

SOU Chamber Music Concerts  
**Friday, April 16, 2004**  
**Mack McCray, piano**

**Padre Antonio Soler (1729-1783)**

**Sonata No. 100 in C Minor**

**Sonata No. 7 in C Major**

Antonio Soler was a Catalan composer, organist and priest who spent his entire life associated with various religious orders. In 1735, at the age of six, he entered the music school of the Montserrat monastery, and he later received appointments as *maestro de capilla* to the cathedrals at Seo de Urgel (1752) and El Escorial (late 1750s, until his death in 1783). The 2001 New Grove Dictionary mentions that he spent “as much of his recreational time as possible composing. He required little sleep, retiring at midnight...and rising for Mass at 4:00 am.” While sacred vocal music naturally comprised a major part of his output, Soler remains best known today for his 120 keyboard sonatas.

His sonatas share some traits with those of the great mid-century composer Domenico Scarlatti, who also spent the last 25 years of his life in Madrid before his death in 1757. Soler regarded himself as a disciple of Scarlatti, and both men wrote primarily single-movement sonatas in binary form. That description captures tonight’s C Minor Sonata, set in a slow tempo, with only the secondary material returning in the tonic key (typical of binary form). But his works also reflect the stylistic developments of the later classic-era generation after Scarlatti as well. In the single-movement C Major Sonata, he moves away from Baroque figuration towards the broader and symmetrical phrase repetitions of Haydn and Mozart. Soler also wrote some of his movements in sonata form, and again the C Major sonata provides an example. Sonata form features a later, more developed version of binary form, as both primary and secondary material return in the tonic key (the recapitulation). In addition he wrote a handful of multi-movement sonatas. The key schemes of his four-movement sonatas don’t reflect his advanced harmonic language, as he sets each movement in the same key. But his eight keyboard sonatas in four movements, a very rare achievement for the 18th century, anticipate Beethoven and Schubert by at least twenty years.

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

**Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17 (1836)**

Fantasia composition precedes Schumann’s Opus 17 by three hundred years. However, few contributions so perfectly reflect the textbook definition - “an instrumental piece in which the composer’s imagination takes precedence over conventional styles and forms.” Schumann’s musical imagination reigns supreme, creating one of the central works of the mid-19th century repertory. And to this day scholars and critics disagree over the structure of each of the fantasia’s three movements. Extra-musical concerns account for some of the ambiguity. His marriage to Clara Wieck was still four years away, and the initially successful attempts by Clara’s father to sever the relationship played a role in both the composition of the Fantasie and its *sui generis* narrative structure.

Schumann wrote this fantasy early in his career, preceded only by “Papillons” (1831), Piano Sonata No.1 in F# Minor (1835) and “Carnaval” (also 1835). While Schumann wrote it fairly quickly, he then spent over two years working through various titles. He repackaged it several times, after rejections from publishers wary of the huge scale of this unusual piece - three movements and almost 700 bars - by such a young and unproven composer.

The multi-layered genesis of this work rivals the ambiguous formal structure in its complexity. Schumann’s original conceptions did not involve a fantasy at all. His first draft consisted of a single movement (the present opening movement) as a lament to the presumed loss of Clara. He finished this in June 1836 with the appropriate title of “Ruins.” However, the prospect of raising money for a Beethoven monument in Bonn prompted him to change course. He added the final two movements (entitled “Trophies” and “Palms” respectively) by December 1836, and offered it for publication as a “Grand Sonata for Beethoven.” In May 1837 the term “Fantasies” first appears, but by 1838 he changed directions again. By then he called it “Fata Morgana” after the fable of the Sicilian sorceress Morgana, who appears in a mirage (Clara has re-entered the picture). Breitkopf and Hartel finally agreed to publish it in December 1838 with Schumann’s new title of “Poems” (and movement titles of Ruins, Triumphal Arch and Constellation). At the last moment Schumann once again changes his mind, striking the movement titles and simply giving the work its current title, “Fantasie.” However, these thoughts came too late for the first edition in 1839, which still includes the movement titles.

Schumann made an even more significant change at the same time. To demonstrate overall unity, he initially drew on the 19th-century fondness for cyclical thematic reprise. However, he ultimately found this reappearance of first-movement themes in the finale too obvious, and wrote the present conclusion to the piece. According to Schumann scholar Nicholas Marston, he “thrived on the subtlety of musical relationships... [and loved] puzzles and riddles.” This subtlety also manifests itself as he deceptively connects the seemingly independent central section of the first movement (“Im Legendton”) to the surrounding material. Unconventional to the end, Schumann places a dramatic, march-like “conclusion” as the middle movement. He then offers an extended reverie as the true finale in one of the most original and challenging of all 19th-century piano works.

### **Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)**

#### **Nocturne in B Major, Op. 62 No. 1 (1846)**

#### **Barcarolle in F# Major, Op. 60 (1846)**

While Chopin’s 21 examples represent “the apogee of the pianistic nocturne” according to the New Grove Dictionary, he initially built upon the achievements of John Field in this genre. Alone among his contemporaries, Field definitively established the Nocturne in the early 19th century. Field was the first to use the French term “Nocturne” in 1813, and created the single-movement format, lyric melodic style and homophonic texture that subsequent composers also employed. However, it was not immediately taken up by other major composers, as Liszt, Mendelssohn and Schumann failed to contribute a single example. In the mid-19th century only one composer truly built upon Field’s nocturnes - Frederic Chopin.

Chopin settled in Paris in 1831. His status as a master virtuoso pianist quickly achieved legendary proportions, unique in music history for a performer who gave only thirty public concerts in his career. However, he cut back on his concerts to establish himself as a composer instead, and his earliest nocturnes already begin moving away from Field's style. He broadens the expressive range of the nocturne with more works in minor keys, and a closer integration of the middle section of the typical ABA form into the style of the opening material. He also fashions a more supple melodic style with irregular decorative figuration (listen for the cadenza-like scale passage near the end of the A section in Op. 62 No. 1), a wider ranging accompaniment, and a sophisticated phrase structure often deviating from Field's frequent two and four-bar patterns. The B Major piece, Op. 62 No. 1, comes from his final set of published nocturnes, written two years before his death. Typical of his later style, it also includes more complex counterpoint. Listen for the several simultaneous strands of melody during the repetition of the opening theme.

As his nocturnes deservedly became the most celebrated of all 19th-century examples, it also comes as no surprise that the 1846 "Barcarolle," Op. 60 - written the same year as the B Major Nocturne - remains probably the most famous single example for piano solo. He expands the typical meter of the Barcarolle, writing it in 12/8 rather than the more customary 6/8, but maintains the characteristic lilting rhythm of the genre. It often appears as an accompaniment figure in the left hand against Chopin's wonderfully flowing and complex melodic figuration in the right. Chopin sets the barcarolle as one of his larger movements, which the scholar and pianist Charles Rosen calls his "fifth ballade." He fashions two contrasting sections, the latter section containing two distinct themes. Each of the three main themes provides a slight increase in tempo. The reprise of each section thus offers a gradual crescendo of intensity, preparing the ground for a dramatic coda of primarily new material. Musical scholarship often links Chopin's style with that of his great Italian opera contemporary Vincenzo Bellini, and this climactic coda of unrelated thematic material comes straight out of opera. It closely resembles the operatic stretto - the fast, rousing final section of an ensemble. Thus the greatness of his "Barcarolle" not only influenced (and reflected) 19th-century music, but reached directly into the 20th century as well. It became one of Debussy's favorite Chopin pieces, and he incorporated its pianistic style into his "L'isle joyeuse" of 1904.

### **Franz Liszt (1811-1886)**

#### **Soirées de Vienne, No. 6 (1846-52)**

#### **Reminiscences de Norma (1841)**

The solo recital first emerged in modern form in the 19th century. Instrumental concerts open to the public were still rare events in the 18th century, and usually consisted of somewhat informal potpourris with a variety of artists and genres. Many prominent 19th-century pianists, Chopin and Schubert among them, also continued the aristocratic, 18th-century practice of the salon, playing intimate, small-scale concerts in front of a select group of guests. The remarkable popularity of Paganini's solo violin concerts in the 1820s and 1830s first put the genre on the map. Franz Liszt transferred Paganini's crowd-pleasing emphasis on extraordinary virtuoso effects to the keyboard. In the process he

contributed more to the establishment of the modern solo concert, and its emphasis on the piano, than any other artist.

The thousands that clamored for tickets to Liszt's concerts in the 1830s and 1840s (he played before 3,000 people in an 1837 Milan concert) demanded larger halls, broader effects, and more robust pianos. It was Liszt who first turned the keyboard to its modern concert position, with the lid of the piano (and the artist's seductive profile) at right angles to the audience. The 2001 New Grove Dictionary mentions that "modern piano technique owes much to Liszt's pioneering developments during these years." Such works as the "Transcendental Etudes" number among the most demanding pieces ever composed for the piano. Liszt also invented the concept of the master class, still a valuable component of any artist's education. And he even christened the new concerts with their modern terminology, the first artist to call them "recitals" (in his London concerts in 1840).

It thus comes as no surprise that Liszt also contributed to the new repertory of these concerts. Along with numerous transcriptions, he also helped develop the extraordinarily popular 19th-century concert paraphrase (a more or less free fantasy based on the works of other composers). Schubert became a favorite resource of Liszt for such pieces. He began the earliest of the nine pieces (based on Schubert keyboard dances) comprising the "Soirées de Vienne" in 1834, only six years after Schubert's death. Liszt possessed a remarkable capacity to recognize genius, because at that time Schubert remained virtually unknown outside of Vienna, and only a handful of Viennese musicians even knew of his instrumental works. He finished the "Soirées" between 1846-1852, basing No. 6 (tonight's piece) on selections from Schubert's "Valses Sentimentales" (D 779) and "Valses Nobles" (D 969). Though Schubert's melodies remain prominently featured, Liszt naturally adds his own overlay of virtuosic figuration, especially in the written-out cadenza.

The opera paraphrase proved an especially popular genre for 19th-century audiences. If you missed the opera itself, these fantasies or "Reminiscences" provided one of the only other sources to hear the work. According to keyboard scholar Charles Suttoni it was "...these pieces, not the piano works of Beethoven, Schubert, or even Chopin or Schumann, that provided the standard concert fare of the period" (between 1830-60). While Liszt set one of his best works on Mozart's "Don Juan" (Don Giovanni), for the most part he focused on living operatic composers (Donizetti, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, and Gounod). He wrote this paraphrase on Bellini's "Norma" in 1841, and it soon became recognized as one of the greatest of all his operatic fantasies. One factor contributing to this quality rested on Liszt's evolution beyond the soloistic figuration which dogged his earlier Reminiscences. Instead, Liszt focuses more on Bellini's music itself, drawing upon seven different themes to depict a more complete representation of the opera. He fashions a large three-part structure for many of these operatic fantasies. After a powerful bravura opening, the slower middle section of "Norma" features some of the most beautiful music of all such settings. Liszt then creates a drive to the final climax based in part on several themes presented simultaneously.

Program Notes by Ed Wight