

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Dr. Jannie Burdeti

### Franz Liszt: Sonetto 104 del Petrarca from *Années de pèlerinage II*

The Italian Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) wrote over three hundred poems about unrequited love for “Laura,” a woman he saw outside a church and most likely never spoke to. Between 1838 and 1839, Franz Liszt chose three of Petrarca’s sonnets for his *Tre Sonetti di Petrarca*, originally for voice and piano but soon transcribed for solo piano. At the time of composition, Liszt had recently traveled through Italy and, moreover, had been deeply involved with transcribing Franz Schubert’s songs for solo piano. Perhaps inspired by Schubert, these settings of Petrarch’s sonnets are Liszt’s first attempts at songwriting, although they are closer to Italian opera in style. This work went through five major incarnations: the original vocal version composed 1838–39, the piano transcription published in 1846, a vocal version for tenor and piano published the same year, a new piano transcription included in the second volume (Italy) of his *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of pilgrimage), and finally a vocal version for baritone and piano, published in 1864.

Liszt’s Sonetto 104 del Petrarca, the most well-known of the three settings, is based on the following sonnet by Petrarch:

I don’t find peace, and I cannot make war;  
And I fear, and hope; and burn, and am like ice;  
And fly above the sky, and lay on the floor;  
And hold nothing, and embrace all life.

They have me in jail, and won’t open or bar the door,  
Neither to keep me, nor free me from my ties;  
And Love won’t kill me, and won’t send me forth,  
Neither wants me to live, nor will let me die.

I see without eyes, and don’t have a tongue and sing;  
And I long to die, and beg for aid;  
And I hate myself, and love anew.

I feed on sadness, weeping grin;  
Death and life disgust me both the same:  
I am in this state, lady, for you.

(Translation: Nathaniel Baker)

Full of oxymorons and conflicting emotions, the poem undoubtedly resonated with Liszt. In 1838, the same year he set this to music, Liszt wrote a very similar utterance in his journal:

“I feel the talons of the eagle tearing at me. Two opposing forces are fighting within me: one thrusts me towards the immensity of space, higher, ever higher, beyond all suns, up to the heavens; the other pulls me down towards the lowest, the darkest regions of calm, of death, of

nothingness. And I stay nailed to my chair, equally miserable in my strength and my weakness, not knowing what is to become of me.”

The work opens in the midst of agitation and angst, then spills over into a plaintive recitative. The theme proper is a lyrical, operatic melody. Liszt would later write fondly about his use of augmented harmonies in this piece. As the music builds, there are cries of obsession, melodies that are hopeful at one moment and sorrowful the next, and the work ultimately culminates in bittersweet resignation.

### **Johannes Brahms: Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118, No. 2**

After a life of writing massive symphonies, sonatas, concertos, and other large-scale works, Johannes Brahms, at the age of sixty, returned to the humble character piece, writing twenty miniatures for the piano, which would make up his Opuses 116–119. They are deeply intimate confessions, of which Jan Swafford writes, “Maybe all the pieces with their delicate lyricism are love songs to lost women in Brahms’s life, to Ilona and Clara and Agathe and Hermine and Alice, to Elisabeth . . . and no less he may have composed the pieces to try and keep Clara Schumann going in body and soul.”

In ABA form, the well-loved Intermezzo in A Major begins with a tender, singing melody, harmonized by euphonious thirds, sixths, and tenths. Long-arching lines create a sense of longing, while shorter motives that are inverted in different ways create a sense of wonder. A darker, melancholic middle section ensues as we hear intertwining, imitative lines. Brahms offers a moment of stillness in F-sharp major before the darkness returns, this time in an outcry from the deepest recesses of the soul. The first section returns, though at first in hushed tones.

### **Frédéric Chopin: Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 59, No. 1; Mazurka in A-flat Major, Op. 59, No. 2; Mazurka in F-sharp Minor, Op. 59, No. 3**

*In his hands, the mazurka ceased to be an actual dance tune, and became a tone poem, a mirror of moods, an epitome of human emotions, joy and sadness, love and hate, tenderness and defiance, coquetry and passion.* —G. C. Ashton Jonson

Chopin composed mazurkas from the age of fifteen until the last year of his life. He ultimately completed fifty-seven mazurkas, ranging from half a minute to over five minutes and typically containing references to three types of popular Polish folk dances: the mazur, kujawiak, and oberek. These dances were traditionally accompanied by mixed instruments, such as guitar, bagpipe, fiddle, and voice. Through the combination of Chopin’s folkloristic roots and his adventurous harmonic language, he transformed a genre of rustic dance melodies into art music for the concert hall. In these miniatures, Chopin explores the entire spectrum of human emotions while paying homage to his roots.

Chopin completed his Op. 59 in 1845, a trying year for him for several reasons. His relationship with his partner, Baroness Aurore Dudevant (best known by her pen name, George Sand), was slowly deteriorating. Health issues further plagued him that summer in Nohant, which the doctor blamed on hypochondria. Last but not least, the weather had been horrible in the countryside where Chopin and Sand lived: first it was cold and windy; then heavy rainstorms arose, followed by flooding, and culminating in a heatwave, causing everything to smell like rotting vegetation.

A wistful and melancholic melody opens the first mazurka of Op. 59. The theme returns in various guises and registers. A central section in the parallel major brings about a more determined hope before the return of the opening in the key of G-sharp minor—a half step lower than expected. Chopin adds a surprising detour at the coda before the music vanishes.

Both sweet (*dolce*) and dignified, the theme of the second mazurka (like that of the first) goes through various transformations: modest, heroic, and at other moments, played by the left hand. The soaring melody of the middle section develops into a ballade-like narrative drama with each repetition of its first and second themes. Chopin dedicated this piece to the wife of Felix Mendelssohn, upon his request. In a letter to Chopin, Mendelssohn had unabashedly asked: “My dear Chopin, this letter comes to you to ask a favor. Would you out of friendship write a few bars of music, sign your name at the bottom to show you wrote them for my wife (Cécile M.-B.), and send them to me? It was at Frankfort that we last met you and I was then engaged: since that time, whenever I wish to give my wife a great pleasure I have to play for her, and her favorite works are those you have written.” Chopin gladly complied and returned the letter with the second mazurka enclosed.

The grandest of the set is the third, which begins with an impetuous Lydian melody. The initial pathos gives way to a middle section in the tender key of F-sharp major, the same key as his Barcarolle, Op. 60, written around the same time and featuring melodies similarly harmonized in thirds. This mature, three-minute piece has a greater dramatic and emotional scope than many large-scale compositions. Initially, Chopin composed the work in full in the key of G minor, only transposing it later.

### **Johann Sebastian Bach: Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp Major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II, BWV 882**

Hans von Bülow famously quipped that “*The Well-Tempered Clavier* is the Old Testament.” Bach’s two volumes of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* indeed cover not only all twenty-four major and minor keys, twice through, but the entire gamut of imagination, intellect, inspiration, and aspiration—words cannot capture the magnitude of this collection. Bach published the second book in 1742, twenty years after the first. The moniker *Well-Tempered* refers to the tuning system and Bach’s desire to demonstrate the possibility of composing in all keys during a time when equal temperament (equality between each key) was not assumed.

The lively dotted rhythms in the radiant F-sharp-major prelude are buoyant, bringing to mind an orchestral French overture. The following fugue contains a quirky subject that begins with a trill.

### **Claude Debussy: *Suite bergamasque***

*Prelude*

*Menuet*

*Clair de lune*

*Passepied*

When Debussy wrote his *Suite bergamasque* in 1890 at the age of twenty-eight, he was in search of his own musical voice—one that would lead him on a path diametrically opposed to that of Wagner and the German musical tradition. Debussy became increasingly attracted to the French

Baroque masters, including Couperin and Rameau, and he effectively infuses their spirit and forms in his four-movement *Suite bergamasque*. This influence is most recognizable in the work's organization and choice of movements, all of which hint at the Baroque dance suite.

The unusual term *bergamasque* refers to a poem by Paul Verlaine entitled "Clair de lune." In the poem, Verlaine writes, "Votre âme est un paysage choisi / Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques": "Your soul is a favored landscape / For maskers and bergamaskers enticingly to roam." According to musicologist Paul Roberts, "Verlaine employed the word [bergamasque] as an archaism, for its suggestive frisson and musicality, which is surely how Debussy intended it in the title to his suite." Bergamasque can also refer to an inhabitant of the city of Bergamo in northern Italy or a sixteenth-century folk dance from the Bergamo region.

Debussy had originally refused to publish his early works because they were not in his mature style. However, after a publisher hinted that they would be successful given Debussy's fame, he gave his consent. He heavily revised the *Suite bergamasque* before its publication in 1905, the same year two later works, *Estampes* and the first book of *Images*, become available in print.

The suite begins with a short Prélude, full of panache, from which emerges a curving melodic line. It contains the direction *tempo rubato* and is free and improvisatory—indeed, Debussy was famous for his entrancing improvisations. Musicologist Frank Dawes compares the melodic curves to the ones found in the Baroque arabesque art style, with its many lines and shapes intersecting and crisscrossing one another. A contrasting, mysterious section is in a stricter tempo. In the middle, Debussy quotes Fauré's setting of the same poem—Verlaine's "Clair de lune." After the A section returns, a coda emerges with declamatory statements and cascading lines that intensify toward an assured finish.

Debussy marks the opening of the second movement, Menuet, as "very delicate." It wistfully evokes the formalities and pleasantries of the Baroque dance. Debussy contrasts the theme's staccato and its rhythmically driven mood with a more extravagant middle section that favors legato and long sustained passages. The coda references one last time the staccato articulations, followed by a soft glissando, which concludes the movement with an otherworldly charm. Debussy composed two vocal settings of "Clair de lune"—one in 1882 and a second one ten years later—in addition to the third movement of this suite with the same name. The movement was originally named "Promenade sentimentale." Perhaps Debussy's most famous work, its outer sections exude an ineffable calm, suspended in time and space. Musicologist Roy Howat has shown Debussy's use of the golden section in this piece—according to Howat, this was the composer's first experiment with it.

The contrasting Passepiéd, which concludes the suite, returns us to a more worldly dance and uses a melody that Debussy heard the year before on the Javanese gamelan at the Universal Exposition in Paris. It maintains a buoyant left hand throughout the movement. Originally called "Pavane," it models itself after Fauré's Pavane in the same key.

### **Sergei Rachmaninoff: Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 36**

*Allegro agitato*

*Non allegro—Lento*

*Allegro molto*

In his memoirs, Sergei Rachmaninov wrote, “The sound of the church bells dominated all the cities of the Russia I used to know. . . . If I have been at all successful in making bells vibrate with human emotion in my works, it is largely due to the fact that most of my life was lived amid vibrations of the bells of Moscow.” It is no wonder then that one hears bell-like sonorities throughout Rachmaninov’s oeuvre, and the Second Sonata, dedicated to friend and classmate Matvey Pressman, is no exception. In 1913, during a family trip to Rome, Rachmaninov made sketches for the Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36, and *The Bells*, Op. 35, a choral symphony. The sonata’s interrelated three-movement structure is played without interruption, as in his Third Piano Concerto, composed four years earlier. The sonata begins with a tumultuous thunderclap that cascades into the deep bass of the piano. A descending-third motive that saturates the rest of the sonata, including the main theme of the middle movement, follows the opening gesture. The second element that permeates this work is a descending chromatic line in the left hand, which later transforms into a plaintive second theme. It reappears in the middle of the second movement, as the contrapuntal web spun around the subject.

Although Rachmaninov’s premiere of the work in 1915 was reasonably well received, he was unsatisfied and felt that it was too sodden—in length, texture, and technical difficulty. He compared it to Chopin’s Second Sonata, a staple in his concert repertoire, and wrote that Chopin’s masterpiece “last[ed] nineteen minutes, and all has been said.” In 1931, he published an alternate, nineteen-minute version, not only taking out 120 measures but cutting other passages as well. While there are many supporters of both versions, the original version is commonly agreed to have a more coherent structure, as many of the passages omitted in the revised version contained important thematic links. There also exists the famous Horowitz edition, endorsed by Rachmaninov himself, which combines elements from the original composition and the 1931 revision. To this day, it is left to the taste of the performer, as great pianists perform all three versions.

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