

ANNIE WU FLUTE FENGNIU PIANO



MIGNON

11 variations on a voice

BEETHOVEN SCHUBERT SCHUMANN TCHAIKOVSKY WOLF BERG TARVER TAFFANEL

About the Artists

Of young flutist **Annie Wu**, the Mercury News said, “This artist, it seems, can do anything.” The Pleasanton, California native is a winner of Astral Artists’ 2015 National Auditions, as well as First Prize winner of the James Pappoutsakis Flute Competition, Yamaha Young Performing Artist Competition, YoungArts National Competition, and National Flute Association High School Soloist Competition. She is also a 2014 U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts. As a soloist, Wu has performed concerti with the Vienna International Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, California Symphony, Kentucky Symphony Orchestra, Livermore Amador Symphony, Diablo Symphony Orchestra, and the San Jose Chamber Orchestra. She is currently a senior at Harvard University as a part of their five-year Dual Degree Program with the New England Conservatory of Music, studying with Paula Robison.

A native of Shenyang, China, **Feng Niu** began studying piano at the age of seven, and made her first public performance at the Shenyang Concert Hall just four years later. The winner of numerous competition honors, Niu was awarded First Prize from the Yamaha National Piano Competition, Second Prize from the Lagny-sur-Marne International Piano Competition, and Third Prize from the Hong Kong Young Pianist Competition. Niu graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 2008 and received her Master of music degree in Piano Performance, with honors, from the New England Conservatory of Music in 2014. She currently pursues Doctoral studies at the New England conservatory with Pei-Shan Lee.

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About the Album

“They Call Me Mignon” is an exploration of how stories can change and expand when they move into the realm of music. In 1795, German literary giant Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a strange novel: *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. While the title spotlights Wilhelm, it is another character, Mignon, who has survived and persisted throughout history, attracting musical settings by dozens of composers. Mignon is a circus-girl, barely a teenager; orphaned, abducted, and abused. Having suffered immense pain, she vows to never tell her story. But in moments of extreme emotion – longing to know her parents, remember her homeland, and express her growing, illicit love for Wilhelm – she sings her songs.

With this collection of settings of her first two poems, “Kennst du das Land” and “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt,” I hope to illustrate Mignon’s increasing agency to express the depths of her inner landscapes. In Goethe’s novel, written narration is antithetical to live performance: Wilhelm transcribes Mignon’s songs so we never hear her sing. Wilhelm interprets her tunes as entertainment when in fact, her lyrical expression reveals otherwise. His narrating of Mignon suffocates her.

The compositions I’ve collected reveal a symbolic narrative of their own: with each musical iteration, Mignon sings, and we hear her expanded expression. The composers, one after another, create a Mignon who is increasingly vocal, self-possessed, and turned outwards. Of course, compositions do not necessarily trace out such a linear narrative over time. But, I hope to think about the symbolic agency that music gives to a performing Mignon. Even though these songs were originally for a vocalist, the flute is a particularly apt medium for Mignon’s voice. Prominent philosophies of the voice focus on semantic meaning: when we listen, we understand the words rather than think about the individual speaker’s sound. Singing Mignon through the flute allows me to “re-voice” her: I turn our focus on Wilhelm’s transcribed poem back towards the sound of Mignon’s internal self. The text is a guiding force, but this time Mignon’s storytelling lies in her voice.

All music for this album is in the public domain. All songs are playing in their original keys, with some register changes to match the timber of the voice in certain ranges. All album notes are written by Annie Wu.

01 Mignon's First Poem, "Kennst du das Land" Recited by Sima Reinisch

Kennst du das Land? wo die Citronen blühn,
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn,
Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,
Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht,
Kennst du es wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn.

Kennst du das Haus? Auf Säulen ruht sein Dach,
Es glänzt der Saal, es schimmert das Gemach,
Und Marmorbilder stehn und sehn mich an:
Was hat man dir, du armes Kind, gethan?
Kennst du es wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Beschützer, ziehn.

Kennst du den Berg und seinen Wolkensteg?
Das Maulthier sucht im Nebel seinen Weg;
In Höhlen wohnt der Drachen alte Brut;
Es stürzt der Fels und über ihn die Flut:
Kennst du ihn wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Geht unser Weg! o Vater, laß uns ziehn!

Do you know the land where the lemon-trees bloom,
where in the dark foliage golden oranges glow,
where a gentle wind blows from the blue sky,
where the still myrtle and the tall laurel stand?
Perhaps you know it?

To there! To there

I would like to go with you, o my beloved!

Do you know the house? Its roof rests on pillars,
the great hall gleams, the rooms shimmer,
and marble statues stand and look at me:
What have they done to you, you poor child?
Perhaps you know it?

To there! To there

I would like to go with you, o my protector!

Do you know the mountain and the path amidst
clouds?
The mule picks its way in the mist;
the ancient brood of dragons dwells in caves;
the rock falls sheer and over it the torrent:
Perhaps you know it?

To there! To there

lies our path; o father, let us depart!

(English Prose translation by Terence Cave)

Mignon starts with a public, externally-oriented language and moves towards an increasingly internal one. Beginning with a pastoral and general image of Southern Italy, she zooms into her childhood home to delve into the dangerous path in the mountains she took when abducted to Germany. Mignon's movement from outside in mirrors the development of the poem's musical settings over time: they progress from a simple song-like character to a dramatic, even operatic Mignon.

- 02 Ludwig van Beethoven** from *Sechs Gesänge, op. 75, No. 1 (1809)*
Beethoven's setting of "Kennst du das Land" was the first to veer away from Goethe's narrative. While previous composers gave Mignon a simple maiden tune, Beethoven writes a much more complicated song, with each stanza split into two parts. Mignon's answer to her famous question – Do you know it? – takes us into what feels like a joyous dance. Her answer is deceptively positive, and Beethoven hints at feelings that might not be so simple.
- 03 Franz Schubert** *Mignon, aus Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister,' D. 321 (1815)*
Schubert's song resembles Beethoven's so closely that it must have been written in reaction: Mignon is now traveling through music. Because Schubert encountered Mignon in sound and not her novel, he depicts her with all her youth, jubilation, and hope to return home, omitting her suffering and pain.
- 04 Robert Schumann** from *Lieder und Gesänge aus 'Wilhelm Meister,' Op. 98a (1849)*
Schumann's dramatic setting reveals a new agenda: a focus on Mignon's negotiation between external and internal expression. His Mignon looks deep within herself, and the soundscape shifts between seemingly spoken recitatives and operative leaps as she bursts into intense longing.
- 05 Hugo Wolf** from *Goethe-Lieder, No. 9 (1875)*
Wolf's setting is like a mini-opera. His Mignon is highly troubled, and her mental state is completely externalized compared to Beethoven's reserved Mignon. Wolf creates different episodes in each stanza, some exploding with power. The voice experiments with speech-like singing, with a melody that espouses the inflections of real words. This aspect makes playing Wolf on the flute even more interesting!
- 06 Alban Berg** from *Jugendlieder, No. 20 (1904)*
Berg composed his Mignon at only 19. Since it was a study of sorts, the song only features the poem's first stanza. Berg's is a lush Romantic setting: his Mignon is hopeful, and she never ventures into the dangerous mountains. This is Berg's own initial venture in the realm of music and text— short and sweet.

07 Mignon's Second Poem, "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" Recited by Sima Reinisch

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt
Weiß, was ich leide!
Allein und abgetrennt
Von aller Freude,
Seh ich ans Firmament
Nach jener Seite.

Ach! der mich liebt und kennt,
Ist in der Weite.
Es schwindelt mir, es brennt
Mein Eingeweide.
Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt
Weiß, was ich leide

Only one who knows longing
knows how I suffer!
Alone and separated
from all joy
I look into the firmament
towards that direction.

Ah! He who loves and knows me
is in the distance
I am reeling, burning
are my insides.
Only one who knows longing
knows how I suffer!

(English Prose translation by Terence
Cave. Popularly known by the English
title, "None but the Lonely Heart".)

Mignon's second song was actually intended to be a duet with her biological father, the Harper—with neither Mignon nor the Harper aware that they are father and daughter. Mignon was born from incest, and the community shame led her to be taken away; her father went mad with guilt. While Wilhelm hears this song as a tribute to romantic love, the two singers' song of longing describes something far more complex. Sehnsucht is an unbearable yearning for something missing which one can never place. Mignon's words mix a conspicuous absence with the increasing presence of bodily agitation. The choice by composers to make this song for Mignon alone depicts an even greater sense of isolation and internalization. With each song, Mignon's sadness finds more physical expression.

08 L. v. Beethoven *Sehnsucht, WoO 134, No. 4 (1808)*

Goethe's theme of unidentifiable, existential longing has proved elusive and intriguing. In fact, Beethoven tried four times to set the poem. On this fourth setting, Beethoven created a Mignon who is probing, with one tender moment as she thinks about something dear before returning to her musings.

09 Franz Schubert *"Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt," from Lied der Mignon, D. 877, No. 4 (1826)*

Schubert composed six settings of this poem; this was his last. Schubert creates a quiet grief. Each phrase grasps upwards but inevitably falls back down. When Mignon sings of her reeling body, she is suddenly gasping. The pulsating piano chords reflect her troubled heart until she returns to her original mournful tune.

10 Robert Schumann *"Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt," from Lieder und Gesänge aus 'Wilhelm Meister', Op. 98a, No. 3 (1849)*

Schumann's song was a part of a larger cycle of Wilhelm Meister lieder. The pain of Schumann's Mignon almost spills out. It's no longer a quiet, internal pain, but one that demands bodily manifestation. Her song alternates between outbursts and retreats: an uncontainable, pulling ache.

11 Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky *"None but the Lonely Heart," from 6 Romances, Op. 6, no. 6 (1869)*

Tchaikovsky's setting is a powerful instance of music expanding a story. His Mignon is fully Romantic – she is completely, self-indulgently obsessed with someone. In fact, Tchaikovsky's tune had the workings of a pop song: in the 1940s, Frank Sinatra sang a version with the English translation "None but the Lonely Heart."

12 Charles Tarver *"Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt: Mignon's Second Song" (2017 commission)*

Boston-based composer Charles Tarver and I discussed what it would look like to have a Mignon today. We wanted to make an instrumental Mignon still informed by the textual: a flute piece conscious of the human voice and her words, even without their explicit presence. Charles' Mignon pieces together several episodes of her narrative: her silence, self-isolation, religiosity, and dance.

THE GRAND FINALE

13 Paul Taffanel *Grande Fantaisie sur "Mignon"*

In 1866, Ambroise Thomas composed the most popular opera in Paris, *Mignon*, which put Mignon center stage: it was now about her love for Wilhelm and their happy ending. That same year, virtuoso flutist Paul Taffanel created a Grande Fantaisie for the flute on the opera's themes. In some ways, this is Mignon at her most extroverted and free: she is the center of attention, while being completely transparent in her longing for love.

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"Kennst du das Land"

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- 11 P. I. Tchaikovsky *"None but the Lonely Heart,"* from *6 Romances*, Op. 6, no. 6 (1869)
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Annie Wu, flute | Feng Niu, piano

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