JANUARY 26, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born: 1873
Died: 1943
Composed: 1907

I. Allegro moderato
II. Lento
III. Allegro molto

In February 1906 Rachmaninoff resigned his position as conductor at the Bolshoi and moved his family to Dresden. He had won critical praise as a conductor, but the demands of that position prevented him from composing, which was what he really wanted to do. He loved the quiet house he rented in Dresden–it was surrounded by a garden–and he set to work immediately. The next few years were some of his most productive, for they included the composition of his Second Symphony, Isle of the Dead, and Third Piano Concerto. Also from these years came a work that has proven much less familiar, the First Piano Sonata. Rachmaninoff sketched the sonata in January and February 1907 and had it complete on May 14 of that year.

But he was by no means comfortable with his latest creation. To a friend he described his problems with it: “The sonata is certainly wild and interminable. I think it takes about 45 minutes. I was lured into this length by its guiding idea. This is–three contrasting types from a literary work. Of course no program will be indicated, though I begin to think that the sonata would be clearer if the program were revealed. Nobody will ever play this composition, it’s too difficult and long . . . At one time I wanted to make a symphony of this sonata, but this seemed impossible because of the purely pianistic style in which it is written.” The premiere, given in Moscow on October 17, 1908, by Konstantin Igumnov, got a respectful but mystified reaction, and the composer had scarcely any more success when he played the sonata on his recitals during the next several seasons.

Perhaps it may help audiences to know that the “literary work” that inspired this sonata was Goethe’s Faust and that its three movements were apparently inspired in turn by Faust, Gretchen, and Mephistopheles. Small wonder that the work struck Rachmaninoff as symphonic in character: these are the titles and sequence of the three movements of Franz Liszt’s Faust Symphony, composed in 1857. Rachmaninoff chose not to reveal the inspiration, and this sonata is in no sense programmatic: its three movements should be understood more as character pieces than as pieces that depict specific events.

This is an extremely difficult sonata for the performer, and it generates textures so full and dramatic that Rachmaninoff was right to wonder if it might really be symphonic music. The Allegro moderato alternates tentative figures with fierce outbursts before rushing ahead at the Allegro; its second subject, marked Moderato, is built on repeated notes that emerge from murmuring figurations. This movement, long and technically demanding, drives to a sonorous climax that rides along great waves of sound before the music subsides to recall the second subject and to close quietly, even peacefully. The main idea of the Lento is introduced above rocking triplet accompaniment, and that rhythm will eventually drive this movement to an agitated climax; a striking sequence of descending trills brings the movement to its restrained close. The finale has seemed to some who know of the sonata’s original inspiration to have been inspired by the Flight to Brocken in Goethe’s Faust. It opens with hammered octaves that are marked both fortissimo and marcato and then races ahead; the second subject is a quiet, march-like idea that Rachmaninoff marks “very resolute.” These two ideas alternate throughout the movement, which also features some lyric and haunting melodies. The music accelerates to the close, where Rachmaninoff rounds matters off with a great chordal climax full of the sound of pealing bells and a suitably furious cadence.

CONCERT

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major

MAURICE RAVEL

Born: 1875
Died: 1937
Composed: 1923-1927

I. Allegretto
II. Blues. Moderato
III. Perpetuum mobile. Allegro

Ravel began making sketches for his Violin Sonata in 1923, the year after he completed his orchestration of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. He was composing a number of works for violin during these years, including Tzigane, but the Violin Sonata proved extremely difficult for him, and he did not complete it until 1927. The first performance, by violinist Georges Enesco and the composer, took place on May 30, 1927, in Paris while that city was still in a dither over the landing of Charles Lindbergh the week before.

In the Violin Sonata, Ravel wrestled with a problem that has plagued all who compose violin sonatas–the clash between the resonant, sustained sound of the violin and the percussive sound of the piano–and he chose to accentuate these differences: "It was this independence I was aiming at when I wrote a Sonata for violin and piano, two incompatible instruments whose incompatibility is emphasized here, without any attempt being made to reconcile their contrasted characters." The most distinctive feature of the sonata, however, is Ravel's use of jazz elements in the slow movement.

The opening Allegretto is marked by emotional restraint. The piano alone announces the cool first theme, which is quickly picked up by the violin. A sharply rhythmic figure, much like a drum tattoo, contrasts with the rocking, flowing character of the rest of this movement, which closes on a quietly soaring restatement of the main theme.

Ravel called the second movement Blues, but he insisted that this is jazz as seen by a Frenchman. In a lecture during his American tour of 1928, he said of this movement: "while I adopted this popular form of your music, I venture to say that nevertheless it is French music, Ravel's music, that I have written." He sets out to make violin and piano sound like a saxophone and guitar, specifying that the steady accompanying chords must be played strictly in time so that the melodic line can sound "bluesy" in contrast. The "twang" of this movement is accentuated by Ravel's setting the violin in G major and the piano in A-flat major at the opening.

Thematic fragments at the very beginning of the finale slowly accelerate to become a virtuoso perpetual motion. Ravel brings back themes from the first two movements before the music rushes to its brilliant close, which features complex string-crossings for the violinist.

Piano Trio

REBECCA CLARKE

Born: 1886
Died: 1979
Composed: 1921

I. Moderato ma appassionato
II. Andante molto semplice
III. Allegro vigoroso

Rebecca Clarke, who died in New York City in 1979 at the age of 93, was both English and American. Born in a suburb of London to an American father and a German mother, Clarke studied composition with Charles Stanford and the viola with Lionel Tertis at the Royal College of Music. She became one of the first women members of a professional orchestra in London when she joined the Queen's Hall Orchestra in 1912, and she also composed. Clarke spent much of her career in the United States, where her brothers lived; she was in this country when World War II broke out in 1939, and she decided to stay. In 1944 Clarke married James Friskin, the distinguished piano pedagogue who taught for many years at Juilliard, and she lived in New York City for the rest of her long life (Clarke and Friskin had met thirty years before when both were students at the Royal College of Music). Most of Clarke's own music comes from early in her career, and much of this–largely chamber and vocal works–remains to be published.

Clarke may have established a solid career in England, but she spent extended periods in the United States, and one of these–beginning in 1916–lasted nearly eight years. It was during this period that Clarke completed two of her finest works, her Viola Sonata (1919) and the present Piano Trio (1921). She wrote both for a chamber music competition sponsored by the Berkshire Festival of Chamber Music, which was under the direction of the famous patron of music Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.

It is a measure of that era that Clarke felt the need to submit both works under the nom de plume Anthony Trent–apparently women were not thought capable of composing music worthy of serious consideration. In each case, Clarke's work was runner-up to the first-place winner, and some of the judges were suspicious that "Anthony Trent" might be the pseudonym of more famous male composers.

Clarke's Piano Trio is a big, powerful piece. It can make a huge sound, it demands virtuoso performers, and it is ingeniously constructed: certain ideas introduced in the first movement return in the following two movements, subtly transformed when they reappear. Clarke marks the opening movement Moderato ma appassionato, and impassioned it certainly is as the piano hammers out what will be one of the trio's principal ideas. The second subject of this sonata-form movement brings complete contrast: solo piano announces this quiet chordal theme, which Clarke marks misterioso. The development brings a return to the dynamic manner of the very beginning. Textures can be thick here, and at one point Clarke specifies that she wants to playing to be vigoroso e pesante. The violin is sometimes sent high into its range as it soars above the turbulence below, and at the movement's conclusion the music disintegrates into fragments.

The beginning of the Andante molto semplice is once again marked misterioso: violin and cello, both muted, sing the bleak opening idea, which is an extension of material heard in the first movement. This movement may have been marked semplice at its beginning, but the development turns violent, boiling over with intensity and huge sonorities. Yet these tensions wind down, and both the violin and piano repeat the simple themes heard earlier as the movement comes to a quiet conclusion.

The Allegro vigoroso explodes to life, and here Clarke asks that the piano part be played martellato: "hammered." The main theme sounds as if it might have its roots in folk music, but this is shouldered aside by much more complex music that leaps by the measure through such meters as 5/8, 7/8, 2/4, and 4/8. Gradually all this energy subsides, and now Clarke reintroduces themes heard at the very beginning. These are recalled, sometimes as almost dreamy memories, before the powerful rush to the concluding chords.

String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op. 18

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833
Died: 1897
Composed: 1860

I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Andante ma moderato
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto — Trio. Animato
IV. Rondo. Poco allegretto e grazioso

We so automatically identify Brahms with Vienna that it is easy to forget that he did not move there until he was nearly 30. By that time he had already written a great deal of music, and some of the best of these early works were composed while he was a court musician in Detmold. About 100 miles southwest of Hamburg, Detmold was a cultured court, much devoted to music, and for three seasons (1857-59) Brahms served as a court musician there. These years were quite productive for him musically. With a chorus, orchestra, and good solo performers at his disposal, Brahms could have his music performed immediately and could test his ideas. From these years came his two serenades for orchestra, the first two piano quartets, several choral works, and the completion of his First Piano Concerto.

It was during his final year at Detmold that Brahms began his Sextet in B-flat Major, completing it in 1860. Brahms is sometimes credited with "inventing" the string sextet (two violins, two violas, two cellos), but that is not true–Boccherini and others had written for this combination of instruments earlier. But Brahms' two examples are the first great works in the form, and they remain–with Tchaikovsky's Souvenir de Florence and Schoenberg's Verklaerte Nacht–the core of the slim repertory for this ensemble. Many have noted that Brahms' Sextet in B-flat Major shares some of the same sunny spirits as his Serenade No. 1 in D Major, premiered in Detmold in the same year he completed the sextet. It is worth noting that Brahms–reluctant to write for orchestra–had originally scored that serenade for winds and a string quartet. Perhaps writing for so generously-proportioned a chamber ensemble encouraged Brahms now to write for an unusually large string ensemble. Perhaps he did not feel ready to take on the formidable challenge of the string quartet. In any case, Brahms added two more instruments to the string quartet and then took full advantage of the larger sonority and wider opportunities they made available.

Perhaps because it is an early work, critics have been quick to detect influences on the Sextet in B-flat Major. Brahms' admirable biographer Karl Geiringer hears the influence of Schubert in the first movement, of Beethoven in the scherzo, and of Haydn in the finale. But the Sextet already shows Brahms' unmistakable voice, particularly in its rich sonorities and in the way a wealth of musical ideas grows out of each theme. And in contrast to the clenched intensity of some of Brahms' later chamber music, the Sextet is (generally) full of sunlight.

From the first instant of this music Brahms fully exploits the richness of the lower sonorities a sextet makes available–there are important thematic roles here for first viola and first cello–as well as playing off combinations of instruments impossible in a string quartet. The gentle, rocking main subject of the Allegro ma non troppo, heard immediately in the first cello, is only the first in a number of thematic ideas in this sonata-form movement, but its relaxed and flowing ease sets a tone that will run throughout the Sextet–this is music that proceeds along a mellow songfulness rather than through the collision of unrelated ideas. Brahms' performance markings tell the tale here: the first theme is marked espressivo, the second subject–for upper strings–is marked dolce and pianissimo, while the third–a winding idea for cello–is marked poco forte espressivo animato. The development treats the first two thematically, but the third is developed rhythmically: Brahms derives a series of rhythmic patterns from this theme that help bind the movement together, and the theme reappears in its melodic shape only in the recapitulation. The lengthy movement closes with a nice touch: the brief coda, played pizzicato, moves gracefully to the two concluding chords.

The second movement, in somber D minor, is a theme and six variations. The first viola immediately lays out the firmly-drawn theme, and the first three variations seem barely able to suppress a sort of volcanic fury that seethes beneath the surface of this music. Even in chamber music Brahms favored a heavy sonority, and at several points in these variations all six instruments are triple-stopped, creating huge chords played simultaneously on eighteen strings. A ray of sunlight falls across the music at the fourth variation, which moves to D major, while the sonorous fifth–also in D major–is almost entirely the province of the first viola, accompanied by the violins' wispy octaves. The dark sixth variation serves as the coda. Here the cello, playing with an almost choked sonority, returns to the D-minor darkness of the opening and leads the movement to its quiet close.

After these two massive movements, the pleasing Scherzo zips past in barely three minutes. The scherzo section itself is playful but feels a little subdued in comparison to the slashing, full-throated trio, which suddenly races ahead (Brahms' marking is Animato). This rises to a sonorous climax before the return of the opening scherzo; Brahms closes with a mighty coda derived from the trio. The concluding Poco Allegretto e grazioso is a rondo based on the first cello's amiable opening theme. Significant interludes intrude on the progress of the movement, which makes use of the same kind of rhythmic underpinning that bound the first movement together so imaginatively. The rondo theme itself undergoes variation as this movement proceeds, and Brahms rounds matters off with a coda so powerful that it feels virtually symphonic.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger