

Angela Cheng plays Schumann

Thursday, March 26 – 7:30 pm

Jean-Marie Zeitouni, conductor

Angela Cheng, piano

MOZART

Don Giovanni, K.527: Overture

(7')*

C. SCHUMANN

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.7

(24')*

Allegro maestoso

Romanze: Andante non troppo con grazia

Finale: Allegro non troppo – Allegro molto

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

WAGNER

Tannhäuser: Overture (Dresden version)

(14')*

LISZT

Légende: St. François d'Assise: La predication aux oiseaux

(12')*

LISZT

Les Préludes

(15')*

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Don Giovanni, K.527: Overture

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(b. Salzburg, 1756 / d. Vienna, 1791)

Opera first performed: October 29, 1787 in Prauge

Last ESO performance of the overture: June 2003

In the early 1780s, Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838) arrived in Vienna, with a letter of introduction to the chief composer of the Viennese court, Antonio Salieri. He quickly established himself there, and contributed libretti for operas by many of the city's leading composers. For Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, he would write the texts for Mozart's three greatest Italian operas: *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*.

After the rollicking success of *Le nozze di Figaro*, Mozart and da Ponte turned to the legend of Don Juan, the notorious lothario (Don Giovanni is his name in Italian). The opera was billed as a "dramma giocoso" (a "jocular" drama, the modern precursor to the word "dramedy," perhaps?), and while filled with comedy, the opera nevertheless relates a dark version of the Don Juan story, in which the title character is ultimately dragged down to hell rather than repent for being the person he has chosen to become. So it's no wonder the opera's overture begins with portentous orchestral chords and a sombre, almost ominous feel. But about two minutes in, the music turns, and the lighthearted energy of many of the opera's characters and situations manifests in a more upbeat, boisterous section.

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.7

Clara Schumann

(b. Leipzig, 1819 / d. Frankfurt, 1896)

First performed: 1835 in Leipzig

This is the first time the ESO has played any work by Clara Schumann

The piano concerto composed by Clara Schumann as a precocious teenager was no mere isolated exception to the rule of the 19th century. Rather, it was the natural product of one of the most prodigious and exceptional talents of the Romantic era. Born Clara Wieck, the daughter of one of Leipzig's most noted piano pedagogues, Clara demonstrated amazing talent from a very early age, guided carefully and expertly by her father. When she was twelve, her father accepted into his home another emerging piano talent, Robert Schumann. Nine years older than Clara, Robert befriended the talented youngster – a friendship that would eventually evolve into love and marriage – very much over her father's objections.

At 13, Clara noted in her diary that she had begun to compose a piano concerto. "Schumann will orchestrate it now so that I can play it at my concert," she added. The one-movement *Concerto-Rondo*, as she called it, would eventually become the third movement of the concerto we will hear tonight. The complete three-movement work opens sternly at first in the orchestra, and the piano's entrance is equally dramatic. Orchestra and piano share in presenting the main theme, but soon enough, the solo instrument dominates in a dreamy rhapsody of that theme. Energy and momentum build throughout the movement, with gentle nudges from the orchestra urging the piano on, until a change in pace ushers in the second movement without a pause. Unusually, the piano is the only instrument used in the "Romance" middle movement, until it is eventually joined by a lone cello. The tender dialog is ended by the timpani, which ushers in the final movement – a triple metre dance full of that same A minor

earnestness of the opening movement. The piano part is brilliantly written – and it should be noted that tonight’s soloist, Angela Cheng, made a recording of the concerto for Koch International.

***Tannhäuser*: Overture**

Richard Wagner

(b. Leipzig, 1813 / d. Venice, 1883)

Opera first performed: October 19, 1845 in Dresden

Last ESO performance of the overture: February 2005

If Richard Wagner took a misstep anywhere in his career, many scholars agree it was with *Tannhäuser*, first performed in 1845. “The flaw is clearly seen in the broken-backed character of Tannhäuser himself, a passive figure of a kind that Wagner was not able to understand,” wrote Michael Tanner in his book *Wagner*. The story tells of a man who has left the superficial 13th century court of minstrels to spend an untold period of time relentlessly pursuing pleasures of the flesh in Venusberg. Finding the wages of sin ultimately world-wearying, he seeks redemption in finding true love back in his old world – which he ultimately achieves only as he dies following his pilgrimage to ask for redemption from the Pope.

The overture is dominated by two main themes. *The Pilgrims’ Chorus* begins in woodwinds, and when the cellos begin to accompany, they do so with a sense of Tannhäuser’s heavy heart. After a brassier statement of the Pilgrims’ music is heard, it is cut off by the other dominant theme of the overture: the music of the sinful mountain where Venus lives in perpetual bacchanale. It is telling, perhaps, that while the pilgrim tune (the “good”) is richly tonal, the Venus music (the “bad”) is quite chromatic.

Légende: St. François d’Assise: La prédication aux oiseaux

Franz Liszt

(b. Raiding, Hungary, 1811 / d. Bayreuth, 1886)

First performance of the solo piano version: August 29, 1865 in Budapest. Work arranged for orchestra by Liszt in 1863.

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

It can be fairly said that Franz Liszt thought orchestrally as a pianist. One of the great innovators of piano performance, Liszt often made piano transcriptions of even the densest orchestral works (including Beethoven symphonies and Wagner opera excerpts), and when he composed for piano, he used every aspect of the instrument to create as vast a canvas of sound as he could. And yet, tonight’s work, written for piano and later orchestrated by Liszt, is one of the very few examples of direct musical onomatopoeia in his piano works.

During the first half of the 1860s, Liszt dedicated much of his efforts to composing religious music. Liszt was named for St. Francis of Assisi and St. François de Paule, and wrote *Two Legends* based on miracles attributed to the saints. The first concerns the story of St. Francis of Assisi coming upon a bit of road in which birds filled the trees on both sides. Leaving his companions behind, St. Francis “preached” to the birds, which flocked to listen to his words. Birdsong can be heard imitated in the piano version, as well as in the orchestration of the piece. The serene chorale in the central section depicts the sermon St. Francis preached.

Les Préludes

Liszt

(see above)

First performed: February 23, 1854 in Paris

Last ESO performance: February 2005

Aside from developing the idea of thematic transformation as the compositional basis of a piece of music, we also have Franz Liszt to thank for the form known as the symphonic poem, or tone poem. Put simply, it is the musical depiction of a non-musical concept. A painting, a poem, a philosophical abstract – things such as this provide the inspiration for symphonic poems. Many composers since Liszt have written them, but he was the first to fully explore the form.

Les Préludes (“The Beginnings”) was the third of the 13 symphonic poems Liszt wrote. The title comes from a poem by Alphonse de Lamartine – the music, however, comes from recycled material Liszt rescued from an earlier abandoned work intended for chorus. The score contains a preface by Liszt which says, in part: “What is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown song of which the first solemn note is sounded by death?” Again, thematic transformation takes the muted theme stated delicately by the strings at the outset, and systematically uses it through the increasingly rhapsodic emotional pull of the work – which ends in a sumptuously stated brilliant conclusion.

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