

Senior Piano Recital

An Honors Thesis (MUSPE 498)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Palmer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "R".

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ABSTRACT

A senior recital is both the culmination of my work as an undergraduate piano major and a foundation for the rest of my professional career as a performer. The components of my creative project are my March 1, 2011 senior recital and program notes as well as a CD recording of my performance. The artist's statement details my growth as a musician throughout my performance preparation of each piece.

Memorization, musical interpretation, repertoire selection, and risk-taking are four facets of musical artistry. This list is by no means exhaustive, but the music on my program represents each of these four aspects. All of the pieces I studied this year required growth, but each strengthened me in different ways. In my artist's statement, I pair these four aspects of artistic growth with the recital program repertoire to demonstrate my development as a pianist.

- Memorization* J.S. Bach: Prelude and Fugue in F# minor, WTC I
- Interpretation* Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata Op. 28 "Pastorale"
- Repertoire Selection* Bèla Bartòk: Suite Op. 14
- Risk-taking* Franz Liszt: *St. Francois de Paule marchant sur les flots*

Though repertoire selection obviously occurs first in the learning process, I discuss the pieces in performance order. In addition to relating the repertoire to my growth as a musician, I share my reasons for choosing each piece and describe solutions to some of the challenges I faced. Sharing my approach to performance will encourage an appreciation for classical music and the performing arts.

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J.S. Bach: Prelude and Fugue in F# minor, WTC I, BWV 859

The combination of memorization and listening form the basis for a pianist's artistic development. Without training the brain and fingers through memorization and the ear through listening, a pianist cannot communicate successfully with the audience. Studying a Bach prelude and fugue tests both skills. The polyphonic texture of Baroque music requires careful listening and painstaking memorization of each melodic line. A pianist uses these indispensable skills when learning pieces of every genre and stylistic period.

As I previewed several pairs of preludes and fugues from Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier Books I and II*, the fugue of the F# minor set attracted my attention. The melody is so expressive despite its narrow range. Hinting at key areas other than F# minor, the line climbs hopefully while gaining momentum but sinks again at the end of the phrase to the starting pitch. After the first statement of the subject, the second subject enters while the first voice continues with the countersubject. In this fugue, the countersubject is a sighing motive of descending steps that is often used in Baroque music as a lament. Aside from the expressive possibilities of the piece, I wanted the challenge of studying a four voice fugue.

My creative process began with memorization. I knew the fugue would be more difficult to memorize than the prelude, so I began with one voice in one phrase in the middle of the fugue. In the past, I played and studied pieces at the piano with the score and then worked on memory as the last step of the learning process. This time I tried a completely new approach. I decided to learn the piece away from the piano by studying the score and then playing the piece for the first time at the piano from memory. I did not attempt to learn the entire prelude and fugue away from the piano, but rather learned short phrases. I carefully studied each melodic line by singing the line using solfège syllables. Then I transcribed each line from memory by hand onto staff paper.

I also visualized playing so that I could choose the best fingering before touching the piano. Once I was confident I could sing and play each line, I sat at the piano to play the phrase! It was not usually perfect the first time, but I had already made great progress from the first days of score study. By memorizing first, I had plenty of time to find the weaknesses in my memorization before my final performances. Experimenting with new memorization techniques served me well, though I will continue to use a variety of approaches to learning music.

Training my ear to listen to each line helped me shape phrases. Singing and playing different combinations of the melodic lines helped my ear and brain to solidify memory while shaping each voice individually. For example, I played the opening subject countless times so I could maintain a smooth phrase despite the decay of long notes on the piano. Playing different combinations of voices also forced me to listen with fresh ears to the shape of each voice's phrase. Even as I practiced in the days immediately before my recital, I had to continue singing and playing individual lines to maintain the shapes of the phrases. The discipline of memorizing and listening carefully to Bach's dense counterpoint continues to teach me how to learn other composers' pieces.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata Op. 28 "Pastorale"

One of the joys of performing is the opportunity to communicate the composer's music to the audience. Instrumental music does not have text, but the historical context, composer's life, and the title of the piece can give clues to the composer's intended message. Interpreting a piece of music requires me to synthesize the composer's message with my personal experiences. When I lack the experience to understand the piece, I get to use my imagination!

At the time when I was deciding which Beethoven sonata to study, I had recently performed Mozart's K 310 sonata in A minor. K 310 has a very serious, desperate quality

different from most of his sonatas. In choosing my next sonata, I listened to several Beethoven sonatas including the “Tempest.” After performing Mozart’s K 310, I wanted something lighter and happier sounding. In my initial listening, the “Tempest” felt too much like the Mozart sonata I had just studied. In contrast, the “Pastorale” attracted me with its genuinely joyful character.

Throughout the learning process, remembering the musical aspects that attracted me to study the piece made me determined to keep working. Developing an artistic understanding of a piece is just as important as developing technical skills. Once I have studied the piece for a while and have a better idea of the composer’s artistic intentions, I like to use imagery, narrative, and sometimes lyrics to help me convey the emotional mood of the piece. My images or stories change throughout the learning process and continue to change, especially when I revisit the piece. Each musician brings personal experiences to his or her interpretation, which makes every performance unique. The images and words I share here are my current interpretation of the Beethoven sonata.

Beethoven composed this sonata in 1801. From my undergraduate courses in music history, I know this year marks a transition between what historians call Beethoven’s early and middle periods when he began to lose his hearing. Throughout his life Beethoven often retreated to the countryside, especially as he realized he was growing deaf. Beethoven’s love of rural areas influenced my interpretation of the sonata.

Traveling in the countryside is a theme that connects the four movements of the sonata. In the first movement, the repeated bass notes lend a forward motion to the piece. Before I start to perform the sonata, I think about what I see and the way I feel when I go for an early morning run at home during the summer. The repeated bass notes provide the constant rhythm for my run. I try to match the quality of my sound with the clear quality of the early morning light. Since I

live in a rural area, there is often a light mist still hanging over the fields and above the river that I cross by bridge in the early morning. The morning light makes the dairy farm and dilapidated barns seem magical in comparison to the way they look in the harsh noon sun.

Before studying this sonata I had never tried writing lyrics, but I found that it helped me connect emotionally to the piece. To help me shape the melody's phrases as well as to sharpen my mental imagery, I wrote two lines of text for part of the first movement. The unrhymed lyrics for the first two phrases are:

At sunrise before morning dew and mist had disappeared
Birds singing greet the new day with their cheerful voices on air.

I tried to match the words' inflections with the inflection and direction of the melody. For example, "disappeared" corresponds to an upward gesture at the end of the phrase. I also wanted those notes to sound very light and easy, so the word "disappeared" reminded me of the sound I wanted to achieve.

The second movement has a very different character from the first. The key of D minor gives the movement a somber, serious mood. Instead of the gently rolling repeated bass notes, the bass line of the second movement is a disjointed staccato. I thought the traveling theme still fit, but with a more tragic story. For this movement, I imagine an elderly man going out for a walk, getting lost, and not remembering the way to return home. I do not have a personal experience related to this scenario, but I can only imagine the frustration and fear someone who is lost might feel. The repetitive bass figures and obsessive melodic line paint a picture of a distressing scene. The contrasting middle section in D major is more energetic and playful. Though I think of this section as a memory of the person's younger days, the outer D minor sections of the movement taint the joy of the middle part. When performing this movement, the

narrative lyrics I wrote for the first D minor section reminded me of the character of the movement. The first two lines repeat since Beethoven included a repeat of the first two phrases.

I went out for a walk alone for the first time.
Not long after I left I turned back home.
I can't remember where I am.
Can someone help me find my way home?
I'm so scared, I've lost my way, please can you give me help?
I guess I'll take this way here and retrace my steps, just hope for the best.
Is there no one who can help me remember?

The words are tied exactly to the notes and rhythms of the phrases. I also tried to match the rhetoric of my text to the rhetoric of the music. My third line corresponds to the third phrase of music. In this part, Beethoven changed from using a disjointed bass line to repeated notes. The repeated bass notes give a nervous feeling that matches the words I chose. I coordinated the return of the original bass line with the sixth line of my text. Here I could imagine the man deciding to try to find his way home. I did not try to think about these lyrics while performing, but penning them sharpened the mental images I recalled as I began each performance.

I did not find it necessary to write lyrics for the third and fourth movements of the sonata. The mood of the third movement is clearly playful, mischievous, and fun. The fourth movement's rolling bass pattern continues to fit the theme of traveling. At the beginning of this movement, I imagine a cast of Jane Austen characters embarking on a carriage ride over hills and through country lanes. In each of the four movements, my experiences with nature helped me connect with Beethoven's enjoyment of the countryside.

Bela Bartók: Suite Op. 14

Choosing the right repertoire for the right time is essential in a musician's development. As any teacher and performer will attest, attempting to study a piece before being technically and musically prepared causes frustration. When recommending repertoire, a teacher must take into

consideration the music his student has already studied and the level of the student's playing. Sequencing repertoire so each piece gradually challenges and strengthens a student's weaknesses is a tricky task. No magic formula exists. My decision to study Bartók's Suite has given me valuable experience in repertoire selection as I begin to rely less on the guidance of my teacher.

My process for choosing this piece was different than that of the other pieces. In this case, I really wanted to study and perform Bartók's *Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* Op. 20 rather than the Op. 14 Suite. I had not studied another work by Bartók before, but his use of Hungarian folk music in his compositions fascinates me. I have a romanticized image of Bartók and fellow composer Zoltán Kodály traipsing around the backwoods of Eastern Europe with a huge phonograph collecting folk songs before the songs became extinct! Despite the jarring dissonances, I love how Bartók crafts an accompaniment around the existing folk songs in the *Improvisations*. I began working on the *Improvisations* in early June, but quickly realized they would be more difficult than I thought. To perform a twentieth-century work by the beginning of October, when I had a graduate school audition, I needed to learn one of the pieces by Bartók quickly.

Sight-reading the *Improvisations* was nearly impossible because of the tempo changes and accidentals. Once I started practicing, I found that I did not enjoy the painstaking process of ensuring note accuracy. Hearing dissonant intervals at slow practice tempos is agonizing. I made the wise decision to switch to working on the Op. 14 Suite, which is seven minutes shorter, much easier to understand, and therefore an excellent first foray into Bartók's repertoire. It was a wise decision, given my time crunch and the difficulty of the other pieces on my program. I have not forgotten the *Improvisations*! I am determined to play them in the near future. This semester I satisfied my interest in the musicological side of Bartók by writing my Piano Literature term

paper about the *Improvisations*. Now I have an even deeper appreciation for the piece, so when I study it in the future my interpretation will be well informed by the research I conducted!

Franz Liszt: *St. Francois de Paule marchant sur les flots* from *Lègendes*

Playing Liszt's music is risky. The first and obvious challenge a pianist overcomes is mastering the technical difficulties of his music. Of the pieces on my program, the Liszt required the most patience in mastering the technical challenges since playing it at slow practice tempos is not musically satisfying. Because the rolling accompaniment has so many notes, shaping and hearing the right hand's melodic line in a slow tempo is difficult. Chromatic runs in the left hand, chromatic octaves, and chromatic chords portray the rolling waves. All of these required careful fingering and attention to rhythmic evenness so I could achieve the desired effect of a stormy sea.

St. Francois de Paule marchant sur les flots made me like Liszt. Choosing to study a piece may not seem risky, but in order to like Liszt's music I had to destroy my prior biases against his compositions. For a long time, I did not like Liszt's music because I thought it was too flashy and virtuosic without any substance. *St. Francois de Paule marchant sur les flots* changed my mind. The piece is based on a story of St. Francis of Paul, which I included in my program notes. Though I had heard many pieces by Liszt, this was the first I encountered based on a religious narrative. Liszt's evocative portrayal of the legend of the saint who walked on the waves convinced me to study the piece and proved to me that Liszt's technical fireworks can be based on serious topics.

Finally, performing this piece convincingly required me to risk stepping outside of my comfort zone to parade my interpretation in front of an audience. My interpretation of the piece remained constant throughout my preparation. Since the piece clearly narrates the legend of St.

Francis de Paul, I “only” had to master the technical challenges to allow the story to unfold for the listeners. The biggest challenge I faced in performing was injecting the religiously themed piece with Liszt’s showman’s flair. As a naturally reserved person, I had to animate my personality in order to tell the story as Liszt would have told it to thrill his audiences. Successfully acting to become Liszt on stage resulted in exciting performances both for the audience and me!

All pianists share the task of choosing, memorizing, interpreting, and performing repertoire. The number of ways to approach the task is as great as the number of pianists! My artist’s statement provides a record of my learning process this year. I know my learning process will continue to develop and change because to resist discovering new ways to learn and perform is to slide backward. Beethoven’s words provide inspiration to musicians and non-musicians alike: “Then let us all do what is right, strive with all our might toward the unattainable, develop as fully as we can the gifts God has given us, and never stop learning.”

Prelude and Fugue in F# minor, *Well-Tempered Clavier* I..... Johann Sebastian Bach
German composer Johann Sebastian Bach's output of keyboard music during the Baroque period surpasses many of his contemporaries. Though he was known during his lifetime as an improviser rather than as a composer, Bach's music has become a staple of the pianist's repertoire.

In the 1600 and 1700s, keyboard instruments did not have standard constructions or tunings as they do today. "Mean-tone" tunings defined in the 1600s were acoustically pure, but playing in remote keys sounded badly out of tune. Equal temperament tuning is a system in which the octave is divided equally into twelve parts. Bach's two books of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* proved the value of equal temperament tuning. Each book contains twenty-four preludes and fugues in all twelve major and minor keys.

Sonata Op. 28 "Pastorale"Ludwig van Beethoven
German composer Ludwig van Beethoven stands as a bridge between the Classical and Romantic periods. Many of his compositions use Classical period forms, but his experimentation and expansion of those forms paved the way for later composers in the Romantic period. Prior to Beethoven's time, composers produced piano sonatas for teaching or for the enjoyment of amateur musicians. By increasing the technical demands and expanding the form to include a dance movement, Beethoven elevated the piano sonata to a genre comparable to the string quartet or symphony. The Op. 28 sonata follows a relatively traditional structure in each of the movements. Beethoven did not refer to this sonata as the "Pastorale." Rather, the repeated pedal tones found throughout the first, second, and fourth movements may have inspired the sonata's nickname.

Suite Op. 14.....Bèla Bartòk
Hungarian Bèla Bartòk's compositions reflect his work as an ethnomusicologist. Eastern European nationalism inspired Bartòk and fellow composer Zoltàn Kodàly to publish a book of folk-song settings. Beginning in 1906, Bartòk took field trips to Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, and Romanian villages to record folk-songs. Many of his compositions, including *6 Romanian Folk Dances* and *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* feature folk melodies with twentieth century harmonies. His Op. 14 Suite is not based on specific folk melodies, but the first movement captures the spirit of a folk dance. The first, second, and third movements increase in frantic, driven energy until the final movement, which can be heard as the desolate calm following a storm.

St. Francois de Paule marchant sur les flots from LégendesFranz Liszt
Two-thousand eleven marks the two-hundredth anniversary of Hungarian composer Liszt's birth. Known as a virtuoso pianist in his time, Liszt is credited with popularizing the term "recital" for solo concerts. Accounts of his performances emphasize his dramatic, often theatrical playing. However, reviews by contemporary musicians such as Berlioz and Robert and Clara Schumann as well as many of Liszt's students reveal the quality of his playing.

Though some people criticize Liszt's compositions for being egotistical displays of technique, many of his later works have programmatic titles that focus on art, literature, or religious concepts. *Légendes* is a pair of character pieces based on stories about St. Francis Assisi and St. Francis de Paul. In the first, *St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds*, trills and arpeggios imitating birds alternate with chordal passages imitating the saint's sermon. In the second, *St. Francis de Paul Walking on the Waves*, bass tremolos and chromatic runs represent waves. According to the story, the saint and his companions needed to cross a sea, but the owners of a boat would not grant them passage. Praying for divine assistance, Francis proceeded to walk across the water and reached his destination before the boat!

Program Notes - Works Consulted

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