

Nan Ni
piano

Recital in partial fulfillment of the
Doctor of Musical Arts degree, 2026
Student of Bruce Brubaker and Alessio Bax

Tuesday, April 30, 2024
8:00 p.m.
Keller Room

PROGRAM

Johannes Brahms
(1833–1897)

8 Klavierstücke, op. 76
Capriccio in F-sharp Minor
Capriccio in B Minor
Intermezzo in A-flat Major
Intermezzo in B-flat Major
Capriccio in C-sharp Minor
Intermezzo in A Major
Intermezzo in A Minor
Capriccio in C Major

Franz Joseph Haydn
(1732–1809)

Sonata in C Major, Hob. XVI: 48
Andante con espressione
Rondo – Presto

Maurice Ravel
(1875–1937)

Le tombeau de Couperin
Prelude
Fugue
Forlane
Rigaudon
Menuet
Toccata

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Composed in June 1878 during **Brahms's** stay in Pörschach, the op. 76 pieces took many months before Brahms felt ready to publish them. Letters from Brahms's friends, including pianist Clara Schumann and surgeon Theodor Billroth, show that the initial order for the 8 pieces was 5, 2, 1, 6, 7, 8, 3, 4, before rearranging them into their final order. Similar to Brahms's later *Klavierstücke*, each piece in the set presents a distinct character and stands alone as a complete self (like the most widely performed No. 2 in this set), but they are also linked to each other, and altogether construct a diverse unity. The set is balanced with two types of movements -- Capriccio and Intermezzo. The structurally weightier Capriccio movements are characterized by their passion and bravura, while the Intermezzi, interspersed within the set, explore the intimate and introspective side of Romanticism.

Beginning with an ominous and unsettled Capriccio in F-sharp minor, we were taken on a journey through a wide range of emotions. The lighthearted, Hungarian dance-style No. 2 is followed by two Intermezzi in a dreamy, floating state. The turbulent No. 5 explores the conflict between duple and triple meter, a feature which is then taken over by the following No. 6, though in a much tender character. Contrasting with the nostalgic and almost fatalistic No. 7, the last movement opens up space over the entire range of the keyboard, and embraces us with the joyfulness of C major. Light wins over darkness at the end of the journey.

The pure C major sonority continues in the two-movement sonata by **Haydn**, Hob. XVI:48, which showcases his creativity with the sonata form. Like other sonatas with only two movements, this sonata explores the idea of duality. The first movement, *Andante con espressione*, takes on an improvisatory nature, and has an air of relaxation and contentment overall, whereas the second movement is a sparkly, vibrant Rondo, marked *Presto*. However, the central idea of "drama" connects these two movements into a pair, which, in many cases throughout the sonata, reflects the humorous side of Haydn. The richly ornamented variations in the first movement resemble opera aria with improvised vocal flourishes. The frequent shift between major and minor, as well as the sharp contrast of dynamics, amplifies the effect of "acting". Similarly in the *Presto*, the abrupt stopping often surprises listeners and brings out the comic effect.

Nearing the end of the First World War in 1917, **Ravel's** mother passed away, which added to his pain from the deaths of his countrymen at the hands of the war. *Le tombeau de Couperin* is his biggest work composed during this time. Taking the original term from 16th and 17th-century literature, the musical tombeau is a piece of music written to commemorate the death of a distinguished person, usually a teacher or master. More than a monument celebrating the memory of the past master, a tombeau brings back sound that is gone and invokes the spirit and style of its dedicatees. Despite the title, Ravel's piece is less an homage to François Couperin as it is to the French Baroque as a whole, and as a commemoration of his late friends

who passed in the war, as well as his mother. Written in the form of a French Baroque suite, each movement of *Le tombeau* is dedicated to one of Ravel's friends who died in the war. In response to criticisms that the piece was too light-hearted rather than somber, Ravel stated that "the dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence."

Besides structure, the six movements borrowed many aspects from Baroque tradition -- the rhythmic features of the dances, use of ornamentation, fugal technique, etc, while employing a strikingly new harmonic language, especially in the dissonant and darkly-hued Forlane. Within the overall economy of writing and transparency of texture, Ravel created a kaleidoscopic palette of harmonic color. Beyond simply replicating the sound of French Baroque, Ravel presented in his *tombeau* a reading of the past through a language that is distinctive of him and his present world. "There is a sound that is gone, and yet is audible through a present sound."
– Nan Ni

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