



PIANO
CLASSICS

TCHAIKOVSKY

Album for the Young Op.39

12 Pieces for Piano of Medium Difficulty Op.40

Yuan Sheng

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY 1840-1893

Album for the Young Op.39		20. No.20 The Old Witch	0'46
1. No.1 Morning Prayer	1'11	21. No.21 Sweet Dreams	1'46
2. No.2 Winter Morning	1'09	22. No.22 Lark Song	1'13
3. No.3 Playing Hobby-Horses	0'42	23. No.23 The Organ-Grinder	
4. No.4 Mama	1'04	Sings	0'50
5. No.5 March of the		24. No.24 In Church	2'22
Wooden Soldiers	0'53		
6. No.6 The Sick Doll	1'54	12 Pieces for Piano	
7. No.7 The Doll's Funeral	1'55	of Medium Difficulty Op.40	
8. No.8 Waltz	1'20	25. No.1 Etude	1'42
9. No.9 The New Doll	0'46	26. No.2 Chanson triste	3'07
10. No.10 The Harmonica Player	0'38	27. No.3 Marche funèbre	8'31
11. No.11 Mazurka	1'06	28. No.4 Mazurka	3'33
12. No.12 Russian Song	0'30	29. No.5 Mazurka	3'34
13. No.13 Kamarinskaya	0'36	30. No.6 Chant sans paroles	2'54
14. No.14 Polka	0'48	31. No.7 Au village	4'35
15. No.15 Italian Song	0'57	32. No.8 Valse	3'38
16. No.16 Old French Song	1'02	33. No.9 Valse	6'06
17. No.17 German Song	1'01	34. No.10 Danse russe	2'26
18. No.18 Neapolitan Song	1'03	35. No.11 Scherzo	4'01
19. No.19 Nanny's Story	0'43	36. No.12 Rêverie interrompue	4'23

Yuan Sheng *piano*

Tchaikovsky's *Children's Album Op.39*, is a collection of twenty-four pieces for children studying the piano. Inspired by Schumann's *Album for the Young Op.68*, these pieces are musically satisfying with imaginative titles and settings. Tchaikovsky began working on the pieces in May 1878 while travelling in Europe. His intention to write music for children grew after remarking that he wished to compose pedagogical pieces that were both instructive and artistic. It is fitting that he later dedicated these works to his young nephew, Vladimir Davydov. Tchaikovsky worked very quickly through this composition, producing a copy of the works in just a few days; he sent them off for publishing a few months later.

The set contains a number of character pieces using a great variety of moods and scenes. The pieces are based on a variety of themes with familiar places and sounds, narrative elements, and international musical styles. Character pieces, short works that reference something non-musical such as a person or a place, were quite popular in the Romantic period and made excellent pedagogical works for children as they used imaginative titles to inspire musical playing from developing musicians. Tchaikovsky's *Children's Album* references a number of familiar places and sounds that children would be acquainted with at this time and still today. The set starts off with *Morning Prayer*, evoking the sound of a hymn with four-part writing. *Mama* (No.4) contains beautiful, lyrical melodies reminiscent of Robert Schumann's writing in his *Album for the Young*. The connection to Schumann does not end here – the following piece, titled *March of the Wooden Soldiers* (No.5), seems to be written in the same vein as Schumann's *Soldier March* from his set. Other pieces capture familiar sounds including the sound of the harmonica (No.10), the song of a lark (No.22), and even the atmosphere and chanting of a choir

in a Russian church (No.24). These familiar and relatable pieces are evocative and quickly draw the listener into their unique soundscapes.

The set also contains story elements that are sometimes linked together. The sixth piece, *The Sick Doll*, exposes the listener to the dramatic story of a doll who eventually succumbs to its illness and is given a serious funeral setting in the following piece (No.7). After a brisk waltz, the ninth piece, *The New Doll*, brings relief to the tragic story. Other narratives are found in the set, including in *Nanny's Story* (No.19), *The Old Witch* (No.20), and *Sweet Dreams* (No.21), which recalls Schumann's *Traumerei*.

Perhaps the most successful and popular of the works are the dances and pieces evoking international styles. Italy is referenced three times in this work. The *Italian Song* (No.15) evokes Italian opera, while the *Neapolitan Song* recalls the piece of the same title from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. The *Organ-Grinder Sings* (No.23) contains a melody also used in *Réverie interrompue* (Op.40, No.12), which Tchaikovsky apparently heard sung by a street performer while in Venice. The set also includes music evoking Germany (No.17), France (No.16), and Russia through two different folk songs (Nos. 12 and 13). In addition to these, two dances – the delightful *Mazurka* (No.11) and the *Polka* (No.14) – are amongst the more challenging and engaging of the set.

The pedagogical value of these pieces cannot be understated. Tchaikovsky definitely succeeded in providing suitable and inspired pieces for children to play as they develop musically and technically at the piano. The works stand out in the pedagogical literature next to the excellent works of other composers of this time including Schumann. Despite the intended use amongst developing pianists, the pieces are artistically woven together and remain one of the most significant pedagogical collections of the nineteenth century. Although not necessarily intended to be performed as a set, hearing

them one after another demonstrates Tchaikovsky's caring and brilliant influence on musical education for young pianists.

Tchaikovsky's *12 Pieces, Op.40* are a set of works he composed between February – April 1878, immediately before he began work on his *Children's Album, Op.39*. The works contain a variety of moods and dances of moderate difficulty, demonstrating Tchaikovsky's interest in adding intimate, charming pieces to the repertoire. While Tchaikovsky composed these works, he was also working on his fiendishly difficult *Violin Concerto, Op.35* and his *Grand Sonata in G Major Op.37* for piano. This set of twelve pieces surely provided a much-needed distraction for Tchaikovsky from the large-scale works he was producing at the same time. The work was published in 1879 alongside many others.

The set opens with a spectacular start titled *Etude*, containing virtuosic passagework for both hands. The piece opens with rapid fingerwork for the right hand, which is immediately taken up by the left hand. This fast exchange between the hands comes to an exciting finish with unison passagework closing the short, but brilliant composition. *Chanson triste* (No.2) is tuneful and melancholic, using a melodic fragment with repeated notes to build much of the musical material. The brighter middle section of the work develops the expression, before returning to the melancholic tune from the opening. *Marche funèbre* (No.3) is full of pathos and is one of the longest pieces of the set. The three-part form begins with a sorrowful melody replete with dotted rhythms, a descending bass line, and the tragedy that is to be expected in the key of C minor. A brass fanfare in E-flat major interrupts the march before returning to C minor. A middle section ensues and the piece moves into A-flat major, evoking the lyrical, cantabile sound of Robert Schumann. Melodic material is exchanged between the hands before

the music returns dramatically to the C minor material of the opening to complete the piece.

The next two selections contain the first pair of the set – a pair of Mazurkas. Both are in a ternary form and have very likeable themes. The first of the pair (No.4), is in C Major and contains a playful and delightfully *scherzando* character. The middle section of the piece moves to A-flat major, providing contrast in key and in material with a bolder theme in octaves. The second of the two mazurkas (No.5) contains a very charming theme from the start. The material, related rhythmically to the previous mazurka, is primarily scalar, rising and falling in stepwise patterns. A sudden change to B-flat major for the middle section includes an exhaustive use of a chordal motive. Characteristic accents on the second beat occur in both pieces along with regular phrase lengths.

Chant sans paroles (No.6), a “song without words” reminiscent of the excellent works of Felix Mendelssohn, follows in A minor. The melody, melancholic and nostalgic, is marked by its rather narrow range (occupying about a fifth) and its predictable phrase rhythms. The middle of the piece provides some interesting moments compositionally – imitation between the right and left hands as well as a passage in which the same melodic material repeats seven times and is harmonized in multiple different ways. After a descent into the tenor and bass range of the piano, a solo melodic line rises to the final chord of the piece. *Au village* (No.7) begins very similarly to the way the previous piece ended, with a plaintive solo call that is answered in harmony. New material follows a half cadence, emphasizing repeated notes, before the opening melodic material makes an appearance in the left hand. Two additional utterances of the opening material show Tchaikovsky's ability to reuse existing material in new ways. The piece seems to fade away into

a quiet close, but Tchaikovsky surprises the listener by inserting a brilliant and exciting second section in C major. Rapid right hand passagework is supported by chordal accompaniment. A short middle section modulates frequently, helping to build musical tension to the lively ending of this work, perhaps one of the most successful from the set.

Another pair occupies the next two places in the set – this time contrasting valse. Valse (No.8) in A-flat major is charming and wistful, recalling the famous waltzes of Chopin. The middle section, marked by a key change to D-flat major, contains hemiola patterns in the melodic material. The writing throughout the piece is endlessly natural and flowing, making this one of the most enjoyable of the entire set. The following piece, *Valse* (No.9) in F-sharp minor, is contrasting in mood and material. Striking a much more serious yet tender mood, the valse begins with a rising half step, before dipping down to a lower register, followed by chords marked *portato*. These motives build much of the opening section. A contrasting section in A major, similar to the previous valse, contains a hemiola pattern in the right hand against chordal accompaniment. The melody swaps between the hands once, but is primarily given to the right hand. A repeat of the opening material followed by broken diminished seventh chords leads to a dramatic conclusion of this valse.

Danse russe (No.10), is similar in form to *Au village* (No.7), with a slower opening section followed by a rousing and speedy second half. The melodic material for this work is in simple four-bar phrases and is based on music from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Tchaikovsky adds interest through various changes to the texture and register. An interesting moment occurs about halfway through – Tchaikovsky alternates repeatedly between a dominant chord and a diminished seventh chord. A quiet close to the first half of the piece leads to the *Allegro molto vivace* that closes the work. The climax of

the piece comes at the close – with the opening melody played *fortissimo* against alternating chords in the left hand.

The following work, *Scherzo* (No.11), is dramatic from the start. Set in D minor, the piece is urgent and constantly pressing forward. The right hand plays octaves – sometimes broken – throughout most of the opening section, before a lyrical trio marked *cantabile* begins. A duet ensues between the hands with the left hand imitating material initially stated by the right hand. The scherzo section repeats and leads to a cheerful coda in D major that quietly ends the piece.

The entire set closes with *Rêverie interrompue* (No.12). The introduction to the piece is quite fascinating in its wandering nature. At first, Tchaikovsky suggests C major, then E-flat major, before moving through a number of other keys chromatically. A rolled E-flat major chord ends this masterfully composed introduction and helps to usher in the key of the piece – A-flat major. Listeners might recognize this melody, which is shared with *The Organ-Grinder Sings* (Op.39, No.23). The melody is first placed in the middle register with rolled chords accompanying it. Tchaikovsky elevates the melody to the soprano voice. Contrasting material, marked *dolcissimo*, sings in an exquisite rising and falling motion. The tender melody returns and is later counterpointed with a falling chromatic voice in the left hand. The set comes to a very quiet and modest conclusion in this simple, yet very expressive piece.

These two sets, written consecutively, show Tchaikovsky's fascination with the romantic character piece, dance, and international styles, as well as his tender love for children and enthusiasm for music pedagogy. His preference for cantabile melodies, conservative phrase lengths, and smaller forms defines the pieces that come from these two opuses. *The Children's Album*

Op.39 has maintained popularity since its composition, with children around the world growing musically and technically through Tchaikovsky's artistic pieces. The *Twelve Pieces Op.40*, though unfamiliar to many, contain many wonderful pieces of great quality that deserve more attention. Through these charming pieces, one hears Tchaikovsky's tuneful and imaginative ideas come to life at the piano.

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YUAN SHENG

Yuan Sheng has gained international recognition through his extensive performances in more than twenty countries. New York Times wrote that “Mr. Sheng’s ear for balance is unfailing... ..the attraction was entirely visceral.” New York Concert Review proclaims that “Mr. Sheng is an artist of the highest quality” The renowned music author David Dubal states that: “Just listen to him, you will be touched!”

Mr. Sheng has performed in Carnegie Hall in New York, Cadogan Hall in London, Ford Performing Arts Center in Toronto, Seoul National Center for the Performing Arts as well as National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing, and Shanghai Concert Hall in Shanghai, China. He has been heard and seen on WQXR in New York, WGBH in Boston, NPR in U.S.A, National Radio Station of Spain, National Radio Station of France, National Television of Poland, China Central TV, and Beijing Music Radio.

As a soloist, Mr. Sheng has performed with Tenerife Symphony of Spain, Oradea State Philharmonic of Romania, Kazakhstan National Symphony, National Symphony of Cuba, National Philharmonic of the Philippines as well as China Philharmonic. As a chamber musician, Mr. Sheng he has performed with the Shanghai String Quartet, violinists Aaron Rosand, Arnold Steinhardt, Vadim Repin, as well as cellist Andres Diaz.

Mr. Sheng’s performances and research on the music of Bach have attracted international attention in recent years. The New York Times said that “The A major and A minor Preludes and Fugues from Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, were models of clarity, balance and proportion. That is not to say that they were straightforward or unmediated: Mr. Sheng made the A minor Prelude into a fiery drama, with the equally energetic but

stunningly voiced Fugue as an otherworldly rejoinder.” The International Piano Magazine, considered Yuan Sheng “The nation (China)’s premier interpreter of Bach.”

His understanding and command on harpsichord, clavichord and early pianos has also generated highest acclaim. In reviewing his recital of All-Beethoven program on an 1805 Kathonig piano, the Boston Intellegencer states that “Sheng had absorbed this music so thoroughly that a listener might easily have imagined the composer at the keyboard.”

Mr. Sheng records under Piano Classics label and NCPA (China National Center for the Performing Arts) Record label. His six album recordings of works by Bach and a Three-Disc Set of works by Chopin performed on an 1845 Pleyel piano have been released internationally. His recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations on harpsichord (NCPA Classics) won 2019 CMIC Music Awards’ Best Classical Performance Award.

Born to a family of musicians in Beijing, Yuan Sheng began his music studies with his mother at age five, continuing them later at the Central Conservatory with Professors Qifang Li, Huili Li, and Guangren Zhou. From 1991 to 1997 Yuan Sheng was a scholarship student of Solomon Mikowsky at the Manhattan School of Music in New York City, where he completed his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees. His interest in the music of Bach inspired him to study intensively with Rosalyn Tureck.

Yuan Sheng is a professor of piano at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music.

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