

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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PROGRAM NOTES

George Frideric Handel: Suite No. 5 in E Major, HWV 430

Präludium

Allemande

Courante

Air and 5 variations: "The Harmonious Blacksmith"

In 1720, Handel's eight suites for harpsichord (including Suite No. 5 in E major, HWV 430) were to be compiled and circulated, in an act of piracy perpetrated by two publishers (Roger in Amsterdam and Walsh in London). While Handel had mostly written these pieces a decade earlier, and while handwritten copies were already in circulation, he was dissatisfied at the prospect of his works being widely distributed in that fashion. In Handel's own words, in the preface of the first volume of his harpsichord suites, he felt that it was his "duty" to revise and publish them before others could take advantage of his work, and that the other copies were "surreptitious and incorrect."

As is typical of most Handel keyboard suites, the Suite No. 5 in E major does not quite follow the formal blueprint of the Baroque dance suite established by Johann Jakob Froberger (i.e., Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue), which often served as the basis of suites by German composers such as Bach. Instead, Handel's suites tend to favor variety and unexpectedness by including movements that are not based on dances. As such, his fifth suite comprises four movements: Prelude, Allemande, Courante, and an Air and Five Variations.

The prelude that begins the set establishes the dialogic nature of the work. Handel weaves a conversation out of an ornamented passage first presented in the bass and then repeated in the right hand, an octave higher. What follows is a tapestry of motives, imitative entrances, and exchanges between hands—where one hand rests, the other picks up. Embellishments serve to add weight to an almost constant yet unhurried string of sixteenth notes. Over this subtle and halcyon rhythmic backdrop Handel superimposes longer note values, creating a textural landscape that complements the improvisational character of the piece while setting the tone for subsequent movements. The conversational exchanges between hands and the kaleidoscopic textures are reinforced in the graceful and lyrical Allemande that follows the Prelude. In contrast, the subsequent triple-meter Courante is permeated with a jaunty and an imitative style of writing.

The concluding movement of the suite surprisingly consists of an air (another word for aria or song-like composition) and five variations. The movement gained such wide popularity that legends about its conception began spreading three-quarters of a century after the composer's death; it consequently was nicknamed "The Harmonious Blacksmith." The title's story suggests Handel first hearing the air sung by a blacksmith while sheltering himself from the rain.

The theme that begins the movement is graceful in character and presented in two repeated phrases, with the second phrase ending on a more satisfying cadence. The first variation retains the same melodic shape while emphasizing the sustained harmony that accompanies the theme. In the second variation, most of the activity is shifted into the left hand with sixteenth notes and ornaments. This excitement is further heightened in the fast-paced triplets of the third and fourth variations and culminates in the fifth variation's fireworks, composed of dazzling scalar passages, bringing the piece to a thrilling close.

Frédéric Chopin: Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49

At the age of thirty-one, Frederic Chopin wrote to his friend Julian Fontana one autumn day in October of 1841: "Today I finished the Fantasy—and the sky beautiful, my heart sad—but that doesn't matter at all. If it were otherwise, my existence would perhaps be of no use to anyone." His Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49, is permeated with sorrow, patriotism, soaring hope, and quiet contemplation. Ten

years earlier was the Polish-Russian War (also known as the November Uprising), which had left Poland thoroughly ravaged. According to Mieczysław Tomaszewski, the Fantasy borrows motives from some of the most popular Polish songs of insurrection, most specifically 'Litwinka' by Karol Kurpiński, an important figure during Chopin's childhood. This song was heard by the entirety of Poland and even those who fled in exile after the November Uprising. Its popularity spread even beyond Polish borders when Richard Wagner quoted the song in his work *Polonia*.

Chopin's Fantasy in F minor belongs with his later hybrid-structured works, being a combination of both sonata and fantasy. Written in 1841, the piece was dedicated to one of Chopin's students, princess Catherine de Souza. The work opens with a solemn introduction marked by a funereal rhythm, that while is never heard again, prepares the listener for marches of various characters. The marches are contrasted by the 'fantasy'—improvisatory textures that spiral, growing in velocity, with centrifugal force. A moment of peaceful stillness in B major is heard in the middle section, paralleling the similar moment of repose in the later Polonaise-Fantasy. While the piece begins in F minor, it ends in A-flat major, the key of his Polonaise-Fantasy (another work with a hybrid form). Shortly before the last two valiant chords, there is a reappearance of the otherworldly middle section, before it dissolves into a starry glitter. Despite the modulation to a major key, the ending is a tragic, grief-ridden triumph.

Frédéric Chopin: Polonaise-Fantasy in A-flat Major, Op. 61

Chopin's Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61, written between the summers of 1845 and 1846, belongs to a time in his life when he found it difficult to compose. His newly ended relationship with George Sand (pseudonym of Amantine Lucile-Aurore Dupin) and declining health were in part to blame, but Chopin was nonetheless at the height of his compositional powers. The Polonaise-Fantasy was to be his last large-scale composition for the piano. At the time of its writing, Chopin had not yet found a suitable title for the piece and confessed, "I'd like to finish something that I don't yet know what to call."

Its ambiguity and search for identity can be traced back to Chopin's own destiny as an expatriate, and his knowledge that he would never return to Poland. The work is first a fantasy, and then a polonaise, in the sense that it is a contemplation on the polonaise. It is a synthesis of the Polish national spirit and Chopin's most personal thoughts and feelings.

Pianist Jeremy Denk calls the opening an "invocation," and the rising arpeggios an invitation to listen. Two chords open the work with polonaise panache, followed by a rising, unmeasured arpeggio, a continuation of the second chord's harmony. The sequence is heard four times, and different polonaise rhythms are slowly born until the lyrical first theme arrives, heralded by repeated, forte octaves in the left hand. Like in the Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49, there is a slow, central section in B major, reminiscent of a dream or a stasis, where the search for answers comes to a momentary halt. In some sections, he strays so far from the polonaise that he comes dangerously close to the world of the nocturne. The coda is an apotheosis of both the first theme and the introverted middle section in B major. Musicologist Arthur Hedley writes about the "spirit that breathes" in Chopin's polonaises, describing them as "pride in the past, lamentation for the present, [and] hope for the future."

Robert Schumann: Arabeske in C Major, Op. 18

In 1838, Robert Schumann returned to Leipzig after a failed attempt to move to Vienna. Heartbroken that Clara Wieck's father refused to allow him to have anything to do with his daughter, least of all to have his daughter's hand in marriage, Schumann had also been desiring a more musically vibrant city. Although his venture to Vienna was by no means unfruitful, he returned to his hometown of Zwickau in haste to see his dying brother, who unfortunately passed the day before he arrived.

It was the following year, at the age of twenty-nine, that Schumann wrote his charming Arabeske. While the term *arabesque* is most frequently associated with the ornate and intricate patterns inspired by Islamic architecture and art, Friedrich Schlegel (one of the important figures in early Romanticism and the author of the quote that opens Schumann's Fantasy, Op. 17) understood the word as "a digression." Erika Reiman writes, "Through the arabesque, a system of fragments can be perceived holistically.... Thus Schumann, in adopting the title Arabeske, implies that his work is fundamentally digressive from something larger."

Schumann's Arabeske opens with an idyllic and innocent atmosphere. A contrasting minor section follows, filled with longing. After a repeat of the opening, the second minor interlude contains marchlike rhythms, an ever-present characteristic in Schumann's writing. The charming work comes to a conclusion by way of a dreamy and poetic coda. Schumann dedicated this work to Majorin Friederike Serre auf Maxen, who greatly supported his engagement to Clara.

Robert Schumann: Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17

Schumann's Fantasy in C major, Op. 17, written in 1836, was originally entitled: *Obolen auf Beethovens Monument: Ruinen, Trophäen, Palmen: grosse Sonate für das Pianoforte für Beethovens Denkmal, von Florestan und Eusebius, Op.12* (Small Contribution to Beethoven's Monument: Ruins, Trophies, Palms: Grand Sonata for the Pianoforte for Beethoven's Memorial, by Florestan and Eusebius). This project of erecting a statue, with the monetary help of Franz Liszt, the dedicatee of this piece, came to fruition in 1845. The work, in addition to being a tribute to Beethoven's life, was also a passionate declaration of love to Schumann's fiancée, Clara Wieck. He was forbidden to see Clara at this time by her father, and the work fittingly uses a quote from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved), revealed at the end of the first movement.

Schumann wrote to Clara in March 1838: "The first movement [of the Fantasie] is the most passionate I have ever composed; it is a profound lament on your account." In the beginning of the piece is a quote by Friedrich Schlegel:

Through all the sounds that sound

In the colorful dream of earth

A soft sound comes forth

For the one who listens in secret.

Schumann had written to Clara, "Are you not the secret tone that runs through the work? I almost think you are." Charles Rosen writes that the "secret tone" is Schumann's quotation from the last song in Beethoven's *An die Ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved). For pianist Murray Perahia, the "secret tone" is G, the opening pitch of the work, which remains a central tone throughout. However one may wish to interpret the "secret tone," Schumann's quotation at the end of the first movement is heard as a culmination — nearly hymn-like — after the movement's impassioned turmoil. With regard to the second movement, Clara had a visceral response: "It makes me hot and cold all over." The music's march-like quality, filled with unwaning energy is reminiscent of the League of David fighting the Philistines. The sublime last movement is an extended song without words.

