The VMI Department of English and Fine Arts
and
The Timmins-Gentry Music Society

present

VICTOR SANTIAGO ASUNCION

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Program

Piano Sonata, Op. 1 . . . . . Alban Berg

Gaspard de la nuit . . . . . Maurice Ravel

Ondine
Le gibet
Scarbo

Five-minute intermission

Sonata in B minor . . . . . Franz Liszt

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Jackson Memorial Hall, VMI

April 18, 2007

7:30 p.m.

Alban Berg, Piano Sonata, Op. 1. Before he began studying composition with Arnold Schoen-berg in October of 1904, Alban Berg had written little more than a handful of songs for voice and piano—nothing at all for instruments. Calling his young pupil's obsession with the voice "a defect in his talent," Schoenberg insisted that, for a time at least, he compose for instruments alone. Berg complied, but compliance cost him considerable effort and no little frustration. Under Schoenberg's tutelage he managed to finish a set of piano variations and a double fugue—traditionally the homework assignment of choice of composition teachers—and he made no fewer than five attempts at writing a piano sonata, none of which pleased him. A sixth attempt produced the one-movement sonata that we're about to hear.

"One-movement sonata" might raise some eyebrows. The classical sonata has three or four movements, only the first of which is in sonata *form*. As every music student soon learns, sonata form contains an exposition, a contrasting development section, and a recapitulation, a modified repeat of the exposition. Because he originally intended that his Sonata serve as only the first movement of a multi-movement work, Berg cast it in this traditional mold. When he expressed his frustration at being unable to make any progress on a second movement, Schoenberg urged him to consider finished what he had already written and move on. Berg agreed, titled the single movement "Sonata," and in 1910 published it as his Opus 1.

Unless they're already familiar with Berg's work, most listeners probably won't know when the exposition ends and the development begins. Instead of extended, contrasting sections, they'll hear what Karen Monson calls "small, telling dramatic gestures that can be quite independent of their formal placement—multipurpose fragments that can be assembled into longer phrases or used separately as either harmony or melody." At the core of each of these gestures is a cluster of dissonant notes that Brahms—or, for that matter, Gustave Mahler, who was still alive in 1910— wouldn't have recognized as a melody. The Sonata is therefore Janus-headed: although its design follows the first-movement pattern of Beethoven and his 19th-century successors, its unrelieved dissonance, startling dynamic shifts, jagged rhythms, and tersely aligned fragments place it firmly within the century of Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

But it is perhaps more than an abstract exercise in early modern style. Its discords and angularities carry a considerable emotional charge. In the spring of 1907, not long before he began writing the work, Berg fell deeply in love with Helene Nahowski, whom he would eventually marry. It's possible to imagine that the repeated climaxes of the Sonata—some of them, it could be argued, near-ecstatic—express the intensity of his feelings for her. Those who heard the first public performance of the Sonata on April 24, 1911, were obviously unaware of these romantic overtones, for, according to Monson, "the critics raged and the public was enraged."

Ravel, Gaspard de la nuit. Ravel was introduced to the three prose poems composing Louis Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit* by his close friend, the pianist Ricardo Viñes, probably in 1908. Seized by their grotesqueries and determined, in his own words, "to say in notes what the poet expresses in words," he resolved to re-create their moods and incidents as technically demanding piano pieces—"works," as he said, "of transcendental virtuosity." ("Transcendental" recalls Franz Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*, music so hard to play that for a generation or so only Liszt himself could play it. Since he declared at

the outset that he aimed at extreme technical difficulty, was Ravel answering an unissued challenge from the grave?)

Bertrand, a minor poet of the generation of Chopin, Musset and Delacroix, claimed that he didn't actually write the *Gaspard* poems but, while sitting on a park bench one evening, was handed them by a stranger identifying himself as Gaspard of the Night—in fact, the poet would later insist, Satan himself. Given the darkly surreal, sometimes morbid content of the poems, the romantics among us could almost be forgiven for believing that Bertrand's account of their origin was some-thing more than an arch-romantic's conceit or the figment of an absinthe-induced fantasy.

Ondine describes the efforts of a water-nymph to seduce a mortal man into abandoning the real world for her watery kingdom where, she promises, he will reign as king. Naturally, the poem brims with water imagery: "It is I, Ondine, sprinkling with drops of water your window-pane, lit by the pale moon's rays . . . Look there! Every little wave is a water-sprite swimming with the current, and every current is a path that leads to my palace, built of water, at the bottom of the lake." And so on. Although critic Roy Howatt calls Ravel's setting of the poem "a sonata form by stealth," you'll probably be unaware of retransitions, codas and the like. By means of soft, steady oscillations of thirty-second notes beneath long slurs—only seven of the ninety-one measures of *Ondine* are free of these—Ravel sustains the illusion of endlessly moving currents, and by placing the parts for both hands on the treble staff he evokes the eerie luminosity of pale moonlight. The single melody of the piece, presumably Ondine's seductive voice, is a spare, sinuous melody, picked out with one or two fingers against the billowing cascades of notes.

Le gibet invites us to imagine a corpse dangling from a gallows and challenges us to identify the sounds that we hear as it swings in the wind, whether the sighing of the corpse, a cricket singing in the ivy beneath the gallows, a fly "sounding its hunting-horn in those deaf ears," a spider "weaving a necktie for that strangled neck," or a bell tolling on the distant horizon. Ravel uses imitations of the tolling bell—steadily repeated B-flat octaves—as a scaffolding for his musical re-creation of the poem. Against this, as Rollo Myers observes, "successive waves of intricate harmony surge and break, like the sea swirling round a rock." It is the freedom and complexity of these harmonies—extreme dissonances unimagined even by the harmonically venturesome Liszt—that give the music its peculiarly "modern" sound. (Its modernity, as you'll hear, is very different from that of Berg's sonata, even though both works were finished in the same year.)

Scarbo recounts the antics of a malevolent dwarf—or, rather, the apparition of one—who torments the sleepless narrator of the poem by scratching at the silk curtains around his bed, laughing at him from the shadows, dropping from the ceiling, pirouetting on one foot, spinning across the floor, and morphing into a giant the size of a cathedral spire before suddenly vanishing. Ravel, at first amused by the romantic excesses of Bertrand's poem, claimed that he set out to write a parody of romanticism but let himself get carried away by its expressive possibilities and therefore settled for merely interpreting it. So dazzling are his bristling, nervously energetic evocations of scratching, giggling, and spinning that it might seem that he did, after all, produce a parody. Parody or not, *Scarbo* makes pitiless demands upon the skills of even the most accomplished pianists. Jankélévitch, an early biographer of Ravel, calls it "a diabolical encyclopedia of all the traps, obstacles, and snares that an inexhaustible imagination is able to lay under

the fingers of a virtuoso." Although the composer slyly suggested that it is the easiest of the three *Gaspard* pieces to play, its rapidly repeated notes, awkwardly alternating chords, finger-breaking figurations, hammering wrist staccatos, and sudden interruptions—not to speak of the demand that the tempo of the work gradually accelerate to almost thirty times its opening speed—suggest otherwise.

Intermission

Franz Liszt, Sonata for Piano in B minor. Liszt began writing his B minor sonata in the late fall of 1852, finished it on February 2, 1853, and published it in the spring of the following year. He dedicated the work to his fellow composer and close friend Robert Schumann in return for Schumann's having dedicated to *him* his Fantasy in C Major. Sadly, because he was confined to an asylum for the dementia that would eventually destroy him, Schumann never saw a copy of the work. His wife Clara, herself a concert pianist and composer, did, however. She was, to put it mildly, unimpressed, confiding to her diary that it was "merely blind noise—no healthy ideas, everything confused, and without a single, clear harmonic progression." Clara was a far better pianist than critic. Except perhaps for Brahms, who fell asleep while Liszt was playing it, the composer's contemporaries and immediate successors greatly admired the sonata, and today even those who find many of his instrumental works to be overlong and invertebrate are quick to acknowledge its greatness. "Arguably," says Alan Walker, "[it is] one of the greatest keyboard works to come out of the 19th century."

Because so much of Liszt's instrumental music is programmatic—that is, narrative or descriptive—scholars and critics have repeatedly attempted to discover a program in the sonata or, failing that, to impose one upon it. One, for instance, has claimed that it offers musical "portraits" of the principal characters of the Faust legend, another that it is "a cosmic self-portrait" (whatever that is), yet another that it dramatizes the struggle between the divine and the diabolic in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* The composer himself said nothing on the subject. His silence suggests that he meant for it to be listened to as we listen to, say, a Beethoven sonata—as pure music.

Like Berg's sonata, Liszt's is in a single movement and contains within its half-hour span multiple shadow-movements. Walker calls it "a sonata across a sonata," explaining that its four contrasting sections are arrayed against a background of three other, quite separate sections that form the three-part structure of traditional sonata form. Eleanor Perenyi hears the result of this layering as "a single unit in which the motifs are twisted, unwound, and rewoven like a serpent's coils." Unless you've made a study of the structural intricacies of the sonata, Perenyi is probably the better guide here. You'll surely be aware of some of this twisting and untwisting—or, put more simply, of the constant repetition of easily identified motifs, or musical tags, that are either played straight or transformed through the manipulation of harmony, rhythm, and dynamics as the music unfolds. Being able to identify the motifs greatly helps. Liszt lets us hear them clearly in the opening measures of the sonata. The first—in fact, the first thing we hear—is a quiet, descending, seven-note figure in the bass. The second, introduced a few measures later, distantly echoes the first but opens with a four-note motto, emphatically tapped out on one key. The changes of tempo will also help. Although there are local

fluctuations, the pattern of tempos is that of the traditional sonata: allegro (fairly fast), andante (slow), allegro, and, in the coda that ends the work, prestissimo (very fast). The slow section, which offers relief from the high drama of the first allegro and allows us a moment's reflection before the outburst of the second, contains a brief lyrical passage that, played first in the high treble range, then in the bass, will remind some listeners of Chopin. Liszt evidently meant to end the piece with a loud prestissimo flourish but decided instead to bring back the soft andante, which, as Walker says, "seems to cast a benediction over all that has gone before." The sonata ends quietly with the same descending motif in the bass with which it began.

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