

Music@Menlo 2008

Carte Blanche Concert

Gary Graffman: For the Left Hand

THURSDAY, JULY 31, 8:00 P.M.

Prelude Performance, 6:00 p.m.

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Palo Alto

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Marcia and Paul Ginsburg with gratitude for their generous support.

TODAY'S PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

SKRYABIN (1872–1915)	Prelude, Nocturne, and Etude (1894)
REINECKE (1824–1910)	Piano Sonata for the Left Hand, op. 179 (1884)
BACH (1685–1750)/BRAHMS (1833–1897)	Chaconne (1877)
REGER (1873–1916)	Four Special Studies (1901)
KIRCHNER (b. 1919)	For the Left Hand (1995)
CORIGLIANO (b. 1938)	Etude no. 1 (1976)
BLUMENFELD (1863–1931)	Etude in A-flat Major, op. 36 (1905)
CHOPIN (1810–1849)	Two Etudes (1830–37)

Despite sustaining an injury to his right hand in 1979, legendary American pianist Gary Graffman has remained active on the world's concert stages, performing and extending the left-hand piano literature. Following his riveting Music@Menlo debut last season, performing the Korngold Suite for Piano and Strings, Gary Graffman returns with this unique recital of left-hand piano music. The program comprises arrangements of works by Bach, Chopin, and Skryabin, as well as pieces specifically conceived for the left hand alone by leading composers of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Some terms throughout these program notes appear in **BOLDFACE**. They can be found in the Glossary of Musical Terms in the program book.

PROGRAM

Aleksandr SKRYABIN (1872–1915) | **Prelude in c-sharp minor, op. 9, no. 1** (1894); **Nocturne in D-flat Major, op. 9, no. 2** (1894); **Etude in c-sharp minor, op. 2, no. 1** (1894) (arr. Jay Reise)

Carl REINECKE (1824–1910) | **Piano Sonata for the Left Hand, op. 179** (1884)

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andante lento (“Nemenj rózám a tarlóra”)
- III. Menuetto: Moderato
- IV. Finale: Allegro molto

Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897) | **Chaconne by J. S. Bach (from Partita no. 2 in d minor for Solo Violin, BWV 1004)** (1877)

INTERMISSION

Max REGER (1873–1916) | **Vier Spezialstudien** (1901)

- I. Scherzo
- II. Humoreske
- III. Romanze
- IV. Präludium und Fuge

Leon KIRCHNER (b. 1919) | **For the Left Hand** (1995)

John CORIGLIANO (b. 1938) | **Etude no. 1 (from Etude Fantasy)** (1976)

Felix BLUMENFELD (1863–1931) | **Etude in A-flat Major, op. 36** (1905)

Fryderyk CHOPIN (1810–1849) | **Etude in e-flat minor, op. 10, no. 6** (1830–32) (arr. Leopold Godowski); **Etude in b minor, op. 25, no. 10** (1835–37) (arr. Leopold Godowski)

Gary Graffman, piano

Notes on the Program

By Gary Graffman

Composers as well as performers of piano music written for the left hand alone face unique problems. For the composer, the very idea of writing music for five fingers which must sound as if it's being played by ten can be a daunting challenge. For the pianist, not only must the one active hand do double duty, it must also learn to function quite differently from its accustomed, often subordinate, manner. Now the left hand, in coming to the fore, must learn to play (in addition to—and simultaneously with—its normal accompanying role) the melodic lines traditionally assigned its **COUNTERPOINT**. To make matters worse, these often singing, **LEGATO** (not to mention complicated) melodies, usually played by the right hand's most agile fourth and fifth fingers, are now undertaken by the left hand's far clumsier thumb, which in itself is quite a virtuoso feat. And all this has to be accomplished while the pianist—whose body is contorted into a most unnatural position when the left hand performs its acrobatics far up in the treble of the keyboard—quickly learns to hang on for dear life with the right hand to the instrument, or the piano bench, or any other available solid matter, to avoid losing balance and being catapulted into the audience.

It is no wonder that very little music has been written in this genre and that the existing works have almost always been composed for a specific purpose or artist. Much of this repertoire owes its existence to the Viennese pianist Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961), who lost his right arm to shrapnel in World War I. In addition to the Ravel **CONCERTO** for Left Hand, he commissioned works for piano and orchestra by Richard Strauss, Sergei Prokofiev, Benjamin Britten, Franz Schmidt, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold.

Aleksandr Skryabin wrote his **Prelude in c-sharp minor, OP. 9, no. 1**, and **NOCTURNE in D-flat Major, op. 9, no. 2**, in 1894, after he had injured his right hand through excessive practicing. An excellent and popular pianist, Skryabin recovered from his ailment and resumed his two-handed performing career. Nevertheless, he included these works in his 1906–07 United States tour, and their presence on the program enhanced the box-office appeal of his concerts.

Skryabin's well-known **ETUDE in c-sharp minor, op. 2, no. 1**, written for two hands, is included here in a very freely arranged version for left hand alone by the Philadelphia composer Jay Reise.

The reigning one-handed pianist of the pre-Wittgenstein era was a Hungarian nobleman, Count Zichy (1849–1924), perhaps best remembered now as a bitter enemy of Gustav Mahler, who was music director of the Budapest Opera during Zichy's tenure as administrator. Zichy, who lost his right arm in a hunting accident, often played his own compositions on his lengthy charity tours, and although the **Carl Reinecke Opus 179 SONATA** bears no dedication, it is likely that Zichy also played this charming work, which was composed late in Reinecke's long life and exemplifies his gift for inventive melodies and graceful, flowing keyboard writing. A relationship to Zichy is indicated in that the second **MOVEMENT** is based on a Hungarian folk tune. Zichy was known to be an ardent nationalist.

Johannes Brahms's transcription of the Bach **Chaconne from the Suite for Solo Violin in d minor** is an early example of a work transcribed for the left hand alone from the repertoire for another instrument. According to some authorities, Brahms (an excellent pianist

himself) transcribed it as an exercise to strengthen his own left hand. But it has also been claimed that Brahms arranged this famous piece as a labor of love—for Clara Schumann, when she was temporarily incapacitated by a right-hand injury. He sent it to her with a note, “I consider Bach’s **CHACONNE** one of the most wonderful and unfathomable pieces of music, and the only one way in which I can secure undiluted pleasure from the piece is when I play it with the left hand alone! The same degree of difficulty, the nature of [the] technique...everything conspires to make me feel like a violinist.”

Max Reger, who was a great admirer of Mendelssohn and Schumann, was most strongly influenced by Wagner. He inherited the latter’s harmonic style, which involved extending the possibilities of tonality without discarding its framework. His **Four Special Studies** for the left hand are quite typical in their harmonic, **POLYPHONIC**, and technical complexity. Like many of Reger’s compositions, the set ends with an intricately devised **FUGUE**.

Pulitzer Prize-winning composer **Leon Kirchner** was born in Brooklyn in 1919. Throughout his long career (which included a stint as a pre-med student) he has produced a large body of varied works, ranging from solo and chamber music to opera. **For the Left Hand**, composed in 1995 for Leon Fleisher, was inspired by lines from Emily Dickinson’s *Wild Nights* and Edna St. Vincent Millay’s *Renascence*.

Wild Nights

Wild Nights—wild Nights:
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our Luxury!

Futile—the Winds—
To a Heart in port
Done with Compass

Done with the chart!

Rowing in Eden—
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but Moor—
Tonight—in Thee!

—Emily Dickinson

An excerpt from *Renascence*:

A quickening Gust
Of wind blew up to me and thrust
Into my face a miracle
Of orchard-breath, and with the smell—
I know not how such things can be!—
I breathed my soul back into me.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

John Corigliano wrote his **Etude Fantasy** in 1976. It is a set of five studies, of which the first is for the left hand alone. But as this left-hand work continues directly into the next etude, it had no ending as originally written. Corigliano wrote a special ending in the summer of 2007 so that I could include the piece on my recital programs.

Felix Blumenfeld dedicated his **Etude in A-flat Major, op. 36**, to his remarkable colleague Leopold Godowski, who felt that even two-handed pianists should cultivate left-hand virtuosity. Ironically, Blumenfeld’s right hand was paralyzed by illness not long after he wrote the etude, and it ultimately became one of the few pieces he could play.

The two **Chopin/Godowski etudes** are from Godowski’s elaborate series of fifty-three paraphrases on the complete set of Chopin’s etudes. Godowski, whose virtuosity was regarded as without equal in his time, pushed the envelope of technical demands to almost unimaginable limits. Included in the series are several tour-de-force etudes for the left hand alone, from which the two on tonight’s program were selected.