

Notes on the Program

by Dr. Jannie Burdeti

Johann Sebastian Bach/Franz Liszt: Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor, BWV 542

“I thought this art had died, but I see that in you it still lives,” exclaimed the great Dutch organist Johann Adam Reincken upon hearing Bach improvise for “almost half an hour” on the chorale *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* in Hamburg in 1720. Coming from Reincken, this compliment would surely have made an impression on Bach, who had held the Dutch organist in high regards since his younger days—in fact, one of Bach’s earliest manuscripts ever found dates from 1700 and is none other than Bach’s own copy of Reincken’s massive chorale fantasia on *An Wasserflüssen Babylon*. While this event in 1720 marked the first time both organists met, Bach had actually travelled to Hamburg for a different reason—he came to audition for the post of organist at St. Jakob’s church. During his audition, Bach improvised a fugue on the Dutch folk tune “Ik ben gegroet,” which later was written down to become the Fugue in G minor of BWV 542. Many scholars believe that the folk tune that formed the basis of the fugue was chosen as an homage to Reincken who was also present at the audition. Even if Bach astonished everyone with his performance, he did not get the job due to factors that were beyond his control.

Often nicknamed “Great” as to differentiate it from the little Fugue in G minor, Bach’s Fantasia and Fugue in G minor BWV 542, is a major work for the organ both in scope and in execution. The Fantasia is dark and tragic, the writing is quasi-improvisatory, yet Bach is as disciplined as ever in his construct and adherence to the traditions of the North German organ school. Between declamatory outbursts, toccata-like passages are contrasted with more serene and controlled fugato sections. The Fantasia ends with a Picardy third, launching the listener into a light-hearted yet impressive Fugue featuring two countersubjects and a jubilant conclusion. Needless to say, to hear Bach improvise this fugue at his audition must have been a mind-blowing experience.

In Liszt’s hands, Bach’s work translates seamlessly from the organ to the piano. Without the organ pedals at his disposal, some voices are unavoidably moved around. That being said, Liszt’s arrangement captures the essence of Bach’s work in what can only be described as a splendid *tour de force*.

Franz Schubert/Franz Liszt: Lieder Transcriptions

Gretchen am Spinnrade

Der Müller und der Bach

Erlkönig

Schubert devoted himself to the *lied* or song genre and composed more than 600 songs during his short life of 31 years. These works for the voice and piano encompass a vast emotional and dramatic scope and are in many ways, great operas in the miniature form. Tonight, they are heard in the solo piano version, as transcribed by Franz Liszt, another great dramatist, who wrote most of his Schubert transcriptions when he was in Schubert’s hometown of Vienna between 1838 and 1839.

Gretchen am Spinnrade (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel), written at the age of 17 and later published as his opus 2, was Schubert's very first setting of a poem from Goethe, a poet and playwright who captivated the composer's mind. In this particular song, Schubert sets the text from a scene in his tragic play, *Faust*. The song depicts a young girl, Gretchen at her spinning wheel, distraught as she obsesses over Faust whom she is madly in love with. The spinning wheel is heard throughout the work, a haunting and obsessive sixteenth-note pattern, reflecting her turbulent thoughts. The left hand imitates the sound of the foot treadle or perhaps, a pounding heart. Gretchen sings over this accompaniment, full of yearning for her lover, Faust, whom she had only met briefly on the street. She is overwhelmed with emotion, yearning for Faust again, in this monologue: "My peace is gone, my heart is heavy; never, but never again, shall I find peace. Where I do not have him, that is the grave, the whole world is bitter to me." The song climaxes as she sings, "And ah, his kiss!"

Der Müller und der Bach (The Miller and the Stream) belongs to the song cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin* (The Fair Maid of the Mill), based on poems by Wilhelm Müller. It was written when Schubert was bed-ridden and sick with syphilis at the age of 26. Not only was he suffering from the symptoms of the disease but he had lost his hair due to a mercury treatment, and was in fear of losing his reputation and relationships with friends. Graham Johnson writes that the modern equivalent of syphilis for understanding Schubert's plight would be HIV or AIDS. The poem here portrays the conversation between a distraught and heartbroken young man, the Miller, and a kindly brook that tries to comfort him. The dialogue begins with the Miller saying to the brook: "Where a true heart dies of love, there lilies wither on every bed; then must the full moon go behind the clouds so that men do not see her tears; then angels cover their eyes, and sob and sing the soul to rest." The stream replies: "And when love escapes from pain, a little star, a new one, shines in the heaven: then there spring up three roses, half red and half white, that will never wither again, from the thorns, and the angels cut off their wings and every morning go down to the earth."

Erlkönig (Erlking), based on another poem by Goethe, was published as Schubert's Opus 1 although it was written after *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. The poem tells the story of a young boy who is riding on a horse, late at night with his father. The repeated octaves create an atmosphere of drama and terror resounding in the pounding steps of the horse. The child is terrified as he sees and hears the Erlking, a supernatural being who tries to lure him with promises of games and rewards. However, his father, who does not see the creature, reassures him that it must be something else he hears and that it is nothing to worry about. In the end, the Erlking takes the child by force, harming him as he cries for help to his father, prompting him to ride ever so swiftly to their destination. Upon their arrival, however, he realizes that the child has died in his arms. There are four characters in the piece, narrator, father, son, and the Erlking. This work was a great favourite ever since Schubert's conception and Liszt performed it on many concert tours, including in Leipzig, Prague, London, Berlin, and St. Petersburg.

Musicologist Alan Walker has interestingly noted that Liszt always adamantly insisted that the poem was printed in the solo piano version. In 1838, when Haslinger printed the poems apart from the score on the inside of the front cover, Liszt immediately requested that the publication

be reprinted with the words under the notes, exactly as Schubert himself had written in his original score.

George Gershwin/Earl Wild: Two Virtuoso Etudes

“Embraceable You”

“Fascinating Rhythm”

The only pianist to have ever played for six consecutive U.S. presidents, virtuoso Earl Wild (1915-2010) held a deep affinity and passion for the music of George Gershwin. His love of Gershwin’s music began at the age of 27, while touring with Arturo Toscanini as the pianist for the NBC Symphony Orchestra. He was invited by Toscanini to perform Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. After a resounding success, Earl Wild went on to become a champion of his music and wrote a number of Gershwin-inspired works throughout his life including, “Improvisations on *Someone to Watch Over Me*,” “Grand Fantasy on *Porgy and Bess*,” and perhaps most famously, his “Seven Virtuoso Etudes.”

“Embraceable You” is the fourth etude in his set of “Seven Virtuoso Etudes.” The writing is prelude-like with its flowing, seemingly-extemporaneous arabesques and the melody floating in the treble registers. Harmonic inflections within the arpeggios serve to create a kaleidoscope of colors. After a chromatic middle section that hints at Rachmaninov, the theme resurfaces, but this time in octaves, bearing with it, increased intensity. After a moment of stillness, the coda makes for a bittersweet moment when the arpeggios that began the piece are recalled one last time.

The last piece in the set of etudes is “Fascinating Rhythm.” A chromatic introduction sets the scene for the iconic theme. Apparently, his older brother, Ira Gershwin, is to have commented: “For God’s sake, George, what kind of lyric do you write to a rhythm like that?” It is amusing to contemplate what Ira would have said in response to Earl Wild’s virtuosic re-writing of the piece. The first complete statement of the theme can be heard in the right hand while the left hand plays a ragtime-style accompaniment. The thematic material returns under different guises, with each variation focusing on different rhythmic transformations. For example, in one rendition of the theme, the left hand plays an ostinato made up of a group of three eighth-notes against the melody’s quadruple-meter drive. This metric displacement gives rise to a polyrhythm-feel that would easily qualify as a “fascinating rhythm” indeed! As the piece reaches its conclusion, the theme is stated one last time only to be interrupted by a staccato sequence reaching the highest register of the piano. From then on, the music spirals downwards, an inversion of the opening ascending introduction. This sequence eventually reaches the lowest note of the piece, B-flat, concluding the etude with a satisfying major-ninth chord.

Franz Schubert: Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 959

I. Allegro

II. Andantino

III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace - Trio: Un poco più lento

IV. Rondo: Allegretto

“Franz Schubert, in his late piano sonatas, is revealed more as a listener than a speaker; the ‘heavenly length’ being that open-ended time it takes for a person to respond to the suffering of another. The composer and performer thus enter into an intimate communion of hearts, and the audience can only ever be eavesdroppers.” -Stephen Hough

Schubert’s last three piano sonatas (D. 958, D. 959, D. 960), String Quintet in C major, and *Schwanengesang* song cycle, were among the last works he finished before his passing in 1828 at the tragically young age of 31 and only one year after Beethoven’s death. While all three sonatas are cyclically constructed, the A major Sonata is most evidently so.

The arresting opening of the A Major sonata’s first movement exudes both grandeur and optimism. The energetic leaps in the bass that begin the work will serve as an important rhythmic motive throughout the rest of the piece. Interestingly, most of these cyclic connections were added in later after he already had a working draft of the sonata. Musicologist Maurice Brown, argues that based on the sketches there is substantial evidence that Schubert wrote the last movement first and then the first one. The second theme of the sonata unfolds into a gentle and tender song or a *lied*. The development, which contains some of the most magical and scintillating moments in the movement, makes use of material from the second theme and oscillates between the key areas of C and B major.

In contrast to the joy, life, and enthusiasm of the opening movement, the second movement makes audible the very definition of terror. The fears, sadness, and anguish that Schubert may have been facing, writing this sonata during the last months of his life, are heard in this movement. Beginning with a lonely barcarolle, the second movement soon whirls into its own madness. Alfred Brendel and musicologist William Kinderman both draw parallels to Goya’s painting 3rd of May, 1808, where an opposition between irrational brutality and defenceless humanity is present. After the intensity of the moment subsides, a short time of stasis gives an opportunity for a low trill to emerge. The movement ends with a restatement of the opening barcarolle, but this time with bells of fate.

If the second movement remains one of the darkest compositions ever to have been written, the third movement almost flaunts its giddiness, with the exception of one fleeting outbreak, recalling the not-so-distant past. The middle trio section makes use of the motivic leap from the very opening of the first movement, but this time, inverted.

Charles Rosen and Edward T. Cone have noted that the last movement of the sonata is structurally modelled after Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 31, No. 1. The movement begins with Schubert in his element as a song composer, the music filled with lyricism and long flowing textures. András Schiff describes the experience as Schubert taking music out of the room and into nature—a symbol of the flowing of water and all that it carries. Indeed, the composer’s appreciation of nature—a recurring theme of the Romantics who were seeking to restore men’s relationship with nature—can be seen in many pages of his letters to his family. However, behind the purity of this symbol, the horrors of the second movement return, before the storm subsides reluctantly. The closing section is astonishing with its hesitations and silences as if the singing stops mid-breath and is unable to continue. The coda brings the work to a close with an

exhilarating rush to the end and the motivic leap from the opening of the sonata makes a triumphant return.