

Notes on the Program

by: Jannie Lo (DMA candidate at the Peabody Conservatory of Music)

Claude Debussy: Preludes

In writing his twenty-four Preludes, Debussy carried forth into the twentieth century the development of the prelude as an individualized musical genre. From as early as the first notated organ or lute preludes of the fifteenth century, the term suggested a “prelude to something” or an extemporaneous introduction, used to warm up the fingers or tune the instrument. Beginning with Chopin, and later with Debussy, the prelude became an independent character piece. Debussy’s first book of Preludes was published in 1910, and he continued working on the second book until 1913, while simultaneously writing his ballet score *Jeux*. Unlike Chopin, Debussy gave each prelude a title, though discreetly. The name appears at the end of each selection, in parentheses, and preceded by three ellipsis, as if an afterthought.

Brouillards (Mists), which opens his second book of Preludes, perfectly captures the mysterious moods, colors, and movements of mist and fog. The work moves between an aural greyness (achieved through bitonality of neighboring tonal centers, D-flat and C) and moments of increased clarity (through in which distant bells are occasionally heard) as the music moves towards the farthest distances on the keyboard.

La Puerta del vino (The Gate of Wine), the third prelude in his second set, is said to be inspired by a postcard Debussy received from the composer Manuel de Falla of the Gate of Wine, located at the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain. Debussy writes at the beginning, “With sudden contrasts of extreme violence and passionate tenderness.” The habanera rhythm that permeates the work serves as a Spanish backdrop to the volatile changes in sound and mood. Debussy also alludes to the soulful, flamenco *cante jondo*, or deep song: a vocal genre, traditionally with lyrics about the unpredictability of life. As de Falla himself said, Debussy, who never once set foot on Spanish soil, wrote the “truest art music” of the Spanish culture.

Aside from Debussy's incidental music for *King Lear*, *La danse de Puck* is likely the only other piece he wrote inspired by Shakespeare. In this prelude, Debussy brings Puck—the sprite and servant to Oberon from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—to life. One hears Puck's mischievous and quicksilver humor, often interrupted by Oberon's call from his magic horn.

The first stanza of the poem “Harmonie du soir” by Charles Baudelaire is the inspiration behind Debussy's prelude «*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*» (The sounds and scents turn through the evening air). It reads as follows:

Now comes the time, when vibrating on its stem;
Each flower sheds its scent like a censer;
Sounds and scents turn on the evening air;
Melancholy waltz and languorous vertigo!

As Debussy scholar Paul Roberts notes, this prelude is essentially an experience of synesthesia, in which the senses blur and sounds and scents are made audible, in the midst of a strange and surreal waltz. He writes of this prelude, “Debussy . . . evokes that half-light, characteristic of so much of his music, in which the conscious and the subconscious meet.” The allusion to the nostalgic waltz ties in with the end of the poem “Harmonie du soir,” which reveals that those sounds and scents invoke bygone memories.

Feux d'artifice (Fireworks), the last piece in Debussy's set of preludes, is not only a dizzying commemoration of Bastille Day (July 14), but surely also a display of pianistic fireworks. It begins with what Paul Roberts calls the “fizzing of a fuse”—tight, whirling energy sprinkled with sparks of sound. Amid the quixotic changes, one hears distantly at the end of the piece “La Marseillaise,” a reminder of the reason for this exuberant celebration.

Franz Schubert: Sonata in C Major (“Reliquie”), D. 840

During his short life, Schubert left a number of unfinished works, with the *Reliquie* Sonata certainly being one of the most inspired,

and perhaps a complement to his two-movement *Unfinished* Symphony. The nickname *Reliquie* comes from the supposition that it was his last sonata, but in fact it was begun in 1825, three years before the end of his life. A number of musicians (such as Ernst Krenek and Paul Badura-Skoda) have attempted to complete the fragments of the third and fourth movements that Schubert left, although tonight's concert will feature only the first two movements, which Schubert wrote himself.

The breadth of the first movement contains undertones of his "Great" C-major Symphony, D. 944, and is orchestral in texture, temperament, and scope, making this movement one of the longest Schubert ever wrote. Written the same year as his "big" Sonata in A Minor, D. 845, the themes in both works demonstrate a closeness in relationship. The C-major Sonata begins with a unison melody that outlines the C-major tonality, answered by harmonized chords. The transition into the second subject, in B minor, is certainly one of the most incredible journeys through harmony in Schubert's music, and according to Susan Wollenberg, evokes a sense of the magical. Even though the second subject is in a distant key, its construction is closely derived from the first theme, supporting the idea of a monothematic movement, according to pianist Vladimir Feltsman.

The second movement, in C minor, is written in the tone of a tragic story. A songlike melody (or *Lied*) is repeated with varying backdrops. As is typical in Schubert's music, sadness and joy commingle freely. The ending connects the motives from the two movements.

Frederic Chopin: Three Écossaises, Op. posth. 72, No. 3

Chopin's three brief and delightful Écossaises are a nod to the Scottish contradance, a style of dance very popular at the end of the eighteenth-century and the beginning of the nineteenth century in European salons. Both Beethoven and Schubert had been generous contributors to this genre. According to scholar Jim Samson, Chopin offered his contribution of three Écossaises between 1829 and 1830.

Originally, these would have never seen the light of day, as on his deathbed Chopin requested that all his unpublished manuscripts be destroyed. However, Julian Fontana, a close acquaintance and musical executor of Chopin, acting in accordance with the wishes of the composer's family, ended up publishing twenty-three of those works posthumously in 1855. These became opuses 66–73, the *Écossaises* being Op. 72, No. 3.

One can imagine Chopin, a skilled dancer and frequent visitor of evening dance parties, improvising these *Écossaises* at the piano. The first dance is permeated with the characteristic “Scotch snap,” a jaunty short-long rhythm. The next consists of quick ornament-like figurations followed by longer notes, and a middle section with fluid sixteenths in the left hand. The last one, in D-flat major, is the most flowing of all, alternating between triplets and sixteenths.

Chopin: Waltz in E Major, Op. posth.

With the help of Johann Strauss II, nicknamed the Viennese Waltz King, the waltz made its shift from a rural folk dance to a cosmopolitan pastime. As a teenager in Warsaw, Chopin had not taken waltz music seriously. It was not until after spending a few months in Vienna at the age of 20 that he exclaimed to his teacher, “Waltzes are regarded as pieces here!” Chopin (along with Schubert and Weber) was instrumental in bringing the waltz to the intimate salon setting. He created such a sophistication through the twenty-five waltzes he composed (of which eighteen survive) that they became opuses worthy of serious study.

The youthful E-major Waltz was written around 1830, during the year he spent in Vienna, although it was published posthumously. The piece reflects all the jovial, glittery social flair that the dance carried in Vienna's cultural milieu.

Waltz in A Minor, Op. 34, No. 2

The Waltz in A minor, Op. 34, is believed to have been composed during the first half of 1830s. In complete contrast to the character of the Waltz in E Major, this work is deeply melancholic. It opens

unusually, with a soulful melody in the tenor voice of the left hand accompanied by a bagpipe-like drone in the bass. When the theme of the waltz proper appears, we encounter the type of *valse triste* that would become increasingly popular among the Romantic composers of the second half of the century, such as Sibelius and Tchaikovsky. The melancholic mood is relieved momentarily by a gracious A-major theme.

Grande Valse in A-flat Major, Op. 42

Upon hearing Chopin's Grand Valse in A-flat Major, Op. 42, Robert Schumann exclaimed that if this was to be danced, "half the ladies should be countesses at least." A trill introduces this iridescent dance. Interestingly, in a genre where the defining feature is its triple time, Chopin teases out a double meter in the right hand, not unheard of in his waltz writing, adding to the piece's whirling excitement.

Bolero in C Major, Op. 19

When the twenty-four year old Chopin published his Bolero, Op. 19, a traditional Spanish dance, he had not yet set foot in Spain, nor would he for another four years. He was living in Paris at the time, and his close friend Pauline Viardot (born Pauline Garcia), with whom he often played duets, would share with him knowledge of her heritage and Spanish music. Aside from Viardot, Chopin may have come across Spanish music at the opera house, where, like all things "exotic" at the time in Paris, it was fashionable. Chopin's Bolero captures the spirit of Spanish music while retaining his own strong inner sense of Polish nationalism. Nineteenth-century Chopin scholar Frederick Niecks nicknamed this piece "Bolero à la Polonaise," and the second publication of this work titled the work "Souvenir d'Andalousie." It is clearly a piece meant to delight the audiences in his relatively new city of Paris.

The work is dedicated to Comtesse Emilie de Flahaut, a pupil of Chopin who was fourteen at the time. After a fleeting introduction followed by a short section that seems Spanish in character, the energetic main melody of the bolero is announced over a polonaise

rhythm. The piece traverses a wide range of keys, and while it begins in C major, its theme is in A minor and it ends in A major.

Four Mazurkas, Op. 24

The mazurkas of Chopin are widely regarded as his most personal utterances. Composed from when he was fifteen until the last year of his life, Chopin's fifty-seven mazurkas range in length from half a minute to over five minutes and are based on Polish folk dances. They predominantly contain references to three types of popular countryside dances: the mazur, kujawiak, and oberek. Each of these dances is in triple meter and has a distinctive rhythm. Traditionally, they were performed on a variety of instruments, such as the guitar, bagpipe, fiddle, and voice. While paying homage to his roots, Chopin simultaneously explores the entire spectrum of human emotions in these miniatures. It is through the combination of Chopin's love of folk song and his refined sense of harmony that he was able to turn a dance music genre into one worthy of the concert hall. The Op. 24 dances were written in Paris, and when Robert Schumann first heard this set, he wrote, "Chopin has elevated the mazurka to an art form; he has written many, yet few among them resemble each other."

The point of departure for the first mazurka is an original folk song, "Why aren't you ploughing, Johnny, why aren't you ploughing?" The overall character is contemplative until a more animated middle section in thirds enlivens the atmosphere.

In the second mazurka of Op. 24, Chopin evokes folk song through a drone that opens the work and creates consecutive fifths that sound mysterious and almost primitive. Originating from a folk melody, the main theme, with its high register, recalls the sound of the *fujarka*, an instrument frequently used in the traditional folk music of Poland that resembles a high-pitched shepherd's pipe.

The third of this set is perhaps the most humble and straightforward in form. The expected lilt of the mazurka is sometimes arrested by fermatas. It ends with a fleeting, almost inaudible passage.

One of the most exquisitely wrought mazurkas in Chopin's oeuvre, the final piece has been called "a lyrical dance poem" by Mieczysław Tomaszewski. The work is strikingly complex both in form and harmony. Its unique introduction, two converging chromatic lines, becomes the inspiration for the music in the main body of the work. In the midst of a wealth of melodic material, a hushed moment arises when an unharmonized melody in unison comes from afar. The coda is most exceptional in its long pedal point (an unchanging bass), ending with a fragment of the melody that trails off, unaccompanied, as if to be continued on another dimension.

Rondo à la Mazur, Op. 5

"He who does not know Chopin had best begin the acquaintance with this piece . . . the rondo is lovely, enthusiastic, [and] full of grace," wrote Schumann in his review of the Rondo à la Mazur.

Rondo à la Mazur was published in 1827 while Chopin was still a teenager studying at the Warsaw Conservatory. The piece was dedicated to Mlle. la Comtesse Alexandrine de Moriollles, a young lady Chopin referred to as "Moriolka," nine years his senior and on whom he had a crush. As has been noted by Alan Walker, Chopin often frequented the palace in which she lived, offering her piano lessons and playing duets with her.

The work itself is essentially a stylized mazurka in the form of a rondo. The piece begins with the theme in F major, played in octaves in the bass, pianissimo, like a deep murmur yet rhythmically active. The modal melody, with its oriental-flavored Lydian fourth, is full of life and seems increasingly ready to burst with each iteration as the mazurka rhythm and its energy permeate the music. The essence of the piece gradually shifts from the rhythmically driven to the graceful. The second theme preserves the underlying mazurka association with its rhythmic figures in the bass but trades its folkish, lively atmosphere for a character of sweetness and a songful melody. The rest of the work alternates between the two themes with even more intensity of character and emotion. As the piece nears its conclusion, Chopin insatiably hints one last time at the primary

theme in the bass followed by the actual return to that theme leading to a cadenza. After a set of sequences, the Rondo ends with boisterous and joyous chords.

Polonaise Héroïque in A-flat Major, Op. 53

Alan Walker writes in his recent book on Chopin, “In the A-flat major Polonaise, Chopin turns his pen into a sword.” This very popular and celebrated work, which serves as an apotheosis of Polish nationalism, was written shortly after the Polish magazine *Literary Weekly* heralded Chopin as the nation’s new cultural ambassador. The magazine’s description of Chopin as the one “who feeds the holy flame of nationhood in our hearts” would be an apt description of this work, as is the title “Héroïque,” whether or not Chopin would have approved of this inscription.

The introduction is a “call to arms,” as a number of musicologists have noted, calling the listener to attention before the central majestic theme in A-flat major. After an abrupt shift to the bright key of E major, heralded by six rolled chords, the famous left-hand octave passage commences. While coaching this piece, Franz Liszt told a student, “What I wish to hear is the canter of the horses of the Polish cavalry before they gather force and destroy the enemy.” The main theme returns a number of times, with added trills, which according to Walker are “a touch of the side drum and all the panoply associated with it.”

The work was written in 1842 and dedicated to Auguste Leo, a friend of Chopin who was a German banker. Though it has been heard on a great variety of occasions, ranging from the return of Chopin’s physical heart to Warsaw in 1945, to films of the twentieth century, to countless piano recitals, this masterpiece retains its freshness and enthusiasm with each and every performance. Like the waltz and the mazurka, the polonaise is yet another dance genre where Chopin demonstrates his genius in transforming a casual dance floor accompaniment into a masterpiece of beauty and sophistication.