

Thursday, June 20, 2024

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Estampes, L.100 (1903)

Pagodes

La soirée dans Grenade

Jardins sous la pluie

David Fung, piano

Debussy's *Estampes* ("prints" or "postcards") are part of a cannon of impressionistic solo piano works that appeared in the early years of the 20th century. While he never embraced the designation of his artistic style as impressionist, the pieces of *Estampes* allude to the subjects of their titles. The atmosphere of traditional Indonesian gamelan music and extensive use of pentatonic scales shroud the first piece, *Pagodes*, in lush serenity that calls to mind the ornate temples of southeast Asia. *La soirée dans Grenade*, the suite's middle movement, evokes a thick, perfumed night in Granada with its lilting habanera rhythms, Arabic scales, and gentle strumming textures. In the frenetic final piece, *Jardins sous la pluie*, Debussy builds on two regional folk melodies to depict lashing wind, rumbling thunder, and sheets of rain in a garden in the town of Orbec, Normandy.

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)

Banalités (1940)

Chansons d'Orkenise

Hôtel

Fagnes de Wallonie

Voyage à Paris

Sanglots

David Fung, piano

Similar to Debussy's *Estampes*, the five *mélodies* (songs) of Poulenc's *Banalités* reference the extra-musical through their texts and music. From the crisp folksiness of *Chanson d'Orkenise* to the dreamy listlessness of *Hôtel*, the vigour and exuberance of *Fagnes de Wallonie* and *Voyage à Paris*, and the enigmatic *Sanglots*, the songs of this collection are brief and individual references to feelings and locales familiar to the composer.

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

Oh! Quand je dors (1841)

O Lieb, S. 298 (1843)

Catherine Daniel, mezzo-soprano

Patricia Tao, piano

Today, Liszt's output of nearly six dozen lieder (songs with accompaniment) is almost totally neglected, which is unfortunate, as he worked in this genre throughout his career. Many of the songs offer interesting perspectives on his development as a composer who shaped and reshaped thematic material.

Oh! Quand je dors appeared in the second volume of a three-volume series of 24 lieder, several of which were based on songs by Victor Hugo. In it, the impassioned narrator longs for the absent beloved,

pursuing a single kiss that they hope will dispel their sorrow. In the closing bars of the lied, as the singer fades away on a line comparing their love to that of Petrarch and Laura, a sudden modulation undermines the piece's harmonic stability.

O Lieb emerges from the same period, appearing in the third volume of *Buch der Lieder*. The material is immediately recognizable, as it was popularized some years later as one of a set of three lieder transcriptions Liszt recast as nocturnes (*Liebesträume*, or *Dreams of Love*) for solo piano. Similar to *Oh! Quand je dors* in structure and tone (both songs generally follow an A-B-A structure in which rapturous bel-canto material flanks recitativo middle sections), *O Lieb* creates a dreamlike sound world roiled by the push and pull of Liszt's harmonic experimentation.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Tzigane (1924)

Kerson Leong, violin

David Fung, piano

Ravel's single-movement *Tzigane*, like the pieces of Debussy's *Estampes*, is a musical postcard. The work was written for (and premiered by) the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi in 1924, and clearly draws inspiration from vigorous folkdance styles such as *friska* and *czardas*, which Franz Liszt had done much to popularize during the previous century. Like Liszt's famous *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, Ravel's piece opens with a declamatory bit of musical stage-setting. A highly improvisatory extended solo passage runs an impressive gamut of technical fireworks before launching into a stream of folksy variations that seem to grow in speed and narrative intensity, as though the players are providing dance music and song for festivities in an imaginary Roma camp. In works such as *Tzigane* (a French translation of the Hungarian *cigány*, or "gypsy"), just as in his earlier Spanish- and Baroque-influenced compositions, Ravel's skill as one of music's great stylistic synthesizers blends a chic modernist musical pallet with a powerful dash of paprika.

Intermission

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Trio No. 1 in D Minor, op. 49

Molto allegro agitato

Andante con molto tranquillo

Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace

Finale: Allegro assai appassionato

Gabrielle Després, violin

Peter Eom, cello

Patricia Tao, piano

Mendelssohn's ruminations about writing a chamber work characterized by an active dialogue between the piano and string instruments first appear in 1832. When working on his first piano trio, it is evident that he went to considerable pains to achieve a cohesive balance between the players, revising the piano part on the advice of his colleague, fellow composer Ferdinand Hiller. The result was piano writing with the backbone to stand alongside the violin and cello, and a thoroughly blended, nuanced texture that influenced later composers (notably Brahms) writing works for piano and strings.

The work's first movement opens with a sorrowful melody shared by the cello and violin, played overtop unsettled syncopations in the piano. Tension builds as the piano gains prominence against its

interlocutors, passing through a nervous second theme before ploughing ahead seamlessly into a typically rigorous development section that never gives up the music's initial sense of melancholy desperation. A charming song-without-words slow movement offers a reprieve from the taut despair of the first movement before the players launch into a spritely scherzo movement that masks its considerable technical demands with tuneful, untroubled grace. The finale mixes the disturbed intensity of the opening movement with the lyricism and athleticism of the middle two. Mendelssohn, even at his wildest, is always firmly in control, his music guided by an uncompromising sense of direction. At the end, as if by some trick, we find that the music has slyly left its moodiness behind as it hurtles toward a muscular, satisfying conclusion in the major key.

Program notes by Morgan Lueth