

Program Notes

Partita No. 2 in C minor Sinfonia

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

The Six Partitas were composed by J. S. Bach between 1725 and 1730. Each partita is a collection of stylized dances, and beginning each partita is an introductory piece. In the case of Partita No. 2, the introductory movement is called a “sinfonia.”

This sinfonia is divided into three sections. Each section builds on the previous section, picking up speed as it goes. The opening, with its slow ponderous chords and dotted rhythms, a flowing lyrical section, and a lively fugue in triple meter.

Miroirs Oiseaux tristes

Maurice Ravel
(1875-1937)

Maurice Ravel was involved with a group of musicians, artists, and writers in Paris called *Les Apaches* beginning in 1900. The name of the group referred to the Native American tribe and expressed their common feeling of rejection by the artistic establishment of the time. During the years 1904-1905, Ravel wrote a collection of five pieces he called *Miroirs*, or reflections, for *Les Apaches* and each piece was dedicated to a different member of the group.

Oiseaux tristes (“Sad birds”) is the second piece from *Miroirs*. Ravel was inspired to write this piece while visiting the forest of Fontainebleau, just outside of Paris. As the story goes, Ravel heard a blackbird whistling and attempted to transcribe the bird song exactly. He used this idea for *Oiseaux tristes*, and he later wrote that the piece “evokes birds lost in the oppressiveness of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer.”¹ The piece is in free form and is intended to sound like an improvisation. Opening the piece is the sound of the lonely bird call which is joined with lower and inner layers that depict the gloom and monotony of the forest below. As the piece progresses, the listener can easily imagine the backdrop of the forest and the sound of the birds as they interact with their environment.

Sonata Ab Major, Op. 26 I. Andante con variazioni

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Beethoven wrote his sonata in Ab, Op. 26, during the year 1800-1801. Typically, the opening of a sonata is a fast movement in sonata-allegro form. In this case however, Beethoven opens with a theme and variations, continues with a scherzo and trio and a funeral march, and concludes the sonata with a rondo.

The theme that opens the *Andante con variazioni* is a simple but thoughtful melody. Following the theme are five variations, each with a unique character. A sudden change in mood can be heard in the third variation with a shift to a minor key. This variation foreshadows the minor key of the funeral march in the third movement of the sonata.

Excursions, Op. 20 III. Allegretto IV. Allegro molto

Samuel Barber
(1910-1981)

In 1943, Samuel Barber was drafted into the U.S. military, but was unable to go into combat because of

¹ Ruti Abramovitch, “Maurice Ravel’s *Miroirs* for Piano: Historical Background and Some Performance Related Aspects,” PhD. diss., (Indiana University, 2012).

his bad eyesight. Instead, he served as a composer for the military and wrote a few patriotic pieces. During the years 1942-1944, Barber wrote his Excursions for piano. Each of the four Excursions draws in some way from American musical styles, either by copying a genre or using material from existing American music.

The melody used for the theme of the third movement and the following eight variations appears to be based off the cowboy ballade called the Streets of Laredo. Each variation consists of two phrases, one that repeats with very little change and the other that varies throughout the piece. One notable element in the piece is the constantly changing polyrhythms, many that have dotted rhythms and syncopations that add complexity.

The fourth movement is the last in the set and portrays a lively and upbeat barn dance. Barber tackles the challenge of making the piano sound like a fiddle and harmonica by using only the higher register with notes no lower than middle C, a limited harmonic vocabulary (the entire piece is based off of tonic and subdominant harmonies), and melodic patterns common in fiddle tunes. Throughout the piece, Barber uses fast repeated notes for the fiddle part to sound like rapid bow changes and sliding grace notes to mimic the violin's ability to bend pitches. The loud staccato chords following the fiddle parts imitate the sound of the harmonica.

Nocturne, Op. 33

Samuel Barber
(1910-1981)

Barber's Nocturne ("Night piece") was completed in 1958 and was written in honor of John Field, the inventor of the genre. In the Nocturne, Barber tries to bring two seemingly incompatible ideas together: a nocturne and harsh and often static sounding twelve-tone compositional techniques.

Barber plays with twelve tones in his Nocturne, Op. 33 but is not as strict in his use of the technique as Schoenberg's twelve-tone system. In fact, Barber manages to keep the piece tonal by putting the same tone at the beginning and end of each row. This pitch anchors the row and gives it a sense of tonality, while still maintaining a modern feel to the piece. The Nocturne is written loosely in ABA form, with the middle section functioning more like a development section, since it uses fragments of the A section.

Hungarian Fantasy

Franz Liszt
(1811-1886)

Franz Liszt left his native Hungary at age eleven to study in Paris, but always had a soft spot for the music of his homeland. While Liszt was at the height of his career as a concert pianist, he returned to Hungary to give a benefit concert to help victims of a flood in Budapest. During this visit, he was reacquainted with the Hungarian folk tunes and gypsy music that had fascinated him as a boy. He decided to collect these melodies and use them to write a collection of pieces in the gypsy style for piano, and these pieces eventually became the 19 Hungarian Rhapsodies for piano.

The Hungarian Fantasy is an arrangement for piano and orchestra of his Hungarian Rhapsody No.14 in f minor. For musical material, Liszt used two Hungarian patriotic melodies and a gypsy dance. Liszt wrote the work in a free style, with improvisatory sounding runs and figurations. Each section of the work flows into the next without break. This structure reflects Liszt's fascination with the one movement concerto.