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Vivian Zhao, piano

Senior Honors Recital

*Study of Performing and Visual Arts
Through Form and Sound*

From the studio of Elena Cholakova

Saturday, March 30, 2024, 2:00 p.m.

Emerson Concert Hall
Schwartz Center for Performing Arts



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Program Design: Lisa Baron | Cover Photo: Mark Teague

Program

Réminiscences de Boccanegra, S.438

Franz Liszt
(1811–1886)

Piano Sonata No. 1

Carl Vine
(b. 1954)

—Intermission—

Pictures at an Exhibition

Modest Mussorgsky
(1839–1881)

- Promenade*
- 1. *Gnomus*
Promenade
- 2. *The Old Castle*
Promenade
- 3. *Tuileries (Children's Quarrel after Games)*
- 4. *Bydlo*
Promenade
- 5. *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*
- 6. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*
Promenade
- 7. *The Market at Limoges*
- 8. *Catacombs—Cum mortuis in lingua mortua*
- 9. *The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)*
- 10. *The Great Gate at Kiev*

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

Program Notes

***Réminiscences de Boccanegra*, S.438 (1882)**

Franz Liszt advocated for the musical arts as a vessel for communicating societal progression through a sonic language. Along his journey, Liszt spearheaded the pursuit of utilizing creative liberties and inspiration

from other artists to design unique works that capture his own musical individuality. In a way, Franz Liszt embodies his collaborative approach to creating and enjoying art in his music. As one of the first pianists to play Beethoven's Sonatas in a recital, Liszt transformed the musical stage into a platform that showcased underrepresented works that he thought were deserving of greater recognition. In creating an accessible method of music-making, he transcribed hundreds of symphonic and operatic works to the piano. Such an example is *Réminiscences de Boccanegra*, the last piece of his monumental set of operatic fantasies inspired by other composers like Wagner and Rossini. Liszt turned to Verdi for his final composition, paraphrasing the opera *Simon Boccanegra*. Liszt avidly watched and admired Verdi's career, responding with great enthusiasm to his 1881 revision of the opera.

The pianist sought to condense this three-act opera into one paraphrase, highlighting key moments with his own twist. Compared to the original opera, Liszt's transcription has a more contemporary harmonic landscape, exploring bitonality and harmonic ambiguity. Liszt opens his *Réminiscences* accordingly, opening with the opera's evocatively warm and pastoral orchestral introduction. He then utilizes different motifs ranging from the second and final acts, including the chorus calling to bear arms and the protagonist's final cry before his death. Finally, he recapitulates the orchestral introduction with an original coda, showering the melodic accompaniment with scaling chordal jumps and indulgent harmonic expansion. Liszt's transcription, alongside all of his other paraphrases, culminates a legacy of experimentation with structure and pushing the boundaries of tonality. His advocacy for musical participation and development inspires greater creative engagement in the generations that follow.

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1990)

Carl Vine, born in Perth, Western Australia, is one of the most prominent composers of the 21st century, famed for his vibrant and widely acclaimed catalog of compositions. Heavily inspired by the Modernist movement of the 20th century, Vine explores this aesthetic language through his symphonies, concertos, film, electronic, and dance music. As an educator, freelance pianist/composer, and entrepreneur, Vine is one of the most celebrated Australian composers, taking him across the world for audiences to savor his modern art music. Some notable undertakings include arranging the Australian National Anthem and writing music for the Olympic Games in Atlanta (1996).

His first sonata marks a triumph in critical approval and an eclectic collection of his pianistic prowess. This sonata, commissioned by the Sydney Dance Company, first accompanied dance performances, then later developed culturally as a stand-alone piece for piano. His enthusiasm for the Elliot Carter Sonata and historical affinity toward dance music is

evident through the piece's rhythmic modulations, with tight-fitting choreography within its framework. Vine redefines the limitations of what a sonata can represent, creating an overarching form expanded across two movements maintained by a percussive undercurrent. The complex polyrhythms synergize with the neoclassically influenced harmonic landscape of the music, pushing for a mosaic of sound. Vine utilizes all three pedals, forearm clusters, and silent key dampening to convey the breadth of possibility when writing for the piano. Each layer of sound is carefully crafted to balance delicate, chorale-like sections with thunderous, dense passages in waves, achieving a diverse listening experience of perpetual motion.

***Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874)**

Modest Mussorgsky was part of the “Mighty Handful,” a prominent group of 19th-century Russian nationalist composers and, by nature, a Realist. He and the “Mighty Handful” composers, such as Rimsky-Korsakov, prioritized curating a recognizable Russian sound. Opposing the conservatory teachings of Moscow or St. Petersburg, Mussorgsky was self-taught and had more organic influences from folk culture, heavily focusing on an agrarian aspect of Russian life. He valued their concerns and interests and portrayed their lifestyles in a celebratory way in his music. To him, Russian sound was a matter of capturing the Russian struggle, joy, and pride of working the soil. In relation to *Pictures at an Exhibition*, his ideas remain faithful to this Russian sound as he captures the soundscapes of everyday activities and individuals. Mussorgsky wrote this work to remember his friend Viktor Hartmann, an artist of astonishing creativity in designing fantastical structures or figures rooted in Russian culture. Hartmann consistently included people in his paintings to provide scale for a greater architectural structure. In 1874, the Russian Architects' Society at the Hall of the Academy of Artists honored the late Hartmann through a gallery of his paintings and drawings. Mussorgsky, moved by this gesture, “[roved] through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend.” Completed within 20 days of its inception, *Pictures at an Exhibition* was a work of great fervor, fueled by the composer's friendship with Hartmann. Popularized by Ravel's orchestration in 1922, *Pictures at an Exhibition* has proved to be a charming, multifaceted suite curated to translate visual art into sound.

The *Promenade* theme opens the suite and reappears in modulated keys and moods throughout the work. It strings each movement together, conveying the sense that Mussorgsky himself is strolling through the gallery and reflecting on the paintings before him or in anticipation of the next.

Gnomus follows with trepidation and tensive rhythmic lurches, breaking the paced grandiosity of the opening *Promenade*. Hartmann's now lost sketch is of a little gnome who runs clumsily with crooked legs.

The Old Castle depicts a troubadour lamentedly singing in front of the ruins of a medieval castle. With patches of moonlight illuminating the dark atmosphere, the mood is serene yet solemn, with the singer's cry contrasted with the stillness of the environment.

Tuileries paints a scene in the garden of Paris with children buzzing with energy, earnestly playing among a group of nurses trying to calm them to little avail. The movement is active with sonic banter and lightheartedness, beckoning the listener to join the merriment.

In an abrupt shift in tonality and texture, Mussorgsky transitions to *Blydo*, a set of oxen toiling across a field, pulling a cart with large wheels. The broad range from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo* pictures a dynamic motion of the oxen, beginning in the foreground of the listener until they slowly inch further into the horizon. This movement came to symbolize the laborious state of the proletarian class during the 20th century, marked by the strenuous yet unrelenting will to move forward.

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks returns to a more frivolous mood, depicting a pair of dancers dressed as canary fledglings still emerging from their shells. Mussorgsky's free-handed use of trills and ornamentation depicts an ensemble of chirps and highlights the piano's percussive potential in mimicking various instruments.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle were inspired by two different sets of portraits by Hartmann and demonstrate a dialogue between the figures. The wealthy Samuel Goldenberg flaunts his riches to the pleas of the poverty-stricken Schmuyle, to which the haughty Samuel retaliates with rude refusal.

Limoges is a western-central city in France, to which this movement is named after. Mussorgsky depicts a bustling market highlighted by the zealous chordal and fast-paced tempo of insistent propulsion.

Catacombs instantly halts the momentum of *Limoges* with the thundering arrival of the opening chords. The spectator has arrived in the dark, spiraling caverns of the Paris catacombs, only illuminated with the lantern in their hand. The exchange between *fortissimo* and *piano* is a musical representation of echoes of the footsteps of the spectator that disturb the silence of an empty tomb.

As the spectator traverses deeper into the catacombs, the light of their lantern causes the skulls littered across the walls to glow with a warm hue. The Latin inscriptions are of a relic language, hence leading to the translated title *With the Dead in a Dead Language*.

Baba Yaga is a legendary character within Slavic folklore, living in a forest hut that travels on a set of gargantuan birds' legs. Her story is told to children, often described as an ogress or a wicked witch who steals misbehaving children who wander into the woods before eating them. The assault of ascending chords sounds as the daunting legs strike closer and closer to the spectator. Baba Yaga waits to corner her next victim with cunning speed to strike at the right moment, characterized by the climactic whirlwind of the coda.

Without breaking, *The Great Gates of Kiev* marks the return of the spectator's journey from the diverse scenes of previous movements back to the central *Promenade* theme. This last movement represents the best of Hartmann's work, depicting the majestic gates and cupola dedicated to Tsar Alexander II in 1866. Mussorgsky highlights the nationalistic pride conveyed both by Hartmann's design and his own devotion by incorporating another theme styled from Russian Orthodox hymns. Mussorgsky ends the suite celebrating the Russian sound and honors his friend forever by etching his name into an epic homage to cultural identification.

Vivian Zhao, piano

Vivian Zhao, 22, will graduate in May with degrees in neuroscience and behavioral biology and music. Originally from Chandler, Arizona, Zhao has had a passion for music since she was young and studied piano for 15 years. Previously a student from the New Century Conservatory, she participated in numerous regional and national competitions. She currently studies under Elena Cholakova. Zhao attended the Prague Piano Festival in summer 2023. As the Pathways Global Award recipient, she explored the repertoire of her honors recital through cultural immersion and the guidance of David Kalhous. Her accolades include the William B. Dickinson and Atlanta Music Club scholarships.

Zhao strives for a collaborative environment in music performance. She actively acts as the keyboardist for the Emory University Symphony Orchestra (EUSO), performs original compositions for the Emory Composer's Society, and participates in chamber music alongside other student musicians. Her contribution to EUSO led her to premiere a live film score, *Sister Carrie* by Daniel Nearing, in Chicago for the Gene Siskel Film Center in 2022 with 11 other principals. Zhao ties her musical life back to her goals to give back to the community.

Zhao would like to thank Elena Cholakova, Edmund Goode, her family, and her friends for their endless support during her artistic endeavors. She is grateful for meeting such enthusiastic musicians, composers, and educators here at Emory and sharing these experiences through music-making. She would also like to thank the staffs of the Schwartz Center for Performing Arts and the Performing Arts Studio for their hard work arranging these performances with such attention to detail. These four years at Emory have a special place in her heart for all the memories and cherished moments shared in this musical space and have impacted her outlook on life more than she can express.

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