Clarice Olson

• piano •

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

February 17, 2017
Friday at 7 p.m.
Davidson Music Center
Room 218

Sponsored by Cal Poly's Music Department and College of Liberal Arts
Program

Senior Recital
Clarice Olson, piano

Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II, BWV 881 ............... Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
  Prelude in F minor
  Fugue in F minor

Trois mouvements perpétuels ............................... Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)
  Assez modéré
  Très modéré
  Alerte

Pavane pour une infante défunte ......................... Maurice Ravel (1877-1937)

Années de pèlerinage, Première Année, Suisse ................... Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
  Au bord d’une source

— Intermission —

Sonata No. 15 in D Major (Grande Sonate), Op. 28 ..... Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
  Allegro
  Andante
  Scherzo
  Rondo
Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II, BWV 881

Someone once said Johann Sebastian Bach played the organ’s pedals with his feet better than others played the keyboard with their hands. Considered one of the greatest composers and keyboardists of all time, Bach’s legacy has influenced generations of musicians in the art of Baroque music. Unlike many other now-famous composers, though, Bach was relatively unknown during his lifetime. He stayed his entire life in his native Germany, holding various church and court jobs in several cities as organist, choir director, or general music director. Much of the music he composed was intended for church services but he became frustrated when his music proved too difficult for his performers. Once, in 1706, he was so fed up with his musicians in Arnstadt that he quit his job to find outlets for his compositions elsewhere.

Some of Bach’s most productive years occurred while he was a cantor in Leipzig, where he lived from 1723 until his death in 1750. He was responsible for the music of four churches in the city, as well as for teaching the St. Thomas School’s boys’ choir. During these years, he composed the majority of his cantatas and many other choral works, such as Masses, motets, oratorios, and Passions, as well as numerous instrumental pieces.

While in Leipzig, Bach completed a set of pieces he had started twenty years earlier, that is arguably the most important collection of keyboard works in the piano’s repertoire: the Well-Tempered Clavier. Since their creation, the preludes and fugues in the Well-Tempered Clavier have become a standard tool in developing a keyboard student’s technical skills and understanding of counterpoint (a compositional style featuring two or more independent melodic lines that imitate each other’s ideas and patterns). The complete Well-Tempered Clavier is divided into two books of paired preludes and fugues, each containing pairs in twenty-four keys. In total, there are forty-eight pairs, two in every major and minor key. Book I was written in 1722, while he lived in Cöthen, and Book II was completed in Leipzig, during the years 1738-42. Bach had written on the title page of Book I that the works were composed for students, as well as for the enjoyment of those already skilled in keyboard techniques.

The title “Prelude” implies the piece is introductory and relatively simple, but this is not always the case in the Well-Tempered Clavier, as Bach takes a wide variety of approaches. He does not employ any predictable form, meter, tempo, or overall character, and thus each prelude of the forty-eight (as well as each fugue) is remarkably different from the others. For instance, the Prelude in F minor, from Book II, is characterized by a three-note, descending figure. This figure alternates with contrasting material that is a stream of quickly moving notes. Together, these two ideas are the building blocks of the prelude. The melodies dance around the keyboard, sometimes in different patterns or directions, and often are combined together.

Unlike the Prelude, the title “Fugue” is less ambiguous. A fugue is a work written in counterpoint that follows specific theoretical rules. The main theme, or subject, that opens Book II’s Fugue in F minor is made of two motifs. It begins with a downward leap into three repeated notes, and is complemented by a quick flow of stepwise notes that rise to a peak and then fall. The subject jumps around different registers of the
keyboard a total of nine times throughout the fugue. As in many Baroque pieces, there is a constant flow of motion that never seems to cease or allow for a breath.

Bach’s music is known for its extreme technical difficulty. The physical coordination and finger independence required to execute any of the Preludes and Fugues is one of the most challenging aspects. If done well, the pieces become more than technical studies, and the beauty of each comes to life.

_Trois mouvements perpétuels_

Francis Poulenc believed his most inventive piano writing was his song accompaniments, and he actually loathed what many would consider his best piano work, _Les soirées des Nazelles_. The twentieth-century composer wrote in several genres, such as operas, ballets, and chamber music, but his most prominent works are songs and piano pieces. He was linked with five other young French composers; together they were known as _Les Six_. Poulenc, Milhaud, Auric, Honegger, Tailleferre, and Durey were connected by a strong friendship and an aesthetic simplicity, largely inspired by innovative composer Erik Satie. Works by these composers were often programmed together. But, even as Poulenc associated with and was inspired by various social and artistic circles, his style remained loyal to established harmonies; he even admitted that he borrowed other composers’ chords rather than innovating his own. Works such as his _Trois mouvements perpétuels_ use familiar tonalities rather than the experimental harmonies of other twentieth-century composers.

The _Trois mouvements perpétuels_, or “Three Perpetual Movements,” is a set of three short pieces based on the idea of never-ending motion. Each work has a quality that suggests the idea of ongoing movement. The constant drive is created with techniques such as repeated patterns, circular figures, and harmonic ambiguity, which imply the possibility of the music never coming to a stop. The set, written in 1918, enjoyed immediate success after its premiere by Poulenc’s close mentor, Ricardo Viñes.

The overall mood of the “Assez modéré,” indicating a rather moderate speed, is whimsical. The most interesting aspect about the piece is the left hand’s pattern, which is consistently repeated until the very last measure. While the left hand lays the foundation, the right hand plays a fun, descending melody. Most of the melodic lines in the piece descend from a high starting pitch. When the melody jumps back to the start of each descent, another level of circular motion is created. The final measure sounds very “modern” as the notes ascend, and the last ambiguous chord denies the listener any tonal closure.

“Très modéré,” or “very moderate,” presents a slow, contented contrast. In the first half, there is little movement in either hand’s fairly small range, while the second half uses more of the keyboard in both directions. Here, the idea of perpetual motion is achieved by repeated figures, primarily in the left hand. The notes in both hands rise and fall in a relaxed, arched fashion, creating a circular effect. Poulenc also adds figures, such as the right hand’s slowly climbing octaves, to introduce a different type of sound. The new serene tone is partly achieved by use of the pedal, which Poulenc once revealed was the secret to his piano music. In general, he believed there was never enough pedal, and at one point he exclaimed, “Put some butter in the sauce! Why play as though you were on a diet?” “Très modéré” ends when the right hand softly glides up
the keyboard, followed by two very short notes that stick out in a curious manner and beg the question: What comes next?

The answer is “Alerte,” the last and the liveliest of the three. Its introductory theme is a playful and celebratory fanfare that emphasizes two repeated notes and then a downward scale. The left hand accompanies the right hand's melodies with extreme intervals that are an added challenge for pianists with small hands. The softer middle section features smooth melodies, the last of which is marked “with charm.” The final section, though the softest, includes some of the most elaborate mechanisms. The right hand plays multiple trills (quick flutterings between two notes), and completely crosses over the left hand. Meanwhile, the left hand has to jump around while avoiding unintentional accents in this “blurred” section. The piece finishes with two scales moving in contrary motion and a tonally vague chord that fades into nothingness.

Pavane pour une infante défunte

Even though Maurice Ravel was kicked out of the Paris Conservatory, he is far from a failure to today’s listeners. He consistently struggled to earn the acceptance of French musical authorities and was accused of imitating fellow composer Claude Debussy. After Debussy’s death, however, Ravel was regarded as France’s leading composer. This newfound status isolated him from some of his colleagues who had formerly identified with him as “artistic outcasts.” Furthermore, the younger generation of French composers, such as Poulenc and Les Six, rejected his “aesthetically outdated” style, which has aspects that are similar to the Classical era’s forms and functional harmonies.

Today, Ravel is celebrated for his beautiful, dreamy melodies, as well as for his brilliant orchestrations, though he believed orchestration was a task that required an entirely different skill set than composition.

Most listeners know Ravel’s Pavane pour une infante défunte in its popular orchestral form, but it was originally written for solo piano in 1899. The name of this character piece—a small-scale piano work that suggests a certain image or mood—translates to “Pavane for a Dead Princess.” A pavane was a courtly dance, popular in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Typically, it was slow and moved in beats of two. Ravel’s Pavane is not meant for dancing, but it still reflects a pavane’s overall structure and character with its processional elegance. This piece is sometimes viewed as mournful, but it simply reflects a majestic pavane that a Spanish princess would have danced in the past. Ravel himself warned against over-interpretation, saying, “Do not attach more importance to this title than it has. Avoid dramatizations.” In general, Ravel preferred his music merely to be played, not interpreted.

Although the Pavane was not written to lament a specific person, its sweet melodies still seem sad. The first section, A, opens with a lullaby-like melody that rises and falls gently. The soothing A section returns three times in the overall ABACA structure. Three prominent ascending notes, a common grouping throughout the Pavane, bring the first section to a stately close. In contrast, the ethereal B section is marked “very remote”; the melody sounds as if it were coming from a distance. In this section, the right hand shares some of its notes with the left. While this choreography is an extra challenge, it puts more emphasis on the melody. Section C, the piece’s climax, begins softly in the piano’s high register but gradually builds in volume, thickness, and
tension before starting a long descent to the section’s close. In addition, Ravel includes many rolled chords and figures that rapidly ascend to create a rippling effect. The largest of these ripples brings the *Pavane* to an end with a flourish.

**Années de pèlerinage, Première Année, Suisse**

Today’s recital would not exist without Franz Liszt. He was a pioneer in solo piano performance and even coined the term “recital” in 1840. Liszt was one of the world’s first rock stars. The mass hysteria created by his theatrical performances, known as “Lisztomania,” is similar to what today’s most successful musicians experience. The caliber of his virtuosity and technique was unmatched in his day. Moreover, his compositions were also considered progressive, similar to those of other Romantic composers such as Berlioz and Wagner. As a teacher, Liszt was passionate about sharing his knowledge with younger musicians while encouraging artistic individuality. He never charged for lessons.

Though he toured and concertized around Europe for the better part of about thirty years, Liszt also travelled for pleasure, which often sparked new compositions. The years 1835-39 are called his Years of Pilgrimage. He and his lover at the time secluded themselves in Switzerland and Italy, often visiting the quiet countryside. Liszt was musically inspired by the sights and sounds he experienced. He captured Switzerland’s essence in a collection of piano pieces entitled *Album d’un Voyageur*, or “Album of a Traveller.” He then reworked these pieces to become the first in a set of three books entitled *Années de pèlerinage*, or “Years of Pilgrimage,” published in 1855. To introduce these miniature soundscapes, he wrote, “I have tried to give musical utterance to some of my strongest sensations, some of my liveliest impressions.” His images range from natural elements and church bells to mountain echoes and Swiss yodelers.

**Au bord d’une source**, or “Beside a Spring,” is a piece of “water music” prefaced with a quotation from German philosopher and poet Friedrich Schiller: “In murmuring coolness the play of young nature begins.” The work portrays playful splashes and, at times, a torrential waterfall. The form follows a broad theme-and-variations structure, appropriate as the trickle of water changes its course and grows in intensity. The “water” theme is created by quickly moving notes that circulate softly in the piece’s background. Embedded within this figure is the melody, played by both hands, the left crossing over the right to play the highest pitches, which suggest splashing water droplets. The later variations of the main theme feature even more active choreography, rolled chords, and an overall thicker texture as the stream gains momentum.

The spring is disrupted by virtuosic sections that are characteristic of Liszt’s works. These passages feature scale-like figures that climb chromatically up the keyboard, build excitement, and then trickle down. The scales do not sound melodic; they are a coloristic effect that contributes to the wash of sound. Though the notes are written out, the passages are reminiscent of the improvisatory skills for which Liszt was famous.
Sonata No. 15 in D Major (Grande Sonate), Op. 28

Modern concertgoers applaud wildly for Ludwig van Beethoven’s music, but audiences in his day were sometimes a little confused as to how they should react to his works. Beethoven’s compositions were groundbreaking, unconventional, far more expressive than anything previously heard, and they consistently shocked audiences with their originality. His stylistic innovations helped him lead the transition between the Classical and Romantic eras. He was a complex man with a temperamental personality who, though extremely gifted, worked immensely hard to craft his works just right.

Beethoven’s piano sonatas span his entire life and reflect his changing compositional styles, which scholars now group into three time periods. Piano Sonata No. 15 in D Major was written in 1801, on the cusp between Beethoven’s first and second stylistic periods. As a result, it follows Classical structures but begins to introduce Romantic expressiveness. It is nicknamed the “Pastoral” sonata due to the images and sounds of nature the piece evokes. Beethoven’s final period contains some of his most obscure works, when he suffered from complete deafness, but signs of his gradual hearing loss were already appearing when the “Pastoral” sonata was written.

Traditional rules are broken in the “Allegro,” the expansive first movement. The very opening measure is unusual because it begins on a chord that is not in the home key. D Major is not established until seven measures later and, even then, it is not stable. Additionally, there are five musical ideas used in the movement. Five is not absurd, but together they produce a movement that is over 450 measures in length, the longest first movement of any of Beethoven’s sonatas to that point. At the same time, a repeated note in the left hand generates a soft drone that serves as a foundation over which the melodies sound. The melodies move smoothly and follow rhythmic patterns that tend to rock back and forth in a peaceful, calming way.

The “Andante,” in the parallel D minor, introduces a tone of hushed excitement. Written in ABA form, the opening A section is slow-moving and has a detached line in the left hand that creates a mysterious, curious mood. Section B, in D Major, features livelier, dance-like melodies. The return of Section A adds variety with elaborated melody lines. Beethoven’s student Carl Czerny, who became a famous teacher himself, once said that Beethoven played this movement often because it was one of his favorites.

The third movement, a scherzo, is playful and humorous. The most striking characteristic is the set of four single notes that descend down the keyboard. This simple figure gradually expands to include additional notes as the movement progresses. The scherzo is also in ABA form, and its contrasting middle section utilizes a left-hand line that never slows in motion or energy until the four descending notes of the opening reappear.

The “Rondo” is the movement most worthy of the “Pastoral” nickname. Its peaceful mood is primarily established by a floating, descending melody. Meanwhile, the left hand repeats a figure with a distinct pitch pattern emphasizing D Major; the figure also contains a rhythmic structure that is used in other melodies later in the movement. The low-pitched figure signals the return of each A section, which it does four times. While the nickname implies a relaxed atmosphere, there are multiple moments of heightened drama in between each A section. The movement closes with a climactic display that is a final variation of the left hand’s opening pattern.
Acknowledgments

My family: Thank you for your constant support, generous trust, and willingness to learn with me. So much of who I am today is because of the freedom you have given me to make my own choices and the loyalty you have shown me when those choices are sometimes poor.

Dr. Spiller: Thank you for mentoring me in music, artistry, academics, and human kindness. I will always remember a bit of advice you once said to me: “Just be gracious.” I never thought I would be so fortunate to study with such an accomplished pianist.

Dr. McLamore: Thank you for being a model scholar and educator, and for guiding my note-writing process. Because of you, the quality of my writing has improved immeasurably, and my critical thinking has reached new levels. You have sparked my interest in so many branches of music: research, education, musical theater!

Susan Azaret Davies: Thank you for the many opportunities you have offered me in the music field. Even a task as deceptively simple as page-turning for you has led to my being employed as an accompanist in various settings for the past three years! You have taught me the skills I need to further pursue collaborative piano and are my idol as a well-rounded musician capable of anything.

Music faculty and staff: Thank you for the expertise and quality with which you do your jobs. My education is a “complete package” because of the efforts and care you show us students.