

Deux-Elles

FREE SPIRITS

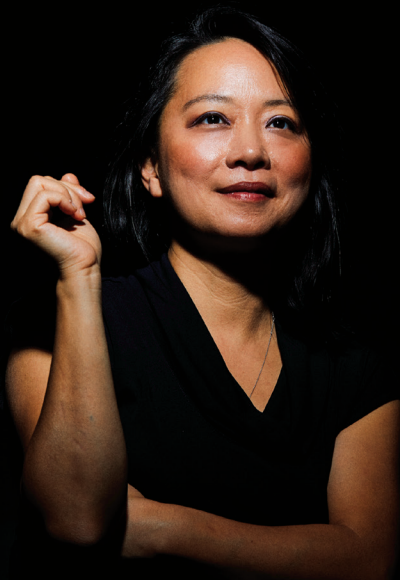
early Romantic music on the Graf piano

Fanny Hensel

Schumann

Schubert

Yi-heng Yang
fortepiano



The piano was the quintessential musical vehicle for a time when personal and interior experience and expression took priority over a musician's social duty and function. As composers and performers demanded from piano makers more and more possibilities from the keyboard of the "piano e forte," instruments arose that could embrace the spiritual and sonic imaginations of the iconoclasts, poets, adventurers, and storytellers of the Golden Age of the piano.

The Viennese fortepiano I used for this album is a beautifully conserved original made in 1825 by Conrad Graf, whose instruments were used and admired by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Schumann. It differs from the industrialised modern piano in design, construction, material and aesthetic aims. Consisting of a wooden frame, leather hammers, strings of less tension, and four pedals which offer various intriguing sound effects, the Romantic Era Graf piano allows sounds and phrases to breathe with intimacy and clarity. By Schubert's time, the Graf had increased in range from the Mozartian standard 5 octaves, to six and a half, and had

at least four pedals (some for registral sound effects such as the moderator and bassoon or percussion effects) instead of knee levers. The sound increased in volume, and sustained longer, in comparison with the earlier classical types. As a result, the instrument connects the musician to new fields of timbre, opening up spatial and sonic possibilities as one steps into more fantastical Romantic musical narratives. Once tuned into the textured sounds and varietal colour of the Graf, I felt that I had both the permission and the tools to bring out the psychological, time-jumping, fragmentary narratives of these pieces of fantasy and exploration. As a musician, the use of historical pianos in interpreting Romantic repertoire has provided a continued liberation of narrative approach, technique, imagination and musicality.

This album shares some of my fruitful discoveries with the Graf instrument. Within the intimate medium of recording, the listener, in a setting of their own choice, at a time of their own choosing, can enter into their own inner journey, guided gently by the collaboration of the Graf



Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel's Music Room, 1849.
Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, New York

instrument with compositions of striking psychological reality.

The works you hear by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Franz Schubert, and Robert Schumann are grouped together because they are all about liminality: stepping outside boundaries of the seen or spoken, beyond the limits of musical formality. Hensel's wild harmonies and reaching, extended phrase lengths seem to indicate a great artist forced to work within the limits of female domesticity, and whose fire, as a result, burned brighter within. The genre of the "Songs without Words" is one of the most identifiable and popular types of piano pieces associated with her brother, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Under her pen and fiery musical imagination, the *Lieder ohne Worte* Op. 8 take on an emotional rawness, with passionate extremes and existential and personal statements. The first Lied in B minor begins with a simple, slowly unfolding arpeggio, whose yearning melodic line hangs in the balance over the bass, and opens the mind to a scene of personal despair. The second Lied, a succinct vignette, begins with a declamatory statement in the piano's right hand alone. The left hand

responds in kind, and we perceive two solitary souls engaging in pure dialogue. The third, which exudes warmth and empathy, carries the subtitle, "Lied (Lenau)", referring to Nikolaus Lenau (1802–1850), a poet whose Romantic melancholy and woodland scenes also inspired Hensel's songs for voice and piano, Op. 10. The fourth is a virtuosic display of Romantic piano figuration, taking sharp left turns of luxurious harmonic progressions, and entering into various sections that feel like digressive cul-de-sacs of tonality, before concluding swiftly in unfettered hope and exuberance.

The *Novellettes* Op. 21 of Robert Schumann likewise experiment with unconventional forms of fantasy and psychological, poetic adventure stories. These pieces, written with Schumann's wild musical-literary imagination, mirror the fragmentary, almost post-modern narratives found in some of his favorite writers—Jean Paul (1763-1825) and E.T.A. Hoffmann (1809-22). Through the varying sections and cyclical tales the fortepiano is one with the pianist, galloping through the quick scene changes, fleet in its capacity to modulate between differing colors and

articulations. At once the sound of the fortepiano springs to brightness and sunlight, and then in a gasp of a memory of loss and love, it throws over a veil of muted ecstasy. Cycles of adventure and recall ever emerge and swirl in our mind's ear, as voices from the past recur periodically over our wandering and longing.

The first Novellette is an adventure tale in the honest key of F major, with an open-hearted and youthful protagonist. Contrasting with the impetuous opening theme is a lyrical and increasingly contrapuntal intermediary section, conveying our hero's dreamy inner life. The next Novellette to appear in my selected grouping is the eighth one. Its opening is an intense thicket of passion and existential frustration in the hirsute key of F-sharp minor. The inspiration of his future wife, Clara Wieck, who at the writing of these pieces was still separated unwillingly from him by her father, is evident in all of Op. 21. In this eighth movement, Schumann summons her spirit, and in the score he writes "Stimme aus der Ferne," (a voice from the distance) over a ghostly and lyrical melody from the Notturmo of Wieck's *Soirées musicales* at the emotional heart of the

piece. I conclude the three movement presentation of the Novellettes with the second one in D. It is a virtuosic display of pianistic fireworks, with a middle section that binds together poetic lyricism and metallurgical, contrapuntal lines fashioned with a sense of Romantic improvisation.

And Schubert! When Schubert is vibrating through the soundboards, the delicate keys, the undulating piano strings, the cosmically proportional, harmonic voicings of the young choir boy Schubert find a natural realization. This sprawling, serene, almost Proustian-lengthened Sonata in G major, which was the last to be published (1826) in Schubert's lifetime, is, as Schumann wrote, "the most perfect in form and conception" of his Sonatas. Almost always unhurried, accepting, zen-like in pace, Schubert plays with our sense of perspective and shows us new realities within these mind-altering and arresting musical frameworks.

The four movements of the G major Sonata range from the spiritual contemplation of the first movement's first theme, to the lively *Ländler* of the second theme, the vernal climate of the second

movement, the rustic frolic of the third, and the Elysian, pastoral romp of the last. As a whole, this work takes us from states of rock-bottom despair and spiritual pain into modes of contemplation, solace, and joy. With these gradual and organic unfoldings of lyricism and drama, the sense of “heavenly length” that Schumann described in Schubert’s music lends an eternal perspective to our own anxieties and discomforts.

In our time, the very existence of a Western musical canon is being called into question, and the central masterpieces of the repertoire can no longer be sustained by the cerebral, score-bound reverence of 20th-century pianism. The use of Romantic fortepianos such as the Graf, with its responsiveness of texture and colour, inspires us to look deeper, beyond linear or structural conceptions of music, and to bring out the immaterial and aetherial qualities of Romantic piano composers. Approached as doorways to engagement with our present realities, the music of Schubert, Hensel, and Schumann is neither old nor irrelevant: within the score, there appear liquid, transparent colors, spiritual realms, and new ways of moving forward in the artistic

pursuit. These are the kinds of places where a searching musical path can still be found.

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PHOTO: COREY HAYES

Pianist and fortepianist Yi-heng Yang has been described as an “exquisite collaborator (Opera News), “suberbly adept (Gramophone)” and noted for her “remarkable expressivity and technique (Early Music Magazine).” Her work spans from collaborations on period instruments with visionary artists such as the Grammy award-winning tenor Karim Sulayman, in their acclaimed and timely album, “Where Only Stars Can Hear Us (Avie Records),” to groundbreaking and provocative explorations into Romantic and Classical performance practice with cellist Kate Bennett Wadsworth (Brahms Cello Sonatas, Deux-Elles), violinist Abby Karr (Mendelssohn Violin Sonatas, Olde Focus), and harpsichordist Rebecca Cypess (“Sisters Face-to-Face” Acis).

As a soloist and collaborator, Yi-heng has appeared at festivals and series such as The Boston Early Music Festival, The New York Philharmonic Ensembles Series at Merkin Hall, The Serenata of Santa Fe Series, Sunday Chatter Albuquerque, The Dayton Early Music Series, The Frederick Collection, The Finchcocks Collection, The Cobbe Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of

Art, the Apple Hill Chamber Music Festival, and the Utrecht Early Music Festival.

Ms. Yang holds a doctorate in piano from the Juilliard School, and studied there with Veda Kaplinksy, Robert McDonald, and Julian Martin. She later studied fortepiano with Stanley Hoogland at the Amsterdam Conservatory. She has received grants from The Mustard Seed Foundation’s Harvey Fellowship and The Dutch Ministry of Culture’s Huygens Award. Ms. Yang is on the faculty at The Juilliard School Precollege and College Divisions, where she teaches piano, fortepiano, chamber music, keyboard skills and improvisation. She has also taught at The Mannes School of Music and Rutgers University, and given masterclasses at The Curtis Institute, New England Conservatory, and the University of Connecticut. She is a director of The Academy for Fortepiano Performance in Hunter, NY, and the creator of their International Fortepiano Salon Series, a popular monthly live-streaming gathering of fortepiano enthusiasts and practitioners, which has reinvigorated and celebrated fortepiano performance and musical community during the Covid pandemic.

DXL 1187 playing time: 74 min

DDD

Four Lieder for Piano Op. 8 (1850)

Fanny Mendelssohn HENSEL

- [1] No. 1 Allegro moderato 4:40
- [2] No. 2 Andante con espressione 2:44
- [3] No. 3 Larghetto 2:31
- [4] No. 4 Wanderlied. Presto 2:43

Novelletten Op. 21 (1838)

Robert SCHUMANN

- [5] No. 1 Markirt und kräftig 5:10
- [6] No. 8 Sehr lebhaft 11:48
- [7] No. 2 Äusserst rasch und mit Bravour 5:56

Piano Sonata in G Major D. 894 'Fantasie' (1826)

Franz SCHUBERT

- [8] Molto moderato e cantabile 17:35
- [9] Andante 7:54
- [10] Menuetto: Allegro moderato 4:17
- [11] Allegretto 8:33

Recording Engineer - Loren Stata
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Producer - Daniel Sedgwick
Booklet Notes - Yi-heng Yang
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