

Department of Music
Senior Recital
8:00 p.m. November 11, 2017



Alexander Woods, piano
with Kayla Cummings '18

“LATE WORKS”

Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 110

Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
Allegro molto
Adagio ma non troppo – Arioso dolente
Fuga: Allegro ma non troppo

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770–1827

En blanc et noir (1915)

Avec emportement
Lent. Sombre
Scherzando

Claude Debussy
1862–1917

Ms. Cummings, piano

❧ INTERMISSION ❧

“Stop the War!” from *The Road*, Part VIII (2003)

Frederic Rzewski
b. 1938

Csárdás macabre (1881-2)

Franz Liszt
1811–1886



In the sensitive acoustic environment of Bridges Hall of Music, your neighbors can hear you! Please be considerate of the audience and performers and silence your telephone ringers, beepers, and alarm watches. Recording devices and cameras may not be used during the performance.

It is customary to hold all applause until the end of a piece or set of pieces.

Audience members arriving late will be seated during a suitable break in the program.

PROGRAM NOTES

In his last book, *On Late Style*, Edward Said reflects on the final works of great artists and writers. He posits that there exists an “accepted notion of age and wisdom in some last works that reflect a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of common reality.”¹ In preparing a recital of late works, I tried to locate pieces that would fit Said’s “accepted notion” through their complex and deeper range of musical expression. Each selection uses compositional techniques that range from comfortably familiar to refreshingly innovative, in all cases representing a substantial departure from the composer’s earlier style. My hope is to bring to life the multifaceted and highly nuanced emotional palette that pervades these final works, which no doubt reflects the composers’ own inner struggles and triumphs.



BEETHOVEN Traditionally, Beethoven’s life and compositional styles are divided into three periods, the last of which extends from 1815 to his death in 1827. Financial instability, political repression, family difficulties, and failing health constituted a heavy burden during these final twelve years. By 1818 Beethoven had lost his hearing, and he became prone to frequent episodes of anger and depression. While his ability to compose was hindered in the face of such challenges, the imaginative and weighty nature of Beethoven’s final works are a testament to his profound fortitude and unfettered genius. Except for the *Missa Solemnis* (1819-23) and the ninth symphony (1822-4), the late compositions can be characterized by their smaller scale—several works for solo piano (including sonatas and variations), the string quartets, and the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* are all fit for performance in a private setting. This general inward turn was accompanied by several other developments of style, including increased harmonic, rhythmic, and metric complexity, the prominent use of soft and exposed textures, and an interest in fugue and variation forms.

Beethoven completed the Op. 110 piano sonata in December of 1821. It was the second in a set of three (Opp. 109, 110, 111) sold to the Berlin publisher Adolf Martin Schlesinger. Overall, this sonata is pervaded by a sense of expressive sincerity and meditative introspection. Emphatic outbursts and technical challenges, although formidable, are grounded more in earnest musicality than in dazzling showmanship. Only brief pauses are necessary between the movements, which function together as one cohesive unit. The warm and intimate *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo* is imbued with a wealth of varied melodic content and rich textural elements. Distinct ideas first heard in isolation often return concurrently, creating a sense of fluidity between sections that softens the clean-cut edges of sonata form. The exposition comprises a poetic and carefree opening, sparkling transition material, and a second theme that showcases the breadth of the piano’s pitch and dynamic range. In the development the music wanders through several keys to lead us to the recapitulation, where we continue to experience sensitive modulations and are left to contemplate a rather unsettled ending. Playful tempo fluctuations, abrupt dynamic shifts, and persistent syncopations define the brief A-B-A second movement, which here plays the role of a *scherzo* (although it is not in triple meter). The last two movements, an *arioso dolente* and a lively fugue, are stitched together in an alternating pattern. They are preceded by an improvisatory recitative section, creating an overall form of Introduction–Arioso–Fugue–Arioso–Fugue. The

¹ Pantheon Books, 2006: 6.

ariosi convey a deep, pleading despair, unfolding through a solo melody that explores several nuanced sentiments in the backdrop of general sadness. The accompanying fugues work to reconcile some the previous anguish, beginning in slow contemplation and gradually gathering energy to achieve a more optimistic outlook. The complete effect is that of a fantasy-like journey that traverses both unrelenting sorrow and triumphant exuberance, concluding with a soaring finale that has been called “one of the most life-affirming moments in all keyboard literature.”²

DEBUSSY During World War I, the French government took extensive measures to cultivate a sense of national consciousness in artistic works. Composers, under pressure from state officials, had to ensure that their oeuvre represented the French essence in its purest form and lacked any foreign (especially German) influences. Although he would not let his work be defined by narrow-minded patriotism, Claude Debussy displayed a particular concern for defining the French style. His *Twelve Études* for piano (1915) and the three instrumental sonatas (1915-17) could be said to draw from the German art music tradition, but as musicologist Marianne Wheeldon points out, Debussy deliberately clarified that he was inspired by Chopin, Rameau, and Couperin—and not Germans such as Liszt or Beethoven.³ The études and sonatas are also significant for their role as instrumental pieces. Ballets and incidental music made up a substantial portion of Debussy’s previous output, but with the onset of the war, public performance venues in Paris were squeezed for funds and under pressure to feature nationalistic works. It is in this context that he shifted his focus towards instrumental music during his last years.

En blanc et noir (in black and white) for two pianos, can be seen as a reflection of Debussy’s late style in multiple ways. Although its title is far more evocative than “sonata” or “étude,” the three movements were originally labeled *caprices*. This rather ambiguous designation for free-form pieces can be seen as further evidence of the composer’s intentions to write instrumental music without a specific theme. At face value, “in black and white” seems to denote a piece that is clear-cut and forthright in its expression. Upon hearing the music, however, it is clear that Debussy locates his compositional voice in gray zones. Black- and white-key harmonic areas are starkly juxtaposed to create a vague sense of tonality, and tempos and dispositions are also rather ethereal. Passages that seem bold and declamatory often disintegrate into hazy undulations, while chaotic washes of sound are commonly pierced by moments of levity and charm.

The first movement is fast-paced, sweeping, and dramatic, but also contains cheeky *scherzando* passages and a wide range of shadowy and soft shades. The second movement bears a dedication to Jacques Charlot (the cousin of Debussy’s publisher Jacques Durand), who was killed in battle. This movement makes an emotionally complex odyssey through passages of somber desolation, tenuous calm, chaotic frenzy, and fleeting optimism. Emerging throughout are a haunting flute tune, several trumpet calls, as well as quotations of the Lutheran hymn “Ein feste burg” and the Marseillaise (perhaps a reference to German and French rivalry). The third movement features playful chromatic flourishes interspersed with lyrical melodic fragments. Its contrasting middle section introduces murky watercolor textures that occasionally bubble up into forceful outbursts. One seems to have no choice but to chuckle at the rather perplexing ending, which abruptly draws the piece to a close.

RZEWSKI (pronounced *ZHEV-skee*). *The Road* is an eight-part cycle of solo piano works composed over the years 1995-2003. Each part contains eight pieces, or “miles.” The

² Stewart Gordon, *Beethoven: Piano Sonatas* Vol. IV (Alfred Masterwork Edition: 2010), 206.

³ *Debussy’s Late Style* (Indiana University Press: 2009), 11-13.

entire set of 64 miles runs about five hours long, and might be more accurately compared to a trans-national highway. *The Road* contains everything from blues to twelve-tone rows, and calls for a variety of extended techniques such as humming, breathing heavily, and even reciting passages of Gogol. Like a real road, the cycle is not necessarily meant to be traveled from start to finish, and offers many off- and on-ramps between twists and turns that sometimes have no explanation.

American composer Frederic Rzewski studied with Walter Piston and Roger Sessions at Harvard and Princeton. He is a dauntingly gifted piano virtuoso, and became known early on for tackling works by Stockhausen, Boulez, and Cage. Rzewski has experimented with popular folk melodies, collective improvisation, graphic notation, and twelve-tone techniques. Some of his most famous compositions for piano include the four *North American Ballads* (1978) and a set of variations *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (1975). The majority of his works are unpublished, but he makes his hand-written scores available for free online through the International Score Music Library Project (IMSLP).

To include a piece from a living composer on a program of late works might seem morbidly presumptuous. With that said, the thorny intricacies and multi-faceted nature of its emotional content (combined with the circumstances of Rzewski's advancing age) make "Stop the War!" an appropriate addition to tonight's theme. At first read, its title seems to be a rather lukewarm exclamation that lacks true meaning: which war should be stopped? And how? Giving the phrase even more significance, the performer is required to speak and whisper its three words multiple times throughout the piece. This pedantic repetition could be interpreted in many ways, but political messages are nothing out of the ordinary for Rzewski, particularly in the *Road* cycle. The anger and frustration conveyed in the music likely render the phrase a genuine and forceful call for peace. "Stop the War!" contains eight sections A-H, each bearing one or two pauses where the performer speaks the title phrase aloud. The music is built entirely around a simple three-note motif that rocks to and fro by a perfect fourth or tritone. To provide a *road* map: Section A is performed on the piano lid and under the keyboard, and section B ushers in the piece's theme in an exposed, atmospheric texture. C brings new material and several improvisatory outbursts that build to thundering climaxes. In D we hear mellower material and several iterations of the theme, which has now morphed to a tritone instead of a perfect fourth. E features canonically imitative entrances of the theme amidst densely-textured crescendos. Sections F and G weave the theme together with new material in a variety of settings, and both finish with an improvised cadenza. Coming full circle, H is played on the wood of the piano, and ends with a thought-provoking addendum to the piece's signature phrase.

LISZT The csárdás (*CHAR-dosh*) is a Hungarian folk dance commonly performed in the Romani tradition. It is distinguished by a slow (*lassú*) opening that builds to a lively (*friss*) ending, and is set in 2/4 or 4/4 time. Liszt wrote three csárdás for piano during the 1880s: the Csárdás macabre, completed in 1881, and a set of two from 1884, called Csárdás and Csárdás obstinée. All three pieces are characteristic of Liszt's late style in their repetitious nature, vague sense of tonality, ponderous temperament, and sparing use of keyboard acrobatics. With their strong ties to the Hungarian tradition, it is even feasible to locate these works as predecessors to the solo piano compositions of Béla Bartók. Considering Liszt's status as the premier concert virtuoso of his time, not to mention the fabled difficulty of his music, the relative lack of technical demands in the late works represents a noteworthy development.

During the late 1850s and the 1860s Liszt became increasingly spiritual, seeking to live a “natural” life where he could cultivate his art in its purest form. He settled in Rome following a failed marriage to his lover Carolyn, and took minor clerical orders in the Catholic church in 1865. Through the 1870s, Liszt split his time Rome, Weimar, and Budapest. He maintained an active teaching career, particularly in Weimar, where he gave his renowned masterclasses (the first ever to be held). He also served as the first president of the National Hungarian Royal Academy of Music in Budapest. Liszt had retired from the concert stage in 1847, but in 1877 he swore off public performance of any kind, including charity events. During the summer of 1881 he fell down the stairs at his residence in Weimar, which led to an extended stretch of illness. Bouts of depression and a general preoccupation with death haunted Liszt in his old age, and this dark trend does not go unnoticed in his late compositions. Liszt scholar Dolores Pesce provides us with a somewhat more optimistic view: Liszt in his final years took on the role of “the elder statesman:” he was a musical intellectual of prominent status, a legendary teacher and pious advisor who in his compositions strived to achieve a forward-thinking and untainted art form.⁴

Csárdás macabre loosely embraces the *lassú-friss* structure of the traditional csárdás. Overall, its form can be described as two pairs of slow and fast sections. The slow portions feature a series of brooding parallel fifths, followed by a sequence of repetitive two-bar phrases that gradually build in energy. The fast sections quote the Hungarian folk tune “*Ég a kunyhó, ropog a nád,*” or perhaps the first few pitches of the Requiem sequence *Dies irae*. They bear the key signatures of F major and D major respectively, but borrow heavily from the minor subdominant (B-flat minor and G minor). The work is at once spooky, menacing, and whimsical, featuring a range of barren murmurings, obsessive repetition, and feisty enthusiasm.

–AW

⁴ *Liszt's Final Decade* (University of Rochester Press: 2014), 1.