

Mozart • Mendelssohn • Mennin • Ravel • Wang



Beth Levin

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (b. Salzburg, 1756; d. Vienna, 1791)

Piano Sonata No. 11 in A Major, K. 331

I. Andante grazioso • II. Menuetto • III. Alla turca. Allegretto

Mozart probably composed this Sonata in the summer of 1783. Though its final movement, Alla turca (better known as his "Turkish March"), is one of Mozart's most memorable tunes, the entire Sonata feels wrapped in gold leaf, each of its three movements providing its own glowingly lyrical delights.

The first movement, Andante grazioso, is cast in the form of a theme-and-variations. Sentimental and graceful, the theme is presented outright and drifts like a lullaby, capturing a pearlescent simplicity. The second movement, Menuetto, is derived from the Baroque courtly dance form and it features a sprightly lyricism mixed with passages of operatic-like drama.

The final movement, Alla turca (in the Turkish style) was meant to evoke Turkish Janissary music – wildly popular in Vienna at the time – which featured drums and clanging percussion. The movement presents several energetic themes in alternation until the final section, which is given over to cheerful boisterousness. To mimic the sounds of the Janissary percussion, Mozart directs chords to be rolled – to sound like drum rolls – and adds some well-placed grace notes so that their natural harmonics clash and ring with glorious cacophony like triangles and cymbals, ending this little masterpiece with raucous joy.

Maurice Ravel (b. Cibourne, Basses-Pyrénées, 1875; d. Paris, 1937)

Menuet antique, M. 7

Ravel wrote this brief and youthful masterpiece in 1895 as a tribute to his first important supporter, Emmanuel Chabrier (1841 – 1894). Ravel had a life-long interest in older, established musical forms which he adapts here as an "antique" (Baroque and Classical) menuet – an instrumental dance genre in the form of A-B-A, with the contrasting B section typically called a Trio – much like Mozart's Menuetto movement of his Sonata No. 11 written 100 years earlier.

The first section of Ravel's Menuet is marked Majestueusement (majestically) and begins with a bold, offbeat motive that falls over the bar line. This motive will inhabit much of this section, but it's countered with delightful sequential runs in the treble and the bass registers that glide around that motive in dancelike reverie.

The middle Trio section (beginning at about two minutes) is marked doux (sweet) and is sumptuously delicate, like dappled morning light and Spring perfumes, and Ravel at his lyrical best. A brief hint of the minor mode brings a gentle sentimentality, but these joys are fleeting, and the Trio ends with quiet radiance. The initial Majestueusement section then returns to end this charming work, but in its repetition, its vigor now seems more valiant, even gleeful.

Felix Mendelssohn (b. Hamburg, 1809; d. Leipzig, 1847)

Variations sérieuses, Op. 54

Theme. Andante sostenuto — 17 Variations — Coda. Presto

Mendelssohn created this magical composition in 1841 as his contribution to an Anthology of new piano works funding the Beethoven Monument being built in Bonn. He qualified this work as "serious" (sérieuses), in part, in homage to Beethoven himself.

Mendelssohn begins these variations with an original theme that's beguiling and haunting, its harmonies glowingly rich. The variations then gradually embellish this original theme, building in virtuosity with each successive variation.

Particularly thrilling are Variations 8 and 9, beginning at about four minutes, with their rocket-quick triplets, followed by the delightful Variation 10, one minute later, where Mendelssohn emulates a Bach 3-Part Invention. Variation 14 (Adagio), at about seven-and-a-half minutes, is both disarmingly beautiful and heart wrenching. The remaining variations grow in intensity until the final section, Coda, which starts with a matchstick that soon flames into a virtuosic firestorm. Mendelssohn ends this small masterpiece, however, with dark and fading chords, in his solemn respect to the lost giant who was Beethoven.

— © Max Derrickson

Wang Xilin (b. Kaifeng, 1936)

The Night in a Deserted Village

Wang Xilin has risen to prominence as one of China's most significant composers. He studied composition and conducting at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where his teachers included enormously influential Chinese composer Qu Wei. Wang was a target of persecution during the Cultural Revolution, but reemerged in the late 1970s, at which time he discovered music by previously banned composers including Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky, and Penderecki — all of whom influenced on Wang's compositional style along with that of Shostakovich and his successors.

Originally composed in 1998 as the first movement of his **Piano Suite in Shanxi Folk Song Style,** ***The Night in a Deserted Village*** was premiered shortly after the suite's completion in Beijing Concert Hall. A performance of this movement and the suite's finale in January 2014 by Xie Ya'ou at a New Year's concert at the Chinese embassy in Germany, followed by additional performances in Europe, brought the piece to international prominence. The prelude draws on the traditional vocal music of the Shanxi province in northern China, with music that simultaneously evokes imagery that is at once peaceful and mysterious.

— Gene Gaudette

Peter Mennin (b. Erie, Pennsylvania, 1923; d. New York City, 1983)

Five Piano Pieces

I. Prelude. Allegro brillante • II. Aria. Adagio • III. Variation-Canzona. Allegro enérgico • IV. Canto. Andante • V. Toccata. Allegro vivace e vigoroso

Mennin played an important role in 20th Century American music, as both the distinguished Director of New York's Julliard School of Music, and as one of the finest composers of his generation. In 1949, near the peak of his popularity, Mennin wrote his excellent Five Piano Pieces, a collection that is infused with an uncanny alchemy of modernism lightened by graceful lyricism.

This work was originally conceived as a "Partita" and used movement subtitles derived from that Baroque genre. It begins with a Prelude which, though Bach-like in feel, zips at hyper-speed and is wrapped in dissonance and changing phrase lengths. The second movement, Aria, is disarmingly sensitive and hymnlike, building in profundity towards its central climax. The third movement's Variations are based on the opening Prelude's musical material and is brimming with virtuosic opposing lines in both hands. The Canto movement pulls the energy back again to hum with an ethereal elegance. The finale, Toccata, is a perpetual-motion showstopper of ostinatos and millions of notes, and imbued with a sense of continual broadening. The movement ends with accumulated force and giant, luminous chords.

— © Max Derrickson

Brooklyn-based pianist **BETH LEVIN** is celebrated as a bold interpreter of challenging works, from the Romantic canon to leading modernist composers. *The New York Times* praised her "fire and originality," while *The New Yorker* called her playing "revelatory." *Fanfare* described Levin's artistry as "fierce in its power," with "a huge range of colors."

Debuting as a child prodigy with the Philadelphia Orchestra at age twelve, Levin was subsequently taught and guided by legendary pianists such as Rudolf Serkin, Leonard Shure and Dorothy Taubman. Another of her teachers, Paul Badura-Skoda, praised Levin as "a pianist of rare qualities and the highest professional caliber." Her deep well of experience allows an intuitive connection to the great pianistic traditions, to Bach, to Mozart, to Beethoven.

Critics hail the immediacy of her performances. "Levin plays with a rare percussive audacity, making notes and phrases that usually rush by in the background stand out in high relief," writes Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*. "Her choice of adventure over suaveness," stated David Patrick Stearns of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "created a sense of barely controlled improvisation."

Levin has appeared as a concerto soloist with numerous symphony orchestras, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston Pops Orchestra, and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. She has worked with noted conductors including Arthur Fiedler, Tonu Kalam, Milton Katims, Joseph Silverstein and Benjamin Zander.

Chamber music festival collaborations have brought Levin to the Marlboro Festival, Casals Festival, Harvard, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the Ankara Music Festival and the Blue Hill Festival, collaborating with such groups including the Gramercy Trio (founding member), the Audubon Quartet, the Vermeer Quartet and the Trio Borealis, with which she has toured extensively. Her solo performances have been broadcast on National Public Radio, WGBH (Boston), WFMT (Chicago) and WNYC, WNYE, and WQXR (New York).

Among Levin's recent albums are ***Blackbird & Ancestors: Mozart, Tiessen, Schubert***, ***Hammerklavier Live: Handel, Eliasson, Beethoven,*** and ***Inward Voice: Schumann, Eliasson, Schubert*** on Aldilà Records; ***Bright Circle: Schubert, Brahms, Del Tredici*** and ***A Single Breath: Beethoven's Last Three Piano Sonatas*** on Navona Records; ***Personae: Chopin, Eliasson, Schumann***, released on Parma; and live recordings of Bach's ***Goldberg Variations*** and Beethoven's ***Diabelli Variations*** on Centaur. Wrote Henry Fogel in Fanfare, reviewing Bright Circle: "Levin's performance is a blend of power and grace, wit and warmth, grandeur and intimacy. It is worthy of standing alongside that of her teacher [Rudolf Serkin]." Tiara Ataii in Music and Vision, reviewing Personae, wrote: "Levin's performance is near perfection, maintaining intensity in each note and crystalline tone in every register." Steve Smith of *The New York Times* described her interpretation of ***Diabelli*** "consistently fascinating," while Robert Levine of *Stereophile* termed it "stunning." Of Levin's ***Goldberg Variations***, Peter Burwasser of Fanfare Magazine stated that "she is in love with the notes...with always the sense that she is exploring Bach's genius."

For all her devotion to the Romantic canon, Levin remains committed to the performance of the music of our time, interpreting composers such as Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, Scott Wheeler, Mohammed Farouz and Michael Rose, among many others. Her closest collaborators have been the composers David Del Tredici and Andrew Rudin, both of whom have written works for her.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: ***Piano Sonata No. 11 in A Major, K. 331***

1. I. Andante grazioso (10:18)
2. II. Menuetto (4:00)
3. III. Alla turca. Allegretto (2:23)
4. **Maurice Ravel:** ***Menuet antique, M. 7*** (7:44)
5. **Felix Mendelssohn:** ***Variations sérieuses, Op. 54*** (13:34)
6. **Wang Xilin:** ***The Night in a Deserted Village*** (from ***Piano Suite in Shanxi Folk Song Style***) (2:38)

Peter Mennin: ***Five Piano Pieces***

7. I. Prelude. Allegro brillante (1:32)
8. I. Aria. Adagio (3:04)
9. III. Variation-Canzona. Allegro enérgico (3:49)
10. IV. Canto. Andante (5:02)
11. V. Toccata. Allegro vivace e vigoroso (4:34)

Beth Levin, *piano*



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