

NYS March 22, 2024: Leon McCawley

Josef Haydn (1732-1809): Sonata No. 34 in D major, Hob. XVI/33 (1778)

Allegro

Adagio

Tempo di Minuet

Haydn wrote about 50 sonatas for the keyboard, the early ones for harpsichord and the later ones, embellished with dynamics, for fortepiano. Some are unpretentious and perhaps written for students, but many are substantial and as finely crafted as the much better known piano trios and string quartets. The very last were written for the more powerful pianos and pianists that he encountered in London.

Today's D major sonata comes from a transitional period away from the harpsichord when Haydn was in the middle of his employment at the Esterhazy court. It was probably written for personal use by members of the court, rather than for public performance; the modest but carefully constructed Minuet variations of the final movement testify to its intimate character.

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) from The Seasons Op. 37a (1876)

March: Song of the Lark - Andantino espressivo

October: Autumn Song - Andante doloroso e molto cantabile

"Our celebrated composer P. I. Tchaikovsky has promised the editor of *Nuvellist*, that he will contribute to next year's issues a whole series of his piano compositions, specially written for our journal, the character of which will correspond entirely to the titles of the pieces, and the month in which they will be published in the journal..."

Nuvellist - December 1875 issue (No. 12)

This notice appeared on the title page of the December 1875 issue of the St Petersburg monthly music review journal *Nuvellist* (Нувеллист), following the receipt by its editor Nikolay Bernard of a letter from Tchaikovsky. In the letter he agreed to composing Bernard's proposed cycle of 12 monthly pieces: *"I have received your letter. I am most grateful for your courtesy and readiness to pay me such a high fee [200 roubles]. So long as I am spared I shall endeavour to oblige you. I shall send you the first piece shortly, and perhaps the next two or three. If the circumstances are right then they will be done quickly—at the moment I am very much in the mood for piano pieces. Yours P. Tchaikovsky. I will retain all your titles"*

As well as providing the titles to these '12 characteristic scenes', Bernard probably also provided the accompanying short poetic quotations. Here are the ones published with tonight's pieces:

No. 3. Song of the Lark (March):

'The field shimmering with flowers,

The stars swirling in the heavens,

The song of the lark fills the blue abyss.'

— Apollon Maykov

No. 10. Autumn Song (October):

'The autumn, falling on our poor orchard,

The yellow leaves are flying in the wind.'

— Aleksey Tolstoy

The series was composed around the same time as his third string quartet and shortly after his third Symphony.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14 (1912)

Allegro, ma non troppo - Più mosso - Tempo primo

Scherzo. Allegro marcato

Andante

Vivace - Moderato - Vivace

The only surviving child of an affluent and cultured Ukrainian family, Prokofiev played the piano and composed from an early age - by 10 he was well into his second opera (a sort of Robinson Crusoe tale)! During the following two summers, the young composer Glière taught Sergei at home and continued by correspondence in the winter. Glazunov encouraged the 12-year-old's parents to send him to the St Petersburg Conservatory. He emerged seven years later an accomplished pianist, but his compositions were more influenced by the St Petersburg 'Evenings of Contemporary Music' music society where his inherent modernist tendencies met a sympathetic reception. The public at the premier of his Second Piano Concerto in 1913 were less sympathetic; many walked out, with the prevailing view being: *'To hell with this futuristic music! The cats on the roof make better music!'*. History has been kinder.

Tonight's Second Piano Sonata was written a little earlier, in 1912, and like the concerto was dedicated to his very good friend and fellow student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Maximilian Schmidhof, who tragically shot himself in April 1913.

Here is an extended quote from Boris Berman's book on the Prokofiev sonatas, which I hope will help you listen to this extraordinary work:

"Compared with the conservatively homogeneous music of the First Sonata, the Second astonishes with its huge variety, even incongruity of styles, presented in a paradoxical carnival atmosphere. In fact, this work pushes the limits of contrast more than any other Prokofiev sonata. It covers a huge emotional range from romantic lyricism to aggressive brutality, from Schumannesque soaring to a parody of the cabaret, or of musical automatons. ... In this music one often feels that there are no sustained emotional values to be relied upon. What has been treated with compassion and tenderness becomes an object of mockery a few short bars later.

"In the aesthetics of early Prokofiev, not much attention is paid to the cornerstone of the romantic sonata, emotional development of the material. Instead, a variety of textures, superimposition of different themes upon one another and unexpected dissonances and accents, discredit the emotional veracity of the thematic material, and prevent our identification with any part of it."

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849) Impromptu No. 1 in A flat major, Op. 29 (1837)

1837 was not a good time for Chopin: his engagement to Maria Wodzińska was slowly coming to an end, and he had not yet started his affair with Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin *aka* George Sand. In the company of pianist, purveyor of pianos and impresario Camille Pleyel, who had recently separated from his wife¹, he made an almost incognito summer trip from Paris to London. Here a letter from Maria's mother ending any hope of his marriage to Maria left him in a 'dreadful state of mind'. Alone and depressed, Chopin spent the rest of the summer in Paris immersed in work, which included preparing tonight's Impromptu op.29 for publication.

Dedicated to an aristocratic lady pupil, the work's opening arabesques give little hint of his emotional upheavals: '[it] has the brightness of sunlight playing in a fountain's spray' wrote one reviewer. The fast tempo together with the opening turn make it difficult to hear the opening rhythm (*illustrated*) as three lots of triplets, rather than just as a spray of sunny splashes. A contrasting middle section starts with a slow rising theme (*illustrated*) which gets progressively elaborated until we are back with the playing sunlight.

Allegro assai, quasi presto

p legato

f

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Four Impromptus, D 935 (1827)

No 1 in F minor *Allegro moderato*
No 2 in A-flat major *Allegretto*
No 3 in B-flat major *Theme & Variations*
No 4 in F minor *Allegro scherzando*

Impromptus are nominally just single movement pieces that let the composer do what they want, but Schubert's are more tightly structured than the name implies. Schubert anticipated Chopin in writing them, though he was probably influenced in turn by his good friend Jan Václav Voříšek. He had had one of his pieces described in a journal as an 'Impromptu' in 1817 and then published 6 more explicitly under that name five years later.

Tonight's impromptus are the last four of eight that Schubert wrote towards the end of 1827 at around the same time as his two Piano Trios. Musical opinion is divided as to whether or not they are really a four-movement sonata in disguise. They are more substantial than the first four of the eight and there are structural and thematic links between the four 'movements'. In addition, Schubert might have thought he would get paid more for four separate pieces than for a single sonata.

The first impromptu combines elements of sonata and rondo. There is a wide range of moods, from the sombre melancholy of the opening to some highly excitable passages later

¹ Camille Pleyel's erstwhile wife Marie had been engaged to Hector Berlioz. When she broke off that engagement to marry Camille, Berlioz plotted to murder Marie, her mother and Camille, purchasing poison, a pair of shotguns and a disguise. Fortunately he then thought better of it.

on. Schubert's characteristic switches between major and minor are something to listen out for.

The second, *Allegretto*, (*illustrated*) is in the form of a Minuet and Trio. The mood, tempo, melodic outline and harmonic progressions of the movement are very similar to those of the *Andante* opening (*illustrated*) of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 26 in the same key.



The third impromptu is a theme and five variations. Its well-known *Andante* theme (*illustrated*) comes from his 1823 incidental music to a play about Rosamunde, Princess of Cyprus. A close variant of it appears in his A minor String Quartet (D.804).



The final *Allegro scherzando* Impromptu is the most virtuosic, ending in a furious rush to the finish, and a swoop down to the lowest note (F) on Schubert's piano.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin

For his other notes see <https://users.sussex.ac.uk/~cjd/WebProgNotes/index.html>