

Revised Programme Notes for MCS Concert 17/07/2021 – Michael James Bartlett

J.S. Bach : Ich Ruf zu Dir, Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 639 (arr. Busoni)

This chorale prelude is probably the most famous in the Bach collection known as 'Das Orgelbuchlein' (The Little Organ Book). Far from 'little' it is a collection of no less than 46 chorale preludes for organ, written between 1708 and 1717. This one is the only one written as a trio - the right hand plays the melody, lightly embellished; the pedal contributes a steady pulsing bass; and the left hand plays an extraordinary middle voice that ties everything together. However a **pianist** has only his two hands! Hence this wonderful arrangement by Ferruccio Busoni who, over a period of 30 years, produced a 25-volume set of his transcriptions of Bach's music.

J.S. Bach : Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring (arr. Hess)

This title is commonly used for a piece of music derived from a chorale setting of the cantata '*Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*', BWV 147 ("Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life"), composed in 1723. This transcription by the English pianist Myra Hess (1890–1965) was published in 1926 for piano solo and in 1934 for piano duet, and is the best known of the many transcriptions which have been written. After first hearing the chorale prelude in April 1920, the melody had stuck in her mind and she soon transcribed and played it over and over again. She enjoyed performing it in public, often at the lunchtime concerts held at London's National Gallery.

Rameau: Suite in A minor (RCT 5): Gavotte et Six Doubles

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1864) replaced Lully as the foremost French opera composer of the day, and is also regarded as the equal of Couperin in his music for harpsichord. We don't know much about his early years but the 1722 publication of his *Treatise on Harmony* brought him great fame in Europe. His music had gone out of fashion by the end of the 19th century, but today he enjoys renewed appreciation with performances and recordings of his music ever more frequent.

The Suite in A minor was published in 1727 and is in seven movements, the last of which is the Gavotte and Six Doubles played today. We are hearing it on the piano of course, an instrument with very different tonal characteristics. The Gavotte is a two-part dance melody of small melodic range in simple note values, doled out in even 4-bar phrases over a series of resonant harmonies. The first three variations present a steady stream of running notes in the treble, the bass, and the mid-range, respectively. The fireworks start in the fourth variation, with a merry chase for both hands and the last two variations combine repeated notes with arpeggio figurations, increasing the keyboard range covered by each hand to as much as a 13th. Rameau ends these variations with a dramatically grander version of the simple gavotte with which he started.

Haydn: Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Major - Hob XVI-46

This sonata is one of a rather mixed bunch (Nos. 27-32) which were published privately in 1776, although it was probably written two or three years earlier. The first movement contrasts a lyrical theme in three-part counterpoint, expressively varied in the course of the movement, with cascading sextuplets that generate a powerful climax in the central development. The most striking part of the sonata is the second movement, a neo-Baroque E minor Allegretto that suggests both a chorale prelude and a three-part invention. This extended second movement is stoically expressive even with its extensive ornamentation, and it provides a moving prelude to the hell-for-leather last movement as only Haydn can do it. This finale follows without a break and is a dashing theme and variations with a contrasting E minor episode.

Chopin : Nocturne in D-flat major, Op.27 No.2

The two Nocturnes of Op. 27 were composed in 1835 and published the following year in Leipzig, Paris, and London, dedicated to the Countess Thérèse d'Appony, in whose salon Chopin often appeared. Only 77 bars long, this is one of Chopin's more popular compositions. It is in three sections, repeated in increasingly complex variations. The piece contains a harmony of broken chords played with the left hand, a habit Chopin had when composing his nocturnes, while the right hand plays the main melody, often with the addition of a second voice.

Schubert: Schwanengesang, D.957: 4. "Standchen" (arr. Liszt)

This is a transcription of the famous Schubert 'Serenade', the seventh song from the 'Schwanengesang' (Swan Song), a setting of a love poem by Rellstab. In his transcription Liszt varies the strophic repetition by putting the melody an octave lower, with the direction '*quasi Violoncello*'. He reserves a degree of elaboration for the final stanza, where he himself was accustomed to add a decorative cadenza. The complete transcription of Schwanengesang was written in 1838 and 1839 and published in Vienna in 1840 by Haslinger, with a dedication of the publisher's choosing to Archduchess Sophie, sister-in-law of Emperor Ferdinand V and mother of Franz Joseph I.

Rachmaninoff: Where Beauty Dwells (arr. Wild)

Earl Wild (1915 – 2010) was a virtuoso American pianist, noted for his transcriptions of jazz and classical music. (*One of the first LPs I ever owned was his performances of the Chopin and Liszt first concertos*). Rachmaninoff occupied an exalted place in Wild's affections. He transcribed many of the composer's songs into virtuoso solo piano pieces and we hear one of them today.

'Where Beauty Dwells' (In Russian '*Zdes' khorosho*', literally 'How nice is here') was written in April 1902, in a sweet moment in the composer's life: he had overcome a creative block and had just married his cousin Natalia Sarina. *Zdes' khorosho* is no. 7 from Twelve Romances, Op. 21, a beautiful song that talks about the bond between man, nature and God. It's also a love song.

It must be said that not all of Mr. Wild's transcriptions have been greeted rapturously – one critic described one of them as " . . . adding *Liberace-like flourishes, flash and trash in places where simplicity rather than Big Chords would have more than sufficed*". Oops! Let us suspend judgement until we have heard Martin James Bartlett's presentation of the piece.

Ravel: La Valse

Maurice Ravel (1875 - 1937) wrote *La valse, poème chorégraphique pour orchestre* (a choreographic poem for orchestra) between 1919 and 1920. Originally conceived as a ballet (for Dhiagilev, but rejected by him) it is now more usually heard as a concert work, and there are also two versions for piano, duet and solo. When Ravel wrote *La Valse*, World War I had just ended. Many people listened to *La Valse* and became entranced with its strange beauty; some want to believe Ravel wrote it as a commentary on life (or decay) after the war. And whether or not it was intentional, this piece became a symbol for "the birth, decay and destruction of a musical genre: the waltz".

Ravel's tone poem reveals itself, ever so gradually, to be a sort of danse macabre. The interval of the tritone (the augmented fourth or diminished fifth), historically understood to convey some diabolical connotation, pervades the melodies of *La Valse*, yielding a sense of something being out of whack. One can't help feeling that the ballroom the piece depicts is oddly out of focus. Nonetheless, a listener encountering *La Valse* for the first time will find it easy to make excuses for the disturbing undertones and the general wooziness - the surface is undeniably festive, after all. Not until the final minutes of the piece is one forced to accept that the waltz has run irretrievably amok. Even

then, listeners are likely to be shocked by the brutality of the piece's conclusion, which is nothing short of violent, terrifying, and bitterly final.

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