Chopin – Before and Beyond
Thursday, 31 October 2019, 7.30pm
Conservatory Concert Hall

Programme

BACH Fugue in F minor, BWV 857
CHOPIN Nouvelle Etude No. 1 in F minor
  Etude in F minor, Op. 25 No. 2
GRIEG Study (Hommage a Chopin) Op. 73 No. 5
LISZT Etude de concert No.2 “La leggierrezza”

FIELD Nocturne No. 9 in E-flat major
CHOPIN Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 9 No. 2
FAURE Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 36

CHOPIN Waltz in F minor, Op. 70 No. 2
TCHAIKOVSKY Valse Sentimentale, Op. 51 No. 6
SKRYABIN Waltz in F minor, Op. 1
DEBUSSY Valse Romantique
GODOWSKY Study after Chopin No. 27 “Waltz” (Op. 25 No. 2)

- Intermission –

MENDELSSOHN Venetian Gondola Song, Op. 30 No. 6
CHOPIN Barcarolle, Op. 60
LISZT Gondoliera from Venezia e Napoli

CHOPIN Mazurka in C# minor, Op. 30 No. 4
TCHAIKOVSKY Un poco di Chopin, Op. 72 No.15
SKRYABIN Mazurka in C# minor, Op. 3 No. 6
SZYMANOWSKI Mazurka, Op. 50 No. 3
GODOWSKY Study after Chopin No. 34 “Mazurka” (Op. 25 No. 5)
Nobody knows why Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750) wrote Das Wohltemperierte Clavier nor what keyboard instrument he had in mind when using the generic term “clavier”. At various times it has been speculated that the work was a teaching exercise aimed at familiarising players with the major and minor keys associated with all 12 chromatic notes of the keyboard, or a demonstration of a new method of keyboard tuning. Both ideas have been largely discredited by scholarship. Similarly, it was long thought that, despite being conceived some 20 years apart, the two volumes together form a single work (which in English is referred to as “The 48 Preludes and Fugues”) with a single objective; something on which, again, scholarship has cast serious doubts. The most plausible current explanation for the existence of Das Wohltemperierte Clavier seems rather more prosaic. For several months during 1717 Bach languished in prison in Weimar. Bored and with no musical instrument at his disposal, it seems he filled his time by grappling with the challenge of writing music in every tonality possible on the keyboard; in short, it was a purely intellectual exercise in the science of composing rather than the artistic results of the composition process. Once free and again in employment, Bach forgot about this exercise until, in 1722, he wrote out a fair copy in support of his application for a school teaching post in Leipzig, on which occasion he wrote on the flyleaf that it was written “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study”. What has become known as “Book 2” dates from 1742, after he had encountered the piano. This seems to have been a collection of pieces, many written earlier, and transposed into every chromatic major and minor key, with the express intention of exploiting the capabilities of this new instrument. In Bach’s time, the two collections of pieces were not in any way connected.
Whatever the origins or original purpose, in *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier* Bach effectively liberated tonality and paved the way for generations of subsequent composers to range freely over all the keys on the piano. Certainly in Bach’s time certain tonalities were associated with certain characteristics, but since the majority of keys were not used, many have used *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier* as the ultimate guide to key/character association. In 1806 Christian Schubart even
went so far as to compile a list of all keys with their associated moods, as implied by his interpretation of the pieces in Das Wohltemperierte Clavier: a dangerous move since it has taken on a life of its own, and subsequent performers have flavoured their interpretations of Bach’s works based on Schubart’s highly emotive and retrospectively applied “key colours”.

Schubart ascribes to F minor “deep depression, funereal lament, groans of misery and longing for the grave”, based on his personal reading of the Fugue in F minor, BWV857 found in the 1722 volume. All we can say about that is, Bach may have been felling all those things while he was languishing in his Weimar prison cell, but he certainly had no intention of conveying such feelings through the abstract medium of a Fugue. With this liberation of tonality, the floodgates opened, and many composers since have felt it their duty to write in all 24 major and minor keys. One such was Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) who, in addition to composing his own set of 24 Preludes in all keys, also composed two sets of 12 Etudes which missed out certain tonalities (notably D, G and B flat as well as F sharp minor and B major) and duplicated several others. F minor seems to have been a particular favourite of his, for not only was that tonality represented in both the books of Etudes, but in 1839 Chopin also produced a set of three Nouvelle Etudes the first of which is also in F minor. This shows some connection with the Bach piece through its heavy use of chromaticism, but hardly accords with Schubart’s depiction of the key’s characteristics. From the second book of Etudes, the Etude in F minor Op.25 No.2, Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) paid homage to the earlier work in his Study (Hommage à Chopin), Op.73 No.5 composed in 1905. The second of the Etudes de Concert, S244, composed by Franz Liszt (1811-1886) between 1845 and 1849 is also in F minor and seems to combine some aspects of Schubart’s poetic description of the key. With an obvious act of homage to Chopin’s Op.25 Etude. The light, flowing and nimble right hand line prompted Liszt to subtitle the piece La Leggierezza.
With a temporary shift away from F minor and into E flat major (which Schubart described simply as “the Key of Love”) we also move into the murky world of the Nocturne. The idea of a piece of music describing the atmosphere, sensations and emotions of night-time was too much of an inducement for many romantically-inclined artists, and when the Irish John Field (1782-1837) invented the piano Nocturne the flood gates were once again opened for composers to indulge in this new genre to their heart’s content. (In an interesting parallel between Bach and Field, both men worked as sales agents for notable firms of piano manufacturers – Bach for Silbermann, and Field for Clementi.) Field’s Nocturne No.9 in E flat is a typical example, with a graceful, flowing right hand line above a steady (in this case waltz-like) left hand accompaniment. The nocturnal character is presented through the work’s general atmosphere of calm and gentleness. Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) was inspired by Field to write some 21 Nocturnes of his own, including two in E flat major. The Nocturne in E flat major, Op.9 No.2 comes from his first set of Nocturnes published in Paris in 1832. It is clearly strongly influenced by Field’s own piece as it projects a delicately ornamented melody above a simple waltz-like accompaniment. Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) also gravitated towards the Nocturne in his own piano music, producing a total of 13 at various times between 1875 and 1921. The fourth of those – the Nocturne in E flat, Op.36 - was written around 1884 and, for all its immense beauty and tranquillity, was criticised by the great French pianist, Alfred Cortot, for being “too satisfied with its own languor” (a criticism that can sometimes be more justly levelled at human beings than charming pieces of piano music), but certainly supports Schubart’s description of this particular tonality.
It is generally regarded that the concept of the piano recital, as we now know it, was conceived by Liszt, and the first "Recital" to be billed as such, rather than as a concert, was given by Liszt in London’s Hanover Square rooms in June 1840. (The above caricature shows a Berlin audience responding to a Liszt recital in the mid-1840s – we must hope tonight’s audience is better behaved.) Up to that point, pianists displayed their skills in public concerts alongside orchestras – in concerto performances – or in private gatherings which took place in the drawing rooms and salons of the affluent middle-classes. In 19th century Paris a distinct Salon Culture evolved, in which women would gather in each other’s salons to enjoy feminine company, and be entertained by a pianist. Chopin was very much the darling of Paris’s Salon Culture, and almost all of his performances were given in such intimate domestic settings. Naturally, enough, he devised certain musical genres specifically to meet the taste of these salon ladies, whose other great joy was ballroom dancing. Chopin ingeniously married the two in the piano Waltz, and while the remainder of Albert Tiu’s recital returns to the Key of Depression and of Longing for the Grave (if we are to take Schubart’s description of F minor at face value), it also explores the piano Waltz as devised by Chopin and taken up by his successors.
The Waltz was unquestionably the most popular ballroom dance of the 19th century and became inseparably associated with Vienna and the glittering orchestral dances of the Strauss family. But Chopin’s approach to the Waltz was radically different. Composed at various times between 1827 and 1848, these were certainly never intended to be danced to; the English pianist John Ogden described them as “the brightest jewels in the greatest salons of the time”. Excluding three which are no longer thought to be by him, 17 Waltzes by Chopin exist, but the fact that each was written for a private domestic performance and that Chopin often presented the manuscript to his hostess as a keepsake, there is much uncertainty over quite how many Waltzes he did write (some sources suggest as many as 40). Albert Tiu opens the Waltzing segment of his recital with the Waltz No.12 in F minor, Op.70 No.2 which was composed in 1842 for a Parisian gathering comprising Marie de Krudner, Mme. Oury, Élise Gavard and Countess Esterházy, to all of whom the piece is dedicated in separate copies which Chopin gifted to them.

"Chopin in the salon of prince Anton Radziwill" by Hendrik Siemiradzki (1887)
According to one friend, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) "did not particularly like Chopin, as he found in him a certain sickliness of expression, as well as an excess of subjective sensibility". Yet in his own *Valse Sentimentale, Op.51 No.6*, composed during August and September 1882 to a commission for salon piano pieces from his publisher, he seems almost to have Chopin’s F minor Waltz as his model. He seems to have had very little enthusiasm for writing these short piano pieces, but dedicated this one to a certain Miss Emma Genton (below left), who was governess to the children of one of his friends. A Russian composer who was much more sympathetic to Chopin was Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915). He trained as a pianist and it was only a carriage accident in a Moscow street in 1886 which prompted the then 13-year-old boy to turn to composition when his injuries prevented him from playing the piano. Naturally, for a student who had been playing a lot of Chopin, his first compositions were very much influenced by Chopin, with the very first of these – *Waltz in F minor, Op.1* – almost more Chopin than Chopin himself. Nobody could ever mistake the *Valse Romantique* composed by Claude Debussy (1862-1918) as the work of Chopin. While it is in F minor, its frequent excursions into more opulent harmonic territory and its splashes of rich colour clearly belong to the final decades of the 19th century, even if they do not reveal any of the “Impressionistic” tendencies of Debussy’s mature works. He wrote it in 1890 for a 21-year-old piano student at the Paris Conservatoire, Rose Depecker (below right).

Like Chopin, Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938) had been born in Poland and emigrated permanently (while Chopin ended up in France, Godowsky went to the USA) at the age of 20. Whilst Chopin was, to a large extent, forced into exile by the Russian invasion of Poland, Godowsky chose to relocate to Chicago following a
highly successful concert tour of America undertaken while he was still in his mid-teens. In his day he was highly regarded as a pianist and particularly as a teacher of piano technique, but in 1930 he suffered partial paralysis during a recording session (recording, coincidentally, music by Chopin) and his concert career came to an abrupt end. He then concentrated on composition and produced a large number of piano pieces many of which were transcriptions or arrangements of other composers’ works, with Chopin taking centre stage in this area of his output. In 1938 Godowsky produced his 53 astonishing Studies on Chopin’s Etudes which included four different studies on the F Minor Etude we heard earlier in this recital, which is a study in Waltz form with a perpetually running left hand figure. Albert Tiu plays the second of these, in which Godowsky inverts Chopin’s original by placing the running figure in the left hand.

Leopold Godowsky at the piano

- INTERVAL -
It might be said that we are all at sea as we embark on the second half of this recital. Certainly boats and the rocking motion of water is keeping everything afloat here. When Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) visited Venice for the first time in October 1830 he arrived at night and was transported through the city on one of the iconic gondolas. Obviously this left a deep impression on him, and almost straight away set to work on the first of his *Venetianisches Gondellied*. He went on to write three piano pieces with that title, each included in his several volumes of *Songs Without Words* (he also wrote two other pieces inspired by gondolas, not included in the *Songs Without Words*). Albert Tiu casts off on the second half of his recital with the second of these *Viennese Boat Songs, Op.30 No.6* probably composed during that visit to Venice in 1830 and dedicated to a Leipzig pianist and pupil of Schumann, Henriette Voigt. When Mendelssohn included it in the second volume of his *Songs Without Words* in 1835, it carried a dedication to another young woman, Elise von Woringen.

So, with the precedent of Mendelssohn to follow, it seems that the pianistic boat-song is also associated with love. That is certainly the case with the *Barcarolle, Op.60*, by Frederic Chopin. If we were to take the words of the great Polish pianist, Carl Tausig (1841-1871) to heart, most of us would not be here now to hear Albert Tiu play this today. Tausig maintained that a performance of the work "must not be undertaken before more than two persons". James Huneker, in his biography of the composer agreed; it "should not be played in public and not the public of a large hall". Both men felt that the character of the work was too intimate, too personal, for public consumption. Certainly it is unique in Chopin's entire output in adopting the rocking character of a traditional Venetian gondolier's boating song, but it is, in effect, nothing more than an expanded Nocturne which, in Schumann's words, "leans over Germany into Italy". Composed in 1845 and dedicated to Baroness Stockhausen, wife of the Hanoverian ambassador to Paris, it comprises a rich melody singing out in parallel thirds above the continually rocking
accompaniment characteristic of any Barcarolle. Tausig saw in the duality of the two notes describing the melodic line a depiction of two people lying on a discreet gondola; “They kiss and embrace! This is evident! We have a continuous, tender dialogue”.

Franz Liszt’s semi-autobiographical volumes of Années de Pèlerinage (“Years of Travel”) naturally include a journey on a gondola, although one which passes through somewhat more turbulent waters than either Mendelssohn’s or Chopin’s. Composed in 1859 and included as a supplement to the second volume (“Italy), Venezia e Napoli opens with a section called Gondoliera which Liszt claimed was an arrangement of a Venetian folk song by a certain composer (who seems never to have existed) called Peruchini.

Liszt once described how “the latent and unknown poetry, which was only indicated in the original Polish Mazurkas, was divined, developed and brought to life by Chopin. Preserving their rhythm, he ennobled their melody, enlarged their proportions and wrought into their tissues harmonic lights and shadows, as new in themselves as were the subjects to which he adapted them”. One of the first pieces Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) wrote for piano was a Mazurka composed when he was just 10 years of age, his very last composition was also a Mazurka, and all told he composed some 64 of them. Liszt was quite right to describe Chopin as the Liberator of the Mazurka. A traditional Mazurka, originating from the area around Warsaw, is in triple time with a strong accent on the second beat. Being a Polish national dance, it attracted Chopin to the extent he wrote more Mazurkas than any other single piece. The popularity of Chopin’s Mazurkas lies in the fact that, while elements of the original dance-style are present, he uses them to express an array of emotions ranging from exultant joy to aching sadness, and it was this ability to use a simple dance form to present, musically, such a wide range of emotions, that led to other, non-Polish composers, exploring the potential of the genre. Chopin’s Mazurka No.21 in C sharp minor, Op.30 No.4 is the last of a set of four published in 1837 and dedicated to Princess Maria Czartoryska of Württemberg (pictured).
An indicator of how totally the mazurka was associated with Chopin comes in the last collection of piano solo miniatures composed by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) just months before his death. The 15th of the 18 pieces published as Op.72 is a Mazurka carrying the title Un Poco di Chopin. As with the Chopin Mazurka which precedes it, both Tchaikovsky’s piece and the Mazurka, Op.3 No.6 by Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915), are cast in the ley of C sharp minor, a tonality which Schubart suggests gives off “sighs of disappointed friendship”. Skryabin’s Op.3 comprises 10 short Mazurkas composed between 1888 and 1890, very much reflecting the composer’s then obsession with the music of Chopin. The first significant Polish-born composer after Chopin was Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) who also turned to the Mazurka in a big way when it came to writing piano music. He wrote 24 of them, including a set of 20 published in 1926 as his Op.50. These are musically far removed from the Chopin model, as is shown by the Mazurka, Op.50 No.3, which inhabits a mysterious, vague soundworld, full of exotic chromaticisms but basically centred around a C sharp tonality. The 34th of the 53 Studies on Chopin’s Etudes by Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938) also seeks out a Mazurka in C sharp minor (Chopin’s Op.25 No.5) and spins a remarkably complicated and intricate web around it.