

Honors 2011 Capstone: A Recital Study on the Great Pianistic Composers

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Honors Capstone Abstract

This project, a combination of piano recital and research for program notes, examines the work and practice associated with producing a professional-level recital and the lasting legacy of Ludwig van Beethoven and Frederic Chopin. The preparation for the recital included both musical work (taking lessons, individual practice professional coaching) and publicity oriented work (designing posters, securing a space to perform, inviting special guests). The program notes researched the connections between the four composers and their music featured on the program (Beethoven, Chopin, Ravel and Scriabin) through biographical and musical works. The project concluded with the April 3rd performance, which is captured and saved on cd, and the redrafting of the program notes, which are also submitted here, to the honors program.

Sonata in D major, opus 28 "Pastoral"

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven, one of the most instantly recognizable names in classical music, was a hailed virtuoso pianist in addition to conductor. His main contribution to the piano oeuvre, his 32 piano sonatas, span his entire career from his early days in Vienna to after his onset of total and complete deafness. His fifteenth sonata, the pastoral, was probably inspired by summer trips Beethoven began taking to the country every summer from 1800 on. When Beethoven was in Vienna he often lived with members of the nobility who also secured his income and provided him opportunities to perform his new works. In the summers in the country, however, Beethoven had his own lodgings, an arrangement Beethoven undoubtedly looked on with favor. This bright, somewhat light sonata was written in the time between Beethoven's famous and bleak "moonlight" sonata and his heroic, extroverted 3rd symphony, the "Eroica". Written in four movements, the sonata follows a typical pattern of a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow section movement, a lighter 'dance' movement (in this case a scherzo) and a concluding rondo. The charming timeless quality of the piece lies with how Beethoven chooses to craft each movement. The serene opening of the first movement contrasts with outburst later in the piece, and Beethoven draws humor here in contrasting loud extroverted sounds with quiet, intimate scenes. The second movement has a frail but constant bass pattern which supports a chorale-like right hand. Beethoven later opens up the choral sound and leaves the top voice to spin out endless melody lines over the same omnipotent bass. The third movement, the scherzo, is lighter hearted and shows Beethoven exposes the genius of his economic writing in one of his favorite forms. The rondo, perhaps the most "pastoral" movement of all, juxtaposes thunder arpeggios and intricate fuguettes against the simple, peasant-like drone like opening of the movement.

Sonata for Piano and 'Cello in D major, opus 102, no. 2

Beethoven

Beethoven's five sonatas for piano cello span almost the length of his entire compositional output; the first two were written in 1796 on a tour where between met King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia who was himself an avid cellist. The third sonata in a major, a sure example of Beethoven's heroic middle period style, was written in 1808 and his last two sonatas were written in 1814. Sonata no. 5 in D major is written in 3 movements in a traditional fast-slow-fast arrangement (the only one of Beethoven's sonatas for piano and cello written in this 'traditional' way). The opening

movement, a sonata-allegro form, has strong parallels to the 3rd movement, the fugue. Both feature moments of heroic vigor in addition to moments of more tender lyricism. The second movement in d minor opens with a slow chorale-like progression, eventually opening up to a more lyrical section in the key of D major, and then finally succumbing again to the opening “procession” motif.

Undeniably recognizable is the similarity of this piece to Beethoven’s ninth symphony, a work most consider Beethoven’s magnum opus. Both pieces are written in D major and feature a heroic flavor that is somewhat less common in Beethoven’s late period works. Also evident, in the first movement as well as the fugue, is Beethoven’s reverence for Johann Sebastian Bach and his mastery of counterpoint. Upon publication, Beethoven’s final cello sonata was considered “too difficult” for publishing by one London publishing house. The difficulty of this work inspired German publishers to print the cello part with the pianist’s part. Now common practice, this Beethoven sonata was the first piece to be published in this manner.

Jeux D’eau

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

The French composer Maurice Ravel entered the Paris Conservatory in the 1890’s as a gifted young piano student before focusing himself solely on his compositions. As such, though his works are endowed with extremely pianistic writing, Ravel rarely premiered them himself in public; rather, he usually relied on several of his closest friends and collaborators to premiere his piano works. Ravel was also a very fastidious composer, preferring to spend a large amount of time perfecting one piece rather than composing multiple, imperfect pieces. As a result, his output as a composer is relatively small compared to Beethoven or Mozart. Instead, we have only a small but extremely special collection of music from Ravel.

Jeux d’eau (translated as water games, or fountains) was written in 1901 and dedicated to Ravel’s composition teacher, the prominent French composer Gabriele Faure. Ravel’s piece was likely inspired by an earlier piece by Franz Liszt entitled “Les jeux d’eau a la Villa d’Este”. Ravel himself wrote that the piece was inspired by the sounds that various types of water make. Beautiful and pianistic, the piece was one of Ravel’s earliest public successes following its premiere by pianist Ricardo Vines in 1902.

Etudes, op. 8, no. 5, 11, 12

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Russian composer Alexander Scriabin was, like his famous contemporary Sergei Rachmaninoff, inspired by the piano works of Frederic Chopin. Prior to Chopin, an 'etude' was assigned to works written as practice pieces to build piano technique. Chopin, with his op. 10 etudes, transcended the etude from its perfunctory beginnings as practice pieces into brilliant piano works equally worthy of the practice room as the concert hall.

Scriabin's first full set of etudes, his opus 8, presents the performer with a host of technical challenges, including repeated octaves, crossed hands, and, a signature of Scriabin's: extremely large intervals occasionally straddling over an octave and a 3rd. However, they also present the performer and audience with a small window into the mind of a brilliant composer whose etudes occasionally rival even the great Chopin for their combination of challenge and beauty.

Barcarolle in F# major, op. 60

Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)

Frederic Chopin remains today one of the most beloved and recognizable names associated with piano music. Pianists of most any age have at some point played a Chopin waltz, mazurka, prelude or other piece. To his peer composers and those whom he influenced (a list that includes Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Liszt, Debussy and Ravel among countless others) he remains to this day perhaps the most influential composer for the piano.

Chopin's barcarolle (in Italian literally, boat song) invokes melodies and rhythms associated with the gondolier songs that one might hear floating up from the canals in Venice. The opening left-hand melody that immediately follows the short introduction rocks gently back and forth like that gondola, shifting into an accompaniment for the song that follows in the right hand. Gradually expanding in size and sound, the melody seems to flow endlessly to the climactic end, where huge chords and blistering runs lead to an unexpectedly serene coda. Inspired by songs and dances, Chopin's barcarolle is equally charming and intimate as it is grand and magnificent.