

Summary of Dissertation Recitals

Three Programs of Piano Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Three recitals of piano music were presented in lieu of a written dissertation.

The first recital traced the development of an Italianate keyboard language, beginning with Domenico Scarlatti and continuing to present day. Keyboard sonatas of Scarlatti interwove with related works across epochs to underscore close relationships in the musical language of Italy.

Friday, October 7th, 2016, 7:30pm, Britton Recital Hall, University of Michigan.

Domenico Scarlatti *Sonata in C Major, K. 159*; Gioachino Rossini/Grigory Ginzburg *Figaro's Cavatina from the Barber of Seville*; Domenico Scarlatti *Sonata in F Minor, K. 466*; Luciano Berio *Luftklavier*; Domenico Scarlatti *Sonata in D Minor, K. 141*; Domenico Scarlatti *Sonata in D Major, K. 214*; Gioachino Rossini/Franz Liszt *La danza (Tarantella napoletana)*; Franz Liszt *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*; Domenico Scarlatti *Sonatas in F-sharp Major, K. 318/9*; Gioachino Rossini/Franz Liszt *La regata veneziana (Notturmo)*; Domenico Scarlatti *Sonata in F Major, K. 379*; Salvatore Sciarrino *Prelude*; Domenico Scarlatti *Sonata in D Major, K. 96*.

The lecture recital discussed the compositional genesis and techniques of Frederic Rzewski's four *North American Ballads*. Particular attention was given to the origins and texts of the four titular folk songs, how Rzewski treated the folk songs compositionally in order to reveal higher truths, and the resulting social commentary.

Tuesday, December 6th, 2016, 7:30pm, Britton Recital Hall, University of Michigan.

Lecture: "Frederic Rzewski's *North American Ballads*: Structure and Social Context;"
Frederic Rzewski *North American Ballads*, 1. Dreadful Memories, 2. Which Side Are You On?, 3. Down by the Riverside, 4. Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.

The final piano recital featured "late-style" works: the final piano sonata of Scriabin, the final opus for solo piano of Brahms, and the final piano sonata of Schubert. This grouping was meant to serve as a reflection on how an artist's musical language might change as they reach the end of their life.

Saturday, April 1st, 2017, 8:00pm, Stamps Auditorium, University of Michigan.

Alexander Scriabin *Piano Sonata no. 10, op. 70*; Johannes Brahms *Klavierstücke, op. 119*; Franz Schubert *Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960*.

Recital 1 Program

Friday, October 7th, 2016, 7:30pm
Britton Recital Hall
University of Michigan

Sonata in C Major, K. 159
Figaro's Cavatina
from *The Barber of Seville*

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)
Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)
trans. Grigory Ginzburg (1904-1961)

Sonata in F Minor, K. 466
Luftklavier (1985)
Sonata in D Minor, K. 141
Sonata in D Major, K. 214
La danza (Tarantella napoletana)

Domenico Scarlatti
Luciano Berio (1925-2003)
Domenico Scarlatti
Domenico Scarlatti
Gioachino Rossini
trans. Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Intermission

Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este
Sonata in F-sharp Major, K. 318
Sonata in F-sharp Major, K. 319

Franz Liszt
Domenico Scarlatti
Domenico Scarlatti

La regata veneziana (Notturmo)

Sonata in F Major, K. 379
Prelude (1969)
Sonata in D Major, K. 96

Gioachino Rossini
trans. Franz Liszt
Domenico Scarlatti
Salvatore Sciarrino (b. 1947)
Domenico Scarlatti

Recital 1 Program Notes

We pianists of 21st-century America have reached by now a level of self-evidence in tracing a “Germanic style” through our beloved canon: from Bach, through Beethoven, through Brahms, to Schoenberg and beyond. Or if we should ever tire of the many masterworks that came out of this tradition, we can divert our attention to other musical cultures with large repertoires for piano solo, the forerunners being French and Russian. Even at the risk of speaking on behalf of all pianists, I believe we carry in our musical imagination a distinct sound, style, and feeling in the hands at the mention of these different musical cultures. What I have decided to explore in my first dissertation recital is keyboard music from a lesser-discussed nation, Italy.

A former piano literature teacher of mine once described Italy as the country that birthed the pianoforte and subsequently turned its back on the instrument’s repertoire. Nevertheless, I perceive from the relatively small Italian repertoire a quality of charm, spontaneity, and irresistible delight. My perception comes primarily from hearing music, but also from the little I know about the sound of the language and from my firsthand interactions with the people and the country. Taken together, a unified picture comes into focus that I wanted to express through this piano recital.

It is worth mentioning that this program is less “lecture” and more stream-of-consciousness “musing,” lest someone take my generalizations (Italian people are like this) or conjecture (Italian language is like that) too seriously.

I decided to center my study on Domenico Scarlatti, whose enormous output of over 500 keyboard sonatas represents bar none the most important fixture in the modern pianist’s repertoire from an Italian composer. These sonatas have always drawn me in with their variety, quirkiness, and downright catchiness. They sound at the same time hundreds of years old yet fresh, fun yet refined. From a technical standpoint, Scarlatti’s name alone also conjures up for pianists a specific facet of keyboard technique (the adjectives I find myself coming back to are wiry, spastic, and risky). This unique sensation of performing Scarlatti along with other musical elements form a reference point as I trace something of a national style through transcriptions of Rossini and original works by Liszt, Berio, and Sciarrino.

This recital was also inspired in part by:

- Several visits to the museum Kolumba in Cologne, Germany. The museum features exclusively very old religious art mixed in with modern (usually secular) pieces, masterfully curated to suggest similarities between them and to somehow make each style more powerful than before
- Susi family reunions
- Our University of Michigan’s own annual Collage Concert

Chatter

Two iconic works of Italy open the program – the oft-played *Sonata, K. 159* by Scarlatti and a virtuoso transcription of “Largo al factotum” from *The Barber of Seville*

by Rossini. These two works share their tonality of sunny C Major along with a certain “chattering” quality that goes hand in hand with the Italian language. The reference to the Italian language is explicit in Figaro’s Cavatina; Figaro is a character whose love of talking is made funnier by how impressed he is with what he has to say. The Scarlatti sonata is without text, yet the articulate style of playing this music is nevertheless rife with pure vowel sounds, double consonants, and dental t’s and d’s. The sound of the language is encapsulated within the music. Add to this a repetitive circling around specific scale degrees and a non-stop momentum, and pianists too may learn what it feels like to perform a “patter song.”

Repetition and the dance

As mentioned above, the idea of repetition features prominently in Scarlatti's musical language. His *Sonata, K. 466* is one such example, where lyrical phrases begin but suddenly halt, repeating themselves always in an effort to say something but never quite reaching a satisfactory conclusion. The result is both hypnotic and depressing. In author Dean Sutcliffe's book on Scarlatti, he speaks of the occasional "intoxicating monotony" in the composer's use of repetition, a phrase truer here than anywhere. Hundreds of years later, Luciano Berio uses repetition in his miniature *Luftklavier* to capture the mysterious whirling of the wind, along with spidery passagework and fast repeated notes reminiscent of Scarlatti. Fast repeated notes make up the formidable challenge of the *Sonata, K. 141*, while repetition reaches a rhythmic-structural level in the *Sonata, K. 214* (or to put it more simply, it has a toe-tapping dance groove). The dance in question here is a *jota*, which has as its choreography three quick steps followed by a

quick leap to a frozen position. Not only does Scarlatti write music that fits this rhythmic pattern, but he also choreographs the fun of the dance into the technique; the keyboardist plays three quick scurrying notes and then leaps dangerously outward to a frozen note. The keyboardist becomes the dancer. Rounding out the set is Liszt's thorny transcription of Rossini's *Tarantella napoletana* from *Soirées musicales*. The sound of a tarantella, to me, transports one immediately to Italy. This is a transcription of Liszt that is never really played, the reason for which makes me think of an idea from the Liszt biographer Alan Walker. In his book Walker emphasizes that the composer, through revisions, constantly strived for "minimum effort, maximum effect." Unfortunately here we have no revisions and are left with "maximum effort, maximum effect," terribly difficult and not always with acoustic reward. Once the pianist invests the work, though, they have a great Italian showpiece for their efforts.

F-sharp major?

About 20 miles east of Rome in Tivoli is the Villa d'Este, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with famously beautiful gardens and fountains. Liszt resided here late in his life after taking minor orders in the Roman Catholic Church. His piano work *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*, or the Fountains at the Villa d'Este captures in sound the wonder and beauty of water trickling from hundreds of fountains. These waters stirred in Liszt some religious meaning as well, as he writes in Latin halfway through the score a quote of Jesus from the gospel of John (4:14), "Sed aqua quam ego dabo ei, fiet in eo fons aquae salientis in vitam aeternam" or "But the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." In reaction to both the intense beauty and

powerful climax of the work, we may begin to grasp just how meaningful these baptismal waters were to the composer.

The figuration of this piece is often tied to the future generation of composers. It serves most obviously as a resource for the water-inspired piano music of Debussy and Ravel such as the former's *L'isle joyeuse* or the latter's *Jeux d'eau* and *Une barque sur l'océan*, but the piece is also connected to the past. The scale and arpeggio filigree of Liszt's *Jeux d'eaux* and Ravel's derivative works in particular often seem related to Scarlatti's figuration in a way that is easily felt but difficult to explain; perhaps the best I can do is to say these works are like Scarlatti played with flat fingers instead of curved.

To contextualize this piece I chose a pair of Scarlatti sonatas in the rare Baroque key of F-sharp Major, the same tonality as the Liszt. The slowly descending scales of *Sonata, K. 318* capture something of the weightless quality of the Liszt, while the opposing ascending triplets of *Sonata, K. 319* brings the music back to the dance.

Play

In preparing this program I realized that English speakers are lucky to use the same verb, "to play," to describe both a child playing and playing a musical instrument. The spirit of spontaneity and play is central to the Italianate musical language, as I believe this set demonstrates. Light-hearted and somewhat comedic, *La regata veneziana* indulges in Rossinian melody with quasi-glissando ornamentation. In the *Sonata, K. 379*, which Scarlatti labels "Minuet," the composer asks the keyboardist to execute a quick C Major scale "con dedo solo" (with one finger), meaning glissando. The speed is really not so quick that we couldn't play the scale with traditional fingering, but the glissando

creates a unique sound effect in addition to adding a spirit of fun and irreverence, all the more cheeky since it interrupts the highly stylized and courtly minuet. The element of experimentation and childlike fun reaches the limit of intelligibility in Sciarrino's *Prelude*, a sound effect piece consisting only of ornaments linked by glissandi. The composer controls certain parameters, such as the type of ornament, the octave of the piano, and the collection to be used (black keys, white keys, whole tone, etc.) but the specific pitches are left unspecified. One might easily think here about the way a young child might "play" with a piano at home. Perhaps I strain myself here, but I believe Sciarrino also captures (whether consciously or subconsciously) the articulate sound quality of the Italian language. Ending this evening's program is a sonata from what scholar Ralph Kirkpatrick calls Scarlatti's "flamboyant period," the *Sonata, K. 96*. With that designation the author refers to the exaggerated leaps and hand crossings, in which the composer loved to indulge just for the thrill and fun of it all. This particular sonata remains a favorite of the oeuvre, as it ties together so many qualities that we associate with Scarlatti – the trills, the repeated notes, the dance rhythms, the leaps, the hand crossings, and above all the sense of fun in playing a keyboard instrument.

Lecture Recital Program

Tuesday, December 6th, 2016, 7:30pm
Britton Recital Hall
University of Michigan

Frederic Rzewski's *North American Ballads*:
Structure and Social Context

Intermission

North American Ballads

Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938)

1. Dreadful Memories
2. Which Side Are You On?
3. Down by the Riverside
4. Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.

Lecture Recital Handout

1. Dreadful Memories

Dreadful memories! How they linger,
How they pain my precious soul!
Little children, sick and hungry,
Sick and hungry, weak and cold.

Little children, cold and hungry,
Without any food at all to eat;
They had no clothes to put on their bodies,
They had no shoes to put on their feet.

Dreadful memories! How they linger,
How they fill my heart with pain;
Oh, how hard I've tried to forget them,
But I find it all in vain.

I can't forget them, little babies,
With golden hair as soft as silk;
Slowly dying from starvation,
They parents could not give them milk.

I can't forget them coal miners' children
That starved to death for want of milk;
While the coal operators and their wives and
their children
Were all dressed in jewels and silk.

Dreadful memories! How they haunt me
As the lonely moments fly;
Oh, how them little babies suffered!
I saw them starve to death and die.

2. Which Side Are You On?

Come all of you good workers

Good news to you I'll tell
Of how that good old union
Has come in here to dwell

Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner
And I'm a miner's son
And I'll stick with the union
Till every battle's won

They say in Harlan County
There are no neutrals there
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J.H. Blair

Oh, workers can you stand it?
Oh, tell me how you can
Will you be a lousy scab
Or will you be a man?

Don't scab for the bosses
Don't listen to their lies
Us poor folks haven't got a chance
Unless we organize

3. Down by the Riverside

Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Gonna lay down my sword and shield

Down by the riverside
Ain't gonna study war no more.

I ain't gonna study war no more (x2)
Study war no more.
I ain't gonna study war no more (x2)
Study war no more.

Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand...
Gonna put on my long white robe...
Gonna put on my starry crown...
Gonna put on my golden shoes...
Gonna talk with the Prince of Peace...
Gonna shake hands around the world...

4. Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues

Ol' man seargent sittin' at the desk
The damn ol' fool won't give us no rest
He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes
To buy a Coca-Cola an' a eskimo pie

I got the blues, I got the blues
I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues
Oh Lordy Lordy spoolin's hard
You know and I know, we don't have to tell
You work for Tom Watson gotta work like
hell

I got the blues, I got the blues
I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues

When I die don't you bury me at all
Hang me up on the factory wall
Place a bobbin in my hand
So I can keep on a-workin' in the Promised
Land

I got the blues, I got the blues
I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues...

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Recital 3 Program

Saturday, April 1st, 2017, 8:00pm
Stamps Auditorium
University of Michigan

Piano Sonata no. 10, op. 70 Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Klavierstücke, op. 119 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Intermezzo in B Minor
Intermezzo in E Minor
Intermezzo in C Major
Rhapsody in E-flat Major

Intermission

Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960 Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
I. Molto moderato
II. Andante sostenuto
III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza
IV. Allegro, ma non troppo – Presto

Recital 3 Program Notes

How does a composer write when he or she knows that they are “at the end of the line”? In my final dissertation recital, I am looking into three examples of final statements from three very different composers, all within a few short years (or weeks, in Schubert’s case) of their deaths.

Scriabin: Piano Sonata no. 10

The *Piano Sonata no. 10* of Alexander Scriabin dates from 1913, a period characterized by the twilight of tonality, Expressionist artwork, and an interest in human subconscious and psychology following the writings of Sigmund Freud. Although the composer did not know that he would die from an infection in two years, he did believe that he would soon bring about the end of the known world through a sort of ecstatic apocalypse upon completion and performance of his time-ending work, *Mysterium* (begun ten years earlier).

To that end, Scriabin had cultivated a late style as early as his late thirties. Certain words crop up frequently in research on this style: ecstasy, rapture, bliss, mysticism, religion, and philosophy. The composer’s luminous final sonata falls in line with these words; its atmosphere is mysterious yet drenched in light (witness the abundant trills and tremolos) and full of desire (witness the ascending chromatic lines).

Scriabin's final piano sonata represents the full maturity of the composer's musical language in terms of both harmony and form. Scriabin casts his final sonata in a single movement, yet the clarity of the structure is concealed and mystified at crucial moments; as with many great composers writing sonatas post-Beethoven, Scriabin walks a delicate line between realizing structural formalities and bending the sonata experience in an original way. The listener can parse an introduction, exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda as traditional units of the sonata structure. However, the composer's mixture of thematic content in these sections manipulates the listener's understanding of the work's form (for example, references to the second theme in the development and coda, and references to the introduction's head motive everywhere). It is in fact extremely difficult to tell whether the introduction even functions as such, or rather as the first theme of the exposition. Finally, lack of the clearly articulated cadences of functional harmony keeps sectional boundaries nebulous.

If I were to draw on paper the structure of Scriabin's last piano sonata, I would draw an upward spiral fading out with a dotted line. In the most basic cases, traditional sonata forms "cycle" through their musical content twice (opening through exposition, recapitulation through ending), with the occasional instance of a development or coda section that features a third (or even fourth) cycle. Scriabin cycles through his content at least four times (opening through exposition, development, recapitulation, coda), suggesting a circular design that lends the work a quality of endlessness. Verbatim cycles would be tedious, though, so Scriabin truncates certain sections and glues them into others, taking care to balance the structure so that no music is heard too often. The final cycle in the coda is hyper compressed, racing through the secondary theme material

“trembling” and “winged” as per the composer’s performance directions. That Scriabin chooses to end the coda with an “end-of-the-end section” in the quiet mood of the opening material would further suggest endlessness (as if the music were about to pick up yet another cycle). Post-life eternity was clearly on the mind of the composer and is conveyed through his final piano sonata, making this masterpiece quintessentially “late-style.”

Brahms: Klavierstücke, op. 119

Writing just a few years earlier and in an opposite style from Scriabin, Brahms too seems to offer a self-consciously final statement with his late piano pieces. The composer had already toyed with the idea of “retiring” in 1889, a lifestyle that proved to be short-lived for him. The piano pieces opp. 116–119 were published in 1892–93 and represent a nostalgic farewell to the instrument on which Brahms made his compositional debut (his first and second piano sonatas constitute his first and second opus, respectively).

Unlike the examples by Scriabin and Schubert on this program, Brahms’s piano pieces convey the melancholy and darkness of saying goodbye. He lived long enough to watch friends and colleagues pass away and to listen as his beloved musical language folded into chromatic experimentation and eventual atonality. In music critic Alex Ross’s book *Listen to This*, the chapter on late Brahms is poetically titled “Blessed Are the Sad.” In it, Ross writes on the composer’s self-confessed, lifelong bent towards melancholy. According to the author, through this very human voice that knew suffering, Brahms reaches all of us in a deep place (not as God speaking to man, but rather as man

approaching us on equal footing). In a previous conversation with Ross, pianist Mitsuko Uchida had described late Schubert as “music to die to.” For Ross, it is late Brahms.

It can be dicey to ascribe meaning to the music of Brahms, one of the ultimate champions of “absolute music.” He eschewed programmatic implications for his pieces and even approached titling his pieces with reluctance; Brahms’s seemingly random sprinkling of Intermezzi, Rhapsodies, Romances, Fantasies, and Capriccios amongst the titles of his works does little to clarify finer details of the pieces. However, stringing together details of the musical text and words that Brahms wrote about op. 119 can result in some careful assumptions:

No. 1 Intermezzo in B Minor Brahms had indicated in a letter to Clara Schumann that this piece is to be performed as if in a *ritardando* in every bar and on every note. He also describes it as being rich in dissonances, probably referring to the fact that pitches are to be tied across their measures with their reverberations rubbing against the other pitches in the measure. These two considerations both point towards a feeling of great reluctance and tiredness that permeates the music; the pianist is slow not only to play the next note, but also to release the note currently being played. Silences begin to punctuate the texture more and more as the work draws to a close. This is music that knows what is coming and does not wish to carry on.

No. 2 Intermezzo in E Minor This musically elusive piece is in an ABA form, with the “A” music agitated and nervous in E Minor, and the “B” section calm and reminiscent of the Viennese waltz in E Major. The opening melody is repeated over and over in this piece with variation on each repetition. The fact that the restless and searching “A” music bears the same melody as the restful “B” music (albeit with modal

adjustments) invites the interpretation of the “A” music seeking to find itself. The goal is the nostalgic and sentimental waltz, of which we have many examples of the composer himself (his op. 39 or the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, op. 52). Just as Beethoven had approached the obsolete minuet with the same nostalgia in one of his last works, 33 *Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, so too does Brahms seem here to be reflecting back on his life and times in a genre that held much meaning for him. To set this music of 1893 into starker relief, Bartók had at this time been publishing piano music for three years, Debussy just began work on *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and Liszt’s *Nuages gris* celebrated its 12th birthday. Put simply, Brahms lived to witness his own cultural era die away.

No. 3 Intermezzo in C Major Here we find Brahms in a lighter affect. The unbuttoned setting might be *Zum Roten Igel* (The Red Hedgehog), the restaurant in which the composer lunched daily and could find the pleasantness of life in food, drink, and the company of friends. This brief piece of under two minutes delights in some of the composer’s favorite compositional methods: shifting meter, hemiola, and chord transformations to distant harmonies.

No. 4 Rhapsody in E-flat Major The finale of Brahms’ last opus for piano is in the heroic, muscular vein of many of his earlier works. The rhapsody generates enough excitement to be effective as the finale of a set, but there is nevertheless no happy ending for Brahms. This piece is known for its sudden and jarring close in E-flat Minor rather than E-flat Major (the key in which the piece begins). While a transformation from a minor key to a major key had been fairly commonplace for over a hundred years at this point, the opposite occurs with far less frequency. One could point to theoretical clues from earlier in the movement or historical precedents from Schubert and Chopin, but the

emotional effect is hard to miss. Three plausible guesses might be that it is (1) Brahms's desire for us to recognize his own melancholy late in life, (2) a statement of sadness at having run out of time to compose music and live life, or (3) a bleak opinion on the future of music. In the end it is up to the listener to decide.

Schubert: Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960

Although Schubert's final piano sonata is far larger than the other works on this program, I also feel compelled to write the least about it; this music speaks best for itself. The posthumous *Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960* dates from 1828, just two months before Schubert's death at the young age of 31. Syphilis claimed the lives of many in the 19th century (particularly from the artistic community), and the illness's unique trajectory and symptoms are such that Schubert must have known that he was in the process of dying while writing this and other late-style works. There are unique juxtapositions in Schubert's late works: the energy (and even cheer?) of a young man combined with the wisdom and seriousness of a man nearing death, a composer who was raised and steeped in the accepted musical community of his day yet felt himself an outsider, and ordinary musical statements that almost inexplicably take on absolute profundity.

That Schubert wrote such a sublimely beautiful work on his deathbed suggests that he either found great peace in dying, was experiencing the sense of euphoria associated with tertiary neurosyphilis, or both. Without reducing the work to a single interpretation, we may nevertheless observe what objectively occurs in the text. The beautiful opening melody of the work resembles a religious chorale in its most perfect form, as if a choir of angels were singing instead of humans. This phrase features a

prominent arrival on the subdominant harmony (containing the pitch G-natural). Midway through, however, the music halts and is interrupted by a quiet, ominous trill on the pitch G-flat. In an overly simplified way, the remainder of the work dramatically follows this conflict between G-natural and G-flat, music that “belongs” in early nineteenth-century Vienna and music that “doesn’t belong.” The G-natural music attempts every possible response to resolve the interruption, from ignoring (throughout the first movement), to eruptive anger (first ending of the exposition, first movement), to resignation (end of the first movement), to elegantly dancing around it (the third movement Scherzo versus its Trio), to insistence (fourth movement). After roughly 40 minutes of persisting, the G-flat at the very end acquiesces into its enharmonic pitch, F-sharp, amidst a flurry of repeated G-naturals. The F-sharp resolves conclusively back upward to the G-natural, and the piece reaches a triumphant conclusion.

