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PIANO SONATA IN D MAJOR, K. 311

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756–1791

Throughout his life, Mozart tried repeatedly – first accompanied by his father Leopold, later alone – to obtain a court appointment to a prestigious musical position that he considered appropriate for his talents. He made numerous trips around Europe’s musical centers but never succeeded in obtaining a secure permanent job.

One of the most frustrating and fruitless of these forays occurred in 1777–78 when he set out from Salzburg with his mother on a grand tour of Germany and France. They stopped for a while in Mannheim, which produced a number of commissions, including the two flute concertos and probably three flute quartets, but nothing permanent. They then went on to Paris for a miserable and frustrating stay, culminating in the sudden death of his mother in July 1778.

Mozart composed the Sonata in D, K.311 *en route*, probably before he reached Mannheim. There is a suggestion in his letters that it was commissioned by Josepha Freysinger, a handsome and talented young lady whom he had met on the way in Munich. It was published, together with K. 309 and K. 310, in Paris in 1782, full of errors and probably without Mozart’s approval. Fortunately, the autograph has survived, allowing modern musicologists to create a proper edition.

ESTAMPES

Claude Debussy
1862–1918

Published in 1903, *Estampes* (Prints) belongs to a tradition of French keyboard music dating back to the seventeenth century with the keyboard works of the Couperin family and especially Jean-Philippe Rameau. These are short pieces evoking a mood, an image or even the personality of a specific individual. Like so many of Debussy’s works, they are deliberately referential, containing programmatic, visual and musical allusions readily familiar to his audience.

The three pieces comprising this set evoke both images and sounds that were dear to the hearts of French painters and composers around the turn of this century. *Pagodes* (Pagodas) draws on the French passion for “orientalism” in all the arts; it particularly imitates the music of the Javanese gamelan ensemble in its use of the pentatonic scale. *Soirée dans Granade* (Evening in Granada) is a haunting *habanera* and, again, reflects the predilection for Hispanic rhythms and harmonies utilized extensively by composers from Bizet to Ravel and Ibert, and in Debussy’s own suite *Ibéria*.

Jardins sous la pluie (Gardens in the rain) employs yet another feature of French Impressionism in music and painting: water imagery. Here, Debussy adapts the style and form of the Baroque toccata to represent the pattering of the rain, underneath which are the tunes of two French folk melodies.

VARIATIONS IN B-FLAT MINOR, Op. 3

Karol Szymanowski
1882–1937

Polish music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reflects the shifting political conditions of that torn country. Politically divided between Russia, Austria and Germany and strongly influenced by French culture and political ideas, Polish culture had difficulty retaining its independent voice.

No one mirrors these problems and influences better than composer Karol Szymanowski. Born near Kiev in [the] Ukraine to a Polish father and Swedish mother, he studied music in Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin and Italy. His early music was strongly influenced by Chopin, Brahms, Schumann, Reger and Richard Strauss; later he came under the influence of the Russian school, especially the music of Skryabin. Eventually, around 1914, Szymanowski began experimenting with atonality, polytonality, Oriental modes and ornamentation, and polyrhythms. After 1921, however, he turned more conservative and nationalist, using Polish folk melodies directly as the basis for his compositions.

Szymanowski was also a poet and novelist, his literary output – the novel destroyed in a fire in 1939 – focusing on the erotic relationships between men and boys.

Szymanowski composed Variations, Op. 3, between 1901 and 1903. While the theme is original, the variations are heavily indebted to Schumann and Brahms, especially the latter's "Handel Variations." The theme is melodically simple, but Szymanowski imbues it from the started with unusual harmonic treatment. Oddly, the variations are more conservative harmonically than the treatment of the theme, focusing more on pianistic technique and mood.

24 PRELUDES, Op. 28

Frédéric Chopin
1810–1849

It is fortunate for music history that Frédéric Chopin's father emigrated from France to Poland just before the French Revolution. Had his son been born and educated in his father's homeland, he might never have been able to rise above his peasant roots to be recognized as the prodigy he was. And even if he had made it to the Paris *Conservatoire*, it's unlikely that its doctrinaire musical establishment would ever have permitted him the freedom to develop his own unique creative voice.

Born and raised in Warsaw, Chopin was hailed as the Polish Mozart. By the age of 20 he seemed well on the road to become Poland's national composer. Perhaps most important, however, was that his teachers at the Warsaw Conservatory appreciated his genius and refrained from forcing him into a rigid academic mold. He was allowed to concentrate exclusively on pianistic composition and to integrate Polish folk idioms into his music.

After the collapse of the Polish revolution against Russia in 1830, Chopin went into exile to France, never to return. Nevertheless he put his homeland on the musical map with a corpus of innovative piano compositions that significantly expanded the formal, harmonic and emotive vocabulary of the instrument. He settled in Paris, then the center of Polish émigrés as well as the center of Europe's musical life, where he quickly achieved brilliant success as a composer and teacher, but *not* as a virtuoso performer. Admired by the leading composers

of his day, including Liszt, Schumann and Bellini, he was both artistically and financially secure.

The term “prelude” is one of the most slippery terms in classical music, denoting a loosely structured, sometimes improvised work, originally for keyboard or lute. Over the course of four centuries, the prelude morphed considerably in form and function. Moreover, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many pieces fitting this general description were also called by other names (*toccata, intonazione, ricercare*, etc.). By the seventeenth century in Germany, the *praeludium* developed into an important part of the Lutheran church service, occurring at the beginning and end of the service or to attract the listener’s attention and define the mode or tonality of a following concerted work, cantata or chorale. By the time of Dietrich Buxtehude, the teacher and idol of the young Johann Sebastian Bach, the prelude had morphed into an elaborate, often multi-sectional, keyboard work, either self-standing or preparatory to the more tightly structured fugue.

In Italy, France and Spain, where prelude-type pieces were called by other titles, the genre was decidedly more secular in nature. By the eighteenth century in Northern Europe, preludes also began to detach from the church service and specifically from the keyboard, becoming self-sufficient short compositions or introductions to dance suites (as in Bach’s unaccompanied cello suites). While many composers left behind individual preludes, they often collected them in sets of one for each mode or major and minor tonality, the most famous collection being Bach’s *Well Tempered Clavier*.

Of the eighteenth and nineteenth century preludes, Chopin’s 24 *Preludes*, Op. 28, is probably the best-known set. The individual pieces were composed between 1836 and 1839, and published simultaneously in Leipzig, Paris and London. The collection contains compositions of varying lengths and moods, arranged by key signature (C major, A minor, G major, E minor...) according to the circle of fifths, rather than chromatically by key, as were Bach’s (C major, C minor, C-sharp major, C-sharp minor...). Again unlike Bach’s set, the Preludes vary in length, although they are all relatively short; the longest, in D-flat major (89 measures) and the shortest (12 measures) in c minor. In this regard, they resemble some of Beethoven’s Op. 116 and Op. 129 sets of *Bagatelles*. In their brevity some of the Preludes present only a flash of emotional insight, a quality that made Chopin’s friend and admirer, Robert Schumann to view them as “...sketches, beginnings of études, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusions.” The “sketchiness” of Schumann’s comment can often refer to the absence of repeats or the B section of ternary song forms, features present in the longer preludes.

In 1835, Chopin abandoned his performing career, choosing to devote his attention to composing and teaching piano. There is evidence that, like Bach, Chopin used the Preludes as teaching tools – although the set is in no way ordered by level of difficulty (as is Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos*). As teaching works, each prelude focuses on a different pianistic technique, but more importantly, on an aspect of musical expression. Although he was a performer and composer for one of Western music’s most percussive instruments, Chopin regarded the human voice, as exemplified in the *bel canto* style, as the ultimate means of musical expression. It is, therefore, no surprise to find in nearly all the Preludes a singing and readily singable melodic line, usually accompanied by an ostinato figure that accentuates the expressive quality of the melodic line. In the most technically difficult preludes, such as No. 16 in B-flat minor, No. 19 in E-flat major and No. 24 in d minor, much of the technical

difficult comes in bringing out the melody in a single hand that must also participate in the accompaniment. The variety of moods and emotions evoked in these 24 brief pieces is astounding, and it is on these qualities that the performer and listener should concentrate.

Chopin had no interest in programmatic music, regarding the art as possessing its own rhetoric and expressiveness; there exists in his work no symbolic, semantic agenda as, for example, in the piano works of Schumann.

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