

Programme notes

Two Preludes - Two approaches to the theme of landscape in music.

Arapatiki

Gillian Whitehead

Gillian Whitehead writes about Arapatiki: This work was commissioned by Stephen De Pledge as one of a series of Landscape preludes, and received its first performance in the Wigmore Hall, London, in January, 2004. Arapatiki translates from Maori as 'the way of the flounder', and is the ancient name of the sand flats in front of my house at Harwood, near Dunedin. The piece has something to do with the advance and retreat of the tide across the flats, where many species of sea and water birds spend much of the day; an ever-varying water-scape. The opening idea is based on the song of the korimako or bellbird. The abundance of life in Arapatiki is expressed through slow waves of chords, birdcall and flights of melodies, with a central slow section based around a repeating motif.

Des par sur la neige (footprints in the snow)

Debussy

The mystery of footprints in the snow in Debussy's 6th prelude from Book I, expressed through ever changing harmonies around a desolate repeating motif.

Impromptu in F minor D 935 No. 1

Schubert

Schubert's two sets of Impromptus were composed in 1827 in a year of feverish creativity even by his standards. Whether this burst of creativity was due to a foreboding sense of death (Schubert would be dead the following year) or not is open for discussion. A sense of melancholy has always imbued Schubert's music.

The title Impromptu was given to these works by the publisher and was not Schubert's own. These impromptus are far more than mere salon pieces that the title suggests. In fact, Schumann himself proposed that the Schubert had something much larger in mind when he composed the D 935 set citing the key sequence as hinting at a larger scale sonata. No 1 in F minor, No 2 in A flat major, and the brisk scherzando no 4 as a 3rd movement certainly could make a convincing sonata form.

The impromptu D 935 No 1 is perhaps one of the most emotionally varied of his impromptus. The opening 12 bars act as a dramatic introduction which gives way to a somewhat foreboding figuration which is more affect than melody. From there we are taken on typically Schubertian journey through various emotional states and the lieder composer is never far away.

Variations on a theme of Corelli Op. 42

Rachmaninoff

Written in 1931 the Variations on a theme of Corelli are Rachmaninoff's last work for solo piano and are also seen as a precursor to his variations on a theme of Paganini.

Rachmaninoff had always faced criticism from some colleagues and critics with accusations of unnecessary sentimentality in his music. But his approach to composition was also totally sincere and he could not bring himself to compose any other way saying:

"I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old way of writing and I cannot acquire the new. I have made an intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me."

He composed from the heart and he himself complained that composers of the day would think rather than feel. It is this approach which makes the Corelli variations a fascinating work, infused with his regret and longing for his homeland. Rachmaninoff left his beloved Russia in 1918 and never returned, expressing his anguish and its effect on his creativity.

"I left behind my desire to compose: losing my country, I lost myself also"

Rachmaninoff's personality permeated his music, and we can see how it changes in the later years as his heartache (and of course his fear of death) became more prevalent. Melodies become more chromatic, less open compared to the soaring melodies from his earlier works. Descending harmonies and melodic material throughout these variations convey a sense of helplessness. Even the theme itself which in fact is not by Corelli but is an Italian folksong, cannot escape Rachmaninoff's thoughts and is presented to us with a sombreness or gravity that sets the scene for the rest of the work. What follows are not formal variations on the theme but rather a transformation of the theme. The music tries to break free from its shackles treating the theme in many ways. Scherzo, lyrical, rage, but ultimately it cannot overcome. The coda and final statement of the opening theme seem to give in to the inevitable.

Interval

Intermezzo Op 118 no 2

Brahms

Written in the twilight of his life this beautiful miniature is some of Brahms most introspective and tender music. It comes from a set of pieces composed for Clara Schumann to play in her autumn years, with whom he shared a deep friendship and even love. They adored each other both as musicians but knew that even after Robert Schuman's passing, their relationship could not be more than the friendship they had enjoyed throughout their lives together, even though Brahms had confessed his love to her years before.

The piece shows Brahms' masterly control of texture and economy with the most stunning harmonic warmth. It is impossible not to think of this piece as an ode to their love and Brahms' longing for Clara.

Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel Op 24

Brahms

Written in 1861 when Brahms was 28, the Handel Variations are considered one of the finest examples of variation form since Beethoven. Brahms was one of the most progressive composers of his time, but he was also a strict formalist and like his good friend Schumann, believed in the importance of absolute music. He had little time for the fashionable trends of his time such as concert paraphrases, free fantasies, or variations that did little more than repeat the theme with increasingly extrovert decorations.

Brahms' Handel variations are a perfect example of his ability to fill a traditional form with his own voice. The expression is quintessentially romantic but using a classical economy of means and there is always a strong sense of classical form. Brahms' genius lies in his ability to fuse these forms with his own voice. Cross rhythms, irregular phrase lengths and harmonic tensions all sound natural under Brahms hands.

The theme comes from Handel's harpsichord suite No. 1 in B flat HWV 434. Through the following 25 variations Brahms explores the melodic and especially harmonic, potential of the theme concluding in a grand fugue. Brahms said in a letter discussing his approach to the variation form that *"In a theme for variations, it is almost only the bass that has any meaning for me. But this is sacred to me, it is the firm foundation on which I then build my stories. What I do with a melody is only playing around."*

Unlike Rachmaninoff's variations which are emotional reflections on the theme, Brahms' genius lies in his ability to build variations from the previous material giving each variation its own character while retaining a strong sense of structure and proportion. The concluding Fugue is a tour de force which after starting with a subject that uses only a minimal section of the theme builds to a grand climax.