

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

May 10, 2023 6:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Lora Al-Ahmad, piano

Piano Sonata in E Minor (1932)

Andante — Allegro

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro

Florence Price
(1887–1953)

Dandelion (2022)

Shahar Regev
(b. 1992)

INTERMISSION

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1943)

Largo. Allegro molto vivace

Larghetto

Presto

Louise Talma
(1906–96)

The Art of Touching the Keyboard (1983)

Judith Weir
(b. 1954)

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the D.M.A. degree.
Please switch off your cell phones and refrain from taking flash pictures.

Notes on the Program

Florence Price's Piano Sonata in E Minor was composed in 1932, the same year she completed her famous Symphony in E Minor. Both of these works won the first prizes at the prestigious Rodman Wanamaker music contest. A pioneer among women, Florence Price was much celebrated for her achievements in her time. Price wrote over 300 compositions, including 20 orchestral works and over 100 art songs and arrangements of spirituals.

The Sonata in E Minor is a notable example of a large-scale, three movement work in the Romantic tradition. It is quite unique, as we can dive in the world of original spiritual-like themes, melodies that rhythmically resemble different African-American dances, such as the Juba (most notably in the second movement theme, a sixteenth note followed by an eighth note and another sixteenth), within the context of a Romantic virtuoso piano sonata.

Her compositional style and orchestral way of thinking are clearly present in this Piano Sonata. For example, the very opening of the first movement (Andante) begins with a chordal introduction in dotted rhythms, resembling a confident orchestral overture, as it's exploring a variety of registers on the piano. What follows is spiritual-like first and second themes, that are originally composed, rather than quoting any specific tunes. The first theme is more upbeat and dance-like and the second calm and lyrical. The movement consists of brilliant, virtuosic and highly expressive passages that emphasize on these original tunes. The thematic material is constantly transformed and taken through various chromatic journeys, until it concludes with dramatic scales and chordal textures in the original key of E minor.

The Andante in Rondo form – tender, lyrical and beautifully expressive, the second movement's opening section contains syncopated Juba-like rhythms on an original tune by Price. Written mostly in the middle register, you might find yourself wanting to sing along, due to the comfortable register, but also because of the accessible and welcoming nature of the melody.

What follows is a contrasting B section, to be performed in a lighter and faster pace manner. It briefly takes us away from the spiritual world as it's more reminiscent of the late-Romantic style due to its harmonic language and more conventional rhythms.

Another contrasting section (C), also reminiscent of the Romantic tradition, takes us through a more dramatic musical journey, as it is more harmonically unstable. We hear a tune, written in thicker textures, consisting of restless chords and arpeggiated patterns that highly contribute to the passionate character of this episode.

The movement concludes with the beautiful Juba-like rhythm tune that opened the movement, and, in a way, resolves all the musical tension from the previous episodes, as it's more peaceful and calm in nature.

The third and last movement of this Sonata is a hybrid two-part form (ABA' + Rondo), which is a very imaginative approach to structure by Price, as it is certainly not the most common form in the piano sonata literature.

The opening A section is a tarantella-like tune, which further shows Price's folklore-oriented way of composing. The theme is developed, becoming more and more dramatic, as the texture thickens and

goes through various chromatic transformations. The “Cantabile maestoso” that follows, gives a chance to “catch our breath” and enjoy a highly expressive and lyrical episode, almost sounding like a solo-cadenza from a late-Romantic piano concerto.

The tarantella-like tune reappears and closes the first part (ABA) of the movement. Make sure to enjoy it, as this is the time you’ll hear it for one last time in the whole movement! The second part (Rondo) starts with yet another folk-like, syncopated dance theme – upbeat, light and witty in character. You’ll hear “calls” from the second movement (slower pace, Juba-like tune) that will be interrupted by the folk-like new Rondo theme.

As Linda Brown wrote in her Schirmer’s edition of the Sonata, “*A real ‘tour de force,’ the dance theme and its subsidiary themes are taken through a series of meter and tempo changes to bring the movement to a triumphant close.*”

This Sonata is an example of how two worlds could be musically intertwined – the highly chromatic and expressive language of the late 19th century Romantic style, together with the spiritual, gospel and folk-like American style of the first half of the 20th century. Florence Price’s usage of sequences and virtuosic scale and arpeggio passages really take us to the passionate world of Romanticism. At the same time, taking advantage of the different registers on the piano throughout the sonata, greatly contributes to the dramatic and orchestral-like aspect of the work. The spiritual-like themes existing in the context of Romanticism and tonal harmony is truly a unique blend, and makes this Sonata an important and valuable treasure of the American piano literature of the 20th century.

The **Dandelion** symbolizes transitions, evolution, movement, and wandering. I relate these ideas to the musicians' process of studying and developing in a foreign country. In addition, the Dandelion reminds me of innocent childhood experiences, with cheerful and optimistic memories. Therefore, this piece represents a past and a future together with a journey of searching and finding.

The piece combines improvisatory fantasia-like writing with a precise, intensive, and rhythmical compositional style. The work is divided into three sections of different moods and atmospheres. One central theme connects the sections, appearing at the beginning and sometimes as an ending with a variation as a preparation for the following.

The first section is mainly in compound meters, highlighting the contrary motion motifs and polytonal harmonies. The short dream-like motif is later transformed and transposed abruptly, musically depicting the dandelion's flowerhead dispersed by the wind.

The second section opens with a chromatic rhythmical figure in the lower register, followed by a haunting folklore-like melody. The peak of the piece arrives as the chromatic gesture expands through the piano's full use of both high and low registers.

The final section is simple and expressive. The broad rubato texture and repeated chord pattern allow the performer to explore and expand the nostalgic and calm character of the piece.

“Dandelion” is dedicated to my dear friend Lora Al-Ahmad.

-Notes by **Shahar Regev**, Israeli composer

Louise Talma's Piano Sonata No. 1 is a captivating work that encapsulates the characteristics of the American style prevalent in her compositions. Talma's incorporation of the American style in this sonata can be observed through various musical elements, including harmonies, rhythms, and thematic materials.

The first movement is a thrilling and dynamic journey that showcases the composer's mastery of both lyrical expression and virtuosic pianistic techniques. The first movement begins with a slow and contemplative Introduction. Talma sets the stage with rich harmonies and a lyrical melody that unfolds gently, inviting the listener into a world of introspection.

As the Largo section reaches its culmination, there is a sudden shift in mood, propelling the listener into the spirited Allegro molto vivace. The tempo increases dramatically, and the pianist is now immersed in a flurry of rapid and groovy passages. Within the Allegro molto vivace, Talma explores a range of contrasting themes and textures. There are moments of playful syncopation, polyrhythms and intricate counterpoint, which add complexity to the musical fabric. The movement reaches its thrilling conclusion with a triumphant flourish, bringing back the material from the Introduction, now transformed and intensified.

The "Larghetto" movement of Talma's first sonata can be characterized by its leisurely pace and reflective nature, often incorporating colorful and jazz-infused harmonies. It invites listeners into a world of introspection, where the music gently unfolds and sustains a meditative character throughout the movement.

The movement opens with a tender and melancholic melody in the right hand, accompanied by dissonant but gentle intervals in the left hand. We are taken on a journey through highly chromatic sequences, which Talma masterfully wrote in a manner that does not disrupt the peaceful character of the movement.

The B section develops the musical texture by adding repeated notes in the accompanying voices which greatly contributes to the lyrical nature of the movement. What follows is a harmonically rich, modal-like transition to the A' section, which is now transposed a half step higher. That closing section is reminiscent of the material in the B section and concludes with tranquil and jazz-infused chords.

The third movement, marked Presto, serves as a thrilling and virtuosic finale to this three-movement sonata. Talma's musical language in this movement is characterized by its rhythmic complexity, harmonic richness, and technical demands, creating an exhilarating and captivating experience for both the performer and the listener.

The Presto begins with an explosive burst of energy, immediately capturing the attention of the audience. Talma establishes a propulsive and driving rhythm, utilizing intricate and syncopated patterns that propel the music forward with relentless momentum. The dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note is one of the main rhythmic motifs in the movement — it almost sounds like swinging eighth notes in a jazz improvisation! The restless sixteenth notes throughout the movement are first introduced in the middle of the first movement as an accompaniment figure in eighth notes — nice catch if you heard that!

The development elaborates on the material presented in the exposition and takes us through various key centers and groovy rhythms, such as syncopations and offbeat accents. As the movement reaches

its climax, Talma unleashes a breathtaking display of virtuosity, with rapid cascades of repeated notes and octaves, until it finally resolves joyfully in the key of C Major.

Judith Weir, a prominent contemporary British composer, has established herself as a unique and visionary voice in the world of composition. **“The Art of Touching the Keyboard,”** written in 1983, is a remarkable work for solo piano that reflects Weir's innovative approach to music-making and her exploration of the expressive possibilities of the instrument.

In “The Art of Touching the Keyboard,” an over-literal translation of the title of F. Couperin’s harpsichord *L’art de toucher le clavecin* from 1716 is named quite similarly for a reason — Weir's compositional style is characterized by its intricate and detailed writing. Notice the repeated note motif from the very opening and trace it throughout the movement — pressing single keys as if encountering the instrument for the first time. I find that very imaginative and entertaining.

She delves into the capabilities of the piano, exploiting its vast range of timbres, dynamics, and textures. The piece incorporates delicate and ethereal passages that require a light touch, as well as forceful and powerful sections that demand strength and intensity. Weir's exploration of touch techniques creates a captivating array of soundscapes, revealing the expressive potential of the piano. Throughout the composition, Weir's musical language is marked by its rich harmonic palette and inventive use of rhythm and phrasing. Her attention to detail is evident in the precise articulation markings and dynamic indications, providing guidance for the performer to fully convey her artistic vision. The pianist is encouraged to experiment with various touch techniques, creating a personal and intimate connection with the instrument.

“The Art of Touching the Keyboard” is a testament to Weir's imaginative and boundary-pushing compositional style. The piece challenges traditional notions of piano music, encouraging the performer and listener to engage with the instrument in new and introspective ways. Weir's exploration of touch and piano technique opens doors to a wealth of expressive possibilities.

About the Artist

Lora Al-Ahmad is a pianist and a composer from Sofia, Bulgaria. She graduated from Mannes College with honors and holds a BM degree in Piano Performance, a Double Major Master's degree in Piano Performance and Composition, and a Professional Studies Diploma degree in Composition. She studied piano with Pavlina Dokovska and Vladimir Valjarevic and composition with Lowell Liebermann.

In May 2019, the last concert of the series "Musical Treasures from Bulgaria", was dedicated to Lora as a composer and a pianist. The performance took place at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall.

In May 2020, her "Two Skazkas", published by the Theodore Presser Company, won the First Prize in the Solo Flute category of the 2020 Newly Published Music Competition by the National Flute Association in the United States.

Her music has been performed by internationally distinguished musicians such as Stefan Ragnar Hoskuldsson, the principal flute player of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Billy Hunter, the principal trumpet player of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Wolfram Koessel, the cellist of the American String Quartet and many others.

Festival appearances include The Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau in France, Festetics Palace, Keszthely Zala in Hungary, The Bowdoin International Music Festival in Maine, USA, and The Mannes Sounds Festival in New York, USA.

As a committed soloist and chamber musician, Lora has performed in prestigious venues in New York such as Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie, The Bohemian National Hall at the Czech Center, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, The DiMenna Center, The German House at the United Nations Plaza, The Schubert Club in St. Paul, Minneapolis and others.

Lora is an active advocate for new music, often exclusively focusing on works by women composers. One of the concerts she organized and presented was "Chamber Music by Young Women Composers", featuring works by her colleagues Shahar Regev and Hyejin Cho.

In November 2021, Lora was the Guest Composer and Lecturer at SIUE (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville), where the premiere of her Piano Trio "Irminden" took place. The commissioned work was recently featured in a new CD release (2022), titled "One hundred years of Bulgarian Piano Trios", with performance by Miroslav Hristov, violin, Marta Simitdchieva, cello, and Ilia Radoslavov, piano.

Lora has given numerous radio and TV interviews in Bulgaria, including her appearances at the Bulgarian National Radio "BNR," "Darik" Radio and "En-face" on TV1 Bulgaria. She is also an executive board member at the well-established organization "BCENY."

Lora is currently pursuing Doctoral Studies in Piano Performance at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City and is a faculty member in the Piano Department at Bard College Preparatory Division.

Her works are published and printed on demand by Theodore Presser Company.