

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

May 9th, 2022 1:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Fifi Zhang, piano

from Preludes, Book 1
II. *Voiles*

Claude Debussy
(1862–1918)

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Frédéric Chopin
(1810–49)

Ballade

Xiaogang Ye
(b. 1955)

INTERMISSION

Four Impromptus, D. 935 (Op. posth. 142)
No. 1 in F minor
No. 2 in A-flat Major
No. 3 in B-flat Major
No. 4 in F minor

Franz Schubert
(1797–1828)

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

Notes on the Program

The English translation of *Voiles* can be either “veils” or “sails.” Whether it means one or the other (or both) is less important than the atmosphere this uncertainty creates. This is a piece that is sometimes bright, sometimes haunting, and always ambiguous; nothing about it feels solid or grounded. **Claude Debussy** layers sweet, caressing melodies atop eerie harmonies, both derived from the whole-tone scale of C-D-E-F#-G#-B-flat, all of which are further layered above a B-flat pedal point. The haziness of the tonal center is what lends this prelude its mysterious aura, making the pentatonic outburst in the middle of the piece seem to come out of thin air. Maybe the “veils” of the cloudy whole-tone mixtures were briefly lifted, or perhaps the “sails” of the piece got caught in a flash of wind; those who hear the richness of the sonorities and textures will be captivated by the magic that is characteristic of Debussy’s musical lexicon. And how about the sonority of the title itself when spoken aloud? *Voiles*. A slow-moving, single syllable of a word that seems to float from the throat just as the various musical layers float out of the piano.

The ballade is one of the most treasured forms of solo piano music from composers of the Romantic era. These types of pieces allude to musical settings of literary ballads, which were 18th century narrative poems that told tales of tragic romance and heroic triumph. **Frédéric Chopin’s** ballades are said to have been inspired by the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, widely regarded to be Poland’s greatest poet, but he avoided explicit programmatic references in his music, preferring listeners to imagine their own storyline. The **Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major**, composed in 1840, is the most unapologetically joyous of the four that Chopin wrote. After an extended introduction that presents the work’s lyrical themes and sighing motifs, the piece launches into a narrative of rich contrapuntal density and ceaseless momentum. Lilted, waltz-like sections provide moments of levity amidst sections that build up into overwhelming emotional tumult. The final iteration of the dance theme appears in various keys back-to-back, all the while accompanied by an ominous, rumbling left hand that barrels forward and eventually leads into an exuberant apotheosis of A-flat Major; this is the only one of Chopin’s ballades to end in a major key.

The **Ballade** composed by **Xiaogang Ye (叶小纲)** adopts the 19th century form to tell a wildly different kind of story. This piece is also built upon contrasting sections and different iterations of its opening material; unlike Chopin’s melodies, however, Ye’s are not built around a clear tonal center, nor do they ever end in nice, satisfying cadences. Oftentimes, a melody gets started (listen for the repeated rising third-falling fourth motif) but is abruptly interrupted or obscured, and then gradually spirals into a chaotic frenzy. As you listen, I encourage you to embrace the fragmented nature of this piece and try to indulge in the unpredictable zig-zag trajectory of its musical events. Moments of playful whimsy and periods of pensive reflection are cut through with rapid tremolos, dissonant harmonies, and bursts of *accelerando*.

An alumnus of Central Conservatory of Music and Eastman School of Music, Ye is one of China’s most esteemed composers of contemporary classical music; his work, *Starry Sky*, was premiered at the opening ceremony of the 2008 Summer Olympics. He is the founder and artistic director of the Beijing Modern Music Festival and currently divides his time between Beijing and Pennsylvania.

Of the **Four Impromptus, Op. 142**, written in 1827, only two were published while **Franz Schubert** was still alive. The word “impromptu” suggests a spontaneous improvisation; however, of these works is carefully structured and grand in scope, the longest of which lasts twelve minutes. Each impromptu explores a different musical form and to experience the entire set of four is to embark on an expansive listening journey ranging from sweet lyricism to somber melancholy.

The first of the set is in F minor and is filled with angst and Beethovenian drama. It feels like a sonata in its cohesive form and grandeur, though it lacks a true development section. This piece is a showcase for Schubert’s brilliantly crafted transitions between the major and minor modes, in which heavy pathos may somehow also create space for glimmers of hope.

The second impromptu is in classic Minuet and Trio form, in which the first section makes a full return at the end. The A-flat Major theme of this piece is an eight-bar phrase of breathtaking purity and simplicity. After a Trio section containing heightened activity and emotional drive, the second appearance the Minuet does not feel the same as the first. Its return has a little more gravity and depth – and less innocence, perhaps – loaded with the poignant memory of what came before.

The theme from the third impromptu seems to have been a favorite of Schubert’s, as he used it in both his *Rosamunde* opera and his string quartet in A minor. This piece consists of five variations on this beloved theme, some of which are witty, some coquettish, and some which allude to the high/low vacillations of yodelers of European folk tunes. The centerpiece of the work is the dramatic B-flat minor variation; it begins with a gentle, rocking intensity that turns into impassioned pleading.

The final impromptu, also in F minor, is full of mischievous glee and rollicking fun. The main theme, which was probably inspired by Hungarian folk dances, gives way to rolling scales with some delightfully unexpected twists and turns. The piece ends with a virtuosic flourish on what would have been the lowest note on Schubert’s piano.

About the Artist

Fifi Zhang 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 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 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. Former teachers include Marjorie Lee, Julian Martin, Matti Raekallio, and Pavlina Dokovska. Fifi is currently a doctoral candidate at CUNY Graduate Center, as a student of Ursula Oppens.