Senior Recital:
Nguyen Le Binh Anh, Piano

G.F. Handel

‘The Harmonious Blacksmith’ Air and Variations

L. V. Beethoven

Piano Sonata in E major, Op. 109

I.  Vivace ma non troppo

II.  Prestissimo

III.  Gesangvoll mit innigster Empfindung

(Intermission 10’)

A. Scriabin

Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53

F. Liszt

Rhapsodie Espagnole
PROGRAMME NOTES

Taken from the composer's Suite No. 5 in E Major, HWV 430, *The Harmonious Blacksmith, Air and Variations* is certainly among the most often-played keyboard work of all time. Simple and fresh - like an appetizer before a big meal - the short work offers a traditional approach to variation form, showcasing brilliant passagework for both right and left hand, alternating through each variation. Despite its brief length, reaching the last variation may prove surprisingly satisfying for the listener, perhaps due to the “organic” rhythmic approach of this British-German composer, whereby note values are progressively shortened through each variation, creating a sense of drive and momentum.

Transitioning seamlessly to my next piece (also in the same key), we come to the *Sonata in E Major Op. 109*, composed in fact by a musician who was a great admirer of Handel. This late work of Beethoven is a remarkable demonstration of music that is at once structural and improvisational. When compared to Beethoven’s other sonatas, the opening *Vivace ma non troppo* movement is one of the shortest first movements of all. It features a compact use of thematic material and yet contains profound, lyric intensity. The rapid second movement, marked *Prestissimo*, can be seen as a more ‘Beethoven-like’ movement: symphonic, dramatic and contrasting in character. The final movement is in *Variation* form, contrasting with e.g. Handel’s *Variations* in that they display an exploratory and innovative manner, especially with regards to the treatment of resonance. Although Beethoven’s hearing condition must have waned completely by this point (1820) the deafness may have been the very impetus for the composer to free up himself from the current limitation of the instrument, reaching for transcendental qualities. Indeed, the whole movement is like a journey of how one’s soul finds its way to reach the heaven.

Whereas Beethoven’s *Sonata* aspires mostly to sacred spirituality, Scriabin’s *Sonata No. 5 Op. 53*, on the other hand, directly addresses the spirituality of sensual realm. In fact, after finishing his symphonic poem *The Poem of Ecstasy*, the Russian composer was inspired to complete his first single-movement Sonata in only six days. Based on the same poem, Scriabin wanted to bring to life the “creative spirit” and the “mysterious forces” held in the “obscure depths”. The work possesses a quality of spontaneity and rawness in depicting each theme, however, my favorite moment has to be when the ephemeral secondary theme - first introduced with extreme sensuality during the exposition - later explodes in ecstasy during the climax of the development.
To finish the recital, there is perhaps no better composer to choose from other than Franz Liszt, affectionately referred to as the “Father of Piano Recital”. As a result of the great pianist's journey to the country of bullfighters, his inspired *Rhapsodie Espagnole* was completed in 1863. It features extreme pianistic demands, but the massive work also delivers two iconic Spanish folk songs in a much larger structure, which makes it stand out among his many earlier “flashy” compositions. Through the extensive use of variation technique, the two themes evolve organically, leading toward the victorious and satisfying conclusion.