

# April 2025

by Rebecca Winzenried

**J. S. Bach (1685-1750)**  
**Three Chorale Preludes**  
**arr. György Kurtág (b.1926)**

Hungarian composer György Kurtág has arranged numerous works by J.S. Bach for piano over the years, employing four-hand settings to paint colors that nod to the full pitch range of the church organ for which pieces such as Three Chorale Preludes were originally written. His arrangements were created largely for his own use in duo piano performances that he and his wife, Márta, gave for decades, programs that often interspersed the Bach Chorale Preludes with Kurtág's own typically brief pieces, notably from his *Játékok* (*Games*).

The couple met at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest in 1947, married the next year, and remained together until Márta's death in 2019. A noted pianist herself, she was his muse and sounding board. Videos of the pair playing Kurtág's Bach arrangements, well into their seventh decade together, have long circulated online. They are continually being rediscovered by viewers who express wonder and enchantment at the assured interpretations, tender intimacy, and quiet joy that emanate from the tandem playing of a couple still enjoying the fruits of a long collaboration.

The husband and wife duo of Soyeon Kate Lee and Ran Dank continue the tradition in these performances of Kurtág four-hand arrangements of Three Chorale Preludes. The form of a chorale prelude originated in church settings, where the organist would play a few bars of a hymn to acquaint the congregation with the melody before they began singing. Enterprising composers of the Baroque period such as Bach soon began augmenting and improvising on the contrapuntal lines of chorales, and preludes specifically for organ became a genre unto themselves. Bach is said to have planned on penning more than 100 such chorale preludes, although even the prolific Johann Sebastian only managed to finish 46.

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## Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) *The Rite of Spring for Piano Four-Hands (1912)*

Headlong, unsettling rhythms and full-bore dynamics are the hallmarks of an orchestral performance of *The Rite of Spring* – and the familiar experience for most listeners. Actually, the first version of Igor Stravinsky’s groundbreaking work to see the light of day was the one he composed for piano four-hands. The piano score was published in 1912, a year before the work commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev for the Ballet Russes premiered. The orchestral score for the ballet was not published until 1921. But oh, to have been a fly on the wall for an evening in June 1912 when Stravinsky tried out the piano four-hands version for the first time at a private event in Paris, playing it on two pianos with none other than his friend Claude Debussy.

This version of *The Rite of Spring* carries all the emotional impact of a full orchestra reading while laying bare the structure of Stravinsky’s composition in a way that invites a new examination of exactly what made it so innovative.

From the quiet opening melody, familiarly carried by bassoon, through the increasing tension of pounding rhythms, and the developing savagery of the sacrificial rite at the heart of the ballet, Stravinsky’s piano four-hands arrangement does not seem a less-than version, or the documentation of a work in progress. It clearly exposes the inner lines of his structure and foregrounds the dissonance and polyrhythms that proved so shocking to audiences at the ballet’s premiere. One can understand Debussy’s comment to Stravinsky in a letter soon after playing the first private performance: “It haunts me like a beautiful nightmare.”

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## Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) Élégie for Two Pianos (1959)

Works for piano—solo, concerto, in combination with winds—figure prominently in the catalogue of Francis Poulenc. Not surprising, especially, given that he was an accomplished pianist and accompanist in his own right. He made numerous recordings (among the first pianists to take advantage of that new technology) and he enjoyed a longtime performing association with baritone Pierre Bernac.

In composition, Poulenc also stretched his piano technique to experiment with works for four hands and duo pianos. Among them are a youthful Sonata for Four Hands (1918), Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra (1932) from his more mature period, and four others from the last decade of his life: *L'embarquement pour Cythère: Valse-Musette for Two Pianos* (1951), *Capriccio for Two Pianos* and *Sonata for Two Pianos* (both from 1952), and *Élégie for Two Pianos* (1959).

The *Élégie* was written in tribute to Marie-Blanche de Polignac, an arts supporter and the niece of Princess Edmond de Polignac, the commissioner of Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos and Organ Concerto. It was suggested at the behest of the American piano duo of Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, who had premiered *L'embarquement pour Cythère* and the Sonata for Two Pianos.

Technically, *Élégie* is not as demanding as the Sonata for Two Pianos. Rather is a fairly simple composition that alternates open chords between the pianos, later moving into an exchange of melodic phrases. In place of virtuosic demands, the *Élégie* drills down to the most essential collaborative aspects of dual piano performance, requiring a keen attention to the matching of voice, balance, and phrasing for seamless, expressive transitions. Rather than having one piano take the lead, the two instruments share equally. Dedicatée Marie-Blanche de Polignac, who had died the year before this piece was written, is known to have sung some Poulenc songs, and the *Élégie* carries a somewhat lyrical, singing quality in the passing of chords and phrases.

As a memorial, *Élégie* is simple and elegant, emotive without being overly emotional. The composer himself is said to have offered the advice to perform it “as if improvising, a cigar between your lips and a glass of cognac on the piano.”

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## Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

### Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Sz. 110, BB 115 (1937)

Let us remember, for a moment, that the piano, that stately solo instrument capable of grand lyrical expression, is actually part of the percussion family. In that regard, Béla Bartók's pairing of two pianos with various percussion instruments for this sonata is not as unusual as it might seem. Bartók was a skilled pianist whose compositions were often written for his own performance use. And he had already begun to think of the percussive possibilities of his instrument before he received a commission for a new work in 1937.

Bartók had in mind pairing piano with a variety of percussion instruments – timpani, xylophone, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, tam-tam and triangle. But as he noted in a program note for the work's premiere: "Gradually, however, I became convinced that one piano and the frequently very sharp tones of the percussion instruments were not in balance." Two pianos, arranged to point toward the percussion array at center stage, by the composer's instruction, also allowed greater textures to emerge.

The work afforded the composer an opportunity to perform alongside his wife, Ditta, born Edith Pásztory. She had been his student, but had given up performing after their marriage in 1923. The couple played the premiere in 1938 at the International Society of Contemporary Music in Basel, Switzerland, with percussionists Fritz Schiesser and Philipp Rühlig. It was well received by critics and repeat performances by the couple soon followed in other European cities.

They also performed the U.S. premiere in 1940 in New York City, where the Bartóks had settled after fleeing their native Hungary in the run-up to World War II.

The Sonata honors a Classical structure in its three-movement form, even as Bartók brings out the percussive vs. melodic nature of the pianos in dialogue with the percussion. The first movement *Assai lento – allegro molto* begins with a quiet timpani roll and disquieting piano introduction before developing into a tense, turbulent sequence, nearly double the length of the following sections. The second movement *Lento, ma non troppo* introduces the mystery and melancholy of Bartók's so-called night music. Things take a livelier turn in the third movement *Allegro non troppo*, a rondo that conjures Bartók's love of the Hungarian folk music he had studied so assiduously.

The Sonata was recognized as a significant blending of traditional structure and 20th century innovation, and it was reworked in 1940 as the Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion, and Orchestra. The Bartóks reprised their solo roles in the 1943 US premiere of that version with the New York Philharmonic, in what would be the composer's last public performance before his death two years later. But it is the Sonata, for four players, that has become the more frequently performed version, as skilled pianists and percussionists accept the challenge of finding balance in a difficult-to-master score.