PROGRAM

Prelude et danse, op. 24

Selections from Suite Bergamasque (publ. 1905), Preludes (Livre I), and L’Isle Joyeuse

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, S. 514 (1859)

A Wild Innocence

Sonata No. 2 in D Minor, op. 14 (1914)
1. Allegro, ma non troppo – Piu mosso – Tempo primo
2. Scherzo. Allegro marcato
3. Andante
4. Vivace – Moderato – Vivace

Jacques Hétu (1938-2010)
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
David L. McIntyre (b. 1950)
Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

“One of Canada’s 30 hot classical musicians under 30 for 2020..”
– CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION MUSIC

NATIONALITY: Canadian
HOME: Montreal

NOTEWORTHY: Not only having been named one of Canada’s 30 hot classical musicians under 30, this Quebec-born pianist has also received the Governor General of Canada’s Academic Medal and a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts for music projects in Europe.

TELL HOW YOU BECAME INTERESTED IN THE PIANO.
I am the youngest of a family of eight children. All my siblings played music before me (mostly classical), which is why I got interested in learning it as well. I tried violin for a couple of months but I thought it was too hard! Besides, I realized pretty quickly that the piano was the best instrument for me to do everything I wanted to do. I also liked to be on a stage, which felt like the best way for me to express myself to others.
The seemingly limitless availability of recordings of all the music that any of us can think of, and a great deal beyond that, makes me have just a touch of chagrin that I don’t know more about Canadian music. And, by that, I mean Canadian composers and performers and the overall robust musical life in our neighbor just to the north, all of which I’ve been learning more about just in recent days. Why don’t we hear Canadian music more often?

Happily, in today’s recital, the astonishing young Quebecois pianist Jean-Luc Therrien will reveal a couple of treasures from that trove that, perhaps, will prod me to study with it increasing devotion. There is a lot of wonderful musical life in Canada, enough, in fact, to make me a little bit jealous, but only in a good way.

Always in preparation for writing notes about a program, I start by listening to all the pieces before researching the musicological stuff. It’s so much more fun just to get the sonorous impression first and then learn circumstances and influences, sometimes whacky, about the composers and the compositional process.

Thus, an overwhelming sense of dance pervaded my first and subsequent reactions to Jean-Luc’s brilliant and carefully chosen program for today. This program is quite evocative and, if you have any bent at all toward visual imaginings in reaction to music, as I constantly do, you might well wind up with quite a visual feast on top of the aural one.

The spirit of dance, you see, is quite present throughout this recital. May I share in comments below what comes to mind hearing these pieces? I hope that you, too, will be carried away by this music, so full of mood and contrast and impetus.

HÉTU

That strong dance influence is before us right from the beginning of this program. One might first wonder about the unusually dark first few notes of Hétu’s Prelude, but stay with it. Happily, in today’s recital, the astonishing young Quebecois pianist Jean-Luc-Therrien will reveal a couple of treasures from that trove that, perhaps, will prod me to study with it increasing devotion. There is a lot of wonderful musical life in Canada, enough, in fact, to make me a little bit jealous, but only in a good way.

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DEBUSSY

Debussy didn’t like being called an impressionist. Rather, he always wanted to be known as a musicien francais. That is, throughout his whole life as a composer and critic, he remained dedicated to a uniquely French musical language, free of the Germanic influences he thought to have dominated French composers since the late 18th century. He hoped to revive long-ago traditions of ancient French music, in spirit, if not in form and technique. About that approach, he said, “French music is all clearness, elegance; simple, natural declamation. The aim of French music is, before all, to please. The musical genius of France may be described as a fantasy of the senses.”

The times in which Debussy lived and worked, of course, were marked by astonishing changes in the ways music was composed. It must be noted, of course, that there were quite divergent styles among composers of the German-Austrian camp and the meteoric rise of pianism (ever more compelling virtuoso playing, much of it only for effect; more and more pianos in homes; pianists as what we now call “rock stars”) created opportunities for composers to exploit possibilities on the piano. Arguably, though, Debussy certainly ought to be considered a principal source of what caused a radical turnover in musical art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That he did so while writing unabashedly beautiful music is the really dumbfounding bit.

In the several movements assembled here from among several Debussy collections, we hear allusions to ancient dances, particularly in the Suite Bergamasque, but, most of all, we might catch his devotion to an aesthetic inspired by his intense admiration for another French composer several generations before him, Rameau. “Rameau’s major contribution to music was that he knew how to find ‘sensibility’ within harmony; and that he succeeded in capturing effects of color and certain nuances that, before his time, musicians had not clearly understood.” Could not exactly the same thing be said about Debussy himself?

There is too much to be said about influences and contradictions and so on in Debussy – the influence of Verlaine and other poets, his initial admiration for Wagner, but later rejection, his reverence for Bach and Mozart, his deep knowledge of literature and visual art, his complicated personal life – but none of that helps one to enter more sensually into listening, clearly what he would have wanted most from any audience member. Let us take a cue from his own remark about his Preludes:

“The sound of the sea, the curve of the horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird enregister complex impressions within us. Then suddenly, without any deliberate consent on our part, one of those memories issues forth to express itself in the language of music.” Ultimately, this is music that radiates with his ability to evoke moods, memories, and images that are both too specific and too vague to be described merely in words.
Finally, L’Isle Joyeuse is a work inspired not, as one might imagine, by a filmy, veiled “impressionist” painting or other source, but indeed by a canvas of a similar name from the great Rococo master Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), L’Embarquement pour Cythere, to be found in the Louvre. Its depiction of revelers departing from the island of Cythera, the traditional birthplace of Venus, seems to have a precise musical reflection from Debussy in its chaotic joy and rapture.

**LISZT**

Mephisto, of course, is short for Mephistopheles, the demon in the ancient tale of selling one’s soul to the devil, a story most of us will think of related to the “Faust Legend,” but that was actually taken by Liszt from a telling of the story by Nikolas Lenau. That cautionary yarn provoked Liszt to write four waltzes, the first of which we will hear today. In the original score for these descriptive pieces, Liszt published this program note from Lenau:

“There is a wedding feast in progress in the village inn, with music, dancing, carousing. Mephistopheles and Faust pass by, and Mephistopheles induces Faust to enter to take part in the festivities. Mephistopheles snatches the fiddle from the hands of a lethargic fiddler and draws from it indescribably seductive and intoxicating strains. The amorous Faust whirs about with a full-blooded village beauty in a wild dance; they waltz in mad abandon out of the room, into the open, away into the woods. The sounds of the fiddle grow softer and softer, and the nightingale warbles his love-laden song.”

All four Mephisto waltzes are devilishly difficult (sorry . . . ), the first probably most of all. For its evident story telling and uberc-gewillikers fireworks in the writing, it has remained a favorite for piano recitals ever since its debut.

The waltzes are from Liszt’s later years when he had ended his extensive performing tours to concentrate on composition. One can hear in them his recollections of dramatic life experiences and, I think, more than a little encouragement of the 19th-century fascination with the virtuoso as someone demonic himself. Oh, how his crowds used to swoon! Some still do.

**McINTYRE**

The dance continues through this program with the inclusion of the intriguing and beguiling A Wild Innocence of yet another Canadian composer about whom we all should learn more, David McIntyre. From the opening notes, spriteliness without silliness reigns, and the visceral, kinetic quality that informs so much of his music comes right through. Indeed, he has collaborated often with dancers and choreographers to produce new performance works to great acclaim.

Here are his own words about the title: “It takes fearlessness to create or perform. My creative process easily bogs down unless I find a way to free it from my curious and controlling mind. That’s what takes the fearlessness. I suppose really it’s finding the balance between control and freedom, finding that wild innocence that liberates both the creator or performer. Introspection is set aside, or perhaps absorbed into the subconscious to play its role more subtly. I find great joy the moment I decide to jump over the cliff, abandoning myself to the discovery in freefall. It frees me psychologically but also physically. This is important to my approach because I see the performer as a dancer, whose choreography or embodiment of the work is ultimately essential to a convincing performance.”

“I think the job of a competition piece is to stimulate on several levels - technical, musical and emotional. It should make room for the performer to display a world of touches, from warm to brilliant; various qualities of energy, from light to driving; and a broad emotional palette. The challenge is to do this in a 5-minute piece.

“The title came to me in the middle of the night and seemed at first bizarre. Now it feels like a perfect description both of how I like to compose and the state of mind of the eager young performer.”

**PROKOFIEV**

The piano sonatas of Prokofiev are nothing new to PPI’s audience, as we have been fortunate to have most, if not all, of them played in our main series in recent years. Those who love Prokofiev’s music — could you bear to talk with anyone who didn’t?! — know that musicologists clump the nine sonatas into various characteristic files, 5, 6, & 7 being the “War Sonatas,” for instance. The second, happily, comes from fairly early in his life, from a time when he had just achieved great acclaim for his first Piano Concerto, written before graduation from conservatory, and finished when on a mountain-hiking and reading retreat with his mother in the Caucasian resort town of Kislovodsk.

“Every morning I go to the local drugstore to work,” he recorded at the time. “There is a good upright piano there, the room is comfortable, no one bothers me, and it doesn’t smell of medicine.”

The sonata is marked by a huge, celebratory jumble of styles. Here he really pushes the limits of contrasts in the piece, perhaps more than in any of the other sonatas. The emotional range is tremendous, from lyricism that would make a Romantic jealous to delightful camping up of cabaret music and much in between. So many ideas are brought forth that there is less “development” than one usually finds in a sonata. Rather, Prokofiev relied upon a shimmering variety of textures, with ideas piled upon one another, and some surprising, delightful dissonances to propel his ideas. Here we hear what ultimately we have come to expect from and love in Prokofiev, an unrestrained embrace of satire and parody, perhaps even a few things grotesque.

“The cardinal virtue (or, if you like, vice) of my life has always been the search for originality. I hate imitation. I hate hackneyed methods. I do not want to wear anyone else’s mask. I want always to be myself.”

We must not mistake, though, that somehow all this described gaiety and fierce individuality and so on somehow indicates that the Second Sonata does not fulfill the mission that all sonatas must undertake, namely to plumb depths and remote corners of the human experience and turn them somehow into profound and touching music. Here, in fact, I believe, he triumphs. It may just be that Prokofiev takes the ideas of real things, but cuts them up and juxtaposes them in chromatic alterations and odd phrases, just as his contemporary visual artists, most notably Picasso, did in early cubism. Isn’t this brief, powerful, and pungent music somehow exceedingly appropriate for our time right now, with so much distortion and unrest? Doesn’t this music somehow strangely soothe and encourage? I hope so for you.
Named one of Canada’s 30 hot classical musicians under 30 for 2020 by CBC Music, Quebec born pianist Jean-Luc Therrien was also recently selected for The Rebanks Family Fellowship and International Performance Residency Program at The Glenn Gould School in Toronto. In the later years, he toured across Quebec and the Maritimes as part of the Jeunesses Musicales Canada’s Emerging Artists Concerts series. Later in 2016, he also made his orchestral debut in Japan with the Sendai Philharmonic Orchestra, performing Beethoven’s fourth piano concerto. In the upcoming months he will be giving recitals as part of the Portland Piano International’s Rising Stars series (USA) as well as a concert tour in the Maritimes. In 2022 he will also be performing as soloist with the Royal Conservatory Orchestra in Toronto.

As a chamber musician, Jean-Luc has collaborated with several ensembles and musicians including the Quatuor Claudel-Canimex, Mai Tategami and Zlatomir Fung. In 2017, he formed the Duo J², with French violinist Jean-Samuel Bez, with whom he toured in Eastern Canada and Europe. Together, they also won the Chamber Music Grand Prize at the Luigi Zanuccoli International Competition in Italy. After recording their first album in 2021, they will be touring around Europe again in March 2022.

Over the years, Jean-Luc has also stood out in many competitions such as the Orford Music Award Contest, the Glenn Gould School Concerto Competition (winner), the Mauro Paolo Monopoli Prize International Piano Competition in Italy (3rd prize and audience prize) and the CMC Stepping Stone (3rd prize), as well as being selected for the prestigious Honens International Piano Competition which will be held in 2022. He was also awarded several prizes like the Wilfrid-Pelletier Scholarship, the Governor General of Canada’s Academic Medal and a grant from the Canadian Council for the Arts for pursuing musical projects in Europe.

Jean-Luc is a graduate of the Conservatoire de Musique de Trois-Rivières (Québec), the University Mozarteum Salzburg (Austria), the University of Toronto and the Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto). His main professors have included Denise Trudel, Cordelia Höfer-Teutsch, George Kern and Marietta Orlow. He has also played in many masterclasses with renowned pianists such as Leon Fleisher, András Schiff, Jacques Rouvier or Robert McDonald.