

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

AARON DIEHL, PIANO CLARA YANG, PIANO

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PROGRAM NOTES

Philip Glass (b. 1937)	Etude No. 11 Etude No. 16	Clara Yang Aaron Diehl
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When Philip Glass composed his first book of piano etudes, his goals were simple: explore the possibilities of piano writing and teach himself to be a better pianist. He composed them in a flurry in the first half of the 1990s and did indeed pronounce himself “a better player” at the end of the process. Upon returning to the form a decade later to write his second book of etudes, he said, “I found the music was following a new path, . . . suggest[ing] a series of new adventures in harmony and structure.” Gone from these is the pedagogical imperative, replaced instead with a fluttering virtuosity, complicated forms, and a piano language that seems to emphasize a very particular kind of density. Or, as composer Nico Muhly once observed about this set, it’s as if these etudes were “designed for technical or harmonic obsessions.”

Opening the second book of etudes, Etude 11 is all dark omens and portents. As ever-changing groupings of cross-rhythms skitter around, thundering octave Cs at the bottom of the piano anchor the piece in nameless depths. Every action seems to be about building toward the next set of Cs or embellishing the last. Even the tension of Glass’s elastic chord progressions takes a back seat to whether or how the player’s left hand is next going to descent to the piano’s lowest end.

Etude 16, on the other hand, centers on a simple seven-beat ostinato and the flowing melody that ostinato coaxes into being. Everything is hushed and delicate, like a water-dappled leaf gradually unfurling. Each new eight-bar phrase brings some new prismatic evolution, even as the left hand never really deviates from its repetitions. Then, in the middle, Glass shatters the contemplative mood with a single heavy fanfare taken straight out of Etude 11. When the volume drops and the crystalline structure is allowed to reassert itself, it’s a welcome relief.

George Gershwin (1891-1937)	Three Preludes I. Allegro ben ritmato e deciso II. Andante con moto e poco rubato III. Allegro ben ritmato e deciso	Clara Yang
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Somehow, these preludes—written in 1926 and published in 1927—represent the sum of the solo piano music George Gershwin published in his lifetime. In 1925, riding high from the instant success of *Rhapsody in Blue*, he declared in a *Vanity Fair* profile that he was working on a set of 24 preludes. Whatever he started writing seemingly didn’t work—the first few pages are missing from a manuscript book he had titled “Preludes, Jan 1925.” A few years later, he repurposed the book for the first draft of the *Cuban Overture*.

These three short preludes were premiered at a recital with the Peruvian contralto Marguerite d’Alvarez on December 4, 1926 at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City as part of a set of five or six preludes that concluded the first half of the program. (The exact identity of the missing two—or possibly three—preludes continues to elude scholars.)

Despite their brevity, the Preludes are packed with character. The first is perhaps the most purely “jazz” piece of the set, brimming with pointy harmonies, jagged rhythms, and stride-like left hand figurations. If you squint, you can almost imagine Art Tatum running wild with the notes. The second is much more of a ballad, whose main theme has the same kind of ambiguous melancholy as “Summertime.” It seems almost perfectly constructed for Coleman Hawkins or Billie Holiday. That dreamy mood is disrupted by the portly second theme in the middle of the piece. Meanwhile, the third prelude flies by in a flurry like a Raymond Scott vignette.

According to Kay Swift, a songwriter friend of Gershwin’s, “George composed the first prelude in one sitting . . . It was not just an improvisation; he already had it worked out in his head. The other two came a little bit later. . . . I don’t know why he published only three; there were others. But he loved to play the three preludes and included them whenever he could!”

Roland Hanna (1932-2002)	Prelude No. 1 in B Flat Major Prelude No. 3 in B minor Prelude No. 10 in E Major (Small Red Piano)	Aaron Diehl
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In late June 1976, Sir Roland Hanna sat down at the piano in King Studios in Tokyo for a recording session with his longtime creative partner, bassist George Mraz. While Hanna had made his name as a jazz pianist, on those days in the studio, he was recording a set of 24 preludes alternating between classical filigree and jazz ease. He had always played classical music. The story goes that in high school, he and Tommy Flannagan would skip class to play piano in the school auditorium. Hanna would play Rachmaninoff; Flannigan Bud Powell tunes. Eventually the two started trading ideas, and so Hanna began to learn to play jazz.

Even as his career took off in the 1960s and 70s, Hanna still played classical music in between gigs. In the 1960s, he bonded with an aging Coleman Hawkins over classical records, figuring out how to integrate their ideas with his jazz playing. “When I study and analyze [classical] music,” he once wrote, “it doesn’t become a part of me until I’m playing jazz. That’s why I use this music. I don’t want to copy what someone else has done. But it is important to be able to grab elements from each musical tradition so I can use them in my own way.” He would go on to declare that Rachmaninoff’s third piano concerto develops its melody the same way as a jazz tune and that Scriabin’s harmonies are the same jazz harmonies.

These 24 preludes demonstrate the synthesis that Hanna was seeking. The three all-too-brief preludes on tonight’s program mix Debussy-esque harmonies with jazz voice leading, floating melodies with virtuosic flourishes, and Schumann with Bill Evans. Critic Mark Stryker has declared that the full set deserves “wider currency.” Unfortunately, the original recordings were only issued in Japan, and they remain wildly out of print in both physical and digital formats. Tonight’s performance is a rare glimpse at an artist who Stryker calls “the most elusive and underrated of the great jazz pianists to emerge from Detroit at Midcentury.”

Gershwin	<i>Cuban Overture</i> transcribed by Gregory Stone for two pianos	Aaron Diehl, Clara Yang
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In February 1932, George Gershwin “spent two hysterical weeks in Havana where no sleep was had, but the quantity and quality of fun made up for that” (according to a letter he wrote to his friend George Pallay).

According to the *Havana Post*, “The siren call of Cuban music with its odd rhythms and plaintive melodies has lured [Gershwin] ... to Havana, in search for new inspiration.” And inspiration he found in the small dance orchestras that populated Havana hotels playing *rumba* or *son cubano*. He brought a pile of Cuban orchestras instruments back to New York City and quickly set out composing this piece over the spring and summer. It was premiered under the title *Rumba* in the New York Philharmonic’s first all-Gershwin concert—its first devoted entirely to a living composer—at City College’s Lewisohn Stadium in front of 17,000 people on August 16, 1932. He retitled it for its second performance later that year to give it more gravitas.

At the time, Gershwin had been taking composition lessons with composer and music theorist Joseph Schillinger, in an attempt to improve his technique and allay his critics. After all, he had risen to fame in Tin Pan Alley and on Broadway, and was therefore seen by some as an interloper in the more “refined” world of classical music. He wrote extensive program notes for the premiere that expounded on the work’s structural and technical elements: complicated polyrhythms, bitonality, intricate counterpoint, advanced harmonies. While it’s true that all those elements are in the piece, they aren’t what made the piece the orchestral staple that it has become. That, instead, comes from its alchemy of lively melodies, thrilling builds, and all-around good vibes.

And then there’s the percussion. It’s everywhere. Gershwin supplements the standard European orchestral battery with maracas, bongos, guiro, and claves. They sound almost nonstop, creating a raucous atmosphere. In early performances, he called for those four instruments to be “right in front of the conductor’s stand,” highlighting both how unusual they were in this context and how central they were to the music.

Gregory Stone made the two-piano transcription being played in this concert in 1944, seven years after Gershwin’s death. His arrangement is impressive, managing to keep the party going while also capturing all the piece’s intricate contrapuntal layers. In fact, given the clarity of the piano’s attack, it’s sometimes easier to hear all the ways the melodies bump against each other. The only thing he can’t quite replicate is the percussion, nor does he really try. In their place, he adds some falling arpeggios in the piece’s outer sections to rev up the energy. But even without the bongos, the arrangement still embodies so much of what makes this piece so much fun, both for the pianist and the audience.

Notes for this evening’s program were written by Dan Ruccia.