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Sanjay Aiyar, piano

Senior Honors Recital

From the studio of Elena Cholakova

Sunday, February 23, 2025, 2:00 p.m

Emerson Concert Hall
Schwartz Center for Performing Arts



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Program Design: Bebe Rogers | Cover Photo: Mark Teague

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Program

Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse, S.160
(Years of Pilgrimage, First Year: Switzerland)

Franz Liszt
(1811–1886)

- I. *Chapelle de Guillaume Tell (William Tell's Chapel)*
- II. *Au lac du Wallenstadt (At the Lake Walenstadt)*
- III. *Pastorale*
- IV. *Au bord d'une source (Beside a Spring)*
- V. *Orage (Storm)*
- VI. *Vallée d'Obermann (Obermann's Valley)*
- VII. *Églogue (Eclogue)*
- VIII. *Le mal du pays (Homesickness)*
- IX. *Les cloches de Genève: Nocturne (The Bells of Geneva)*

This recital is presented by the Department of Music at Emory University | music.emory.edu

Program Notes

Notes on the program by Sanjay Aiyar

Chapelle de Guillame Tell (William Tell's Chapel)

In the late 1830s, Franz Liszt visited the Tellskapelle—a Catholic chapel constructed where William Tell made his famous escape. *William Tell's Chapel*, the first piece of the *Années de pèlerinage*, serves as more than a programmatic recounting of the Tell legend. While the middle section portrays Tell's capture and escape during a violent storm, Liszt really explores principles associated with the legend as well as his own experiences. Tell's story is one of new beginnings—with the Swiss people rebelling against their tyrannical rulers. Liszt's whole purpose of the "pilgrimage" was to find himself, introspectively considering his place in the world. Moreover, there is an obvious political tone to Tell's legend. Switzerland was in the "Regeneration" period (1830–1848) after the 1830 July Revolution in France, where Liszt undoubtedly supported the struggle of the masses. Additionally, Liszt was deeply impacted by the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, which occurred around the time that the coda for this piece was written. In it, Liszt reflects on both Tell's legacy and his own experiences and travels. Another important aspect of the piece is the inherent religious quality—with the piece referencing a chapel. Interestingly, Liszt would reuse ideas from this piece in later religious works, such as the introduction from this piece in his *St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds* (1863). Liszt invokes many orchestral sounds in this piece. The opening of the piece has strong brass character—like military fanfare. Later, he indicates alphorn, a traditional lip-reed instrument of the Alps. In the middle "Prisoner and Storm" section, Liszt writes vibrato, foreshadowing the "laissez vibrer" markings of Ravel and Debussy, and uses pedal and intonation techniques to create a three-dimensional atmosphere. The audience is instantly captivated by the depiction of increasingly turbulent waves during a storm (which differs from later depictions of water and storms in this set), which are all strikingly impressionist textures.

Au lac du Wallenstadt (At the Lake of Walenstadt)

The breathtaking Lake Walenstadt captivated Liszt, inspiring him to compose a beautiful proto-impressionist and proto-minimalistic work. The left-hand is an ostinato figure for nearly the entire piece, having an A-flat pedal point functioning as a drone. The piece is monothematic,

with the theme being pentatonic—in fact, the first half of the piece only uses six-pitch classes (A-flat pentatonic plus the occasional D-flat in the left hand). Pentatonic melodies would become intimately associated with water—foreshadowing Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* (1901). Liszt also uses perfect fourths and fifths contributing to the sense of openness. The piece is deeply philosophical. There is a push back against the dogmatic tonic-dominant relationship, which mirrors the turbulent and unsettled waters of nature. Liszt puts the tonic and dominant in harmony with one another, using pedal points and omitting key chord tones under long pedal markings, portraying the tranquil scene he experienced. Brief substitutions of minor for major momentarily invoke a darkening of the “purer spring.” Additionally, there is the short modulation to E major, with a truncated version of the theme. The passage has an illusory quality, as if we are searching for something that isn’t there (an idea that is further developed in *Vallée d’Obermann*). Cleverly, Liszt respells D-sharp as E-flat, allowing for a seamless transition between the distant E and A-flat major.

Pastorale (Pastoral)

A prevailing idea in this cycle is Liszt’s admiration for the shepherd’s lifestyle. This piece continues the proto-impressionist and proto-minimalistic ideas explored in the previous two pieces. *Pastorale* is rather simple, with two themes being presented sequentially, and then repeated. The left-hand uses two different ostinato figures. The first is an oscillating motive in fifths under an E pedal point, which creates a harmonious relationship between tonic and dominant—perhaps the relationship between humans and nature that shepherds idealize. The second ostinato is a series of open perfect fifths invoking a bagpipe texture. The modulation between themes comes without modular preparation, yet not jarring in the slightest. The atmosphere Liszt creates is an observer looking across the countryside and spotting a distant village with festive dances. Themes A and B serve to contrast attentiveness, with the observer’s attention shifting back and forth from the performance to the natural landscape. This is best portrayed with the piece’s ending, with the music seemingly fading out—as if for the final time, attention has shifted elsewhere and the performers have become part of the scene.

Au bord d’une source (Beside a Spring)

Liszt now depicts water not as turbulent or tranquil, but as active and lively. Comparing the depiction of water in *Au lac du Wallenstadt*, Liszt is much more fluid texturally and harmonically, invoking a more spirited, turbulent character. This is quite the development, and can be seen in his later compositions like *Les jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este* (1877). Debussy in particular was highly influenced by this piece, actually hearing it performed by Liszt when the two met in Rome. In fact, Debussy’s

Jardins sous la pluie (1903) would draw inspiration from Liszt's textures and structures. The piece also has connections to impressionist art, with the main theme becoming apparent when viewed (or listened to) from a distance—one cannot just follow the top line and say that is the melody. As such, the main theme is contrapuntal with four main motives. Liszt develops each of these motives throughout the piece, with the “sigh” motive (a dissonant second) permeating consistently. This idea represents a departure from the tension-release dialectic, and are really capricious, ephemeral aesthetic motives. Ravel, with *Jeux d'eau* (1901), and Debussy, with *Pagodes* (1903), borrow this idea in their depictions of active water. Liszt is truly adventurous with his textures and harmonies. The first development of theme B texturally foresees Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan* (1905). Dissonances like sevenths, ninths (and flat-ninths), the aforementioned seconds are extensively used as colorful devices, as well as diminished and half-diminished chords. The cadenza that follows the climax uses ascending quartal and quintal harmonic flourishes, with a descending pentatonic scale using parallel perfect fourths and fifths. Structurally, Liszt departs from the more standard, more rigid variation structure and explores thematic transformation—which will be used later in this set, and to a larger extent in the *B minor* (1854) and *Dante* (1856) sonatas.

Orage (Storm)

The mountainous regions of Switzerland are infamous for their thunderstorms, which are depicted masterfully here by Liszt. However, the piece also represents a philosophical and introspective view on the human psyche. For instance, the introductory idea bears striking similarity to the opening of Liszt's *Concerto for Piano and Strings* (1833), which he referred to as “Malédiction.” The middle F-sharp major development on the first theme could represent the “high nest.” This is repeated in E major, which interestingly, along with F-sharp major, are two keys that Liszt held in high religious significance. Structurally, the piece explores thematic transformation instead of the typical variation structure. Liszt's influence on Debussy is evident, with his seventh prélude *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* (1909) drawing much inspiration from the opening motive and chordal ideas of the main theme. An intriguing composition motive in *Orage* are the interesting scales. Firstly, the huge swell of octaves at the beginning is a scale that would become Olivier Messiaen's fourth *Mode of Limited Transposition*. Secondly, a similar passage right at the end uses the Hungarian minor scale, which Liszt pioneered the usage of in Western Classical music. Pianistically, *Orage* presents numerous technical challenges due to its striking textures. Notably, Liszt uses a chord cluster of six notes under the cataclysmic cascade of octaves closing the first theme's phrase, serving a more aesthetic purpose than a functional

one. He also uses radical interlocking octave textures of progressing diminished seventh harmonies, over a chromatically ascending bass, invoking a powerful, howling wind. The surges of octaves, huge tidal scales, clashing double thirds, stabbing cluster chords, thunderous accents, and overwhelming sounds convey the violent storms superbly. Liszt's deliberately long pedal markings are seldom observed, leading some performances to fall short of the overwhelming character.

Vallée d'Obermann (Obermann's Valley)

The pièce de résistance of the set, and one of Liszt's greatest compositions. The first thing to note is the metaphysical and philosophical conception of the valley. It is an homage to Senancour's epistolary novel, *Obermann* (1804). In it, Obermann, a man plagued by self-doubt, aimlessness, and despair, undergoes self-imposed exile to Switzerland to find his place in the world. Despite experiencing brief episodes of sublime spirituality, he discovers he does not belong there either. Liszt certainly resonated with the story and composed a piece that depicts principles from the narrative. The piece is a series of thematic transformations on the seemingly simple theme that is stated in the very opening. One of the three principal motives of the theme is the "sigh" motive, which contrasts with the one heard in *Au bord d'une source*. This main theme gets inverted, fragmented, and permuted. The ideas are freely associated with one another, with theme B being an especially clever rearrangement of theme A's ideas, but in a sublimely different character. Liszt's harmonic language here is truly revolutionary. The harmonic restlessness of the opening phrase ingeniously portrays aimlessness. Modulations are frequent and direct, often between very distant keys. Polychords, diminished and half-diminished harmonies, and dissonant additions are recurrent. Liszt's use of the striking augmented major seventh chord is pervasive. Unusual scales like the Ukrainian Dorian and Neapolitan minor are used to arresting effect. Structurally, Liszt marvellously depicts Obermann's experiences, delving into the depths of suffering and rising to the heights of bliss. The ending of the piece is particularly striking, with an emphasized dissonant seventh and augmented harmony undermining the seemingly triumphant ending.

Églogue (Eclogue)

Églogue presents a reawakening and rebirth (both naturally and philosophically) after the previous two pieces. The shepherd's lifestyle theme returns, with Eclogues being poems that focus on pastoral ideas. This piece is another departure from traditional variation structure, instead using thematic transformation. The main theme is pentatonic and comprises a few key ideas that get developed—a prominent upbeat and dotted rhythm. Pedal points, chordal extensions, and oscillating,

euphonious tonic-dominant oscillations give a more aesthetic and colorful approach to harmony. Dominant ninth chords are used as stable sonorities, with the E-flat 7(9) miraculously fading out at the end of the first section, for example. One of the developments of the upbeat motive uses exclusively dominant seventh chords with added sixths and ninths. Liszt uses some gorgeous modulations, including a particularly enchanting one between the distant keys of G-flat and C major. The ending has an unconventional resolution of a seemingly out-of-place Neapolitan chord: N6-ii7(add11)-V9, which he would later use to conclude his famous *Liebesträume* No. 3 (1850). Liszt's genius truly shines through texturally. The playful eighth-note trill accompaniment, harp-like cascade, and ending graceful figure portray a serene pastoral scene. Listen to how the eighth-note melody line of the introduction seamlessly becomes the accompaniment of the main theme.

Le mal du pays (Homesickness)

Homesickness is not just something Liszt must have felt during his travels, but throughout his life at that point considering he never really had a proper home. The piece has two main sections. The first is highly improvisatory, jumping between ideas restlessly like an unsettled soul. The second is a two-part theme, stated in parallel keys. The opening theme bears similarity to Liszt's innovative *Nuages Gris* (1881), with both sharing a prominent sharpened scale-degree four. When the first section is recapitulated in G minor, the audience can hear the subtle changes Liszt makes with articulation and expression, invoking small mistakes when recalling past experiences. These markings are often ignored in performance, but are crucial to convincingly convey the unique feeling of homesickness and nostalgia. The B minor transformation of the second section is very similar to a passage in Liszt's *St. Francis of Paola Walking on the Waves* (1863). Harmonically, we see an adventurous side of Liszt here. The piece is very free, jumping between keys after only establishing them for a short time; worth mentioning is the modulation from distantly related G-sharp minor to G minor between the second section and recapitulation of the first section. Liszt uses unorthodox harmonic language to convey the unique sensation of homesickness. For instance, diminished major seventh and half-diminished sharp four chords he uses are pervasive and striking. *Le mal du pays* was a major influence for esteemed Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami in his novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2013). It makes an important impression on the protagonist, Tazaki, who is overcome with nostalgia remembering his former friends.

Les cloches de Genève: Nocturne (The Bells of Geneva)

Geneva, particularly the Saint Pierre Cathedral, is famous for its bells.

Both of the main themes principally represent bells, but in miraculously different ways. The first theme in the Nocturne section is characterized by the bell-like three-note ostinato—an idea Debussy would later use in his *Les cloches* (1891)—accompanying a lyrical, tender bell-like melody. Additionally, the structure of the first section bears similarity to Ravel's *Entre cloches* (1897), having sonorous layers coupling with the ostinato and contextualizing the harmonic progression. The second theme is accompanied by a harp-like figure, building to a huge, rhapsodic climax. Listen to the remarkably seamless transition between compound duple meter (6/8) and simple duple meter (2/4) between the two sections. Other representations of bells include the deeply resonant bass sonorities of the Nocturne and delicate, airy sonorities near the end. Liszt is harmonically experimental here. The main harmonic idea, a simple ii-I, is developed into vii⁰7-I and V₉-I later, for example. Modulations between distant keys happen remarkably smoothly (from B to C major as the first theme tapers off, for instance), diminished seventh and half-diminished seventh chords are plentiful, and both seventh and ninth chords are handled as stable sonorities. A particularly magical unresolved harmony is the C7 (it ends up “resolving” to a dominant and half-diminished harmony), where Liszt creates an atmosphere of bells penetrating through a gloomy, dark night. A radical harmonic move sounds near the end of the piece, with a G major chord bridging a I₇ (B₇) and ii₇ (C-sharp m₇).

Sanjay Aiyar, piano

Sanjay Aiyar, 21, is a senior in Emory's College of Arts and Sciences pursuing a double major in biology and music. He began learning piano at age five with Laura Kerr in the Philadelphia suburbs and studied with her throughout high school. At Emory, he first studied with Dr. Erika Tazawa and currently studies under Dr. Elena Cholakova, director of piano studies. In his performing career, Aiyar has performed at the Curtis Institute and in the Philadelphia Music Teachers Association State Festival. At Emory, he received the William B. Dickinson Scholarship and is a nominee for the Louis C. Sudler Prize (results to be determined). Franz Liszt is his favorite composer and he has listened to all one thousand of Liszt's works along with reading the entire three-volume Alan Walker biographies. Aiyar also enjoys improvising, playing by ear, transcribing music by composers like Fats Waller and Nat “King” Cole, and composing arrangements on different themes and songs. In addition, Aiyar is passionately involved with Emory's Qawwali and Gamelan ensembles.

Outside of music, Aiyar enjoys biochemistry and worked in the

Benovic Lab at Thomas Jefferson University studying G protein-coupled receptors. After college, he aspires to pursue an MD-PhD. In his free time, you can find Aiyar on the baseball field or exploring Google Maps. He is the Vice President of the Emory DII Club Baseball team and plays all around the diamond. Aiyar's passion for geography has him ardently competing in GeoGuessr (online geography game) tournaments, where he even qualified for the 2023 World Cup.

Aiyar would like to thank his family for their consistent love and support; professors, teachers, and mentors; as well as his friends and supporters. He extends the utmost gratitude to his honors committee members, Drs. Elena Cholakova, Laura Emmery, and Roger Deal, for their guidance in his honors thesis.

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Series, Schwartz Center, Emerson Concert Hall

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Tuesday, April 22, 8:00 p.m., Spring Composition Showcase, Performing Arts Studio

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