

CAL POLY

SAN LUIS OBISPO

Music Department
California Polytechnic State University

Matt Abela ◆ piano ◆

A Senior Recital in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts in Music

March 31, 2012

Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

Davidson Music Center

Room 218



Sponsored by the Cal Poly Music Department and College of Liberal Arts

Program

Matt Abela, piano

Senior Recital

Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2, BWV 875 Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude in D minor (1685-1750)

Fugue in D minor

Sonata No. 24 in F-sharp Major, Op. 78 Ludwig van Beethoven

Adagio cantabile–Allegro ma non troppo (1770-1827)

Allegro assai

Estampes Claude Debussy

Pagodes (1862-1918)

La soirée dans Grenade

Jardins sous la pluie

— Intermission —

Années de Pèlerinage Franz Liszt

Sonetto 104 del Petrarca (1811-1886)

Sonata No. 3 in A minor, Op. 28 Sergei Prokofiev

(1891-1953)

Program Notes

***Well-tempered Clavier, Book 2* — “Prelude & Fugue in d minor”**

The name ‘Bach’ was often used as a synonym for ‘musician’ in 18th-century Germany. The reason for this was because the Bach family, originating in Germany in the mid-16th-century, was prolific both in number and in musical talent. Also productive in both these respects was Johann Sebastian Bach. Over the course of time, he fathered twenty children; thirteen of these children survived to adulthood and of these, six made their careers as musicians, but none surpassed the eventual fame of their father. Born on March 21, 1685, Johann Sebastian Bach established himself as a virtuoso keyboardist and a prolific composer; by the end of his life, he had written nearly 1200 compositions encompassing a wide range of media including voice, chamber ensemble, orchestra, organ, and harpsichord.

Despite his prolific musical output, after his death in 1750, Bach was, for over half a century, virtually forgotten. A ‘Bach Revival’ began to coalesce in 1802 after the publication of Johann Nicolaus Forkel’s biography of the composer, but it was not until Felix Mendelsohn’s performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in 1828 that ‘Bach Fever’ began sweeping the world. Because of Bach’s newfound popularity, more people began to see the value of his work, not only in terms of entertainment, but also with regard to musical technique.

Bach took great interest in the musical development of his children and used his compositional prowess to supplement their education with now-celebrated works, such as the two- and three-part *Inventions* and the *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* (“The Well-Tempered Clavier”). In 1722, Bach completed Book I of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*, which contained 24 preludes and fugues in major and minor keys. His intent, as he put it, was “to teach clear playing in two and three obbligate parts, good inventions [i.e., compositional ideas] and a cantabile [singable] manner of playing.” Then, in the 1730s, Bach published the second part of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, known as “Book 2.” Book 2 also contains 24 preludes and fugues in major and minor keys. The sixth prelude and fugue are both in D minor.

This pair of pieces is organized in ascending difficulty, similar to any lesson. The prelude, the name of which simply means a piece of music that precedes something else, begins by outlining the D-minor melodic scale in a descending motif. It then transitions into an ascending four-note motif, which at its peak accents the D with a quick oscillation, called a mordent. The four-note motif is then exchanged between the treble and bass lines. As Bach explores the harmonic minor mode (as well as D major), the piece increases in complexity to the point that one can become almost lost in the notes. This temporary confusion is remedied by the return of the four-note motif, which acts as the glue that holds this piece together. The piece ends with an interesting and unexpectedly cheerful-sounding major chord.

The performer’s test comes in the form of the fugue, which essentially is a complicated version of a round: think, “Row row row your boat.” It begins by outlining a musical theme, called the subject. The subject in this piece is heard right at the beginning, and consists of ascending and descending triplets followed by a descending chromatic scale. The subject acts as the center of the piece; it will switch between left and right hands, appearing continuously throughout the work in interlocking and interweaving segments.

Sonata No. 24 in F-sharp Major

Franz Gerhard Wegeler, one of the first biographers of Ludwig van Beethoven, said that “[Beethoven] was never without a love,” but despite Beethoven’s numerous attempts to court high-society ladies, Beethoven remained married to his music. Ludwig van Beethoven was born on December 17, 1770, in Bonn, Germany, and demonstrated prodigious musical skill at an early age. His father Johann, eager to develop his son’s talent, vigorously began instructing him on violin and piano. Unfortunately for Beethoven, his father was a very harsh teacher, and the young Ludwig would often be in tears as he practiced. Beethoven eventually sought tutelage elsewhere, and in 1792, he travelled to Vienna. There he studied under Joseph Haydn and also played for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who said, “That young man: he will make himself a name in the world!” With these notable endorsements and his increased compositional output, Beethoven’s fame grew.

The positive effects of both his rise in status and popular esteem were dampened by a cruel twist of fate. As early as 1796, Beethoven began displaying signs of hearing loss, and though initially mild, it would ultimately progress into total deafness. Understandably, this handicap propelled Beethoven into a profound depression. Nevertheless, Beethoven defiantly wrote in a letter to Wegeler, “I will seize Fate by the throat.” Beethoven overcame his depression and continued to compose. Remarkably, the compositions written after his deafness were just as good if not better than the pieces he wrote when he could hear.

While his deafness did not hamper his ability to compose, it did impede his ability to form personal relationships. Nevertheless, Beethoven still fell deeply in love with various women. After his death in 1827, a letter written by Beethoven, addressed to his ‘Immortal Beloved,’ was discovered among his possessions. The identity of the ‘Immortal Beloved’ has remained a topic of debate for many musical scholars. One of the possible candidates for this title is Thérèse von Brunswick, to whom Beethoven’s 24th sonata was dedicated.

Beethoven completed his 24th sonata in the summer of 1809, while the French army bombarded Vienna with howitzers. It is set in an unusual key, F-sharp major, and unlike most of his piano sonatas, it has only two movements. The first movement, “Adagio cantabile–Allegro ma non troppo,” combines both refined lyricism with a comical and cheerful mood. It follows a sonata form, consisting of an introduction, exposition, development, and recapitulation. Probably the most interesting feature of this movement is the brief yet beautiful four-bar introduction that seems to be the remnant of an independent slow movement. The serenity of the introduction provides an excellent contrast with the more light-hearted exposition. The piece never strays too far from this gentle character; even when turmoil seems to be building, the tension is soon diffused by the return of the theme.

While the first movement embodies a refined, light-hearted atmosphere, the second is akin to slap-stick comedy. Its more direct humor is a product of the rapid tempo, “Allegro vivace,” and the sudden contrasts of dynamics and mode. As a whole, the piece sounds like the soundtrack to a demented chase. It stops and starts, slows down and speeds up, and leads the listener along toward an expected conclusion, only to begin another chase.

Estampes

Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel are considered the founders of a musical style called impressionism, but Debussy personally hated this label. He refused to call his music

impressionist, and referred to the critics who used the term as “imbeciles.” To this day, academics argue over what Debussy’s music should be called. Nevertheless, Debussy’s style remains one of the most innovative of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Debussy’s wide exposure to a variety of music aided in the development of his own characteristic style. He was born on August 22, 1862, and by the age of ten he was enrolled in the Paris Conservatory. Even though he was a talented pianist and could have made a career as a performer, Debussy instead chose to focus primarily on composition. As a composer, Debussy was never satisfied with the traditions of the conservatory, so he began to look for inspiration elsewhere. Debussy was initially attracted to the music of his contemporary, Richard Wagner, but eventually — like many Frenchmen — became disillusioned with Wagner’s style. This change of heart was nurtured in Debussy by his friend and fellow composer, Eric Satie, who later wrote,

“I explained to Debussy the need a Frenchman has to free himself from the Wagnerian venture . . . I also pointed out that I was in no way anti-Wagnerian but that we should have a music of our own — if possible without any Sauerkraut.”

In Paris, the Exposition Universelle introduced Debussy to music from the Far East. For Debussy, the highlight of the exposition was the gamelan, which is a general term for an Indonesian ensemble, comprised primarily of tuned, metal, percussive instruments. These experiences influenced Debussy’s overall style, which is especially evident in his piece, *Estampes*.

Estampes demonstrates Debussy’s connection with visual art as well as his exposure to a wide variety of music. In visual art, “estampes” is a term normally used for etchings or engravings. By using a label from visual art, Debussy implies that this work was similar to a collection of images. Therefore, each of the three movements, in the mind of the listener, should paint a picture about its respective subject: “Pagodes” expresses the Orient, “Soirée dans Grenade” demonstrates Spain, and “Jardins sous la pluie” displays France.

The first movement’s title, “Pagodes” (Pagodas), refers to the multi-eave towers prevalent in the Far East. This movement embodies Debussy’s perception of Asia, a perception that was shaped by his exposure to the gamelan. The whole piece is composed using eastern-sounding pentatonic scales. Prevalent throughout are notes reminiscent of a deep bass gong, whose presence marks the beginnings and ends of phrases. Here, Debussy shows his skill by reflecting an entire gamelan through a solo piano piece.

The second movement, “Soirée dans Grenade” (Evening in Granada), expresses the flair and emotion of Spanish music. The piece begins by outlining a recurring habanera rhythm, a rhythm that gives the listener a consistent evocation of Spain. Sudden accelerations and great dynamic contrasts paint a picture of a dramatic Spanish night filled with mystery and excitement.

The final piece, “Jardins sous la pluie” (Gardens in the Rain), portrays a rainy night in Debussy’s homeland, France. The melodies of this piece are comprised of two French nursery rhymes, but the soothing aspects of these tunes are tempered by the ever-present rain. The listener’s perception of the storm is always changing. Sometimes it seems serene and beautiful, but as its power grows, it become more dissonant and frightening.

Sonetto 104 del Petrarca

Elvis Presley was not the first musician to inspire “mass hysteria.” In 1844, ‘Lisztomania’ referred to the fanatic excitement a performance by Franz Liszt inspired; the biographer Alan Walker describes one fan’s devotion: “Liszt once threw away an old cigar stump in the street under the watchful eyes of an infatuated lady-in-waiting, who reverently picked the offensive weed out of the gutter, had it encased in a locket and surrounded with the monogram “F. L.” Such dedication was prompted by one of the most innovative musical composers and performers of the Romantic era. Born in Raiding (Doborján), Austria, on October 22, 1811, Franz Liszt demonstrated musical aptitude at a very young age, and by the age of nine he was performing. In his twenties, Liszt began an innovative concert tour; his performances, called ‘recitals,’ would feature only Liszt as a solo piano performer, playing memorized pieces. Before this time, performances were traditionally not called recitals, memorized, nor limited to one performer. Liszt’s recital format would become the standard to which most contemporary pianists, including today’s performance, adhere. Even after his death on July 31, 1886, Liszt is still regarded by many as the best pianist ever.

Besides his strength in performance, Liszt was also an innovative and prolific composer; he invented a new orchestral genre, the symphonic poem, and also added to existing genres: songs, cantatas, masses, psalms, and oratorios. His piano pieces have become legendary in both difficulty and beauty, often requiring great technical skill as well as strong expressive interpretation. Liszt’s mastery of the piano also made him excel at transcribing other media to piano. These transcribed works include piano arrangements of other composers’ pieces, as well as arrangements of his own earlier non-piano works. A case in point occurs with the three “Sonetti di Petrarca.”

The “Sonetti” were part of an anthology of piano pieces called the *Années de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). The title of the collection referred to a period in Liszt’s life that was shaped by a romantic affair. In 1832, Liszt met Countess Marie d’Algot and despite the fact that she was already married, the two fell in love. Three years later, Marie was pregnant. Afraid of the scandal resulting from the birth of their daughter, Liszt and Marie began traveling throughout Europe. In 1839, the couple spent the summer in Italy awaiting the birth of their third child. While at a small fishing village called San Rossore, Liszt wrote a set of three songs to poetry by the famous Italian poet Francesco Petrarca. Liszt later arranged these pieces for solo piano. The songs themselves garnered little acclaim, but the subsequent transcriptions were better received, becoming common performance pieces. The second of the set of three pieces is “Sonetto 104 del Petrarca.”

In “Sonetto 104 del Petrarca,” Liszt conveys the meaning of the poetry without using words. The poetry tells of a person constantly swaying between opposite extremes: “I fear, I hope, I burn, I freeze again.” These bi-polar emotions are the result of his unrequited love for a woman. Liszt expresses these emotional states with various contrasting musical elements. The piece begins with a short, tumultuous introduction, which effectively paints the initial words of Petrarch: “Warfare I cannot wage, yet know not peace.” This bombast gives way to a slow, “Adagio,” complemented by a lilting song-like melody reminiscent of love, played “molto espressivo” (with much expression). The music again reflects the tumultuous nature of his emotion with passages of notes played loudly and disconnectedly. The left hand begins an ascending and descending accompaniment that reflects the rising and falling emotions expressed by the poetry. Intermixed with the “Adagio” melody

are sudden bursts of speed from exciting ornamented passages, again emphasizing the contrasting elements present in the words.

Sonata No. 3 in A minor

It seems fitting that the so-called “Bolshevik Pianist,” also known as Sergei Prokofiev, died on March 5, 1953, the same day as Joseph Stalin, but — nicknames aside — Prokofiev was neither very fond of Bolshevism nor Stalin. Toward the end of Prokofiev’s life, the Soviet government, spearheaded by Stalin, condemned and subsequently banned Prokofiev’s and other composers’ music for its deviations from the cultural ideal known as “soviet realism.” It was not until after the death of Stalin that the constraints on Prokofiev’s compositions were eased, and the Russian people could again freely appreciate one of their great composers.

Prokofiev’s life was marked by various musical triumphs and failures. He was born on April 23, 1891, and by the age four, his mother, an amateur pianist, began instructing him on the piano. Around this time, Prokofiev also began composing. By the age of twenty-three, he performed his own concerto for a competition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, winning first prize. Prokofiev seemed poised to become a Russian sensation, but in 1918, because of Russia’s increasingly unstable political climate, Prokofiev emigrated to the United States. In the U. S., Prokofiev hoped that his skill as a virtuoso pianist and his abilities as a composer would earn him a place in American musical society. Unfortunately, much of his work was heavily criticized; one notable reviewer referred to Prokofiev’s *Classical Symphony* as an “orgy of discordant sounds.” Prokofiev’s lack of success in the West, coupled with his nostalgia for home, eventually motivated him to emigrate back to the USSR in 1933.

Despite the limits imposed on the arts by Stalin, Prokofiev for a time thrived in Russia as a composer. During this time, he composed his famous *Peter and the Wolf* and also composed the music for Russia’s first sound film, *Alexander Nevsky*. Unfortunately, this success did not last. As the Soviet government began to crack down on the cultural elements that it found subversive, Prokofiev began to face heavy criticism, and much of his music was banned in 1948.

Prokofiev had begun work on *Sonata No. 3 in A minor* in 1907, when he was only sixteen; later, in 1917, he modified it, and then in 1918 he published it. This piece contains many of the impressive technical elements that would become staples of Prokofiev’s sonatas: rapid, wide leaps, hand-crossings, and swift arpeggios. The percussive introduction forcibly grabs the listener and its motor-like pulse propels him forward. Its intensity seems to build and build, until suddenly, it drops off into a flowing legato melody. The piece continues to alternate between the bombastic and the beautiful, concluding with a powerful and dramatic coda. It is a straightforward sonata form, with an exposition, development, and recapitulation, but interestingly, unlike most piano sonatas, which have multiple movements, this piece has only one. Prokofiev explained, “It will remain . . . in one movement: pretty, interesting, and practical.”

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