

Kevin Chen

Sunday, May 24, 2026 at 3pm

This is the 1,531st concert in Koerner Hall

Kevin Chen, piano

PROGRAM

Fryderyk Chopin: Trois Nouvelles Études

No. 1 in F Minor

No. 2 in A flat Major

No. 3 in D flat Major

Fryderyk Chopin: 12 Études, op. 10

Étude No. 1 in C Major

Étude No. 2 in A Minor

Étude No. 3 in E Major

Étude No. 4 in C sharp Minor

Étude No. 5 in G flat Major ("Black Keys")

Étude No. 6 in E flat Minor

Étude No. 7 in C Major

Étude No. 8 in F Major

Étude No. 9 in F Minor

Étude No. 10 in A flat Major

Étude No. 11 in E flat Major ("Arpeggio")

Étude No. 12 in C Minor ("Revolutionary")

INTERMISSION

Alexander Scriabin: Prélude in B Major, op. 11 no. 11

Alexander Scriabin: Fantasy in B Minor, op. 28

Alexander Scriabin: *Vers la flamme*, op. 72

Franz Liszt: "Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este" from *Années de Pèlerinage*, Vol. 3, S.163, no. 4

Franz Liszt: Les préludes, S. 97 (transcr. Kevin Chen)

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Fryderyk Chopin

Born in Żelazowa Wola, nr. Warsaw, Poland, March 1, 1810; died in Paris, France, October 17, 1849

Trois Nouvelles Études (1839)

Quietly forming a postscript to his two collections of Études (opp. 10 and 25, each containing a dozen Studies), Chopin created three additional études for his friend Ignaz Moscheles and François-Joseph Fétis, two of the greatest piano pedagogues of the early to mid-19th century. Their *Méthode des Méthodes* aimed to be the most comprehensive of piano methods, building upon the best keyboard teachings and exercises of the past, together with 18 new études by leading composers such as Chopin, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Thalberg, and others. Within a year of their first publication in 1840, Chopin's études were independently published as *Trois Nouvelles Études*, a name that has stuck to this day.

Chopin was never competitive in his virtuosity and his three études maintain a calm composure while presenting both technical and musical challenges in the company of the transcendental virtuosity found in the *Méthode*. No. 1 in F minor poses right-hand quarter note triplets against left-hand eighth notes ('threes against fours') in a subdued, even dreamlike nocturne. The polyrhythms continue in the A flat étude, now triplet against duplet eighth notes, all the while sustaining an upper bel canto melody or, in the central section, a no less lyrical tenor line. The D flat Nouvelle Étude (No. 3) presented challenges to Debussy, a fine pianist, who claimed to have 'worn down his fingers' with its varying right-hand staccato and legato articulations and voicings.

12 Études, op. 10 (1829-32)

When Niccolò Paganini took Warsaw by storm on May 23, 1829, Fryderyk Chopin sat among a glittering audience, witnessing the first of 12 concerts the violinist would give in the Polish capital. Paganini's virtuosity left a deep mark on the 19-year-old Chopin. By October, he was writing to his close friend Tytus Woyciechowski: "I have made a large technical exercise (Exercice en forme) in my own special style. When we meet, I will show it to you." Three weeks later came a follow-up: "I have written a few exercises; I would play them well if you were at my side." These offhand remarks point to the first drafts of what would become the 12 Études, op. 10, with the opening study in C major explicitly mentioned. The manuscripts of the others are lost. However, Chopin dated copies of Nos. 1 and 2 (A minor) "November 2, 1830" – the very day he left Warsaw for good, less than a month before the Warsaw Uprising. Piano studies themselves were nothing new. Pianist-composers had already written collections of 12 or 24 to probe the instrument's technical potential – broken chords, hand-crossings, arpeggios, thirds, sixths, extensions, and so on. Free from pedagogical preconceptions and with little formal training, Chopin relied instead on the instincts of a fully formed pianist, sidestepping cliché and familiar keyboard sonorities.

By the time he settled in Paris in October 1831, pursuing his ambition of "creating for myself a new world," as he had earlier told his teacher Józef Elsner, he already had an impressive collection of manuscripts ready for publication. These included such masterpieces as the B Minor Scherzo, op. 20, the G Minor Ballade, op. 23, mazurkas, nocturnes, and waltzes. The first of his two sets of Études, op. 10, was composed and polished over a three-year period, 1829-32, not in chronological order, since the order of the published version is known to have been arranged and rearranged before its publication by the Paris publisher Schlesinger June 8, 1833. Chopin's Douze grandes études, op. 10 was dedicated to Franz Liszt, who promptly took them on tour. "I should like to steal from him the way to play my own Études," Chopin joked to a colleague.

The opening Étude, a study in extended arpeggios, reminds us that Chopin's hands, though not large, were remarkably supple. The poet Heinrich Heine likened them to "the jaws of a snake, suddenly opening to swallow its prey." Behind the piece lies Johann Sebastian Bach – specifically the C Major Prelude from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Chopin played Bach daily, drawn to one of the few composers who – like himself – aimed to fuse didactic purpose with the highest artistic aims. Schumann famously captured Chopin's sound at the keyboard in the A flat Étude, op. 10, no. 10: "Imagine an Aeolian harp with all the scales [not to mention the complex cross-rhythms and syncopations] and that an artist's hand had mingled them together in all kinds of fantastic decorations, but in such a way that you could always hear a deeper fundamental tone and softly singing melody – there you have something of a picture of his playing." Whether the fall of Warsaw directly triggered the so-called "Revolutionary" Étude in C Minor, op. 10, no. 12, remains uncertain. What cannot be doubted is the music's emotional force – tragedy voiced with a power rivalled only by Beethoven. It closes a collection that pushed the Étude beyond the practice room and onto the concert platform – where it has remained ever since.

Alexander Scriabin

Born in Moscow, Russia, December 25, 1871/January 6, 1872; died there, April 14/27, 1915

Prelude in B Major, op. 11, no. 11 (1895)

The Prelude remained Scriabin's lifelong touchstone. Across his career he wrote nearly 90 – miniature tone-poems that distill a single mood or idea, often within a page or two. Their concision and freedom suited his improvisatory nature, mirrored in the inspired spontaneity of his own playing. Witnesses recalled that each performance seemed newly created, shaped by supple rubato and a skilled use of the sustaining pedal. The poetic, somewhat Chopin-like B Major Prelude (*Allegro assai*), written in Moscow in 1895, spans the impetuous and the reflective. "What if my music does sound like Chopin?" the young Scriabin once said. "It is not stolen. It is mine."

Fantasy in B Minor, op. 28 (1900)

The Fantasy in B Minor, op. 28, written between the Third and Fourth Sonatas, represents Scriabin's piano writing in an altogether grander, virtuoso scale. A single continuous movement – essentially a sonata-form opening – it unfolds with Lisztian sweep and a pianist-composer's instinct for colour and texture. Bold harmonic turns and ecstatic surges foreshadow the transcendental sound world of his later works, while its melodic fervour and glittering passagework bid farewell to Chopin. The Fantasy stands as both culmination and prophecy – Romantic passion giving way to mystical revelation.

Vers la flamme, op. 72 (1914)

Vers la flamme (Towards the Flame) is one of Scriabin's late poems, composed in the year before the composer's death. Conceived as an unbroken physical and emotional crescendo, it is written without themes other than a recurring falling semitone. Horowitz viewed the six-minute piece as reflecting the composer's belief that the world was set on a course 'towards the flame' and would eventually heat up into a fiery cosmic conflagration. The vivid symbolism of the title has also been seen as Scriabin's 'ocean of fire' which engulfs and remakes the universe. Either way, Scriabin's pianistic gestures increase in intensity and in difficulty as the music progresses, culminating in a blinding, ecstatic E major

Franz Liszt

Born in Doborján (Raiding), Hungary, October 22, 1811; died in Bayreuth, Germany, July 31, 1886

"Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este" from *Années de Pèlerinage, Vol. 3, S.163, no. 4 (1877-82)*

Liszt's "Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este" – inspired by the fountains at Tivoli's Villa d'Este near Rome (then owned and restored by Cardinal Gustav von Hohenlohe) – shimmers with light, colour, and movement. At the heart of this evocative sequence of variations and play of light on water lies a radiant F sharp major, a key Liszt often associated with music of spiritual elevation. Having taken minor orders in the Catholic Church, he linked "Les jeux d'eau" to Christ's words in St. John's Gospel: "Whoever drinks the water that I shall give will never thirst." This fusion of virtuosic brilliance, impressionistic sonority, and devotional symbolism was unmatched until Ravel and Debussy carried Liszt's water imagery into a new century.

Les préludes, S. 97 (transcr. Kevin Chen) (1849-54)

Franz Liszt effectively invented the symphonic poem, writing 13 large-scale, single-movement orchestral works that fuse music with literary or visual ideas. *Les Préludes* is the best known. Its point of departure is a poem by the French Romantic Alphonse de Lamartine, whose verses touch on love, destiny, war, and the consolations of nature. Liszt does not follow this scheme literally. Love is answered not by battle but by a storm, while a pastoral episode gives way to a rousing march that stands in for destiny fulfilled.

What anchors the piece is musical logic. Every theme grows from the same three-note figure heard at the outset, transformed and reshaped as the drama unfolds. As Liszt wrote in his preface: "What is life but a series of preludes to that unknown song of which the first solemn note is sounded by Death?"

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Kevin Chen

Piano

Canadian pianist Kevin Chen has quickly established himself as one of the most distinctive voices of his generation, praised for his poetic sensitivity, natural eloquence, and remarkable technical command.

Most recently, in October 2025, Kevin won the Second Prize at the 19th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw. His decision to perform the complete set of Chopin Études, op. 10 in the second stage drew wide attention and praise, with Polish critics calling his interpretation “a complete musical story, not a show of virtuosity.”

He is also the First Prize winner of the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition (Tel Aviv 2023), the Concours de Genève (2022), the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition (Budapest 2021), the Hilton Head International Piano Competition (2020), and the International Piano-e-Competition (Minneapolis 2019). His artistic maturity and individuality have been widely recognized by audiences and juries alike.

Kevin has appeared with major orchestras including the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Taipei Symphony Orchestra, Hungarian National Orchestra, Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, and Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra. He has been featured at international festivals such as La Roque d'Anthéron, Chopin and His Europe (Warsaw), and Duszniki-Zdrój, and has performed in leading venues including Carnegie Hall, Berlin Philharmonie, Munich Prinzregententheater, St. John's Smith Square (London), and the Taipei National Concert Hall.

Born in Edmonton, Kevin began piano studies at the age of five and soon attracted national attention, winning first place at the Canadian Music Competition at eight. He was later named one of the CBC's “Top 30 Hot Canadian Classical Musicians Under 30” and one of *Maclean's* magazine's “100 Remarkable Canadians.”

He currently studies at the Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover with Professor Arie Vardi.

Kevin Chen earned his Associate of The Royal Conservatory (ARCT) Diploma – amongst the highest academic credentials awarded by the RCM – and, at eight years of age at that time, was the youngest student to receive First Class Honors with Distinction on his ARCT Piano Performer's exam. He made his Koerner Hall debut on December 15, 2024 and will return on March 21, 2027 with Illia Ovcharenko to play a two-piano version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.