

Encore: Mitsuko Uchida and Friends

LA LUGUBRE GONDOLA
(The Funeral Gondola)

Franz Liszt
1811-1886

Franz Liszt's early piano works were often showy and tailored to his tremendous technical facility. While his works frequently featured thick, unconventional harmony, his emphasis was primarily on the flash his audiences craved. With the approach of middle age, however, Liszt greatly limited his public appearances as pianist while simultaneously his compositions began increasingly to stretch the limits of tonal harmony. With his enthusiastic support of young and innovative composers, the ageing Liszt became a spokesman for the music of the future. By his late 60s, perhaps under the influence of his son-in-law Richard Wagner, Liszt added to his already highly chromatic harmonic vocabulary a level of tonal ambiguity at the basic structural level of his works. In 1885, for example, he composed a *Bagatelle sans Tonalité* (Bagatelle without tonality) that is often considered a forerunner of Arnold Schoenberg's atonal compositions.

In November 1882 Liszt paid a long-postponed visit to Venice, to see his daughter Cosima and her husband Wagner, who was gravely ill following a severe heart attack. Liszt had a premonition of Wagner's death – he died four months later – envisioning the passing cortege with the black gondola carrying the body down Venice's Grand Canal. He immediately composed the first version of *La lugubre gondola*, using a rocking accompaniment suggesting the movement of the gondola and the lapping waves. Over the next two years he reworked the composition, and now at least three piano versions have come to light, all composed within two years; the one known as "version I" being probably the final one, from 1885. "Version II" also exists as a piano and violin or cello piece; "version III, however, discovered only in 2002, was probably the first composed.

Composers have traditionally conceived their musical images of Venice using the rhythmic pattern of the barcarole. In its rhythmic ostinato, *La lugubre gondola* references the cliché of the gentle tour of the side canals of Venice to the strains of a singing gondolier, but now turns the image on its head with a kind of anti-melody replete with the entire repertory of pregnant intervals (minor sixths, minor sevenths and tritones) begging for resolution that never comes. The musical style is not so much chromatic as modal, in a way that foreshadows some of Debussy's Preludes.

CONTRASTS
For Clarinet, Violin and Piano
1945

Béla Bartók
1881-

Born in the midst of a revival of Hungarian nationalism, Béla Bartók spent most of his life trying to rescue and record his country's folk music. As composer, he used the melodies, modes and rhythms of the music he collected as the basis for his own music; as a concretizing pianist and teacher he tried to promote the music among his students and the public at large. He spent most of his life based in Budapest, traveling extensively as a pianist throughout Europe and the United States. The rise of Nazism in his native country, however, forced him to flee with his family in the fall of 1940 to settle in the United States. For a couple of years he eked out a precarious living teaching piano and performing with his wife,

Ditta, also a pianist. By the end of 1942 he fell ill with what turned out to be a form of leukemia that killed him three years later. In spite of these constraints, he spent his final years composing some of his most popular works, including the Concerto for Orchestra and the Third Piano Concerto.

In the spring of 1940, before leaving Hungary for good, Bartók made a successful tour of the United States, in the course of which he recorded – with violinist Joseph Szigeti and clarinetists Benny Goodman – his most recent chamber work, *Contrasts*. This recording, remastered and digitized, remains in the catalogue.

Well known as a jazz clarinetist, Goodman wanted to ensure his reputation as a classical artist as well. In 1938, at Szigeti's suggestion, he commissioned Bartók, for \$300, to compose a two-movement work of about 6-7 minutes to fit on both sides of a 12-inch 78 rpm record. Bartók initially provided two fast movements (*Verbunkos* and *Sebes*), but both were too long for a single side. Goodman premiered the two movements in January 1939, and after further discussions, Bartók added the middle, slow (*Pienho*) movement and also finally settled on a title, *Contrasts*.

Although *Contrasts* is a trio, Bartók understandably gave the most difficult and virtuosic role to the clarinet in the first movement. He wrote contrasts into all three movements, which each contain a middle section with contrasting tempo, thematic material and mood.

The *verbunkos* was the recruiting dance of the Imperial Austro-Hungarian army in the eighteenth century. Soldiers in full regalia used to “perform” in public, in order to attract young men into the army. Gypsy musicians appropriated the slow-fast-slow tempo (called respectively *lassu* and *friss*). Via the compositions of Franz Liszt – the *verbunkos* became part of the repertoire of Classical music. This movement is characterized by a persistent 4-note rhythmic motive. There is also a final cadenza for the clarinet.

Pienho is Hungarian for repose, relaxation. Bartók, however, creates significant underlying tension, both with the collection of eerie sounds of the violin and clarinet and the alternation of quiet calm and passionate outbursts. The effect is similar to the erratic calming process an excited child goes through until it finally falls asleep.

The *sebes* is a fast dance for rapidly spinning dancers. Bartók casts it as a fast rondo with shifting meter and tempo. For the first 30 bars of this movement, the violinist must have ready a second violin, tuned G sharp, D, A, and E flat, which, for a “tuning passage” on open strings, creates the effect of a *danse macabre*. The tritone (A-E-flat) was known in the Middle Ages as the *diabolus in musica* (the devil in music); Saint-Saëns had previously employed this tuning to open his *Danse macabre*. In this movement the violin and clarinet have a more balanced role. After the initial fast section, the dance becomes slower, based on a modal melody. After a return to the fast tempo, Bartók includes a jazzy lick, obviously a bow to Goodman, and perhaps a nod to jazz as a kind of American folk idiom. He also gives the violin a brief cadenza to balance the clarinet cadenza in the first dance. To end the dance on a comic note, the two instruments chase each other around in a canon, one of the composer's favorite devices, ending with a “squeaking” contest.

QUATUOR POUR LA FIN DU TEMPS

Olivier Messiaen
1908-1992

A Catholic by religion and a mystic by nature, French composer and organist Olivier Messiaen intrinsically linked his music to his beliefs and visions. He claimed that the three cornerstones of his music were first, “the theological truths of the Catholic faith...perhaps the only aspect of my work that I will not regret at the hour of my death;” second, “the greatest theme of human love” referring to the medieval legend of Tristan and Iseult; and third, the sounds of nature.

Messiaen demonstrated extraordinary musical and aesthetic sensibilities from early childhood, mounting productions of Shakespeare in translation and composing at the piano when only seven years old. He entered the Paris Conservatory at ten and was trained according to that institution’s rigid methods. In 1931 he was appointed organist at *La Trinité* in Paris, a post he held for over 60 years.

By the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Messiaen was already a well-known composer. He was called up for military service, but by May 1940 had been captured and held as a prisoner of war in Stalag VIIIA in Görlitz, Germany (now Poland). There, under freezing conditions and severe deprivation he composed what became his most famous work, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) for clarinet, violin, cello and piano. A sympathetic German guard, a lover of Classical music, smuggled him paper and pencil to compose and hid him while he worked. He and three other musicians, including the famed cellist Etienne Pasquier, premiered the Quartet before a crowd of their fellow prisoners and jailers on a bitter cold day on January 15, 1941. Messiaen commented: "Never was I listened to with such rapt attention and comprehension."

Messiaen’s own remarks to accompany the Quartet provide not only a musical explanation but also how the music fits the composer’s mysticism, which no outsider could experience. Messiaen begins with the quotation from Revelation:

I saw a mighty angel descending from heaven, clad in mist, having around his head a rainbow. His face was like the sun, his feet like pillars of fire. He placed his right foot on the sea, his left on the earth, and standing thus on the sea and the earth he lifted his hand toward heaven and swore by Him who liveth for ever and ever, saying: "There shall be time no longer, but at the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel the mystery of God shall be consummated."

“... It [the Quartet] is directly inspired by this excerpt from "The Revelation of St. John." Its musical language is essentially transcendental, spiritual, Catholic. Certain modes, realizing melodically and harmonically a kind of tonal ubiquity, draw the listener into a sense of the eternity of space or time. Particular rhythms existing outside the confines of meter contribute importantly toward the banishment of time. (All this is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!) This quartet contains eight movements. Why? Seven is the perfect number, the creation of six days made holy by the divine Sabbath; the seventh in its repose prolongs itself into eternity and becomes the eighth, of unfailing light, of immutable peace.

- 1) ‘Liturgy of Crystal.’ Between the morning hours of three and four, the awakening of the birds: a thrush or a nightingale improvises, amid notes of shining sound and trills that lose themselves high in the trees. Transpose this to the religious mode: you will have the harmonious silence of heaven.
- 2) ‘Vocalise, for the angel who announces the end of Time.’ The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of that mighty angel, his hair a rainbow and his clothing mist,

who places one foot on the sea and one foot on the earth. Between these sections are the ineffable harmonies of heaven. From the piano, soft cascades of blue-orange chords, encircling their distant carillon the plainchant-like melody of the violin and cello.

- 3) 'Abyss of the birds.' Clarinet solo. The abyss is Time, with its sadness and fatigue. The birds are the opposite of time; it is our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows and for jubilant outpouring of song!
- 4) 'Interlude.' Scherzo of a more outgoing character than the other movements but related to them, nonetheless, by various melodic references.
- 5) 'Praise to the eternity of Jesus.' Jesus is here considered as one with the Word. A long phrase, infinitely slow, by the cello expatiates with love and reverence on the everlastingness of the Word, mighty and gentle 'which the years can in no way exhaust.' Majestically the melody unfolds itself at a distance both intimate and awesome. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'
- 6) 'Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets.' Rhythmically the most idiosyncratic movement of the set. The four instruments in unison give the effect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse attend various catastrophes, the trumpet of the seventh angel announces the consummation of the mystery of God). Use of extended note values, augmented or diminished rhythmic patterns, non-retrogradable rhythms – a systematic use of values that, from left to right or from right to left, remain the same. Music of stone, formidable sonority of granite; movement as irresistible as steel, as huge blocks of livid fury or ice-like frenzy. Listen particularly to the terrifying *fortissimo* of the theme in augmentation and with change of register of its different notes, toward the end of the piece.
- 7) 'Cluster of rainbows, for the angel who announces the end of Time.' Here certain passages from the second movement return. The mighty angel appears, and in particular the rainbow that envelops him (the rainbow, symbol of peace, of wisdom, of every quiver of luminosity and sound). In my dreams I hear and see ordered melodies and chords, familiar hues and forms; then, following this transitory stage, I pass into the unreal and submit ecstatically to a vortex, a dizzying interpenetration of superhuman sounds and colors. These fiery swords, these rivers of blue-orange lava, these sudden stars: Behold the cluster, behold the rainbows!
- 8) 'Praise to the immortality of Jesus.' Expansive violin solo balancing the cello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second glorification? It addresses itself more specifically to the second aspect of Jesus – to Jesus the man, to the Word made flesh, raised up immortal from the dead so as to communicate His life to us. It is total love. Its slow rising to a supreme point is the ascension of man toward his God, of the son of God towards his Father, of the mortal newly made divine toward paradise.

And I repeat anew what I said above: All this is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!"

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