

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

November 15, 2021 1:00 p.m.

*Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall*



## Zach Mo, piano

Evocations (1954)

*Largo*

*Andante con fantasia*

*Moderato appassionato*

*Adagio sostenuto*

Carl Ruggles  
(1876–1971)

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1930)

Roger Sessions  
(1896–1985)

Three Character Studies (2001)

*Nocturne for the Left Hand Alone*

*Little Spinning Song*

*Chorinbo: Study in Thirds & Sixths*

Fred Hersch  
(b. 1955)

## INTERMISSION

Piano Sonata, A. 85 (1919)

Charles Griffes  
(1884–1920)

Scherzo Romantique, Op. 73 (1851)

Louis Moreau Gottschalk  
(1829–1869)

The Dying Poet, Op. 110 (1864)

The Union, Op. 48 (1862)

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

## Notes on the Program

“Irascible, lovable, honest, sturdy, original, slow-thinking, deeply emotional, self-assured, and intelligent.” This long list of descriptors from Henry Cowell about **Carl Ruggles** (1876–1971) could just as easily apply to the piece, *Evocations*. Ruggles began working on this piece in 1921 and revised it with friend and pianist John Kirkpatrick until 1954, the version presented here. Perhaps “intensely critical” would better describe his compositional process than “slow-thinking.” Ruggles would work, re-work, revert, trash, and start anew far more frequently than he would be satisfied with any measure. At times, he would pound a single chord for an hour to test its veracity. “If I find I still like it after trying it over several thousand times, it’ll stand the test of time, all right!”

Often, commentators draw on the ideas of space and timelessness to describe Ruggles’ music. Although the entire set spans only 10 minutes, these tropes permeate the work via its Webernesque concision. Slow tempi and expansive motivic development lend the piece its timelessness. The broad textures and polyphonic clarity give it a vast sense of space.

In 1927, Ruggles wrote, “More and more, I’m gaining that complete command of line which, to me, is the basis of all music.” No better example of line can be found than in the first piece. From the slow opening rising figure, the music reaches further and further into the atmosphere, always increasing in intensity, suggesting an impending revelation. But even after a fortississimo climax, it never “reveals” the point and only points to the vastness of space. Conversely, the second piece adjoins seemingly disparate sections to create a wandering fantasia. While the piece still has long lines and motivic cohesion, it is the unexpected changes and atonal counterpoint that characterize it. The next piece, dedicated to his wife, Charlotte, is the most “irascible” of the suite. Marked “plangently,” it is thunderous, grinding, and emotionally cynical. Most of the piece is marked *f* or *ff*, with only a single measure of a timid *mp*. By contrast, the last piece is open and quiet. Broad sonorities develop in the long open pedals marked. This movement again evokes the vastness of space dotted with points of light. Cosmic dust starts clumping together in the middle, building up to a monolithic *fff*. As the dust settles, we are once again left with a clear night sky and shining stars.

Neoclassicism was a predominant compositional trend during the interwar period. **Roger Sessions** (1896–1985), who was born into the post-Romantic era, and who had studied with Ernest Bloch at Yale, was roaming the streets of Pisa, Italy in 1927 when the first germ of his *Piano Sonata No. 1* came to him “in the form of a complex chord preceded by a sharp but heavy upbeat.” This chord was a C minor triad played by the right hand, with a F#-E dyad in the left. Not only was this chord the seminal idea for what was to become a harmonically rich and motivically dense piece, it also represented a compositional crossroads for Sessions along with many composers of the era. The minor triad and suggested dominant seventh were two remnants of the 19th century. But the juxtaposition at the tritone was the language of the future. In this first Piano Sonata, Sessions fused classical ideals of form and motivic unity with dissonant harmonies of constant tritones, sevenths, and ninths.

The overall structure of the piece follows a standard three movement setup: a fast and serious first movement, a slow and lyrical second movement, a fast and lighthearted third movement. However, instead of separating them with breaks, each movement is preceded by the same introductory cantilena, connecting them in a continuous evolution. Sessions, who is known for long, taut lines, writes impossibly long phrase markings for these cantilenas, asking for only three phrases in the two-

minute opening. From there, the first movement proper begins. Two other common characteristics of Sessions' music appear here: rhythmic drive and structural cohesion. From the starting octaves, syncopations and ties propel the motivically saturated texture through a textbook sonata-allegro form. The movement abruptly ends with the "complex chord preceded by a sharp but heavy upbeat." Then, the cantilena reappears before introducing the central movement: a dissonant and beautiful duet with counterpoint evoking the 18th century. Again, this movement melts away into the cantilena, which in turn, presents the last movement. The lively finale combines sections of lighthearted tittering, abrasive industrialism, and dreamy lyricism, all at formidable speeds.

"A living legend" of jazz piano, **Fred Hersch** (b. 1955) has shaped the course of the genre as an improviser, composer, educator, and recording artist. The list of his accolades alone is enough to fill these programs notes, including 15 Grammy nominations, 2016 and 2018 Jazz Pianist of the Year from the Jazz Journalists Association, and the 2003 Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in Composition.

While the tradition of the pianist-composer (e.g. Chopin, Mendelssohn, Scriabin) has dwindled in the modern age of classical music, it is Hersch's intimate knowledge of both performing and writing that makes his *Three Character Studies* so satisfying to player and audience member alike. The term "study" in this case carries a double meaning. First, in the sense that they are etudes - musical miniatures designed to study a technical or pianistic element. And second, in the sense that they are characterizations of friends.

The first study, "Nocturne for the Left Hand Alone," pays homage to both Chopin (who popularized Nocturnes and Etudes in the early 19th century) and Scriabin (who composed a Left Hand Nocturne as well), and is dedicated to Hersch's teacher Sophia Rosoff. This study evokes the night by its quiet, veiled harmonies and mellifluous melody. Arpeggios undulate up and down the keyboard, cresting with *bel canto* melodic notes. A rocking middle section changes this texture, pressing toward a climax before returning to the rolling arpeggios once again.

"Little Spinning Song" is for fabric artist Penny Sisto. Like Mendelssohn's "Spinning Song," it too creates a tapestry of swirling inner figurations to accompany the melody. The two hands reach outward to play melody and bass and return inward to spin. At first glance, the constant and quick alternations seem to be the focus of the study, but creating a smooth, nuanced melodic line is the real challenge.

The last of the set is dedicated to the late Spike, Hersch's cat. He remarks: "This recalls his spirited and sneaky personality." The piece is a *Chorinho* ("little cry"), a Brazilian genre characterized by fast tempi, happy (despite the crying) demeanor, and syncopations. The left hand plays a syncopated, rhythmic ostinato while the right hand plays constant thirds, sixths, and octaves. The result sounds like a jazzy, fun-loving feline always ready to pounce and create mischief.

Like many from America's early musical history, **Charles Griffes** (1884–1920), born in Elmira, NY, went to Europe to study his craft. He studied as a pianist in Berlin, but turned to composition by influence of his teacher, Engelbert Humperdinck. He returned to the US in 1907 and became faculty at Hackley Boy's School in Tarrytown, NY, where he worked until his untimely death. Many of his early works were rejected for publication by Schirmer for their being "too subjective." The slow beginning to his career turned around after a lecture at the MacDowell Club in 1917. He was labeled as one of a few composers "illustrating American tendencies," which promptly launched his career. Shortly thereafter, he had the opportunity to have his work premiered by the Boston

Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestra in 1919. However, the strain of preparing for these performances while maintaining his teaching duties weakened him enough to catch influenza and develop pneumonia. Griffes' abrupt death at age 35 was a great loss to American composition. His music has been described as having "a certain element of daring and independence, an experimental frame of mind."

Griffes adopted and adapted many of the European trends that he encountered in his studies in Germany. Early works resemble Brahms or Strauss; later works take on an impressionistic style. Even later still, he became interested in Scriabin's progressive harmonic language, his mysticism, and even his synesthesia. The *Piano Sonata* of 1919 exhibits aspects of all these influences while also establishing itself as one of the "finest abstract work[s] in American piano literature."

This piece consists of three *attaca* movements in a traditional arrangement. The first is fast in a standard sonata form. It has two contrasting themes in the exposition, a development expanding on those themes, and an abridged recapitulation. The second movement is slow, lyrical, and at times meditative. The final movement is fast and impish, with a return of a theme from the second movement to create a cyclic effect.

While the framework is traditional (a result of his German education), the harmonic language and aesthetic resemble the progressive styles of the day. The piece is essentially in the key of d minor, but Griffes uses an artificial scale as the harmonic basis. This scale combines the d minor tonality (D, F, A) with the pentatonic scale (the five black keys of the piano), similar to Scriabin's use of the Promethean tonality or Stravinsky's octatonicism. The result is a combination of colorful impressionistic effects, enigmatic mysticism, and fiendish pyrotechnics.

**Louis Moreau Gottschalk** (1829–1869) was born in New Orleans to a British father and a French Creole mother of Haitian descent. He was recognized as a child prodigy and gave his first public concert at the age of 11. His father realized he needed a classical training and was sent to France to study at the Paris Conservatoire. Although he was rejected on the grounds of his "uncultured" American background, it was precisely his exposure to diverse musical traditions in his childhood that garnered him early successes. His music was the first to incorporate Creole styles in classical concert music. Coupling his "exotic" style with his penchant for sentimentality and dazzling virtuosity, he became a sensation in Europe. After a concert at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, Chopin predicted he would become "king of pianists."

The *Scherzo Romantique* originates from this European period. This elegant salon confection resembles waltzes of his Romantic contemporaries such as Chopin or Moszkowski. The coy introduction gives way to a cloying duet of a main theme in A-flat major before abruptly taking a virtuosic spin through the upper register of the piano. The middle section, in the unexpected G-flat major, produces an equally charming theme, again as a duet. This becomes a series of increasingly impassioned and polyphonic variations before a false return to the main theme in the "wrong" key of D major. The introductory material returns as a coda and bookends this delectable tryst.

Following his wildly successful life as a touring concert pianist and ladies' man in Europe, Gottschalk returned (or perhaps fled) home to the US in 1853, allegedly due to his entanglements with aristocratic women. From 1853 to 1865, he tirelessly toured the US, Canada, and Cuba, including a four month span in 1862 during which he played in 85 different cities. He traveled with his tuner and two "mastodons": a pair of 10-foot Chickering grands. His compositions of this period were littered with unabashedly sentimental potboilers due to his relentless schedule and inherited family

debt. Nonetheless, a piece like *The Dying Poet* still struck a chord with the American public. Perhaps as an admission of its frivolity, it is attributed on the score to “S. (Seven) Octaves,” a less than believable pseudonym. Yet, it’s tuneful melody, sensibility, and glittery, celestial effects made it one of his most tear-jerking and popular pieces. Through its apparent simplicity, Gottschalk managed to capture the public’s tastes and an indelible sense of nostalgia during these tumultuous Civil War years.

Despite his Louisianan origins, Gottschalk was a supporter of the Union. He wrote, “When you have observed its [slavery] horrors as I have ... you would condemn without forgiveness the greatest of the inequities which the ages of barbarity bequeathed to us.” In the nationalistic spirit of the Romantic era, Gottschalk composed and traveled the US with *The Union*, a concert paraphrase of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “Hail, Columbia,” and “Yankee Doodle.” An impassioned introduction of tremolo octaves and cadenzas leads to a melancholic “Star-Spangled Banner,” which, at the time, had not yet become the national anthem. The de facto anthem of the day, “Hail, Columbia,” makes its appearance following strident bugle calls. This militaristic setting is then accompanied by left-hand drum rolls, alluding to marching soldiers. The piece ends with bombastic fireworks and “Hail, Columbia” in counterpoint with “Yankee Doodle” to create a true “union.” Perhaps this compositional technique was symbolic of a wishful end to the war - a union of the nation, with the “Yankee” on top (in the right hand).

## About the Artist

Pianist **Zach Mo** has had a wide-ranging variety of performing and teaching experiences around the globe. His performance engagements have taken him to Europe, Asia, as well as the United States, as a solo recitalist, a chamber musician, a choral accompanist, and an orchestral pianist. An avid teacher, Zach has served as faculty for music schools, festivals, and competitions, including 92Y School of Music, Point Counterpoint, and Weill Institute of Music and Carnegie Hall. Additionally, he has been an adjunct faculty member of the Fine and Performing Arts Department at Baruch College in New York City since 2019.

As a teacher, Zach Mo has instructed students of all ages and skill levels, from pupils of age three becoming newly acquainted with music to advanced pianists preparing for auditions and competitions. He has been invited to China as a guest instructor at the Piano Arts School in his home province of Hunan, teaching students and presenting recitals in the Yueyang city's new and only music school. Zach has been teaching over 15 years and considers education the greatest gift a person can give. He views music as a medium through which a person can engage with an ever deepening understanding of the mind, body, and the relationship between the two.

Mr. Mo is currently a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, studying under Alan Feinberg. He received his Master of Music degree from the Manhattan School of Music in 2008 under the tutelage of Daniel Epstein. He has also studied at Northwestern University, the Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg State Conservatory, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he the recipient of the Lucille Kimball Scholarship. Furthermore, he has had the privilege of participating in master classes with such great pianists as Yefim Bronfman, Murray Perahia, and Barry Snyder.