

LIR CLASSICS

LIR016 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Travelling between worlds

This recital is for my family and friends. It includes many pieces I have played for decades, and in which I am delighted to keep finding new things. Many of them have a distinctly autobiographical aspect. (How often do we remember important events and periods of our lives, most vividly, by a particular piece of music?) The title I have chosen seemed to fit the experience of entering these various, vividly different, musical worlds - and the excitement and privilege a performer has in doing so. And there are other connotations: the experience of having my own roots on two sides of the world, the chance we musicians have to travel and meet many national cultures, the perspectives of the changing world itself, and the endless mystery of worlds beyond our own. Above all, these pieces speak of the composers' inner worlds, longings and sorrows, joy and exuberance, and always the feeling that just over the horizon.....who knows?

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849): Fantaisie Impromptu Op.66

The title Impromptu came into being in the 1820's, Schubert's two sets being the best known. Chopin's four works by this name are not in fact "impromptu" in their design, but carefully shaped and planned. Op 66 (1835) was the first of the four, and Chopin's editor, Julius Fonata, added the 'Fantaisie', perhaps as a marketing ploy. Chopin's reverence for Bach is evident in the famous opening theme, but its agitato marking and fleet-fingered piano figuration carry it forward as a drama, until the enharmonic change to D flat and the famous melody of the central section. A recapitulation leads to an even stormier coda, which finally sinks to rest as an echo of the lyrical central theme is heard in the left hand.

Frédéric Chopin: Nocturne in A flat Op.32 No.2

Les Sylphides was the first ballet I ever saw, and the enchantment remains. Britten's orchestral arrangements of Chopin perfectly matched the diaphanous, floating figures on stage and created an atmosphere of haunting magic. I went straight home to the piano to try to play some of those tunes. This Nocturne in A flat (1836) was one of them. Again, it mixes drama and songful melody in perfect balance, and in opposite fashion to the Fantaisie Impromptu. Here the storm is central, and initially colours the return of the main theme. But by perfectly convincing harmonic progressions, under a constantly improvisatory right hand, the music is finally allowed to subside.

Frédéric Chopin: Waltz in C sharp minor Op.64 No.2

In 1829 the young Chopin had completed his studies in Poland and sought to extend his horizons. Vienna was his first port of call and he made a considerable impression in two successful piano recitals. The Viennese waltz made its impression on him and, as with the mazurka, Chopin turned a popular dance into a concert piece. But whereas the mazurkas became increasingly introspective, the waltzes have a more sociable feel to them. The Waltz in C sharp minor in fact dates from 1847 - just two years before Chopin's premature death at the age of thirty-nine. The returning refrain ensures its memorability, while the more lyrical D flat section is highly original in its syncopated hesitations and unexpected harmonic twists.

Robert Schumann (1809-1856): Arabesque Op.18

Schumann's literary interests often led him to devise original titles for his works. It was a novel idea to call a piano piece after a Moorish ornamental frieze or border. In time, the word "arabesque" became part of both the ballet and the classical music lexicon. (In fact this Arabesque's rondo form and contrasting moods are not dissimilar in design from the preceding pieces we have heard). It is possible that Schumann also had in mind the little acciaccaturas which garnish the melody when choosing his title. This is one of those pieces that always seem to have been there - I remember it in childhood, played by my mother as I drifted off to sleep.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Intermezzo in B flat minor Op.117 No.2

In later life, Brahms, having scaled the heights with symphonies and large-scale choral works, returned to the piano to express some of his most intimate thoughts. The sets Opp.116, 117, 118 and 119 contain many gems. The tenderness, even heartbroken sadness in some of these works show an inner world which the public Brahms would never acknowledge. The gruff, at times rude individual (described most vividly in Dame Ethel Smyth's wonderful memoirs) was clearly allergic to praise from his many admirers. Comments from trusted musical friends like Clara and Robert Schumann, and Elizabeth von Herzogenberg - that was a different matter.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943): Étude Tableau in C Op.33 No.2

The glittering pianism and big tunes, for which Rachmaninov is so widely known, often obscure his sheer originality. This piece, for example - one of nine descriptive "picture studies" - alleges that it is in C major. Certainly that is where it starts and ends. But almost immediately the music is on an A flat/C minor axis, its questing theme then visiting F, E flat minor, B flat minor, and again A flat. Rachmaninov never wished to reveal the picture he had in mind - and the mystery lends magic. Questing, unresting - where is this music going? To me it speaks of something sensed, but not fully seen.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Nocturne in D flat Op.63 No.6

I first encountered Fauré's piano music through my inspiring teacher, Albert Ferber. There were many wonderful pieces to discover, but the 6th Nocturne made a special impression. It combines delicacy and sophistication in its rhythmic and harmonic detail, with an over-arching structure that creates real drama.

The Nocturne was composed in the 1890's, which makes it a near contemporary of the Brahms Op 117 Intermezzo. Yet what a different world it inhabits! Fauré's

elusive harmonic shifts are just one of the challenges of his music. He is like someone whose original thought leads to the unexpected conclusion, rather than to the obvious. He wrote once "The artist should love life and show us that it is beautiful. Without him, we might doubt it".

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946): Danse des Voisins (from The Three-Cornered Hat)

Around the turn of the 19th century a growth of nationalism throughout Europe led to a re-evaluation of folk culture and to the systematic collecting of folk songs and dances. For Spain, Falla was a leader in the field, much inspired by Grieg's work with Norwegian folk music and instruments. He also spent time in Paris where he received encouragement from Debussy, Ravel, Dukas and others. His one-act ballet *El Sombrero de Tres Picos* received its first performance in London, enjoying the distinction of Diaghilev's choreography and Picasso's set designs. The depiction of Spanish village life was strengthened by Falla's use of idiomatic instrumentation, and he later arranged three of the dances for piano, of which this is the second.

Samuel Barber (1910-1981): Excursion Op.20 No.3

Barber came from a cultured American family and studied at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, at one time seriously considering a career as a singer. His own note on the Excursions Op.20 - which were much popularised by Horowitz - reads: "These are 'excursions' in small classical forms into regional America idioms. Their rhythmic characteristics, as well as their source in folk material and their scoring, reminiscent of local instruments, are easily recognised". I am indebted to my Melbourne University piano professor - Allan Fraser - for introducing me to the Suite, and I have often performed it - either as a whole, or using individual movements. No. 3 is based on an American folk-song.

Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894): Danse Villageoise (from Pièces Pittoresques)

A folk theme continues in Chabrier's evocation of rustic French life. This is one of the piano set *Pièces Pittoresques* (1881). The composer orchestrated four of the *Pièces* most effectively, entitling that work *Suite Pastorale*. In the *Danse Villageoise* there is indeed an earthy quality which becomes more whimsical in the central section. A friend of Manet, Fauré and Verlaine, among others, Chabrier's cultural interests ranged widely. He had started his career as a lawyer, finally resigning (to concentrate on composition) just 13 years before his death.

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915): Étude in C sharp minor Op.2 No.1

From dance to song. Although not dealing in folk-music as such, national characteristics seem to continue through the next three pieces. There is a very slavonic longing and sorrow in this famous early work of Scriabin's, also revealing his undoubted debt to Chopin. Such early works give no hint of the extraordinary musical paths of exploration which Scriabin was later to take.

Arthur Benjamin (1893-1960): Scherzino

Brisbane-born, Benjamin went to study composition with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music, shortly before enlisting in the air force in the 1914-18 War. Benjamin's elegant craftsmanship produced a canon of works which deserve better recognition - particularly his Symphony and his major opera 'A Tale of Two Cities.' Much influenced in the 1920's both by Gershwin and later, by Caribbean music, he was also a successful pianist and teacher. (One of his most

distinguished piano pupils was Benjamin Britten.) The Scherzino is dedicated to Irene Kohler.

George Gershwin (1898-1937) arr. Grainger: The Man I Love

Gershwin's story is unique. He had no training in music - or access to a piano - before the age of 12. His career went forward because of an outstanding natural gift for playing and improvising, starting as a "song-plugger" at the age of 16. His brother Ira supplied the words for many of Gershwin's unforgettable songs, including this one. Percy Grainger (1882-1961) often performed Gershwin's Piano Concerto and, to play as encores, arranged two of his songs - Love Walked In and The Man I Love.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918): Jardins Sous La Pluie (from Estampes)

A theme of childhood joins the final two tracks. Estampes or 'Impressions' was first published in 1903: an apt title since the whole of the new musical movement pioneered by Debussy and others was referred to as Impressionism. Debussy's understanding of the piano's potential enabled him to create worlds of new sonorities. Estampes includes three vividly pictorial pieces: Pagodes, La Soirée dans Grenade, and finally Jardins Sous la Pluie. Using a French nursery tune for his theme, he conjures up a rain-swept garden - the droplets now pattering gently, now working up to a real downpour. During a less frenzied moment we hear, as if in the distance, a second nursery tune (children watching through the streaming window panes?) The storm returns, with a wonderful moment suggesting the sun breaking through momentarily, before the piece moves to a bravura conclusion.

Penelope Thwaites: An Encore - Dreamy Waltz

On a very much simpler level, many years ago I wrote three pieces for a friend who was an amateur pianist, and whose three small children enjoyed dancing. Emma's Dreamy Waltz seemed to suit her personality. At the end of a fiery recital programme, I have often played it as a peaceful concluding encore.

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