

Nan Ni
piano

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

Sunday, April 20, 2025
4:00 p.m.
Brown Hall

PROGRAM

Igor Stravinsky
(1882–1871)

Piano Sonata, K0 43

I. Quarter note = 112

II. Adagietto

III. Quarter note = 112

Franz Liszt
(1811–1886)

Au lac de Wallenstadt

from *Années de pèlerinage*, S. 160

Nuages gris, S. 199

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude

from *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, S. 173

Intermission

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770–1827)

Variations and Fugue for Piano in E-flat Major,
op. 35 “Eroica”

Composed in 1924, **Stravinsky's** Piano Sonata belongs to the so-called "neo-classical" period—a time when composers sought clarity, structure, and restraint in reaction to the emotional excesses of late Romanticism and the upheavals of World War I. True to this aesthetic, the sonata's outer movements are based on sonata form structure, while the overall transparency of texture reflect a deliberate turn toward order.

Throughout the work, different styles from the past have been evoked: violin-like string-crossing figurations, lively counterpoint recalling Baroque style in the finale, and a slow movement adorned with extravagant ornaments over a steady bass, evoking Haydn and Beethoven while hinting at Stravinsky's ballet music. Yet these borrowed gestures are not meant to be true representations of the old styles; they are exaggerated "mannerism" through a modernist lens. The result is a vibrant dialogue with the past, not a replication of it.

Liszt's late works reveal a composer far removed from the flamboyant virtuosity of his youth. Introspective and infused with literary and religious influences, they showcase his poetic sensitivity and radical harmonic experimentation.

Liszt prefaced the score of *Au lac de Wallenstadt* (At Lake Wallenstadt) with lines from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "Thy contrasted lake / With the wild world I dwell in is a thing / Which warns me, with its stillness, to forsake / Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring." His lover and travel companion at the time, Marie d'Agoult, wrote in her *Mémoires*, recalling how he composed for her a "melancholy harmony, imitative of the sigh of the waves and the cadence of oars," a piece she "could never hear without weeping."

Nuages Gris ("Grey Clouds") marks a striking departure from his earlier style and 19th-century harmonic language. With its fixation on tritones and constant buildup of unresolved dissonances, it refuses to settle into any key or cadence, creating an unsettling, eerie stasis. Foreshadowing 20th-century modernism, this work may have influenced Debussy's *Nuages*.

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude reflects Liszt's profound religious devotion. Unfolding from a contemplative opening, the piece gradually evolves toward a moment of sublime glory and divine blessing. The tonality of each section descends by a major third -- a scheme favored by Schubert and Beethoven.

Today, **Beethoven** is often remembered as a figure of heroic defiance and great seriousness. Yet the *Eroica Variations* reveal the often overlooked side of the composer: his irrepressible humor, and his ability to fuse high intellect with earthy wit. With the brightness of E-flat major and overall joyfulness, it's hard to relate it to the *Heiligenstadt Testament* written in the same year, a letter confessing suicidal thoughts.

The theme, a favorite of Beethoven's, also appears in the ballet music for *The Creatures of Prometheus* and the *Eroica Symphony*. Departing from a traditional theme-and-variations form, this work starts not with the theme but with its bass line, subjected to three variations before the real theme is introduced. This approach is carried over from the ballet music, through which it represents the gradual creation

of life by Prometheus. Same approach was later adopted in the *Eroica Symphony*. Throughout the variations, boundaries between different styles are often crossed: highly sophisticated fugal writing juxtaposes down-to-earth jokes; intimate expression interspersed with virtuoso fireworks, notably the hand-crossings. In this sense, this work is a microcosm of his genius and optimism -- a reminder that even as he reshaped music's future, he never lost his joy in its sheer fun.

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