Virginia Tech
School of Performing Arts
Music | Theatre | Cinema
Presents
A Faculty Piano Recital
Dr. Hsiang Tu

Musical Birds and Co.
Monday, April 19, 7:30 p.m.
Livestreaming from the Recital Salon

Musical Birds
Birds are magnificent subjects for musical portraits. Not only are their songs a godsent inspiration for composers, birds’ soaring flight and darting movement also light up a composer’s imagination.

Group I (11 minutes)
A Hermit Thrush at Eve, Op. 92, No. 1
Amy Beach (1867-1944)

Oiseaux tristes (Sad Birds), from Miroirs
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Le Cygne (The Swan), from Le carnaval des animaux
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)
Transcription by Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938)

One of the first American composers to earn international renown, Amy Beach faithfully wrote down the songs of a hermit thrush that appeared outside of her window one day and used it as the central theme in the profoundly moving and atmospheric work. While the hermit thrush seems rather carefree, Ravel describes the haunting and forlorn bird calls in Sad Birds as “birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer.” Godowsky’s skillful transcription of The Swan capitalizes on every one of the pianist’s ten fingers. Seeing that it is unwise for the piano to compete with the cello (the original owner of this tune), Godowsky drapes the melody with countless fragments of arabesque figures and chromatic lines that add to the melancholy beauty of the music.

Group II (9 minutes)
Le Coucou, from Premier Livre de Pieces de Clavecin, 3rd Suite
Louis-Claude Daquin (1694-1772)

Les Fauvettes Plaintives (Plaintive Warblers), from the 14th Ordre.
François Couperin (1668-1733)

Le Rappel des Oiseaux (The Conference of the Birds), from Suite in E Minor
Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

The French Baroque keyboard music deserves more time in the spotlight. Daquin is all but forgotten today except for the upbeat and catchy Le Coucou, but he was a highly sought-after organist and a child prodigy who performed in front of Louis XIV at the age of 6. The next work, in contrast, is by the single most important French Baroque composer for the keyboard: François Couperin. Les Fauvettes Plaintives shows extreme
motivic economy by featuring exclusively a two-note motif riding on the dotted rhythm that simulates quite accurately the warblers’ song pattern in nature. While no specific bird is named in Rameau’s *Le Rappel des Oiseaux*, the work vividly paints the picture of chatty birds vying for attention. More so than the previous two works, Rameau weaves contrasting moods and colors with well-delineated phrasing, a process that points toward the classical era.

**Group III (4 minutes)**

*Småfugl (Little Bird),* from Lyric Pieces, Op. 43, No. 4  
Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

*Ballet of Unhatched Chicks,* from *Pictures at an Exhibition*  
Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

*A 60-second Ballet (for Chickens)*  
William Bolcom (b. 1938)

These are three very short and whimsical miniatures. While the musical device Grieg employs to simulate bird chirps is nothing new and the overall shaping of the piece unremarkable, the work’s captivating power is a testament to Grieg’s genius. “Ballet of Unhatched Chicks,” one of the shortest numbers in Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, was inspired by sketches of children dancing as chicks in eggshell costumes from an actual ballet production. American composer William Bolcom begins his little homage to Mussorgsky with a rude rooster crow and ends with the chickens disappearing off stage.

**Group IV (17 minutes)**

*Sýček neodletěl! (The Barn Owl Hasn’t Flown Away!)*, from *On the Overgrown Path*  
Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

*Pajaro Triste (Sad Bird)*  
Federico Mompou (1893-1987)

*St. François d’Assise. La prédication aux oiseaux*  
Franz Liszt (1811-86)

(St. Francis of Assisi. The Sermon to the Birds), from *Légendes*

These works share a quiet intensity that transcends birds into the symbolic and spiritual. The hypnotic *The Barn Owl Hasn’t Flown Away!* by the Czech composer Janáček deals obliquely with the death of his then 20-year old daughter in 1903. Despite the work’s published English title, it should have been the tawny owl instead, whose call Janáček recreated with stunning accuracy on the piano that a quick YouTube search would quickly prove. The owl in question brings bad omen in Czech folklore, and its oppressive hovering is something that the faithful chorale in the piece repeatedly failed to dispel.

Catalan composer Mompou’s music strives to “do simple well”: Every note, every gesture, and every chord are painstakingly crafted to perfection. Incidentally sharing the same title as the Ravel in Group I, Mompou’s bird is even more inwardly inclined and moves in a slow dance that never quite found its momentum.

After a string of personal unhappiness and tragedy that included the deaths of two of his children, Liszt retreated to a monastery outside of Rome in 1863 (two years later, he would enter the lower orders of the priesthood). It was under such circumstances that he composed the Two *Legends*. The first, “St. François d’Assise. La prédication aux
oiseaux,” opens with harmonies and figurations that depict the birds in their natural state. The impassioned sermon of St. Francis then begins with operatic fervor, but the birds are unmoved. A glorious fanfare of divine proportion interjects and gradually churns St. Francis’ persuasion into a powerful wave that carries the music to its climax. The piece ends with serene peace and love as the birds again return to nature.

**Cat and Mouse (15 minutes)**

*O Gatinho de papelão (Little Cardboard Cat) and O Camondongo de Massa (The Little Papier-Mâché Mouse)*, from *A Prole do bebê, II (Baby’s Family, II)*

Tabby Cat Walk

William Bolcom

The Cat and the Mouse – Scherzo Humoristique.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Brazilian composer Villa-Lobos wrote three books of character pieces titled *The Baby’s Family* (Book 3 is now presumed lost), which are among his most popular works for piano. Book 2 contains pieces inspired by toy animals (Book 1 is about dolls), and each piece is an etude that explores individual aspects of the piano technique. *The Little Cardboard Cat* puts a Ravel-esque obsession on a two-note figure that mimics the meowing of the cat, while *The Little Papier-Mâché Mouse* completely obliterated the melancholy and wandering cat with high-voltage romps that send the pianist’s fingers scurrying across the keyboard.

Ragtime fell out of fashion by the 1920s but never completely went away. A significant revival was spurred on by Bolcom, Gunther Schuller, and others in the late 1960s and 70s. The best of Bolcom’s rags carry catchy melodies, artful craftsmanship, and adventurous harmony. The *Tabby Cat Walk* captures the elegant nonchalance and quiet confidence of the animal, as well as something that a cat could spend up to two-thirds of its life enjoying. Despite full of Debussy-tinged whole-tone harmony, Copland’s *The Cat and the Mouse* was written in Brooklyn before the composer’s study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. The piece was an immediate hit: the major French publishing house Durand quickly bought it after hearing Copland playing it in Paris, making it the first published score of Copland’s career.

**Insects (10 minutes)**

*Noctuelles (Night Moths)*, from *Miroirs*

Maurice Ravel

*Butterflies, hummingbirds*, from *12 New Etudes for Piano*

William Bolcom

*From the Diary of a Fly*, from *Mikrokosmos, #142/Vol. 6*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

*The Black Fly*

Seymour Bernstein (b. 1927)

*The Flight of the Bumblebee*

Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Transcription by Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

It is still possible to be startled by the degree of harmonic shifts and dissonance in the opening of “Noctuelles.” The frequent disruption of pulse depicts the insect’s erratic flight pattern, and the flapping of the wings is mirrored by a figure that requires fast
rotating movement in the pianist’s right hand—a pattern that Bolcom does not hesitate to make use of in *Butterflies, hummingbirds*. But Bolcom’s etude (the whole set won him a Pulitzer in 1988) takes it a step further with rapid tremolos that could only be played by placing one’s entire palms horizontally on the keys—both a sonic and kinetic simulation of the hummingbird’s wings.

Bartók’s musical portraits of animals reveal a deep level of empathy that could not have come from anyone but a true lover of the animal world. According to the composer, *From the Diary of a Fly* describes a fly buzzing around and unsuspectedly gets caught in a cobweb; it then desperately tries to free itself before being eaten; after much struggle, it escapes and flies away happily!

The wonderful pianist and much-revered pedagogue Seymour Bernstein got the idea for *The Black Fly* during his own performance of *From the Diary of a Fly* many years ago: Bernstein, a man of great wit, suddenly had the idea of swatting at an imaginary fly at the end of the Bartók, and he cleverly incorporates this human behavior into his homage to the earlier work.

Great transcribers can transcend the original: Rachmaninoff’s truncated version of *The Flight of the Bumblebee* is perhaps more well-known today than Rimsky-Korsakov’s orchestral original, and the lithe and effective piano writing is every bit as thrilling.

**Biblical (6 minutes)**

*The Serpent’s Kiss – Rag Fantasy*, from *The Garden of Eden*  
William Bolcom

*The Serpent’s Kiss* is the showstopper from a quartet of rags that are inspired by the story of the original sin. As if the relentless drive and virtuosic firework aren’t enough to fully realizing the insidious allure of the serpent, the pianist is, at times, asked to incorporate foot-tapping, tongue-clicking, hand-slapping, and whistling—a wild one-person band on display!

**Total Time: ca. 72 minutes**

Praised by *The New York Times* for his "eloquent sensitivity," *The Boston Intelligencer* for his "impeccable technique," and *Fantare* for his “chameleon-like ability to move between the composers,” pianist **Hsiang Tu** has graced the audience with his creative programming and wide range of repertoire. Dr. Tu is currently working on the complete cycles of piano solo works by Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel and thematic recitals featuring animal-themed music. Born in Taipei, Taiwan, he debuted in New York at Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center as the winner of The Juilliard School Concerto Competition, and he has performed in venues all over the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, National Museum Cardiff, and National Recital Hall in Taipei.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Tu has released his debut solo CD *Bestiary on Ivory* with Bridge Records, and presented virtually for the Virginia Music Teachers Association’s annual
conference and the Virginia Music Educators Association. Recently, he gave an online recital for the Conservatory at Lynn University, a masterclass at the Peabody Conservatory Preparatory Division, and served as a jury member for the East Carolina University Young Artist Competition.

Before being appointed as an Assistant Professor of Piano at Virginia Tech, Dr. Tu taught at the University of New Hampshire, Utah Valley University, and Snow College. He studied with Hung-Kuan Chen, Jerome Lowenthal, and HaeSun Paik, and holds a B.M. in Piano Performance from the University of Calgary and an M.M. and D.M.A. in Piano Performance from The Juilliard School.