

MUSIC at EMORY

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RACHEL CHON, PIANO

SENIOR HONORS RECITAL

SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2019, 2:00 P.M.

EMERSON CONCERT HALL

SCHWARTZ CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

PROGRAM

Toccata in E Minor, BWV 914

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685–1750)

Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, op. 83

Sergei Prokofiev
(1891–1953)

I. *Allegro inquieto*

II. *Andante caloroso*

III. *Precipitato*

Vallée d'Obermann from *Années de Pèlerinage*:
Première année: Suisse

Franz Liszt
(1811–1886)

La Valse: Poème chorégraphique

Maurice Ravel
(1875–1937)

PROGRAM NOTES

Tocatta in E Minor, BWV 914

Toccatas were one of the first freely composed works for solo keyboard. As pioneering works that highlighted the keyboard alone, without any vocal or dance element, toccatas featured virtuosic passagework and improvisatory interludes. The earliest toccatas emerged in the 15th century in Germany and typically featured running scales alongside chord sequences. In the 16th century, toccatas grew in popularity and became more rhythmically complex. Towards the end of the Baroque period, toccatas usually incorporated other musical forms such as variations and fugues.

In Johann Sebastian Bach's toccatas for keyboard and organ, the fantasy-like, free-spirited nature that saturates each piece is intermingled with the logic and structure characteristic of a fugue. It is no wonder that Bach often used his toccatas for teaching: the ingenious combination of free and structured material demands a well-rounded interpretive sense from the performer.

Bach's Toccata in E Minor, BWV 914, was written in 1710, during which time he served as court organist for the Duke of Weimar's court. The Toccata opens with a brief prelude that introduces a simple three-note motif, which is referenced in the double fugue that ensues. It is in the improvisatory character of the *Adagio* where the heart of the Toccata lies, with its recitative-like scale passages and broken chords that embellish the path through an imaginative variety of key areas, leading to a return to E. An animated, vivacious fugue ends the piece, featuring two themes comprised of the three-note motif from the opening. While certainly more structured than the preceding *Adagio*, the incomplete restatements of the theme, creative intertwinings of melodic lines, and virtuosic sequences reinforce the overall fantastical nature of the piece.

Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, op. 83

Sergei Prokofiev navigated his musical career in a tumultuous period of Russian history, living through World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War, and World War II. The evolution of his compositions unmistakably reflects the changing political atmosphere throughout the first half of the 20th century. He began his Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth piano sonatas (called the "War Sonatas") in 1939, the year that marked the beginning of World War II.

Prokofiev straddled the borderline between embracing revolutionary ideas and working to establish himself in the Soviet Union's musical scene throughout his life. Lack of opportunity for artistic progress in the Soviet Union contributed to his move to the United States in 1918, but he strengthened his ties with the Soviet Union upon returning to Europe. During these pre-World War II years, Prokofiev composed for significant Soviet occasions including the centenary of Pushkin's death and Stalin's 60th birthday. Youth-oriented works were also prized at the time, making it no surprise that Prokofiev's compositional output consisted of many of these works. He wrote 12 piano pieces, *Music for Children* (op. 65, 1935), and a symphonic work that musicians today still encounter in their childhoods and beyond, *Petya i Volk* (*Peter and the Wolf*, op. 67, 1936).

Shortly after World War II began, Prokofiev's close friend and collaborator, theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, was tortured and killed by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). Meyerhold's experimental style opposed the movement of socialist realism in the Soviet Union, bringing him under scrutiny by authorities throughout his career. While Prokofiev was devastated by Meyerhold's killing and grew increasingly reluctant about composing for state interests, he continued to compose propaganda work, like the "War Sonatas." Soviet supervision of artistic output was less strict during the war years, however, and in Prokofiev's works we observe atonality and elements of socialist realism. The Central Committee would later crack down on these features in its 1948 resolutions to bring Soviet art back to its roots, banning works like the "War Sonatas."

Prokofiev completed his Sonata No. 7, the second of the "War Sonatas," in 1942. Prior to the denunciation it would later face when Soviet controls on art tightened, the work was premiered by Sviatoslav Richter in Moscow's Hall of the Home of the Unions to national praise. The Seventh Sonata, along with the Eighth Sonata, would also go on to win Stalin Prizes. What is evident throughout the Seventh Sonata is its *inquieta* (restless) spirit, which Prokofiev indicates on the very first measure of the score. This restlessness is instilled in the core of each movement's individual character.

We encounter the character of the first movement through its rhythmically simple, yet melodically unsettling introductory motive. The restlessness intensifies each time the motive unexpectedly returns throughout the movement, with the listener never sure which voice the motive will enter in, where accents will be placed, and what form the accompaniment will take. The constant swelling of dynamics from mysteriously soft to menacingly loud and back adds another dimension of unpredictability to the movement, which arguably ends rather sarcastically with a quiet, rumbling blip of a B-flat major triad.

The common thread of restlessness continues in the second movement, which is restless in a more haunting and doom-impending sense. While the movement starts off *caloroso* (warmly) in all three voices, there is an unmistakable sense of underlying instability as the introductory theme teeters on the threshold between consonance and dissonance. The restlessness escalates as the voices intertwine and layer over each other, leading to a catastrophic bell-like climax that quickly dissolves back into the opening theme, now tragically scarred by the movement that has just unfolded.

The third movement is considered by many to be a triumphant conclusion to the Seventh Sonata, but the listener and performer must latch onto a rapid-fire of eighth notes in a dancelike yet restless 7/8 meter. The accented left-hand motif serves as an anchor for the listener in this relentless movement. There is a moment of short-lived lyricism in the middle of the movement, but it immediately snaps back into a repeat of the beginning material. This paves the way for a quick ramp-up to the triumphant climax, which is reinforced to the extreme with a four-measure long belting out of chords in the home key of B-flat major.

Vallée d'Obermann from *Années de Pèlerinage*

The traveling lives of the widely-performing, ever-booked concert pianists of today undeniably connect back to the career of Hungarian composer and virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt. During the 19th century, the public grew increasingly musically-engaged and fascinated by the idea of the virtuoso musician. Liszt's performances of both emotionally and technically demanding repertoire were so enthralling for audiences that the obsession with Liszt took on a name of its own, coined by German poet Heinrich Heine: "Lisztomania." Liszt's contributions to classical music, however, extend far beyond the dramatic stage presence and technical command that he was able to radiate through his works like the *Transcendental Études*. A prime example of Liszt's engagement with literary and artistic influences, and of his more introspective and expressive compositions is his *Années de Pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage)*, a collection of three suites for solo piano.

The first two suites of *Années de Pèlerinage* evoke Liszt's years in Switzerland and Italy with his lover, Countess Marie d'Agoult. Liszt had travelled to Switzerland with d'Agoult in 1835, which was the start of a four-year journey for the couple. Liszt initially illuminated on his sensory experiences of Switzerland in his *Album d'un voyageur*, which he reworked in creating the first suite of *Années de Pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse (First Year: Switzerland)*. Among the places Liszt visited in Switzerland are William Tell's Chapel and Lake Wallenstadt, depicted in the first and second pieces of the suite, respectively. The sixth piece in the suite, *Vallée d'Obermann*, highlights Liszt's emotional sensibility and the influence of Romantic literature. This particular piece draws from French author and philosopher Etienne Pivert de Senancour's novel of the same name, which was prized by 19th-century Romantics. In Senancour's *Vallée d'Obermann*, the embattled hero Obermann contemplates his desires and identity while surrounded by the nature of Switzerland.

Obermann's sense of contemplation emanates from the very first phrase of the piece, which features one of two main themes that Liszt develops throughout the entire piece. This theme starts off with a melancholy descent, followed by a short episode of wandering that leads into another descent. The melody then soars with a glimmer of hope before falling again. Later in the piece, the second theme enters at a slightly more animated pace, portraying both blissful hope and sorrowful contemplation as it soars to unexpected, bittersweet harmonies before coming to the first truly triumphant cadence. The triumph of this cadence, however, is short-lived: the piece quickly enters a stormy tremolo and octave section.

After finally weathering this storm, we hear embellishment of the two initial themes with *arpeggiation*, quickly repeated chords, and running octaves. The piece closes with an extended section that enforces the key of E, in which we can sense the plight of the man in Senancour's novel as he makes realizations about his identity and purpose: "I feel, I exist only to exhaust myself in untamable desires, to drink deep of the allurements of a fantastic world . . ." After a glorious build-up to an E major octave *arpeggio*, Liszt abruptly and menacingly repeats the first theme, which reflects Obermann's ultimate conclusion of being "finally vanquished by [the world's] sensuous illusion."

La Valse

Maurice Ravel was no stranger to external setbacks throughout his musical career. His early failures to be recognized at competitions and classes led him to leave his piano studies at the Conservatoire de Paris and focus on composing, but even the realm of composition served up obstacles. Ravel was prohibited from entering the final round of the Prix de Rome competition in 1905 for his use of then alternative elements like parallel fifths, and his setting of works like the exotic *Scheherazade*, inspired by the Middle Eastern story collection *A Thousand and One Nights*, was also criticized by the conservative figureheads of mainstream musical society.

Ravel faced opposition again when he completed his *La Valse*, a symphonic poem for orchestra, in 1919. The composer introduced the work to impresario Sergei Diaghilev through the two-piano reduction, but Diaghilev, who had commissioned *La Valse* for the Ballets Russes, rejected it as a ballet despite calling it a masterpiece. As Ravel himself described it, *La Valse* was meant to be “a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, mingled with, in my mind, the impression of a fantastic, fatal whirling.” It was not until 14 years after Ravel's death that the piece was staged to critical acclaim as a ballet, by choreographer George Balanchine who, according to critics, “[understood] the balletic charm of the uncertain.” Balanchine highlights the very idea of the self-destructing waltz in his staging of the ballet, which ends with the heroine coupling with death, her corpse floating atop the other dancing pairs beneath her.

While scholars and Ravel's contemporaries have frequently attempted to attach a programmatic meaning to *La Valse*, the composer firmly rejected such notions that the piece was linked to the end of the Hapsburg Empire or to post-World War I destruction. Ravel asserted that the waltz, and nothing but this fatalistic waltz, was the sole essence of the piece. Interpretative disagreements aside, Ravel's establishment of a waltz that becomes increasingly distorted is clear.

From the initial rumblings of the piece emerges a characteristic waltz melody and rhythm that our ears latch onto. However, the waltz seems unsettled from the outset with its continued low rumbling and frequent dissonances that dispel any semblance of normalcy in the dance. Adding to the waltz's complex writing are the orchestral layers that Ravel so faithfully presents in the solo piano transcription. The singing string lines, luscious harp strummings, and march-like brass interruptions take the listeners and performer on an unpredictable journey of the waltz's dissolution. As this frightful decay continues, cacophonous disruptions and rhythmic distortions increasingly intrude, chipping away at the charismatic danceable form we all thought we knew.

RACHEL CHON, PIANO

Rachel Chon is a senior from Centreville, Virginia, double majoring in music and business with concentrations in finance and accounting at Emory. Chon is a four-year Robert W. Woodruff Scholar. Chon began studying piano in 2003 with Narciso Solero. She performed in the Kennedy Center Concert Hall as a finalist in the National Symphony Orchestra Young Soloists Concerto Competition and in Weill Concert Hall of Carnegie Hall as a prize-winner in the American Protégé Competition. Chon has been alternate winner for the Music Teachers National Association Piano Performance Competition for Virginia, and a prizewinner in the Virginia Music Teachers Association State Auditions. Chon has performed in master classes for Anne Schein, Conrad Tao, Momoro Ono, Lise de la Salle, and Ory Shihor.

Chon is enthusiastic about small businesses and entrepreneurship, and has served as the chief loan officer of the Emory Impact Investing Group (EIIG), which provides \$5,000 to \$10,000 loans to socially impactful entrepreneurs in disadvantaged areas of Atlanta. She combined her interest in entrepreneurship and fashion as an offline sales intern at the fashion-tech company MM.LaFleur after her sophomore year, where she continues to work part-time. This past summer, Chon interned in the Global Commercial Services Lending Decision Support Team at American Express in New York City. She is excited to return to American Express as a financial analyst upon graduation. Chon also enjoys running, baking, writing, and traveling in her free time.

Chon would like to thank her instructor William Ransom for helping her discover new depths in her approach to music and playing the piano. She is grateful to her honors committee members, William Ransom, Elena Cholakova, Kevin Karnes, and Oliver Randall, for their guidance in preparation for her senior honors thesis. She would also like to thank her family and friends for their constant support.



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