

Amir Moheimani

(Piano, Harpsichord)

Undergraduate Honors Recital

June 1, 2018 – 5:00 PM
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

A Voluntary (For My Lady Nevell) (1591)	4'
	William Byrd (1538-1623)
Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C Major, BWV 870 (1722)	3'+2'
	J. S. Bach (1685-1750)
Impromptu No. 4 in F minor, Op. 142 (1827)	7'
	Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
<i>Vers la Flamme</i> , Op. 72 (1914)	5'
	Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915)

-Intermission-

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1987)	6'+6'+8'+6'
	Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)

I. *Lento*

II. *Allegro*

III. *Lento*

IV. *Allegro*

Byrd: A Voluntary (1591)

This short piece appears in a book of keyboard music dedicated to Byrd's patron, the anonymous "Lady Nevell", who commissioned Byrd for a book of solo virginal music. The virginal was a small keyboard instrument similar to the harpsichord which flourished in England and Northern Italy during the late 16th century, due in part to its convenience and inexpensive cost. Because of the work's dedication, it is regarded as an early example of a keyboard piece which was written expressly for the virginal (as opposed to the organ), at a time when keyboard music was less differentiated. Byrd's compositional approach combines the refined, florid imitative counterpoint associated with Catholic liturgical music, alongside the types of ornaments running melodic lines, and dancelike rhythms, more idiomatic to keyboard writing.

After having initially learned this piece for the piano I made the decision to relearn it on the harpsichord and discovered that while the piano has many advantages over the harpsichord in terms of dynamics and color, the comparative ease of executing trills, shakes, runs, and rolls on the harpsichord allows Byrd's music to speak for itself more easily. The sharper attack of the harpsichord also allows for greater clarity and transparency in situations where the contrapuntal texture becomes especially dense. Additionally, I generally find that the use of unequal temperament often lends a certain vividness to Byrd's charming and uniquely modal harmonic progressions, which is less obvious in equal-temperament. There is a certain magic in the way Byrd achieves such harmonic richness and warmth almost entirely diatonically.

Bach: Prelude and Fugue in C-major, BWV 780 (1722)

The opening of the Prelude is remarkably similar to the opening of Bach's organ prelude in C-major, BWV 545a No. 1. Generally, many of the preludes in the Well-Tempered Clavier seem to be imitating other instruments. The octave pedal tone of the opening, the rhythmic figuration of the moving lines, the initially slow harmonic rhythm, and the gradual unfurling with in improvisatory style all seem to recall Bach's organ music. As it unfolds the prelude seems to evolve from a diatonic, almost-homophonic piece into a densely contrapuntal, almost fugue-like work, increasingly infused with chromaticism. As soon as chromaticism becomes fully-saturated, a descending sequence allows the music to slip cleverly back into the opening (transposed up a fourth) in a kind of recapitulation.

Whereas the prelude is dense in texture, the fugue is dense in gesture. It is limited to three voices, but they are highly active. The compact opening subject is separated from the steady, pulsating countersubject by an amusing quarter-rest that evokes an air of playfulness and irreverence. The contrast between the subject and countersubject provides a constant source of dramatic tension. As noted by Susan McClary in her critique of Adorno's essay on Bach, many of the fugues in the well-tempered clavier are driven by the tension between the abstract nature of fugue-writing and a more spontaneous, dancelike impulse which is also pervasive in much of Bach's music. Ultimately the fugue is driven to its conclusion by the disintegration of the strict contrapuntal texture into a more rhythmic, chordal texture.

Schubert: Impromptu No. 4 in F minor, Op. 142 (1827)- *Allegro scherzando; più Presto*

In this final impromptu, Schubert poetically plays with ambiguity of key as well as ambiguity of meter. The opening section, though it flirts with other keys, is clearly in F minor, while the meter feels somewhat unstable (the right hand plays in groupings of 3 beats whereas the left hand plays in groupings of 2, creating a 'hemiola' effect). Through its charming, witty melody and playful, nervous, even perhaps even reckless spirit the opening section seems to recall the influence of Gypsy music, in contrast to the much more reserved, elegant, "Viennese" middle section. The contrast between the two sections is extremely striking: the second section shifts instantly to a placid, absentminded daydream (more 'impromptu' in character) of rising and falling scales along with a whimsical dancelike motif, in which rather than shifting between meters, any sense of time seems to disappear almost entirely, and with it, any sense of a stable key. By emphasizing harmonies that function in more than one key, combined with oddly abrupt pensive silences, as if trailing off in mid-sentence, seeming to invoke a casual improvisation, Schubert is able to pivot instantly between distant keys (E-flat and A, for example) like a magician performing sleight-of-hand. The lengthy coda sets this impromptu apart from all Schubert's others with its synthesis of material from both sections into a surprising, thrilling, and deeply moving finale: in the middle, the music absentmindedly trails off for a final time, before the final chord progression surges forth out of nothing.

Scriabin: *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72 (1914)- *Allegro moderato; Éclatant, lumineux*

Scriabin originally conceived *Vers la Flamme* ("Towards the Flame") as a sonata, but was forced to publish it early due to ill-health, as a condensed "*poème*". He died less than a year later aged 43 of sepsis, resulting from an infection of his upper lip from a shaving cut. Scriabin's life is full of serendipity-- he was born on Christmas and died on Easter, and was intensely megalomaniacal, often referring to himself as a deity in his diary. Scriabin openly celebrated the outbreak of the First World War, not because of nationalistic zeal (he came from an aristocratic Russian family and lived mostly in Western Europe) or because he thought it would result in favorable social or political changes, but rather because he believed it would be so cataclysmic as to usher in mankind's ascendance to an elevated level of consciousness. Scriabin's bizarre and grandiose vision of an ecstatic global apocalypse fills this short work. However the work's 'program' remains as enigmatic as its title. According to Vladimir Horowitz, the work was inspired by Scriabin's weirdly prescient belief that the planet would eventually be consumed by the accumulation of heat generated by the advent of the internal combustion engine. Regardless, *Vers la Flamme*, like much of his music, seems to provoke vivid imagery while maintaining a lofty abstractedness. The work unfolds in three phases, from dark, murky, cold, and static in the opening, to languidly churning in the middle, and finally ignited by shimmering *tremellandi* into a voluptuously radiant, frantic, even violent, ecstasy seems to suggest an endless variety of possible images, inviting the creative listener's imagination

Schnittke: Piano Sonata No. 1 (1987)

As with his illustrious forefather, Shostakovich, irony and absurdity play a central role in Schnittke's music. Whether this represents the inheritance of the Socialist-Realist aesthetic forced upon Shostakovich during the Stalin era (both composers made their living chiefly from composing film scores) or a more sincere aesthetic, offers an interesting opportunity for speculation. Nonetheless, Schnittke seems to have inherited some of Shostakovich's brand of sharp-witted, caustic humor, communicating a pervasive sense of alienation and hopelessness. However, Schnittke's music is tinted heavily by his admiration of Viennese musical culture. He grew up and began his musical education in Soviet-occupied Vienna, and in particular, studied and idolized the music of Mahler and Berg. Both Mahler and Berg, with their tensions in the collision of different musical languages, raggedly juxtaposed and sometimes even superimposed upon one another, seem to anticipate Schnittke's use of "polystylism", while inviting additional comparison to Ives. In Schnittke's case, as well as for Mahler, his music appears to reflect a complicated and somewhat inconvenient identity. Schnittke, A Russian-born German-Jew, raised and educated in Soviet-occupied Vienna, who converted to Catholicism in late-adulthood, said of himself: "to Germans I am Russian, to Russians I am German, to Catholics I am Jewish, and to Jews I am Catholic". Schnittke's tense identity parallels the tension between musical idioms in his works, as well as his peculiar relationship with both history and the present. One imagines Schnittke embarking on his musical education in the midst of the living and dead of Vienna's history in the wake of the Second World War, and reading the landscape of musical culture as a kind of palimpsest- a document which equally represents the accretion of history as well its effacement, and the awkward and messy superposition of competing histories.

However, the works of Schnittke's late period, composed amid the collapse of the Soviet Union and his emigration to Germany (following a debilitating stroke), achieve a qualitatively different sense of alienation. This music is often uncomfortably frank and intimate. There are more frequent instances of deliberate, grotesque ugliness, alongside inhuman intensity and relentlessness. Schnittke's trademark irony seems to have been attenuated as well. Whereas in earlier works, where Schnittke's music (following Mahler) came to be associated with gigantic orchestras employing every imaginable instrument, from the harpsichord to the electric bass, music of his later period moves towards a more coherent and more personal kind of musical expression. This may also explain why he was not able to produce a piano sonata earlier, despite being an able pianist himself.

Schnittke's late period was ushered in by a massive brain hemorrhage in 1985 which saw him pronounced dead three times in half an hour, and which he described as a profoundly mystical experience. After regaining consciousness, he experienced a loss of memory and speech as well as the loss of the use of the right side of his body. Following his brush with death, Schnittke's music seems to have become more introverted, developing an increasing stylistic coherence in the process, while continuing to emphasize the role of contextual contrasts. In this sonata, Schnittke's only obvious appropriation of other music comes in the form of a chordal hymn theme whose appearances in the first, third, and final movements seems, by its presentation, to invoke

something at once surreal, absurd, and sacred, rendered like a hallucination. Through its odd harmonic shifts and low register, the hymn theme appears to refer to Russian-Orthodox liturgical music and the *Oktavist* voice type, idiomatic to both sacred and secular Russian vocal music. The chantlike, vaguely modal melodies of the opening bars also suggest a kind of grotesque rendering of Gregorian chant.

One of the hallmarks of Schnittke's compositional style is a certain nihilistic or perhaps even contemptuous attitude towards musical material. Perhaps as a result of his polystylism, Schnittke's musical language has a unique ability to be simultaneously disturbing and hilarious. In much of his music, Schnittke seems to be developing his themes by subverting them, distorting them, and ultimately destroying them. Despite Schnittke's strict application of serial technique, and the uncompromising exactitude with which themes are reiterated and permuted (often either inverted, reversed in time, and superimposed over their inversions, or in ultra-dense canons), the result seems to paradoxically render the themes progressively less familiar. Rather than hear the melodic lines, our attention is drawn to the intervals between them and their bizarre harmonies, often resulting in various types of tone-clusters, and inhabiting a strange gap between tonality and atonality. In climaxes the music degenerates precipitously into a mess of tone-clusters reverberating over the entire range of the instrument. Yet the structural-dramatic arc of this sonata combines a compelling narrative with large-scale cogency and traditional structural logic in a way that invites comparison to the late Beethoven sonatas: the four movements form a subversive approximation of the Classical sonata, and like Beethoven Schnittke makes use of imitative counterpoint as a dramatic device. The four movements recycle the same thematic material. In fact, all musical material is derived from the morbidly-sparse first movement, and very little new material is introduced after the first two sections of the second movement. Like Beethoven, Schnittke's music often seems to depict the struggle to create, including the failure of the composer to achieve satisfaction. Schnittke also seems to draw strength from the dramatic tension created by his own failed attempts. However, unlike Beethoven, Schnittke ultimately seems to give up.

The essence of the sonata is concentrated in the paradoxically majestic and pathetic climax of the fourth movement. Here, the hymn theme appears for the final time, embedded in a haze of polyrhythms, and alternated with a montage of canonized, condensed, fragments of the other main themes. The hymn becomes a ghostly echo; its harmonies are veiled in a haze of clusters and almost clunky polyrhythms, 12-tone arpeggios. The music seems to be remembering (or perhaps even failing to remember) something that no longer exists, something that is perhaps broken beyond repair and lost to time, unsalvageable. With the final iteration of the hymn theme, and the transition into the closing section (a synthesis of the two chant melodies from the very beginning of the first movement), the music seems to float away from consciousness, erased, like a palimpsest, perhaps even achieving a kind of afterlife. In this sense the music could be regarded not merely as a post-apocalyptic, post-war, post-modernist reminiscence, or perhaps more concretely as an emblem of Schnittke himself in the wake of a disorienting crisis, faced with mortality. Even more broadly, it might be heard as a depiction of the frailty of memory, identity, and consciousness.

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