

Tony Siqi Yun

Sunday, November 23, 2025 at 3pm

This is the 1,465th concert in Koerner Hall

Tony Siqi Yun, piano

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach: Chaconne from Partita No. 2 for Violin in D Minor, BWV 1004/BV B24 (arr. Busoni)

Robert Schumann: Theme and Variations in E flat Major, WoO 24 ("Ghost Variations")

Franz Liszt: "Après une lecture du Dante, fantasia quasi una sonata" from *Années de pèlerinage II*, S. 161

INTERMISSION

Luciano Berio: *Wasserklavier*

Johannes Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, op. 5

- I. Allegro maestoso
- II. Andante espressivo
- III. Allegro energico
- IV. Intermezzo (Rückblick): Andante molto
- V. Allegro moderato ma rubato

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.

Johann Sebastian Bach (arr. Busoni)

Born in Eisenach, Germany, March 21, 1685; died in Leipzig, Germany, July 28, 1750

Chaconne from Partita No. 2 for Violin in D Minor, BWV 1004/BV B24 (1720/1891-2, rev.)

At the age of 22, Ferruccio Dante Michelangelo Benvenuto Busoni began a series of Bach transcriptions that eventually ran to seven volumes. "By cleaning them of the dust of tradition, I try to restore their youth," he said in 1902, "to present them as they sounded to people at the moment they first sprang from the head and pen of the composer." As one of the last in a line of 19th century composer-pianists, Busoni felt he should do more than simply make music from one medium more accessible through another. His transcription of the magnificent, stately Chaconne from Bach's D Minor Partita for solo violin was made while living in Boston, 1891-2, and premiered there January 30, 1893. He published three revisions, the last in 1916. Although Bach's violin work has no actual bass line, it is nonetheless classed as a chaconne – traditionally a dance movement built over an unvarying bass pattern – because the bass is implied throughout its remarkable 64 variations. Busoni provides a monumental reinterpretation of the original, realising Bach's implied harmonies, while extending and re-voicing his polyphonic writing, as though viewing the piece through the lens of an imagined organ transcription. He strives to make complex music ever more complex. "A transcription does not destroy the original," Busoni once said. "From Bach, I learnt to recognize the truth that Good and Great Universal Music remains the same through whatever medium it is sounded."

Robert Schumann

Born in Zwickau, Saxony, June 8, 1810; died in Endenich, nr. Bonn, Germany, July 29, 1856

Theme and Variations in E flat Major, WoO 24 ("Ghost Variations") (1854)

"Today I come before the great world for the first time with my variations!" wrote 20-year-old Robert Schumann on November 7, 1831, the day his op. 1 was published. The youthful declaration (in his diary) was intended to launch a career as a pianist-composer with his "Abegg" Variations. A little over two decades later, mentally ill, alternately elated and tormented by visions, now all but dismissed as Municipal Music Director in Düsseldorf, Schumann returned to the variation form for what would be his final composition – a "Theme with Variations" dedicated to his wife Clara. On February 17, 1854, Clara wrote: "He firmly believed that angels were hovering above him and making him the most glorious revelations, all in wonderful music ... Robert wrote down a theme, which, he said, the angels had sung to him."

In the days that followed, despite being stalked by "good and evil spirits," Schumann showed periods of rare lucidity. He composed five variations on the angelic theme. According to his concertmaster Ruppert Becker, Schumann believed the theme had come directly from Schubert: "a glorious melody" from beyond the grave. The theme, however, contains echoes of two earlier compositions by Schumann himself and bears resemblance to his Violin Concerto's slow movement, completed just months earlier. It flows throughout the five variations.

10 days later, on February 27, Schumann attempted suicide in the Rhine. Clara guarded the manuscript through his institutionalisation and death over two years later. Only Brahms was allowed to see it, before basing his own Variations for Piano Four Hands, op. 23 on its theme. "The gentle heartfelt melody says enough," Brahms wrote. "Like a departing spirit bidding us a friendly farewell, he addresses us, and we remember in reverence and emotion the great man and artist who created it."

Franz Liszt

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

"Après une lecture du Dante, fantasia quasi una sonata" from *Années de pèlerinage II*, S. 161 (1838-61)

Hell is a more interesting place to visit than Heaven in Liszt's formidable "Dante" Sonata. Inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the music vividly evokes both Inferno and Paradise. The "Dante" Sonata is the final piece of seven in the second volume of Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage)*. The title of this single-movement work – 'After a Reading of Dante' – is deliberately imprecise, leaving the listener free to associate the music with whichever passages seem most fitting. The introduction opens with a sinister portrayal of Hell. "Abandon hope all ye who enter here," it seems to say. The music then plunges into the agony of the Inferno, where Dante's "strange tongues, horrible cries, words of pain, tones of anger, and voices deep and hoarse" are whipped into something none too

pretty. As the temperature cools, the same theme is radiantly transformed into a chorale-like melody, with the accompaniment of a harp. The accompaniment soon shifts to plunging octaves as the tempo again accelerates, whipped up into what is believed to be a musical depiction of Lucifer – the “creature eminent in beauty once.” The Inferno gives way to a moment where Dante gazes up to Heaven and contemplates the beauty of Paradise. The chorale theme returns, now transfigured into a shimmering vision of Heaven.

Luciano Berio

Born in Oneglia, Italy, October 24, 1925; died in Rome, Italy, May 27, 2003

***Wasserklavier* (1965)**

Luciano Berio brought a rare lightness of touch and Italianate lyricism to the avant-garde. A pioneer of electronic music, he co-founded the Studio di Fonologia in Milan, and his collaborations ranged from Umberto Eco to his one-time pupil, the Grateful Dead’s Phil Lesh. His *Sinfonia* (1968–9) exemplifies his collage-like layering of texts, voices, and orchestral memory in an unlikely radical tribute to Mahler and Martin Luther King among others. Berio saw composition as “a way of remembering,” and throughout his wide-ranging output, he challenged, delighted, and provoked, from his virtuosic solo *Sequenzas* to his reworkings of Puccini and Schubert. 100 years and a month after his birth, we salute a composer whose restless curiosity remains as vital as ever.

A wartime firearm injury put paid to his early intentions to work as a concert pianist. As a result, perhaps, piano music does not hold a prominent place in a large creative output spanning six decades. *Wasserklavier* (literally, ‘Waterpiano’), originally for two pianos, is one of four miniatures inspired by the ancient elements, together with Earth, Air, and Fire, plus two additional pieces, all published as *Six Encores*. Marked *ppp sempre et lontano* (always very quiet and distant), elusive and reflective, with an *una corda* haze throughout, the gentle score alludes to both a Brahms Intermezzo and Schubert Impromptu before fading to a memory.

Johannes Brahms

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

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, op. 5 (1853)

In the heady world of 19th century Romanticism, Johannes Brahms proved himself the exception by launching his career with three large-scale piano sonatas. After arriving unannounced at the Düsseldorf home of Robert and Clara Schumann, Clara was bowled over by the 20-year-old Brahms: “He played us sonatas, scherzos, and so on, all of his own, all of them showing exuberant imagination, depth of feeling, and mastery of form.” Robert was no less struck: “His brilliant playing transformed the piano into an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices,” he wrote. Brahms stayed with the Schumanns that October, completing his third piano sonata under their appreciative, but considered encouragement. Schumann perceptively described the sonatas as “symphonies in disguise” – a prescient remark, as the F Minor would be Brahms’s last in the form. From then on, his large-scale ideas turned orchestral, while his piano writing evolved through variation form (on themes by Schumann, Handel, and Paganini) and, eventually, toward the inward, more intimately drawn forms of the intermezzo, capriccio, romanze, and ballade.

One of Brahms’s early biographers, Richard Specht, saw the F Minor Sonata as a portrait of the artist as a young man – full of ardour, yet already shaped by formal command. Its five-movement design is unusual, but links between the Andante and the Intermezzo, and subtle reminiscences of all four previous movements in the finale, bind the whole together. Brahms evokes the orchestra throughout. Yet the fiery, craggy opening, ranging over the entire keyboard, is utterly pianistic in concept. No notes are wasted in the Allegro maestoso, which grows entirely out of the opening few bars. By contrast, the Andante is a tender, deeply personal nocturne, prefaced by a love poem from Sternau: “Evening approaches, and in the light of the rising moon, two loving hearts join in rapture.”

The Scherzo returns to the fiery F minor passion of the first movement, with hints of the rustic Ländler. The Intermezzo (subtitled ‘Retrospect’) breaks with the classical tradition of the three or four movement sonata, offering a wintry, elegiac echo of the Andante, shadowed by a distant drum-roll. The rondo finale, with its vivid contrasts and contrapuntal bravura, drives this monumental sonata to a triumphant close.

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Tony Siqi Yun

Piano

The Canadian-born pianist Tony Siqi Yun, Gold Medalist at the First China International Music Competition (2019) and awarded the Rheingau Music Festival's 2023 Lotto-Förderpreis, is quickly becoming a sought-after soloist and recitalist. At the age of 23, he has been hailed as a "poet of the keyboard" (*Pianist*), and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted his thrilling performance and "interpretive flashes that point to an emergent big personality: moments of grandness or deep expressivity."

In 2025-26, he appears with Orchestre Métropolitain, Louisville Orchestra, Las Vegas Philharmonic, and Lincoln Symphony, among others. Major recital debuts this season include Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw, Flagey, Harrogate, The Royal Conservatory, and Celebrity Series of Boston, as well as returns to Vancouver and Ghent. He returns to China this season, appearing with orchestras in Beijing and Hangzhou. Summer highlights include a debut recital at Ravinia and a concerto debut at the Aspen Music Festival, performing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 with Xian Zhang.

This past season, Tony appeared with the Nashville Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, and Colorado Springs Philharmonic orchestras, among others. He had debut recitals with Washington Performing Arts, San Francisco Symphony's Shenson Spotlight Series, and Friends of Chamber Music Denver.

He made his Carnegie Hall debut in 2024 under the baton of Yannick Nézet-Séguin with Orchestre Métropolitain, following his 2022-23 debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mr. Yun has appeared recently with the Toronto Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Calgary Philharmonic, Buffalo Philharmonic, Hamilton Philharmonic, and Rhode Island Philharmonic; outside North America, he has recently appeared with Orchestre de Chambre de Paris and Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. Previous recital appearances in North America include Stanford Live, La Jolla Music Society, Gilmore Rising Stars Series, 92NY in New York, and the Vancouver Recital Series; in Europe, he has given recitals at the Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Gewandhaus Leipzig, Tonhalle Düsseldorf, and Philharmonie Luxembourg.

Mr. Yun is a 2024 graduate of The Juilliard School, where he was a recipient of the Jerome L. Greene Fellowship and studied with Professors Yoheved Kaplinsky and Matti Raekallio. He continues his studies in the Masters program at Juilliard.

Tony Siqi Yun is making his Royal Conservatory debut.