FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC
Olga Kern
Program Notes
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Clara Schumann: Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 20

Clara Schumann, one of the great pianists of the 19th century, wrote this score in 1853 and presented it to her husband on his 43rd birthday, three years before his death in 1856. A child prodigy at the keyboard, she began composing at 18 years of age. When Brahms, whom the Schumanns had befriended, saw the unpublished score, he composed his own variations on the same theme.

To support her seven children, the widowed Clara continued performing on stage until 1891.

Robert Schumann: *Carnaval*, Op. 9

"If only I could blend my talents for poetry and for music into one," wrote Robert Schumann to his mother during student years, "I might go far." And Richard Wagner, born only three years after Schumann, sought to create the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the composite work of art that sought to unite in happy harmony all artistic endeavors.

It was Schumann, however, who first brought about the fusion – or confusion? – of literature and music that was to remain all-important in German music on through Gustav Mahler.

Schumann was an avid reader; his favorite authors included E.T.A. Hoffmann (famous for the *Tales* that found their way into opera via Offenbach) and Jean-Paul Richter, whose Kapellmeister Kreisler is the "central figure" of the composer's *Kreisleriana.* Schumann's *Papillons*, his Op. 2, inspired by Richter and begun when he was 19, is a series of short pieces that describe a masked ball, a setting that *Carnaval*, a product of 1833 to 1835, shares.

"To figure out the masked ball will be child's play for you," Schumann wrote to Ignaz Moscheles, a composer 16 years his elder. "And I hardly need assure you that the putting together of the pieces and the superscriptions came about *after* the composition." The emphasis on the preposition is significant from the perspective of "program music" so closely associated with the Romantic age.

Thus in *Carnaval* Schumann did not set out to "portray" either Chopin or Paganini in sound – nor did he make an effort to reflect their musical style in his own, for he gave those sections of the score their titles only after writing them. Yet these sections can be approached with something of a code in mind.

"Estrella" is a mask for Ernestine von Fricken, Schumann's first serious interest of the heart, and "Chiarina" is Clara Wieck, the famous pianist whom he was later to marry. Most significant, perhaps, are the "self-portraits" of "Eusebius" and "Florestan," Schumann's alter-ego twins who represent the two major impulses of the Romantic soul.

"Florestan" – the name is loaned from the hero of Beethoven's single opera *Fidelio* – is bold and extroverted; he was – said Schumann – "one of those rare musical minds that anticipate what is new and extraordinary; he grasps the unfamiliar in an instant."

“Eusebius,” named for a saint martyred in the fourth century, Schumann explained, “studies more seriously than Florestan, and his piano playing is more intellectual – gentler and mechanically more perfect.”

Attention is drawn to the final “March of the League of David against the Philistines,” for this joyous conclusion speaks of the Romantic urge to break the bonds imposed on the creative soul by Germany’s smug and narrow-minded middle class.

Schumann and his friends, champions of progress and idealism against the disciples of tradition and the commonplace, actually founded a League of David – the gentle slayer of uncouth Goliath, the Philistine warrior who was their hero. He, the subject of Michelangelo’s sculpture, is magnificently celebrated here.

The Philistines, it hardly needs be pointed out, suffer total defeat at the hands of youthful exuberance and in faith in a worthy cause.

“Schumann’s greatness,” Tchaikovsky wrote in 1872, “lies on the one hand in his wealth of emotion, on the other in the depth of his spiritual experience and striking originality.” All three qualities make *Carnaval* the masterpiece that it is.

Rachmaninoff: Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 36

Since Rachmaninoff’s career as a concert pianist reached to the dawn of the long-playing record, there is excellent and convincing evidence that he was indeed one of the great keyboard virtuosos of the 20th century. And his prodigious talent is reflected in the demands that he makes on those artists who today play his works. Indeed, so complex are his two solo sonatas for piano that he rarely played them in concert himself.

The genesis of the second sonata, the original version of which dates from 1913, is complicated by the fact that the composer undertook a total revision of the score in 1931, which version Ms. Kern plays tonight. At that time he made cuts and thinned the texture of the work not necessarily to make it more easily playable, but rather to make it conform to his thinking about keyboard style at the later date.

(In 1940 Vladimir Horowitz – with Rachmaninoff’s permission – edited his own version of the score, in which he drew upon both versions. The late Ruth Laredo, a major Rachmaninoff interpreter, followed Horowitz’s example for her recording of the sonata in 1982.)

Rachmaninoff began work on Op. 36 in Rome while living in the apartment that had been the residence of Tchaikovsky and his brother Modest during their many visits to the city. Simultaneously he worked on *The Bells*, a choral symphony inspired by a poem by Edgar Allen Poe. The sonorities of the larger work carry over into the sonata, noticeable above all in the climax of the development section of the first movement and in the center of the second.

The sonata exudes formidable power and a strange lack of concern for obvious thematic material. “All is caprice, teeming with life,” Robert Matthew-Walker writes, “until at last a theme appears quietly worming its way around a pivotal note.” A second theme is heard, and – following a brief development – the Allegro ends with an unanswered question. The slow movement is pastoral in spirit, suggesting a quiet summer day and a fullness of nature far removed from city life. The two themes of the first movement are heard again. A coda that recalls both Mendelssohn and Schumann forms an intermezzo before the final Allegro bursts forth with renewed energy.

It is of interest to note that Stravinsky, born nine years after Rachmaninoff, wrote his revolutionary *Rite of Spring* in 1913, the same year as this sonata. While the ballet has gone down in history as the work that changed the course of Western music forever, Rachmaninoff's second sonata looks back upon – and confirms – the great Romantic heritage of the 19th century.

Scriabin: Piano Sonata No. 9, Op. 68

Scriabin – strangely – comes and goes, depending on his appeal to performers of the day. Vladimir Horowitz, who knew the composer personally, played his works – as did countryman Sviatislav Richter. Ruth Laredo justified her nickname "Tigress of the Keyboard" with her recording of all 12 of his sonatas.

Although his contemporary, Scriabin found his way to atonality without Schoenberg's influence: the last five sonatas, composed between 1911 and 1913, are without key signatures. Nicknamed "Black Mass" by a friend, Scriabin compared the eight-minute score with its gloomy atmosphere to the distressing situation of a dreamer assailed by the forces of evil in a nightmare.

One of the most fascinating figures of the post-Romantic age, Scriabin was a mystic of tormented religiosity. He called his earlier F minor sonata "a cry against God, against fate" and at the time of his premature death was making plans for *Mysterium*, a grand religious synthesis of all the arts that would herald the birth of a new world.

Within the context of tonight's program it is noteworthy that Scriabin injured his hand attempting to play Balakirev's *Islamey*.

Balakirev: *Islamey*

Today Balakirev's name is more frequently encountered than his music, for he is now noted mainly as the founder of – and inspiration for – that group of Russian composers known as "The Five." He was a major influence on the other four: Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Cui, and Mussorgsky.

Largely self taught and an admirer of Glinka, who was the father of national Russian music, Balakirev's own works are a fusion of Western music with folk elements from Russia and the Orient. The themes that he developed in *Islamey*: *An Oriental Fantasy* he heard during summers in the Caucasus. One report states that he heard one of the themes sung by an actor in Tchaikovsky's home.

Allegedly the work is of such difficulty that the composer was unable to play it. And it is appropriate that Ms. Kern plays it on the heels of the Friends' all-Liszt program by Jean-Yves Thibaudet, for Liszt was an early – and impassioned – performer of the score, completed in 1868.

Such modern Russian works as *Scheherazade* and *Prince Igor* owe much to Balakirev.

- *Program Notes by Wes Blomster*