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Nom/Name: Ying Zhang

Classe de/Class of: Stéphane Lemelin

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### **Chen Yi – Ba Ban (1999)**

Chen Yi is one of the most significant contemporary Chinese composers. Trained in both China and the United States, she integrates traditional Chinese musical aesthetics with Western compositional techniques. Ba Ban, meaning eight beats, draws its inspiration from an ancient Chinese tune bearing the same name, a melody that has been passed down through generations.

This work exists in multiple arrangements, including a chamber version and this virtuosic piano solo. The piece begins with sparse sonorities and isolated gestures, recalling the meditative space of traditional Chinese music. The piano imitates the timbres of Chinese instruments such as the pipa and guqin through pentatonic melodic shapes, wide spacing, and ornamented grace notes. As the piece unfolds, it traverses a narrative arc of increasing intensity. The textures become more complex, with layered rhythms and sudden bursts of energy, before returning to introspective calm.

Chen's music is often described as a bridge between cultures. In Ba Ban, one hears not only a stylistic synthesis but a cultural dialogue. A 2020 analysis by John Roeder notes how “Chen employs ‘transformational discontinuities’ to mirror the spontaneity of Chinese folk traditions, rejecting Western teleological progression in favor of episodic storytelling.”<sup>1</sup> (Roeder, “Review: Interactions of Folk Melody,” *Music Theory Online*, 2020).

As a pianist who came from China, the experience of performing Ba Ban is transformative. The piece demands a fine balance between control and release, structure and improvisational spirit. It is less about imposing interpretation and more about inhabiting a sound world where gestures, timbre, and silence carry meaning.

### **Frédéric Chopin – Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante in E-Flat Major, Op. 22**

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<sup>1</sup> Roeder, John. “Review: Interactions of Folk Melody.” *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (2020).  
<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.3/mto.20.26.3.roeder.html>.

This dual section work by Chopin is both a poetic and a virtuosic showcase. The Andante spianato was composed in 1834 and serves as a lyrical prelude to the Grande Polonaise brillante, which was written earlier (1830 -1831) but later published with the Andante as a set.

“The term ‘spianato’ suggests smoothness and serenity.”<sup>2</sup> In the Andante, Chopin conjures a graceful, almost nocturne-like atmosphere, where a singing right-hand melody floats over harp-like arpeggios. This section is in G major and flows with gentle momentum, often compared to its expressive purity. The use of rubato here is subtle and intimate, inviting the pianist to shape phrases with personal nuance.

After a fanfare-like transition, the Grande Polonaise brillante enters with bold, noble gestures. The polonaise, a Polish dance in triple meter, serves as a medium through which Chopin expresses national pride and personal flair. While filled with dazzling technical passages - rapid octaves, cascading scales, and brilliant figurations - the work never loses its aristocratic elegance. As Jeffrey Kallberg argues, “Chopin’s music frequently stages a dialogue between the poetic and the heroic.”<sup>3</sup>(Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries*, 1996).

The performer must manage stark contrasts: lyrical refinement versus exuberant display, restraint versus flamboyance. In performance, this piece becomes a balancing act of temperament, one that captures Chopin’s dual artistic identity. The final pages, triumphant and radiant, conclude with a flourish that encapsulates both the Romantic spirit and the classical poise that define Chopin's voice.

### **Robert Schumann – Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6**

Schumann's Davidsbündlertänze (Dances of the League of David), composed in 1837, is a musical manifesto as much as a piano cycle. The League of David was a fictional brotherhood invented by Schumann, whose mission was to combat the philistinism he perceived in the musical world. Through eighteen brief but vivid pieces, Schumann channels his inner dialogue via his alter egos - Florestan (the impetuous, extroverted self) and Eusebius (the dreamy, introspective soul).

Unlike traditional dance suites, this set unfolds more like a diary or novel in miniature. Each piece contributes to a larger emotional and narrative landscape. “Motifs recur and transform, and the tonal structure is cyclical, echoing ideas of return and memory.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Mieczysław Tomaszewski, “Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante in E-Flat Major, Op. 22,” *Chopin 2020*, <https://chopin2020.pl/en/compositions/70/andante-spianato-and-grande-polonaise-brillante-in-e-flat-major-op.-22>.

<sup>3</sup>Kallberg, Jeffrey. *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre*. Harvard University Press, 1996. <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/43768080>.

<sup>4</sup>Nigel Simeone, “Program Notes: Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6,” *Music in the Round*, <https://musicintheround.co.uk/programmes/schumann-robert-davidsbundertanze-op-6/>.

Several pieces are marked with the initials F. or E., signaling which voice is speaking. The first movement begins gently but hides harmonic tension beneath its lyrical surface. Others, like No. 3 and No. 13, erupt with sudden passion and rhythmic instability, hallmarks of Florestan. Eusebius is felt in the hesitant, almost murmured lines of No. 5 and No. 14.

The 17th piece is particularly striking: a march-like character full of resolve, it appears to conclude the cycle. But Schumann adds an 18th piece marked "Wie aus der Ferne" ("As if from afar"), which revisits earlier themes with a hushed, reflective tone. "It suggests that Schumann, ever the Romantic, believed true artistic resolution was always just out of reach."<sup>5</sup> ("Program Notes: Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6," *Music in the Round*).

Performing this cycle is not only a technical challenge but an emotional journey. One must inhabit the full spectrum of Schumann's imaginative world - sometimes within a single phrase. The work is intimate, volatile, ironic, and deeply human. It does not simply entertain but also invites the listener into a conversation across time, where identity and expression are forever in flux.

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<sup>5</sup> Nigel Simeone, "Program Notes: *Davidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6," *Music in the Round*, <https://musicintheround.co.uk/programmes/schumann-robert-davidsbundertanze-op-6/>.

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