THE VMI DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND FINE ARTS
and
THE TIMMINS–GENTRY MUSIC SOCIETY

present

VICTOR SANTIAGO ASUNCION

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PROGRAM

Sonata in A major, D. 959 . . . . . Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

1. Allegro
2. Andantino
3. Scherzo. Allegro vivace
4. Rondo. Allegretto

INTERMISSION

Four Ballades . . . . . Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23. Largo–Moderato–Presto con fuoco

No. 2 in F major/A minor, Op. 38. Andantino–Presto con fuoco–Agitato–Tempo I

No. 3 in A flat major, Op. 47. Allegretto

No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52. Andante con moto

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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2004. 7:30 P.M.JACKSON MEMORIAL HALL, VMI

FRANZ SCHUBERT, SONATA IN A MAJOR, D. 959. Schubert's creative output in his final year was perhaps equaled only by that of Vincent van Gogh, who painted most of his major works in the last eighteen months of his life. Van Gogh's frenzy was fuelled by the compulsions triggered by a rare form of epilepsy, Schubert's, perhaps, by intimations of approaching death. He had survived several serious illnesses, including two near-fatal bouts with typhoid, and, though only 31, he was something of a fatalist, "sharing," says John Reed, "in the romantic's love affair with death." Whatever his fears or impulses, between January 1 and November 19 of 1828, the day he died, he composed no fewer than twenty-eight works, among them such masterpieces as the Symphony in C Major (the "Great"), the Mass in E-flat major, *Schwannengesang* (his last song cycle), and—astonishingly, in a single month—the String Quintet in C major and the piano sonatas in C minor, A major, and B-flat major.

The three sonatas are unquestionably the finest of the twenty-one that Schubert wrote. It's the second of the three, the A major, that we're about to hear. A radiant, life-affirming piece, it contains few if any intimations of approaching death. Its first movement is in sonata-allegro form. The exposition opens with a majestic rising figure. This is soon followed by a turbulent passage punctuated by descending arpeggios. Dominating the measures that follow is an insistent two-note motif. Before long, the second melody—simple, clear, and thoroughly Schubertian—quietly appears. It is played and replayed in several keys, makes way for a vigorous contrapuntal passage, and then, as quietly as before, reappears. The mood of the development section is fitful, almost anguished, the result mainly of a sequence of *forte* chords in the left hand supporting a falling figure in the right. A version of the opening theme provides the grand climax of the slow crescendo with which the development section ends. The only real surprise in the recapitulation, whose function, after all, is merely to hold up a slightly distorted mirror to the exposition, is the haunting coda that brings the movement to a serene close.

One critic has called the second movement a lullaby, another a barcarolle. Because of the steady, rocking rhythm that prevails throughout, either suggestion is apt, and the listener is—for a while at least—free to imagine that he or she is either rocking a baby to sleep or being gently rocked in a gondola. Or, better still, to imagine nothing at all, and merely listen to the long-breathed melody moving gracefully above its legato bass line. Be prepared, however, for a turbulent central section full of rapid scale-passages, sudden stops, trills, resonant tremolandos, and a dramatic descending scale. Either the baby has colic, an Adriatic storm has arrived, or, as Maurice Brown sensibly observes, Schubert is "sacrific[ing] formal unity for the sake of a programmatic episode full of bravura passage-work in the search for dramatic contrast." Eventually, calm is restored, but the movement ends darkly with a short sequence of chords played in a lower register.

Dominating the opening section of this exhilarating scherzo is a series of staccato 32nd-note runs over skipping chords, each of them brought to an emphatic halt by a plunging four-note figure in the right hand. Following a moment's pause, the middle

section, the trio, opens with a gentle, hesitant, typically Schubertian melody. After several ruminative measures, it is repeated, then fades slowly into silence. The third section, a few variations aside, is a replay of the first.

Traditionally, the rondo is a vigorous, purposeful affair, designed to bring the sonata to a decisive (and, the performer hopes, applause-inspiring) close. Schubert's A major rondo, however, is somewhat fitful and episodic in its unfolding—more broadly lyrical than brilliantly demonstrative. One reason for this is its main melody, serial statements of which provide the "spine" of the movement. Stretched over a leisurely sixteen measures, it is, when first heard, limpid, lilting, almost folklike. Its restatements—something like brief variations on the original tune but without the repeats—vary widely in structure and mood. The second of these sings softly in a lower register, beneath a counterpoint of high-lying triplets. Another turns serious, its energy and chromaticism seeming to offer a brief, glowering homage to Beethoven, the chief god in Schubert's pantheon. As the end of the movement approaches, we hear a long coda, which, as Philip Radcliffe says, "opens in a whirlwind, rises to a climax, and then looks back nostalgically to a quieter mood." The movement closes with a brief passage that faintly echoes the opening of the first movement.

INTERMISSION

CHOPIN'S BALLADES. It's possible that Chopin's four Ballades were inspired by his reading of the *Ballads and Romances* of the poet Adam Mickiewicz, with whom he shared exile in Paris in the 1830s and 40s. He suggested as much to Robert Schumann when the two composers met in Leipzig in 1835, but apparently stopped short at identifying particular passages in the Ballades with incidents in the poems. Critics seeking a "program," a musical narrative like that which threads its way through the five movements of Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique,*have therefore had to resort to guesswork. Benita Eisler's guesses, based apparently upon her reading not only of Mickewiecz's poems but also the medieval ballades that served as their models, are suggestive: "With its seductive scrap of recitative that breathes 'Once upon a time' Chopin's [first] Ballade draws us into his story. Wistful opening melodies evoke a fleeting innocence before we are swept into a drama of musical episodes, racing chromatic pursuits, lyrical encounters, cold silence, wrenching separation, tension and sudden release." More usefully perhaps, Jens Hagestedt suggests that the Ballade, like the ballad, contains the three basic types of poetry—or, rather, musical equivalents of them: "[The] Nocturne-like passages are lyric, [the] waltz-like passages are epic, and [the] virtuoso passages are dramatic." Which might help to explain why Chopin's Ballades are longer, more episodic, and more given to sudden mood-swings than, say, his nocturnes or mazurkas.

Although narrative incidents in the Ballades are hard to identify, their formal elements are not. Each contains strikingly beautiful melodies—the opening themes of the second and third are particularly memorable—and rich, sometimes daringly dissonant harmonies. Each, moreover, has an appropriately "balladic" compound meter

(a flowing 6/4 or 6/8), and each develops according to the principle of thematic metamorphosis—that is, by gradual transformations of a single melody rather than a conventional pattern of strict repetition such as sonata-allegro form. Each, therefore, has a supple, somewhat invertebrate structure that readily accommodates sudden changes of tempo, volume, and tonality and encourages abrupt shifts of mood. The second Ballade, the violence of whose mood-shifts borders upon the bi-polar, offers the most obvious example of this pattern, not least because it is written in two keys. The piece opens quietly with a limpid, almost wistful melody in F major, whose restatements and extensions stretch over sixteen sunny measures—Eisler's "Once upon a time." Then, without warning, we are plunged into what Denis Matthews calls an "A minor storm"—in fact, a sequence of rapid *fortissimo* chords and falling figures over an undulating bass. (Chopin's score-marking for this passage is *presto con fuoco*: "fast and fiery.") Almost as soon as it began the storm ends, and the F major melody returns, bringing with it the quiet, reflective mood of the opening. After a few measures, however, the storm, again in A minor, returns. And so it goes, loud passages alternating with soft, fast passages with slow, tranquil with turbulent, major with minor, until the closing measures, in which we hear a hushed reprise of the original melody. We're never allowed to settle for long into a particular mood, and because we're not led to expect sonata-like repetitions at prescribed intervals, we easily surrender to the fluent rhythms of the Ballade and go with the musical flow.

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A native of the Philippines, Victor Santiago Asuncion has given solo recitals in Canada, Japan, Mexico and the United States. As the winner of a National Council for the Arts award he was chosen to perform with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and he has performed as either a pianist or harpsichordist with such orchestras as the Boston Pops Esplanade, the Washington Opera, and the Washington Bach Consort, the 20th Century Consort at the Smithsonian. Lexinton audiences have heard him in both solo and chamber performances at the Garth Newel Music Center in Warm Springs. Some of his performances have been broadcast on National Public Radio, as well as on radio stations in Mexico, Canada, and the Philippines. He has recorded for the Hartt, ERM, and Deux labels. He currently teaches at The University of Memphis.

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Next event: The Kandinsky Trio. Wednesday, March 24, at 7:30 p.m., in J. M. Hall

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This concert was made possible by a grant from the Herbert N. Dillard '34 Fund.