Piano Recitals

Stephen Kovacevich

Sunday, October 5, 2025 at 3pm

This is the 1,446th concert in Koerner Hall

Stephen Kovacevich, piano

PROGRAM

Johannes Brahms: Intermezzo in E Major, op. 116, no. 4
Johannes Brahms: Intermezzo in F Minor, op. 118, no. 4
Johannes Brahms: Capriccio in D Minor, op. 116, no. 7
Johannes Brahms: Intermezzo in A Major, op. 118, no. 2
Johannes Brahms: Intermezzo in E flat Minor, op. 118, no. 6

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Major, op. 110

I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
II. Allegro molto –
III. Adagio ma non troppo – Arioso dolente –
IV. Fuga: Allegro ma non troppo

INTERMISSION

Franz Schubert: Piano Sonata in B flat Major, D. 960, op. posth.

I. Molto moderato
II. Andante sostenuto
III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza
IV. Allegro ma non troppo

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested $10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Johannes Brahms

Born in Hamburg, Germany, May 7, 1833; died in Vienna, Austria, April 3, 1897

Four Intermezzos and one Capriccio

Robert Schumann perceptively described the three early piano sonatas of the young Johannes Brahms as "symphonies in disguise." The remark proved prescient, since Brahms abandoned the sonata form after the third, turning his larger musical arguments into orchestral works, while his piano writing evolved along different lines. Variations on themes by Schumann, Handel, and Paganini became his proving ground before, in later life, he turned inward – toward the shorter, more intimately drawn forms of the intermezzo, capriccio, or simply "piano piece."

Between 1892 and 1893, Brahms produced some 20 of these late piano "miniatures," as he called them, now published in opp. 116–119. These pieces represent Brahms's final thoughts for the instrument, distilling a lifetime's craft into music at once personal, concise, and profound. They are reflective in mood but rigorously disciplined, written not for virtuosic display but for musicians and listeners able to appreciate their inward intensity. Clara Schumann, to whom Brahms sent several Intermezzos, found them "a true source of enjoyment, everything, poetry, passion, intimacy, full of the most marvellous effects."

The Capriccios are often dramatic and fiery, glancing back to the turbulence of Brahms's youth, but now expressed in compact language and refined keyboard textures. The Intermezzos, more introspective, extend Brahms's harmonic and motivic imagination in striking new directions, sometimes capturing the enigmatic spirit of Schumann's piano writing. The prevailing tone is one of reflection, even resignation, but also of quiet rapture. Their elusive harmonies, subtle inner voices, and rhythmic flexibility often suggest more than they declare, leaving performers and listeners alike with the impression of music half-whispered, half-remembered – a final glimpse into the private, contemplative world of a composer who, in his last decade, found vast horizons within the smallest forms.

The surface form of the late piano pieces generally follows a simple ABA design, but internally the music can be intricately interrelated. As Philipp Spitta, the great Bach biographer and Brahms's friend, observed: "Your piano pieces … are not only reflections on the past, but also prophetic of the future. I believe I understand you correctly in venturing the opinion that you wanted to hint at something of the sort with the intermezzos."

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born in Bonn, Germany, baptised December 17, 1770; died in Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Major, op. 110 (1821)

The year 1821 was a grim one for Beethoven. Illness plagued him relentlessly – even through the summer, when he developed jaundice, an ominous sign of the liver disease that would eventually take his life six years later. Family tensions and financial worries added to his distress. The A flat Sonata, op. 110, was the only work he completed that year, finishing it on Christmas Day. Like the earlier "Hammerklavier" Sonata, it reflects Beethoven's oscillation between exhaustion and renewal. By year's end, he could write: "Now, thank heaven, my condition is better, and good health seems to be returning at last …"

Op. 110 stands at the centre of Beethoven's final trilogy of piano sonatas – works imbued with the transcendent spirit that would soon inform the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony – and then culminate in the late string quartets. These late-period works share a profound concern with spiritual struggle, consolation, and luminous ideals.

The sonata unfolds as a continuous musical argument, with its three movements played without pause. Thematic material is subtly interwoven across the whole, giving the work a quiet coherence beneath its striking contrasts. Though its moods shift dramatically, the piece offers no external program – it maps its own emotional terrain with clarity and depth.

Beethoven marks the opening con amabilatà, and the music maintains amiability and warmth of feeling throughout. In contrast, rapidly changing moods and rhythms give the second movement the character of one of Beethoven's gruff bagatelles. Though it functions as a scherzo, its duple metre and unexpected allusions to two popular songs bring an idiosyncratic stamp.

The slow movement and finale are intimately connected, a transcendent interweaving of arioso dolente and consoling fugue, together carrying much of the weight of the sonata. Three bars of introduction and a recitative preface a vocal song of lamentation. This contrasts with the serene fugue that follows, itself a variation of the same

tender theme with which the sonata began, and soon to be heard in its inversion – compellingly "gaining new life," as Beethoven writes in the score. The revival of strength from desolation to the transformation of the closing fugue has no parallel in Beethoven's earlier music. Writer William Kinderman has compared the progression with that of the *Agnus Dei* to the "Dona nobis pacem" movements in the *Missa Solemnis,* music that Beethoven was wrestling with at the time. At both a musical and a spiritual level, he suggests that the sonata mirrors the promise of liberation that emerges from an endless cycle of suffering and injustice reflected in the music of the mass.

Franz Schubert

Born in Vienna, Austria, January 31, 1797; died there, November 19, 1828

Piano Sonata in B flat Major, D. 960, op. posth. (1828)

In 1828, the final year of his life, Franz Schubert composed three monumental piano sonatas – works that now stand among the supreme achievements in the repertoire. They were only published 11 years later and so carry the rather bleak label opus posthumous. Moving from the dark, brooding C Minor Sonata (D. 958), through the expansive emotional terrain of the A Major (D. 959), to the meditative serenity of the B flat Major (D. 960), these sonatas form a loosely connected trilogy. Schubert worked on all three simultaneously – sketching, revising, and writing in ink on sheets of varying sizes – in a burst of creative intensity that suggests both urgency and elation.

Why this surge of creative energy? At the time, Schubert's music was being ignored by many publishers and performers. He was in the tertiary stage of syphilis, his health failing, his circle of friends shrinking. Financial insecurity dogged him. In the final three months of his life, he moved into the apartment of his brother Ferdinand at Kettenbrückengasse 6, where a piano – still there today – stood in the corner. It was here, likely aware that death was near, that Schubert completed this final trilogy.

Unlike Brahms, Schubert was not paralysed by Beethoven's legacy. Though he had served as a pallbearer at Beethoven's funeral the previous year, Schubert approached the sonata with a different temperament – less assertive, more searching. He absorbed Beethoven's structural discipline but replaced his assertiveness with ambiguity, contradiction, and open-ended reflection. The music is spacious and reverent, grounded in sonata form yet reaching beyond its confines toward something ineffable.

The B flat Sonata, Schubert's final instrumental work, opens with quiet introspection. Marked Molto moderato, the first movement begins in calm, unhurried tones, with no suggestion of urgency. Then, it halts – chilled by a low, rumbling trill. When the music returns, it modulates warmly to G flat major, before veering unexpectedly into a poignant second theme in a forlorn F sharp minor. A third theme dances briefly in triplets but offers no resolution. The ominous trill returns, each time deepening the sense of unease.

This foreboding intensifies in the slow movement. Set in C sharp minor, its pulsing, sorrowful theme echoes the slow movement of the C Major String Quintet, another masterpiece from Schubert's final year. A central section offers warmth and light, but the return of the opening theme is darker, shadowed by a deep, pulsing bass figure and – in one transcendent moment – a radiant shift from C sharp minor to C major, and a glimpse of the beyond.

The ethereal lightness of the Scherzo, with its unusual marking con delicatezza, seems removed from the everyday world, even while its theme plays with the main theme of the first movement. It throws into contrast the ambiguity of the finale which begins – in a Beethovenian jolt – in the 'wrong' key of C minor, before circling home to B flat. A recurring octave G anchors the movement, much as the low trill haunts the first. With its subtle interplay of forward-driving momentum, poignant lyricism, and a serenity that cannot be put into words, the movement caps the greatest contribution to the genre of the piano sonata since Beethoven.

Stephen Kovacevich

Piano

Stephen Kovacevich is widely recognized as one of the most revered artists of his generation. With an international career spanning more than six decades, he has long been one of the most sought-after performers: "A musician who is totally immersed in his craft, his interpretations are like no one else's and always come straight from the heart: musical messages of wisdom, peace, resignation and hope" (*The Washington Post*).

Born in Los Angeles in 1940, Kovacevich laid the foundation for his career as a concert pianist at the age of 11. After moving to England to study with Dame Myra Hess, he made his European debut at Wigmore Hall in 1961. Since then, he has performed with the world's finest orchestras and conductors, including Hans Graf, Bernard Haitink, Kurt Masur, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Simon Rattle, and Georg Solti.

Kovacevich is a dedicated chamber musician who has worked with legendary artists such as Lynn Harrell, Jacqueline du Pré, and Josef Suk, as well as the Amadeus and Cleveland Quartets over the course of his long career. Today Kovacevich gives concerts with violinists Nicola Benedetti, Renaud Capuçon, and Alina Ibragimova; cellists Gautier Capuçon, Steven Isserlis, and Truls Mør; flutist Emmanuel Pahud, the Belcea Quartet, and Martha Argerich.

Stephen Kovacevich has enjoyed a long and fruitful collaboration with the record labels Philips and EMI. To celebrate his 75th birthday, Decca released a limited edition 25-CD box set containing all his work recorded for Philips. In 2008, he re-recorded Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations," exactly 40 years after his first recording of this work. This Onyx recording earned him the Classic FM Gramophone Editor's Choice Award (2009) and *Gramophone* Magazine Top Choice Award (2015), writing: "His seasoned yet fearless command reveals something new with every listen..."

Stephen Kovacevich is making his Royal Conservatory debut.