

PROGRAM NOTES

War of the Romantics

Following the death of Beethoven, there was great contention in the direction of Western Classical music. There was a division between the radical progressives from Weimar, called the New German School (*Neudeutsche Schule*), represented by Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, and Hector Berlioz, and the conservatives from Leipzig, represented by Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, Clara Schumann, and Johannes Brahms. The main disagreements between the two groups were in the treatment of forms, such as the sonata and symphony, as well as the use of programs, such as poetry and painting, to provide extra-musical meaning. The first half of this program includes music by the conservatives, Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, which highlight the influence of J. S. Bach on their compositional styles, followed by the monumental *Sonata in B minor* by Franz Liszt, which departs from tradition and forges a new path.

Giya Kancheli (1935-2019)

33 Miniatures for Piano

Composed in 2009.

Born in Tbilisi, Georgia, Giya Kancheli was a composer from the former Soviet Union who combined the innovations of 20th-century Western music with his cultural roots, including Eastern Christian spirituality. Kancheli viewed music as sound being born out of silence, which evolved into his style of simplicity, controlled lyricism, and the concept of a 'lost' harmony. This idea served as the basis of his works, which evoke a sense of nostalgia, reminiscence, and higher spirituality.

Whilst composing symphonic and chamber music, Kancheli also wrote music for plays and films. His *33 Miniatures for Piano* are based on fragments from his music for the stage and screen. Of this work, Kancheli wrote:

The simplicity of presentation does not preclude but rather encourages freedom of interpretation, particularly for those with a gift for improvising.

Strict adherence to tempo markings, dynamic indications and performance instructions is by no means obligatory.

The second miniature, “Valse from ‘The Eccentrics,’” is from the film by Eldar Shengelaya and Revaz Gabriadze, produced in 1974. The film is about an orphan, Ertaoz, who helps the woman he loves, Margalita, by going to prison to rescue her. This miniature is characterized by the use of the ascending arpeggiated triad.

The third miniature, “Theme from ‘When Almonds Blossomed,’” is from the film by Lana Gogoberidze, produced in 1972. The film is about Zura, a high school boy whose rich and influential father wants the best for him. After making an irreversible mistake, although his father wants to protect and save his son, Zura decides to confess and take responsibility for his actions. This miniature is characterized by the use of the interval of a second in the form of retardations and suspensions.

The fifth miniature, “Theme from ‘As You Like It,’” is from the play by William Shakespeare, directed by Robert Sturua in 1978. The play is about Rosalind, a girl who disguises herself as Ganymede, a boy shepherd, who goes into the forest to find Orlando, her love. Ganymede meets Orlando and pretends to cure him from being in love, and later reveals his true identity. This miniature is characterized by the use of repeated notes in a *parlando* manner.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Variations sérieuses, Op. 54

Composed in 1841; published in 1842. Premiered on November 27, 1841 by the composer at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig.

In the early 19th century, composers took popular themes from songs and arias and wrote variations of these themes to show technical bravura. Mendelssohn rejected this trend by returning to the treatment of the theme and variations form as serious, rather than for pedagogical or entertainment purposes, following the precedent set by J. S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *32 Variations in C minor*. In his *Variations sérieuses*, Mendelssohn uses an original theme and

combines elements of romanticism with Baroque counterpoint. Although Mendelssohn composed three sets of variations, the *Variations sérieuses* is the only set that was published and remains in the standard piano repertoire.

The *Variations sérieuses* was composed to be included in the anthology, "Album-Beethoven," published by Pietro Mechetti to raise funds to erect the Beethoven monument in Bonn. The other composers included in this anthology are Chopin, Czerny, Döhler, Henselt, Kalkbrenner, Liszt, Moscheles, Taubert, and Thalberg. Mendelssohn completed the first draft of the work in ten days, consisting of fifteen variations. The work later underwent a series of revisions to become the final seventeen variation version. Upon publication, the work received high praises from critics declaring its musical significance in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

Mendelssohn was greatly influenced by the music of J. S. Bach throughout his life. This influence began when he studied harmony and composition with Carl Friedrich Zelter, who's pedagogical method was inherited from a disciple of Bach. This study developed his skills in figured bass, chorale, and counterpoint, instilling a sense of deep respect for conservative musical tradition. In 1823, Mendelssohn received a manuscript copy of the *St. Matthew Passion* from his grandmother, which he studied in the hopes of being able to perform it one day. Six years later, the work was performed under his baton at the Singakademie, which marked a pivotal moment in the revival of the performance of Bach's music.

Bach's influence on the *Variations sérieuses* begins with the somber theme in D minor, which is chorale-like in a four-voice texture and features harmonic suspensions and chromaticism in its counterpoint. The first variation features staccato octaves in the bass, reminiscent of a double bass or bassoon playing *basso continuo*, while the fourth variation uses contrapuntal imitation and resembles a two-part canon. In variation ten, the opening chromatic suspension in the theme becomes the basis of a four-voice fugato. The fourteenth variation is an expansive chorale, which represents the heart of this work and is the only variation that is not in the key of D minor. The shift to the parallel major, D major, brings a sense of light and hope before returning to the melancholic key of D

minor. The work ends with a triumphant and climactic coda before quickly descending back down into the darkness from which it began.

Robert Schumann (1810 –1856)

Arabeske in C major, Op. 18

Composed in 1839. Dedicated to Friederike von Serre.

In late 1838, Schumann traveled from Leipzig to Vienna in the hopes of establishing relationships with publishers and the Viennese audience. Although he was unable to gain the favor of the publishers, Haslinger and Diabelli, or the Austrian court sensor, he enjoyed the Viennese cultural life, where opera and theater gave him a renewed interest in dramatic music. Although his stay in Vienna was short-lived, he composed many piano pieces including the *Arabeske* op. 18, *Blumenstück* op. 19, *Humoreske* op. 20, *Novelletten* op. 21, *Nachtstücke* op. 23, and *Faschingschwank aus Wien* op. 26.

In a letter to Ernst Adolph Becker, Schumann wrote, “Op. 18 and op. 19 are frail and for the ladies, but op. 20 seems to me more substantial.” He made it his mission to “rise up to become the favorite composer of all the ladies in Vienna.” The *Arabeske* is a product of this in its graceful, delicate, and elegant nature.

The *Arabesque* is written in a five-part rondo form. The refrain, which appears three times, contains a ternary structure within: beginning in C major, briefly tonicizing E minor, and then returning to C major. This section is characterized by a carefree lilting melody, which floats above rolling arpeggiated chords and a bass line that mostly moves in contrary motion to the melody.

The refrains are contrasted by two minor episodes. The first minor episode contains continuous eighth notes, which create a doldrum effect and bring a sense of hopelessness and despair. Every phrase in the second minor episode begins with declaration of a fragment from the opening of the refrain, and is characterized by the use of suspensions and retardations. The piece closes with a dreamy coda which ends with a final reminiscence of the opening of the piece.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Sonata in B minor, S. 178

Composed in 1853; published in 1854. Dedicated to Robert Schumann. Premiered in 1857 by Hans von Bülow in Berlin, Germany.

Written during his Weimar years, Liszt's *Sonata in B minor* (originally titled *Grande Sonata* in the autograph) is widely recognized as one of his most important contributions to the piano repertoire. During this time, Liszt served as the court Kapellmeister, which gave him more time to dedicate to composition, as well as access to the cultural wealth in the city. In addition to the *Sonata in B minor*, Liszt completed other important works in Weimar, including his two piano concertos, Faust Symphony, and Dante Symphony.

The *Sonata in B minor* is regarded as an important cornerstone in the evolution of the sonata form after Beethoven. Unlike the classical sonata form, this sonata is written in one continuous movement. It has a double-function structure, containing four movements which are connected into one in the foreground, against a background of a sonata-allegro form (exposition, development, and recapitulation). The sonata is based on three thematic cells introduced at the opening of the work. The first motif is characterized by syncopated repeated notes, similar to pizzicato notes played by a double bass, followed by suspenseful descending scales. The second motif ('Sprung'), is characterized by rapid octave leaps and arpeggiated diminished 7th chords. The third motif ('Hammerschlag') is characterized by repeated notes, which Liszt likened to the blows of a hammer.

The sonata begins in a tonally ambiguous place when the motives are introduced. It is not until the formal exposition of the sonata that Liszt delivers the first tonic arrival in B minor. The primary thematic area remains in a dark and agitated state, before transitioning to the expansive and lyrical secondary thematic area in the relative key of D major. The 'second movement', *Andante sostenuto*, is in the dominant key of F# major, which for Liszt, has religious connotations, as found in his other piano works, *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* and *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*. The 'third movement' is a fugato based on the Sprung and Hammerschlag motifs, giving homage to Beethoven. The 'fourth movement' is a

recapitulation of the first movement, followed by a coda, which begins in a triumphant frenzy but then returns to the pious theme from the *Andante sostenuto*. The sonata ends softly with chords ascending to the long-awaited B major.

Although nearly ninety percent of Liszt's compositional output was given programmatic titles, this sonata was an exception. Due to this, there have been many conjectures by scholars about possible hidden programs, such as the sonata depicting the Faust legend, the Garden of Eden, or an autobiography of Liszt himself. Although the sonata was dedicated to Robert Schumann, he never knew of this because he had already been entered to the mental asylum. The reception of the sonata was terrible, with Clara Schumann declaring it was "merely a blind noise," Eduard Hanslick saying "anyone who has heard it and finds it beautiful is beyond help," and Johannes Brahms finding the piece so boring he fell asleep. Despite this, the work is now regarded as one of the pinnacles of the piano repertoire.

-Program notes by Erica Phung

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