbling sonorities of the left-hand melody, creating a cycle of dissonant fog that is momentarily dispersed by the celestial ostinato. The second prelude offers even more strident dissonances, this time penetrated by ripples of quintuplets and sextuplets that propel the melodic line to expand and intensify in waves. The witty third prelude stands out among the rest of the set for its lightness and humor; its lilting middle section is a *siciliana* rhythm filled with unexpected whimsy and mischief. The last prelude is the most haunting of the four pieces; after being pummeled by dissonances at the climax of the middle section, one can barely register the final sounds as they disappear into the ether.

One of most beloved masterpieces of the solo piano repertoire is **Johannes Brahms'** set of **Six Piano Pieces, Op. 118**, completed in 1893 and dedicated to the unconsummated love of his life, Clara Schumann. Composed four years before Brahms' death, each miniature is representative of the powerfully sonorous yet deeply intimate style of his mature late period. These pieces traverse a vast emotional landscape while also showcasing Brahms' masterful ability to develop and intertwine motivic units to create impressively rich counterpoint.

The intermezzo in A minor opens with a fit of passion that seems unable to contain itself; its sweeping arpeggios eventually peter out to an A major chord that leads directly into the next intermezzo. The second one is breathtaking in its lyricism and brilliant in its development of a single, small motive; a heart-wrenching F-sharp minor middle section contains a soaring melody marbled with canons. The Ballade is the most fiery and energetic of the set, with a heroic theme that contrasts with a gentler second theme in B Major. The most elusive one is the Intermezzo in F minor, which uses a triplet figure that constantly interrupts itself with its own echo. After a stately and poignant middle section, the triplets become increasingly less restrained before tumbling into the final F octave. This leads nicely into the Romanze, which consists of a swooning melody that evokes a bittersweet nostalgia – a tenderness which is heightened by a wistful, softly-rocking second theme. The final intermezzo, based off the *Dies Irae* chant motif, is enigmatic and haunting; its ghostly opening theme is highly contrasted with a heroic and vigorous middle section in which the drama and fervor of the entire set reaches its pinnacle. Only a work with this much emotional gravity could serve as the finale to such an impassioned and affecting set of piano pieces.

Johann Sebastian Bach wrote his six French Suites probably between 1717 and 1725 while he was serving as *Kapellmeister* for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen. Besides their title, which was not given by Bach himself, there is nothing decidedly 'French' about these works, as they are written in the basic, conventional form of the Baroque dance suite.

The **French Suite in C minor** begins with a graceful Allemande featuring sensuous, singing lines and coy turns of phrases. The Courante is the most extroverted piece in the suite, with a buoyant bass line supporting a jubilant right-hand melody. The Sarabande represents Bach at his most lyrical and introspective, while the Air is light and delicate. The two Menuets are personal favorites of the performer, as their elegance and poise are unmatched among the rest of the set. (An alternate version of this work unfortunately does not include Menuet II.) The suite closes with a boisterous Gigue that ends in a triumphant flourish.

In 1939, a close friend of **Sergei Prokofiev's** was arrested, and later shot, by Joseph Stalin's secret police. Months after the arrest, Prokofiev was invited to compose a piece to celebrate Stalin's 60th birthday. After having forced himself to write cheerful music glorifying a dictator, Prokofiev proceeded to work on his Piano Sonatas No. 6, 7, and 8, widely known today as the "War Sonatas". It has been speculated that these works allowed him to express his true feelings about the spirit of the times by depicting the horrors and atrocities of countries at war, all under the sheen of Prokofiev's characteristic sarcasm and dark humor.

Sonata No. 7 begins its first movement with a nervous agitation created by short, restless gestures in dialogue with harsh percussive clusters. There is nothing subtle about the wicked and twisted nature of the exposition; it eventually settles into a calmer second theme. The lyricism of this second theme is not warm or tender, but rather haunting. Violence erupts in full force in the development, where brutal dissonant chords sound like bombs being dropped, making the return of the second theme feel even more bleak.

The opening theme of the second movement is unexpectedly romantic – a welcome, but short-lived, contrast with the first movement. The theme eventually evolves into increasingly demented versions of itself, making one question the sincerity of it all. The melody seems to have been borrowed from a lied by Schumann, titled *Wehmut* (Melancholy), and when it returns in its original form at the end after all the tumult, one can truly feel the weight of its text: *I can sometimes sing / As if I were glad, / Yet secretly tears well up / And thus free my heart.*

The final movement is an obsessive, off-kilter romp in 7/8 time that feels as if it could go off the rails at any moment. The propulsive forces are held in check by precise rhythmic control and consistency of the left-hand accents. All of the pent-up nervous energy which permeates the entire movement is finally released at the end, in a triumph of B-flat major octaves.

About the Artist

Fifi Zhang is originally from the Washington DC area. She began piano lessons at age six and made her debut with the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic playing the Saint-Saens G minor concerto at age eleven, as the Grand Prize winner of their national concerto competition. She is one of a handful of musicians to have won both the Junior (2008) and Senior (2010) divisions of the national MTNA (Music Teachers National Association) high school competition.

Fifi has participated in the Maj Lind Piano Competition in Finland, Maria Canals International Piano Competition in Spain, Seoul International Music Competition in South Korea, and the International Paderewski Piano Competition in Poland. She has spent summers at the Banff Centre's Piano Master Classes, Sarasota Music Festival, Chautauqua Institute Piano Program, and New Paltz Piano Summer, as well as performed in Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall and New York's Steinway Hall.

An alumnus of the Columbia-Juilliard Exchange, Fifi holds a BA in History from Columbia University and an MM in Piano Performance from Juilliard. She also received a Professional Studies Diploma from Mannes School of Music. Former teachers include Marjorie Lee, Julian Martin, Matti Raekallio, and Pavlina Dokovska. Fifi is currently pursuing her doctorate at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center, as a student of Ursula Oppens. She also maintains her own private teaching studio in NYC, providing in-home and online piano lessons to students of all ages.

Spring 2021 Online Events

March

- 8 Ari Livne, piano
- 12 Han Chen, piano

April

- 7 Kirsten Jermé, cello
- 16 Audrey Chen, cello
- 23 Carrie Frey, viola
- 26 Federico Diaz, guitar
- 28 Antonio Valentin, piano
- 30 Austin Lewellen, double bass

May

- 3 Thapelo Masita, cello
- 5 Clare Monfredo, cello
- 12 Julia Danitz, violin
- 14 GC Composers
- 17 Isabel Fairbanks, cello
- 19 Jeremy Kienbaum, viola
- 21 Fifi Zhang, piano

All events begin at 1:00pm and will be live-streamed free of charge at this link:

<https://gc-cuny.zoom.us/j/95813229159>

For detailed concert information, please visit our website at: <http://gcmusic.commonsgc.cuny.edu>