

Inside the Concert with Albert Combrink
Leo Gevisser Young Artist Recital - 6 August 2022, 14:30

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Ariette "Ein Weib ist der herrlichste Ding" avec Variations pour le Clavecin ou Piano Forte K.613



The clutch of compositions published in Vienna by Artaria Publishers in 1791, the last year of Mozart's life, is a very odd bag. Great works and trifles are jumbled together. The last two operas, *Die Zauberflöte* K.620, and *La Clemenza di Tito* K.621, rub shoulders with an obscure collection of German Dances, Contredances, some organ works, a piece for Mechanical Organ, an arrangement of Handel's entire oratorio *Alexander's Feast*, the 6th String Quintet and a ditty for Glass Harmonica, plus many sketches and unfinished bits and pieces. That some of his late piano works, such as the rather large-scale piano variations, have been relegated to this list of minor works, is partly owing to the collective dismissal of the odious catalogueing task that would attempt to place these works in their rightful place in the composer's output. In fact, the rather clumsily named *8 Variationen über das Lied "Ein Weib ist der herrlichste Ding" in F Major K.613* based on a theme from a Singspiel by Benedickt Schack, "*Der Dumme Gärtner*" had to wait until 1985 for its first critical edition and analysis.

Mozart was a natural improviser, and had great skill, often taking well-known melodies and spruicing them up in concert. He was quite impatient when writing down variations of his own works, let alone that of others, so this set appears to have been a deliberate and hurried attempt to create something quick and publishable, and easy to sell to his editor. That the work isn't viewed as being at the heights of his piano sonatas, can be attributed to the neglect of later Mozart piano works in favour of early Beethoven, and also the rather simple melodic material of the singspiel by Shack: decidedly foursquare and conservative harmonically, containing only chords I, IV and V – the most basic building blocks. Mozart adjusts by rhythm and melodic changes, but the basic harmony remains the same throughout.

Mozart, always the creative genius, manages to pour an opening refrain and a simple two-part song into 8 variations that resemble the shape of a little classical symphony. The opening Allegro statement of the theme leads to Variation 1 and 2 expands the material with arpeggios and some creative but not challenging counterpoint. Variation 3 and 4 function as a Scherzo, introducing first Triplets and then faster Semiquavers to liven up the proceedings. Variation 5 introduces virtuosic runs and quasi-tremolos, adding a wealth of colour as it transitions to an tradition symphonic slow movement in Variation 6 and 7, where typical Mozartian synchopations give way to a cadenza before launching into the 8th Variation Allegro Finale. A Coda returns the whimsy to the simplicity of the original material, bringing the work to a calm close.

Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907)

Ballade in the Form of Variations on a Norwegian Folk Song in G Minor Op.24



As a child, Grieg was taught by his pianist mother, and his talent was such that he was sent to Leipzig as a teenager to study with Ignaz Moscheles. He hated the Conservatory experience, and found his individuality suppressed. An awakening came when he encountered the folk tales and sagas of Norway and when he undertook deliberate studies into the folk music of his country, the effects were soon heard in his music. By the age of 50, Grieg was claimed as a Norwegian National hero. No less than Henrik Ibsen commissioned him to write the music for his play "*Peer Gynt*".

In 1894, he decided to use a folk tune simply called "Mountain Tune" - rather uninspiringly - from a collection published by Ludwig Lindmann. The Theme with 19 Variations and Coda, became a work which Grieg himself loved deeply, and found emotionally wrenching to perform.

The variations contain a huge range of emotional expression, from simple elaborations to daring excursions into a variety of darker moods. Canons, recitatives, a sombre *Lento* slow movement and Lisztian outbursts, contribute to making this one of Grieg's longest works for solo instrument.

Alexander Scriabin (1871 - 1915)

Poème-Nocturne, Op.61

Alexander Scriabin was undoubtedly one of the most creative composers to emerge from Russia at the turn of the century. He was a brilliant pianist, but had very small hands, and therefore his music uses many techniques to give the impression that the pianist is covering more of the range of the keyboard: a multitude of pedal-effects, huge extended chords and runs and leaps beyond the range of a single hands span that somehow still form part of a unified gesture.



Above all, he explored the colours of the keyboard to a higher level than any composer before him. Much has been made of his mysticism, and much of this thought tends to overshadow his pure genius as a composer. By 1911, Scriabin was undergoing a dramatic transformation. The homages to Chopin were far behind him, the jealousy of the giant hands and sound of his classmates Rachmaninov and Prokofiev, had dissipated. His 6th Sonata Op.60 and the Poème-Nocturne, Op.61 finds Scriabin exploring chromatically liquefied harmonies, evanescent dream-scapes and “a deliberate desire to explore states of consciousness on the borders of sleep.” With all of his works at this time, he was creating variations on octatonic harmonies, with chords and melodic cells built on 4th intervals, rather than the more traditional Western harmony of 3rds. The performance instruction is *Avec Languueur, comme en un rêve* – with languor, as if in a dream.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 - 1953)

Piano Sonata No. 4 in C Minor Op.29 “D'après des vieux cahiers” (“After the old notebooks”)

Allegro molto sostenuto // Andante Assai // Allegro con brio, ma non leggiero



Written in 1917 before the great February Revolution, the 4th of Prokofiev's piano sonatas is very different to the exuberant and compact 3rd, or the dark but violently explosive “War Sonatas” (6 to 8). The work is dedicated to the close friend of his teenage years, Maximilian Schmidt, whose suicide affected Prokofiev deeply. The title refers to notebooks of themes and ideas which Prokofiev had kept as a student and occasionally revisited for inspiration.

The first movement appears to be antithesis to what we understand of Prokofiev, the self-confident *enfant terrible* of Russia, ready with a march and a defiant melody. The first movement opens hesitantly, almost uncertain of itself. The dark registers of the piano take precedence, and despite some turns to the fairytale sounds of Medter, a few neo-classical effects by Stravinsky, and even quotes of the broken chord patterns in the Scriabin Poème-Nocturne, Op.61, the movement never reaches an emotional climax. Ambiguous pulsation and ambiguous phrases make this sonata a rare experiment for the composer, whose trademark dance and march is simply absent here.

The second movement again starts in the shadow register of the piano. Prokofiev loved this movement deeply, performing it often, recording it himself as well orchestrating it. The basic melody becomes more symphonic as layers build up and creates set of variations with occasional hints of a Funeral March rhythm, building to a large but brief emotional climax before sinking back into the forest register.

The third movement displays the Neo-Classical side of the composer, recently given free-reign in the “Classical Symphony”. Trademark elements of humour and sarcasm come into play with Alberti-bass passages that derail their own key, arpeggios with “wrong” notes that dart off into foreign modulations. A Stravinskian middle section brings a moment of lyrical respite before the jesters resume demented juggling in a race to the end.