

# AJERO FAMILY PIANO

Olivia Ajero. Antonio Ajero. Mario Ajero.

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The Ajero family pianists are by now familiar faces at our Sugarmill Music Festival. Three years in a row, young Antonio and Olivia have blown us away with their virtuosity. Now, once more, they and their father, Mario, will share with us their talents at our Fourth Annual Festival. Their program opens with two preludes and fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* by **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* consists of two volumes, each of which includes one prelude and fugue pair in every major and minor key. This means that each book contains twenty-four preludes and fugues, so that the total number between the two books is forty-eight; indeed, the two sets are often casually referred to as “The Forty-Eight” for this reason. In the later seventeenth century, experiments in tuning had made available for the first time all twenty-four major and minor keys. Previously, keys with more accidentals, such as F-sharp major with its six sharps, would have sounded crude and out-of-tune. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* was one of several compositions written in Germany around this time which aimed to demonstrate the new feasibility of all twenty-four keys. Arguably, it was the most successful artistically, for its contents are played far more frequently than similar manuals. In its contrast of freer prelude movements with strictly contrapuntal fugue movements, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* setup a format of greater musical interest than its predecessors. Its example is one which later composers like Frédéric Chopin, in his *Twenty-Four Preludes*, Op. 28, and Dmitri Shostakovich, in his *Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 87, have followed.

The first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* was complete as of 1722, a year before Bach left his post at Cöthen for his new appointment in Leipzig. Several preludes had already appeared in the *Clavierbüchlein*, “Little Keyboard Book,” which he had composed to instruct his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach in the basics of keyboard technique. The first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, presumably, completes his tutelage. Though Bach would continue to revise the first book until 1740 at the latest, the pieces it contains are consistent with each other, some thoroughly rewritten from earlier versions to satisfy the volume’s

stated goal as an exploration of keyboard technique in all twenty-four keys. The second volume is less consistent, compiled in Leipzig from approximately 1738 to 1742 when Bach had larger, even more extensive projects on his mind, such as the *Clavier-Übung III* from which we heard excerpts yesterday evening. This does not mean, however, that the pieces themselves are any less than those of the first book, simply that he had already accomplished his stated goal with the first volume and could add the more idiosyncratic second volume as a companion of sorts. This afternoon we hear the Prelude and Fugue in C minor, BWV 847, from the first volume and Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor, BWV 873, from the second volume. The former pair includes a Prelude of brooding character with its quick, pulsating sixteenth notes; the resolute Fugue which follows is in three voices entering in the order alto, soprano, and bass. The Prelude of the latter pair is slow and exacting with its three, interwoven voices; the propulsive Fugue, also in three voices, reverses the order of entrances we had encountered in the previous Fugue: now they enter bass, soprano, and alto.

Performing music for piano four hands was a popular social activity in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth, most of the major orchestral and chamber works, in fact, could be purchased in four-hand arrangements for performance at home by amateurs. Less commonly, four-hand recitals were given by professionals. **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**, by some accounts, was the first to give a recital of four-hand music, an event which occurred on May 13, 1765 in London. He was joined, in his case, by his sister, Maria Anna Mozart whose nickname was “Nannerl.” It was during their eighteen-month residency in London and represented one more occasion for their father Leopold to show-off his talented children. The instrument on which they played was a recently completed two-manual harpsichord constructed by Burkhard Tschudi for King Frederick the Great of Prussia. The children were, in effect, to christen the instrument before it was shipped abroad. The Sonata in D major, K. 381 which Olivia and Mario play this afternoon, however, was composed after this London

recital in Salzburg in 1772. Both Wolfgang and his sister enjoyed using this Sonata and its partner—K. 358—to teach students. Though no documentation survives of these sonatas' premieres, there is a letter dated December 1777 from Leopold about potentially mailing these sonatas to Wolfgang, if he were to decide to remain in Mannheim. There is a similar letter, this time from Wolfgang to Leopold, from June 1781 soon after he had relocated to Vienna. Undoubtedly, Wolfgang and Nannerl would also play these sonatas together as they had done with other repertoire when they were children in London.

The Sonata in D major, K. 381 is in three movements according to the Classical fast-slow-fast pattern. The first movement is an exuberant *Allegro* applying sonata principle. Its first theme is characterized by quick scalar runs, played *staccato*. The second theme with its slightly altered rhythmic profile is equally vibrant; it is in A major, the dominant key. After the repeat of the exposition, the development begins, temporarily in the minor mode. It is brief, however, and soon we are back in familiar territory with the appearance of the recapitulation. The second movement is marked *Andante* and also follows sonata principle. This movement, now in G major and simple triple meter, is far more lyrical than its predecessor. Underlining its almost naïve melody is a persistent Alberti bass—a stock figure used in the Classical era to express triads horizontally instead of as weighty block chords. Luckily for their sakes, the pianists split time playing this repetitive figure. The third movement, now back in D major and marked *Allegro molto*, regains the energy of the first movement. It also adds the excitement of a hammered three-chord motive heard in its first measure and frequently throughout. Its development is incredibly brief, giving hints of contrapuntal imitation as well as call-and-response before changing its mind and proceeding blissfully to the recapitulation.

It was with some reluctance that the Polish-born composer and pianist, **Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)**, came to resettle in Paris in September 1831. With help from Franz Liszt, Chopin was soon adopted by Parisian high society and began giving intimate recitals at the fashionable *salons* and teaching piano to private students. All of Chopin's compositions, with only a few exceptions, are written for solo piano. Many of these are in shorter genres that he himself popularized. With Liszt and Robert Schumann, therefore, he shifted the emphasis in nineteenth-century piano music away from the sonatas and long forms of Classical-era Vienna and toward smaller forms, though all three of these pianist-composers continued to write in longer forms too. Smaller genres we associate with Chopin

include the nocturne, polonaise, mazurka, waltz, étude, prelude, and impromptu. Chopin also extended the harmonic vocabulary of tonal music, approaching chromaticism more thoroughly than many predecessors, and he likewise foregrounded syncopation as a significant rhythmic component in many of his pieces.

This afternoon we hear three works by Chopin. The first is the Étude in A-flat major, Op. 25 No. 1. An étude is a study piece written to exercise particular playing techniques. Though Chopin was not first to write études, through him this genre gained increased artistry, so that it was also acceptable for his and later études to be played on recitals. Chopin published two sets of twelve études: the Opus 10 and Opus 25. This first étude from his second set appeared in 1837 with the others of Opus 25. With its quick arpeggios, it demands dexterity and velocity of its performer. Schumann suggested its nickname "Aeolian Harp" after an instrument which is played by the wind, not human hands. Afterwards, we hear Chopin's Impromptu No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 29. The impromptu is a short piece of improvisatory character; Franz Schubert had previously contributed notable examples to this genre. Chopin wrote four impromptus, each composed and published at separate times. This First Impromptu appeared in 1837 and is notable for the triplet figures of its repeated A section and the gentle lyricism of the intervening B section. Lastly, we hear Chopin's Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49, a longer work running about ten minutes and composed in 1841. Its genre, like the impromptu, can also be improvisatory. Indeed, Chopin often appended the word "fantaisie" to works in other genres to suggest their forms were freer than might ordinarily be expected. Opus 49, however, is one-of-a-kind in Chopin's catalogue as the only work solely titled "fantaisie." It is also atypical for its time in that it ends in A-flat major, not its own tonic, but the key of the first two pieces in our set by Chopin.

If Scott Joplin, the African-American composer of "Maple Leaf Rag" and "The Entertainer," can be regarded as the most famous creator of piano rags, then **William Bolcom (born 1938)** has every claim to second place. Bolcom, a contemporary American composer, tells the story of how he first came to know Joplin's music: "One day in the fall of 1967, I had lunch with Norman Lloyd who mentioned having heard of a ragtime opera by Scott Joplin. 'Who is that?' I asked, and Norman told me but his opera existed only in legend. For some reason I immediately went on the trail of *Treemonisha*, only to find that no one even at the Library of Congress, Lincoln Center, or the Schomburg Collection had it. That is, until I asked my colleague Rudi

Blesh at Queens College. When he said 'I have a copy of the vocal score—shall I bring it next week?' I nearly fell off my chair." Joplin was not nearly as well-known in 1967 as he is today: an incredibly popular figure at the turn of the twentieth century, his music had quickly been forgotten after his death in 1917. Soon after Bolcom's encounter with Joplin, pianist Joshua Rifkin would record his rags, the film *The Sting* would feature his music in its soundtrack, and Gunther Schuller would restore and stage that mysterious opera of his, *Treemonisha*. No longer would Joplin be only a footnote in the history books.

Bolcom would also make an important contribution to this ragtime revival. Specifically, he would begin composing and performing new rags, something no one had done for probably fifty years. In this pursuit, other composers including William Albright, Peter Winkler, and even George Rochberg would also join. Bolcom mentions how he and Albright would mail each other rags, likening their exchange to playing chess by mail. He also comments that their internalization of ragtime marked a new phase in the creation of a distinctly American music: "Where Gottschalk would figuratively wear the costumes of the ethnic musics he evoked and Brooklyn-born Copland donned musical cowboy hats and overalls, we younger composers internalized rag (and other popular music) in such a way that our subsequent music became profoundly changed, whatever styles we each pursued later." Bolcom's catalogue is littered with rags, including many for solo piano—such as the celebrated *Ghost Rags* of 1970—as well as rags for string quartet and an orchestral piece from 1982 entitled, *Ragomania*. The titles of many of these works, like "Eubie's Luckey Day" and "Epitaph for Louis Chauvin," make inside jokes that anyone familiar with turn-of-the-century rags should catch. Bolcom's suite, *The Garden of Eden*, was composed in 1968 and consists of four rags. It recounts the Biblical story of the Fall through ragtime. "The Serpent's Kiss" which we hear this afternoon is its third movement. Its minor key is uncharacteristic for rags, but, otherwise it has all the aspects, including the syncopation in the right hand, steady pulsing in the left, and a variety of tuneful themes. These and other traits of classic rags are often exaggerated and made to sound obsessive in Bolcom's restyling. The original is for solo piano; it also exists in a version for two pianos made by the composer.

We close our program with a showpiece by the Hungarian composer and pianist **Franz Liszt (1811-1886)** who was well-known for his otherworldly virtuosity. Even as a boy, Liszt was receiving the highest acclaim and from the most distinguished of sources. His Viennese piano teacher, the

respected Carl Czerny, refused to accept payment for lessons considering it too much of a privilege to teach the talented child. Beethoven, likewise, offered his praise and guidance to the young pianist. Liszt's technique only improved with further studies in Paris, and, by 1831 when Chopin arrived in the French capital, Liszt had become a fixture of Parisian society. Liszt's Étude in D minor is the fourth in the set of twelve *Transcendental Études* dedicated to his teacher Czerny. These études actually exist in three different versions, published successively in 1826, 1837, and 1852. The earliest edition is clearly the work of a student, written in the manner of the standard and often bland pedagogical exercises which were common in Vienna at that time. The second edition expands on the basic ideas of the earlier works, infusing them with tremendous displays of virtuosity. The final version then adds poetic refinement to these flashy showpieces, elevating their artistry without significantly reducing their virtuosity. Certainly in their second and third editions, these études are unlike those of Chopin and others which were written primarily to instruct the student. Instead, Liszt wrote his études to demonstrate the prowess of the virtuoso with Liszt himself, as a consequence of his innumerable recitals and a fandom to continuously impress, the chief virtuoso he had in mind. It is in their third and final form which these études are most often performed today.

The Étude in D minor which we hear is subtitled "Mazeppa" after the notorious seventeenth-century Ukrainian military figure, Ivan Mazeppa, and specifically the poetic account of his adventures given by Victor Hugo. In his 1828 poem, *Les Orientales*, Hugo tells of how Mazeppa, as a young man, was tied naked to a horse and cast-out into the desert as punishment for being caught in the act with a Polish noblewoman. After carrying him three days, the horse eventually falls dead, and the badly sunburnt Mazeppa untangles himself while also fending-off vultures and other birds interested in making a meal of him and his deceased transportation. Lord Byron was the first to give this legend in 1819, and his account inspired many authors, composers, and visual artists in the nineteenth century, including Alexander Pushkin whose poem was transformed into an opera by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Liszt also orchestrated his étude as a symphonic poem. In its piano version, this work makes incredible demands on the player, such as quick scalar passages, pounding octaves, and a section with so much activity that it is written on three staves instead of two. The incessant rhythms depict the protagonist's wild ride strapped to the back of the horse as well as the expanse through which the two doomed travelers must journey. A tender middle section seems to

represent their perseverance. The sudden triumph at the work's conclusion then heralds Mazeppa's freedom and his pronouncement as king of the Ukrainians.

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**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 upon the completion of his thesis, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." He has shared this pioneering research through presentations given at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. During his studies in Louisville, he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight D. Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world's leading contemporary composers. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA. Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. He has remained a concert annotator and organizer, co-directing the annual Sugarmill Music Festival. The scholarly writings he has produced for this festival have even attracted the attention of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, and award-winning nature photographer.

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