

# Hongzhen Wang

*piano*

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

Wednesday, October 8, 2025  
8:00 p.m.  
Williams Hall

## PROGRAM

---

**Franz Liszt**  
(1811–1886)

**Piano Sonata in B Minor, S. 178 (1853)**

*brief pause*

**Ludwig van Beethoven**  
(1770–1827)

**Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, op. 106**  
**“Hammerklavier”**

Allegro

Scherzo: Assai vivace

Adagio sostenuto– Appassionato e con  
molto sentimento

Largo – Allegro risoluto

*Thank you to everyone who came to my recital tonight!*  
*This is my final recital at NEC, and it feels especially meaningful as I reflect on ten years*  
*since I first arrived at this wonderful institution.*  
*NEC has become my second home, and I will deeply miss everyone here.*

*First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my beloved parents*  
*for their constant support since I learned the music.*

*I am also deeply thankful to the faculty members at NEC*  
*who have taught and inspired me over the years.*  
*Your guidance, help, and encouragement have shaped me*  
*into not only a better musician but also a better person.*

*Most importantly, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my mentor,*  
*Prof. Bruce Brubaker. Your encouragement, generosity, and vision have profoundly*  
*influenced me as both a musician and an individual.*

*Your endlessly dedicated nurturing and guidance have cultivated me into the*  
*musician I am today. Every detail you shared in our countless lessons will remain with me,*  
*continuing to inspire and guide me throughout my life.*

*Words cannot express how honored and grateful I am to have been your student!*

### **Liszt Piano Sonata in B Minor, S. 178 (1853)**

Liszt composed his monumental Sonata in B Minor between 1852-53 during his years in Weimar, a period of intense creativity when he served as Kapellmeister at the ducal court and produced many of his major orchestral and keyboard works. He dedicated the sonata to Robert Schumann, answering Schumann's earlier dedication of his Fantasy in C Major, Op. 17, to Liszt in 1839. By the time the sonata was published in Leipzig in 1854, Schumann had already been confined to a mental asylum and was unable to respond. The premiere took place in Berlin on January 22, 1857, performed by Hans von Bülow, one of Liszt's students and—later that year—son-in-law through his marriage to Liszt's daughter Cosima.

The early reception of the Sonata in B Minor was far from favorable. Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick dismissed it in 1857 as “merely a blind noise,” while Clara Schumann wrote in her diary that she “could not make it out at all.” Johannes Brahms was reputed to have fallen asleep when Liszt performed the work in 1853. Despite such reactions, this piece gradually gained recognition. Its technical difficulty and its status as “new” music delayed widespread acceptance, but by the early-twentieth century it had become firmly established as a pinnacle of Liszt's output, and a staple of the piano repertoire and a subject of extensive scholarly analysis.

During his Weimar period, Liszt was deeply engaged with questions of musical form. The Sonata in B Minor represents his boldest attempt to fuse the conventional multi-movement sonata cycle into a single, cohesive structure. Instead of presenting separate movements, Liszt interweaves four main sections through seamless transitions, creating a unified narrative lasting about thirty minutes. Scholars have described this design as a “double-function form,” or a “sonata within a sonata”: it follows an overarching sonata form while containing smaller embedded elements such as slow passages, recitativo, and fugato sections, all derived from the initial motives. Several of Liszt's symphonic poems of the 1850s (*Tasso*, *Les Préludes*, and *Die Ideale*) demonstrate similarly intricate approaches to form, suggesting a clear correlation between this sonata and his orchestral works. Liszt also employs the technique of thematic transformation, in which a small set of musical ideas undergoes constant metamorphosis, taking on different rhythmic, harmonic, and emotional characters. For example, a “diabolic” figure introduced in the bass near the beginning is later transformed into a theme of sweetness and longing.

The sonata's unstable introduction features a descending scale motive, whose first two appearances consist of distinct tetrachords later fused in the closing epilogue, the second coda. The climactic moment arrives with the secondary theme, where Liszt introduces the so-called “Cross motive” (an ascending whole tone followed by an ascending minor third), a figure also found in his oratorio *St. Elisabeth* and other religious works. The presence of this motive, combined with the sonata's proximity to Liszt's programmatic symphonic poems, has encouraged interpretations beyond purely formal analysis. Some scholars have proposed a spiritual narrative of Creation, the Fall, and Redemption through Christ's Crucifixion, with the Cross motive as central and the fugal section as a representation of struggle. Other scholars' interpretation suggest the sonata's themes may represent Faust,

Gretchen, and Mephistopheles, emphasizing the demonical qualities of certain motives.

Ultimately, the Sonata in B Minor unfolds as a single, vast musical drama rather than a sequence of independent sections. Its quiet, introspective conclusion in B major, rather than a virtuosic climax, puzzled many early listeners. Today, however, this ending is recognized as a stroke of visionary imagination: Liszt turns inward rather than outward, closing in transcendence rather than triumph.

### **Beethoven Piano Sonata Op. 106 in B-flat Major, “Hammerklavier” (1818)**

Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata is the longest, richest, and most technically demanding of his 32 piano sonatas. As one of the most significant and influential compositions in the piano literature, it is often described as a “Mount Everest” for pianists. The work pushes performers to the limit of their physical and psychological endurance, exploring musical frontiers where invention borders on the extreme. At approximately forty-five minutes, it also challenges listeners’ perception of the classical sonata, more radically than any of Beethoven’s other ones. Begun in 1817 and completed in 1818 after eighteen months of work, it was Beethoven’s first large-scale composition in five years and the first four-movement sonata he had written since Op. 31 No. 3 (1802). Beethoven himself once referred to it as a five-movement sonata, considering the Largo introduction before the finale an independent movement.

Originally planned for publication in both Vienna and London in 1819 through Beethoven’s former student and friend Ferdinand Ries, the Viennese edition appeared in October through Artaria, followed by the London edition in December. Beethoven dedicated the Vienna publication to Archduke Rudolph, while the London edition is dedicated to Antonie Brentano. Interestingly, the London edition divided the sonata into two parts: the first three movements (with the second and third movement printed in reverse order), and the final movement published separately. This unusual arrangement was due to economic considerations, as shown by Charles Rosen. The sonata remained rarely performed or reviewed due to its sheer scale and technical demands, placing it far beyond the reach of most pianists of the time. The first documented public performance did not take place until 1836, when Franz Liszt possibly played part of it at the Salle Érard in Paris, receiving an enthusiastic review from Hector Berlioz who was impressed by Liszt’s ability to unlock the sonata’s complexities.

The title “Hammerklavier” comes from Beethoven’s own indication on the title page of the first edition: “Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier.” Literally meaning “hammer-keyboard,” the term used in Beethoven’s time to distinguish the fortepiano from the harpsichord. Beethoven also employed the term in his earlier piano sonata, Op. 101, reflecting a broader cultural trend: with the rise of Romantic nationalism, German musicians increasingly resisted foreign terminology, favoring native expressions that emphasized their cultural identity. Beethoven composed this sonata during a turbulent period of his life. By 1817 his deafness was nearly total, and he

was burdened with financial instability and guardianship of his nephew Karl. His hearing loss forced him into social isolation, with visitors and friends communicating through written “conversation books” which survive today. William Kinderman has described the “Hammerklavier” as provoking a crisis in the reception of Beethoven’s music. It was perceived as paradoxical: monumental and majestic on one hand, yet enigmatic and labyrinthine on the other. Many listeners found Beethoven’s late works inaccessible, ambiguous, or even incomprehensible. Yet from this period of hardship emerged a new phase of creative renewal, marked by works of unprecedented complexity and scope.

The sonata opens with a thunderous fanfare propelled by a bold ascending leap that generates much of the material for the entire work. This reckless gesture embodies both risk and triumph. The first movement unfolds with proclamatory rhythms, a lyrical secondary theme, and a vast fugal development that heightens its grandeur. Its contrapuntal and chromatic intensity create both ecstatic fervor and expressive depth, making it one of Beethoven’s most heroic and majestic openings. One of the controversial issues in the sonata are the metronome markings. This is the only piano sonata for which he provided metronome markings, enabled by Johann Nepomuk Maelzel’s 1815 invention of the device. Performers have long debated their practicality. If the tempo was taken too fast, the music loses the clarity and collapses into confusion, rather than revealing the richness of detail Beethoven has embedded in the score.

Another debated passage occurs in the transition to the recapitulation of the first movement. A rising progression in sixths ends ambiguously: should it resolve to A-sharp or A-natural? With A-natural, the harmony forms a conventional dominant leading to the tonic; with A-sharp, it produces an enharmonic modulation back to the tonic, a more striking effect. The problem is compounded by the loss of Beethoven’s autograph manuscript and the two manuscript copies used for the original editions. Both the Viennese and London first editions agree on A-sharp. Yet a surviving sketch in Beethoven’s hand, along with a lost sketch recorded by Gustav Nottebohm from the Boldrini sketchbook shows the harmony built on A-natural. Because of its structural importance, this passage continues to spark debate among pianists and scholars. For over a century, the two first editions, together with the rare surviving sketches by Beethoven, have been our only reliable primary sources.

The Scherzo (*Assai vivace*) provides a sharp contrast with its brevity and wit. Often described as a parody of the first movement, it employs humorous elements with compressed motives in dotted rhythm. Though it begins in the same key, the trio section casts a darker shadow with its parallel key of B-flat minor, tinged with foreboding, before the energetic Scherzo returns. Strikingly, the movement concludes not on the tonic but on a diminished chord, an extremely unusual choice at the time. Its most striking juxtaposition lies in the tonal conflict between B-flat and B-natural, hammered obsessively in both hands. At the climax, the B-natural octaves are repeated for fifteen times in rapid succession, violent and perhaps sardonic in their defiance, before the theme finally re-emerges in B-flat major.

Lasting about twenty minutes, the *Adagio sostenuto* is the longest slow

movement in all Beethoven's piano sonatas. It conveys deep sorrow, suspending time with profound solemnity, later brightened by an aria-like outpouring of lyricism. It is centered in F-sharp minor, a third lower than the home key of B-flat major. The opening measure with two A and C-sharp of octaves was added just before the publication. Scholars also suggest that it provides a transition between the previous movement and the slow movement, as well as relating to the opening of the first movement, second movement and final fugue theme that all begins with a rising third interval. Structurally, the Adagio follows a conventional sonata form with tonality development built largely on descending thirds. The music shifts to F-sharp major in the final measures, as if the frozen grief finally melts into transcendent stillness.

The Finale begins with a slow Largo introduction that bridges as a transition from the third movement. Charles Rosen described it as "The Creation of a Fugue." Out of these searching and halting fragments erupts a colossal fugue, one of Beethoven's most complex contrapuntal achievements. With tremendous technical demands for the pianist, the fugue unfolds through contrasting episodes and employs an array of enigmatic contrapuntal devices, wielded with dramatic force and dissonance. Its subject, built on a leaping tenth, embellished with trills, and driven by scales, undergoes every possible transformation: inversion, augmentation, diminution, retrograde, and stretto. The result is both demonic and sublime, alternating between violent outbursts and a tender, contemplative episode reminiscent of sacred choral music. Unlike Bach's fugues, which affirm an eternal order, Beethoven's fugue confronts "an open universe." The sonata concludes with a volcanic coda, where obsessive leaps and trills propel the music to a defiant and shattering close.

The "Hammerklavier" has transcended its own time, securing its place as one of the most experimental works in the history of Western classical music. Beethoven himself once described it as "a sonata that will give pianists something to do and that it will be played fifty years hence." He underestimated his own prophecy: not only did it remain formidable for fifty years, but it has continued to challenge pianists and listeners alike for generations, and it still does today.

## **Upcoming Student Recitals at NEC**

*all programs subject to change*

Visit [necmusic.edu](http://necmusic.edu) for complete and updated concert information

**Sarah Flynn**, *trumpet* (MM)

Student of Thomas Siders

*Friday, October 17, 2025 at 8:30 p.m., Burnes Hall*

**Abigail Hope-Hull**, *oboe* (GC)

Student of John Ferrillo

*Friday, October 17, 2025 at 8:30 p.m., Brown Hall*

**Elgin Lee**, *collaborative piano* (DMA '27)

Student of Pei-Shan Lee

*Saturday, October 18, 2025 at 8:00 p.m., Keller Room*

**Grace Lee**, *piano* (GD '25)

Student of Randall Hodgkinson

*Saturday, October 18, 2025 at 8:00 p.m., Williams Hall*

**Ethan Morad**, *clarinet* (MM)

Student of Andrew Sandwick

*Sunday, October 19, 2025 at 12:00 p.m., Burnes Hall*

**Lingbo Ma**, *composition* (DMA)

Student of Kati Agócs

*Saturday, October 25, 2025 at 8:00 p.m., Burnes Hall*

**Camden Briggs**, *percussion* (BM)

Student of Matthew McKay

*Sunday, October 26, 2025 at 12:00 p.m., Brown Hall*

**Alexander Knutrud**, *trombone* (DMA)

Student of Stephen Lange

*Sunday, October 26, 2025 at 12:00 p.m., Burnes Hall*

**Jake Haskins**, *percussion* (MM)

Student of Will Hudgins and Daniel Bauch

*Thursday, October 30, 2025 at 8:00 p.m., Burnes Hall*

**Shanshan Xie**, *mezzo-soprano* (BM '25)

Student of Bradley Williams

*Saturday, November 1, 2025 at 8:00 p.m., Brown Hall*

Food and drink are not allowed in the concert hall,  
and photography and audio or video recording are prohibited.  
Assistive listening devices are available for all Jordan Hall concerts;  
contact the head usher or house manager on duty or inquire at the Coat Room.  
Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of management.

Stay connected



[necmusic.edu/tonight](https://necmusic.edu/tonight)