NAXOS

ROMANTIC PIANO

CHRISTIAN SINDING

Piano Works

Piano Sonata in B minor • Caprices • Fantaisies

Yanfeng Tony Bai



Romantic Piano • 13

Christian Sinding (1856–1941)

Christian (August) Sinding was born in Kongsberg, Norway, on 11 January 1856, and died in Oslo, Norway, on 3 December 1941.

Christian's father, Matthias Wilhelm Sinding, was a mining engineer who owned a sulphuric acid factory servicing the silver mines for which Kongsberg was known. When he died in 1860, Christian's mother Cecilie Marie Mejdell and her five children moved to Christiania (now Oslo) to be closer to relatives. Many family members were high achievers with Christian's brother Otto becoming an established artist, and brother Stephen an acknowledged sculptor. His sister Thora Catherine married her first cousin the jurist Glor Thorvald Mejdell, while his cousin Alfred Sinding-Larsen was a journalist and writer. Christian's uncles Nicolai Mejdell and Thorvald Mejdell were prominent in their respective fields of mining and forestry.

Unsurprisingly, Christian benefitted from some of Oslo's finest music teachers, including Gudbrand Bøhn (violin), Betzy Fischer (piano) and Ludvig Matthias Lindemann (organ and theory). For a time he played violin in The Philharmonic Society in Christiania with conductor Johan Svendsen. In 1874 he entered the Leipzig Conservatory, studying with Henry Schradiek (violin) and Salomon Jadassohn (theory and composition). During his four years there composition became his main focus, with the influence of Wagner and Liszt prevalent. However, despite regular performances of his works they were not particularly well received and many were destroyed through his avid self-criticism. Moving to Munich in 1882, Sinding began to receive more encouragement as a composer and scholarships from the Norwegian Government and private foundations supported his endeavours. Following further study in Dresden and Berlin he returned to Leipzig in 1886. There he met Russian violinist Adolph Brodsky and Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni, both of whom were decisive influences.

1889 proved a pivotal year with Brodsky and Busoni both playing in a performance of Sinding's *Piano Quintet* in Leipzig in January, and Norwegian pianist Erika Nissen performing his *Piano Concerto* in Berlin the following month. During the next three years the *Quintet* received 30 performances across Europe and America, and the *Piano Concerto* also established itself on the concert stage. Regular grants from the Norwegian government enabled him to build a successful composing career in Germany in the following years and his international reputation was sealed by the wildly popular *Frühlings-rauschen* ('Rustle of Spring') from his *Sechs Stücke, Op. 32* in 1896, although with copyright laws still undeveloped at the time he benefitted little financially from the enormous sales. In 1898 Sinding married actress Augusta Gade who had previously been married to physician and art patron Fredrik Geog Gade. In 1921 Sinding's *Third Symphony* was performed in Berlin by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Arthur Nikisch, he taught at the Eastman School in Rochester, New York, USA, from 1921 to 1922, and in 1924 the Norwegian government granted him Grotten, a residence on the lands of Oslo's royal palace. Henceforth, this became his permanent home where supported by government grants, he could compose untrammelled by financial worries.

By this time Sinding was widely seen as Grieg's successor. His rich melodic gifts made him immensely popular, and he became a member of the Order of St Olav in 1905, a Commander in 1916 and was awarded the Grand Cross in 1938. Nevertheless, he did not encompass Norwegian folk-music in his compositions directly, as Grieg did. Instead, his more cosmopolitan musical outlook embraced the high Romanticism of Liszt and Wagner and was further marked by his empathy with the violin which ensured his remarkable melodic facility. Sinding's *oeuvre* stretches to Opus 132 and more than two thirds of this comprises piano music and songs. Of these the two collections of *Symra, Opp. 28* and *75* and the *Sange, Op. 18* have a special place. Some believe his best work was produced in earlier years where Wagner's influence appears freshly minted, such as his sole opera *Der heilige Berg, Op. 111* (1912), his *First Symphony, Op. 21* (1880–90) and his *Piano Concerto, Op. 6* (1889). Moreover Sinding did not progress his highly Romantic style to any large extent during his lifetime so that comments in 1889 about his piano quintet such as 'one cannot cease to voice one's admiration for this very important musical talent that expresses itself, daring and individual everywhere' became in the 1920s 'Sinding readily absorbs outside influences without distinguishing between that which is worth imitation and that which is not.' In this context it must be said that some of Sinding's melodies sail perilously close to the Viennese Operetta style of fellow violinist Franz Lehár, whose works such as *The Merry Widow* enjoyed enormous popularity at the time. In the post-First World War period of Stravinsky and Prokofiev, Sinding's music must have sounded very outdated.

Despite these drawbacks the sheer melodiousness and elan of Sinding's music would undoubtedly have guaranteed the survival of more works but for a most unfortunate incident during the Second World War. He had suffered from severe dementia in his last years. Eight weeks before his death in 1941 he seemingly joined the Norwegian Nazi party, although his party card remained unsigned. It appears the party was desperately keen to recruit him given his immense popularity with both Norwegian and German audiences, although he had been clearly against the Nazi occupation of his country and had supported the cause of Jewish musicians during the 1930s. A generous verdict would surely have posthumously exonerated him in 1945 but generosity towards Nazi sympathisers was understandably in short supply at the time and he was not present to defend himself.

Piano Sonata in B minor, Op 91 (1909)

I. Allegro non troppo
In keeping with Sinding's lyrical gifts, this work is almost entirely driven by melodic invention. Traditional sonata form scaffolds the first movement. A lengthy, brooding opening melody in B minor dominates the first subject section and indeed the whole first movement. Two further themes form part of the first subject section, the first more alert with a dotted martial rhythm, the second a dramatic *marcato* bass falling figure. In contrast, the second subject is a warmly ardent and more hopeful rising and falling figure in D major. Dramatic trills herald the movement's development which is mostly devoted to the first subject's three themes. A change in the accompaniment figuration from rolling semiquavers to the triplet quavers that commenced the movement announces the recapitulation. A lengthy coda section firmly in B minor uses the *marcato* bass falling figure of the first subject ensuring a dark ending.

II. Andante
The rich Brahmsian voicing of this simple contemplative chordal theme and its three variations plus one reprise, serves to create some peaceful contrast between the volatile outer movements. The theme comprises 16 bars, followed by Variation 1 with the theme in augmented rhythm and a simple rolling accompaniment. Variation 2 presents the accompaniment in an off-beat syncopated rhythm, while Variation 3 transfers the theme to the bass. A gentle reprise of the theme is interrupted by the third movement.

III. Vivace
This commences with agitated semiquavers built around the first subject of the first movement but hidden by their sheer speed although their overall disquiet is apparent. The movement gradually calms and a slower main theme enters accompanied by gentle triplets. There is kinship with the first movement's main theme as it commences with a rising fourth instead of a falling fifth, the same notes in reverse. However, the D major key sounds more uplifting and confident. The theme itself demonstrates Sinding's extraordinary powers of lyrical invention, occupying 101 bars from start to finish. The following section returns to the agitated first movement theme in B minor before Sinding embarks on another sustained melodic slow-burn, this new one for 96 bars before it morphs into the previous uplifting confident theme. Agitation returns at the end with a reiteration of the fast semiquaver section that concludes the movement with pyrotechnic virtuoso octaves.

15 Caprices, Op 44 (1898)

No. 1 in C minor (Allegro passionate), No. 2 in E flat major (Andante con moto), No. 3 in C major (Marcato), No. 4 in D flat major (Allegretto)
The musical form of these caprices is similar, and they are all monothematic, containing a single musical idea. The opening theme is stated, then subjected to various changes while being moved through various keys before a return to the main key of the piece and a restatement leading to the conclusion. Sinding's splendid melodic abilities enable him to easily maintain interest using just the main theme material. A broad variety of moods is included, from the dramatic *No. 1* to the Brahmsian *No. 2* and the compact *No. 3*. *No. 4*'s main theme is ingeniously constructed, being compressed into a duple two-beat rhythm while seemingly trying to expand into a broader triple metre waltz-like frame.

No. 5 in A flat major (Allegretto), No. 6 in F major (Non troppo Allegro), No. 7 in B flat minor (Allegretto scherzando), No. 8 in E flat minor (Animato), No. 9 in B flat major (Presto), No. 10 in G flat major (Andante)
No. 5 contains perhaps the finest of Sinding's characteristically extended melodies to be found in this set. A contrasted middle section exploring C minor gives an ABA quality to the form. Likewise, *No. 6*'s Schumannesque-styled canvas has a quiet middle section giving an ABA ternary form feel although it is all built on one theme. *No. 7*'s balletic theme hovers gracefully between B flat minor and D flat major, comfortably straddling two pages without the need to modulate unduly. *No. 8*'s agitated mood is uninterrupted even during the more lyrical middle section. *No. 9* bubbles with suppressed energy, ending in a possibly tongue in cheek over-the-top repeated B flat major chord. *No. 10*'s extended melody, which involves some chromaticism, needs only one repeat with a coda to complete the piece.

No. 11 in F minor (Presto), No. 12 in E major (Allegretto), No. 13 in F minor (Agitato), No. 14 in D flat major (Allegretto), No. 15 in F major (Poco maestoso)
No. 11 has a gruff Beethovenian *Scherzo* feel with its constant octaves and quick chord changes. More delicate treble writing provides the middle section of this tripartite structure. In *No. 12* the cantabile melody over a rolling accompaniment covers a very limited range, giving an effect of stasis and contemplation. The energetic semiquavers of *No. 13*'s opening section push Sinding into one of his most ebullient short themes in the middle section. The piano figuration in *No. 14* is highly original comprising octaves in both hands in the outer sections and a melody with both hands three octaves apart in the middle section. A pentatonic feel predominates. Echoes of Schumann permeate *No. 15* with its sturdy chords and steady tread.

Fantasies, Op. 118 (pub. 1914)

Décision
This character piece has a decisive opening first subject in E flat minor that moves to a gentler more relaxed episode in G flat major. In Richard Strauss fashion this traverses many keys without modulation. The decisive first subject then returns in E flat minor moving to a triumphant E flat major for the final section, with further echoes of Richard Strauss.

Méditation
This gentle berceuse-like movement demands a span of a tenth from the pianist to manage the widely spread chords. A middle section in G major breaks with the bell-like bass sonorities of the outer two B major sections.

Caprice
Like its predecessor this also has a reiterated left-hand figure that predominates through the outer two sections. An ingenious juxtaposition of chords between the hands gives a slightly syncopated feel.

Nocturne
Sinding achieves a somnambulant mood through reiterated pedal notes in the left hand maintaining the same pitch for lengthy periods. Additionally, he uses softly changing harmonious chords above in a Debussian impressionist manner.

Conte
Sinding evokes an air of mystery for this musical narrative by frequently using the flattened fourth of the piece's G sharp minor key. The swirling fog of the accompaniment also contributes.

Rodney Smith

Yanfeng Tony Bai


Photo: Victor Lee

Chinese pianist Yanfeng Tony Bai is a laureate of numerous international competitions, including the Olga Kern International Piano Competition, China Shenzhen International Piano Concerto Competition, International Grotrian Piano Competition and the China Central Television Piano Competition. An accomplished chamber musician, Bai is a founding member of Trio Azura. The trio was named Young Concert Artists' (YCA) inaugural Ensemble-in-Residence following the 2025 Susan Wadsworth International Auditions, and in 2024 it swept the board at the 51st Fischoff National Chamber Music Competition, winning the Grand Prize, Gold Medal, Lift Every Voice Prize and the Horszowski Trio Prize. Bai has performed with orchestras including the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, China Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra Antonio Vivaldi and New Mexico Philharmonic, collaborating with conductors such as James Conlon and Miguel Harth-Bedoya. He has appeared across North America, Europe, Oceania and Asia, including at the Aspen Music Festival and Brisbane Festival. He is currently the chamber musician-in-residence at the Colburn Conservatory of Music and a YCA artist, and he completed his Artist Diploma at the Colburn School under Fabio Bidini.

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Norwegian composer Christian Sinding benefitted from some of Oslo's finest music teachers, later studying in Leipzig and encountering Ferruccio Busoni. With his rich melodic gifts Sinding became seen as Grieg's successor, though his music avoided Norwegian folk-music influences and looked more towards the high Romanticism of Liszt and Wagner. In keeping with his lyrical gifts, the *Sonata in B minor* is driven by melodic invention with Brahmsian influences that also emerge in the *15 Caprices*. This collection is a fine representation of the sheer melodiousness and energy that made Sinding's music incredibly popular in its day. Sinding's *Rustle of Spring* and *Am spinett* are available for streaming and download on a digital single (9.70394).

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(1856–1941)

	Piano Sonata in B minor, Op. 91 (1909)	**22:32**
1	I. Allegro non troppo	10:49
2	II. Andante –	3:35
3	III. Vivace	8:08
	15 Caprices, Op. 44 (1898)	**33:06**
4	No. 1. Allegro passionato	2:18
5	No. 2. Andante con moto	2:07
6	No. 3. Marcato	1:24
7	No. 4. Allegretto	2:31
8	No. 5. Allegretto	3:02
9	No. 6. Non troppo allegro	2:03
10	No. 7. Allegretto scherzando	1:17
11	No. 8. Animato	1:39
12	No. 9. Presto	3:01
13	No. 10. Andante	1:36
14	No. 11. Presto	2:19
15	No. 12. Allegretto	2:14
16	No. 13. Agitato	1:34
17	No. 14. Allegretto	3:14
18	No. 15. Poco maestoso	2:49
	5 Fantaisies, Op. 118 (pub. 1914)	**19:08**
19	No. 1. Décision	3:50
20	No. 2. Méditation	3:05
21	No. 3. Caprice	4:23
22	No. 4. Nocturne	3:59
23	No. 5. Conte	3:51

Yanfeng Tony Bai, Piano

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