2022

Concert recording 2022-04-04

Asher Armstrong

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS | Fulbright College of Arts & Sciences

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

ACCENT FACULTY PERFORMANCE SERIES

Dr. Asher Armstrong, piano

UAMusic

April 4, 2022 | 7:30 PM
Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall

CONCERT PROGRAM

5 Improvisations, Op. 148 (1938) ..... Amy Beach (1867-1944)
No. 5: Largo maestoso

Thème et Variations for Piano (1914) ..... Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

Sonata Appassionata, Op. 6 (1934) ..... Vítezslava Kaprálová (1915-1940)
I. Maestoso
II. Theme and Variations

PAUSE

The Art of Fugue, BWV 1080 (1749) ..... J.S. Bach (1685-1750)
Contrapunctus XIV

Four Serious Songs, Op. 121 (1896) ..... Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
arr. Reger

I. Denn es gehet dem Menschen
II. Ich wandte mich und sahe an alle
III. O Tod, wie bitter bist du
IV. Wenn ich mit Menschen und mit Engelszungen redete

Nacht und Träume, D. 827 (1825) ..... Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
arr. Armstrong

NOTES

5 IMPROVISATIONS, OP. 148

The 5 Improvisations, Op. 148, is the last piano opus of formidable pianist-composer Amy Beach. The set closes with a bold and powerful masterpiece, marked Largo maestoso. Comparisons with Brahms (and with his last solo piano piece in E-flat) might be apt, but at least one scholar has also related this to the music of another composer fond of pianistic thickets and briar-patches: "The large keyboard range with emphasis on low octaves, four-voiced chords in each hand, and the dark key of e-flat minor create a sound reminiscent of Rachmaninoff's keyboard style" (M.S. Miles). This tragic canvas seems to lie somewhere between a "Mighty 5" Mazurka and a Bachian Sarabande, but in blazing its own path it is overwhelmingly convincing. Opening with massive, granitic textures, the left hand's thunderous octaves gradually plow into the bedrock of the piano's range, precipitating a herculean effort to re-establish the opening E-flat minor key. The piece closes with a pianissimo restatement of the opening theme, which is as breathtaking as it is simple; somehow witnessing this intense opening music drained of its power creates the feeling of defeat, or that something is left unreached. In a postlude that quietly affirms the tragic key of E-flat minor, we see some of the most poetic and compelling lines of Amy Beach's piano music.

THÈME ET VARIATIONS FOR PIANO

One sees in the short life of Lili Boulanger an unfulfilled artistic promise. Her career was distinguished by the coveted Prix de Rome (at the age of 19, she was the first woman to receive this honour) and characterized by consistent and high quality in all her work, but ill health overshadowed her 25 years; at the age of two, she suddenly became very sick with bronchial pneumonia, leaving her immune system precarious: "for the rest of her life she was almost constantly ill, with either passing infections or outbreaks of (chronic Crohn's) which led to her death in 1918" (A. Fauser). The impact of her death was enormous on her older sister Nadia, whose legacy as a piano pedagogue is one of the greatest of the last century. Francis and Berry note that "art was something these sisters shared; it was something special to their unique relationship"; in her own composing, Lili told those close to her how "she and Nadia had worked together at the piano 'to revisit the melodies and decide on nuances'."

Lili's slight piano oeuvre bears witness to "strength, ambition, wit, and power"; and of her Thème et Variations for piano specifically, pianist Emile Naoumoff notes "(an) austere beauty (which is) almost frightening." This is indeed a "serious and substantial work, requiring considerable power" (C. Potter); its haunting opening theme is played with a single hand, sculpting the clear key of C minor as well as tracing the chromatically-inflected subsidiary areas of D-flat and B-flat. This theme is followed by 8 variations (the 8th a repeat of the 1st): the 1st introduces the darkest textures of the whole set, and is marked "slow, grand, sombre, and painful." The 2nd, at first glimpsed in oblique fragments, coalesces into the larger chordal textures of the 3rd, which in turn introduces an ocean of double-note cascades and canon-effects in the 4th. The "very calm" 5th variation precedes the harmonically wayward undulations of the 6th, before the 7th, a broad march which ends in pianissimo. Then the 1st "slow, grand, sombre, and painful" variation returns, closing out the entire set in a sepulchral shadow.

SONATA APPASSIONATA, OP. 6

Kaprálová has been called "Europe's great forgotten female composer" (J. Allison), and the brief incandescence of her career brings to mind that of Lili Boulanger. The precocious child of a composer and pianist, she began studies in her hometown of Brno, composing and conducting a staggering Piano Concerto as her graduating work at the age of 20. Her study continued in Paris, where she began a close relationship with Martinû. (Scholars have noted it seems Kaprálová had just as much influence on Martinû as he on her—a situation not dissimilar from those Shostakovich had with Galina Ustvolskaya, or César Franck with Augusta Holmès). By the time she reached the age of 25, she had composed an impressive amount of music. But Europe was fast reaching a boiling point; Hitler had invaded Poland in September of 1939, with France and Great Britain promptly declaring war against Germany. In a matter of months, the Nazis were at the doorstep of Paris: "It is not difficult to imagine the chaos, fear, hopelessness, and disintegration of that terrible time. Both the French and British armies were in full retreat; millions of refugees were fleeing to southern France on foot, by horse and cart, bus, car, and train" (M. Henderson). The 25-year-old Kaprálová remained in Paris—having begun to experience intense stomach pain from April of 1940, she died on June 16th, 1940, the official cause of death listed as tuberculosis miliaris.

Her two-movement Sonata Appassionata, Op. 6 is an astounding work, charting a journey of artistic growth from its beginning to the end. Its first movement opens with a "robust style recall(ing) Rachmaninoff" (Entwistle) and synthesizes all the hallmarks of hard-earned compositional mastery. Such details as Kaprálová's efforts at unity and thematic organicism (the opening theme is literally grafted from the helix of accompaniment with which the movement begins) are just as impressive as her "convincing integration" of romantic and impressionistic elements throughout this movement. The second movement is a set of variations, beginning with a simple melody which has "characteristics of a folk song" (K. Hartl) but just enough harmonic colour to suggest the mischievous inventiveness

which will follow: "Kaprálová gradually obscures the melodic and harmonic connections to the original theme" (Entwistle), emphasizing punchy contrast as the movement progresses. The first variation is the most traditional, adding only decorative filigree in either hand, while the second hints at a more dissonant, off-kilter undercurrents. The third and fourth variations gradually increase in speed and virtuosity, arriving at a broad and improvisatory Largo 5th variation; here Kaprálová pauses to "look back" at the opening theme, before moving on into the most hair-raising area of the score. "With its length of 151 bars, the final variation dwarfs its predecessors" (Entwistle); this final stretch opens as a fugue, but its grotesque and sardonic subject is now worlds away from the opening folk tune, gradually becoming wildly overgrown by tendrils of chromaticism and dissonance. A final lyrical episode offsets the fugue's re-appearance, in which the jagged subject is actually overtaken and subsumed by the surrounding chromatic whirlwind. Kaprálová closes this substantial work in virtuosic, epic fashion, with a final combination of the first and second movements' themes.

The whole sonata illuminates clearly the Kaprálová described by pianist Rudolf Firkušný:

> "(Kaprálová's) music speaks to everyone in the same language, but people who knew her personally would perhaps understand it a little bit more. Vitka's personality was unpredictable, like the weather at home in the month of April. We never knew how she would be: sometimes very happy, funny, and full of life, and sometimes, on the contrary, quite serious. She was well aware of the world situation and the unfolding events. Her personality was charming and her work irresistible, just like she was. We can see many signs of a great talent in her work and the towering heights it might have reached."

THE ART OF FUGUE, BWV 1080

Somewhat ironically, the music of J.S. Bach was seen as outdated and old-fashioned by the end of his life; even the Art of Fugue engraving plates (from which comes the piece you'll hear today) were promptly melted down for their metal value after his death, and interest in these complex, intricate fugues waned for many years. Thankfully, through the efforts of composers like Felix Mendelssohn in the following century, Bach's music experienced an enormous revival, and began to serve as a permanent model and influence on future generations of musicians.

All of Bach's music is concerned with the idea of counterpoint, and in the Art of Fugue "The governing idea [. . .] was an exploration in depth of the contrapuntal possibilities inherent in a single musical subject" (C. Wolff). The final entry in this gargantuan compendium of contrapuntal technique is the 14th Contrapunctus, which Bach left unfinished. Bach scholar David Schulenberg notes: "A remark added in the autograph by (Bach's son) CPE Bach explains that the composer died 'over this fugue, where the name B-A-C-H is used as a countersubject.'" In fact, in this fugue, Bach uses three themes (or subjects): one is an austere, protracted melody outlining a D minor triad; the second, a serpentine, modulating melody which pauses halfway through, and the third—the most remarkable—is Bach's own name in musical letters: B (B-flat), A, C, and H (in German, B-natural). Bach completed a three-fold structure in which each of these themes is given an exposition and then combined with other themes; it seems his intention was to continue working on a grand synthesis of all three themes, and possibly one other. If this had been completed, it would have made this a quadruple fugue of enormous proportions, amounting to a truly "visionary experiment" (R. Marshall). As it stands, unfinished, it is still a deeply moving and profound testament of Bach's lifelong art.

FOUR SERIOUS SONGS, OP. 121

"When Clara suffered a series of strokes in 1895, Brahms realized that the woman he had always loved could not live forever (. . .) His deepest feelings about her are revealed in his last great songs, the Vier ernste Gesänge (Four Serious Songs), written in May 1896, as she

lay dying in Frankfurt (. . .) Clara's death came on May 20, 1896. Brahms died eleven months later." (N. Reich)

Brahms's Four Serious Songs take as their texts meditations "on death, on the fragility of human life, on the transcendent power of love" (MacDonald), comprising one of the most personal, powerful (if intimate) reflections on the subject. German composer Max Reger transcribed all four for piano solo, in which version you will hear them today.

The first song is from Ecclesiastes: For it goes with man as with the beast; As that dies, so he also; And they have all the same breath; And man has nothing more than the beast; For all is vanity. The opening music is in Brahms's austere, ballad voice (familiar from such works as his Op. 10 "Edward"), and is characterized by text-painting which is masterful and communicative –for instance such details as the opening tenor contours reflected by the bass, imitating the words "men" and "beasts." The middle section is a harrowing "allegro in a swirling of dust" (Swafford), again conjuring up a powerful picture of the text: "from dust we come and to dust we return." The song closes with a question: "who knows if the spirit of man ascends upward, and that of the beast descends into the earth?"—answered with a symbolic and inevitable D minor chord.

The second song is the most deeply pessimistic of the 4, with a text again from Ecclesiastes: I turned and looked on all who suffer oppression under the sun: And behold, there were tears from those who suffered oppression, and had no savior;(...) Then I praised the dead more than the living; And he who has never been; Is better off than both; And is not conscious of the evil; That happens under the sun. Brahms's way with the text leaves a haunting impression; particularly where reflecting on the idea that "it would be better to have never been born." The power of this moment is signified by complete silence; after such a pessimistic reflection, even the gentle warmth of G major with which the song closes cannot hope to provide adequate consolation.

It is in the third song that Brahms's "found words ... again speak for him" (Swafford): the speaker reflects at first on the bitterness of death, with music in the hollow, bleak landscape of E minor: O death, how bitter you are; To one who has good days and enough; Who lives without cares; Who is doing well in all things; O death, how bitter you are. Suddenly, the music shifts to the balmy parallel of E major, underpinning a narrator who has shifted perspective: O death, how welcome you are to one that is needy; Who is weak and old; And has nothing better to hope for or to expect; O death, how welcome you are.

The last song takes its text from 1st Corinthians—often read at weddings, and associated with love: If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels; But do not have love; I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. The inner episode of this song traces an intimate, almost confessional constellation from its text: For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; Then we shall see face to face; Now I know in part; Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known—at this hope of being "fully known," Brahms's music pauses with momentary uncertainty: the "awful daring of a moment's surrender." The song closes with a peaceful contemplation on the idea that, of faith, hope, and love, "the greatest of these is love."

NACHT UND TRÄUME, D. 827

The final piece on today's program is my transcription of one of Schubert's best-loved Lieder, Nacht und Träume (Night and Dreams). The simplicity of this lullaby encapsulates a spacious, timeless night landscape; the rocking accompaniment remains unchanging from the opening to the end, and any harmonic furrows are gently smoothed by a canvassing tranquility. Schubert's harmonic magic is present once, where the music breathtakingly dips into a "dreamworld" key of G major—in the text, perfectly mirroring the moment where the narrator describes one passing into sleep.

UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

April

TU 5 **Guest Artist Concert:**
Susan Milan & Lillian Buss Pearson
5:45 pm, Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall
free and open to the public

TU 5 **Saxophone Music of Dave Liebman**
Troiano Saxophone Studio
7:30 pm, Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall
free and open to the public

WE 6 **UARK Signature Jazz Series:**
NEA Jazz Master Dave Liebman
7:30 pm, The Momentary, RØDE House
tickets at theMomentary.org

WE 6 **Cholthitchanta Clarinet Studio Recital**
7:30 pm, Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall
free and open to the public

TH 7 **UARK Inspirational Chorale**
7:30 pm, Faulkner Performing Arts Center
tickets at uark.universitytickets.com

FR 8 **UARK Percussion Ensemble**
7:30 pm, Faulkner Performing Arts Center
tickets at uark.universitytickets.com

TU 12 **UARK Wind Ensemble**
7:30 pm, Faulkner Performing Arts Center
tickets at uark.universitytickets.com

TU 19 **UARK Latin American Ensemble**
7:30 pm, Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall
free and open to the public

WE 20 **UARK Jazz Orchestra**
7:30 pm, Faulkner Performing Arts Center
tickets at uark.universitytickets.com

TH 21 **Pierce Tuba Euphonium Studio Recital**
7:30 pm, Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall
free and open to the public

Ushering and stage management for this concert provided by Sigma Alpha Iota and Phi Mu Alpha.

Giving and Support

Our musical offerings are supported by contributions from alumni, friends, and generous benefactors. If you enjoy our concerts, please consider giving to support our continued efforts. Giving is simple and can be made through the University system by visiting **www.onlinegiving.uark.edu**. Simply designate the Department of Music for your gift, choose an amount, and fill out the online submission or call Fulbright Development at (479) 575-4272. Your gifts will help the Department better our students through scholarships, performance, and the best in instruction.

The University of Arkansas is accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music and the Department of Music is housed in the Billingsley Music Building. Home to over 300 music students and fifty faculty members, we offer a variety of degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Through generous support from alumni and friends, the Department of Music became an All-Steinway School in 2010. The University of Arkansas is the third SEC school to gain the distinction and one of only 150 universities worldwide with the honor.

Department faculty and students perform over 600 concerts per year, on and off campus. Large concerts are performed at the 600-seat Faulkner Performing Arts Center with intimate chamber and solo concerts primarily presented at the 200-seat Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall. Additionally, students and faculty perform throughout the region, including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Fayetteville Public LIbrary.

For more information, find us on social media or contact us at (479) 575-4701, email us at music@uark.edu, or visit music.uark.edu.