

PROGRAM NOTES

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Vier Klavierstücke, Op. 119



Composed in 1893, the Vier Klavierstücke, Op. 119, represent some of the last music Brahms wrote for solo piano. The set consists of three intermezzos followed by a rhapsody, a sequence that moves from introspective lyricism to a more extroverted and dramatic conclusion.

The first intermezzo, in B minor, is marked by a restless harmonic language and a texture of flowing arpeggios. Its chromatic inflections and shifting tonal colors create an atmosphere of subdued intensity. The second intermezzo, in E minor, is cast in ternary (A–B–A) form, with agitated outer sections framing a contrasting central passage in E major. This middle section has the character of a gentle waltz, offering a momentary sense of ease before the return of the more unsettled opening material.

The third intermezzo, in C major, provides the most transparent and lyrical writing of the set. Its rocking motion and diatonic clarity evoke the style of a lullaby or song without words, standing in contrast to the harmonic complexity of the preceding pieces.

The final work, Rhapsodie in E-flat major, departs from the inward character of the intermezzos. Brahms gives this piece a separate title, and its broader scope and more turbulent energy distinguish it from the others. Structured in a loose ternary form, it features forceful outer sections built on rhythmic drive and dense chordal writing, surrounding a more lyrical central idea. The work closes with a sense of emphatic resolution, bringing the set to a decisive conclusion.

Taken together, these four pieces illustrate Brahms's late style, characterized by concentrated forms, subtle harmonic shifts, and an economy of gesture that yields considerable expressive depth.

CARL CZERNY (1791-1857)

Variations on a Theme by Rode, Op. 33



Known to piano students worldwide on account of his volumes of etudes that have been standard teaching material for more than two centuries, Carl Czerny forms the link between Beethoven and Liszt, in that he was a pupil of the former and teacher of the latter. The Liszt family lived on the same street in Vienna as Czerny and took their talented eight-year-old son

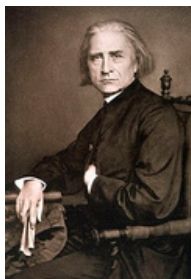
Franz to play for their famous neighbor. Czerny was so impressed by the boy that he taught him free of charge and arranged, with some trepidation, for him to meet and play for Beethoven, who was known to be irritated by requests to audition child prodigies. To everyone's surprise, Beethoven was so impressed with the young Liszt that he gave him a kiss on the forehead. Liszt was later to repay Czerny's kindness by introducing his teacher's music at many of his Paris recitals.

Much like his famous etudes, Czerny's variations require the pianist to perfect and employ basic skills, such as arpeggiation, simultaneous staccato and legato touch, clean pedaling, rapid ornamentation, controlled dynamic changes, and smooth execution of rapid sixteenth- and thirty-second-note runs. The theme for the variations (la Ricordanza, or Memorial), is credited to Jacques Joseph Pierre Rode (1774-1830), a French violinist and composer whose reputation in Vienna was greatly enhanced when Beethoven wrote his Violin Sonata no. 10, op. 96, with Rode in mind. The first performance, in 1812, featured Rode on the violin and one of Beethoven's pupils, Archduke Rudolph Johannes Joseph Rainier of Austria, at the piano.

-Stephen Ackert

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

Après une Lecture du Dante (Fantasia quasi Sonata)



In the mid-1830s, when he was already steeped in great literature and poetry in particular, Franz Liszt came across Victor Hugo's poem "Après une lecture de Dante" (After a reading of Dante) and was inspired to begin work on a "fragment dantesque." He later incorporated the work in revised form into the volume "Italy" of his "Années de pèlerinage," (Years of

PROGRAM NOTES

LISZT (CONT.)

pilgrimage), giving it the title of the Hugo poem. The resulting single-movement work, which Liszt identified as a "Fantasia quasi sonata," is based on the Canto Inferno in Dante's Divine Comedy. It describes the wild ride of a soul into hell, culminating in a transfiguration. The work contrasts a chromatic, tritone-laden hellish theme in D minor with a chorale-like heavenly theme in F-sharp major. D minor is a common key for music relating to death, as evidenced by other compositions such as Liszt's Totentanz (Dance of Death) and Mozart's Requiem. The omnipresent tritone (augmented 4th or diminished 5th) is traditionally known as the Devil's interval. The second theme, a beatific derivation from the first theme, constitutes a musical transformation. The use of F-sharp major is also symbolic here, being the signature key for other uplifting moments in Liszt's music. The second theme may also represent Beatrice, Dante's guide in the last book of the Divine Comedy, as it is interspersed with the chromatic passages, symbolizing the character's repeated appearances in hell. The sonata ends with rapid chromatic octaves that, when played at speed, seem to split into three distinct themes, representing Satan's three faces in the Inferno.

-Stephen Ackert

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Suite bergamasque



The four dances that comprise Claude Debussy's *Suite bergamasque* were among his early compositions, which for the most part he withheld from publication. In 1905, however, at the encouragement of a publisher, he agreed to publish the dances, but with revisions that reflected his development as a composer. Originally an exercise in writing a baroque dance suite for the piano, the later ver-

sion retains some dancelike movements and titles, such as menuet and passepied.

But with the third movement, Clair de lune, Debussy reveals the fascination with symbolism that he had acquired in the intervening years, particularly as it appears in the poetry of Paul Verlaine. The movement bears the same name as a famous poem by Verlaine that describes a garden and its fountains in the moonlight. With its rippling arpeggios, Debussy's music evokes one of the images in that poem "Jets d'eau svelte" (slim streams of water). The title Debussy gave to the suite also comes from an image in the poem "masques et bergamasques jouant du luth et dansant" (masqueraders playing the lute and dancing).

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

Three Movements from *Pétrouchka*



Written in Paris for the 1911 season of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company, the ballet *Pétrouchka* premiered with Vaslav Nijinsky starring as *Pétrouchka*, a puppet. The libretto tells the story of the loves and jealousies of three puppets who are brought to life at a fair in Saint Petersburg. At the end of September 1910, Diaghilev went to visit Stravinsky

in Switzerland, where he was living at the time. Expecting to discuss the new ballet *Rite of Spring*, Diaghilev was astonished to find Stravinsky hard at work on a totally different project. Stravinsky reported that he had had a vision: "I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts." Diaghilev immediately realized the theatrical potential of Stravinsky's vision. The notion of a puppet brought to mind *Pétrouchka*, the Russian version of Punch and Judy puppetry that had formed a traditional part of the pre-Lenten carnival entertainment in 1830s St. Petersburg. *Pétrouchka* is a character known across Europe under different names: Punch in England, Polichinelle in France, Pulcinella in Italy, and Kasperle in Germany. Whatever his name, he is a trickster, a rebel, and a wife-beater. He enforces moral justice with a wooden club, speaks in a high-pitched, squeaky voice, and argues with the devil. Diaghilev and Nijinsky came up with choreography to complement Stravinsky's music, and a new ballet with a new twist on the story of Punch came quickly into being.

In Russian Dance, the first of the three movements from *Pétrouchka* played in tonight's concert, Stravinsky provides both music for the crowd wildly dancing in celebration of Shrovetide (the equivalent of Mardi Gras) and for the Ballerina, the puppet with whom *Pétrouchka* falls in love. Her music is quiet and introspective, as is most of the music for the scenes that involve her. The middle movement is music that accompanies the scene in *Pétrouchka's* room. It is angular and dissonant, representing his troubled existence. Its bitonal harmony is derived from the "Pétrouchka chord," consisting of C major and F# major triads played simultaneously. In the scene titled Shrovetide Fair, the villagers return to the town square for more dancing. Their merriment is interrupted by heavy menacing chords low in the piano, as *Pétrouchka* and his rival, a puppet known as the Moor, enter the scene and come to blows. *Pétrouchka* loses the duel and falls to the ground in a final dramatic downward glissando.

-Stephen Ackert