

new century : new paths

leva Jokubaviciute, piano

Thursday, January 21, 2010 at 7:30pm
Ward Hall
Rome School of Music
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

Sunday, January 24, 2010 at 3:00pm
Saint Andrew Music Society
Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church
New York, NY



Debussy

Preludes from Book I:
Les collines d'Anacapri
Voiles
Preludes from Book II:
Brouillards
Feuilles mortes
La Puerta del Vino

Schoenberg

Sechs kleine Klavierstucke, Opus 19

Scriabin

Sonata No.4, Opus 30

Janacek

Selections from *On an Overgrown Path*
Our Evenings
A Blown-Away leaf
Come With Us!
The Madonna of Frydek
They Chattered Like Swallows

*Words Fail!
Good Night!*

Berg Sonata Opus 1

Debussy *L'isle joyeuse*

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'Artists are the antennae of the race, though the bullet-headed many will never trust their artists.'

Ezra Pound

'Art at its most significant is a distant early warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen.'

Marshall McLuhan

'Every major social rupture has been preceded by an essential mutation in the codes of music, in its mode of audition, and in its economy.'

Jacques Attali

The Background

Endings—beginnings; degeneration—regeneration; a new century—new paths. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the arts underwent unprecedented upheavals breaking from the sedimented foundations established over the last centuries: representation in the visual arts that had dominated since the Renaissance and functional tonality in music that regulated musical practice since the 17th century. The solo piano works on this program—all written within a nine-year period during this tumultuous and transitional period—represent some of the most influential works of the piano literature, which, in hindsight and each in its own way, anticipated the European crisis of the following decade. Debussy, Schoenberg, Scriabin, Janacek, and Berg each responded to the loosening and dissolution of tonality with radically innovative music that shaped new musical 'languages' at a time of great social, political, and cultural shifts in Europe.

By 1900, Europe had experienced nearly three-decades of internal stability with war being absent since the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. This was a period of unparalleled economic boom: Europe had exported its violence to its colonies and imported the wealth and resources reaped from its colonial domination. The stability and prosperity of the period nurtured scientific and technical advancement. Industrialization flourished; communication and transportation infrastructure extended across the planet. A certain sense of optimism prevailed at the turn of the century. Yet, for more progressive thinkers and artists, the veneer of *La belle époque* and its bourgeois value system was predictable and repressive; great tensions bubbled underneath. The institutions of patronage that dominated the arts in previous eras had withered thus opening the possibility of new artistic freedom and the cultivation of extreme individualism, which eventually turned its energies toward exposing the disillusioned underbelly of this complacency.

The foundations and assumptions providing the framework for centuries of development and knowledge were crumbling. Einstein published his theory of relativity, which suggested that the physical world is not as ordered and predictable as we had thought, in 1905. At the same time,

Sigmund Freud was developing his psychoanalytic theories of the human psyche—theories that rocked the prevailing assumptions of human nature to its core. In the visual arts, Kandinsky was fathering purely abstract art, and Picasso and Braque were developing Cubism, both of which brought the realist tradition to a close. In literature, Musil was portraying the unraveling of the old social order, and Proust's work was undermining temporal and spatial notions through the portrayal of inner experiences, memory, and reflection.

Mirroring closely the ruptures and revolutions in the other arts, the end of tonality can be seen as yet another symptom of a wider European project of creative destruction, i.e. destroying the basis of the old way of structuring life in order to create the foundations for the new. The musical culture of that first decade experienced this collapse of traditional tonality, which eradicated the relative agreement that was in place since the 17th century as to the basic technical foundations of music. Of course, this was the end result of a long process; it could be argued that tonality harbored the seeds of its own destruction from its very beginning. And, one could say that the entire 19th century, particularly with Romanticism, was a larger process by which the progressive weakening and loosening of functional tonality unfolded.

Tonality is being used in its broadest sense. It is not simply a system in which pitches are organized in such a way that each work has a center in relation to which everything else acquires meaning and towards which resolution is attained but refers also to the structures and practices developed in conjunction with tonality and its clearly defined goal-oriented motion. What is common to all musical forms developed in conjunction with tonality is a hierarchical system in which the whole is composed of shorter musical parts, which balance one another in a complex network of delayed and fulfilled expectations. The evolution of the tonal system, by the end of the eighteenth century, had achieved something of a 'universal language' throughout Europe—universality being of paramount importance to the Classical era and to Enlightenment thought.

In the nineteenth century, however, the main currents of Romanticism undermined this 'universal language' with a turn towards more personal, individualized modes of expression and intensity. The use of dissonance and chromaticism was exploited and eventually was stressed to the point at which the balance tipped away from tonal stability towards instability and ambiguity.

Several significant factors inherited from Romanticism, beyond the specific technical modifications, were in play within musical culture at the dawn of the twentieth century. These factors aided the opening of extraordinary freedom and a seemingly limitless range of compositional possibilities. The centrality of 'program music' contributed to the breakup of tonality by emphasizing the dramatic, descriptive, and coloristic that could not necessarily be explained according to purely musical terms and that, in turn, questioned the view of music as abstract and absolute. The rise of nationalism produced a situation in which composers in countries on the edges of Europe enriched music by drawing on the modal relationships, which were quite foreign to the prevailing tonal thinking, and vernacular found in the folk and ethnic music of their homelands. Independent from the largely Germanic tradition, this music also called into question the basic organizational principles of tonality. The third major factor contributing to the breakup of musical form was the increasing 'autonomy' of the musical work. Gradually, music became separated from the larger cultural and social framework as the old systems of patronage (the church and the court) withdrew. Artists were no longer subservient to higher authorities and were free to explore the new without having to appeal to the conventional expectations of audiences. Above all, it was the Romantic notion of the artist as cultural hero and as an individual freely creating according to his own conscience that helped shape the modern impulse towards the unique and the original.

At the turn of the century, the composers on this program (and many others not represented here) were faced with a situation in which the old propositions ceased to function as the dominant basis out of which music was created. The assumptions of tonality were no longer valid and necessary. A certain 'spirit of the new' defined the age. As the last breaths of representation and tonality were exhaled—what had been the shared, common foundations for European culture—artists sought to create new artistic modes to fill this vacuum, to experiment, and to explore new territory strewn with the shards and

fragments left from the shattering of traditional foundations, a process the world would experience in the next decade with WWI. Artists are indeed ‘the antennae of the race.’

The works of each of these composers on this program forge radically distinct paths (or, perhaps, distinctly radical paths) through and out of this situation and have been of transitional importance to each composer’s later work, which, in turn, reverberated throughout the entire twentieth century.

The Foreground

Sound Canvases—1909-1913

Claude Debussy’s musical explorations of how the mind perceives, processes, and remembers stand as singular achievements in Western art, and his insistence on sound itself—his conception of pure timbre and shimmering sound—as the dominant element of his music set the course for the century of music that followed. Debussy liberated harmony from outworn rules and functions, creating works that grew out of his diverse musical material rather than from ideas stuffed into preconceived forms. His works for piano solo reconceived the art of piano playing setting new technical, sonic, and emotional demands on pianism. Raising tone color to paramount importance, Debussy was interested in the sounds lingering after the piano hammers hit the strings.

Debussy’s title *Preludes*—composed as two sets of twelve miniatures each—placed them in the grand tradition of keyboard music leading back to Bach and Chopin, yet his two books of *Preludes* follow an intricate programmatic design rather than circling through each key. *Book I* was composed in late 1909 and early 1910, and *Book II* was published in 1913 at a time when Europe had entered a treacherous state, and the disease that was to kill Debussy in 1918 had taken hold during the three years separating the publication of each set. As something of a signature, Debussy gave the titles at the end of each prelude suggesting that, irrespective of the abundant programmatic references throughout the *Preludes*, each miniature is first and foremost music.

Anacapri in *Les collines d’Anacapri (The Hills of Anacapri)* is the name of one of the two small towns on the island of Capri in the Bay of Naples, which, since antiquity, was an exquisite resort destination for those with means. ‘Voiles’ in French means both ‘sails’ and ‘veils’. The prelude is a study in stasis reminiscent of Whistler’s late miniature seascapes. *Brouillards (Mists)* and *Feuilles mortes (Dead Leaves)* were always conceived as the opening pair of *Book II*. Their evocation of characteristically Debussyan landscapes whose haunting ambiguity activates the imagination in unexpected ways sets the course for the entire set. *La Puerta del Vino (The Gate of Wine)* was supposedly inspired by a postcard sent to Debussy by Manuel de Falla showing one of the gates to the Alhambra palace in Grenada, where gypsies assemble. Debussy’s instruction at the beginning of the work reads: ‘with sudden contrasts of extreme violence and passionate tenderness’. As music about music, *La Puerta* is not a journey to Spain so much as it is an imaginative harnessing of the feeling and violence of flamenco.

Beautiful Mountain—1911

Of all the composers on this program, Schoenberg’s music grows most directly out of the German Romantic tradition and was a deliberate extension of it, even though he frequently denounced the excesses of the Romantic period and polemically set out to find new means of expression. During the first decade of the 20th century, Schoenberg’s art developed from his darkly Romantic *Verklärte Nacht* of 1899 through his expressionist works, his development of his theoretical *Harmonielehre*, and his early ‘freely atonal’ compositions, which prepared the soil for the full implementation of his revolutionary twelve-tone system that entirely replaced tonal thinking.

In the winter of 1911, after having composed large, dense works such as *Pelleas und Melisande* and at a time when he was orchestrating his massive *Gurrelieder*, Schoenberg decided to take the day ‘off’ and to compose five miniature piano pieces. The first five pieces of Opus 19 were composed in a single day: February 11, 1911. The concluding piece was written June 17, 1911 as the grieving Schoenberg mourned the death of Gustav Mahler several weeks before.

Each of these pieces is a musical aphorism that can be understood as a longer composition condensed into a miniature—a compositional approach profoundly influencing Schoenberg's student Anton Webern. Schoenberg felt that such brevity and compactness was a necessary compositional method to counteract the diminishing force of tonality. Opus 19 is entirely symptomatic of the freely atonal works Schoenberg and his pupils were developing as a prelude to the serial works of the 1920s.

The Messiah—1903

The Russian Scriabin is arguably the most idiosyncratic and controversial figures in the musical firmament. Fashioning his own system of mysticism—under the influence of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy—in which he saw himself and his music in a Messianic perspective, Scriabin was, not surprisingly, isolated from Russian music. He created music verging on the atonal independently of the revolution brought forth by the Second Viennese School. A synesthete as well, Scriabin saw colors as tonalities and chordal complexes. Although following entirely different paths, Scriabin and Debussy share this central concern of fusing the visual and the aural. Scriabin was internationally renowned as a concert pianist, thus the centrality of his ten piano sonatas within his body of work and the notorious difficulties with which he challenged interpreters of his music.

His fourth sonata was written in 1903 after Scriabin left his conservatory position and occupies an important transitional position within the compositional history of the ten sonatas. This sonata foreshadows his explorations of his late period and leads into *The Poem of Ecstasy* (his fifth sonata), which proves to be a turning point toward atonality. Opus 30 is a two movement work in which the first movement leads directly into the second and in which the opening motive is restated in the ecstatic coda, described by Scriabin as 'the striving upward toward the ideal creative power.' Striving for a transformative musical as well as philosophical experience, Scriabin wrote a poem to accompany the fourth sonata describing the contemplation of a distant star, the journey towards it, and the final, fiery plunge into it, and the music certainly mirrors this journey into the light.

Moravian Nostalgia—1900-1912

Breaking from the Germanic in order to establish their independent Czech musical tradition, the visionary nationalists Smetana, Dvorak, and Janacek shaped the next century of Czech music. The Moravian Janacek is celebrated as 'one of the most creative and lastingly original operatic forces of the twentieth century.' His pioneering theory of 'speech-melody', made possible by his 'ethno-musicological' research, in which he shaped his musical phrases based on the rhythms and contours of his native tongue, allowed him to transcend Romanticism with an endlessly inventive and ruggedly non-conformist conception. In addition to his operas and his collection of speech melodies, Janacek left several compositions for piano solo, which do not follow the virtuosic demands of pianism set forth by Chopin and Liszt. Rather, Janacek's poetic piano music reflects his highly personal and intimate inner life.

The autobiographical *On an Overgrown Path* recalls Janacek's childhood spent in the forests and mountains around the Northern Moravian village Hukvaldy. The cycle of fifteen miniatures organized in two volumes—the first pieces were intended for the harmonium—were composed between 1900 and 1912. Adding a tragic tinge to these works of intimate nostalgia, Janacek, during this period, was devastated by the death of his twenty-one year old daughter Olga after protracted suffering and illness. These 'little compositions' constitute something of a private musical diary of Janacek's memories, reflections, experiences, emotions, images that he kept while working on *Osud* and *Jenufa*—two large, public works. About these works, Janacek wrote that, 'there is more distress than there are words to tell it, they are above all things the most dear to me.'

Der Zauberberg—1908

Alban Berg's Piano Sonata Opus 1 may very well be the most formidable initial works of any composer in the history of music. Before beginning his studies with Arnold Schoenberg in 1904, Berg had composed dozens of songs for which he had a close affinity. Under Schoenberg's tutelage, Berg turned towards instrumental composition and undertook a sonata project that entailed exercises in

writing within sonata form. There were five preliminary one-movement sonatas—none of which were fully completed—preceding Opus 1, which was completed in 1908 and published in 1910.

Certainly in the piano sonata, Berg is working within the late-Romantic world, yet he places the sonata in a new idiom in which Schoenberg's principle of 'developing variation' is fully employed to generate structural units in a constant state of transformation. The philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, who studied composition with Berg and who referred to his teacher as 'the master of the smallest link', argued that the basic structure of Berg's music is not 'tension/resolution' but 'construction/deconstruction'. About the piano sonata, Adorno writes: 'The Sonata's formal concept might be summed up as follows: within the smallest possible space an expansive profusion of thematic characters is derived from a minimum of motivic material; at the same time, the work is strictly unified in such a way that, despite its brevity, the abundance of shapes does not become confusing.'

Sound Canvases again—1904

L'isle joyeuse (*Joyful Island*) was published in 1904 and was inspired by Rococo painter Antoine Watteau's painting *L'embarquement pour Cythere* and was formally modeled on Chopin's third *Ballade*. Cythera is the birthplace of the goddess of love Aphrodite, and Watteau's painting depicts lovers leisurely paying homage to the statue of the goddess in a lush landscape in what was the first work in the genre of the *fete galante* that Watteau helped to establish. In the summer of 1904, Debussy escaped to the island of Jersey with his lover Emma Bardac. Certainly, there is a central autobiographical connection between Debussy's time with Emma, Watteau's painting, and *L'isle joyeuse*, and Debussy was striving to convey the feelings and emotions associated with these experiences. Beyond its virtuosity and personal intimacy, however, this work attempts to capture 'air, lightness, and grace'—a painting in sound.



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