

John Chen 2014 Programme Notes

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At 18, John Chen was the youngest-ever winner of the Sydney International Piano Competition. Since then, he has become one of the very few musicians whose career has matched its auspicious beginnings. Over the last 10 years, he has worked with all the major Australian orchestras and performed in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, the US and Europe, and he returns each year to play with one or more of New Zealand's top orchestras. He currently teaches at the Musikhochschule in Hamburg.

Sonata in Eb minor, op. 26 (1949)

Samuel Barber (1910 – 81)

I – Allegro energico

II – Allegro vivace e leggiere

III – Adagio mesto

IV – Fuga: Allegro con spirito

This sonata is one of the masterworks of the twentieth-century piano literature, and certainly the most often performed American piano sonata today. It was commissioned by the League of American Composers for their twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations, and premiered by Vladimir Horowitz. Horowitz was enthralled with the sonata, deeming it the first truly great American work in this form.

Barber originally intended the work to have three movements, finishing with the tragic *Adagio mesto*, but Horowitz encouraged him to add a virtuosic final movement. Barber experienced months of writer's block over the finale, but an insulting phone call from Horowitz's wife spurred him into writing the final fugue in one day. Barber famously quipped to his editor that he would have made the sonata more technically difficult if the commissioners had given him more money.

Barber's musical style was pluralistic. He was one of the few composers to utilize a myriad of twentieth century trends, including serialism, popular music, jazz, minimalism, and the dissonant Romanticism of film music. However, he also embraced tradition, especially with his Romantic expressive ideals, his handling of traditional forms and his proficiency with imitative counterpoint. Many of his earlier works are harmonically consonant and lyrical, but with the Piano Sonata, Barber moved towards newfound levels of dissonance.

Sonata in C minor Op. 111

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

I – Maestoso; Allegro con brio ed appassionato

II – Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

Beethoven's final piano sonata was dedicated to the Archduke Rudolph of Austria, Beethoven's longtime patron and supporter. It was composed in 1822, but sketches for themes for the sonata date back twenty years earlier.

Beethoven turned to strict counterpoint late in his career, as Mozart and Clementi had done before him. Some have suggested that the Classical composers' engagement with earlier contrapuntal traditions was their way of giving their music a heightened sense of sophistication and complexity. More so than writing stand-alone fugues inspired by Bach, the Classical composers usually worked fugal techniques into the framework of their larger compositions. Beethoven often used fugato as a means of developing material. Most famously, the entire development section of the finale of the Piano Sonata in A major op. 101 is a fugue. In op. 111, Beethoven made use of fugato in the bridge passages and development section of the passionate and stormy first movement. This movement is perhaps Beethoven's most finely integrated fusion of fugue with sonata form.

Two Fugues from Seven Character Pieces, Op. 7

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 47)

3. Kräftig und feurig

5. Ernst und mit steigender Lebhaftigkeit

Mendelssohn composed his opus 7 in 1827, near the end of his teenage years. This work was one of the first important sets of piano character pieces, short works which describe a single picture, character or mood. The character piece reached its peak in popularity around 1840, with significant contributions to the genre from composers such as Schumann and Chopin. The third and fifth character pieces from Mendelssohn's opus 7 set are fugues. Mendelssohn's experience with fugue began with his childhood studies with Carl Zelter. Mendelssohn went through such thorough training in strict counterpoint that he was perhaps the Romantic composer for whom strict counterpoint was most natural. His expertise was so thorough that it became a great source of enjoyment. He enjoyed playing games based on counterpoint with Zelter, especially solving each other's canonic riddles.

As with many of his contemporaries, Mendelssohn had a deep interest in early and Baroque music. He collected, edited, analyzed and performed music from the past, the most iconic instance being his much celebrated performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion with the Berlin Singakademie in 1829. This concert renewed interest in Bach's music and began a renaissance of the keyboard fugue. The Romantic composers tried to reappropriate features of early music within the context of their concurrent musical style. One of the ways they chose to reinterpret the fugue was to recast it as a character piece.

Mendelssohn was not the only one to see the connection between fugue and character piece. Schumann famously wrote, "Most of Bach's fugues are character pieces of the highest sort, at times genuinely poetic creations, of which each demands its own expression, its peculiar light and shadow". Schumann believed that fugues were especially good at describing an emotion, because the mood of the fugue subject would be perpetuated throughout the overall fugue.

The fugues from Mendelssohn's opus 7 owe much to the fugues of the Baroque period. The fugue subject of no. 3 resembles the fugue subject from Bach's Sonata in G minor for violin solo BWV 1001, except far more positive and rejoicing in spirit. Despite the ways in which Mendelssohn channels the Baroque style, there are nevertheless clues in this fugue that betray it as a nineteenth-century composition. Most obvious is how Mendelssohn moves between strict polyphonic independence and more homophonic Romantic keyboard textures, complete with doubled octaves.

No. 5 has been compared in mood to Bach's stately E major fugue from *The Well Tempered Clavier* book 2. But Mendelssohn's fugue, also inspired by the accelerando fugues of Beethoven (for example the final pages of his Piano Sonata in Ab major op. 110), grows in intensity and speed towards a virtuosic frenzy, becoming a grand Romantic concert work. Mendelssohn's Christian faith was an integral part of his musical aesthetic, and the opening of this piece suggests pious reverence and humility. The joyous excitement that he infuses into the latter part of this piece through the accelerando and the thickening of textures adds to the expression of religious fervor.

Piano Sonata No. 3 in Bb major (1936)

Paul Hindemith (1895 -1963)

I – Ruhig bewegt

II – Sehr lebhaft

III – Mässig schnell

IV – Fuge: Lebhaft

Lately Hindemith's work has unfairly gathered a reputation for being dry and intellectual. Indeed, his works do have much appeal for the intellectual musician. Hindemith developed his own tonal system using modes more than diatonic scales, often utilizing the perfect fourth interval. His decision to embrace tonality stood in direct contrast to the Viennese serial composers of the time. But he moved boldly forward towards a unique harmonic language by ranking degrees of the scale and chords on the basis of their dissonance. Hindemith also had a great interest in early music, and much of his music demonstrates his neo-Baroque aesthetic. In the early 1940s, he wrote his contrapuntal masterpiece *Ludus Tonalis*, a set of interludes and fugues for piano inspired by Bach's *The Well Tempered Clavier*. Many of his other works also contain fugues and he was renowned as one of the greatest contrapuntists and contrapuntal teachers of the twentieth century.

But to pander to the serious musician was by no means Hindemith's aim. He wanted to create music accessible to a broad audience. His works often embrace styles common in folk music and dances, and he particularly championed the march. He was also one of the leading proponents of *Gebrauchsmusik* (music for everyday use), and wrote many works to be performed by amateurs.

Hindemith was an extremely prolific composer, writing chamber music, symphonic music, song cycles, and 11 operas. He is especially known as the composer who wrote sonatas with piano for every principal string, wind and brass instrument, and all of these sonatas are staples in the instrumental repertoire.