" Sounds in the Sanctuary" – Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation

Bernard Rose, piano -- 7/9/2021

J.S Bach: Partita No. 5 in G Major, BVW 829

Praeambulum – Allemande – Corrente – Sarabande – Tempo di Minuetta – Passepied – Gigue

Bach's six keyboard Partitas were composed between 1726 and 1731, with a seventh published as the French Overture in 1735. Partitas are suites consisting of short, two-part dance movements that follow a longer opening prelude. Each partita has a character of its own; as with all, that of the fifth is hard to describe in one word, but cheerful, playful and lyrical all apply. Like all seven, this suite is more than the sum of its parts, as Bach holds brilliantly to a wiry keyboard style and lyrical-comical point of view.

This work is set in seven movements. The opening praeambulum displays the composer in comical mode, with lyrical material playing a secondary role. There's no mistaking that the falling scales followed by simple, flop-down chord sequences of the opening phrase is funny stuff. Later the composer presents it in a more thoughtful guise, but chortling figuration in the left hand keeps comedy in the forefront. Lyricism dominates the allemande, however, where an airy theme of great beauty is decorated with billowing trills and triplets, a common rhythmic device where three notes are

squeezed into the space of two. The corrente is a bristling, bustling, airborne version of a quick dance that often displays a hard edge, though not here.

The slow sarabande that is the fourth movement seems a more delicate example than many; but the diaphanous tempo di minuetta (minuet) that follows may be the most enchanting movement in the partitas. Bach sets out a soaring melody in teasingly ambiguous phrasing with delicate keyboard writing. A vigorous passepied, chunkier in texture, is very appealing as well. The composer ends the suite with a gigue of greater weight, dimension, and difficulty than the previous movements. Though complex, this jolly fugal dance shows the playful side of his contrapuntal skill.

Debussy: Images, Book 1

Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the Water)

Hommage à Rameau (Homage to Rameau)

Debussy composed two sets of piano pieces titled Images, the first in 1905, the second two years later. These follow the path of the composer's Estampes ("engravings") of 1903, as studies in tone painting. Both Debussy and Ravel took the example of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition as inspiration. It's worth noting that Ravel preceded Debussy in groundbreaking use of the keyboard to depict water with his Jeux

d'eaux ("fountains") of 1901. Debussy's open admiration for this masterpiece is no surprise. But Ravel was apparently annoyed that Debussy often got credit for inventing the style, perhaps because he was older. Debussy's skill at depicting water musically stands on its own, culminating in his pantheistic tone poem for orchestra, La Mer.

Debussy's recognition that nothing is ever still and his skill at rendering gentle movement in tone probes at the nature of perception and reality. In Reflets dans l'eau, the composer depicts light refracted on water that's not quite still, moving more rapidly, then slowing again. It's hard to explain how sound can so clearly suggest sight, but the opening chord in the bass, above which even tones shimmer gracefully, somehow mime the look of gently moving water. Soon rippling notes interrupt the languorous flow, then move into a steadier pattern. Radiant climaxes reveal the splendor of light on moving water. These flashes of ecstasy are brief, though: Debussy is painting a picture in tones, not showing off. The closing passage slows down again, with descending individual notes evoking falling droplets.

Longest and grandest of the Images, Hommage à Rameau does not a paint a picture like Reflets. It's a musical tribute to Debussy's musical ancestor Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) and to the glory of French music of the baroque era. A multifaceted composer of genius, Rameau produced lively, colorful works in many genres, including opera, ballet, sacred music, and suites for the harpsichord. Although his work is less

well known than that of Bach or Handel, Rameau is close to those giants and contemporaries in stature.

Formally, Debussy's piece can be considered in two ways. It's a tombeau, which translates literally as gravestone, but has been used figuratively since the Renaissance to mean a posthumous musical tribute. More specifically, Debussy's piece is a sarabande, the same slow dance of the baroque era as in the Bach partita. With its slow tempo, the sarabande is often a stately vehicle for profound emotions, as here, where a nostalgic melancholy predominates. But for all its grandeur, Hommage à Rameau forgoes a tragic posture; an irony-laden example of music about music, its affects seem elusive and abstract.

The piece speaks well enough for itself. One can, however, listen for its vast phrases, some even extended by echoes, with the floating harmony of Debussy's mature style fully in evidence. A majestic chord sequence builds to an enormous climax, from which there's an extended descent, where the opening theme returns but re-harmonized as though spent. Hommage à Rameau ends on a big chord, struck gently in the bass, then the treble.

Ravel: Miroirs

Noctuelles (Night Moths)

La Valée des cloches (The Valley of the Bells)

With its title suggesting visual reflections, "Mirrors," completed in 1905, is another set of five studies in pictorial mode in this extraordinary year and era for piano music in France. As we've seen, Ravel and Debussy traded concepts for titles and sometimes actual ideas, with the younger Ravel ahead often enough on the conceptual front. Whether in rivalry, mutual appreciation, or both, the two spurred each other on.

Miroirs opens with the strange and beautiful Noctuelles, a sublime depiction of fluttering moths, if an unlikely subject for poetic treatment. Ravel's title is an unusual word that names a species of moth, into which the suggestion of nocturne is embedded as well. While this isn't a nocturne in Chopin's sense, it has a dimly lighted, nocturnal quality. Set in three parts, the delicate fluttering of the opening evokes an image of moths batting around. The gorgeous melodic line unfurls in Ravel's best manner, decorated with dissonances that are swift but startling. It's good for twenty-first century listeners, accustomed to Stravinsky, Bartók, Schoenberg, and Webern to hear Ravel's boldness and imagine the bafflement an audience of 1905 must have experienced on hearing this. More somber but no less beautiful is the middle section, built of rich chords set against pulsing syncopated notes in the bass. The composer gradually brings back the opening material, at first in fragmented form, then ends on a few flutterings, as though moving away.

Inspired by the sound of church bells in Paris, La Valée des cloches forms a rich and calm conclusion to Miroirs. Surely The Great Gate at Kiev, the closing section of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, in which that master evokes tolling bells, served as example and inspiration for Ravel. The two tone paintings differ in affect and dynamics, with Mussorgsky's being mostly excited, exalted and loud, whereas Ravel finds ecstasy in a quieter, less obvious way. Like Mussorgsky, Ravel gets the piano to sound like many bells, some pealing, others resounding deeply, by using the sustain pedal to hold long tones, while the player's hands move around the keyboard.

The piece moves at one slow, even tempo, perhaps making performance somewhat easier. La Vallée opens quietly with repeated tones, into which a steady murmuring carillon enters. A third set of "bells," falling deeply and slowly in the left hand, come in. A long-breathed, calm theme opens the middle section, and from this a soaring, ecstatic melody emerges, accompanied by a variety of chiming effects. The carillon returns in abbreviated form and at lower volume, then in fragments, and the piece ends quietly with two low chimes, sounded softly, deep in the bass.

Beethoven: Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110

Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo

Allegro molto

Adagio ma non troppo: arioso dolente

Fuga

A profound lyricism pervades this, the penultimate of Beethoven's sonatas, which alongside its companions (No. 30, Op. 109 and No. 32, Op. 111) forms the conclusion of the composer's cycle for the instrument. The three sonatas differ radically in character, with that of Op. 110 being intimate, even confessional. Beethoven began the sonata while ill, in late 1821, recovering as the year ended. Op. 110 seems to track a parallel course, from muted sadness to newfound strength and joy. While the lyrical nature of the music is obvious and the triumph of lyricism at the end complete, the composer also expresses a containment verging on weariness in the first movement and open sorrow in the third. The third and fourth movements are merged in a remarkable structural experiment, where Beethoven employs the contrasting baroque techniques of aria and fugue to achieve his expressive goals.

The first movement is also fascinating structurally for having a single thematic group, but a well-defined development section. In it, Beethoven exploits the frictions within the themes, which turn out to be considerable, given their gentle sound and contained nature. The opening phrase, graceful and dancelike, is followed by a vocally styled melody that's frail but soaring. This soon breaks apart into ecstatic arpeggios that are pure keyboard writing; in a melting transitional passage, fervent trills struggle to rise. In the short development, the composer puts the graceful opening phrase through eight exquisite but dark permutations before guiding it back to the home key. Further

harmonic excursions generate even more conflict; even the beautiful closing section contains a rumbling threat.

In the compact second movement we hear the familiar, aggressive Beethoven. It's a quick-tempo German dance of an almost childlike plainness that sets it off from the rest of the sonata. Boisterous and sometimes explosive, it contrasts utterly with its companion movements, filling a need within the overall structure for a change in mood and texture.

The slow movement and finale are linked in a complex, multi-part structure. This begins with a recitativo – recitative – a pianistic recasting of a vocal style from opera or sacred music where text is "recited" so that it can be heard clearly. This eloquent recitative for piano opens in a slow tempo with wide-ranging chords; falling speech-like patterns pull toward the body of the slow movement itself, opening in throbbing chords over which a sinuous theme (described by the composer as the "arioso dolente," which translates basically as sorrowful melody) like a lament from an Italian opera, unfurls. The composer lets the tune reach for glorious high notes in a vocal manner, before falling again deep on the keyboard. The fugue begins without pause, but the primal quality of the subject and its lilting gait mark a complete change from the tragic tone of the arioso. Beethoven moves to surging contrapuntal treatments, but their joy and richness wilt before a change in key and an unexpected return to the arioso, now

rendered in broken phrases that seem to gasp. This leads to a terrifying passage where a single chord is repeated eleven times, with suffocating weight, deep in the keyboard.

This alarming moment gives way to a return of the fugue, but in inversion, meaning that the notes move down where they originally went up. Beethoven tightens the contrapuntal gears while raising the temperature too. Finally, the subject is thundered out in the bass over a rattling accompaniment; it's then repeated over and over in the right hand, highlighted by various (and glorious) harmonic shadings. The excitement mounts to a level not heard before as Beethoven reaches a brilliant ending that's heartfelt, hard-won, and not the least showy.

Notes by Victor Lederer