



ENCORES/NOTES



Simon Trpceski, March 9, 2003

Notes on the Program

Valses nobles et sentimentales

MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, Basses-Pyrennes

Died December 28, 1937, Paris

In 1911, Ravel took time off from his work on the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* to compose a very different sort of music, a set of eight waltzes for piano, which he called *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The inspiration for these dances may at first seem an unlikely one for so French a composer, for Ravel wrote these waltzes as an act of homage to Franz Schubert. Schubert wrote an enormous amount of dance music for piano: waltzes, laendler, minuets, German dances, and so on. This music rarely appears on recital programs, but all piano students are familiar with it, and as a young man Ravel fell deeply in love with it. Among Schubert's dances for piano are a set of *Valses sentimentales* composed in 1823 and a set of *Valses nobles*, from three years later, and these were the inspiration for Ravel's own set of waltzes for piano: his title, he said, "sufficiently indicates my intention of writing a cycle of waltzes after the example of Schubert." A decade later, Ravel would return to the Viennese waltz in his famous *La Valse*, but then his evocation of Vienna-colored by the experience of the First World War-would be dark; here he sets out simply to evoke the gracious world of Vienna a century earlier.

The first performance of the orchestral version of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was given by Louis Aubert in Paris on May 9, 1911, under very unusual circumstances. The Societé Musicale Indépendente, which sponsored the concert, had decided that audiences-and critics-were prejudiced against certain composers and kinds of music. To circumvent these prejudices, all works on the program were performed without the composers' names announced. While this may seem a good idea, it proved an uncomfortable experience for Ravel, who sat stoically while his friends seated around him jeered the *Valses*. The audience's attempt to guess the composer of this music may have been even more disconcerting to Ravel: guesses included not only Zoltan Kodaly and Erik Satie, but also Mozart, Chopin, Gounod, and even Wagner. The music, however, proved attractive enough that Ravel was encouraged to orchestrate it the following year as a ballet; titled *Adelaide, ou le langage des fleurs*, the ballet told of Adelaide, her two suitors, and the flowers that symbolize their relationships. The orchestral version was premiered by Pierre Monteux in 1914.

These eight brief waltzes require little introduction. By turns languid, sparkling, lilting, vivacious, they show a rhythmic sophistication and suppleness (as well as a harmonic language), far beyond Schubert, but they also capture much of the fun and spirit of Schubert's waltzes. The graceful seventh waltz, which Ravel called the "most characteristic" of the set, may be familiar to audiences in Jascha Heifetz's transcription for violin and piano—he often used it as an encore piece.

Ravel himself may best get at the flavor of this music in a light-hearted quotation from the novelist Henri de Régnier that he set at the top of the published score: "The delightful and always novel pleasure of a useless occupation."

Two Scherzos

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Born February 22, 1810, Żelazowska Wola

Died October 17, 1849, Paris

Though the term had been used earlier, it was Haydn who conceived of the scherzo in its modern sense. In 1781, he called the third movement of some of his string quartets "scherzos"—what had been the old minuet-and-trio movement now became a scherzo (and trio), and Haydn's choice of the name indicated that he wanted more speed and liveliness. Beethoven took this evolution one step further: his scherzos, usually built on very short rhythmic units, explode with violent energy and with enough comic touches to remind us that scherzo is the Italian word for joke.

In his four scherzos, Chopin does not copy the forms of Haydn or Beethoven exactly, but adapts the general shape of the classical-period scherzo for his own purposes. He keeps the quick tempo, the 3/4 meter, and (usually) the A-B-A form of the earlier scherzo, but makes no attempt at humor—the emphasis in this music is on brilliant, exciting music for the piano. The general form of the Chopin scherzo is an opening section based on contrasted themes, followed by a middle section (Chopin does not call this a trio) in a different key and character; the scherzo concludes with the return of the opening material, now slightly abridged.

Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp Minor, Opus 39

Chopin's third scherzo, composed in 1839, has the most unusual structure—it lacks the clearly-defined A-B-A form of the others and in some ways approaches traditional sonata-form structure. The beginning, marked *Presto con fuoco*, presents tentative bits of sound, and out of these the true first theme bursts to life. Marked *Risoluto*, this theme is in powerful, plunging octaves, and in fact much of the writing throughout this scherzo is in octaves. The second theme is a quiet chorale tune, but what makes it distinctive is Chopin's elaboration of the end of each phrase: he decorates the end of each line of the chorale with a falling arpeggio, almost silvery in its quietly sparkling color—the combination of the sober chorale tune and its sensual decoration is striking. These themes alternate until the close, where powerful octave chords drive the scherzo to its cadence.

Scherzo No. 4 in E Major, Opus 54

Chopin's final scherzo, composed in 1842, is suffused with a spirit more relaxed than one generally associates with the scherzo—it is full of sunny, almost rhapsodic music. It is also his longest, and the entire scherzo is to some extent unified around the first five notes, which will reappear throughout in a variety of guises. Particularly striking is the trio in C-sharp minor, in which a flowing melody moves along easily over a rocking accompaniment. The return of the opening material is extended, and the final pages are brilliant. .

Suite from *The Nutcracker*

PETER ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk
Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

Early in 1891, the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg approached Tchaikovsky with a commission for a new ballet. They caught him at a bad moment. At age 50, Tchaikovsky was assailed by worries that he had written himself out as a composer, and-to make matters worse-they proposed a story-line that the composer found unappealing: they wanted to create a ballet on the old E.T.A. Hoffmann tale *Nussknacker und Mausekönig*, but in a version that had been retold by Alexandre Dumas as *Histoire d'un casse-noisette* and then furthered modified by the choreographer Marius Petipa. This sort of fairy-tale full of imaginary creatures set in a confectionary dream-world of childhood fantasies left Tchaikovsky cold, but he accepted the commission and grudgingly began work.

Then things got worse. He had to interrupt work on the score to go on tour in America (where he would conduct at the festivities marking the opening of Carnegie Hall), and just as he was leaving his sister Alexandra died. The agonized Tchaikovsky considered abandoning the tour but went ahead (it was a huge success), and then returned to Russia in May and tried to resume work on the ballet. He hated it, and-probably more to the point-he hated the feeling that he had written himself out as a composer. To his brother, he wrote grimly: "The ballet is infinitely worse than *The Sleeping Beauty*-so much is certain." The score was complete in the spring of 1892, and *The Nutcracker* was produced in the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg that December, only eleven months before the composer's death at 53. At first, it had only a modest success, but then a strange thing happened-that success grew so steadily that in the months before his death Tchaikovsky had to reassess what he had created: "It is curious that all the time I was writing the ballet I thought it was rather poor, and that when I began my opera [*Iolanthe*] I would really do my best. But now it seems to me that the ballet is good, and the opera is mediocre."

Tchaikovsky's premonition was quite correct: no one is interested in *Iolanthe* today, but the score for *The Nutcracker* contains some of the best-loved music ever written. Tchaikovsky was essentially a dramatic composer, and-however much he may have claimed to dislike this tale of magic mice, a nutcracker that turns into a prince, and vistas made up of jam and candy-he could still respond to the situations and actions of the ballet. And Tchaikovsky had a real melodic gift: he could create attractive-and instantly recognizable-tunes for characters or scenes in the ballet, and one need only think of how familiar the *Waltz of the Flowers* or *Trepak* have become (and the tunes of *Nutcracker* were famous long before Walt Disney's *Fantasia* burned them into the public consciousness).

Tchaikovsky may have suspected-in the months before his premature death-that *The Nutcracker* would prove a success, but he could have had no idea just how popular it has become over the last century: the current catalog lists nearly forty recordings of the familiar *Suite* of excerpts from the ballet. This evening's performance offers a suite of movements from *The Nutcracker*, arranged for piano by the Russian pianist-conductor Mikhail Pletnev.

Three Movements from *Petrushka* IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum
Died April 6, 1971, New York City

In the early 1920s, Igor Stravinsky-one of the greatest orchestrators in history and creator of some of the finest music ever written for orchestra-began to write for solo piano. There were several reasons for this. In the aftermath of World War I, Stravinsky discovered that orchestras that could play huge and complex scores were rare (and expensive). And in any case Stravinsky did not

wish to go on repeating himself by writing opulent ballets. But the real factor that attracted Stravinsky to the piano was that he was a pianist and so could supplement his uncertain income as a composer by appearing before the public as both creator and performer; this was especially important during the uncertain economic situation following the war.

While not a virtuoso pianist, Stravinsky was a capable one, and over the next few years came a series of works for piano that Stravinsky introduced and then played on tour. The impetus for all this piano music may well have come from Artur Rubinstein, who asked the composer to prepare a version of the ballet *Petrushka* for solo piano, which Stravinsky did during the summer of 1921. Rubinstein paid Stravinsky what the composer called "the generous sum of 5,000 francs" for this music, but Stravinsky made clear that his aim was not to cash in on the popularity of the ballet: "My intention was to give virtuoso pianists a piece of a certain breadth that would permit them to enhance their modern repertory and demonstrate a brilliant technique." Stravinsky stressed that this was not a transcription for piano, nor was he trying to make the piano sound like an orchestra; rather, he was re-writing orchestral music specifically as piano music.

The ballet *Petrushka*, with its haunting story of a pathetic puppet brought to life during a Russian fair, has become so popular that it easy to forget that this music had its beginning as a sort of piano concerto. Stravinsky said: "I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggi." That puppet became *Petrushka*, "the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries," as the story of the ballet took shape, but the piano itself receded into the background of the ballet; perhaps it was only natural that Stravinsky should remember the ballet's origins when Rubinstein made his request for a piano version.

Stravinsky drew the piano score from three of the ballet's four tableaux. The opening movement, *Russian Dance*, comes from the end of the first tableau: the aged magician has just touched his three puppets-Petrushka, the Ballerina, and the Moor-with his wand, and now the three leap to life and dance joyfully. Much of this music was given to the piano in the original ballet score, and here this dance makes a brilliant opening movement. The second movement, *In Petrushka's Cell*, is the ballet's second tableau, which introduces the hapless *Petrushka* trapped in his room and railing against fate and shows the entrance of the ballerina. The third movement, *The Shrove-Tide Fair*, incorporates most of the music from the ballet's final tableau, with its genre pictures of a St. Petersburg square at carnival time: various dances, the entrance of a peasant and his bear, gypsies, and so on. Here, however, Stravinsky excises the end of the ballet (where *Petrushka* is murdered and the tale ends enigmatically) and replaces it with the more abrupt ending that he wrote for concert performances of the ballet suite.

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