Hélène Grimaud, piano
Program Notes

Berio: Wasserklavier from Six Encores

Wasserklavier (Water Piano, 1965) by Italian composer Luciano Berio (1925-2003) serves as a graceful dive into a diverse program of pieces all about water. Like many of Berio’s works, it references music from the past. Here, motifs from Brahms mix with hints of Schubert. Even as the music reaches ever higher toward the quiet climax—the entire piece is incredibly quiet—a repeated, descending motif drips downward, and the ending is left intentionally ambiguous.

Liszt: St François de Paule marchant sur les flots
Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este

Though he made a name for himself as a demonically virtuosic pianist, late in life Franz Liszt (1811-1886) retreated into his Catholic faith. He spent two years living in a monastery outside Rome, where Pope Pius IX visited him and performed a Bellini aria with Liszt accompanying at the piano. Liszt in turn premiered for the Pontiff his recent religiously inspired work, St. Francis of Paola Walking on the Waters (1863). Legend has it that St. Francis of Paola, Liszt’s patron saint, was turned away trying to cross the Straits of Messina, for want of the fare. “If he is a saint, let him walk,” declared the scornful boatman. So St. Francis lifted up his cloak, which lofted like a sail and bore him safely to the other side. The surging waters roil in the left hand underneath a hymn-like theme that represents the saint. As a stately, solemn conclusion, Liszt quotes a passage from a choral work he had written also as a devotion to the saint, reusing music that sets the words “O let us preserve Love whole.” The composer explained that the story and his musical setting are meant to extol “the law of faith, which governs the laws of nature.”

In 1867, Liszt accepted an invitation from a Roman Cardinal to visit the Villa d’Este, a 16th-century palace some twelve miles from Rome, perched on the site of a former Benedictine monastery. It had fallen into disrepair, but the Cardinal restored the buildings, grounds, and celebrated fountains. There Liszt composed a late masterpiece, “Les Jeux d’eau” (Water Play), part of a magnificent three-volume set of piano works titled Années de pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage, 1867–77). Liszt would gaze into the dancing waters for hours at a time, transfixed. His reveries resulted in this harmonically daring, utterly innovative piano fantasy, which references not only the actual fountains but also the spiritual symbol of water. The score quotes (in Latin) a passage from the Gospel of St. John: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” Liszt’s music has served ever since as the source of all musical fountains, including Ravel’s own Jeux d’eau.

Schubert, arr. Liszt: Auf dem Wasser zu singen

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) had a brief but immensely productive career, and is remembered especially for composing over 600 songs on texts by some 150 poets. In 1838, Liszt transcribed Schubert’s boating song, Auf dem Wasser zu singen (1823) for solo piano. The poem that
Schubert set likens the setting sun to the passing of time, the docking of the boat on shore to the final mooring of the soul in heaven.

Amid the glitter of the playful waves
the rocking boat glides like swans;
similarly, on the softly glittering waves of joy
the soul glides away like the boat;
for, pouring down from heaven onto the waves,
sunset dances around the boat.

Above the treetops of the western grove
the reddish glow beckons us in friendly fashion;
under the branches of the eastern grove
the sweet flag rustles in the reddish glow;
the joy of heaven and the repose of the grove
are breathed in by the soul in the reddening glow.

Ah, time escapes me
with dewy wing on the cradling waves;
let time escape again tomorrow with glittering wing
as it did yesterday and today;
until with loftier, radiant wings
I myself escape from changeable time.

The transcription is fairly literal, capturing all of the details of the song. Liszt tucks the original vocal line in the top of the left hand—the middle register of the piano. The cascading, swiftly moving notes in the right hand seem like they must be Liszt’s own virtuosic addition. But in fact they are Schubert’s own invention, a perfect rendering of the rocking waves and setting sun described in the poem. The spectacular conclusion is, however, pure Lisztian drama and fantasy.

Ravel: *Jeux d’eau*  
*Ondine*

When Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) was asked how *Jeux d’eau* (Water Play, 1901) should be played, he responded, “Like Liszt, of course.” Of course, because the very title of the work recalls Liszt’s beloved “Les Jeux d’eau à la Villa d’Este.” Ravel was a great admirer of Liszt’s virtuosic piano music, and prized its unique blending of technical bravura and singing melodies along with Liszt’s remarkable ability to bring out both the resonance of the piano and its percussive effects. Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* includes a poetic epigram in the score that captures the ebullient splashing spirit of the music; the reference is no longer to Catholic tradition (as in Liszt’s original) but to a Roman deity: “A river god laughing at the water that tickles him.” Harmonically, *Jeux d’eau* is very advanced for its time; the sparkling qualities owe much to a particular combination of scales that later influenced Stravinsky.

“Ondine” is the first piece in an extraordinary trilogy titled *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) based on three prose poems by Aloysius Bertrand, a contemporary of Edgar Allan Poe (Ravel’s favorite
Ondine is a water spirit who offers herself to a mortal man. When he rejects her, explaining he loves another already, she “cried a little, and with a burst of laughter disappeared in a shower of drops that fell in pale streams.” As in Jeux d’eau, those streams are depicted by fast arpeggios sweeping up and down the keyboard, and the liberal use of the damper pedal (which lifts the hammers from the strings, allowing them to resonate freely) creates a watery blur.

Albéniz: Almeria

Spanish pianist and composer Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) was a rebellious child prodigy and a student of Liszt who began to devote himself to composition in the 1890s, when he moved to Paris and fell in with Debussy. His most profound compositional achievement is the Iberia Suite (1905–8), a compendium of solo piano works evocative of Spain. Almeria is a port town in the south east where Albéniz’s father once worked in the customs office. Characteristic rhythms and genres of the region are heard throughout, including the gentle rocking rhythm at the opening and passionate song toward the end.

Takemitsu: Rain Tree Sketch II

Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996) is undoubtedly the most renowned Japanese composer of the twentieth century. His music marries the inspiration of the French composers Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen to traditional Japanese content. Rain Tree Sketch II (1992) is a case in point: Written in memoriam Olivier Messiaen, it uses some of that composer’s noted technical innovations, while also drawing on the stories of Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oé about the Rain Tree, which stores water in its leaves. Rain Tree Sketch II is a five-minute study in the piano’s upper registers that falls in three sections: the first marked “Celestial Light,” the second “Joyful,” and finally a return to “Celestial Light.”

Janácek: In the Mists

I. Andante
IV. Presto

Whereas Ravel’s Jeux d’eau depicts water splashing in a fountain, Leos Janácek’s In the Mists (1912) tries to evoke a kind of damp fog. The mists here are metaphorical: Janácek’s piece is a portrait of his own interiority, and the mists represent the personal and psychological difficulties he endured around this time. Born in Moravia, Janácek (1854-1928) was himself a talented pianist with a renowned light touch at the keyboard. His piano music is equally gracious—spare, haunting, with clear textures (the melody always in the right hand) and repetitive rhythms. The Andante moves through a variety of moods, from a resigned, melancholy at the opening to a peasant dance toward the end. The Presto features ever-shifting rhythms drawn from Moravian folk music.

Fauré: Barcarolle No. 5 in F-sharp minor, Op. 66

Over the course of his career, Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) composed thirteen barcarolles, a kind of stylized Venetian boat song. In this, and in his entire oeuvre for piano, he follows Chopin’s
example (Fauré also composed ballades, impromptus, nocturnes, fantasies, and preludes.) Yet the fifth Barcarolle is well beyond anything Chopin could have imagined, with its adventurous harmonies—even the key of F-sharp minor is unusual—and crooked rhythms. This is no nostalgic reverie down an imagined canal, but instead a tempestuous journey into the then-uncharted waters of musical modernism.

**Debussy: La cathédrale engloutie**  
*Children’s Corner – IV. The snow is dancing*  
*Pour les arpèges composés*  
*Poissons d’or*  
*L’isle joyeuse*

French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918) stands as the greatest exemplar of musical Symbolism. He studied long and patiently at the Paris Conservatory of Music, which he entered at the astonishingly early age of ten. He performed poorly at his piano exams, but won medals and awards in theory and composition. His style was as radical and innovative as it was sensual and evocative. Mystery is an essential element of Symbolist art, and what could be more mysterious than water? It moves through many states of being—solid, liquid, gas—and many shades of blue, gray, and black. It is translucent, clear, yet opaque. The surface hides the depths. Always changing, somehow water suggests timelessness. And so too Debussy wanted to create timeless music, even though of course music is an art that is yoked to time and its passing.

*La cathédrale engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral, 1910) exploits the sonic potentials of the piano, exploring the resonances of the instrument itself through the ingenious use of particular chordal sonorities. Here the depths of the ocean are plumbed through resounding chords. “The Snow is Dancing” creates a different kind of depth—a perceptual field of near and far, snow falling in front of your eyes and at a distance—through the use of repeated but offset motivic fragments. *Pour les arpèges composés* (For Composite Arpeggios, 1915) is an exercise, an etude for pianists to learn the kind of finger gymnastics required to play *Jeux d’eau* (either Liszt’s or Ravel’s). *Poissons d’or* (Goldfish, 1907) is another kind of etude: It’s a study in musical onomatopoeia, the quicksilver gestures perfectly mimicking fish in the water. And the masterpiece *L’isle joyeuse* (The Joyous Isle, 1904) is akin to Debussy’s greatest seascape, the orchestral work *La mer* (The Sea, 1905), in its symphonic grandeur. The composer himself recognized the breadth and depth of the work: “My God! it’s hard to play,” he wrote to a friend. “This piece seems to me to bring together every different way of striking the piano, since it unifies force and grace.”

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