



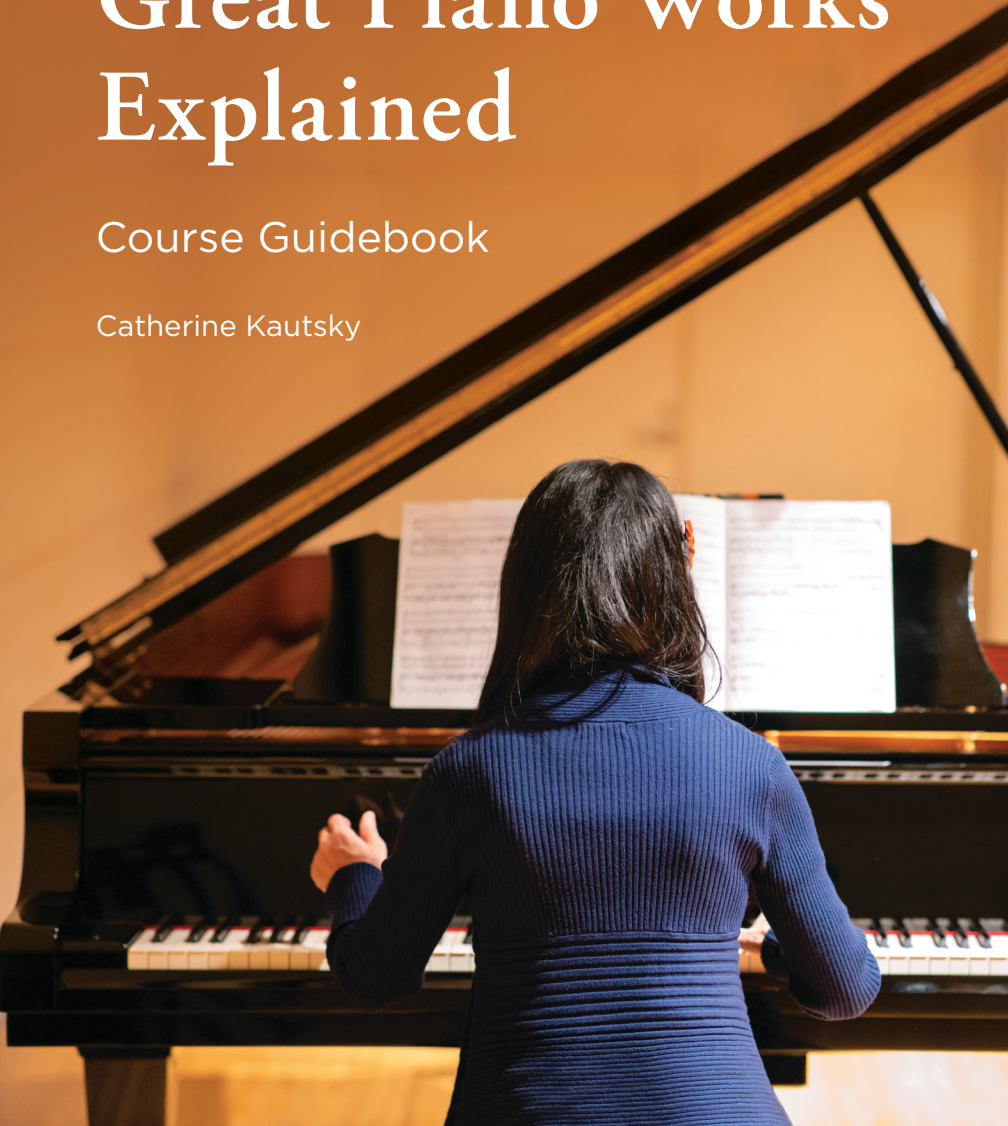
Topic
Music & Fine Art

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Classical Music

Great Piano Works Explained

Course Guidebook

Catherine Kautsky





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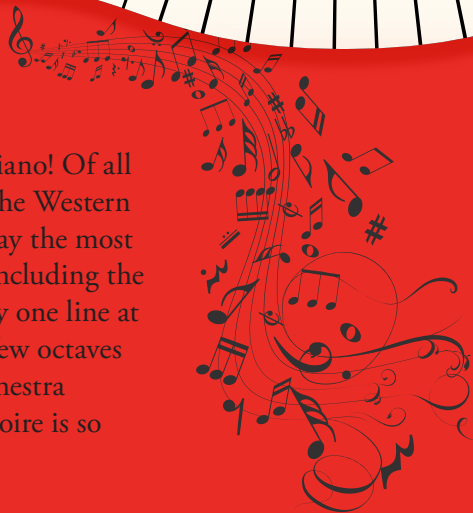
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J. S. Bach and *The Well-Tempered Clavier*



Welcome to the world of the piano! Of all the musical instruments in the Western world, the piano can do far and away the most things because most instruments, including the human voice, can play, or sing, only one line at a time, and they have a range of a few octaves at best. But the piano is like an orchestra unto itself, and that's why its repertoire is so enormous and so splendid.



Bach's Compositions

Johann Sebastian Bach was the all-time champion of letting one person impersonate several. Much keyboard music was written before Bach—not to mention concurrently with Bach. But despite the beauties of English virginal music written in the late 1500s, as Shakespeare was writing his great plays, and French clavecinist music written in France when Louis XIV ruled at Versailles and Bach was writing in Germany, Bach's music defines the beginning of every pianist's repertoire.



Which is interesting, since he wasn't writing for the piano! Bach, who lived from 1685 to 1750, could have written for the piano because it was invented around 1700. But rumor has it that he wasn't much enamored of those early instruments, and he preferred the harpsichord, clavichord, and organ. Of the three older instruments, the organ has its own literature, and the clavichord produces such a tiny sound that it can barely be heard a few feet away. Thus, it's the harpsichord that interests us here.

The Harpsichord

If you search online, you can find clips of the great harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. In particular, search for her playing the Fugue in C Minor, from *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2*. From that, you can get a pretty good idea of the grandeur of that instrument, with its possible double manuals, or double keyboards, and multiple stops—buttons and levers that change how many strings are plucked. Both can provide contrasting sounds and, as in this case, can double notes to increase their power.

What the harpsichord can't do, however, is crescendo or diminuendo. Notes are plucked rather than struck by a hammer as on the piano, and no amount of force hitting the key will result in more power—only in total demolition.

The Piano

Do you try to make the piano sound like a harpsichord, forgoing pedal and most dynamic variation, since that's what Bach had in his ear? Or do you make use of every ability the piano has, assuming that this music is not about the color of a particular instrument and will only benefit from added possibilities?

Most musicians use dynamics and pedal, but modestly, and try to imitate the ping of a harpsichord attack. The hardest challenge is achieving clarity. The simple richness and resonance of the piano sound, particularly in the bass, can work against that. Over-pedaling is the greatest risk because Bach's music is all about single lines that need to be heard independently rather than as a single composite entity. Each line is on its own, and they're meant to be heard as equals.

To that end, in Bach, pianists often play different notes with different sorts of articulation to make the separation between those lines more audible. Shorter note values are more connected. Longer note values, especially skipping ones, are more detached.

The Fugue

If Bach takes imitation to the next step and increases the number of voices from two to three, four, or five, then he might arrive at a fugue. You may want to check out Glenn Gould's fabulous spoof "So You Want to Write a Fugue?" if you're considering becoming an expert.

The early musical ancestors of fugues undoubtedly involved actual voices singing. But the word *voice* is also used when a line enters on the piano. It's a nice word because it immediately implies conversation, and conversation between lines is what this is all about. Sometimes the lines say something important simultaneously, sometimes in succession. Sometimes they imitate each other precisely; sometimes they go off on tangents. Sometimes they speak in full sentences, sometimes in fragments. But always, they are interacting as equal players.

In a fugue, the first thing you'll hear is a short theme, which is called a subject. And it is indeed the subject—in fact, practically the sole concern—of the fugue. There are an infinite variety of things that can be done with that one tiny idea, which is never more than a few measures long.

The Well-Tempered Clavier

You will look at two fugues in this lecture, each different from the other. One has a stately, harmonically conservative subject and goes on to expose it to an astonishing array of fugal procedures. The other has a crazed, desperate subject and exposes it to extremely few procedures indeed.

You may have heard of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Bach wrote 48 preludes and fugues—24 in *Book 1* in 1722, covering every major and minor key, and then 24 more, again in every key, some 20 years later. The term *well-tempered* refers to the relatively new tuning system, which allowed the use of every key. Previously, systems had rendered certain keys unbearably out of tune, and therefore unusable.

Bach must have had one of the most orderly minds ever known to mankind, and when he saw a system on the horizon awaiting encyclopedic exploration, he was on it. Thus it was with the 24 keys, and once wasn't enough. No doubt he would have done it again another 20 years later had he lived that long, and he would have been happier had there been 240 keys to catalogue instead of only 24!

Both the fugues in this lecture come from *Book 2*; thus, they were written pretty late in Bach's life.

Fugue in C Minor

Fugues are classified according to how many voices they have, with most having three or four. However, there's one in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* with only two and two that have five. This one has four. Listen to the four entrances and the small bridges that connect those entries. It starts with the alto, followed by the soprano, then a short bridge, then a tenor, then a longer bridge, and then the bass.

Bach then alters the rhythm of the subject, followed by a couple more entrances. He then presents the subject in augmentation—with note values doubled. But that isn't enough. Piled on top of that augmentation first is another entrance of the subject itself, starting an eighth note earlier. This is called a *stretto*—voices entering one on top of another without waiting for one to finish before the next one interrupts.

In the next measure—only halfway through the subject in its augmented form—another voice enters, this time playing the inversion of the subject. It’s a challenge for the pianist to continue hearing the long note values of the augmentation, the inversion that’s underneath that augmentation, and the original form of the subject that’s above it. The stretto continues, with voices literally piling up in a seemingly endless succession.

And that culminates in another augmentation, placed against an inversion and marking the first time in the whole fugue that you hear all four voices playing at the same time. Those four voices build with successive entries toward a cadence, marking the arrival at the tonic, with a low bass C. After that, there’s a coda, marked again by the increased tension of voices interrupting one another and piling on top of one another, and one final inversion.

It’s not too difficult in the first half to hear all the entrances when they appear one at a time. But after that, there’s so much going on at once, and there’s not one line that takes precedence over the others. Think about the performer, equipped with only two hands and two ears. It’s a bit like being a ventriloquist—a single person speaking as many.

Playing a Fugue

Sorting it all out is part of a pianist’s basic training. That’s why almost every audition in the world requires playing a fugue. There are all sorts of practice techniques to help untangle the knots: marking entrances with highlighters in neon colors, playing each voice alone, playing one voice and singing another, and playing with two hands what ultimately will be played by one.

However, the difficulties as listeners and performers pale in comparison to the challenges that Bach must have faced constructing an edifice like this. It’s one thing to write a pretty tune as the subject. It’s another to make it sound pretty when it’s played against its own augmentation, its own inversion, and its own self starting at a different moment.

Fugue in A Minor

The Fugue in A Minor isn’t as complex procedurally. Instead, it derives its strength from the singularity of the subject itself. It veritably shrieks, and it feels like a pianistic version of a “Dies Irae” descending on us, with its unusual, widespread intervals and rhythmic fierceness.

There are many different opinions about this fugue. Harpsichordist Laurette Goldberg says it's "not terribly difficult," while pianist Edward Aldwell calls it "the most virtuosic of the *Book 2* fugues." But this is a difficult fugue to play, perhaps more so on the piano than the harpsichord.

In addition to its sheer angularity, it gets much of its power from the compactness of its material. It requires high-voltage energy at every moment, making use of a countersubject, as well as a subject, to make its fiery, single-minded case. A countersubject is an idea that appears in a second voice each time the subject is stated. Some fugues have them, and some don't. The Fugue in C Minor didn't, since so much of it was concerned with the subject sounding against itself in various strettos, but this one does. The countersubject serves as an important commentary on the subject. It spits out rapid-fire scales and trills with unceasing force.

And the countersubject, along with the subject, gives rise to small fragments that spread into other voices and into the episodes—the transition sections of the fugue. The tail (the second portion) of the subject combines with the tiny scalar figure from the countersubject, with a bridge between the entrances.

There isn't a single moment in this fugue when those elements aren't present—those jagged, dissonant leaps; the rapid runs; the jolting trills. They feel like a display of fireworks that's filled with imminent danger.

Tempo in Bach's Compositions

If you search online, you can contrast Angela Hewitt's tempo with that of Walter Gieseking, who's more moderate, or Wanda Landowska, whose version is much slower. This is typical for Bach—he gives no tempo indications.

As his music works irrespective of instrument, it often seems to work in different tempos. That's not true for any other composer. The wrath of this piece crashes down with equal power when played at breakneck speed or with willful deliberation.



Walter Gieseking

The Character of the Fugues

The fugues each come with a companion—fittingly, a prelude, which precedes them. It's often of a different persuasion, contrasting with the fugue itself. In the case of the Fugue in A Minor, the prelude is certainly not happy, though it speaks in far more muted tones than the fugue. Laurette Goldberg characterized it as “desperately angry, increasingly outraged.” But as with tempos and levels of difficulty, even the characters of Bach's pieces can be subject to debate—and they can function exquisitely with all these different understandings.

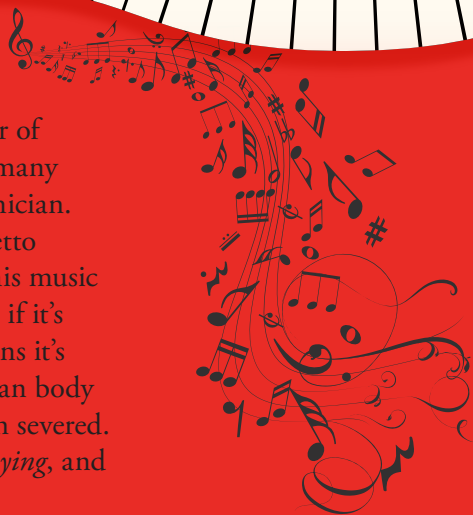
The chromatic, winding, labyrinthian half steps are desolate—and increasingly so in the second half. But at the same time, the music is so comforting. Perhaps it's the repetitiveness of the rhythm and motive, the sense that every note matters, that there are no extras. The most fundamental aspects of musical existence—whether a line is rising or falling, skipping or stepping, saying something old or something new—seem here to be of the utmost importance.

Bach defies the randomness of the universe. And whether we share in his profound religious belief or not, we sense in him the safety and total order that he must have found in what he considered absolute truth.

Bach's French Suites



Despite being the all-time master of counterpoint—composing in many voices—Bach was not a dry academician. No one can make a fancy fugal stretto dance like Bach can. It's true that his music can sound wooden and mechanical if it's played poorly, but when that happens it's because the connection to the human body and its inclination to move has been severed. The technical term is *typewriter playing*, and Bach is a frequent victim.



Variation in Bach's Compositions

A string of equal note values has a numbing effect on people, but if you find the melodic peaks and valleys, the varying degrees of tension and dissonance, and the harmonic progressions hidden in those sixteenth notes, typewriters will be a bygone. The infinite varieties of motion that Bach imagined are most obvious in his dance suites—for orchestra, flute, violin, cello, and keyboard. The idea of a dance suite goes back to the Renaissance, with its paired pavanes and galliards. And the French clavecin, or keyboard, composers Jean-Philippe Rameau and François Couperin, Bach's contemporaries in the early 18th century, followed suit with enlarged harpsichord suites.

For Bach, the principal movements of the solo instrumental suites were the allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue, each with characteristics of meter, tempo, and dance steps. Rameau's and Couperin's were collected haphazardly, leaving Bach to organize, catalogue, and explore every crevice of the genre.

For keyboard alone, he composed three sets of six suites each—the French Suites, English Suites, and Partitas. The French Suites are the shortest since they lack the prelude movement that opens every suite in the other sets. Otherwise, the three sets parallel one another in the order and variety of the dances, as do the six suites for cello and the six partitas for violin.

Meticulous Composition

Every grouping—for keyboard, cello, and violin—comes in a set of 6. Bach was fascinated by numerology, and his mission in life was to create order. The number 6 in traditional numerology stands for familial harmony. The disarray inherent in 5 French Suites, 7 English Suites, 9 Partitas, and 11 for strings would have made Bach suicidal; thus, 6 it is—across the board.

Other compositions feature different numerological arrangements. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* has 24 preludes and fugues, one for each key. The *Goldberg Variations* have a more complex scheme—a theme of 32 measures and 30 variations that are preceded and followed by a statement of the theme, meaning a theme of 32 measures and a piece with 32 parts. The cantatas are filled with numerological references to the number 7, which symbolized the Creator and Creation, and the number 3, which stood for the Trinity.

Even the order of keys in his works tends to be meticulously patterned. The French Suites are relatively loosely organized, moving from three suites in minor keys to three in major. But other collections are tighter: The keys of the English Suites move systematically stepwise from A (one in A major and one in A minor) all the way to D. And the keys of the Partitas are the most remarkable: They fan out in both directions at increasingly greater distances—from the initial B-flat, a single step up to C, a third down to A, a fourth up to D, a fifth down to G, and, finally, a sixth up to E.

B-flat major



C minor



A minor



D major



G major



E minor



French Suite No. 5 in G Major

But if you don't believe that Bach—strict Lutheran and composer of all those erudite canons, fugues, and motets—was an incorrigible dancer, the French Suite no. 5 in G Major should persuade you forever. The rhythm and melodies are irresistible. The textures are thinner than in his fugues, and often, one voice dominates.

There are seven movements in this suite: the four standard ones that populate almost every dance suite—the allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue—and three gallantries, or optional short dances. What makes this music great is the simplicity of the materials—mainly arpeggiated triads (three-note chords) and little scales, mostly within a small range.

Arabesques, or little figures that curve up and down, figure prominently in all Bach's music. Their combination of intricacy and simplicity, balance and symmetry, all presented in modest proportions, is endlessly appealing.

Sequences and Repetition

Allemandes are dances in a duple meter (a meter in two or a multiple of two) played at a moderate tempo. One voice imitates another in the gentlest way, both hinting at what's coming and reflecting on what's been played. And direction and repetition mean everything.

Sequences are at the core of baroque music. Repetition, as a road map, is a comforting thing, and patterns are all about intervals, or the varying distance between notes. Bach moves from a scalewise pattern to larger and larger leaps until he hits a high note. This gives it added emphasis with the largest leap—a third, a larger third, a fourth, and, finally, a sixth.

On almost any instrument, including the voice, the leap of the sixth would take longer to traverse than the smaller distances. Pianists must be taught to make it take longer; one wants to feel a bit of a strain. And the leap happens at the peak of an excursion into the minor mode, which makes it worthy of extra attention. The simple shift between major and minor is significant. Tonality is everything—the tension of dissonance versus consonance of chords and keys that are farther afield from the home key and the inevitable pull back to that home base.

The dances in a Bach suite alternate between slower and faster tempos. Thus, a suite of multiple movements achieves the emotional variety that the classical period aims for within a single movement or piece.

The Courante

The next dance needs to be fast. Its name, courante or corrente, comes from the phrase “to run.” It's less complex than the allemande was, making do with only two voices rather than three. And it's in a triple rather than a duple meter—three beats per measure, rather than four. In that way, Bach provides alternation of meter as well as tempo between the dances.

The Sarabande

Usually, the sarabande is the most touching, most personal movement of the suite. Sarabandes, as we know them now, are always slow. But in their early days in Spain, they were a fast dance, and they were judged so lascivious as to be impermissible.

The sarabande in French Suite no. 5 in G Major begins immediately with a beautiful melody, repeated with variation, and the repetition is again soothing and comforting. It has three voices, with a complex texture, although still with one voice predominating. There's more rhythmic variety in this movement. Many different note values flow together, in contrast with the stream of unvariegated sixteenths and eighths that made up the courante.

Ornamentation in the Sarabande

Sarabandes are in triple meter but are known for a characteristic stress on beat 2. They have an abundance of ornamentation, which is a thorny subject. Baroque music—written between about 1600 and 1750—abounds in ornaments (like baroque architecture). Even when they aren't written down by the composer, it's assumed that the performer will add their own.

In a movement like this, the dances are in a binary form, with two halves (each with a repeat sign), and the creative performer would traditionally play variants, adding trills, rolls, or flourishes to provide variety. Bach writes the opening of the second half practically without any ornaments. One might play it that way the first time but add a few additional notes the second time.

The Gavotte, Bourrée, and Loure

After the sarabande, the audience needs release, and this is where the composer usually inserts a couple of gallantries. This suite contains a gavotte, a bourrée, and a loure.

The gavotte and bourrée are jolly and straightforward, both fast dances. Much of the articulation, particularly in the gavotte, is detached rather than legato, or connected, as it is in the allemande and sarabande. Those are choices that the performer makes since Bach rarely indicates articulation. But there are long traditions governing such choices. Frequently, the decisions are based on whether notes are moving in skips or steps. Skipping intervals generally encouraging a skipping articulation.

Both these dances feature a second half that turns the first half upside-down, and the triads play an outsize role in these pieces. The opening of the bourée showcases the simple building blocks Bach used—the left hand cavorts through arpeggiated triads, and the right hand follows suit, with little scalewise arabesques thrown in for good measure.

This piece has an overwhelming preponderance of G major, and it takes a talented composer to stay in one key for such a long time and not bore us to tears. Bach obviously has talent and thus manages to make what comes next—despite again being in G major and based on G major triads—a total surprise. It's a so-called *louré*, and you're not alone if you've never heard of it. This is the only *louré* in any of Bach's suites, and it's a curious dance with a rhythm that staggers. It's an old French dance, elegant and melancholy, with an antiquated air.

This movement provides a good example of the role that register can play in highlighting imitation. Each voice speaks with a clear and stately identity according to its placement on the keyboard.

The Gigue

All that pleasurable melancholy, whether high or low on the piano, is dispensed in the final gigue. Giges are descendants of old jigs, and they tend to romp in rapid triplet formations. They're often fugal, with a sparse texture.

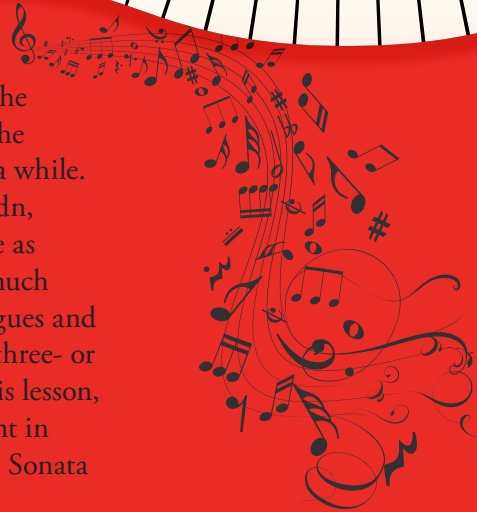
You've already seen less formal inversions in the gavotte and bourrée, which are reminiscent of the fugal procedures in *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The prelude to the Prelude and Fugue in A Minor—which is also in binary form—has a second half that's an inversion of the first. This gigue, though, features far less angst and fewer complexities, simply sheer unadulterated joy. It feels like a festive gathering—more and more guests arriving, more and more voices joining the party.

It's unlikely that people were dancing to this music by Bach's time, and some of the dances were long out of fashion. The challenge for the pianist is to make the 21st-century audience feel that allemandes, courantes, sarabandes, and giges are alive and well. Playing the piano has been called an exercise in antigravity, and the gigue should make you feel both less grave and decidedly less earthbound.

Joseph Haydn's Early Classical Piano



In this lecture, the course makes the significant move to Vienna and the classical period and stays there for a while. But the leap into the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven is not quite as abrupt as it might seem. There is much that happens in between Bach's fugues and dance suites and those substantial three- or even four-movement sonatas. In this lesson, you will examine some of what went in between, and then explore Haydn's Sonata in C Minor.

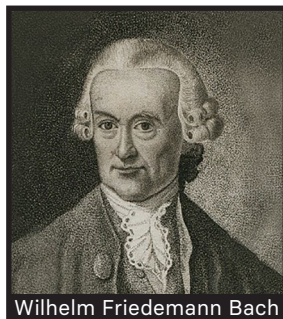


J. S. Bach's Creations

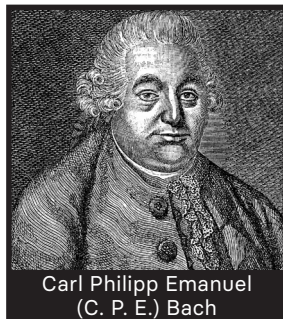
Bach produced more than 200 cantatas, solo suites for violin and cello; 48 preludes and fugues for keyboard; 18 dance suites for harpsichord; countless concertos; at least 2 Passions; a massive Mass; and myriad works for organ.

He also produced 20 children, 3 of whom became important composers: Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, Carl Philipp Emanuel (C. P. E.) Bach, and Johann Christian Bach. They went a long way toward defining the music of the period between the baroque and the classical. This period is covered by the terms *galant*, *rococo*, and *empfindsamer Stil* (“sensitive style”), which feels like the most evocative label. *Empfindsamer Stil* is often paired with the label *Sturm und Drang*, or “Storm and Stress,” which is similarly picturesque.

French writer Paul Valéry suggests that great art produces, and is a product of, “enthusiasm” and “order.” The balance between those two characteristics shifts through different periods. Although J. S. Bach leaned into order, C. P. E. Bach, who lived from 1714 to 1788, tilted heavily toward enthusiasm. He had little interest in writing complex motets, canons, and fugues and chose to write fantasies and sonatas that were often fantasy-like.



Wilhelm Friedemann Bach



Carl Philipp Emanuel
(C. P. E.) Bach

C. P. E. Bach's Sonata in G Minor

Written in 1746, this sonata has an opening that is aberrant. But there is a juxtaposition between the opening bedlam and the extreme tidiness that follows. First is a cadenza—a passage without bar lines, with free rhythms, filled with unfinished thoughts—and then a severely disciplined first theme. That first theme seems so orthodox that it reneges on all promises of further madness. But the rest of the movement oscillates between order and anarchy.

The excesses are reminiscent of German *Sturm und Drang* literature, which appears on the scene toward the end of the 18th century. It features similar emotional roller coasters. And as with C. P. E. Bach, extravagance had a great deal of charm.

Joseph Haydn

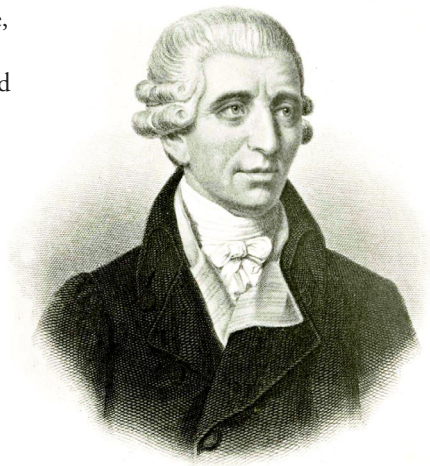
Approaching the second half of the 18th century, J. S. Bach's orderly universe, melding music and religious dogma, yields to more worldly concerns. And the generation of composers after C. P. E. Bach needed to find a balance. Joseph Haydn, who lived from 1732 to 1809, achieved that balance.

His Sonata in C Minor was written in 1771, about 25 years after C. P. E. Bach's Sonata in G Minor. It comes straight out of Haydn's own *Sturm und Drang* period and models a wonderful combination of order and enthusiasm—sonata form happily interrupted by moments of sheer caprice.

The sonata is in three movements, and all are in some semblance of sonata form. Confusingly, *sonata form* is used to describe single movements, not entire sonatas. To understand music from the second half of the 18th century—and even all the way to the 21st—it is important to understand this term.

The Parts of a Sonata

Every piece from this period, known as the common practice period, is in a particular key—it draws its main pitches and harmonies from a particular major or minor scale. But in a long piece, you can't stay in one key all the time. It's too boring.



In a sonata, an opening exposition lays out two keys: the tonic, or I, which is the key the piece is in, and another contrasting key. If the piece is in a minor key, then it's likely to go to the relative major—the key with the same sharps or flats—but being in major will change its color. If the piece is in a major key, then it's likely to go to the dominant—the key built on the fifth note of the scale. The dominant key has one pitch that's different from the tonic—one different sharp or flat—and that's enough to create tension.

In the exposition, the different keys are represented by two or more different themes—a first theme in the tonic, a second theme in the relative major or dominant, and a closing theme in the secondary key. That isn't essential, though, and Haydn delights in making do with fewer themes.

After the exposition, there's a development section that prolongs the agony of the conflict between the two keys—numerous keys get batted about, along with fragments of themes, all in a restless fashion. When it's ready to settle down again, it launches into the recapitulation. This restates the exposition but with one critical difference—everything returns, this time in the tonic key, to avoid further conflicts.

Haydn's Sonata in C Minor

Although the first movement of this sonata checks the essential boxes for bona fide sonata form, the proportions are odd. It's missing a real second theme, and the exposition spends more time transitioning into a second key than settling into it. And the development, usually fairly compact, is as long as the exposition and the recapitulation.

The movement also proceeds at a more relaxed pace than the first movements of most Mozart or Beethoven sonatas. The moderate tempo allows the music to unfold at leisure. And the detours Haydn takes in this sonata might have been left unexplored had he chosen a brisker tempo.

In the exposition, there is a moment when motion unexpectedly ceases—a freeze. The first theme is in the tonic key of C minor. An idea, which is not quite a second theme, then brings it into the relative major, which is E-flat. But it doesn't sound melodic, and it clearly starts in the middle of something. What precedes the freeze is a little cadenza, à la C. P. E. Bach, which isolates itself from the main argument of the movement by proceeding at an *adagio*, or super slow, tempo. That tempo slides in courtesy of increasingly morose harmonies.

It's the disconnects that make this piece so remarkable, and they occur throughout the movement. Amid ongoing music, those sudden, seemingly impulsive absences of sound or motion leave you mystified and stranded while you wait for normalcy to return. But those discontinuities begin to vanish as the sonata form gets better established. The issue of continuity and discontinuity is a “continuous” thread—continuity waxes and wanes as composers feel more or less inclined to impose logic upon their unruly thoughts.

The Emotions of the Compositions

Whatever the balance, there's no way to succeed with a large form like the sonata unless you have a mechanism for moving smoothly from one type of material to another. Classical style, or the music written roughly between 1750 and 1820, proved itself adept at such transitions. The sonata, as opposed to earlier, shorter forms, is predicated on the ability to incorporate changes of character within a single movement. It utilizes different themes or keys as the vehicle for those shifts.

If you think back to the pieces of J. S. Bach, you'll realize that each one featured a single affect, or emotion. When they were placed in conjunction with other pieces—as in a prelude with a fugue or a particular dance within an entire suite—different emotions were covered. But rarely did that happen within a single movement.

C. P. E. Bach moved from one affect to another within a movement—despair, agitation, and complacent affability—but he did it with enormous abruptness and often clumsiness. It can make us feel wrenched from one state to another. Although that can be powerful at times, at other times, it can simply feel disorganized.

This Haydn sonata, though, features the best of those surprising moments. But it also introduces us to the genius of those transitions in sonata form, that ability to move smoothly from one idea to the next, which didn't interest C. P. E. Bach. Haydn moves from the first theme to the lengthy transition material that eventually lands in E-flat major. However, the transition starts—incorrigibly “wrong”—in A-flat major.

You'd think he'd have a problem reconciling those two significantly different musical affects. But he has built on the same elements for both. The repeated note, combined with an ornament and a large leap at the end of the first theme, is the building block for the transition material that follows.

Likewise, when he moves into the closing theme, he builds in invisible bonds. He introduces the sextuplets—the quick sixteenth notes in groups of six—so that the new tune moves in comfortably with that as the background. And the delightfully fast notes trot cheerily to the end of the exposition. In each case, it sounds totally natural. It moves into new territory without a bump.

Modulation

The connections travel under the surface, but when they aren't there, we notice. The idea of traveling brings us to another crucial aspect of sonatas—modulation, or moving from one key to another. In a short piece, you can stay in closely related keys that differ by only one or two sharps or flats. But in a longer piece, the listener needs variety.

In the development section, the first theme is in three different keys. Then the closing theme cavorts from an initial minor key to a much brighter major one. And by the end, he's changing keys every measure.

Modulation is a clear way to create instability. Remember that sonatas are always alternating between order and enthusiasm. If the development, then, revels in enthusiasm, the recapitulation should restore order. It should regale us with material we've already heard, letting us feel all-knowing and comfortable as the themes reappear. This time, they should be particularly content because they're all in the tonic key and have resolved their differences.

Haydn ends the movement, appropriately enough, with the closing theme. And one of its features is a particularly reassuring and frequently occurring classical music trope—the question-and-answer formulation. It's a musical announcement that all's right in the world. A brief, quivering doubt is raised and is put to rest.

The harmonies are V, I, V, I, as predictable and comforting as it gets. The hierarchy has been well restored. The end of the movement stabilizes us on that I chord, with 17 iterations of a bass C.

The Final Movements

There are two movements to go after this one. First is a particularly lovely slow one in A-flat major. A-flat is the sixth note of the C minor scale. It gives rise to a rather distant key, which is briefly encountered in the first movement. That key, with its change to a major mode presented in a mellow contralto register, is enough to create a striking color. The changing function of E-flat, which is the third note of C minor and the fifth note in A-flat, serves as the pivot between the two keys.

Second is an allegro finale, which features a first theme with the same question-and-answer idea from the closing theme of the first movement.

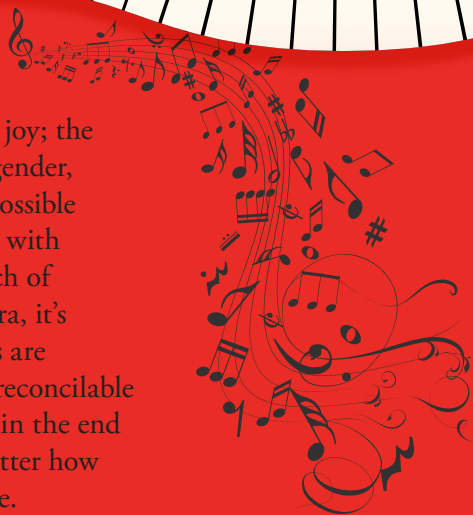
If Haydn had written regular symphonies, instead of *Toy Symphony*, *Surprise Symphony*, and “*Farewell*” *Symphony*, he might have written a nice, symmetrical, and conventional four-measure phrase made up of two balanced halves. Instead, he writes four measures plus two. He’s not supposed to do that. The phrase has a tail growing on it.

Haydn is renowned for phrases that don’t quite add up, and he likes odd numbers instead of even. He likes to veer off on tangents, and he turns proportions and thematic orthodoxies on their head. His crimes against expectations are far less onerous than those of Schiller’s *Robbers*, but they’re equally engrossing.

Mozart's High Classical Piano



The combination of sadness and joy; the ebullient conversations across gender, class, age, and almost every other possible divide; and the final reconciliation, with a wrong made right, inform so much of what Mozart had to say. In the opera, it's with text, but even there, the words are secondary. Mozart is always about reconcilable differences. Often, there's a feeling in the end that all's well that ends well, no matter how deeply one knows that's not the case.



The Marriage of Figaro

The Marriage of Figaro is a comic opera filled with silly misunderstandings, people hiding behind chairs, and people jumping out of windows. And the final scene of forgiveness could not be more profound—it makes us weep with its truth and generosity. The count, who has all along deceived his wife, apologizes to her; she, with utter radiance, accepts his offering.

Hidden behind all the drama, both silly and profound, are some subversive verities about social standing in late 18th-century Austria. Figaro is a mere servant, an upstart. But he and his brilliant fiancé, Susanna, are infinitely more clever than the aristocratic count, and they do an excellent job of letting him know it.

Significantly, the Beaumarchais play on which the libretto is based was censored in Vienna. The opera's rebellious overtones, however, were apparently more subtle than those in the play.



Mozart

Music in Society

In general, music enjoyed a privileged position in that society, which poses a perennially fascinating question: Why is it that such an enormous portion of the West's great music came out of Vienna in the late 18th and the 19th centuries but so comparatively little of its great painting and literature? While Wordsworth and Blake wrote in London and Ingres and David painted in Paris, Mozart and Beethoven composed in Vienna.

Some of the answer lies in political realities. The Hapsburg Empire was already a relic among more progressive European nations in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert were in their primes. Long after the French and English had their revolutions, Austria was still mired in its old-fashioned monarchical ways. Part of this was rich aristocrats' support for a steady supply of new music.

The aristocrats no doubt liked music itself, but they also liked it because it wasn't threatening. It didn't boast words or images laden with hidden radical ideas. Even an opera like *The Marriage of Figaro*, which flaunted egalitarian thoughts, had the good grace to bury them amidst pretty tunes. In a world that was spouting change and revolution, those tunes, enchanting but not threatening, were what precarious rulers—as well as their populations, who were subject to repression and censorship—needed to stay afloat.

The economy of means and familiar patterns are not trivial aspects of this writing; they're the essence of Mozart's language. But what makes them resonate so deeply?

Mozart's Style

We sense in this music the child prodigy for whom the language of music is so apparently effortless. Mozart takes all the conventions governing harmony, melody, and formal structure in the high classical period and makes them sound magical. How does he take a language where expectations are strongly established and formulas readily available and make it sound like his own—and ours, almost 250 years later?



Where Mozart starts briskly and logically, Chopin takes pleasure in meandering. It takes Chopin eight measures to get to the point. Meanwhile, the key and first themes of Mozart sonatas are unmistakable from the first measure. It's clear which of these composers lived in the Age of Reason.

Each of Mozart's pieces begins with a perfectly balanced four- or eight-measure phrase. The first half ends on the dominant, or fifth note, of the key we're in, and the second half takes us back to the tonic, the home note of the key. Certain chord progressions are expected, certain outcomes inevitable. The forms are also relatively standard. And Mozart was amenable to many formulas that are endemic to the style. They serve as a neutral filler, facilitate transitions, emphasize a particular key, and might occur interchangeably in different compositions.

The melody is filled with the small arabesque figures that occur frequently in Mozart; they add enormously to its everlasting grace. Like so much great music, this music dances. And one can't help moving one's body as one plays or listens to it.

In the final movement of Sonata in A Minor, K. 310 is one of the most beautiful moments in all piano sonatas. From a rough, jagged, relentless section in the home minor key, it suddenly comes into the parallel major key. You feel like you're in the company of angels.

In these melodies, we can hear many familiar things—the small range of the melody, balance in the phrase structure, a thin texture that highlights the melody, and much sequential repetition. Another critical attribute is moving from one emotional state to another within a single movement, with no ostensible transition. Bach didn't do that often—he sequestered different emotional states in different movements. This is an achievement of the high classical style.

Sonata in E-flat Major, K. 282

Finding ourselves in the company of angels is commonplace in Mozart. A lesser-known and earlier sonata is Sonata in E-flat Major, K. 282. It's a short sonata and a wonderful example of how Mozart uses bafflingly simple means to write beautiful music. Even in a brief glance, we can see all the components mentioned—melodies, harmonies, phrase structures, transitions—and try to understand why this music touches us so deeply.

It is his only piano sonata that begins with such a slow movement. The opening idea is eloquent, moving from I to V and back to I. Then, the entrance of sixteenth notes in the left hand has an enormously soothing effect. They're imperturbable, and their rocking motion feels reassuring after the loneliness of the opening measures. The minor harmonies that complete the passage are obviously sad. But the continuing left-hand sixteenths, so unflustered, provide a safety rail.

The passage that follows is perhaps the most wondrous because it could not be simpler. It moves into the major mode, and the left-hand sixteenths continue, this time in a blocked triadic formation. The right hand outlines broken triads going up, then down, with the idea repeated twice, in perfect symmetry.

How can something that simple be that powerful? It wouldn't be if it had started at that moment. We had to arrive out of a different emotional state. That state makes us grateful for the arrival of a major tonality and stable triads because we've been immersed in minor coloration and dissonance and, at the end, restless harmonies that shifted on every sixteenth note.

We're grateful for the presence of that ongoing motion when we started out so static. But most fundamentally, we're grateful for the melodic pattern itself, for the inevitability of the answer it provides to the stated question. We deeply crave that certitude. It must all come back to the count and the countess. Perhaps, like the count, we've been granted absolution.

Mozart's Sonata in C Minor, K. 457

This second lecture on Mozart specifically centers on a single piece, the Sonata in C Minor, K. 457. The previous lecture examined Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro* and suggested that every good pianist should emulate a singer. This lecture begins by talking again about Mozart's symbiotic relationship with opera. It also highlights some of the contributions he made to musical style that were carried through into the 19th century by Beethoven and Schubert.

A Prolific Decade

Between 1781 and his death in 1791, Mozart wrote *Idomeneo*, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, and *The Magic Flute*—plus several less well-known operas. There must have been something about stories and relationships and the mingling of comedy and tragedy that made opera Mozart's natural habitat. The Sonata in C Minor was written in 1784, in the middle of that incredible decade.

Don Giovanni perhaps has the most in common with this sonata. Like *Don Giovanni*, the Sonata, K. 457 is primarily in the minor mode, and its story is not a happy one. But, also like *Don Giovanni*, it's replete with moments of good humor.

Conversations in Music

The sonata starts, predictably enough, with balanced phrases—antecedents and consequents. First, two measures plus two measures, then another two plus two—on a larger scale, we're once again hearing four plus four.

Rather than a world of numbers and predictability, this is a world of conversations. Those first two measures are brusque—a blazing and barren broken triad, unharmonized. But then there's an immediate, dissenting response—someone pleads softly in a different register and deals in doubts rather than certainties. We're instantly confronted with the juxtaposition of opposites, which is the crowning achievement of the classical style. Bach laid out different affects, or emotions, in separate movements. But Mozart's language lets them engage directly; thus, we can have opera at the piano.

That's true especially in the concertos. Small wonder that Mozart wrote 27 piano concertos, and they're among the greatest ever written. What better opportunity for interaction between a group and an individual, with the comradery and antagonism it can imply and all the free-floating competition? But a single pianist can do it alone. The piano is peculiarly suited to conversations, and the wide range of registers is an enormous advantage. Male and female voices are built into the instrument as they are in few others.

Then, there are the two hands, which can easily become two people. Sometimes they're on friendly terms, and sometimes they're not. Sometimes the two hands cross and amicably exchange registers, like good allies willing

to share their territories. Sometimes they fight over the same material and then come to a sudden and unexpected truce. Sometimes the hands exchange only the briefest of commentaries. And sometimes one hand simply converses with itself, with the other providing moral support.

Sonata Form

Conversations also take place on the macro level because sonata form is a structured conversation between opposing ideas. If you've ever listened to the first movement of a sonata, concerto, symphony, trio, quartet, or quintet written between 1750 and 1830, you and sonata form are probably on familiar terms.

There's an exposition that starts the conversation by exposing two contrasting theme groups: one in the tonic, or original, key; and the other in either the dominant, if the piece is in a major key, or the relative major, if the piece is in a minor key. The dominant is built on the fifth note of the original scale. The relative major is built on the third note of the scale—the major key with the same key signature as the original minor.

The exposition is followed by a development, which develops the original material. It ups the ante via fragmentary phrases and restless modulations. It often exacerbates the conflict between the contrasting ideas. Finally, there's a recapitulation, restating both themes, now peaceably reconciled in the tonic key.

Mozart brilliantly achieves continuity between the themes despite an emotional landscape that shifts on a dime. He can move from rage to pathos in an instant. He can dance, and he can wrestle. He can be conciliatory, and he can be pugilistic. Mozart is like Shakespeare; he speaks in every voice.

The Minor Key

Sonata in C Minor is fiercer than most of Mozart's sonatas, and that's related to the key. Only 2 of Mozart's 18 numbered piano sonatas are in minor keys, and this is one of them. Mozart doesn't use minor keys lightly; he chooses them when his message is especially intense. And even when pieces start in the minor, he's likely to end them in the major—he likes happy endings. This one, however, sticks to its guns.

The key of C minor is particularly meaningful. It already had a history when Mozart came to it—recall Haydn’s Sonata in C Minor. Once this sonata, its accompanying fantasia, and Mozart’s great Concerto in C Minor, K. 491 were out in the world, Beethoven took over with a vengeance. His *Sonata Pathétique*, his third piano concerto, his fifth symphony, and his last piano sonata are a few telling examples.

One of the ways that C minor announces itself is through the forte opening. And, of course, the conversation continues in adversarial manner, in large part due to a difference in dynamics—forte and piano. Mozart’s score is replete with instructions about when to play loudly or softly, with changes occurring between or even in the midst of themes. Thus, there’s a constant undercurrent of surprise—forte and piano.

The Fortepiano

That option wasn’t available to Bach on the harpsichord. It’s a direct result of Mozart’s instrument, the so-called fortepiano—“loud/soft.” The interplay between a composer and the instruments they have at their disposal is always fascinating. In this case, the fortepiano was new on the scene. Even Haydn’s early sonatas were probably still written for the harpsichord. Dynamics were a novelty, and equally thrilling were the pedals.

All sorts of exotic pedaling options existed. Mozart’s famous so-called “Turkish Rondo” could have been played with “Turkish” pedal effects—similar to placing a piece of paper over the strings to create a rattle, with bells ringing at other (or possibly the same) moments to create maximum clatter. Those pedals weren’t long for this world. More important for posterity is the damper pedal—the right pedal on the modern piano. It created a fundamental change in how notes on a keyboard instrument merge and connect to one another.



In Bach's time, the default articulation was what is called *nonlegato*. This is a slightly detached motion from one note to another, which continues to be the default for Mozart. But Mozart's sound is coming from a *fortepiano*, which employs a hammer to attack the strings and a damper to stop the vibration once the note is released. The pedal, operated by a knee lever, lifted all the dampers rather than only the damper on the specific note being played. That possibility was left to the middle pedal, which hadn't yet been invented. Thus, you got the glow of overtones from the entire instrument whenever you depressed it.

Haydn was even more intrigued by this than Mozart. He wrote an amazing passage for "open pedal"—the pedal went down at the beginning of the passage and didn't come up until the end, no matter what transpired in between. In the late *Sonata in C Major*, Hob. XVI/50, the muddiness that emerges from the humungous modern piano would have been significantly modified on a more delicate 18th-century instrument. But the idea was still extremely daring. Beethoven copied this in the *Tempest Sonata*, op. 31, no. 2, in the first movement.

Mozart was more conservative about it, but he was enthusiastic and wrote his father about the pedal with great excitement. That letter clears up the frequent misunderstanding that one shouldn't use the pedal in Mozart. Indeed, one should—with discretion. You should never mess with the clarity that's so critical to Mozart's speech. But you might want to emphasize certain notes or make the harmonies more luminous with a touch of the right foot.

In the beautiful second theme of *Sonata in C Minor*, using the pedal not only emphasizes the most important pitches but also allows the notes in the accompaniment to melt together. It's the difference between adding something liquid or granular to the melody. The same thing happens at a similar moment in the *Fantasy in C Minor*, which is paired with this sonata. That piece is filled with dynamic and registral contrasts. The pedal emphasizes every long, angst-filled note. And the accompaniment that joins those bare octaves needs the pedal to properly melt. It would sound dry and academic without it.

And that accompaniment is critical to the character of the melody it accompanies, with the pedaling a major determinant of that character. The accompaniment would be annihilated by using too much pedal and obliterating all the articulation indications that Mozart notates in both melodies and accompaniments.

The most powerful example of the tiny slur in the first movement comes at the strange transition to the recapitulation. In most sonatas, that's a smooth transition and a moment of jubilation—after all, we're finally heading home to familiar territory, both tonally and thematically. In the Sonata in C Minor, the transition is the quietest, lowest, slowest moment of the movement. Mozart wants us to be fully immersed in the obscurity of that dissonant chord.

The painfulness of that sigh is followed only by a protracted silence. It sets the forte return, marking the recapitulation with relief. And although the ambiguity of that hovering chord may be temporarily obliterated by the return of the opening forte, the sound of the chord stays with us, soon to recur.

The Chords

Diminished seventh chords, so named for the interval outlined (a diminished seventh), are dissonant, troubled creatures. And in this sonata, they appear all too frequently for comfort. This chord was in the opening idea. It also ends the exposition.

One could well claim that it's that chord, and its upper pitch, A-flat, resolving down to G, that allows Mozart to tie together so many of the ideas in the sonata. The same chord is in the principal tune of the third movement. In the third movement, its inherent harmonic tension is exacerbated by Mozart's insistence that every important melody note in this theme occur off the beat.

That melodic motion to and from A-flat in the opening theme of the first movement (G, A-flat), in the large sigh (A-flat, G), and in the tune of the last movement (G, A-flat, G) gets played out on an even larger scale in the second movement through two magical modulations. The first modulation is to A-flat itself. The modulation boosts that note to center stage as a full-fledged key rather than simply a neighbor note to G. You'll hear a cadence, which is in E-flat major, the key of this second movement, and then a new section entirely in A-flat major.

Beethoven modeled portions of his own Sonata in C Minor, the *Pathétique*, on precisely this modulation, lifting the tune for his second movement. But that's only the beginning. Beethoven didn't go nearly as far as Mozart.

We've been dealing with A-flat often in relation to G-natural. G-natural belongs to the scales of both C minor, the key of the first and third movements, and E-flat major, the key of the second. But then, the music undergoes a significant transformation. It sinks down all the way to the key of G-flat, first by way of E-flat minor, in one of the most touching moments of the sonata.

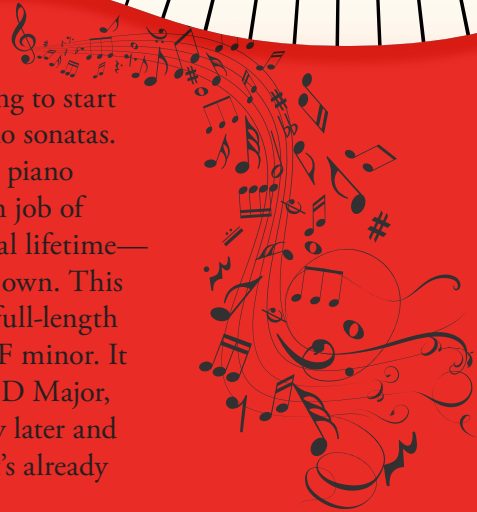
It starts on a high A-flat. Then it makes its way down to a G, and then an E-flat that gets reinforced with a high E-flat. Then it goes to cadence in E-flat minor and makes its way to G-flat. In typical fashion, Mozart takes a moment of despair and transforms it into a moment of transcendence. That moment is a good introduction to what's coming next.

Chromaticism

This sonata is filled with chromaticism—the use of half-step instead of whole-step motion. It starts from the beginning in the first movement and pervades the piece. Chromatic motion is more disquieting than diatonic. It always tends to introduce more notes that aren't part of the original scale, since major and minor scales are made up mostly of whole steps. In the first movement, and again in the third movement, that motion is deeply unsettling. But sometimes chromaticism is heavenly—precisely because it takes you so far from everything that previously seemed real.

Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2, No. 1

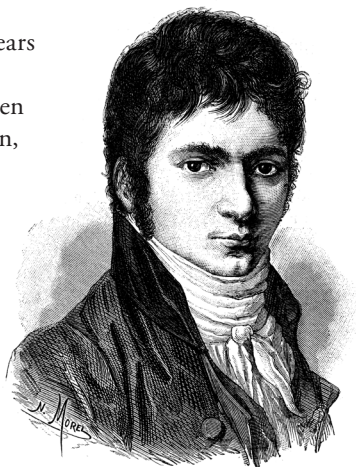
It's both exciting and overwhelming to start looking at the 32 Beethoven piano sonatas. There is no other series of works in piano literature that does such a thorough job of chronicling a musical and emotional lifetime—Beethoven's and, by extension, our own. This lecture examines Beethoven's first full-length published sonata—op. 2, no. 1, in F minor. It will also briefly consider Sonata in D Major, op. 10, no. 3. It was written slightly later and mirrors similar predilections, but it's already expanded and more sophisticated.



Beethoven's Beginnings

Beethoven, who was born in 1770, was 25 years old when he wrote his first piano sonata for publication in 1795. Mozart was only 18 when he wrote his first piano sonata for publication, and he had nearly 300 catalogue listings preceding it. Beethoven played for Mozart in 1787 and studied with Haydn. In 1792, he moved permanently from his hometown of Bonn, Germany, to Vienna. There, he was surrounded by music composed by the masters of keyboard writing.

Beethoven set himself apart for this first foray into the major leagues of piano literature in numerous ways—first, by choosing a minor key when Mozart had written almost all his sonatas and concertos in major keys; then, by writing a sonata in four movements instead of the traditional three; and finally, by unifying those four movements around tiny motifs to create one major structure. Those are the formal aspects. The intangibles are harder to enumerate: force, energy, and electric voltage, the likes of which the piano had never encountered.



The Minor Key

Pitch has changed since the 18th century, and F is a different pitch than it was then. But it's unlikely that the precise frequency of a pitch conveys a particular emotion to human ears. Rather, over the years, certain keys took on affects for composers—first because tuning systems made some keys more dissonant than others, and later, after tuning was more equally regulated, because of traditional associations with various keys.

F minor, the key of this first sonata, had an interesting history. Haydn wrote a stunning set of piano variations, but no sonatas, in F minor. Mozart chose not to use it in his piano output but used it for two tumultuous organ fantasies near the end of his life. Beethoven took it for his own in op. 2, no. 1; in an early sonata, written at the age of 11; and, more importantly, in that most daring and heroic of works, the *Appassionata*, op. 57, written in 1804 to 1805.

Some 20 years later, Schubert turned to it for his poignant Fantasy in F Minor for four-hand piano, written in 1828. It's one of the most important works in the history of that genre. Its long history of associated angst is too uniform to ignore.

For Bach, F minor conveyed pathos. Haydn, whose F minor variations appeared in 1793, was obviously influenced by the tradition of anguish that accompanied the key. But he took the home note, F, and wrote a double set of variations, alternating between F minor and F major. He was clearly fascinated by the dialogue between despair and hope, though the minor wins in the end.

Beethoven is fascinated by that same F minor–F major dichotomy in this sonata. And he takes the unusual step of writing all movements of the sonata with the same tonic, or first scale degree. Usually, at least the slow movement of a sonata is in a contrasting key. Like Haydn, Beethoven chooses to end the sonata in F minor despite a tradition of ending on a more cheerful note. But he places the inner movements in major. For Beethoven, the key seems less about deep loss and more about unrest, agitation, and assertive struggle.

Bach was a composer whose acceptance of divine providence and the necessity of human suffering infused every note he wrote. His German Lutheran world wouldn't have it any other way. Beethoven, by contrast, lived in an interior and exterior world far less dominated by religion. His life and work seem to assert a continual struggle against fate and in support of human command.

Beethoven's early sonata is in that same key of F minor. Already, the young composer is experimenting with the novelty of a slow introduction—something Mozart and Haydn hadn't done. The introduction also returns as a completely unanticipated interruption amid a fast movement—an even greater innovation. The use of that introduction already foreshadows a lifetime of experimentation and daring.

Contrasting Mozart and Beethoven

Piano sonatas by Mozart were often performed in small rooms on small instruments by smaller people—women. Mozart's fortepiano had a sound somewhere between that of the harpsichord and the modern piano. Invented around 1700, the fortepiano functioned as both a musical instrument and a piece of furniture. Thus, it often fit under the rubric of ornament and interior design, and producing much noise was not a requirement or a desired feature.

Mozart's sonatas are wonderful, and a few of them stand out among Mozart's best music. But Mozart is consistently at his greatest in the piano concertos—where the piano is part of a larger contingent, soloing with a whole orchestra. Mozart's piano sonatas were meant to be accessible to both performer and audience. Thus, they feature brevity, lovely melodies, and few enormous technical demands. For example, the Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 570 was written in 1789, two years before Mozart's death and six years before Beethoven's first sonata. It features a simple, beguiling melody, culminating in a reassuring cadence, all unfolding at a gentle piano dynamic. The melody has a lovely shape as it gently curves around, with that smooth and singing line.

But Beethoven's musical life was different from Mozart's. Mozart started out as a servant to the Archbishop of Salzburg. Once he left that position, in some disfavor, his career was marked by financial insecurity. He was the first major composer to “freelance”—to survive without the regular patronage of either the church or an aristocrat. It was a rough path to follow. Beethoven was no one's servant. The rise of new bourgeois audiences and his personality made that possible. He was gruff, macho, and confident. In op. 2, no. 1, he already thumbed his nose at the set expectations about charming sonatas.

The Movements

In Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, we have not only the three traditional fast-slow-fast movements but also a minuetto inserted between the traditional slow movement and the final fast movement. Symphonies had four movements. Through enlarging the traditional proportions of a sonata, Beethoven creates mini symphonies at the piano. He was determined that the piano would take on heroic proportions. It helped that his instrument would soon grow stronger and could increasingly withstand the new demands placed upon it. For the time being, though, Beethoven had to be content with a fortepiano like Mozart's and substitute absolute will for desired decibel levels.

The first eight measures of this piece comprise three important elements: an ascending broken chord (a rocket theme); a descending, fast triplet that incorporates a little scale, which launches that triplet on its way; and a neighbor note. Neither the parts nor the whole form a particularly compelling melody. It's jagged and made up of spiky staccatos. And instead of expanding into a flowing eight-measure phrase, it compresses, providing a sterling example of foreshortening.

It moves from eight beat units to four beats to two beats to one beat and then to silence. But music gains power as it is compressed. And in this piece, the rhythm of the left hand only exacerbates our discomfort. We're used to every measure beginning with a strong beat—a downbeat. Music depends upon it for clear organization.

It moves from a relatively comfortable upbeat figure that leads to a downbeat to three-note figures with no downbeat in sight. The rhythm becomes breathless when the stability of that first beat in every measure disappears. The piece is written in cut time—two half notes to the measure rather than four quarter notes. That means we hear it in larger pulses, typically resulting in a faster tempo and more excitement. That's why that compression, that foreshortening, can pack such a wallop.

Beethoven introduces a far greater range of dynamics, with more drama and contrast, than anyone had previously envisioned. When the music goes from two-measure groups to one-measure groups, *sforzandos*—loud, sudden accents—appear to make us notice. They're unprepared jolts, like electric shocks. When it gets to the top, there is a *fortissimo* that subsides to a *piano* within one tiny measure. That's a lot of change and many surprises within a short period. It creates musical electricity.

You'd expect that Beethoven would provide large, crashing chords for all those shocks. But instead, he does something awkward and Beethovenian. Those *sforzando* notes are high in the puny register of the piano, and they're alone, without left-hand harmonization. They get absolutely no help from their friends. Those notes are like the lone person struggling against all odds and winning—but no victory is handed over on a silver platter.

The Two Themes

Beethoven presents this whole first theme with his usual tenacity. He uses repetition to drive home his point. A composer like Debussy might use repetition to create a dream state. But for Beethoven, it's pure insistence, and he's wide awake. Beethoven wants us to be certain where we're anchored. But eventually—in music, as in life—we must leave that safe harbor.

Sonata form—the musical form in which first movements of most classical period sonatas, symphonies, quartets, and other large-scale works are written—demands conflict between keys. Thus, as we determine that we’re living in an F minor universe, we’re yanked away from that homeland. And according to traditional formats, the rest of the movement will be about the continuation and eventual resolution of the conflict between two warring keys and often two themes. We’ll have an exposition that exposes two keys, a development that prolongs the tension between them, and a recapitulation that provides reconciliation.

Beethoven was agreeable to those conventions. In that sense, this is a traditional sonata, even to the extent of repeating its two halves—a convention common to Haydn and Mozart, which quickly disappeared in later Beethoven and thereafter. But within the conventions, we start to see what distinguishes Beethoven. He wants to use any means at his disposal to build energy and tension. Beethoven was obsessed with small connections and how they can be used to create larger constructions. In this movement, after the transition, the second theme will be a foil to the first theme. It will contrast and disagree.

The two themes rhyme. They share the same quarter-note rhythm and the same broken chordal structure. Where they diverge is simply in direction. Whereas the first theme shoots upward, covering a large segment of the keyboard, the second doesn’t spread as far. It spills downward, with its notes connected rather than detached. And, of course, it is in a new key, this time major.

Here, Beethoven is following directions. When you have a first theme in minor, you present a second theme in its relative major—the major key that has the same key signature. In later sonatas, Beethoven will increasingly move away from those rules. But even here, where he follows them, he bends them by coloring major with minor. He’s interested in the pathos created by the half step. He even places yet another *sforzando* on the offending “wrong” note to mark its prominence.

This theme, despite being legato and covering a smaller range than the first theme, is more about explosiveness than melodic beauty. The themes are brief and based on small motives. They’re about fragments and how to make something large out of something small. They’re about the process of creation.

Connections between Movements

We've looked at how Beethoven navigates the first and second themes of the exposition. The two bars with *sforzandos* early in the first theme and the closing idea that ends the exposition are connected. As the first theme culminates in left-hand syncopations and an arrival at a long top note, falling to its resolution, so does this one.

We can look at the larger picture—the rest of the sonata. We can zoom in and out of the first few bars and generate an astonishing amount of the material that Beethoven makes use of in the following three movements. He does that more than his predecessors did.

Remember, Bach was writing short movements that often had little relationship to one another other than key. Mozart and Haydn were writing sonatas, which were much longer than Bach's preludes and fugues or dance suite movements. But those sonata movements, despite sharing keys and serving as emotional foils for one another, often bore no thematic relationship to each other. Beethoven is out to change all that.

The six-note scale that capped the first theme of the first movement is in the opening of the second movement—not simply any six-note scale but even the same pitches, changed from minor to major. The neighbor note motion in the first movement triplet, the down-up motion from F down to E to F, is in the opening of the third movement. It's a bit submerged. But not so in the trio, or middle section, of that movement, which seems to take the neighbor note motion as its entire *raison d'être*.

Finally, the fourth movement reiterates the neighbor note exactly as the first movement ended, in that precise register. A little later comes the six-note scale—three times. Could all these connections between themes and movements be coincidence, simply the happy outcome of a tonal system that privileges scales and arpeggios? Many pieces in the tonal era feature broken chords, neighbor note motifs, and scales. But the insistence here—the isolation of each tiny motif, and its examination from such an array of tempo, rhythmic, and melodic perspectives—is difficult to ignore. There's an austerity to this piece, with its insistence on the fullest development of the most basic musical cells.

Sonata in D Major, Op. 10, No. 3

In this sonata, begun a year later but already vastly larger, Beethoven fixates on the interval of the fourth. He helps us hear the interval because he fills in all the notes, and we can count them. His first theme outlines a descending fourth before rocketing upward. And after that, the fourths veritably swarm, not only in the first theme but also in the second. The whole first movement features an unending stream.

As in op. 2, no. 1, the third movement is a menuetto, again with a middle trio section with unmistakable fourths in bold letters. The last movement takes refuge in cagier strategies. It's as if we've entered some clandestine space, us and the fourth, plotting some covert mischief.

It is difficult to leave these early sonatas. In each case, tiny, inauspicious embryos have miraculously given birth to large structures and a whole carnival of interrelated ideas. These pieces bind together logic and emotion with galvanizing force. The progression from one thought to the next is inescapable. Yet the variety of thoughts appears infinite.

These early pieces are about fragmentation, unification, and inexorable energy—fledgling characteristics ready to explode. There are 32 sonatas, and Beethoven will have much to say about how to build them. Each sonata is an essay in new possibilities.

Beethoven's Sonata No. 31, Op. 110, Movt. 1

This lecture moves to late Beethoven, with his Sonata in A-flat Major, op. 110, and enters uncharted territory—not approached before, or possibly since. All composers evolve—and many improve—as they mature, although some, like Mendelssohn, appear to be at their best when still young prodigies, and others, like Rossini, drop out in middle age, when the going is good. Beethoven, though, presents a special case because his style changed so markedly over time.

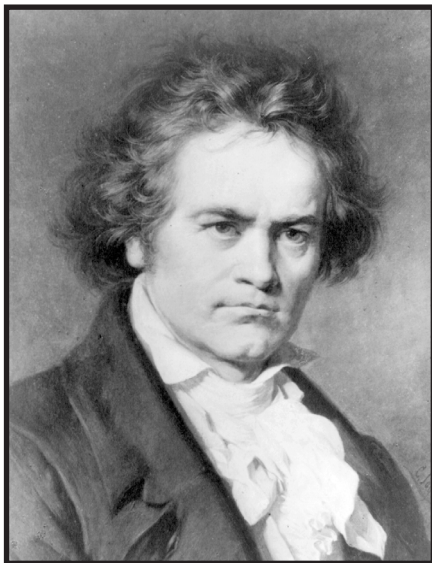


Beethoven's Style Periods

Musicians generally divide his works into early, middle, and late style periods. But those divisions are approximate at best. Nevertheless, few would disagree that op. 110, written in 1821 when Beethoven was 51 years old, is totally different from op. 2, no. 1, written in 1795 when he was 25. His first published sonata has brethren among its ancestors by other classical period composers. But the late piano sonatas, opuses 101, 106, 109, 110, and 111, stand alone with the late string quartets in their daring, range, and power.

In his day, Beethoven's late works were seen as bizarre and explicable only as the infirmities of a deaf man. It is worth taking a moment to hypothesize about the connection between Beethoven's deafness and his late style. Beethoven's terror of his increasing deafness reached its peak in 1802. He despaired about his inability to hear even the flute of a shepherd, and contemplated suicide. In his later years, he conducted deaf, unable to hear even the applause that followed a performance of his Symphony no. 9. Surely such isolation in a hidden world would have a profound effect on one's inner hearing and thinking, allowing for sounds, harmonies, and forms never imagined.

In his late works, sonata form is stretched, compressed, and bent out of shape. In op. 101, it becomes so concise as to make the form nearly unrecognizable. In op. 106, it becomes so vast as to dwarf all previous sonatas. Modulations, or key changes, can be wildly unorthodox. Extremes of register, dynamic, and tempo become commonplace, and disparate ideas butt up against each other. Movements permeate one another as the architectural vision grows larger. And the weight of the work moves away from the first movement and into the last.



The way Beethoven explicitly connects the separate movements of a single piece and moves the largest movement to the end makes that narrative more compelling. Beethoven is always interested in navigating across contradictions and embracing opposite poles. And it gives the music vast emotional range. He does it across sonatas, and he does it within sonatas. In the opening of op. 109, he moves from one state to another within the first nine bars. The determination to wrest contradictions into unity, be all-encompassing—compositionally and emotionally—and create a refuge from chaos rather than a disjointed muddle makes this art extraordinarily powerful.

Sonata No. 31, Op. 110, Movt. 1

This sonata has its own overriding narrative. It starts from a place of innocence in the first movement, and it moves to brisk, fierce austerity mixed with humor in the second. Then, in the last—a vast double construct of slow to fast, slow to fast—it goes through a period of grief, moves on to a rigorous fugue, disintegrates, and is finally reborn. This is a life story that ends in redemption.

We'll examine the first movement in this lecture. We'll start with the exposition, where Beethoven lays out the materials that he'll be molding together. The glory of the melodies speaks for itself, but it's worth talking about other amazing aspects that are less obvious. One is the sheer number of disparate ideas that Beethoven introduces in a short movement.

The more there are, the harder it is to build that necessary coherent narrative. Nothing can be random, nothing unrelated to what comes before or after. And there are many ways to meet that obligation and create a cogent structure. It can be jagged, as in op. 109, or smooth, as in op. 110.

The Exposition

The first theme, theme A, is harmonized simply and consists of a chain of fourths—which become the subject of the later fugue. The opening falling third from C to A-flat and the rising sixth that follows it permeate the movement. They immediately recur in the next theme, theme B, which is independent but closely related. It shares key, mood, tempo, and intervals with theme A. It's filled with thirds, and it ends with the same traversal as theme A did, from A-flat up a sixth to F. This theme is again harmonized simply and goes straight to the heart; it's all sung.

But one of its most striking aspects is its accompaniment. The regular sixteenth notes beneath the melody go a long way toward conveying its wisdom. It has a support system that's unwavering and utterly reliable. Sixteenth notes are the glue that hold this movement together. Sometimes they provide serenity, sometimes propulsion, and sometimes flotation. But their rhythm is a constant, while their divergence in harmony, articulation, and function is infinitely rich.

There is a foil, however. Part C of the first theme occurs directly after parts A and B, those gentle opening melodies. It takes the simple harmonic underpinnings of the beginning and literally flies with them. The sixteenth notes disappear, the melody gives way, and the passage is entirely in thirty-second notes, purely about texture and register.

Beethoven is interested in traversing large swaths of the keyboard, untethered. We're dealing with matter that is unweighted, as if all the ropes that tied it to earth were suddenly released. It's the movement's first inkling of Beethoven's obsession with great height and depth. That sense of freely floating, as if the keyboard were one great galaxy, occurs often in this sonata. It's a release from the laws of gravity, and it works both up and down. It gives a foretaste of our painful descent to G minor later in the sonata and then of our triumphant rise back up to A-flat.

The End of the Exposition

Usually, the end of the exposition is marked by a large cadence and a repeat sign. That repeat sign, with its two vertical bars, gives a visual portrayal of the stop we need to observe before starting up again. It's a red light. But not in this piece. Beethoven slows down and glides right through. There's no repeat sign in sight.

Instead, we've arrived at one of the most magical moments of the piece. The stable sixteenth notes we encountered have disappeared. They've floated upward and are now so unencumbered that their weightlessness lets them dissipate altogether. We roll right through that missing stop sign between exposition and development.

This moment makes one gasp at Beethoven's temerity. We're falling through emptiness. No sixteenth notes, sheer octaves, no harmonies for support, and no clear modulatory mechanism. This modulation could not be more abrupt.

It's accomplished through magic rather than logic. Beethoven is holding us gently. Now, we find ourselves in F minor, with our beloved accompanying sixteenths back again, this time in the service of theme A.

The Development

Thus begins a brief but memorable development section. Like the recapitulation, it brings together disparate ideas. The drama centers on the left-hand sixteenths; soon they take on an independent life. They're not simply cushions upon which a beautiful melody rests; they are intricately curving scale figures, highlighting the low registers of the instrument in well-delineated tenor and bass voices. They're on a search. The tenor asks a question. The bass answers, always in measured tones, neither hurrying nor hesitating.

That commentary, weaving a spoken counterpoint around the familiar theme, imparts a new multilayer quality to the music. And we explore one key after another, moving down by thirds. When B-flat minor melts into A-flat major, we enter the recapitulation.

The Recapitulation

The sixteenths give way to the flying thirty-seconds that are an accompaniment rather than a separate theme. The return washes over us, and we feel immensely grateful. That return is infinitely reassuring because it brings back the tonic key, and it centers in the middle of the keyboard, exactly where it began. But most importantly, it unites those two previously independent ideas that we called themes A and C. It creates a synthesis, a sense of progress that provides a marker in the tale.

Progress has been made, but this can't be the end. There's no late Beethoven that stays in the center of the keyboard for long or settles so easily for reconciliation. Here, the thirty-seconds gradually rise into the right hand, ending in a veritable cry of unrelenting high A-flats. Beethoven knows that anything outside of a normal vocal range conveys angst, and this repetition pounds.

That cry carries it to the familiar theme B, and though its faithful sixteenth-note accompaniment is intact, it's in the wrong key: D-flat major. It must get back to the home key of A-flat. That's the nonnegotiable imperative

of a recapitulation in classical sonata form. But how it gets back there is unprecedented. Beethoven seems to be determined that modulation in this piece will take place through sleight of hand rather than approved procedure.

Theme B, so full-throated in its first appearance, gradually becomes frailer. And as it gets softer, it begins to fall, eventually landing strangely in E major, the “wrong” destination. This is a wonderful modulation, playing on the most magical aspect of harmony—one note can be two notes. D-flat is suddenly C-sharp. Once that transformation has taken place, a whole new set of related keys becomes accessible.

The home key must come back eventually, though. This modulation dispenses with caution. The steady tempo of the sixteenths we’ve been hearing ceases, interrupted by an explicit instruction to hold back. Time is put on pause, resuming only when the piece is safely heading to A-flat major.

The Coda

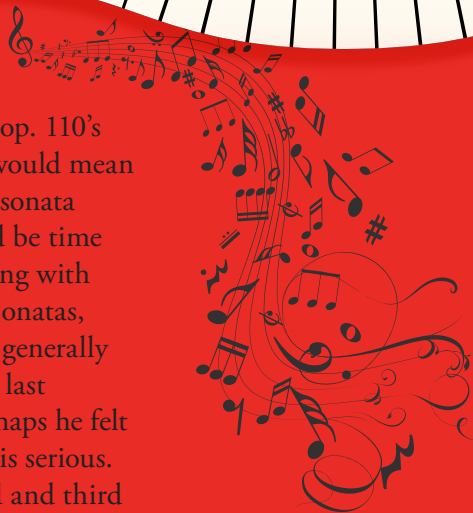
Once back in the right key, the piece stays put. But the coda—the end of the movement—will transport us forward and backward in time, allowing us to reflect on what’s been and what’s to come. Here, the ongoing sixteenths merge with the opening tune. It’s hiding in a new register, in the left hand. That tune in the left hand is like a memory recurring, fragmentary and distant. And finally, in the last measures, another inner voice hints at the subject of the great fugue to come.

In the movement as a whole, there is a journey of those many sixteenth notes, a spinning of theme after theme, modulations that convey you from one universe to another, and registers that sparkle, shriek, boom, and snarl. This movement is the calm prelude to the coming saga. The saga is complex, fraught, and a vibrant testimony to art’s narrative power.

Beethoven's Sonata No. 31, Op. 110, Movts. 2–3



The previous lecture focused on op. 110's first movement. Usually, that would mean that most of the serious part of the sonata had been examined. Then, it would be time to relax and look forward to finishing with scherzos and lighthearted rondos. Sonatas, like symphonies and concertos, are generally front-loaded. But Beethoven, in his last sonatas, rejected that tradition. Perhaps he felt that wasn't how life goes—the end is serious. This lecture will explore the second and third movements in more detail.



The Second Movement

The second (and shortest) movement is a foil to the generous lyricism and amabile character of the first movement and the complexities of the third. Its speed lends it good humor that is edgy, even abrasive. The key is F minor. The prevailing intervals reinforce the first movement. This movement is in a simple A-B-A form. Especially in section B (the middle section), the right hand circles obsessively around the interval of a fourth. The left hand provides a spiky counterpoint, always syncopated, leaping, crossing over the other hand, generally taking pleasure in creating a maze of discomfort.

There's something lean and muscular about this movement. Nothing could be more different from the *adagio* that follows it. It has an uncompromising rhythm, regular phrase lengths, intrusive left-hand syncopations, and steely, sharp attacks that brook no opposition. In the coda, suddenly all that resolution melts away. The *sforzandos* disappear, minor becomes major, the pedal goes down, and the tempo loosens its hold. From that point, the music is no longer encased in protective armor. In fact, it's about to become painfully vulnerable. The ensuing *adagio* emerges out of that open pedal, which turns out to be its dominant.

The movement opens with a vast distance between the hands, conveying emptiness. Then, it moves into a recitative, meaning there's no time signature with regular bar lines. The music is free to move when and how it wants, seemingly without premeditation. In the brief moments of recitative, Beethoven defies every expectation—the score is littered with accidentals.

He changes tempo four times: *adagio ma non troppo*, *più adagio*, *andante*, *adagio*. He asks for long pedals that shamelessly encompass dissonance. And, oddest of all, he notates changed fingers over repeated notes that are notated as ties. Somehow these notes both repeat and don't repeat. The sound is like *bebung*, which is the name for vibrato on the old keyboard instrument, the clavichord. Here, it feels like speech without words.



The Third Movement

When the recitative ends and the repeated sixteenths begin, gradually swelling from a single pitch to full triads, the song—or the sad lament, as Beethoven labels it—begins in the unusual key of A-flat minor. Harmonies lie beneath the song. Vibrations shift in counterpoint to the melody, sometimes moving in sync, sometimes behind or ahead, sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant. Their colors change, but the heartbeat they provide is constant. There are crescendos, but they lead nowhere, always falling and grieving again.

The end turns a radical corner. The heartbeat ceases, and it settles into bare A-flat octaves—a pedaled, pianissimo, low sonority that is both numb and filled with inchoate possibilities. Out of those barren octaves is born one of the great fugues of Beethoven's late period. The main theme, or subject, is built on the series of fourths that Beethoven has been hinting at since the first bar of the first movement. After the aching reach of the melodic line in the lament, the confines of the contrapuntal fugue subject come as a relief. The fourths feel like a ladder we can climb. And the rigorous addition of one voice after another, with single notes instead of ambiguous harmonies, lets us feel in control again. The fugue is additive and purposeful.

At two points in the fugue, Beethoven proclaims himself with a naked show of power. The first occurs about midway through, when the bass enters, fortissimo on an elongated upbeat, blasting forth out of a piano measure. And that dotted quarter that was the beginning of the fugue subject becomes a loud dotted half. It's too violent, too jarring to be Bach. In the final buildup, Beethoven again uses the bass, doubled in octaves, with entrances piling one on top of the other. He could have ended the sonata after that fortissimo. But it's not so easy. Instead of proclaiming victory after that long climb, at the end of the fugue, the key slips down a half step from A-flat major into G minor. And the earlier lament returns, this time sadder, more desperate.

That lament gasps for breath, distraught at the collapse of the fugue, the loss of structure. Bare octaves then move suddenly from G minor to G major. Those chords thunder, fighting against the *una corda*, or soft, pedal. Then, they subside into a version of the fugue subject, but it's badly hurting, muted, slowed, and in inversion.

In the final portion of the movement, the first statement of the subject is very fragile. It has a long way to go. It must emerge from the *una corda* pedal, resume the original tempo, and un-invert itself. And, most importantly, it needs to get out from the shadow of G to the key of A-flat, a large half step away. Gradually, other voices—also inverted—join that first tentative appearance of the inverted subject. Then, the energy level increases. The subject turns right side up. It's three times faster in the lower and middle voices and twice as slow in the upper voice.

This activity leads to more hopeful signs. First, there's a left-hand augmentation in octaves. And gradually the *una corda* comes off; thus, the full resonance of the instrument is heard. Then there's an *accelerando*—or speeding-up—with diminutions placed above and below an inversion. The impatience builds. When the counterpoint disappears and the subject peals out, no longer competing with other voices, we know we're victorious. All the voices become one unified statement, and it feels as if Lazarus has risen from the dead.

The final A-flat arpeggio banishes all doubts. The world is no longer a lonely or upside-down place. This is not salvation bestowed from on high; it's a resurrection earned. We've heard the struggle, the grace, and the extraordinary determination that got us there. That is late Beethoven.

The Songs of Franz Schubert

Schubert lived at the same time as Beethoven but for a much shorter time. And he was often in Beethoven's shadow. He was born in 1797 and died in 1828, only 31 years old. He has even Mozart beat. Beethoven lived from 1770 to 1827. When Beethoven died, 10,000 to 30,000 people marched to pay him homage. When Schubert died a year later, he was still relatively unknown. His life was regarded as a promise unfulfilled.

Modulation

This lecture will mainly examine modulation. Modulation is reminiscent of Schubert's famous song "Der Wanderer" and the title of one of Robert Schumann's pieces, "Of Foreign Lands and People." When music wanders, or modulates, it's exploring foreign lands. Some are close, some more exotic, but all involve leaving its hometown—its home key. One can slip from one key to another, crossing a border without passport or border patrol, or one can make elaborate preparations and announce the arrival with fanfare. Schubert prefers the more clandestine approach.



Franz Schubert

He's especially interested in moving between minor and major, since that can be two sides of the same coin. In fact, that's not even technically a modulation when you keep the same tonic, or first note of the scale. It's more like staying in one place and seeing it in a different light.

In the Schubert Impromptu, no. 1, op. 142, one puny half step creates a move from a major to its parallel minor. C-natural is reiterated again and again; then, suddenly, C-flat takes its place. And the fact that one note changes by the smallest possible distance makes the effect even more powerful. The fact that something so small had such a large impact makes it more personal, as if we've witnessed our own private revelation.

Then, there's a modulation from the minor to its relative major—the key with the same key signature. In this case, A-flat minor moves to C-flat major—both keys with seven flats. It would have been simplest to stay put for a while, but for Schubert, one emotion is always tinged with another. And before the section ends and we cadence on that C-flat major, there's a glancing reference to C-flat minor. Minor and major are constantly interacting in Schubert. One can't exist without the other.

Schubert's Songs

Schubert is probably the most natural and prolific songwriter who ever lived. He wrote 500 to 600 songs. In fact, two of his greatest—“Gretchen am Spinnrade” and “Erlkönig,” both with texts by Goethe—were written when he was merely 17 to 18 years old. Interestingly, despite trying repeatedly to succeed at opera, which was far more lucrative than lieder, Schubert never achieved success. Opera is public and larger than life; lieder songs are intimate. Schubert is not into spectacles.

One of his songs that deals with lost love (a subject Romantic poets specialized in) is the first song of the famous song cycle *Winterreise*, or “Winter Journey,” adapted from poems by Wilhelm Müller. It tells the tale of a man who’s been left by his love and is setting off on a desolate winter journey to nowhere. In this song, he bids his former love “Gute Nacht,” or “good night.”

This wanderer is already in despair from the start. You hear that in the minor mode and the dissonance that accompanies his first repeated phrase. As soon as his mind shifts to a more reflective mode, commenting on lovers’ fates in general, we hear the first modulation. This goes to the relative major. Then, with infinite sadness, he resolves to leave so quietly that he won’t disturb his lover’s dreams. And we switch into the parallel major—that’s Schubert’s calling card. Again, with a single half-step change, our entire emotional world has shifted. Here, the major feels sadder by far than the minor. It paints a world we know is lost. But at the same time, the music is filled with the glow of major, of what was and what might have been. One emotional world is tinged with another; joy comes layered with regret.

Another Schubert song, also dealing with lost love, is “Sei mir gegrüßt,” or “Be Greeted by Me”—transcribed for solo piano by composer Franz Liszt. The major is a repository for loss and resignation. The lover says his love has been torn from him, presumably by death. But greetings are sent across that impassable chasm. The opening phrase of the song is first in G minor, then in B-flat major, with the initial F-sharp falling to an F-natural.

Obviously, Schubert's genius resides not only in how many foreign lands he visits but also in how he gets from one to the next. The great pianist Alfred Brendel said that Schubert composes like a sleepwalker, one who never falters as he moves in unforeseen directions. The image is perfect because it encompasses dreams, motion, and intuition.

Schubert's Dances

Schubert wrote almost as many dances as songs. And if people could be sleep-dancers, this would be their song. Schubert glides from one key to another in *Valses Sentimentales*, op. 50, no. 13, D. 779. In this dance, there is yet another kind of modulation—chromatic mediant—moving between two keys a third apart. It's the chromatic or half-step change that transports us. It happens both out of and back into the original key of A major—from A to C-sharp, then back again. When one of those fabulous moments arrives, it's usually marked by what we call a color change. Schubert puts a mere *p* for *piano*, but any pianist knows that doesn't begin to cover it. It's softer, yes, but also a little more velvety.

Finally, let's look at the wonderful Impromptu, op. 90, no. 4, which no one ever knows whether to call the Impromptu in A-flat Minor or the Impromptu in A-flat Major, since it can't make up its own mind. This piece is in an A-B-A form. In the A section, it travels from key to key and mode to mode, sticking to the simplest of harmonic progressions. It seemingly moves by way of incantation rather than labor. The best way to know when Schubert has modulated is when you feel chills.

First, there's a modulation to the relative major, and then the almost inevitable modulation to the parallel major: A-flat minor, then A-flat major. By the end of the A section, the major mode has dominated for a long time. The B section is decidedly more troubled. Recall that the same note can have two names. This piece utilizes that same *doppelgänger* phenomenon. And the entire middle section is generated by renaming D-flat as C-sharp and moving regretfully from the calm of a major key to a more disconsolate minor.

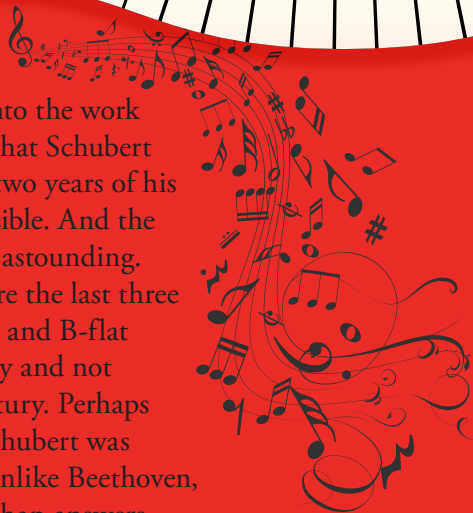
Schubert takes that original tonic of A-flat and makes it function as the dominant—the fifth note—of D-flat, thus heading for the key of D-flat. Then, he renames D-flat as C-sharp. Thus, he arrives at C-sharp minor.

It is a far cry from that opening A-flat minor but an appropriate key for the agitation that follows. At the end of the section, he turns himself around. Again, through enharmonic means, he gets himself back.

This music moves so effortlessly. We wander along with it, always at the boundaries between emotions—that state of perpetual ambiguity, joy with despair hovering, defeat with hope still imagined.

Schubert's Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960

This lecture continues to delve into the work of Schubert. There's no doubt that Schubert wrote more great music in the last two years of his life than would seem humanly possible. And the last three months were particularly astounding. Among the pieces that emerged were the last three piano sonatas—C Minor, A Major, and B-flat Major—all published posthumously and not appreciated until the mid-20th century. Perhaps they weren't appreciated because Schubert was overshadowed by Beethoven and, unlike Beethoven, Schubert deals in questions rather than answers.



The Final Sonata

The last of the three great posthumous works, the Sonata in B-flat Major, enters the world with no grand proclamations. It starts pianissimo and stays there for more than a page. The tempo is *molto moderato* instead of the brisk, confident *allegro* that opens most sonatas. This sonata could have achieved greatness simply on the merits of that pianissimo principal tune. It's infinitely tender. And it's one of those themes that, once you've heard it, will always inhabit you.

Schubert was a great melodist, and every pianist who plays his melodies faces the challenge of playing with a true legato to connect one note to the next, like a singer. It's hard enough to do it well with single notes when your fingers can connect. But when you're playing chords and must pick up your hand between chords, it's smoke and mirrors. Or, more accurately, pedaling, listening, and shaping the line.

But gorgeous melodies are only part of what Schubert does well. They wouldn't be enough to see him through large-scale works. After that singing opening phrase, Schubert does something that no singer can do. As the phrase ends, the flow of the music suddenly halts. The left hand sinks to the bottom of the keyboard and utters a trill. It's like someone muttering under their breath. We can't understand it, but it's an interruption we can't ignore. And that interruption is crucial to the drama unfolding. A meaning to that puzzling trill begins to emerge with hindsight. That trill starts on G-flat and lands on F. And that G-flat throws into question all our certainty that the piece is in B-flat major—B-flat major has no G-flat in its scale.

This sonata movement is a tale of many things—of flowing sound versus silence filled with unfinished thoughts, of accompaniments exquisitely attuned to emotional oscillations, of harmonies poised to fly in unexpected directions. But at the beginning, it is, above all, a tale of multiple keys—B-flat and G-flat major / F-sharp minor—where there was meant to be only one. Schubert doesn't like to stay in one place. For him, there is nothing more human than the relationships forged between keys. And that entails the magic of moving between them, or modulation.

Modulation

To hear and love what Schubert does with harmony, you need to understand all the ways his music skirts the obvious and raises questions instead of providing answers:

- ▶ Is the main theme in major as it is in the opening or minor as it appears later?
- ▶ Will the dominant resolve to the tonic or get lost on its way there?
- ▶ Will a chord take you where you expect it to go, or might it not be what you think?

Schubert didn't only write charming songs, dances, and military marches. He manipulated the tonal system with gut-wrenching mastery.

This piece opens in the peaceful key of B-flat major. And although all sonatas are about conflict and resolution between two keys, the expectation is that the second key won't arrive until the first is well established. And it will be a close relative—the dominant or relative major—thus not all that foreign. A sonata exposition in B-flat should sit unambiguously in B-flat for a while and then create conflict with its move to F, the dominant or fifth degree of the scale.

In this movement, a foreign key arrives unexpectedly early and from an unexpected quarter. B-flat has barely had time to introduce itself. At first, G-flat is incognito. It disappears into a vacuum. That's the first of many silences in this movement. And they're not to be taken for granted. Their emptiness makes one uneasy; once music starts, you expect it to continue.

During the silence, following the trill, B-flat gathers strength and plays its theme again. But this time, at the end, it embraces G-flat. G-flat gloriously takes over that initial theme and unexpectedly becomes part of the first theme group. Then the familiar trill returns, this time on B-flat rather than G-flat. And it descends to G-flat at the end. Then there is a variant of the first theme in the key of G-flat. The accompaniment is vital here. The theme is radiant in the new key, but it's floating on a gentle stream of sixteenths in the left hand that constantly, subtly reiterate G-flat.

Schubert is used to thinking about accompaniments. He was the first songwriter to care so much about the piano part. The sixteenths ripple in a celestial fashion—much like the sound of the brook in the song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*. There's much rippling water in Schubert's music. It tends to be a reassuring presence, and it keeps melody lines moving along.

With this second key and variant on the first theme—G-flat major instead of B-flat major—there's already a mix of stability and instability. The initial key proved so quickly untenable—it was supposed to occupy much of the exposition. Yet both these iterations of the tune are built upon a rock-solid bass. They feel anything but unhinged. That combination of stability and instability is tied up with a theme's openness to modulation, its ability to seamlessly morph into a different image of itself, often acquiring a newly flowing accompaniment along the way.

The Other Posthumous Sonatas

In each sonata, a beautiful lyrical theme is presented in the standard key for a second theme. Then, suddenly, there's a change of key. It's always soft. It deviates from the straight and narrow. That deviation, with its wholly unexpected beauty, is what wows us. In Sonata in C Minor, the modulation is brief. But it ushers in a repeat of the theme, with a lithe Schubertian accompaniment that seems to easily dispense with all afflictions. And the variant, of course, allows for a second chance at that wonderful modulation.

In the A Major op. posthumous sonata, the modulation appears with a variant of the second theme. The new key and the flowing eighths in the bass feel welcoming, like a haven, especially after the touch of minor in the preceding measures. Schubert uses his accompaniment to change the character and provide motion. In each of these examples, there's both the elation of a new, unforeseen possibility and sorrow at its transience.

Return to Sonata in B-flat Major

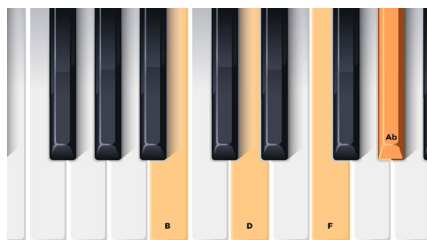
After B-flat and G-flat have both had a go at the first theme, there's a fabulous moment of exultation before the G-flat vision disintegrates. G-flat suddenly transforms into a conduit back to the theme in B-flat. A thundering chord is reiterated 21 times, adding notes along the way. It's the augmented sixth chord, the chameleon chord that can always go in two possible directions. It's perfect for modulation for people like Schubert who always want to show that there's more than one possible path.

This time, it goes back to the original key of B-flat with admirable decisiveness. We think a determination has finally been made. But at the last moment, the music swerves. It's an open confession of hesitation and unknowability. The triplets that sounded so sure of themselves in



the left hand throb with uncertainty. It lands on a diminished seventh chord, which, like the augmented sixth chord, means an indecisive fork in the road.

Via that diminished seventh chord, it wends its way to another unforeseen key. G-flat major isn't the only possible outcome of the opening trill. The G-flat might have been named F-sharp. That's what we call an enharmonic renaming. It's the epitome of changing one's mind. Instead of resolving, it engages in more enharmonic, name-changing tactics—uncertainty heaped upon uncertainty. The worst of it is that the beloved note we thought was G-flat is now suddenly F-sharp. And it's a stranger. It's become minor. It has a new accompaniment, and it's presenting an anxious new theme. In any normal sonata exposition, we'd still be in B-flat heaven.



As the extremely lengthy exposition progresses, it becomes clear that B-flat won't be back for a long time, and even G-flat is unrecognizable. The insecurity implicit in that initial low, rumbling trill makes itself felt. Even when the agitation of the triplets subsides and is replaced by sixteenth notes that flow more easily, the troubled diminished sevenths won't go away. Somehow Schubert must get himself out of this place filled with strange keys and chords: G-flat major, F-sharp minor, and other detours. We are taking the scenic route to a second theme.

In a piece in B-flat major, the first theme needs to establish B-flat, and only B-flat. And the second theme, which should have arrived long ago, needs to land squarely and decisively in F major.

The Second Theme


But in Schubert, what you're led to expect is not there, and what you get is so much better. The modulation that finally gets him to a second theme—in F major, where it belongs—is based on the same diminished seventh chord that got us into trouble in the first place. This time, the chord is on our side. And within one measure, those troubles drop away. The bass line drops. Suddenly, we're unburdened.

The descending bass line moves to C, the dominant of F, and then to F itself. The trill that rumbled between G-flat and F so long ago is smiling on us. We become aware of the F portion of that trill. What an incredible adventure it's taken us on—first to G-flat major, then to F-sharp minor, and now, via many other briefly visited keys, down to F. That's plenty of mileage from one trill.

But it's a ruse. Chords resist resolution. Diminished chords come back. And soon, continuity is shattered, and all pretense of predictability is lost. There's one interrogation after another, one gaping hole after another. The troubled silence we heard after the first statement of the theme is multiplied many times over.

And when the exposition comes to an end, there are yet more modulations, more joys, more tribulations. And that's where this lecture stops—fittingly, on a so-called deceptive cadence. Yet another question. Every theme is exposed to new keys, new modes, unpredictable outcomes. We're learning that we—and Schubert—live with constantly shifting perceptions, that certainty is suspect, and that this is music willing to expose its vulnerability like no other.

Robert Schumann's Romantic Dream World



This lecture marks the transition from the classical to the Romantic era, and there's no place better to begin than with Robert Schumann. His small piece "Träumerei," or "Dreaming," from *Kinderszenen* is the perfect introduction to Romanticism. Dreams, nighttime, and Romanticism go hand in hand, as do unabashed sentiment and longing, lush melodies, incomplete thoughts, and fragmentary forms. This is music's chance to turn against the Age of Reason toward the fleeting whims and fantasies of the individual. This is visible in the preference for vignettes over expansive discourse, the fascination with multiple identities, the loosening of rhythmic restrictions, and the harmonic freedom that comes with increased dissonance. And the aching memory of lost love is everywhere. All this is most apparent in songs where the text tells the story.

Frauenliebe und Leben

Frauenliebe und Leben, with poetry by Adelbert von Chamisso, traces a woman's life. Her first sighting of her husband-to-be is filled with wonder and joy. Then, at the end of the cycle, the music is filled with grief at his death. The harmony then magically shifts, and we feel her mind go back in time. The beginning returns like a dream—a memory—yet imbued with loss.

Schumann's Writing for Piano

Schumann used that same cyclic form in his writing for solo piano. Like the song cycle, it builds a whole out of small parts.

And it often takes similar advantage of memories built into returning material. In piano cycles, there was no need to provide elaborate transitions from one thought to the next. Schumann could simply stop and then start a new piece in a new mood. Schumann wrote three great sonatas for the piano and four beautiful symphonies. But the music for which he's most famous does not fit into a strict, formal rubric. Rather, it's the song cycles and the piano cycles—*Papillons*, *Carnaval*, *Davidsbündlertänze*, and *Kreisleriana*—because they can wander so much more freely.

Schumann is more at home with single performers than whole orchestras or opera companies because he needs the pliability and introspection of the single mind. And in his fertile imagination, that one mind itself will subdivide and become many. Those multiple personas are at the crux of Schumann piano writing.

Schumann went mad. And long before he fully succumbed to his illness, he alternated episodes of manic productivity with periods of paralytic depression. Even when relatively stable, he delighted in acquiring multiple identities. They were stand-ins for his own volatile moods, signing articles he wrote and even claiming credit for musical compositions. Most prominent were Florestan—extroverted and cheerful—and Eusebius—introverted and reflective.



Robert Schumann

Imaginary Dances

Davidsbündlertänze, op. 6 are dances of Schumann imaginary musical society, the League of David. Each piece is followed by the initial *F* for Florestan or *E* for Eusebius, or sometimes “Florestan und Eusebius.” It’s interesting that he removed those initials in his second edition of the piece.

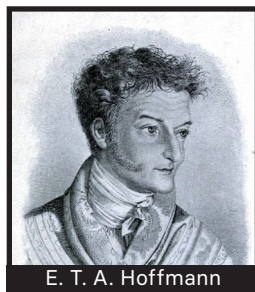
In *Davidsbündlertänze*, Florestan is clearly partying. And Eusebius, at the end of the piece, is engaged in the most tender of waltzes and farewells. The stress is often pulled away from the downbeat, as if Eusebius were always slightly off-center in the world. Schumann liked to converse intimately with performers. At one point in his *Humoreske*, he goes so far as to compose—and publish—an inner line of music that is not to be played, only imagined by the performer.

Perhaps he does this because he tended to imagine his beloved wife, Clara, performing his pieces, as she often did, and he regarded these piano pieces as encoded love letters. But for Schumann, there was a fine line separating reality and his own imaginings. It makes sanity precarious and makes for strange and wildly imaginative music.

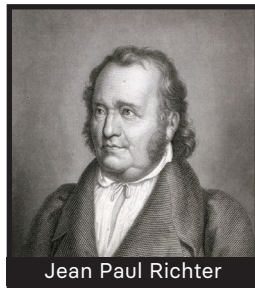
Kreisleriana, Op. 16

Schumann wasn’t the only one of his age to be fascinated with doppelgängers. His two favorite authors, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul Richter, specialized in disguises. *Kreisleriana*, op. 16 is based on Hoffmann’s novel *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. It is ostensibly written by two authors: a tormented choirmaster, Kreisler, and a crazy cat, Murr, who knows how to read and write.

Murr appears in movement 3. He returns in movement 5, in the same key and register. He sounds equally cheerful there—equally ready to pounce. Kreisler appears in movement 4 as he digresses, explores, and reveals all his own self-doubts and vulnerability. He reappears two movements later—in the same key, tempo, register, and mood.



E. T. A. Hoffmann



Jean Paul Richter

There are many grace notes that blur the beat and harmony and add grace and obscurity. There's indecision and ambiguity everywhere in this piece. One of the most striking things about this cycle is that it never decides between Murr's key, G minor, in the opening of movements 3 and 5, and Kreisler's key, B-flat major, which dominates movements 4 and 6.

Earlier composers knew what key they were in and only wandered away from it with great discretion. But Schumann lives in a state of wandering. Limbo is a way of life. Schumann was probably the most literary of all composers. And his music goes where only words and psyches had previously trodden.

Papillons, Op. 2

Kreisleriana isn't Schumann's only opus based on a book he loved. His early work *Papillons*, op. 2 refers to Jean Paul Richter's novel *Flegeljahre*, or *Years of Adolescence*. It is a highly digressive tale about twins and a masked ball gone awry. One twin is good and the other bad. Their names are almost identical: Walt and Vult. And it's not hard to imagine them as two halves of one person.

Schumann sets the last two chapters of the book, where the twins are at the masked ball, changing disguises at a dizzying rate. Everyone's wearing a costume. Then, Vult switches disguises with Walt in an effort on both twins' parts to woo the same lady. There are dances, ironies, and mistaken identities galore. But it's also the roundabout plot and non sequiturs that made Schumann fall in love with this novel.

The opening waltz of *Papillons* will return at the end. The disguises jump from one to another, obviously taking pleasure in their unpredictability. The fourth piece, a waltz, unexpectedly trades in its lilt for a nervous twitch. Then, it returns to normal, only to jump to a polonaise with no transition.

At the end of *Papillons*, time periods are shoved together, and we're in more than one place at a time. We hear an old tune called "Grandfather's Dance." It takes us back in time, as an old man imagines himself dancing like a youngster. Then suddenly, the first waltz reappears, and they are superimposed on one another. Minds fly from one place to another or inhabit two at once—like a dream.

Carnaval, Op. 9

That same grandfather makes an appearance as a memory—dislocated entirely from his initial habitat. He appears in a tiny snippet at the end of another cycle, *Carnaval*, op. 9. The name *Carnaval* tells us about the panoply of figures we'll encounter—dressed up, pretending to be what they are not—and the grandpa is one among many.

Eusebius is caught up in his own dream world, not even able to get his hands to coincide, as if coordinating would be much too intentional an act. Unusually, Schumann asks the pianist to play with no pedal whatsoever, making it clear how lonely Eusebius must be. The piano sounds bare without any sympathetic vibrations. He's followed by Florestan, who couldn't be more different. He chimes in with his customary bravado, happily fielding all sorts of spiky, offbeat accents. But he, too, has a mind that wanders and can't stay focused on the present moment.

There are again bits of *Papillons* in the wrong piano cycle. In this case, it's the initial waltz, peeking in ever so briefly at first but then making a more prolonged appearance. Memories of the past are constantly intruding on the present. By the end, Florestan's thoughts are so shattered that he can't even remember what piece he's in. His manic ending is spliced onto the beginning of the next scene, entitled "Coquette," which has little to do with anything Florestan was previously saying.

By now, he begins to evoke Chopin. Perhaps the impersonation is tongue-in-cheek, but the melody, arpeggiated left hand, and rubato are vintage Chopin.

Letters in Schumann's Work

The central conceit of this entire musical masquerade, *Carnaval*, is a carnival of letters. Four letters generate the whole piece: *ASCH*. They're the musical letters of Schumann's name. The word for "flat" in German is *Es*. Thus, *S* in *ASCH* can be translated as "E-flat." *H* in German stands for "B-natural." The result is A, E-flat, C, and B. Those are the notes that generate the entire first half of *Carnaval*.

In "Arlequin," going back to *ASCH*, "S" can combine with "A" to become one note: A-flat. Its name is spoken as two syllables, or two letters—A, S—but played as one. Thus, we have A-flat, C, B. Those are the pitches that generate the second half of *Carnaval*.

One more option, SCHA, is added mysteriously in the movement called “Sphinxes,” where the notes are written in large, black rectangles above the staff, but again presumably exist only in the performer’s mind. *Presumably* is important here. One famous recording, made by none other than the great Rachmaninoff, plays the “Sphinxes” in ominous and booming tones.

For Schumann, our minds are also sphinxes—never to be totally understood and never reduced to certainty. It’s not that Schumann is hiding himself under all these disguises. Quite the opposite. It’s that he, like the rest of us, is not of one mind. Nothing could be more honest and intimate than the revelation of all the masks that go into his single identity.

Clara Schumann and the Plight of Women Composers

Clara Schumann (née Wieck) was Robert Schumann's wife. She is celebrated throughout Europe as one of the greatest pianists in the world but regarded herself as congenitally unable to compose. Even though she took center stage, sometimes even performing her own works, she was typically playing works by men. Creating her own music on any large scale was going too far. But she didn't come to that conclusion by herself. Most of the male population was happy to help her along.



Women Composers in the 19th Century

A world that believes women can't compose makes sure they remain unqualified to do so. Women were encouraged to take piano lessons—and upped their chances for a suitable match if they did so. But they were not educated at choir schools, made to copy out complex contrapuntal manuscripts, or encouraged to learn multiple instruments. Their training in the inner workings of music was severely limited.

Harold Schonberg's classic book *The Lives of the Great Composers*, which was updated in 1981, features 40 names, but not one is female. Compare that to the undeniable impact of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Colette in literature. If you write letters and read novels, which women were permitted to do, you stand a fighting chance of becoming an excellent writer. If you never learn harmony or counterpoint, you're unlikely to excel at musical composition.

Only in the last few decades of the 20th century did women begin to get true recognition as composers. In the 19th century, Clara Wieck, who lived from 1819 to 1896, was arguably the most important female voice on the scene. She had access to a far better musical education than most. She wrote comparatively little. But her *Piano Trio*, some songs, and several of her piano miniatures still hold their own in the mainstream repertoire. In general, she preferred to write small-scale pieces. And her choice of genre points in the direction of gender expectations as much as her words do. What could sound more feminine than “Romances,” or *Soirées musicales*, conjuring pictures of idealized love or families gathered around a keyboard in domestic bliss?

Notturmo

Most revealing of these genres was the nocturne, telegraphing womanhood through its title, tempo, and mood: The night, the dreams, and the slightly flirtatious pleasure in indecision shout out girlhood. Clara's Notturmo, written in 1836, emerges less than 10 years after Frédéric Chopin had begun his own lifelong exploration of that form. Interestingly, his music was often seen as effeminate despite its male author. Clara played Chopin's works and had met him. He was clearly an influence.



Form may be the wrong word to describe and understand a nocturne. The whole point of piano miniatures is that they evade specific formal expectations. When Robert Schumann quoted his wife-to-be's Notturmo in his eighth Novelette, written in 1838, he hit on something far more important than its formal design. He introduced her music toward the end of his piece as "a voice from afar." It was a love note to the woman he wished to marry who was not yet his.

The Key

In her introduction, Clara achieves a sense of distance by using one foreign note. There's an intentional vagueness in the opening note, with a change of harmony when the melody enters. The original key of F major, introduced unambiguously in the opening left-hand arpeggios, which circle right around F, A, and C, loses its clarity with the introduction of the C-sharp. That C-sharp presages everything that follows.

Throughout the piece, obscurity reigns. Contrary to her own proclamations, Clara shows herself to be unafraid and original. It's precisely in her embrace of that shadowy reality that her own voice lies. She uses a Neapolitan sixth chord built on the lowered second degree of a scale—not the normal second note of the scale but an altered note. It's outside the key of the piece and therefore particularly seductive.

Harmonies like that—chromatic harmonies that are outside the province of the key—have been used by composers since time immemorial. But they became more prevalent in the Romantic period. People wanted a language less cut-and-dried and less tied to predictable procedures.

Rhythm and Phrases

In addition, syncopations precede the Neapolitan sixth chord. And the bass line introduces foreign-sounding harmonies. The choice to retreat into a pianissimo rather than to charge forward is easily characterized as feminine. It's the antithesis of the victorious hero's approach.

In writing about nocturnes, musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg points out that detail in visual art has often been characterized as feminine. In music, these embellishments suggest a coloratura soprano, with jewels sprinkled generously across a modest gown. But this soprano had better be skilled because she might have a hard time knowing where to breathe.

One of the most significant challenges of this piece is identifying where the phrases end. They're often intentionally lengthened, pulled out of shape. They draw out our longing and our nocturnal wanderings.

Only the middle section of this piece resorts to straightforward rhythms and several plain, predictable cadences. But even there, Wieck can't quite resist the pleasures of delayed gratification.

We could hear this piece as excessively sentimental or touchingly filled with sentiment. The excursions could appear strikingly original or slightly awkward. We may feel that this music has been unjustly neglected because it's by a woman, or that it remained slightly flawed because its composer was not allowed to reach her own potential.

The Mazurka

Lest you think that everything Wieck wrote fits the stereotype of a girl with her head in the clouds, we can examine another piece from the same set of *Soirées musicales*. Robert used the opening of this Mazurka as the opening to his own *Davidsbündlertänze*.

Here, in her own Mazurka, Clara is still daring and full of grace but far bolder. This piece has a great blend of decisive rhythms, improvisatory touches, and beautiful harmonic shifts.

Male Influence in Clara's Life

Clara Schumann was far from the only woman attempting to compose in the 19th century, but she had advantages over many of them. Her father was an outstanding piano teacher, she received an intensive music education, and she was married to an eminent composer who had connections to the greatest musicians of the day. But it was those men who made her suffer. And her life story is a series of contradictions that make it strikingly difficult to picture who she was. She was both docile and assertive. Men ran her life. She believed that was how it should be. Her father was a tyrant, and he expected Clara to do his bidding in every regard. Clara was in her father's custody from the age of five, when her parents divorced, and he controlled every moment of her day. He even wrote her diary entries—using her first person.

Luckily for Clara, and posterity, his practice regimes worked. It was his reputation as an outstanding piano pedagogue that drew Robert Schumann to study with him. And that's how he and Clara met. From an early age, Clara soloed with orchestras and performed for glittering audiences. Those audiences and orchestras did her bidding while she largely did her father's—until he interfered with her desire to marry Robert. Friedrich Wieck vehemently opposed their marriage, but Clara was not to be subjugated. Robert and Clara married. And Clara passed from one man's dominion to another.

Robert knew and valued Clara's talents. He needed quiet when he composed, which Clara gave him. He was threatened by Clara's concert tours, income, and success, and she cut way back. He wanted children, and she bore eight. In her private life, she checked every box—generous, sensitive, thoughtful, a female paragon of virtues. In her public persona, she regularly premiered works of Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms, and her success was up there with Liszt. She was an incredible, admirable enigma.



Fanny Mendelssohn

The other woman whose life as a composer was deeply enmeshed with the men surrounding her is Fanny Mendelssohn—sister of the famous composer Felix Mendelssohn. She lived around the same time as Clara, from 1805 to 1847. The association with a famous man must have cut in two directions. Fanny's husband, Wilhelm Hensel, was supportive of her talents, but her brother and father frowned upon a woman's exertions.

Though Fanny was well-educated and enormously talented, and persisted to some degree despite their discouragement, she wrote comparatively little. And her music, when published, was sometimes placed under her brother's name to make it appear respectable. She accepted a life in the private sphere far more readily than Clara. And she died far younger; thus, we know less of what she might have been.

She, too, wrote short pieces that often fit under the rubric of the salon. That was her world; women couldn't help but be aware of what was suitable. Fanny wrote a nocturne in 1838, in the mold of her brother's *Songs without Words* but also strikingly similar to Clara's Nocturne.

Hensel, too, chooses to deflect rather than charge ruthlessly forward after a buildup. And she opts for some out-of-the-way harmonic strategies. She fearlessly tampers with predictable phrase lengths, as Clara did. It is interesting to wonder whether we've been overlooking minor masterpieces in not performing these pieces more often, or if we should simply sadly regret so many women's lost opportunities to develop and reach the pinnacle of their art. In her nocturne, Hensel is loath to announce closure. Like Wieck, she aims for phrases that spin and spin and leave the listener yearning.

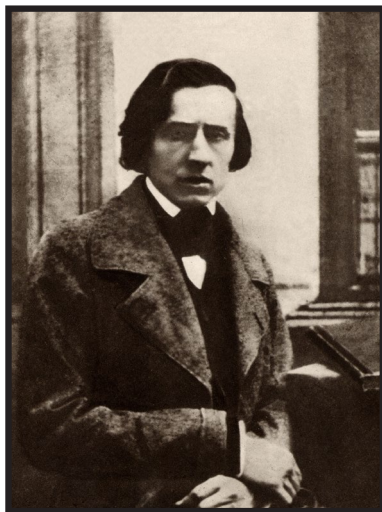
Frédéric Chopin: Piano's Quintessential Romantic

This lecture moves on to a composer who stands alone in the history of piano music because his history consists entirely of piano music. For Frédéric Chopin, who lived from 1810 to 1849, the piano was his voice. He wrote a few pieces for the cello, a few songs, and hundreds of great pieces for the piano. That's quite unusual. Most composers get bored staying with one instrument in one place, and they ramble around.



Frédéric Chopin

Chopin is the quintessential Romantic composer. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 39. He's reputed to have rarely played loudly. Despite this, he had an impressive reputation. But his was an intimate, melancholy art. And the melancholy of his music is well suited to the melancholy of his life story: exile from Poland (his country of birth), failed love affairs, and chronic illness. It's no surprise that the man's music is infused with regret. Chopin's music puts sound to the unrequited longing of the Romantic poets, the ceaseless wandering, the dreaminess that they attached to a lost past.



Tight symphonic forms didn't suit that dreamy atmosphere at all—orchestras are too unwieldy, and sonata form is too rigid. Instead, the piano, with its wide range and subtle complexities of coloration, provides a perfect singular voice. And short forms—fragments that dip into the subconscious—provide the perfect framework.

Preludes

In the first prelude, as thoughts and emotions flash across one's mind without clear definition and disappear as quickly as they come, so these musical fragments evade easy classification. Some convey mainly instability. Offbeat accents and rapidly shifting harmonies indicate that this is not about mellifluous melody.

The second prelude is perhaps the most puzzling of all. It's renowned for its extraordinary dissonance. Can this be the same composer who wrote dances of every variety, whose melodies soar, whose virtuosity astonishes? Yes. The ability to convey a vast range of emotional possibility in sound is the sign of a great composer. But what singles Chopin out is the modest means, the short forms he often employed to do so. A one- or two-minute prelude conveys "a world hostile to tenderness, from which human affection is excluded."

Then—perhaps even on the same day—he composes an unassuming waltz that’s filled to the brim with sentiment and could not be more tender or more different from that prelude.

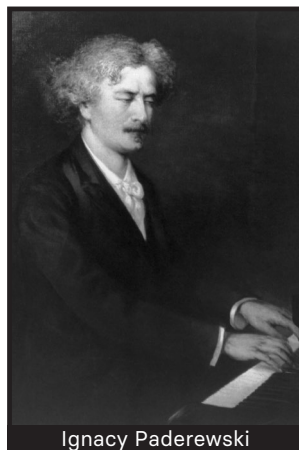
Beethoven died in 1827, and both Schumann and Chopin were born in 1810. It was a good time—Mendelssohn in 1809, Liszt in 1811. The world of music had been filled with symphonies, sonatas, and string quartets by Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. Now, with Chopin, there aren’t symphonies, and there are few sonata forms. Instead, there are 24 preludes, in homage to Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. But these are preludes to nothing. Incompleteness and fragmentation have become a virtue, and implicit, rather than explicit, is what wins the day.

Chopin’s art’s minimalism makes it more human. The everyday, after all, is where we exist. How splendid that a “mere” waltz can convey so much. To make that work, there’s a shift in emphasis away from formal outlines to the instrument itself and to the inspiration of the moment.

Rubato

In *The Farewell Waltz*, op. 69, no. 1, there is dissonance; fleeting, unexpected accents; wonderful undulating rhythms; and embellishments that take flight. The rhythm feels pliable. This rhythmic flexibility is called rubato. The composer steals time from one place and gives it back in another. In musical terms, that means you go faster in one part of a passage and then give the time back by slowing down in another. Obviously, the more instruments you have playing together, the harder that is to coordinate. But when you have one, there’s no limit to what you can do.

Rubato is one of the defining characteristics of Chopin’s music; it’s what makes it dance. And if you listen to some of the great historic pianists of the earlier part of the 20th century—Ignaz Friedman, Josef Hofmann, and Josef Lhévinne—you’ll hear what Chopin must have had in mind. The great pianist Ignacy Paderewski—who was also briefly the prime minister of Poland—saw Chopin’s rubato as a potent symbol of Poland’s national identity.



Ignacy Paderewski

There's never been a composer as completely identified with a particular country as Chopin is with Poland. To this day, Warsaw is filled with Chopin monuments and museums. Even the nation's largest airport is named after Chopin. His heart, pickled in alcohol, resides in Holy Cross Church, in deference to Chopin's dying wish that it returned to his native land. The rest of him lies interred at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

Thus, that tempo rubato is powerful stuff. It's characteristic of a whole nation that sees itself as brave and perpetually persecuted but flexible enough to avoid spiritual capitulation. It's an assertion of musical freedom and autonomy in response to centuries of bullying and abuse.

Chopin's Patriotism

Chopin left Poland in 1830, shortly before the tragic 10-month rebellion in which Poles tried unsuccessfully to finally wrest control of their government from the Russian czar. Chopin's family was quite conservative, even monarchist. And Chopin had no interest in joining any militias and fighting. Nevertheless, he was patriotic. When he settled in Paris in 1831, he brought with him a lifelong allegiance to his country of birth. Nowhere was that allegiance clearer than in his dances.

Two sorts of dances call upon Polish folk traditions. One is the Polonaise—meaning “Polish” in French. The other is the Mazurka, which is often more emotionally complex. Chopin wrote almost 60 of them. They're a veritable encyclopedia of rhythms, scales, and harmonic procedures that come from Poland.

The Mazurka

Many of these pieces have a bittersweet mood with rhythmic ambiguity. Mazurkas are in triple meter—three beats per bar—but they often stress the second or third beat rather than the first, which makes for a sense of being caught off guard. In Mazurka, op. 7, no. 2, Chopin uses plenty of chromaticism—notes outside the chosen scale or key of his piece. He also makes use of modes—scales other than major and minor—which take us back to those old folk traditions.

Op. 17, no. 4 is one of the most famous, for good reason. It relies on modal harmonies, incorporates a drone bass, and has offbeat accents. About halfway through, it has an open fifth in the bass that lasts for 31 measures. This may remind you of fiddles tuning their E and A strings. It ends on an irresolute harmony.

Mazurka, op. 50, no. 3 has not only the yearning initial melody—a love song or a song for love lost—but also a heroic outburst, which could surely send the soldiers off to war. The opening is nostalgic and chromatic. Then comes a more military sound before the beginning returns. That heroism so soon after the beginning is a trait that further complicates our image of this frail man.

The wealth of formats that Chopin utilized is mind-boggling. And yet, his music could not be more different from that of Bach and Beethoven and the music coming out of Germany. But its appeal has lasted for nearly 200 years. This music has had an indelible impact on all piano music written since Chopin's lifetime.

Chopin's Nocturnes and Ballades

The nocturne appeared as an emblem of femininity. Commentary on Chopin often circles around gender. Even when it's not explicit, the innuendos are unmistakable. This lecture will start with Chopin's nocturnes. Chopin's work is often referred to with feminine imagery—fairies and elves, tender and delicate, elegant and graceful. And his lengthy affair with George Sand, who'd taken a man's name and who dressed in men's clothes, lends credence to the idea of gender reversals.

Chopin's National Identity

Poland, a notoriously conservative nation on gay rights, is in an uproar at recent research indicating Chopin may have been gay. And the controversies regarding his gender identity began early on. His sexual preferences are irrelevant, but the sighs he draws from the piano are not. Rubato—rhythmic flexibility—has much to do with those sighs and nothing to do with the beat of a metronome. Paderewski identified Chopin's rubato as the saving national characteristic of Poland.

Paderewski didn't mention patriotic overtones from the pedal, but the pedal augments every other kind of overtone. It's the key to Chopin's sound. It engulfs a fundamental pitch in a haze of vibrations. And Chopin discovered how to make use of that possibility as no one before him had.

Nocturne, Op. 27, No. 1

In the opening bars of Nocturne in C-sharp Minor, the first section boasts an unbelievable 28 bars with C-sharp in the bass. And it stays in the pedal. He modulates briefly and then goes back to C-sharp, then low G-sharp—the dominant—and back again to C-sharp. It gives the feeling of being delightfully bathed in sound. If it's played without the pedal, you're out in the cold. Chopin couldn't have existed on the harpsichord, which didn't have a pedal.

People sometimes think that the pedal is there mainly to connect notes that might otherwise be detached because one's fingers can't reach them. But it's needed for the enormous warmth of the sound. Connecting the notes is crucial, but the poetry also should not be ignored.

Nocturne, Op. 27, No. 2

This nocturne is in D-flat major. And it basks in the low D-flat that opens the piece. Again, a pedal is filled with the vibrations from that note. Thus, that note remains resonant for six voluptuously slow bars. The constancy of that unwavering D-flat against shifting chords creates continual ripples of tension and resolution.

When D-flat is left behind for the first beautiful modulation—to B-flat minor—it would never seem as lovely if D-flat hadn't so completely immersed the piece before. After that, it's even more stunning. The D-flat takes on a new identity as C-sharp in the key of A major. It is difficult to tell them apart. And yet they function in different ways.

Chopin returns to the opening material twice more in this piece—once in a hushed pianissimo that feels like an extremely distant memory and once in a triple forte that feels like a culmination of every effort that came before. The end of the nocturne, though, isn't about that triumph. And it's interesting that Chopin chooses to end it *dolcissimo* instead of *fortissimo*. It's infinitely sweet. It's resigned to loss. And it's set over 16 more bars of a D-flat in the bass, as if it's refusing to let go of that last tie to home.

Melodies

The rubato, pedaling, and modulations all contribute to the beauty of the music, but so do the melodies themselves. And those melodies—and their generous embellishments—are vintage Chopin. They remind us that Chopin spent his nights at the opera, immersed in *coloratura* soprano arias. He loved Italian opera.

In longer pieces, like the four ballades, the melodies are found again. The melody from G Minor, op. 23 first appears so tenderly, tentatively pianissimo. A little later, it comes back, and it's come to full fruition. It's in a new key, and it's surrounded by large, exultant chords. Those are the two sides of Chopin. The forte rendition completely carries you away. This is ecstatic music.

Ballade, Op. 52, No. 4 in F Minor

These ballades are all large-scale pieces—10 minutes or more—which means that form becomes a larger issue than it is in shorter works: preludes, mazurkas, waltzes, and nocturnes. Chopin's music is anything but formless, but he often made up his own forms. He rejected predictable A-B-A, sonata, rondo, or pure variation forms. Instead, he combined them, bringing elements of all of them to bear. Thus, his pieces unfold like narratives, hence the appropriate title *Ballade*, or “ballad.” What's amazing is that no matter how impeccably planned the music is, it always sounds completely free and extemporized.

In this piece, Chopin has an introduction, a first theme, and a second theme. And variations on all three are interspersed with one another. There aren't any stops and starts. It's a seamless show. The repeated notes of the introduction will return. But like so much of what Chopin does, the connection is subtle enough to go unnoticed. He hints, and the back of your mind makes the associations.

Chopin modulates right away in the first theme. He's always in motion. It's unusual to move away from the original key so early in the piece, but those changes immediately make the music take flight. He starts in F minor, which is where he's supposed to be. Then the first modulation goes to A-flat major. The tune is repeated in A-flat. This time, there is a fleeting cadence on B-flat minor and then a beautiful modulation to G-flat major. Then, it returns to F, but this time F major rather than minor.

He brushes on keys rather than sinking into them at length. And he does the same thing with dissonances. They're too brief and too quiet to be shocking, but their presence makes Chopin's world complex.

The First and Second Themes

The first theme at the beginning is *mezza voce*: soft and tentative. Then comes the mysterious section in G-flat, and he starts to dance. The G-flat resolves to an F. And the first tune comes back with a new accompaniment.

Soon after the large *forte* climax, everything calms down, and the music arrives at a second theme that's like a chorale. *Dolce*, *rubato*, slowing down. Then the tempo picks up and starts to dance. More *rubato*. Then the introduction returns, this time in a new key, and it spins us back to the first theme. But first, there's a riff that's quintessential Chopin. It's immersed in pedal, there's no meter, and it's all *pianissimo*, floating right up into the ether.

The first theme then reemerges but in canon, with the left hand imitating the right. Then a new key, but the same idea. And again, another key. He's caught in a labyrinth. Then, he finds a way out, and back to that beautiful G-flat major, and then F. Next comes a full variation on the first theme. And then he's off and running. We always stop in the middle of a story with Chopin unless we can get all the way to the end. And even then, it sometimes sounds unfinished. This piece, like the other ballades, though, ends with a large, virtuosic coda.

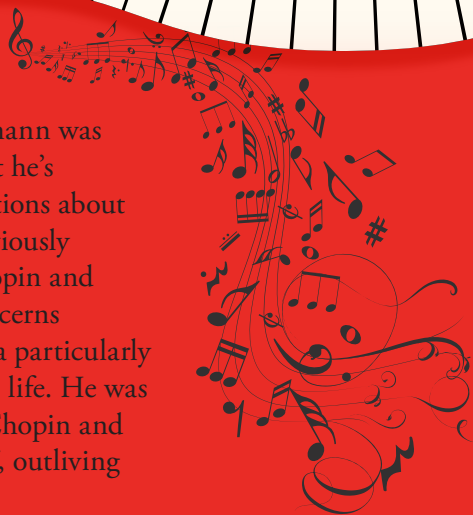
This music is about being in flux. It's always morphing from one state to another. Chopin carries us with him, dancing, marching, floating. But whatever the mode of transport, we're swept off our feet. Leon Fleisher said that playing the piano is an act of *antigravity*—Chopin is particularly audacious in defying that fundamental law of physics.

This music takes enormous joy in the physical act of playing the piano—its virtuosity—and in the sensuality of its sound. It's fascinating that a composer whose music is so filled with melancholy also wrote some of the most rapturous music that we know. Perhaps it's because both the melancholy and the rapture are about longing—in one case denied, in the other fulfilled.

We're watching that longing pour out the happiest and saddest of dreams—melodies that make us sing out loud, rhythms that make us dance and bend, harmonies that are filled with mystery. And always, as the ultimate vehicle of romantic expression, an instrument that encompasses a universe of vibrations. Chopin managed to transform the piano. Without Chopin, we would never have had Liszt, Debussy, or Ravel—or, arguably, anything that followed. For pianists, Chopin is the linchpin of the repertoire.

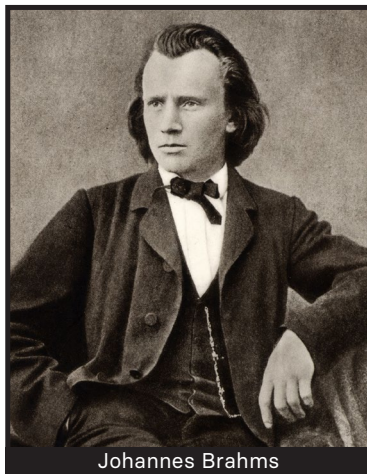
Johannes Brahms: Piano's Dark Poet

As a music critic, Robert Schumann was prescient on many counts. But he's probably most famous for his intuitions about two young men who had been previously completely unknown: Frédéric Chopin and Johannes Brahms. This lecture concerns Brahms, who was destined to play a particularly important part in Schumann's own life. He was born in 1833, 23 years after both Chopin and Schumann, and he lived until 1897, outliving them by nearly half a century.



Brahms's Beginnings

Brahms is portrayed as being old-school. He stuck to the old forms and followed the path of Beethoven rather than writing *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “Total Artwork,” like Wagner, programmatic symphonies like Berlioz, or virtuosic fireworks like Liszt and Paganini. He grew up in Hamburg, Germany, in the family of a modest freelance musician. As a young teenager, he earned his pocket money by performing in bars. He later moved to Vienna, but it took years for him to be settled there. He never felt at home. He never married, and he had only failed love affairs.



Johannes Brahms

His relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann and their children was lifelong, deep, and tender. He came to know the Schumanns before Robert's descent into terminal mental illness. But it was during the time when Robert was confined to a mental asylum that he took on a central, essential role in the family. No one knows whether the relationship between Brahms and Clara was platonic or romantic. Either way, until Clara's death in 1896, only a year before Brahms's, their relationship remained the bedrock of his life. There are countless letters between them, dedications of music, criticisms, reunions, and quarrels.

Brahms's Music

Unlike Chopin, Brahms wasn't wedded to a single instrument. He wrote massive symphonies, string quartets, songs, and a great requiem. In his writing, the piano often feels like a stand-in for the orchestra. The piano music is filled with large, dark harmonies and deep, rich sonorities that are reminiscent of well-burnished strings and mellow winds. The second theme from the first piano concerto—D Minor Concerto, op. 15—brings to mind that heavy chordal riding. He wasn't interested in technical ease or finesse. And his own playing was apparently powerful but sloppy—the opposite of Chopin's. You hear the opposite kind of music-making in the pieces as well.

Brahms played often, however. He wrote for the solo piano early on—three early sonatas, op. 1, op. 2, and op. 5, which were undoubtedly a homage to Beethoven; four ballades, op. 10; many earlier, smaller variation sets; and finally the massive *Handel Variations* and the brilliant *Paganini Variations*. Between 1863 and 1878, in his prime, there weren't any important solo works.

It's not that he abandoned the piano—he merely used it in conjunction with other instruments. Brahms's chamber works for the piano are probably the largest single chamber legacy the piano has: three piano trios, three piano quartets, a piano quintet, the horn trio, the clarinet trio, three wonderful violin sonatas, two great cello sonatas, and, at the end of his life, two sonatas for viola or clarinet. And then there's the four-hand and two-piano music and the music for voice and piano. Brahms obviously couldn't leave the piano alone.

The Instruments

But that statement is true in both its meanings. The Violin Sonata in A Major rejects aloneness. The melodies are radiant, and the companionship between the two instruments is palpable. In this piece, Brahms uses a hemiola—two measures in triple meter that are reconfigured to sound like three measures in duple meter. It's wonderfully ambiguous, and composers love that kind of complexity. It's one of the many irregularities that Brahms builds into his music.

It's precisely those irregularities in terms of harmony, rhythm, and phrase that inspired the great, revolutionary 20th-century composer Arnold Schoenberg to write an essay entitled "Brahms the Progressive." It sought to regain Brahms his place as a force for change rather than as a fuddy-duddy who represented stasis in German Romantic music.

Intermezzo, Op. 118, No. 2

Brahms returned to the solo piano toward the end of his life. And the same warmth that suffused the violin sonata is found in this piece. It's in the same friendly key of A major. It's one of six pieces in op. 118, all dedicated to Clara Schumann and published in 1893, only four years before Brahms's death. It's filled with delightful complexities, including instances of hemiola.

This piece sounds natural, and yet its construction is rigorous. It starts with a tiny opening cell. Then, before the end of the A section, Brahms engages many permutations for that opening cell—first in the bass, then in minor, next with the right hand brought out. Then, it's inverted—turned upside-down: Instead of going down and then up, it goes up and then down. Next is an imitation in an inner voice, a secret voice. And then, at the end of the section, it's buried again in an inner alto voice, as if it's saying farewell.

This piece has three sections, with the middle part a contrasting section, and the first and third close to identical to one another. We call that an A-B-A form. In this case, the B section is in the relative minor of F-sharp minor—it has the same key signature as A major. It is the most intricate part of the piece. Because Brahms is an indefatigable architect, you can trace its melodic origins in the opening of the piece. That little cell from the beginning is well hidden in the beginning of the B section.

But what's most striking in this section is the long, uninterrupted line of melody and the counterpoint that it gives birth to. The hands constantly take up ideas from one another. And Brahms conveniently provides a repeat of the first eight bars so that you have the option of showing different lines the two times through. Eventually, the two hands divide the main tune between themselves in a well-camouflaged inner voice. That inner voice is easy to miss. We tend to think all melodies belong in the right hand. And when they cross from one hand to another, our brains get a little foggy.

In the midst of those two contrapuntal segments, there are many rippling conversations: The ongoing triplets cease for eight bars, the tempo slows, and we hear the previous material now in a major key. The soft pedal, the *una chorda*, goes down, and we're amid a chorale—still, distant, reverent, as if we've entered a church.

When the *una chorda* lifts and the chorale ceases, it returns to that human and openly expressive middle voice. But even the increased activity, the crescendo that ensues, the turbulence, the hands exchanging the tune can't get rid of the peace bestowed by that brief and unexpected major key interpolation. We're only too happy to hear that A tune come back. It's small wonder that this is the piece pianists seem to play more frequently than any other Brahms. Its warmth is unmistakable.

The Other Five Pieces in Op. 118

These pieces are wonderful. They give you a sense of Brahms's enormous emotional range. Each one is wildly different in its mood. The first one, marked "molto appassionato," is a brief introduction to the rest of the opus. It features a turbulent stream of eighth notes that cross the hands and span four octaves in their largely unsuccessful quest for a settled moment. You'll hear Brahms's orchestral sonorities, especially his love for the rich bass of the piano. You'll also hear the embrace of dissonance that helped convince Schoenberg that Brahms was indeed a progressive—not a regressive—composer.

The third one is called a ballade. Brahms only uses that term for his early ballades, op. 10. And perhaps he uses it here to invoke a storyline because the piece crosses from one mood to another, like a narrative depends on fluctuating emotional territory. It starts out *allegro energico*, and it lives up to that directive with much determination and enthusiasm.

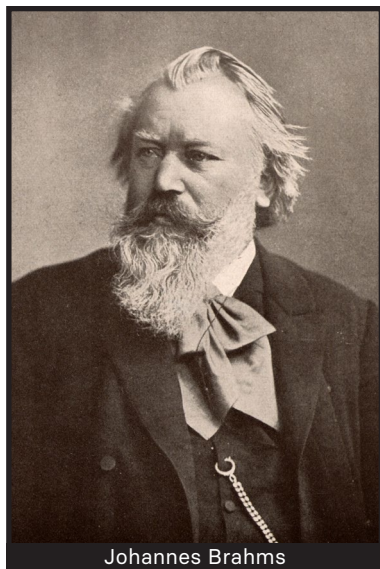
What's most fascinating is how Brahms maneuvers himself from that soldier-like material to being a lover using precisely the same musical idea. In the portion leading into the B, or middle, section, there is a G major chord. But it is a dominant; thus, it has an F-natural on top. Then, he moves the bass from G to B, the third of that chord. Still the same chord but in a different position. The B becomes the root of the next chord, and we're in a new key. It's a fabulous modulation.

The next piece in the set—*Intermezzo*, op. 118, no. 4—begins with that same tiny building block that spanned op. 118, no. 3, that descending and ascending third. But this piece is all about mirrors. It's as if Brahms takes on a new task with each of these pieces, and here, he's interested in the most rigorous kinds of imitation. In that opening idea, the imitation isn't literal. The two hands aren't playing the exact same thing. But later in the piece, there are perfect canons, with the two hands playing identical material—the left hand imitating the right hand a beat later. And the entire middle section is a perfect canon. In fact, for 40 measures, Brahms sustains perfect imitation between the voices, starting with a recall of that opening octave descent. This is a composer who reveres Bach and views his world from every perspective, a little like a cubist painter.

The fifth one is entitled *Romanze*. The variety of the titles imply fleeting moments. Fragments appealed to the Romantics. Here, Brahms isn't the significant symphonist constructing massive structures. He's a composer at the end of his life recalling fleeting memories. In this piece, he uses variations, taking the time-honored method that Beethoven liked of increasing note values as he goes. Thus, the beautiful tune is heard in quarter notes; then in eighth notes, this time in major; next in triplets; and, finally, in sixteenths.

This piece is filled with rhythmic variety. And it's not simply due to the increasingly quick note values but also to Brahms's unceasing love affair with hemiolas. The piece is in $6/4$, meaning that if it behaves itself, it'll divvy up into two groups of three beats in each measure. That's what so-called compound meters like $6/8$ and $6/4$ are supposed to do—they have two strong pulses per measure. In the first four measures, there is no choice but to change how six gets added up. This gives you three strong pulses instead of two at the end. Brahms further complicates things by placing the long notes, which get an implicit stress, on second rather than first beats at the beginning. Brahms treats rhythmic alterations like plot intrigues. They're central devices, and the more uncertainty they create, the better.


The *Intermezzo*, op. 118, no. 6 is the most mysterious and solemn of the set. The opening is in the key of E-flat minor—a key that's rarely used. And that lonely, muted voice is quoting the “*Dies Irae*,” or “*Day of Wrath*.” The ghostly, disembodied diminished seventh arpeggio in the left hand that joins the two measures provides scant comfort. The only sustained moment of apparent brightness appears with a modulation to the relative major—G-flat major. Brahms is taking a tiny musical nugget and turning it around and around in a musical kaleidoscope. The opening idea has a three-note scalewise descent embedded in it.



Johannes Brahms

That descent returns at the end of the A section. And then, that little descent, that little scale, governs the whole section that follows, where faster note values and cheerier staccatos and the major key provide a foil to those deep, dark shadows that engulf the rest of the piece. In the start of the B section, you hear the scale. It's short-lived. The music is quickly troubled again. And when the opening returns, this time fortissimo and fully harmonized, we're no more at ease than in the beginning. The upheaval is more pronounced. And it threatens to overwhelm the brighter material that we've been dancing to. This music was written near the end of Brahms's life. He was looking backward, sure that his powers were waning, feeling sadly isolated from Clara and embittered by the reverence accorded his enemies, Wagner and Liszt.

Franz Liszt: The Consummate Pianist



This lecture moves from Brahms, a veritable recluse, to Franz Liszt, a consummate performer. Franz Liszt—1811 to 1886—qualifies for rock star status. Ladies fainted when he played. He was widely seen as demonically possessed. There may never have been, nor will be again, a composer as tantalizingly ambiguous. Alfred Brendel criticized Liszt for “his alleged bombast, superficiality, cheap sentimentality, formlessness, his striving after effect for effect’s sake.” Both Clara Schumann and Brahms would have totally agreed with that list of demerits. They may have had a point, but they were also defending their own preeminent place in 19th-century music history. They were in pitched battle against the progressive Wagner-Liszt faction that viewed them as old-fashioned byones.

Liszt's Style

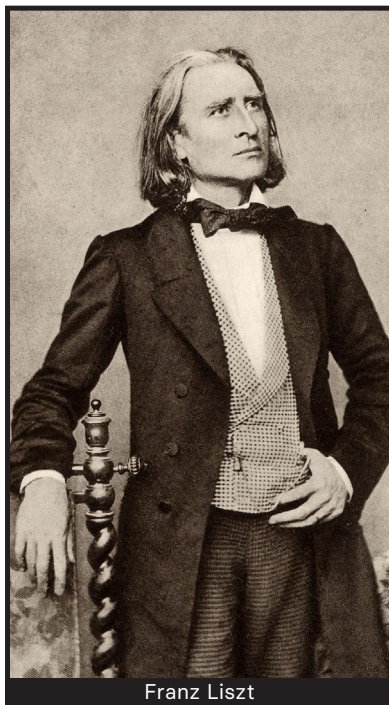
Whatever one may think of some of his flashy minor compositions, Liszt's Piano Sonata in B Minor alone would place him in the top ranks of composers. His use of thematic transformation became the formal inspiration for Berlioz, Wagner, and many others. His use of color and sound revolutionized piano literature, and his virtuosity may still be unmatched.

There's never been another composer or performer as physically fused with the piano as Liszt. That instrumental awareness infuses everything he wrote. He had so many ideas that he apparently never played anything the same way twice. Every performance was an occasion for a new idea. He was an incredible improviser. His music is not about nailing things down; it's about opening them up. Everything was constantly shifting.

He was from Hungary but lived in Paris, Weimar, and Rome and traveled widely. He spent much of his life with one partner, Marie d'Agoult, but he never married her. He moved on to another, Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein. And the two of them were by no means his only lady friends. In the end, however, he became a deeply religious monk.

Liszt's Transcriptions and Études

His musical homes were borrowed, varied, and contradictory. Most striking is his ability to take other people's music and make it his own. In his transcriptions, Liszt took someone else's material and rewrote it for the piano in his own style, often replete with flourishes and razzle-dazzle that none of those composers would ever have imagined.



Franz Liszt

He didn't sit in his study, carefully plotting indelible musical maps. Instead of reaching inward for musical inspiration, he reached outward—to other composers, the undiscovered capabilities of the instrument, other countries and cultures, literature, art, philosophy, and religion. Improvising on those ideas was at the root of his art.

His études for the piano—the *Paganini Études*, based on Paganini's Caprices for Solo Violin, the *Transcendental Études*, and the *Concert Études*—are at the heart of the piano literature. Unlike Chopin's études, which each concentrate on one technical issue, Liszt's are longer and more sprawling. Often, an étude demands multiple skills from the pianist. The pianist becomes a bona fide athlete, moving from one Olympic event to another within a single piece.

First, speed is a given. You may hear scales—diatonic or chromatic—arpeggios, rapid octaves, sometimes interlocking octaves—a brilliant Lisztian device that doubles one's speed—difficult leaps, repeated notes, and much more. He uses an encyclopedia of pianistic pyrotechnics. And each challenge gives rise to debates about how best to meet it. Liszt lived during an age of virtuosi, and he wasn't the only one writing and playing difficult music. But his was better than most others'—more imaginative harmonically, coloristically, and melodically.

Hungarian Rhapsodies

He didn't write only transcriptions and études. Liszt was always looking for ways to display his loyalty to Hungary as it went through revolution and repression. And he adored the music of the Roma people, whose itinerant lifestyle mirrored his own unsettled ways. In his 19 *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, Liszt saw himself as glorifying the street music he'd grown up hearing. However, the tunes he used came from various sources, some old, some new, some Roma, some not. Recently, those pieces have fallen under the cloud of cultural appropriation.

Based on a Hungarian dance style—verbunkos—the *Rhapsodies* are sectional pieces that alternate fast and slow sections. The sixth rhapsody has irresistible dance rhythms and flexible tempos. The capriciousness of the music didn't emerge from a written tradition. As Hungarian Rhapsody no. 6 moves into the second section, it speeds up and uses syncopated rhythms. The rhetorical section has fermatas, or holds, everywhere and markings such as *ritenuto a piacere* (*a piacere* means “at your pleasure”). The final allegro builds and builds, faster and faster, louder and louder.

Petrarch Sonnet No. 104

This piece is Liszt in his serious mode. Liszt wrote three pieces based on sonnets by the great Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch. And Sonnet 104 is the story of a wild and unrequited love that leaves the lover in helpless despair and without an exit from his dilemma. This sort of text is perfect for his temperament: impassioned, agitated, and carrying the grandeur of ages past. Liszt published the piano piece in 1846, but he'd already used the text and much of the same music for a song. The strain of loyalty to a hopeless cause fuels the tension of the music, and that suits Liszt's unabashed romanticism. It includes all sorts of his favorite devices.


The piece begins in the brooding harmonic territory of a diminished seventh chord. It starts with a harmony in the same chord but in a different register. The augmented harmony and rolled chords of the main tune return many times. It's quite an essay in the emotional life of an estranged lover. The music takes every possible detour, veritably embracing the torment and reluctant to let go of any shred of emotion. But at the end, he bids a lingering farewell.

The piece comes from a set of pieces called *Années de pèlerinage*, or “Years of Pilgrimage.” It includes music inspired by Dante, Michelangelo, Raphael, and other luminaries. These are early works of Liszt. But remember that Liszt's years of pilgrimage ended in a surprising place: an austere monastery. You'll hear that severity in the opening of *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, with its insistence on the interval of the tritone—first in the right-hand melody, then, a little bit later, in the left-hand accompaniment.

That's the monk at work. The white gloves and fiery mane of the virtuoso are gone. Minimalist writing has replaced the delightful excesses of the past. Liszt had retired from the concert stage many years before, but his renunciation of dazzle in his piano compositions didn't come until later.

Liszt added notes and notes and more notes to Mozart, Schubert, Verdi, Beethoven, and Wagner. He piled them on in his original compositions. But now, in 1885, the year before his death, Liszt starts to take away notes. This is lean music, and it delights in dissonance. Perhaps Schoenberg and the 20th century weren't quite as original as we all thought. Liszt, at the end of his life, proved to be a renegade who led the way.

The Rise of the Russian Pianists



Every lecture seems to present its own challenges, and this one is challenging because it ought to be more than one. Rachmaninoff—1873 to 1943—is one of the giants of the piano world. His piano concertos are among the best-loved works for the piano ever written. And he wrote études, preludes, transcriptions, sonatas, variations, and countless miscellaneous pieces that all form part of the popular repertoire. But many of his pieces are difficult to play for people with small hands. Rachmaninoff was six foot six, and he had enormous hands. Small hands are not a reason to change profession, but they do make things more difficult, with chords that require large spans and passages that require awkward twisting or creative fingering.

Playing with Smaller Hands

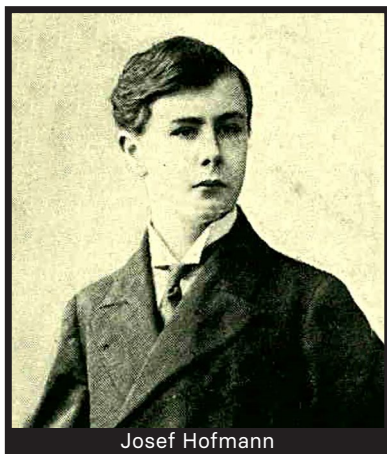
For pianists with smaller hands than Rachmaninoff's, some subtle editing is required in Prelude in G Minor, op. 23, no. 5 to reach the chords in time. Many factors go into being able to play difficult passages. Sometimes, on a hard jump, deciding which hand should move first determines one's accuracy. When playing a rapid octave passage, you might need to decide how to finger the octaves.

Which hand leads can also make a difference. In some passages, the left hand may be easy, and if you think about it, it makes the right hand easier. The placement of your hands vis-à-vis the black and white keys can make a difference. If you must move from a black key to a white key and start far in on the black keys, it will take longer to get there. How you group the notes also makes a difference. If you think of each one individually, that's a significant amount of work. If you do two at a time, it's easier. Three is even easier. And four is best of all.

Making those kinds of decisions with skill can solve many technical issues. But piano keys were designed for a certain size hand. There's even one historical virtuoso, Josef Hofmann, who traveled with his own piano with narrower keys, designed for him by Steinway. There's now a manufacturer who's making similar smaller keyboards.



Sergei Rachmaninoff



Josef Hofmann

Russian and German Schools

There's a split in the piano community between German and Russian schools of playing. The German lineage generally descends somewhere along the line from Theodor Leschetizky and then Artur Schnabel. And much of the Russian lineage dates back to Heinrich Neuhaus, who taught an incredible array of pianists, including Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter.

To put it simply, the Russians prided themselves on a large-scale virtuoso technique and large, voluptuous sound, tilting toward the Romantic style. And the Germans prided themselves on highbrow, serious interpretation, tilting more toward the classical era. Obviously, both are needed for great piano playing. It's fascinating that Russia should have played such a significant role in both piano composition and performance because before Glinka—1804 to 1857—there were no Russian classical composers to speak of.

The first conservatory in Russia opened in 1862 in St. Petersburg, with the Moscow Conservatory following in 1866. Contrast that with Paris (1795), Prague (1808), Vienna (1817), and London (1822). Of course, Russia was still an agrarian, feudal society in the 1800s. There was a wide gap between the rich and the poor. And the rich identified heavily with western Europe rather than with Russia. It was a sign of being upper-class to speak French instead of Russian. And for a long time, incorporating distinctly Russian folk elements into music was seen as debasing.

Glinka started to change that. But it didn't change in a significant way until the so-called Russian Five: Cui, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov. They started writing in the second half of the 19th century. They were rebelling against the German academic tradition, and they made their own independent way. But the group wrote strikingly little piano music—they were occupied with symphonic color and operatic drama. Thus, it was left to Rachmaninoff to carry that torch.



Mikhail Glinka

Rachmaninoff

It's astounding how quickly the piano took hold in Russia once there were conservatories to train people, musical scores circulating, and domestic production of pianos. Rachmaninoff is the visible symbol of that transformation. And by the early 20th century, he was joined by Scriabin, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and a host of others composing and playing.

By the mid-20th century, the Russian pianists were the cream of the crop—Horowitz, Richter, Gilels. And beginning in 1958, the International Tchaikovsky Competition became the Holy Grail for aspiring young virtuosi. In less than 100 years, Moscow and St. Petersburg went from being musical outposts to arguably being the world capitals of pianism.

Rachmaninoff wasn't interested in Russian folklore, but his music still feels Russian to the core. Lush harmonies; warm, soaring melodies; powerful climaxes; and technical virtuosity are characteristics of both his music and of Russian pianism in general. Rachmaninoff's own recordings are staggeringly beautiful. That melodic gift seems to come straight down from Tchaikovsky. And the melodies themselves are heavily influenced by the liturgical music of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Prelude in G Minor, Op. 23, No. 5

Russia was being forced into modernization, and the changes for those who'd been comfortable in the old regime were too much. Rachmaninoff had been among that privileged class. Immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917, Rachmaninoff left—the Russia he knew and loved was gone.

Perhaps you can hear that loss in his music. Prelude in G Minor, op. 23, no. 5 begins with a stern march. But then comes the heart of the music, a gorgeous middle section, one of those melancholy passages that is paradoxically full of joy as well as nostalgia and yearning. That section starts with wide-open arpeggios in the bass that Rachmaninoff learned from Chopin and Liszt. The music aches, even as it soars.

Then, things get more complex. Rachmaninoff adores secret melodies placed in inner voices. Crevices appear, filled with memories and private thoughts. It's always a challenge for the pianist to bring out inner voices; they tend to get lost in dense chords. And they're especially difficult for smaller hands if the chords involve large stretches. The opening march then returns.

Prelude in D Major, Op. 23, No. 4

This piece has another of those long, irresistible melodies. It's no less melancholy for its major key. Part of that sorrow stems from the tolerance of dissonance. One wants to veritably crawl into those dissonances.

Rachmaninoff uses widely spaced arpeggios that entwine themselves around the melody on both sides to surround you with sound. It is as if that melody is cushioned everywhere but has a special intensity that allows it to always hold sway, whether it does or doesn't easily harmonize with its surroundings.

It's clear that this is Romantic music par excellence. The uses of melody, chromatic harmony, and pleasure in sheer physical pianism point backward to the 19th century rather than forward into the 20th.

Prelude, Op. 23, No. 7

Even this piece, which starts without a clear melody and instead fixates on Rachmaninoff's love of figuration and speed, is much more beholden to Liszt and Chopin than to the acerbic 20th century to come. Rachmaninoff's music seems extremely personal. It takes us directly back to his home that was fast disappearing. He was not interested in looking forward into a bleak future.

Aleksandr Scriabin

But there was also Russian music that was moving forward into the next century. Aleksandr Scriabin was Rachmaninoff's contemporary—1872 to 1915. He and Rachmaninoff were students together in Moscow, sharing that city's more Western musical orientation. And he also started out by writing music that's heavily Romantic, such as his beautiful *Étude*, op. 2, no. 1, which he wrote when he was only about 15 years old.

His music didn't stay like that. Neither did most of the music in the 20th century. He's one of the instigators of those changes. Scriabin was a fascinating man—a mystic, a dreamer, a decadent, and a nutcase. He captures a whole different side of Russia, a side endemic with madness, alcoholism, and sexual perversion. He believed that his music would lead to the dissolution and rebirth of the world.

You can certainly hear the wild ambition of it all, even in the small piano pieces. In the preludes from op. 74, the last pieces he wrote, there is the angst and the torment that is also evident in his 10 piano sonatas, particularly the later ones. He uses many fourths and tritones—a fourth plus a half step.

Those intervals pervade so much of his music. They were the building blocks of his favorite chord, which he named, fittingly, the “mystic” chord.

In those preludes, you can hear the full embrace of dissonance, the preference for ambiguity over certainty, the raw desperation of certain passages, and the mysticism of others, with color rather than melody driving the emotional message—though there are some beautiful melodies. All those characteristics launch us into the 20th century.

Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern

The next few lectures will be concerned with composers whose music plays out in dreamlike scenarios. Dream states vary drastically from person to person and from country to country. However, they all entail an enthusiastic rejection of the rational self and quotidian life. The early 20th century is not only an age when movements like theosophy and spiritualism flourished but also an age when Freud's theories of psychoanalysis took hold. And that emphasis on the subconscious played out especially in the composers covered in this lecture, the so-called Second Viennese School.

The Second Viennese School

Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern shared a city with Freud. And there must have been something about Vienna circa 1900 that set off neuroses, hysteria, and sexual dysfunction. You can see it in Schoenberg's painting. Schoenberg had enough anguish to supply two arts: music and painting.

Like Russia, Austria was a society stuck in an earlier century. But it was a broken monarchy, an empire that was frayed beyond repair, hopelessly trying to hold together cultures that were hell-bent on rebelling. And the simmering anti-Semitism in Vienna meant that vast numbers of the city's most accomplished artists and professionals were regarded as suspect.

Schoenberg—1874 to 1951—was born in Vienna and lived in Austria and Germany until emigrating to the US when the Nazis came to power. He converted from Judaism in an attempt to become mainstream, but that was a temporary fix. He left Judaism in 1898 and went back in 1933 as he fled the Nazis.

The culture of Vienna was extraordinary. A renaissance had taken place in the early part of the 20th century as the empire dissolved and new reactionary forces gained a foothold. It must have been precisely the tension between new and old, between radical and reactionary, that spurred rebellion, as well as neuroses. And eventually, it spawned a bizarre hunger for war among even the most educated classes. This helped bring about World War I.

Arnold Schoenberg

Schoenberg was surrounded not only by anti-Semitism and a failing empire but also by painters Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, and Egon Schiele; architects Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, and Josef Hoffmann; and writers Arthur Schnitzler and Ludwig Wittgenstein. That's an impressive group of peers. And many of them, like Schoenberg, were active in more than one art form.

It was a time of revolutionary thinking across the board. Painters moved away from realism, architects rejected historicism, writers flouted sexual mores, and musicians spurned tonality. It's a scary thing to turn your back on the entire common practice period—a period when music was governed by a tonal system. And one can watch Schoenberg feel his way as a daring rebel, concerned with what's called the emancipation of the dissonance.

If a dissonance is freed and no longer needs to resolve and a piece no longer needs a central tonal axis around which it revolves—perhaps analogous to a painter’s image that no longer needs to correspond to an object or a fictional sexual union that exists free of moral constraints—then how does one organize compositions? How does one signify tension and release, which is so central to writing and playing music?

Schoenberg’s first attempts were closely observed by Wassily Kandinsky, who painted *Impression III (Concert)* in response to hearing Schoenberg’s first piano pieces, *Drei Klavierstücke*, op. 11. The music is strident and violent. The opening idea reverberates across voices, morphing in shape and intervals.

Like Schoenberg, Kandinsky delighted in what he called jumping spots—noncontiguous spots that move across the page with no apparent connection to one another. His artists’ collective, Der Blaue Reiter, was challenging the assumption that art should create logic out of chaos, preferring that it convey the disorder of our thoughts and dreams. Schoenberg was admitted to that elite fraternity. In Freud’s terms, the id was overtaking the superego.

Sechs kleine Klavierstücke, Op. 19

This was written in 1911. Most of these six pieces are under a minute long. They’re not nearly as wild as op. 11, no. 3, but they are decidedly atonal. And they’re filled with leaps of both mindset and register, jumps (jumping spots), dissonance, jagged lines, the interplay of many different voices, and quicksilver changes. These are things that may seem radical—even today. One striking thing about Schoenberg is how new he still sounds, some 110 years after he wrote these pieces. The insistent clashes and the unpredictability wrench us out of our comfort zone.

This piece has little snippets of thoughts that are incomplete. And often Schoenberg moves from one thought to another with no transition. Modern, if not entirely new, are the ways in which motives return. They’re reminiscent of their past, but they’re far from identical. Those are new things. But there are many old things—for example, his use of half-step resolutions, which we have heard all over the place, especially in the classical period. There is tension and release, antecedent and consequent phrases, questions and answers.

No. 2 is brilliantly built around one interval: the third. Atonal composers often use intervals to structure their pieces. It's a substitute for the tonics and the dominants, the hierarchy of triads that tonal composers use. The third can be used vertically and horizontally. And it's even used in large chordal constructions.

It's omnipresent. It piles up. Its repetition is like a clock ticking—except that the clock stops and starts. Large intervals are used to create maximal tension. And Schoenberg uses something called octave displacement—placing consecutive notes in noncontiguous octaves—to up the ante. Octave displacement is intentionally awkward. The sheer vocal calisthenics that would be needed to cross that nearly two-octave chasm if one were singing are viscerally stressful. And the strain is felt similarly on the keyboard.

No. 3, by contrast, has a beautiful vocal curve to the melody. Schoenberg was able to write melodies as well as abstract music. It has a lovely, regretful echo of a thought, a Romantic kind of gesture. In no. 4, there is a thematic transformation that would have done many an earlier composer proud. Brahms and Liszt were pros at it. No. 5 is fascinated by a little rhythmic figure; it's hinted at in the beginning, and then it takes over at the end.

There is a spareness to no. 6, with two widely spaced chords that are repeated softly but obstinately. And then bells appear. Those bells are reputed to be the bells at Gustav Mahler's funeral. Schoenberg painted *The Burial of Gustav Mahler*, and he composed this piece shortly after his friend's death in 1911.

The piece goes down to a quadruple piano, which is basically a dynamic that was previously unknown. And it barely breathes its notes. That's an unnatural dynamic to play in, and it creates real strain. This is no longer music that simply hangs loose, though it does hang onto the angst of expressionism. Schoenberg was not a hang-loose kind of guy. The madness of op. 11, no. 3 and the free atonality of op. 19 were both way stations. Schoenberg wanted a more orderly way to convey disorder.

Superstitions

He probably craved order more than the average man on the street. Schoenberg was deeply superstitious, and that's an effort to force order on the total disorder of fate. His superstition took the form of what's called triskaidekaphobia—the number 13 was anathema to him.

He'd been born on the 13th of the month. And he believed that birthday essentially doomed him in any future encounters with the number. Thus, he avoided addresses with the number 13. And he even changed the spelling of the name of his opera *Moses und Aron* so that it would have 12 instead of 13 letters. Despite all his precautions, however, he died on Friday the 13. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, he was then aged 76 years; the two digits add up to 13.

The 12-Tone System

Luckily, music was more amenable to his scheming than life. And, happily for him, the musical alphabet has 12 letters, not 13. And he manipulated that alphabet to systematize atonality via what's called the 12-tone row.

In the 12-tone system, which was later taken up by many composers, a composer creates a 12-tone row. It is a musical idea comprised of each note in the 12-note scale, with each pitch appearing only once to give them equal importance. In a tonal piece—a piece in a particular major or minor key—some notes, by definition, are more important than others; they dominate the piece. Here, there's a perfect democracy. All notes are created equal, and there's no central authority. Composers avoid triads, scales, arpeggios, and all the accoutrements of the tonal system. That's why the music sounds perpetually unfamiliar.

A 12-tone composition consists of permutations of that initial row: its inversion (its upside-down form), its retrograde (its backward form), and its retrograde inversion (backward and upside-down). And those rows can be transposed to any pitch if the intervals within them remain the same. The row can be used vertically to form chords and horizontally to form melodies. Thus, you won't always hear the row spelled out as a single line. It's often impossible to recognize because of the many faces it can wear.

One of the most straightforward examples of this technique is found in the Menuett movement of Schoenberg's *Suite für Klavier*, op. 25. It's one of the first pieces he wrote using his new system. It starts out with the row in what's called its prime, or original position.

Most of the piece consists of that row and its inversion. It is similar to how Bach handled a fugue subject and its inversion. Schoenberg is channeling Bach—not only is this a baroque dance suite, but the last four notes of the

row spell “Bach” backward in the German musical alphabet. And the music is filled with repartee between the voices and with Bach’s love of sharp, bright articulations. There’s a jauntiness that Bach’s dances must have inspired. And you can feel the kinship between the composers despite the dissonance, the wide-open intervals, and the emphasis on the tritone.

Alban Berg

Schoenberg had two famous pupils, Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Neither Berg nor Webern wrote much for the piano. Berg wrote one piano sonata, op. 1, that’s a fascinating neoromantic piece written in 1908–1909. It’s teetering on the edge of modernism. It’s in an old-fashioned sonata form, with first, second, and closing theme groups; an exposition, development, and recapitulation; and a repeat of the exposition. It’s in a discernible key, with a clear B minor cadence at the end.

But the language is irrefutably 20th-century. There’s no sugarcoating emotions. It seems to be all about relentless striving, and it never lets up the intensity. It starts out immediately with a melodic line featuring a tritone and an augmented triad. And the texture is dense, filled with echoes and recollections. There’s a tritone and then the outline of an augmented triad. There’s dissonance galore. In the exposition, you hear the language: the combination of Romanticism’s long melodic lines and overt expression and the fragmentation, imitation, and constant straining across uncomfortable intervals that characterized Schoenberg’s music.

The harmonies are sometimes familiar triads, but they’re used “wrong.” This is called nonfunctional tonality. A dominant seventh might appear, but it doesn’t resolve to its tonic the way it’s supposed to. It’s like Wagner’s endless melody. And without those resolutions, everything is restless and in flux. There are constant subconscious connections that link the shape of one theme to another; it is indeed a dream play.

The piece begins with a prominent augmented triad. The next theme, which is still part of the first theme group, morphs right out of that theme. Its upbeat is like the tail of the opening idea, and it uses the same augmented triad. Thus, it has the same dotted rhythm—and the same harmony.

You can't help but feel the subliminal connections between the melodies. A little bit later, the second idea reappears, but it's inverted. And the next theme group emerges right out of the falling interval at the end of the inversion. And the sigh generates what's to come.

It is stream of consciousness and free association. It's the musical equivalent of Freud's couch, replete with manifest neuroses. One musical thought gives rise to another as dream images mutate.

Anton Webern


Anton Webern is the third member of this triumvirate. His one important opus for piano, *Variations*, op. 27, was written much later, 1935–1936. It's a complicated piece that would take a long time to delve into. But Webern's music had an enormous impact on the rest of the century.

This opus is written in strict 12-tone fashion, and it's the ultimate in musical distillation. Its austerity leaves Berg's early Romanticism in the dust. But it's important to know that it's far from devoid of emotion. Webern had undergone psychoanalysis. And he said that with few exceptions (not including the *Variations*), all his works related to the death of his mother—hardly an unfeeling or impersonal topic.

In the beginning, you can hear the severity of the idiom and the expressiveness contained in that restraint. Despite the extraordinary discipline Webern achieves in his *Variations*, the nervous disorder of his time is still so palpable. It's there in the interval choices, the dissonance, the registral gaps.

In the words of the composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, Schoenberg managed to “organize the delirium” in his atonal music, but that delirium still lurks in every shadow. The 20th-century malaise of Vienna made that necessary. This was a city that imprinted itself with a vengeance.

Claude Debussy's “Clair de lune”



As this lecture swings from one country to another, investigating the fin-de-siècle dream landscapes, it's hard to miss Claude Debussy's “Clair de lune.” Thus, this lecture begins the French expedition with only that one iconic piece. As Schoenberg was incontrovertibly Viennese, so Debussy was Parisian to the core. As Paris, especially in the belle époque, brings to mind all things good and beautiful, it's easy to see “Clair de lune” as the perfect accompaniment to that idealized vision. It's serene, peaceful, and, above all, pretty. But that's a bit one-dimensional—as perfect things always are. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, the 19th-century French painter, stated that Paris in 1889—one year before “Clair de lune” was written—was “restless and tossing about like a sick man.”

“Clair de lune”

“Clair de lune” is anything but restless. It doesn’t seem ill, and if you stick with conventional ideas of gender, “Clair de lune” has got to be a woman. Much was going on in 1890 or thereabouts that might make Paris so restless: The Paris metro was soon to open, sewers were a major preoccupation, anarchists were setting off bombs, the Eiffel Tower had recently been built, trains were in their heyday, and glaring electric lights had recently been introduced on major boulevards. It doesn’t sound like a dream landscape. Debussy lived from 1862 to 1918, and this piece was written early in his compositional life.



Claude Debussy

If you read Stéphane Mallarmé or Paul Verlaine, French symbolist poets, or if you look at Odilon Redon, the French symbolist painter—all people from Debussy’s own social circles—you’ll see how the mysteries of our irrational mind and the victories of our senses over our logic fuel Debussy contemporaries. That’s Debussy chosen milieu. And it puts Paris center stage. Debussy taps into dreams and the unknowable light of the moon and accesses a sensuality that is quintessentially French.

Germanic Influences

Debussy’s musical context is primarily Germanic because that’s the tradition that had dominated music for 200 years since Bach. Some of Brahms’s last pieces from op. 118 were written in the 1890s. They’re contemporaneous with “Clair de lune.” Schoenberg’s early piano pieces were written only 20 years after “Clair de lune,” and at that point, Debussy was still in his prime.

Debussy was trying his best not to be like the German crowd. He desperately wanted to be known as a French musician, or “*musicien français*,” as he signed his pieces. He avoids divisions, endings, and well-defined goals in order to emulate his drifting dreams and divorce himself from Germanic hard-edged logic. Overt clarity is unwelcome. Debussy would say that bar lines are best ignored. Music belongs wafting freely out of doors. It should spin rather than drive.

Most music gets divvied up into measures, or bars, of equal length—most often three or four beats, though it can be any number. And those bars are marked off regularly by bar lines. Those in four tend to have a squarer feeling, like a march, whereas pieces in three—and “*Clair de lune*” is one of those—often have more lilt, like a waltz. In all cases, bar lines mark the measures. And the first note of every measure, or the downbeat, gets a stress that announces unequivocally the beginning of the new bar.

For instance, in the opening of Beethoven’s *Pathétique Sonata*, op. 13, it feels as if the entire force of Beethoven’s struggles and convictions comes crashing down on every rising downbeat. The rests, or silences, that he places between phrases only serve to further emphasize each explosive entrance.

Music That Exists outside of Time

Debussy wants to undo the emphasis of that sort of music and let his music simply slide into the world like breezes that can’t be touched. Thus, he doesn’t begin “*Clair de lune*” on a downbeat. And for the first 24 bars of music, not a single important melodic note falls on a downbeat. The piece wants to exist outside of time. It’s the unknowable that Debussy is after.

He does mark bar lines in the score. But all those melody notes are stretched, or tied, across them without being re-sounded on the downbeats. Thus, the melody is doing its best to rub out the obvious divisions of meter and phrasing. Debussy never allows the sound to stop. The melody seems to tilt and flow. And since phrases aren’t separated by silences, there aren’t any stops and starts, merely a continuum.

Another important thing to notice is the direction of the music. Whereas the *Pathétique* moved continually upward—as achievements and progress should—this music moves down, down, down, until it hits the bottom. It’s in free fall. And its motion downward accelerates as it goes. It’s like a pantomime of falling asleep, and it obviously helps that the sound is soft and a little indistinct.

The Pedal

Debussy wanted a piano without hammers. And creating his sound, which goes entirely against the percussive mechanism of the instrument, requires a delightful sleight of hand—or “sleight of foot.”

It is possible that Debussy wrote an enormous amount for the piano because of his love affair with the pedal. There’s a magic to the pedal; it’s been called the soul of the piano. When the pedal is down, all the dampers in the piano come up. That means that every note gets sympathetic vibrations from the other notes that are undamped across the entire instrument. Chopin was the first composer to fully exploit that. He, too, lived in Paris, and Debussy learned from him.

All the overtones that are suspended around you are the crux of Debussy’s sound. In this piece, he moves deliberately from the small compass of the opening measures, each one only about an octave, to a restatement with a larger range, thus with more overtones, and then to a new idea with a yet larger span, using most of the piano. There would be no way to play all the notes Debussy indicates if the piano had only a keyboard and no foot mechanism. All those vibrations add to the intentional obscurity of this music and its refusal to be nailed down. We don’t hear single pure notes; they melt together.

It’s not only the clean articulation of every note that makes earlier music sound different and far more reasonable than Debussy, it’s the clarity of the harmonies themselves. Mozart’s harmonies invite labels as clear, functional parts of a key—tonic, or the first note of the key; dominant, the fifth; subdominant, the fourth. They move from one to another in orderly and predictable fashion. They follow long-established rules. And they always eventually lead us back home to I.

The Chords

Chords with increasing numbers of chromatic variants—notes that don't belong in the key—have been our loyal companions thus far, up until Scriabin and Schoenberg questioned their despotism with a vengeance. “Clair de lune” is still fairly traditional. But its chords and progressions are already intentionally murky. Chords combine with one another and refuse to be isolated, named, or told where to go.

You hear familiar harmonies, but Debussy was in the process of moving away from tonality. He would eventually be a crucial player in moving the 20th century toward atonality. But because he was less shrill about it than Schoenberg or Charles Ives, he's beloved instead of frequently denounced.

Debussy also avoids closure like the plague. He leaves chapters unfinished, mysteries unsolved. Debussy's sentences, left hanging, refuse answers. The bar lines fall between measures, individual notes—they blend into one another—and sections. Debussy erases the divisions between high and low on the piano. He opens a whole new world of sound by creating a chasm between the bass and the treble, while showering it with pedal so the sounds merge.

There can be enormous distance between two chords. But instead of thinking about contrast, you feel as if everything is coming together. Brahms would have wanted you to feel the enormous strain of the reach. And how much you pedal determines the landscape. With only a little, it's barren, but with too much, the denseness of the sound is overwhelming.

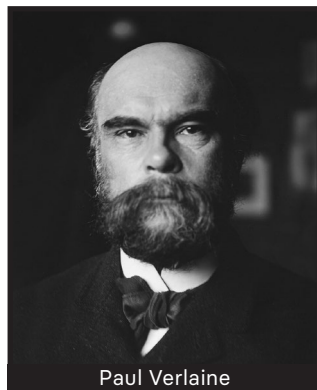
The Origin of the Title

Clair means “clear” as well as “light” in French. Debussy chooses titles aptly when other composers are content to rest with charmless words like *sonata*. Debussy had first chosen the title “Promenade sentimentale” or “Sentimental Stroll” for this piece. But presumably, he changed his mind because the tie-in with light proved irresistible. All its refractions and reflections are so perfectly conveyed by the pedal. And though Debussy hated the label *Impressionist*, he surely couldn't help but notice the light-obsessed Impressionist painters who surrounded him.

The first concrete association with the new title, “Clair de lune,” is the French folk song “Au clair de la lune.” The words of the song introduce us not only to the moon but to Pierrot, who’s a long-time favorite of Debussy’s and comes into play whenever the moon shines. Pierrot couldn’t sing; he couldn’t even talk. He communicated everything through pantomime. The idea that words were superfluous made him an especially appealing subject for music, which of course also hopes to outdo language through its own gestures.

Pierrot, in all his unpredictability, irascibility, and unknowability, appears in countless poems, paintings, and songs. Debussy even wrote a song expressly in his honor based on a poem by Théodore de Banville. For him, and everyone else in France, the whiteness and inscrutability of Pierrot were inextricably connected to that white and unknowable moon.

Pierrot’s buddies in the commedia crop up in another version of Debussy’s title, a poem he knew well and had set to song: “Clair de lune,” written by Paul Verlaine. The poem’s indecisiveness, its refusal to proclaim anything with certainty, and the ways in which it draws together sadness and happiness are reminiscent of Debussy’s music. When we listen to “Clair de lune,” we’re happy to be sad and sad to be happy.



Paul Verlaine

Debussy makes the link to Verlaine’s masqueraders clear by placing his piano piece “Clair de lune” into a suite of dances called *Suite bergamasque*, or a “suite from Bergamo.” The suite was an overt act of patriotism in an age where classical music was seen as a political force and composers competed to take musical loyalty oaths. This piece paid homage to French composers, specifically Rameau and Couperin. Debussy’s dance movements were something that no self-respecting late 19th-century German composer would possibly have duplicated—much too lightweight. The Germans were into massive symphonies and operas that lasted five hours. All these masks and dances and mixed emotional messages have one more connection to the moon: The word *lune* gives rise to the word *lunatic*. These French artists found sanity an overprized trait.

Motion in “Clair de lune”

In “Clair de lune,” you can hear the wind, always in motion and always brushing imperceptibly. We talked about the widely spaced notes and the sense of unknowable vastness they create. But the luxurious rolled chords unfold in a leisurely way, stretching time and exploring every possible way to view the high A-flat at the top of each one of them. It’s gently adamant about topping every single harmony.

The chords’ motion, which feels restful rather than hurried, is the perfect lead-in to the first sixteenth notes, or quicker note values, that follow. Once again, Debussy evades complete closure. We travel always in circles—no bars, no sentences with periods on the horizon. And the repetition is hypnotizing. Sixteenth notes in the left hand run in a continuous stream without end, imitating the stream of our consciousness, which is so much what dreams are about.

They gather steam until the piece reaches its only forte climax and then collapses in a languid heap. The sexual innuendo in the climax and its murmuring aftermath are reminiscent of the symbolists, who were always implying without stating and trying to capture what couldn’t be said.

When the opening theme comes back, it begins in minor, with the tune in the highest, most ethereal register of the piano, and incorporating those sixteenth notes that had appeared initially as part of a different theme. This is about memories blending, as they do in a dream. It’s triple piano, pianississimo, because it takes place as far back in the mind as you can go.

The End without an Ending

Instead of ending there, he circles back to the tune one last time, back in D-flat major, its original key, and back in its original register. But there’s a wrong note there. There was no C-flat the first time. That’s a rogue note, marked with an accent, to remind us that nothing we remember is ever exactly as it was. We live in a world replete with distortions.

The end of the piece is filled with nostalgia. The opening theme melts into streams of familiar sixteenth notes. They waver indecisively between major and minor. And they culminate always in unfinished thoughts. Debussy had

so many opportunities to say “The End,” and he always starts again. When the end finally comes, it’s as drawn-out as possible—no metronome ticks, simply a rolled chord that drifts gradually into less and less audible vibrations.

As a performer of this music, which is about magic and what can’t be known, you try to find the sweet spot among contradictory demands. You play softly but audibly. You pedal copiously but preserve precision, use rubato—flexible timing—but remain true to Debussy’s rhythms, and avoid the sickly sentimentality that comes with too much license. As the listener, you need to become pleasantly drowsy but remain hyperalert to all the subtlety of Debussy’s language.

In the light of that French moon, Debussy found all the glory of remembering, with its inherent nostalgia, melancholy, longing, and imprecision. He gifts us a space that tolerates our contradictions and regrets and frames them in unanchored harmonies that drift in circles. This explains why we continue to love “Clair de lune” today more than ever.

The Preludes of Debussy

The beginning of this lecture picks up 20 years after Debussy wrote “Clair de lune.” And since then, the apparitions have been multiplying. Music, with all its nonverbal innuendos, is well suited to portraying apparitions. And Debussy is particularly addicted. This lecture starts the journey into his *Preludes* with a piece called “Sounds and Scents Turn in the Evening Air.” It doesn’t feature any ghosts, but it is all about disembodiment. Everything in it floats, unseen.



“Sounds and Scents Turn in the Evening Air”

The title comes from a line in a Baudelaire poem called “Harmonie du soir”—“Evening Harmonies.” Baudelaire had translated all of Poe’s prose works, and he was mesmerized by the rhythms and the subconscious innuendos. Those rhythms are part and parcel of this poem, a pantoum. Pantoums repeat the second and fourth line of each verse as the first and third of the following verse. That pattern is hypnotic; one thought blends into the next.

This poem evokes synesthesia, or the blending of one sense into another. And there, the loss of boundaries is crucial. Baudelaire had also written about synesthesia in a prose work called *Artificial Paradises*, which is all about drug-induced hallucination.

Debussy was no opium addict, but he would have been perfectly pleased to exhale himself entirely. He would have liked the idea of floating far away, unencumbered. His music is filled with the instruction *lointain*—“far away.” And the titles he chose for his pieces are often about distance. Their reverberations allow his quotidian self to disappear entirely.

In this piece, you hear memories and echoing thoughts from the first bar. There’s a falling interval—first a tritone, then a fifth in the bass. Then a fourth, way up, and then a fourth in the middle. Those intervals pervade the piece, always filled with remembering. And there are circles, a shape so characteristic of Debussy. His music is filled with so-called arabesques, or figures that simply turn in and out without arriving anywhere. They’re a way to keep time from moving on.

“The Maiden with the Flaxen Hair”

This piece sways and loops its way through life. It begins with an unmistakable arabesque. And it couldn’t be more appropriate for the subject at hand. Arabesques were beloved by 19th-century French craftsmen and painters, and women’s hair was a favorite image. It curved gracefully and was far more interesting than the woman’s face. The heroine of Debussy’s one completed opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, had long blond hair. And it seems to provide an identity that she’s otherwise lacking.

This maiden of the piano is clearly a gentle, forlorn sort. She's been beloved by pianists for more than a century now. She checks every box of traditional womanly restraint, moving with slow grace and never speaking above a mezzo-forte. She's not driven.

“Voiles”

Those kinds of shapes crop up in another prelude belonging, again, to a woman. *Voiles* can mean either “sails” or “veils” in French. We don't know which one Debussy had in mind, but we do know that Loie Fuller, renowned for her dances with veils, had choreographed several of Debussy's pieces. He knew her dancing well; thus, “veils” is a good bet.

This piece doesn't only give us more arabesques, it also introduces us to the exoticism that played such a large part in Debussy's aesthetic, especially after he encountered the gamelan—an orchestra of gongs. He was tired of major and minor scales. Thus, here we have a piece based on whole-tone and pentatonic scales—the two scales in Western music closest to the ones used by the gamelan. They are present right from the beginning.

Debussy wrote in layers. The gong and the other figures are layered on top of each other in much the same way that the gamelan layers different gong rhythms one on top of another. Toward the end of the piece, Debussy introduces the pentatonic scale. On the piano, it's all five of the black notes. Then, he brings the whole-tone scale back in figures that sound like beautiful glissandos.

Clearly, exotic women, veils, and far-off places were much more interesting than old-fashioned ideas about proper dominant-tonic cadences—the fewer cadences, the better. The wonderful thing about a whole-tone scale is that it has no half steps that demand resolution. With the whole-tone scale, there's no definitive end in sight—boundaries are again dissolving. And Debussy helps them dissolve by engulfing the entire ending in one long pedal. It's one of the few times that he marks the use of the damper pedal.

Debussy loved being far away, and his apparitions follow suit. He lived in an age of colonialist expansion, which meant a larger world was opening—much to the joy of French artists and the detriment of people who lived where the French were happily expanding. And in this piece, we start to encounter the

good and bad of Debussy's being a "musicien français." Debussy called on his nation's heritage—and baggage—at every moment. The personal and the public were deeply entwined. It's a complex interplay.

Travels to Far-off Lands

The "Canope" comes from Egypt. The opening conveys the beauty of ancient Egyptian burial jars that Debussy owned. Faraway triads somehow evoke an ancient world. Then comes a magical moment: what seems like a dominant seventh, a normal dominant seventh, spelled D, F-sharp, A, C-natural—but with a disembodied C-sharp floating above it. It's as if it epitomizes a lost past. The beautiful serenity of the piece entirely circumvents the brewing Egyptian conflicts with colonialist powers.

Greece was equally enticing. "Danseuses de Delphe" is a musical portrait of a statue of the same name. All the stateliness of the statue is in the opening chords. Debussy manages to encompass both the stillness of the statue and the motion of the dancers in that opening. Again, that dignity comes with an underside. That statue, and many others like it, were unearthed under something else—villages, homes, schools.

Southern Spain was another favorite. It was nearby and sun-drenched, and Debussy found it completely irresistible. "La Puerta del Vino" presents a picture of the Moorish palace, the Alhambra, complete with castanets, habanera rhythm, and seductive women. Right at the beginning, there's a rhythm that runs through the piece.

This piece has a few completely unprepared explosive moments of raw passion, both in the beginning and the middle. Debussy instructs the pianist to play with "the brusque oppositions of extreme violence and passionate sweetness."

The Cakewalk

The cakewalk took Paris by storm in the 20th century. Its abandon was embraced by Parisians no longer content with proper gavottes, bourrées, and minuets. While proper dance schools shuddered, men and women flocked to the dance halls, kicking up their feet and shedding their inhibitions.

The new dance appeared on the scene courtesy of black-faced American minstrels who came to France in the early 20th century to provide popular entertainment. And the origin of the dance—plantation slaves from Africa—was not lost on the Parisians. Africa was often seen by the French as a realm of primitive, hedonistic passions. And as they relished the newfound freedom of the cakewalk, they also relished the superiority they felt to those whom it had originated from.

With “Golliwogg’s Cakewalk,” Debussy has the dubious distinction of having perpetuated our memory of the cakewalk into the 21st century. Without his cakewalks, many of us might never have even known they existed.

“General Lavine – eccentric”

Another place that inspired Debussy was closer to home. It was around the corner, and it was available nightly—the circus. It wasn’t necessarily a far cry from distant palaces and untrammelled wilderness: wild animals, death-defying acts of bravery, exotic costumes—and dances from the jungle. Or so they were seen.

Circus shows didn’t feature only dancers; they also featured clowns. Debussy loved the clowns. And he immortalized a clown in his music: General Lavine. He juggled, walked on stilts, and played the piano with his toes. But minstrels, replete with racial stereotyping and denigration, do lurk in the background. And midway through the piece, we’re treated to a version of an actual minstrel song.

As with earlier preludes, Debussy fused his own imagination with what was going on in the society around him. He didn’t create the realities, but neither did he question them. He happily acquiesced. This isn’t a prelude that asks many questions. General Lavine is a clown who’s pleased with himself, which is clear in the jaunty opening.

He does, however, have his depressed moments. Those cheerful opening chords return about halfway through the piece, and Debussy says they should be dragging, *trainé*. Debussy integrates both sides of the clown into the prelude: the happy clown and the sad clown. And the minstrel makes his appearance shortly after the sad clown has his say.

Debussy was a master of splicing. It didn't matter if the elements fit together logically or not. In much of Debussy's music, especially his later music, one idea sidles up against another as a total non sequitur. And that reproach to continuity and linear time proved a harbinger of the future in 20th-century music. Debussy's apparitions had a habit of appearing unexpectedly. That could be comic or tragic. But either way, it seemed to suit a century that was filled with wild gyrations.

Debussy was a sponge. His music tells us not only about his internal meanderings but also about the society that surrounded him. He took from the brilliance of Baudelaire, the inspiration of Loie Fuller, the wealth of great museums. And he took from the desperate flaws of a country out to prove itself a victor on every cultural and military front.

French Piano in the Early 20th Century

This lecture takes a whirlwind tour of French music from the first half of the 20th century by composers other than Debussy. It starts with Debussy's contemporaries, Maurice Ravel and Erik Satie, and then moves on to Francis Poulenc. These composers are all different from one another. But they have one thing in common: Much of their music is referential—about something outside of the music itself. And those choices of subject provide much insight into the historical moment at which the music was written.

The Historical Backdrop

Each of the pieces is accompanied by some sort of text—a few words or dedications, or an actual storyline. The years 1910 to 1945 are not a particularly happy time in French history, encompassing the buildup to and aftermath of two world wars. Given that background, it is striking how anguish-resistant all of the pieces in this lecture are. Each one opts for emotional distance—through nostalgia, humor, childhood fantasy, or religion.

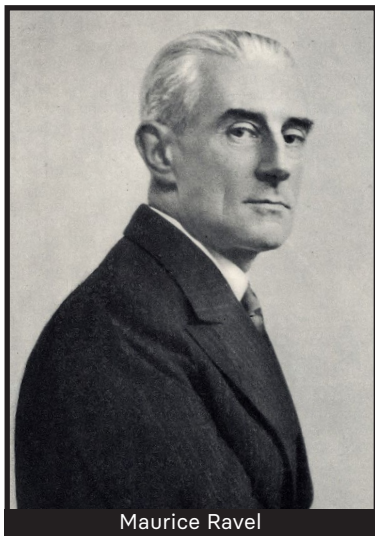
The biography of each composer might help explain that need for distance. They all remained single and led troubled or unusual lives. Satie and Ravel eschewed sexuality entirely, leaving posterity to guess at their probable homosexuality. And Poulenc was openly gay as well as observantly Catholic, which meant he was convinced that he lived in a state of perpetual sin.

Maurice Ravel

One relatively early piece by Ravel, written in 1911, is the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The title is taken from two sets of Schubert waltzes. And Ravel's piece is brimming with nostalgia for a Vienna that probably never existed. If you listen to this music, you'll find yourself basking.

The piece opens in a carnival of dissonance, with seconds sprouting everywhere. But then it settles down into a more muted, wistful state of mind. There is something delicious about that unusual combination of pungent, biting harmonies and lazy, languid motion. It's like a sweet, but slightly forbidden, fruit.

It was written during the “belle époque” and published three years before the start of World War I. But *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a dance suite



that was written during the war and is about the war. None of the movements is slow. There's barely a whiff of tragedy to be found, despite each movement being dedicated to a friend of Ravel's who was killed in the war. Instead, the music is filled with elegance and restraint. It presents an alternative to reality rather than a gut-wrenching depiction of it.

And, like the waltzes, it's deeply imbued with nostalgia for a bygone time—the aristocratic 18th century of François Couperin, one of France's great baroque masters. Its fugue is especially rigorous and spare, and its subject severe, with all its downward intervals. There are no extra notes to make it friendlier. It's all downward intervals, syncopated accents, and anxious gasps between the tiny gestures.

Toward the end of the first half, the subject gets inverted, à la Bach. The countersubject, which is the tune that's played against the subject, gets inverted as well. The opening of the fugue grows toward the inversion and the first forte of the piece. Then comes a forlana—a faster-paced Italian dance, popular in the 18th century. It's full of grace and poise, but somehow it's also filled with the most private kind of grieving.

Erik Satie

Satie was writing at the same time as Ravel, but he took a different approach, both to useless pleasures and to music of the past. He wrote a piece called *Sports et divertissements*, translated to *Sports and Pastimes*. But his pleasures were laced with irony rather than nostalgia.

Satie's life was filled with stops and starts. It's not quite clear where to classify him among composers. He often omitted bar lines entirely, thus foreshadowing other, later composers for whom time signatures were a limitation. That's true in the early *Gnossiennes*. It starts with no time signature whatsoever, and simply floats imperturbably along.

And he invented so-called furniture music: music intended as background. He also labeled many of his pieces with bizarre titles—*Dried-Up Embryos*, *Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear*, *Truly Flabby Preludes (for a Dog)*. And these pieces often had texts as well, which weren't supposed to be read. They were whispered conspiratorially by Satie to the performer.

The written prologue to *Sports et divertissements* is followed by a chorale that is both boring and pretentious. And then come the 20 short pieces, each introducing a different pastime, such as “Le Tango (perpétuel)” — accompanied by text that begins, “The tango is the devil’s dance” — and a piece about ill-fated horses at the racetrack, “Les Courses.”

Finally, we will consider Satie’s *Sonatine bureaucratique*, which was written in the midst of war in July 1917. It is, however, notably unencumbered by grief. Music of this ilk could link Satie with Dadaism—how World War I could have sent anyone scurrying away from those French bureaucrats into a world of Rose Sélavy. Satie never fully joined the Dadaist movement, but he consorted with its protagonists.

Francis Poulenc

Satie had a good deal to do with the rise of our next composer, Francis Poulenc. Poulenc liked Satie’s general disdain for propriety. He didn’t sneer at the world like Satie did, but he did lighten things up by bringing the music hall into the sober classical music scene.

Poulenc’s *L’histoire de Babar* is about an elephant, Jean de Brunhoff’s Babar. And he evolves quickly from a jungle animal to a connoisseur of the finer things in Parisian life. The story has been read as a colonialist parable: The African native wanders away from the jungle. He gets adopted and “civilized” in Paris, and he heads home to Africa as an “enlightened” ruler, with Europe’s elegant pleasures in tow. The story was written in 1931, when France was colonizing Africa and spreading her “vastly superior” wisdom. The music was written in 1940, still within the colonialist period—and in the middle of World War II.

The unusual combination of pianist and narrator adds to the undeniable, wonderful charm of the music. Poulenc’s Catholicism coexisting with his homosexuality was a thorn in his side. He must have needed escape. Presumably, elephants who married correctly were at least a small comfort. Babar did everything right; he was a proper Frenchman.

Charles Ives, Sergey Prokofiev, and Béla Bartók

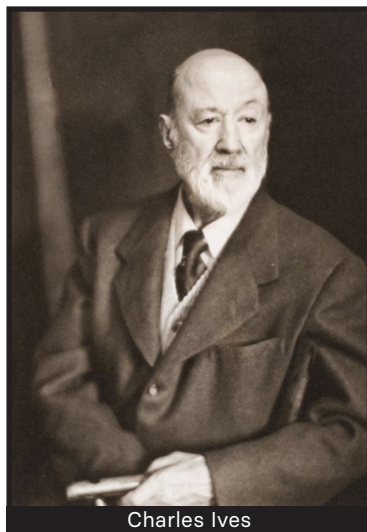
The last three lectures have looked at France and what its composers were up to in the first half of the 20th century. This lecture looks outside France, at a few iconic pieces that have withstood the test of time and made it into the standard repertoire. They make a headlong leap into the future while keeping a safety net. They use forms we associate with Bach and Mozart—fugues, suites, sonatas, variations. Often, their vocabulary is dissonant, their touch percussive, and their structure discontinuous. And 19th-century composers hearing many of these pieces might have pronounced them downright ugly.



Charles Ives's Heritage

The most daring of these composers is Charles Ives—1874 to 1954. He's also the first American composer this course has dealt with. Until the 20th century, America was an upstart nation with none of its own classical music traditions. American composers headed to Europe to learn to sound like Europeans rather than staying home to explore their native ground.

Ives was different. He was educated in music at Yale in a typically conservative manner. But he later opted to go into the insurance business. This would allow him to write whatever music he wanted and not worry about whether it earned him a living.



Charles Ives

It was probably lucky that he made that decision. Along with Debussy and Schoenberg, Ives arguably set 20th-century music in motion. And he did so through his willingness to break all the rules. That spirit of adventure was deeply American. But Ives's music was American in other respects as well. He figured that if America was a melting pot of people, his compositions could be a melting pot of music. He incorporated marches, ragtime, hymns, and minstrel songs into his music—often all at the same time, though perhaps in different keys. You might hear ragtime passages, patriotic marches, or clusters that are inclusiveness incarnate. Every pitch is there, and even a wooden block is invited in.

Concord Sonata

This sonata was first sketched from about 1911 to 1912. Each movement was named for a transcendentalist writer: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau. By the time it was published in 1920, Ives had written a book to explain it—a retroactive preface called *Essays Before a Sonata*.

Ives brings much of his own background into this piece. He came from a prominent and well-read New England family. Religion was important—thus the hymns—and so was social action, which may well have given rise to the inclusiveness of the music. Even Ives’s decision to go into the insurance business was an effort to help others. He hoped to protect people from disastrous misfortunes at a time when insurance was a relative rarity.

Like the French composers, Ives was happy to have his music reflect extramusical ideas. But unlike them, he mixed those ideas. His music rarely sticks to one mood, and he especially liked to recreate scenes of convivial gatherings where hopes are high and exuberance unrestrained.

The quotes that fill his music place it in an idyllic American past and let it cross back and forth across serious and popular genres. The sonata begins completely self-confident in its use of unconventional harmonies, incomplete melodic fragments, and dense, nearly impenetrable textures. His first movement is called “Emerson.” And Beethoven peeks out at the end.

“The Alcotts”

In “The Alcotts,” Ives’s nostalgia takes a different turn. This movement is contemplative and serene, rather than reckless and rambunctious. Instead of raucous dissonance, you’ll hear consonant triads. Ives sets out to paint the “home under the elms,” where the Alcott family thrived. There’s even a theory that the occasional wrong notes you’ll hear—the tiny grace notes that Ives sticks in, apparently gratuitously—represent the out-of-tune piano the family gathered around.

“The Alcotts” movement refers primarily to the father of the family, Bronson Alcott. But Ives gives the daughter, Louisa May, due credit. Presumably, despite Ives’s conviction that only men could write music, a female author catering to children and filling their minds with moral rectitude was tolerable.

Beethoven emerges again at the beginning of “The Alcotts.” He was the perfect virile antidote to the well-manicured music that Ives detested. The reference to Beethoven’s fifth symphony gets transformed into the so-called “Missionary Chant.” “The Alcotts” is by far the tamest part of the sonata. But even it has its rasher moments, where hope runs wild, and Ives is his incorrigible self.

Sergey Prokofiev

Prokofiev's early one-movement sonata, Sonata no. 3, was written about the same time as the *Concord Sonata*. Prokofiev was a teenager and still in his native Russia when he started to sketch it in 1907. He finished it in 1917, at the time of the Russian Revolution—when he decamped for the US and then for Paris. Unlike his countrymen, Rachmaninoff and Stravinsky, Prokofiev eventually returned to the Soviet Union.

This piece is far more conventional than most of the *Concord Sonata*. It has a recognizable sonata form, a regular time signature, and a discernible key. But you can't miss the biting dissonance and motoric rhythm. This is the Machine Age, and you hear its spikiness in the accents of the first melody and the percussiveness of every attack. But then you hear Prokofiev's melodic gift. And with the bona fide second theme, you're fully reminded that the piano can speak like the human voice.

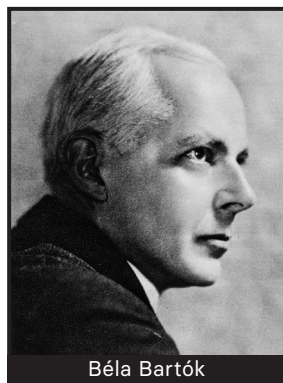
Prokofiev managed to meld Romanticism and modernism. And that's probably the key to his continued popularity. Not many 20th-century composers were writing minuets, let alone charming melodies, like his *Romeo and Juliet*. This music is unapologetic about pleasing, and that distinguishes it from much else being written at the time.



Sergey Prokofiev

Béla Bartók

Bartók was Hungarian, though he eventually emigrated to the United States. He's been seen as one of the first ethnomusicologists. He and his fellow composer Kodály traveled all over the countryside recording peasant folk tunes and dances. Bartók then incorporated these, either directly or indirectly, into his compositions.



Béla Bartók


The *Romanian Folk Dances*, written in 1915, has syncopated dance rhythms and the modal touches of those peasant dances. Modes are a great way for a composer to be experimental, but not ruthlessly so. Modes are like our major and minor scales, but they offer an assortment of other arrangements of half steps and whole steps. Both Bartók and Debussy—and many other composers—took full advantage of them.

Bartók also took full advantage of the piano's potential as a percussion instrument. And that was something that had not interested Debussy, who went in precisely the opposite direction. Bartók even wrote a great piece for two pianos and two percussion instruments, where the pianos set out to beat the drummers at their own game.

In the “Free Variations” from the sixth and last volume of his series *Mikrokosmos*, the time signature changes in every bar. Rhythm is more fundamental than melody. And the piece is a nice example of the term *primitivism* in music. Bartók wrote another piece for piano called *Allegro barbaro*. Going back to an earlier, less civilized way of life was exhilarating. Jagged harmonies and rhythms were the barbaric name of that game.

While Haydn and Mozart sound quite alike, Ives and Prokofiev have little in common. The first half of the 20th century was a time of wild experimentation. And we still don't quite know what will live and what will die from those experiments. We're all still learning about the capacities of the instrument and the myriad ways that sounds can speak to us.

Marginalized Composers



This series is drawing to a close, and it's important to address what's become a burning issue in the classical music community: elitism. Many marginalized composers and potential audiences have been pushed aside by the way the canon was formed and by the norms of concert life. In this conversation, it's important to distinguish between access to classical music (which is limited) and the appeal of that music (which is not limited). The problem appears to lie with the former. Simply because a piece was written by a white European male 200 years ago doesn't mean it can't speak to an American woman today. Reactions don't need to be determined or limited by race or class.

Access and Image

Access and projected image are a different story. For example, an African American college student may never have played a piece by an African American composer. And they may have assumed that composing wasn't something African Americans did. The illustrations in every book of music they'd been assigned might have pictured only whites. That could have told them that they were an imposter in this world; they weren't supposed to have access. Caucasians take many things for granted because their white world reflects their own image back to them.

This lecture is devoted to marginalized composers and musical stories of marginalized people.

Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges

Saint-Georges lived from 1745 to 1799—the same time as Mozart. And he and Mozart lived under the same roof for a while in Paris. Saint-Georges was from Guadeloupe. His mother was a slave, yet his father, a plantation owner from France, did not disown his son but instead sent him to France to be educated.

In France, Saint-Georges joined the elite, due in large part to his fencing skills. He became a champion fencer, but he was also a superb violinist and conductor. He eventually had his own orchestra—one of the best, if not the best, in Paris. He commissioned works from Haydn, and he performed for and with royalty. He leapt across racial boundaries.

Race, however, was hardly irrelevant. He was denied certain positions, and his marriage prospects were foreclosed: Had he married a Black woman, he would have lost his status. And marrying a white woman was unimaginable. Thus, he didn't marry. He wrote a great deal of music, but it was ignored by posterity. It's only now being rediscovered.



Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges

Ruth Crawford Seeger

Clara Wieck Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel were covered in a previous lecture. But the assumption that women couldn't compose went on way past the 19th century. One of its clearest 20th-century victims was Ruth Crawford Seeger—1901 to 1953. She was successful to a point—she received a Guggenheim to study in Europe; she met Alban Berg and Béla Bartók while she was there; she received a serious musical education. And yet, she was told by an influential music publisher that “it would be particularly hard for a woman to get anything published.”

Eventually, no doubt in part responding to frequent discouragement, she moved on from writing “serious” music. She married and had children. And she spent the Depression years in the US researching and arranging American folk songs for the Works Progress Administration. She dreamed that when her children were grown, she would return to her composing. Tragically, Ruth Crawford died of cancer just as she was ready to resume her career as a composer. Had she been born later, perhaps it would never have been put on hold.

Prelude no. 6, written in 1927–1928, lives in a mysterious and dissonant world, fixated on clashing sevenths. It is reminiscent of Scriabin. Seeger was modernist, but like Scriabin, she was also captivated by theosophy and ideas of spiritualism.

Many 20th-century composers moved away from Christianity. Debussy was tempted by the occult, Scriabin and Crawford were taken with theosophy, Ives loved the transcendentalists, and George Crumb dabbled in astrology. Organized religion must have seemed way too cut-and-dry.

Florence Price

Florence Price lived from 1887 to 1953, and she was the first African American woman to have a symphony performed by a major American symphony orchestra. Her *Symphony in E Minor* was played by the Chicago Symphony in 1933. She composed many works, but they were hidden from view until recently.

Price was born to an upper-class African American family in Little Rock, Arkansas. It's worth noting her relative wealth. It's hard to become a classical musician without money—you need good instruments, lessons, and plenty of

leisure time. Price received an excellent education. And because she was light-skinned, she enjoyed privileges denied to darker neighbors. After college, she became a teacher, married, and raised a family.

But, unlike Ruth Crawford Seeger, she lived long enough to enjoy a rebirth of her compositional career after her children were grown. In Chicago, where she'd moved in 1927 to escape the increasingly intrusive racism of the South, she was part of a vibrant Black community. And she was active in numerous musical organizations from which many African Americans were excluded.

Her music brings together her classical musical education, her strong identification with African American culture, and her desire to remind us of the legacy of slavery. She transcribed Negro spirituals and slave dances. She often wove their moods and syncopations into large-scale works. Her harmonic language is romantic. She brings back memories through quotation and her compositional style.

Her Sonata in E Minor was written in 1932. This was about the same time as her Symphony in E Minor that was performed by the Chicago Symphony and a few years later than Seeger's prelude. But it's in a completely opposite style.

It isn't about modernism at all. It's much gentler stuff. She provides the expected benchmarks of a sonata. There is a slow, regal introduction, a first theme, and then a contrasting second theme. And within that structure, there are harmonies and rhythms characteristic of spirituals. She builds in a wonderful elasticity of tempo and some surprising chromatic harmonies.

Oscar Wilde

The final piece is not by a marginalized composer but rather about a marginalized man: Oscar Wilde. Frederic Rzewski, who died in 2021, was an American composer whose political convictions permeated almost everything he wrote. His most famous piano piece, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, is based on a Chilean protest song.

De Profundis tells the story of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment for homosexuality from 1895 to 1897. The trial and imprisonment devastated Wilde. And aside from his great letter, *De Profundis*, for which this piece is named and which he wrote from prison, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which he wrote soon after his release, he never wrote again. He died in Paris, a ruined man.



Rzewski set Wilde's letter to music—music the pianist plays while reciting Wilde's text. It's a powerful experience for the pianist. The piece begins with a series of grunts, specified with "ins" and "outs" of breathing. They convey well the nonverbal state to which one can reduce a man of words if one inflicts sufficient humiliation. Then words creep in. When the text begins, in a relatively calm reflection on what has brought Wilde to this impasse, Rzewski leaves it fully exposed, with little competition from the piano.

Gay people, women, African Americans, and any number of people from poorer nations and non-Western cultures have been stigmatized and left out in classical music—as elsewhere. They've been forced to see themselves through the denigrating eyes of others, a double vision many of us are spared. Perhaps that's beginning to change. But conservatories are traditional places, and there's a long way to go.




Oscar Wilde

New Sounds for a New Century

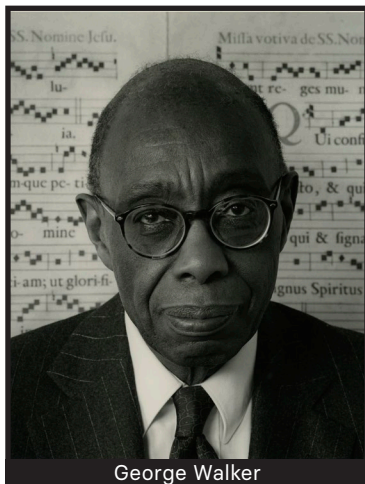


This final lecture wraps up the series by looking at three different pieces from the last half of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st. Each of these composers' unique styles provides a glimpse into the piano music of the future. From the engaging spikiness of George Walker's music to George Crumb's revolutionary use of the piano to Jörg Widmann's homage to Schubert, it is clear that piano music can look both forward and backward while constantly evolving to reflect our most human emotions.



George Walker

The first piece, *Spatials*, is by George Walker—1922 to 2018. He was African American, and he wrote bitterly of the discrimination he faced on account of his race. But unlike Florence Price, he didn't choose to make his compositions about his Black identity. This piece is abstract. It darts across space, creating the same sort of “jumping spots” you hear in Schoenberg. Walker says, “*Spatials* is a set of six twelve tone variations on an original theme called ‘Statement,’ composed in 1960. Its title suggests colors emanating from changing dispositions occurring in the different registers of the piano.”



George Walker

The 12-tone music system is a system that Schoenberg invented, designed to equalize all 12 pitches of the scale rather than designating one as the home note, which is what tonality does. It thus essentially leaves one homeless—which is simultaneously disorienting and liberating.

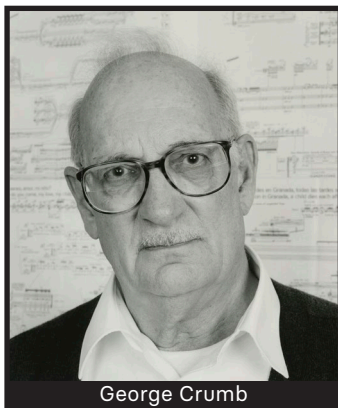
You can witness it at work in *Spatials*. All 12 pitches are sounded before any one gets repeated. It's a way of systematizing atonality, rather than leaving it as a free-for-all. And it had an enormous impact in the 20th century. Eventually, composers took the idea of a 12-tone row and expanded it to serialize rhythms and dynamics, coming up with rows that then governed every facet of a piece.

But this kind of music can feel off-putting. It's difficult to get your bearings without memorable tunes and predictable harmonic progressions. But try to be engaged by the sheer spikiness of the writing. It's electric. One never knows quite when or where a note will pop up and whether it'll be witty or angry, whether it'll be joined by others or remain a solitary crackle. It's more reminiscent of bumper cars than of a scenic stroll.

George Crumb

The next piece couldn't be more different, though it was written only 12 years later. George Crumb's *Makrokosmos* is a large-scale work of 12 parts, which he followed with a second, similar volume with another 12 parts. The work is an homage to Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* and Debussy's two sets of 12 preludes each.

George Crumb was born in 1929 and died in 2022. He built his piano output around the possibilities presented by the inside as well as the outside of the piano. He no doubt drew his initial inspiration from the American renegade composer Henry Cowell, who was fascinated not only by the strumming and plucking of strings but also by those same clusters encountered in Ives. He saw no reason why only fingers should play the piano. Crumb took many of Cowell's innovations, and then he added various preparations that could change the sound of the instrument.



George Crumb

Pianists are trained to play on keyboards, not on strings. And the first thing one realizes on attempting Crumb's music is that no one has thought to differentiate between black and white strings. All the strings look the same. And even landmarks, such as the metal beams that run inside, are of little use because they fall in different places depending on the make and size of the piano. Piano makers didn't foresee pianists searching for the precise location of harmonics or overtones produced by a fundamental pitch. And learning a distance through practice is useful only if one always plays the same size instrument.

Crumb asks for mild amplification. This gives the music an otherworldly quality, as well as assuring that the softest sounds will be audible. He assigns a sign of the zodiac to each of these pieces, leading us gently toward the occult. He draws the score in shapes that convey its content. And he employs implements, such as chains and thimbles, that will change the sound of the instrument and place us in an unknown space.

Makrokosmos

In “Primeval Sounds,” a little lamp chain is dropped over the strings. In the next portion, “The Phantom Gondolier,” the strings are played using thimbles. It is a lilliputian but malcontent phantom who groans and chants and hammers at a hostile world.

Another piece, “Dream-Images (Love-Death Music),” takes place, for the most part, on the outside of the piano but on the inside of our minds. Chopin’s famous *Fantaisie-Improptu* weaves in and out of the score, colliding softly with Crumb’s own dream fragments. Time is measured in long seconds, with fermatas rather than metronomic beats. Chopin’s *Fantaisie-Improptu* tells you that we’re outside the realm of inflexible calculations.

Thus, we’re ending with dreams, quotations, and memory. Music seems particularly well suited to deal with the passage of time. And we’ve seen Schumann, Debussy, Ives, and Price, among many others, dip into music from the past in ways that access their own past thoughts and dreams.

Jörg Widmann

This series ends with a beautiful and wistful piece from 2009—*Idyll and Abyss: Six Schubert Reminiscences for Piano*. It looks backward and forward at the same time. It’s an homage to Schubert. Unlike Crumb, with his Chopin dreams, Widmann doesn’t quote Schubert directly. Rather, he carries him into the 21st century and translates him into his own musical idiom.

The Future of Piano Music

The 21st century still looms large, and with it, all the unknown possible trajectories of piano music. This has been the merest sampling. No one knows if 12-tone music will be a dominant force. But there will continue to be many atonal compositions, like Walker’s, that deal with life in explosive fragments. And there will be many others who discover, as Crumb did, new sounds for the instrument. And there will be still others, like Widmann, who build bridges backward as well as forward and let us know that traditions get adjusted but not eradicated.

All of these approaches will confront both the idyll and the abyss. For three centuries now, the piano has proven itself peculiarly well suited to that confrontation. It is an orchestra unto itself. And its ability to capture single-handedly Widmann's—and Schubert's, Bach's, Mozart's, Beethoven's, and others'—“constantly precarious flight between heaven and hell” is unequalled. We, as humans, are constantly teetering between ecstasy and despair, and the piano is there to tell us about it.

Playlist

Lectures 1–12:

Bach, French Suite no. 5 in G Major, played by Tatiana Nikolayeva:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa8Lt6NvclI>

Bach, French Suite no. 5 in G Major, played by András Schiff:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_U0lm6HZMk

Bach, Prelude and Fugue in C Minor, Bk. 2, BWV 871, played by Edward Aldwell:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oYk3QdW-pw>

Bach, Prelude and Fugue in C Minor, Bk. 2, BWV 871, played by András Schiff:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeRtTDf5sE4>

Bach, Prelude and Fugue in A Minor, BWV 889, played by Edward Aldwell:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJsfCpskUxo>

Haydn, Sonata in C Minor, H. XV1:20, played by Gilbert Kalish:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmqJmIplNis>

Haydn, Variations in F Minor, played by Radu Lupu:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BatjiA6VPWI>

Mozart, Sonata in A Minor, K. 310, played by Dinu Lipatti:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYz7ChXH9sE>

Mozart, Sonata in C Minor, K. 457, played by Maria João Pires:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-ndNUaSXgl&t=244s>

Beethoven, Sonata no. 1 in F Minor, op. 2, no. 1, played by Richard Goode:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7SUN6Jq5jY&t=180s>

Beethoven, Sonata no. 31 in A-flat Major, op. 110, played by Richard Goode:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDHIovyhfpU&t=887s>

Schubert, Sonata no. 21 in B-flat Major, D. 960, played by Artur Schnabel:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grY7ds78XQE>

Schubert, Sonata in A Major, D. 959, played by Radu Lupu:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOy5T1g6wrM>

Schubert, Sonata in C Minor, D. 958, played by Radu Lupu:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txZVjYGg6gE>

Schubert, Impromptu no. 4 in A-flat Major, op. 90, D. 899, played by Maria João Pires: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDVJkxGz_Tc

Schubert, *Winterreise*, performed by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Alfred Brendel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0Rry-ahcHM>

Clara Schumann, Nocturne, op. 6, no. 2, played by Tiffany Poon:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMlMj94WcUs>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEkd2ZCe9eE>

Robert Schumann, *Carnaval*, played by Sergei Rachmaninoff:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTaWwK2Z5RU>

Robert Schumann, *Kreisleriana*, played by Martha Argerich:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_cKfMT9nzRM

Robert Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*, played by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMqdEaLbLUM>

Lectures 13–24:

Chopin, Nocturne, op. 55, no. 2 in E-flat Major, played by Ignaz Friedman:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wqp4JpvNxaw>

Brahms, *Three Sonatas for Violin and Piano*, played by Wen-Lei Gu (violin) and Catherine Kautsky (piano):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7d_8GUxOmA

Liszt, Hungarian Rhapsody no. 6, played by Martha Argerich:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhInwkq4nAw>

Liszt, Hungarian Rhapsody no. 6, played by Vladimir Horowitz:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plXXY27vk9s>

Liszt, Petrarch Sonnet no. 104, played by Luciano Pavarotti:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXFRO8FRyic>

Rachmaninoff, Prelude in G Minor, op. 23, no. 5, played by Rachmaninoff:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8RyWFA7PSY>

Scriabin, Étude, op. 2, no. 1, played by Vladimir Horowitz:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSsKJIzwapA>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jr49IDJs_WE

Scriabin, Sonata no. 9, “Black Mass,” played by Vladimir Horowitz:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rt6EEsSYwHU>

Schoenberg, *Drei Klavierstücke*, op. 11, played by Mitsuko Uchida:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd1rGhIX7wo>

Debussy, “Clair de lune,” played by Claude Debussy:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yri2JNhyG4k>

Debussy, *Préludes*, played by Catherine Kautsky:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6cN6aGQ7_8

Ravel, “Scarbo” from *Gaspard de la nuit*, played by Martha Argerich:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWLgyV7X0LI>

Bartók, *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, played by Martha Argerich and Nelson Freire (pianos), Peter Sadlo and Edgar Guggeis (percussion):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ0z6WVryWI>

Prokofiev, Piano Sonata no. 7, played by Sviatoslav Richter:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wsjc6PM5wxg>

George Crumb interview by Gilbert Kalish:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9B2WtNtaW8>

Florence Price, *Piano Concerto in One Movement*, played by Lara Downes:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fU9NHe2zVks>

Frederic Rzewski, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, played by Igor Levit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-UGSjBUusI>

Copland, *Piano Variations*, played by Aaron Copland:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tng-plH_8XA

Ives, “Emerson” from *Concord Sonata*, played by Gilbert Kalish:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NHLdhp07os>

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