The University of Virginia
Music Department

presents

A Distinguished Major Recital

Alexander Suh

piano

Sunday, April 13, 2025
3:30 pm
Old Cabell Hall
University of Virginia

This recital is supported by the Charles S. Roberts Scholarship Fund

Established in 2004 by the generosity of Mr. Alan Y. Roberts ('64) and Mrs. Sally G. Roberts, the Charles S. Roberts Scholarship Fund underwrites the private lessons and recital costs for undergraduate music majors giving a recital in their fourth year as part of a Distinguished Major Program in music.

Recital Program

Alexander Suh, ***piano***

Sonata in F Major, K. 332 — Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

I. Allegro
II. Adagio
III. Allegro assai

Miroirs — Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

I. Noctuelles
II. Oiseaux tristes
III. Une barque sur l'océan
IV. Alborada del gracioso
V. La vallée des cloches

Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52, No. 4 — Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

About the Performers

Alexander Suh is a fourth-year student from Fairfax, Virginia, majoring in music and computer science at the University of Virginia. He was previously a winner of the Music Teachers National Association Young Artist Piano Competition at the state and division levels, representing the Southern Division at the MTNA National Finals in Reno, Nevada. He has also won the Charlottesville Symphony's inaugural concerto competition and performed Sergei Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Symphony; the Washington Music Teachers Association Ylda Novik Concerto Competition; and the WMTA Nora Lichtenberg Piano Scholarship Competition, among others. With duo partner Jialin Tso, Suh has been the top prizewinner at the national level of the MTNA Senior Piano Duet Competition and performed with esteemed duo Anderson & Roe on National Public Radio's popular show, "From the Top," in 2020.

Program Notes

Mozart, Piano Sonata No.12 in F major, K.332/300k

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91) wrote keyboard music primarily for the fortepiano, an instrument similar to but smaller and quieter than the modern piano. In Mozart's time, it had just begun to replace the harpsichord and clavichord. Its ability to bring out different voices and to produce a wide range of dynamics and articulation made it an ideal instrument for Mozart's highly nuanced style.

Mozart's Piano Sonata in F major, K. 332, has the standard three movements, but its opening *Allegro* movement is unusual for the way it assembles a variety of "musical topics," conventional gestures with specific meanings. For example, it begins with five different topics in quick succession: a "singing" style, a snatch of counterpoint, a minuet-like cadence, a series of horn calls, and a quasi-tragic *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) episode. The two subsequent large-scale sections—the development and the recapitulation—continue to experiment with these various themes and thereby impart a modular quality to the piece, as though it were made of smaller puzzle pieces.

Like the first movement, the second is also a sonata form. Composed merely of an exposition and the recapitulation of the exposition, the movement is overtly repetitive, a feature that would have encouraged pianists to improvise ornamentation in performance. Its slower, flowing character provides a moment of respite between the thematic volatility of the first movement and the whirlwind excitement of the finale. At the beginning of the virtuosic third movement, a loud tonic chord in the left hand precedes and even seems to precipitate a series of rapid, swirling passages in sixteenth notes in the right. On the final page, a highly dynamic and unpredictable movement gets caught up in a series of false endings before coming to a sweet and gentle conclusion.

Ravel, Miroirs

After a few big successes early in his career, the French composer Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) suffered a setback. He gained international fame with *Jeux d'eau* (1901, for solo piano) and the String Quartet (1903), but failed to progress to the finals of the Prix de Rome composition competition in

1905. In the wake of the latter—which caused a public scandal—Ravel's confidants drew ranks around him. To return the favor, he composed the five-movement suite solo piano *Miroirs* (Mirrors) and dedicated each piece to a different friend: "Noctuelles" (Moths) to the poet Léon-Paul Fargue, "Oiseaux tristes" (Sad birds) to the pianist Ricardo Viñes, "Une barque sur l'océan" (A boat on the ocean) to the painter Paul Sordes, "Alborada del gracioso" (Dawn-song of the jester) to the critic M. D. Calvocoressi, and "La vallée des cloches" (The valley of the bells) to the composer Maurice Delage.

"Noctuelles," was inspired by lines from Fargue's poem: "The moths launch themselves clumsily from their barns, to settle on other perches." The piece stitches together a series of musical moments as it moves across registers and tonality. Through fluttering sixteenths, it depicts the erratic flight of moths.

According to Ravel, "Oiseaux tristes" was "the earliest of these pieces to be written, and the most typical of all to my way of thinking... It evokes birds lost in the oppressiveness of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer." At first, Ravel's friends did not seem to appreciate "Oiseaux tristes," whose improvisatory quality was supposed to have been inspired by a conversation with Debussy. As Calvocoressi noted, Ravel "was rather disconcerted to find us indifferent to a piece into which he had put so much of himself."

"Une barque sur l'océan" is the longest of the five movements of *Miroirs* and contains the most standard textural writing. It features arpeggios that move, wave-like, up and down the keyboard, as well as high-register trills that evoke Liszt's music. It alternates between images of storm-terrorized waters and those of peaceful, sunlit tides.

The title "Alborada del gracioso" is difficult to translate accurately. An "alborada" is a Spanish song or poem greeting the dawn, while a "gracioso" is a character in Spanish comedy, similar to a buffoon or a clown. Born in the Basque country to a Basque mother, Ravel always felt a connection to Spain. "Alborada" opens with a guitar-like motif in the style of Domenico Scarlatti. A slow middle section, which features an expressive melody, gives way to a reprise of the opening strummed motif. The piece concludes with a thrilling coda.

According to pianist Robert Casadesus, the idea for "La vallée des cloches" first came to Ravel upon hearing multiple bells in Paris striking at noon. In this piece Ravel shows his interest in *sonic realism*: the use of music to evoke sounds as they appear in the real world. Although sonic realism was evident in the birdsongs of "Oiseaux tristes," it is even clearer here. "La vallée" opens

with octaves written in three staves, tied to rests that suggest the resonance of sound. The octaves are enveloped in a wash of sixteenths that creates an idyllic background for the bells. A new bell in the bass unfolds into a lush, romantic inner section that is cantabile in style, one of the longest melodic lines in his oeuvre. It is written *largement chanté*, broadly sung, in contrast to the rest of the piece, which should be played "with great calmness, very softly, without accentuation." Ravel allegedly wanted the final chords to sound like the Savoyarde, the bell in Paris that rings every day from the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur de Montmartre. "La vallée des cloches" thus exists in a liminal space between sonic realism and music, blurring the boundaries between composition and the world that lies outside it.

Chopin, Ballade No. 4, Op. 52

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-49) was born in Poland but lived in France from 1831 until the end of his short life. As a composer, he wrote mainly for solo piano and was a contemporary of his fellow Romantics, Franz Liszt and Robert Schumann. Around 1842 his music underwent a marked change, becoming more fluid, pursuing unexpected developments, and freely blending different formal structures. His *Ballade No. 4, op. 52*, is a prime example, combining sonata form with theme and variations.

The term *ballade* is derived from *ballad*, a song that tells a story. When Chopin published his *Ballade no. 1, op. 23*, in 1836, it was the first time that a composer had used this title for a purely instrumental work. The instrumental *ballade* became very popular, resulting in about four hundred contributions to the genre in the nineteenth century.

All four of Chopin's ballades follow a similar pattern: an initial statement of themes, a transformation of these themes, and a resolution. In the case of the *Ballade No. 4*, pianist Alfred Cortot has claimed that Chopin drew inspiration from the Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz's poem *The Three Budrys*, in which three sons are sent on a journey by their father to look for treasure and return with their brides.

The *Ballade No. 4* opens with a brief introduction in the key of F major before progressing to Theme I in F minor. Chopin then writes a variation on this theme by adding ornamentation to the melody. A brief episode provides a moment of reflection before giving way to a more dance-like figure. A second variation on Theme 1 then transforms into Theme II in

B-flat major. This concludes the sonata-form exposition of the ballade. In a conventional sonata, a development section follows the exposition. Here, Chopin provides instead a transition that has some characteristic features of a development – such as modulatory sequences – but lacks its customary tension and instability. The reprise of the exposition restates the introduction and segues into a third variation of Theme I, which unexpectedly opens in D minor. The *ballade* eventually finds its way back to the opening key of F Minor before presenting a fourth Variation of Theme I. The long-awaited Theme II finally returns in the key of D-flat major. It concludes with a series of bravura chords whose dominant harmony is immediately suspended by mysterious, very quiet (*pianissimo*) chords: the calm before the storm. As in Chopin's other three ballades, the coda is intense, fiery, and passionate. In its virtuosic fury, it casts out all tension and is among the most profound moments of Chopin's music. Fierce to the very end, it concludes its wordless story in F minor, rather than the tranquil F major that began the work.

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