

## Conrad Tao to premiere Adam Roberts' *Book of Flowers* on Kent Keyboard Series

by Daniel Hathaway



A new collection of solo piano miniatures by Kent State University composition professor Adam Roberts will be unveiled by its dedicatee, Conrad Tao, during his upcoming solo recital on the Kent Piano Series on Sunday afternoon, October 6, at 5:00 pm in Ludwig Recital Hall.

*Book of Flowers* is a collection of sixteen character pieces for piano. Roberts writes in his composer notes that “each piece aims to capture a particular energy, from the playful and rhythmic, to the fragile and breakable, to the brutal and ferocious.”

I arranged for a recent Zoom conversation with the composer and the pianist to learn more about the project. Adam Roberts was in his studio at Kent State, and Conrad Tao was on tour in Iowa.

*Daniel Hathaway: How did Book of Flowers come about?*

Adam Roberts: I don't usually just write pieces randomly, but I had written a couple of miniatures and for a long time I had yearned to write a book of my own piano music to see if I could get my language into that form. It's a medium that is old and full of history and it restricts your imagination in productive ways. I reached out to Conrad and asked him if I expanded this set would he come play it, and he said yes. So that was my motivation to go forward.

*DH: It sounds like a charmingly retro idea, reminiscent of 19th-century collections like Edward MacDowell's Woodland Sketches.*

AR: Yes, the spiritual ancestors for these pieces for me are all those composers of shorter piano pieces. There's a lot of variety in their forms, kind of like aphoristic experiences as opposed to essays.

*DH: How long did it take you to write the pieces?*

AR: When the idea coalesced and I got Conrad to agree, I had maybe three or four written, and then I ended up writing twelve more over the past year. I didn't have a set number in mind, but rather some sort of balance of energies. So there are some that are really rhythmic and angular, and then there are a few that are really about sonority and meditation. Three or four are really violent and aggressive. I wanted them to spread out into a kind of holistic meal that would feel like a tasting menu that would leave you feeling very full and satisfied.

*DH: Are you a horticulturist by nature?*

AR: No, and 'flower' in this case is a little bit more metaphorical than literal. My idea is that you just encounter these pieces that each have their own shape and individual beauty. I remember my piano teacher Rebecca Penneys, who was a great inspiration, talking about Chopin mazurkas in this way, saying that a mazurka is like a butterfly — unless you catch the energy of it and embody it in just the right way, you kind of miss it. They don't really develop for very long or they're not making a big argument, they just make an appearance — like a flower that blooms and dies with an ephemeral kind of beauty and each one is very specific.

*DH: Had you worked with Conrad before?*

AR: I've known of him for a very long time and have been really inspired not only by his pianism, but his artistry and the way he thinks about programs, but no, I hadn't worked with him before.

*DH: What would you say about your composing style? Or is it adaptive to the subject at hand?*

AR: It's always hard to talk about style. There's a part of my music that is very interested in color, abstract energy and gesture. But there's also a part of me that's a bit more literal and connected to drama and clarity of form, and these two energies often work together. In a work like this one, the sixteen little pieces allow me to explore different competing impulses without having to try to integrate them.

*DH: Conrad, I've already interrogated Adam about Book of Flowers. Give me your side of the story about how this project came about.*

Conrad Tao: It's pretty straightforward. Adam wrote me a couple years ago about this body of piano music that he was thinking about and starting to work on, and I was excited to get in the mix. It's a solid book of piano material and it turned out to be really great timing, because my other repertory project this year is the complete Debussy *Études*, book two. So I have two big 40-minute chunks of piano pieces that are going to come together on this program.

*DH: What did you think about the collection when you first saw it?*

CT: My immediate response was, this is 145 pages of piano music! And then I was struck by how many of these pieces are shapes that metamorphosize through different harmonic worlds. And a lot of them have this kind of kaleidoscopic, chime-like texture where you're just moving notes subtly through different worlds as the piece progresses. I was also really struck by how haunting the music is — harmonically lush, but also spiky.

It's been a fun learning process and it's really striking to me how much of it feels like internalizing a new set of shapes. I feel like I'm getting inside someone else's body and someone else's hands.

AR: Part of my self-identity has been integrating different impulses that I feel are sometimes very far apart from each other. I'm a composer who loves abstraction and noise, but I can also hang with minimalism too. I feel like my challenge to myself has been how to include everything in a way that doesn't feel like the kitchen sink, but is actually integrated in a deep way. This project has been really interesting because each little piece offered a little part of myself that could speak for a second, and then I could go to some other really very different part.

CT: I think there's something almost intimately diaristic that's opened up for so many composers by piano music. Also I feel very strongly that its self-imposed limitations are also really interesting and open up all sorts of possibilities. And the ways in which they're related to history excite me.

*DH: Conrad, did you choose the Debussy as a companion or was that suggested by Adam?*

CT: No, that came from me. But I should give Jacob Greenberg a little bit of credit here. He's the pianist for the International Contemporary Ensemble, and he created a podcast

where he talked about his own relationship to the Debussy *Études* and likened it to visiting the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens and reflecting on flowers. It was just a lovely, straightforward personal meditation on the qualities of those pieces.

Similarly, the Debussy *Études* are pretty methodically working through a number of different pianistic questions, as etudes are wont to do — through intervals and arpeggios and hanging sonorities, etudes for ten fingers, for eight fingers, with his ultimately abstract but witty titles. So, on this program we have one book of flowers and another book of flowers. I'd say that makes an evening full of poetry.

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