

Lise de la Salle, piano

Program Notes

February 26, 2014

JS Bach/Busoni: Chaconne from the Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor

Ferrucio Busoni (1866 – 1924) was a man out of time and place. An Italian who seemed not to care for opera, he instead developed a career as an electrifying piano virtuoso, the Franz Liszt of his generation. Moreover, as a pianist, he revered the artistry of Bach, whose music was by then two centuries out of date. Bach never wrote for the piano, as the new invention was not then widely known in Germany. So Busoni took Bach's harpsichord and organ works and re-imagined them for the modern concert grand, changing details at times so as to take better advantage of new technology.

Busoni also looked beyond keyboard originals to find other impressive Bach works, and in 1892 chose the famously intricate Chaconne from the Violin Partita No. 2. This is no note-by-note transcription but rather an even more elaborate redesign of an already elaborate work. It is as if Busoni wanted to show what Bach could have done had he just had modern technology at his disposal. Even then, to achieve this stunning level of pyrotechnics, Bach would have needed more flamboyance than a serious German was likely to favor. Only an Italian could have imagined this new Chaconne.

Debussy: Selections from Preludes Books I and II

The Piano Preludes of Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) were published in two books, each comprising a dozen pieces: the first book appeared in 1910, the second in 1913. He was far from the first composer to write solo keyboard pieces and call them preludes. Even JS Bach had done so, as had more recent composers, including Chopin and Liszt. Yet Debussy went one step further than his predecessors, designating each piece not just by number and key, but also by a vividly descriptive title. Interestingly, he placed the titles at the ends of the pieces, not the beginnings, as if he did not want either players or listeners to feel too constrained by his imagery.

Debussy never insisted that either book of his preludes be performed complete, nor did he prohibit mixing and matching so as to create a solo suite that perfectly suited the tastes of a specific performer. Ms. de la Salle will present a selection of her favorite Debussy preludes, arranged in a sequence that makes the most of the variety inherent in the music.

Ms. de la Salle will begin with the fourth prelude in Book I, the gently haunting “Le sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” (Sounds and Perfumes Swirl in the Evening Air), its title borrowed from the Baudelaire poem “Harmonies du soir.” After that softly reflective opening, she’ll proceed to the light and nimble images of dancing fairies, as evoked in the fourth prelude in Book II, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses” (The Fairies are Exquisite Dancers). Then it’s back to drowsy moods with the pretty blond girl who occupies the eighth prelude of Book I; “La

“fille aux cheveux de lin” (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair). This is the most frequently performed of the preludes.

Restless high spirits – somewhat erratic of mood – come next with Debussy’s vision of Puck, from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as portrayed in the eleventh of the Book I Preludes. Puck’s energy is assuaged by the next of Ms. de la Salle’s chosen preludes. The first of those is Book I, “Danseuses de Delphes” (Dancers of Delphi), evoking the ancient grace of Greek sculpture. She will conclude her collection of Debussy preludes with the third from Book I, the abstractly titled “Le vent dans la plaine” (The Wind on the Plain). Here, it seems, the wind in question may be stirring tall grass on the plains, or perhaps – more abstractly yet – stirring emotions. The piece serves as a perfect finale to the chosen pieces.

Brahms: Theme and Variations in D minor, Op. 18b

Were there by chance someone in the audience not already familiar with the solo piano music of Johannes Brahms, that person might yet feel that this piece were familiar. That feeling would be due less to familiarity with the underlying theme than with the piece as a whole, for Brahms borrowed it complete from his String Sextet No. 1, Op. 18, of 1860. Having made much of the theme in that work, he thought it might also suit the piano and determined to craft his own transcription.

The central theme, moody and languid of mood, is simply stated at the beginning before the sequence of variations begins. As would be his life-long habit, Brahms does not offer variations on the entire theme. Rather, more frequently he toys with only fragments of it, showing time and again what other things might have been built upon those little melodic bits. Some of the variations are bright, others dark, though the latter approach is more frequently encountered. Bold, rushing runs alternate with more delicate statements, the whole relaxing at last into an unexpectedly gentle closing.

Upon meeting the young artist, Robert Schumann wrote enthusiastically of Brahms’s gifts in one of his last articles for the *New Journal for Music*. Praising Brahms as “a man of destiny,” Schumann also spoke highly of his use of the keyboard, making of it “an orchestra or mourning or jubilant voices” and adding that the solo piano works were “partly of a demonic character.” In this work, one hears those varied moods: mourning, jubilation, and even demonic fury, each set against the others for maximum effect.

Ravel: *Miroirs*

The most expansive of the solo piano scores by Maurice Ravel, *Miroirs*, is a five-movement suite, comprising roughly half an hour of music, completed in 1905, well before any of the works mentioned above. Each movement has its own descriptive title that can serve as a hint of what image this so-called “Impressionist” composer had in mind. Yet his music varies from typical

Impressionism, being both stronger and more various in character as he works through his several inspirations. Ravel rarely stays long with the light, shimmering sounds usually identified as Impressionistic.

The first movement portrays the blind moths of dusk, with fluid melodies that evoke the skittish flight of such creatures. The second movement turns to sorrowful birds, with melancholy chords floating above somber chords. The seafaring view of the third movement “Une barque sur l’océan” (Ship on the Ocean) offers a rich barcarolle-like melody with surging waves: this is not merely a ship at sea, but one on a turbulent sea. Fourth in sequence is a rhythmically intricate morning song: a “gracioso” is a kind of jester-like fellow, here in what sounds like a buoyant mood, riding on Spanish rhythms. Last is a melancholy landscape recalling church bells ringing out across a meadow. Of the original piano version, each movement is dedicated to a different artistic figure of the composer’s acquaintance. Ricardo Viñes, the pianist who premiered the suite in Paris in January of 1906, was granted the honor of the dedication for the bird-like second movement.

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