

JAEDEN IZIK-DZURKO

piano

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Six Moments Musicaux D 780

Nos. 1, 2 & 3

I. Allegro

II. Andantino

III. Allegro Moderato

(approx. 13 minutes)

NIKOLAI MEDTNER (1880-1951)

Sonata Romantica in B-flat minor Op. 53 No. 1

I. Romanza. Andantino con moto, ma sempre espressivo

II. Scherzo. Allegro

III. Meditazione. Andante con moto (espressivo, ma semplice)

IV. Finale. Allegro non troppo (sempre leggero, poco giocoso, ma al rigore di tempo)

(approx. 25 minutes)

Intermission

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Miroirs

I. Noctuelles

II. Oiseaux tristes

III. Une barque sur l'océan

IV. Alborado del gracioso

V. La vallée des cloches

(approx. 27 minutes)

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor Op. 20

Presto con fuoco

(approx. 10 minutes)

Franz Schubert

Moments Musicaux D 780

Nos. 1, 2 & 3

Schubert's six piano miniatures published in 1828 under the title *Moments musicaux* are rooted in Viennese social life, particularly that brand of informal home entertaining that involved singing, dancing, and someone holding forth at the piano. They are as close as we can get to hearing what a Schubert evening, a *Schubertiade*, must have sounded like with Schubert himself at the piano.

Intimate, almost confidential in tone, these pieces, set within the melodic range of the human voice, are akin to instrumental 'songs' while their buoyant rhythms and numerous sectional repeats evoke the spirit of the dance. Above all, they have an improvisatory feel, especially in their simple textures and limited harmonic vocabulary – often just tonic-dominant, with frequent use of pedal tones in the bass.

While the context of this music is social, Schubert's own personality is distinctly audible within it, especially in his quicksilver changes in tonal colouring between major and minor and at the phrase level in the way in which he toys playfully with the listener's harmonic expectations.

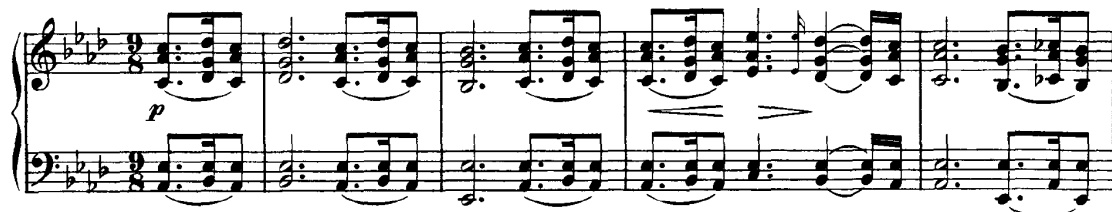
These traits are immediately evident in the opening bars of *No. 1 in C major* which begins with a little Alphonse yodel based on nothing but the pure C major triad:



This is followed by a 'harmonic rainbow' of tonal colours as Schubert slips in rapid succession through C minor, E-flat major and G minor before sliding back through G major to C major again, all in the time it would take you to pour yourself a glass of Riesling and take the first sip.

Its soft and soothing middle section announces 'sleepy-time.' Rippling gently in triplets, it takes the rhythmic & harmonic excitement down a notch, like the trio of a minuet, to prepare for the return of the more active opening material.

No. 2 in A flat major opens with a succession of lyrical melodic fragments of small range that stop and start as if a daydream were being constantly interrupted, and then re-begun.



This enigmatic mood of reverie fades into gentle minor-mode pathos in a middle section that circles plaintively around a single note, swelling in its second iteration into heart-rending cries of operatic passion.

The ‘toy march’, *No. 3 in F minor* is the most popular piece in the set and was later published separately under the exotic title *Air Russe*, presumably because dance-like pieces in the minor mode were thought typical of Eastern Europe.

Its endearing charm derives from the devil-may-care breeziness of its simple melodic line, merrily twinkling with grace notes and playfully supported by a ‘frisky pony’ trot of staccato oom-pahs in the left-hand accompaniment.



Despite attempts by publishers to market this piece as Russian, its simple tunefulness and slyly changing harmonic colours mark it as distinctly Viennese.

Nikolai Medtner

Sonata ‘Romantica’ in B-flat minor Op. 53 No. 1

Nikolai Medtner, like his friend and compatriot Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), composed well into the 20th century in the tonal idiom of 19th-century Romanticism, an idiom that both composers had learned as gold-medal-winning students at the Moscow Conservatory. But while Rachmaninoff’s soulful melodies and yearning harmonies earned him instant popularity and lasting respect, Medtner’s impeccably crafted but more densely intellectual scores have not found themselves a place in the performing repertoire commensurate with the aesthetic achievement they represent. This is especially true of his fourteen piano sonatas, despite their being viewed along with those of Scriabin and Prokofiev as the most important Russian works in this genre produced in the 20th century.

Medtner’s 12th piano sonata was composed in 1930 and represents well the stylistic divide the composer straddles between the ideals of the Classical and Romantic eras. Its ‘Romantic’ credentials reside not just in the programmatic epithet ‘*Romantica*’ in its title. Pre-eminently Romantic in conception is also the organic linking of its four movements in a continuous stream without interruption, as well as its recall of themes between movements – not to mention its keyboard-spanning textures that presuppose a Romantic-era virtuoso pianist as its ideal performer.

More reminiscent of Classical-era procedure, though, is its relentless pursuit of motivic development – described by one commentator as “Beethoven on steroids” – and its clear formal layout in the canonical structures of the Classical sonata with outer movements in sonata form, and inner movements comprised of a three-part scherzo and a binary slow movement.

The sonata’s opening theme arrives on the scene in a conspiratorial whisper, and what a strange little theme it is. Jarringly irregular with many twists and turns and a spotty alignment with the left-hand accompaniment, it offers up the principal motives ‘discussed’ in the first movement.

Chief amongst these is a falling 5th or 4th, either at the end of a phrase or occurring as a ‘gap’ in the middle of an otherwise stepwise melody:

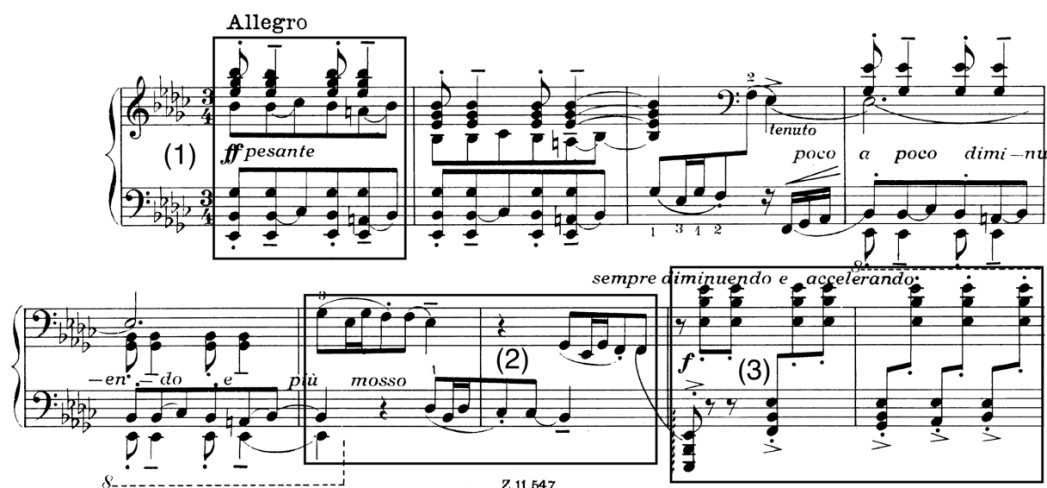
The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked "Andantino con moto, ma sempre espressivo" and "p cantabile". It features a melody with a falling 5th interval. The second system continues the melody with various markings including "tenuto", "pp", and "senza Pedale".

Taking his cue from Beethoven (who learned it from Haydn), Medtner re-uses this same ‘gapped’ melody element from his 1st theme in the construction of his endearing 2nd theme in running 16th notes. The pattern is clearly evident in the 2nd theme’s concluding phrase:

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked "dolcissimo, tranquillo" and "pp". It features a melody with a 'gapped' pattern. The second system continues the melody with various markings including "rit.", "legatissimo", and "tenuto".

The exposition, development and recapitulation segments of this sonata-form movement are clearly delineated, with the central development section dominated by the 1st theme, often in canonic imitation between the hands. And the recapitulation is in no way exceptional except for its coda’s rich and resonant mining of sonorities from the lowest reaches of the keyboard and its concluding whirlwind of roller-coaster runs that sweep directly into the pounding rhythms of the following scherzo.

Medtner’s second movement is clearly inspired by the rhythmic acrobatics of Beethoven’s most raucous scherzos. Its arrestingly emphatic opening bars introduces three rhythmic anomalies: (1) *within the bar* in a thumping syncopated drumbeat; (2) *over the bar line* with a scampering figure mixing 8ths and 16ths; and (3) *between bars* that alternate 6/8 and 3/4 metrical groupings.



When combined with the movement's many weak-beat *sforzandi*, this rough rhythmic surface may leave first-time listeners, especially those with a penchant for toe-tapping, at risk of going cross-eyed trying to figure out where in God's green earth the downbeat is to be found. But fortunately, the lovely central Trio section soon arrives like breath of fresh air to give much-needed relief to their beleaguered ankle joints and fast-twitch musical musculature.



There is a grace and simplicity to this elegant tune that sounds distinctly “French,” not surprising since Medtner was in Paris when he wrote this sonata. And of course a composer with Medtner's intellectual inclinations just couldn't resist combining this melody with the opening material on its reprise in the final section.

The *Andante con moto* ‘slow-ish’ movement is labelled *Meditation*, and like the opening movement, features two themes interlinked by a common motivic thread – the siciliana-like lilt embedded in its recurring dotted-rhythm figure.



The opening theme in the minor mode, set in a low register and supported by a bass-line creeping up by semitones, does indeed suggest a ‘meditative’ tone, although one more than a little tinged with melancholy. But its equally-litling thematic twin in the major mode, appearing soon after, lives in the sunlit uplands of the keyboard’s higher register, bringing bright tonal contrast to what would otherwise be a somewhat gloomy tonal landscape.

The last movement is in sonata form, but its line-up of thematic material is wide, since melodies from previous movements are woven into the fabric of this finale. The first theme is a scampering set-up for the texture of interlocking rhythms and complex interplay between right and left hand that will be featured later:



The pulse of the second theme is more rhythmically regular but somewhat eccentric and more than a tad ‘squirrelly’ in its articulation.



The importance of these themes is somewhat overshadowed by a curtain call of tunes heard before – in particular the opening themes of the first and third movements in the development section, and a full range of motivic memories that float through the texture of the extended coda.

It is a remarkable feature of this sonata that each movement before the finale ends without a satisfying conclusion that seals in the memory the resolution of emotional tensions previously experienced. It is perhaps for this reason that Medtner saves this ‘summing-up’ for the great nostalgic remembrances that dominate the finale, a finale that ends almost absent-mindedly while noodling over yet another variant of the phrase that opened the first movement.

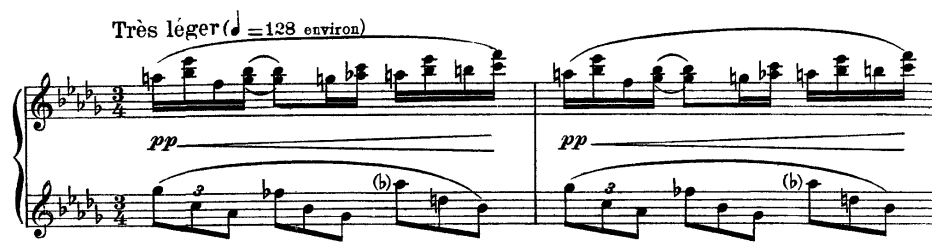


Maurice Ravel

Miroirs

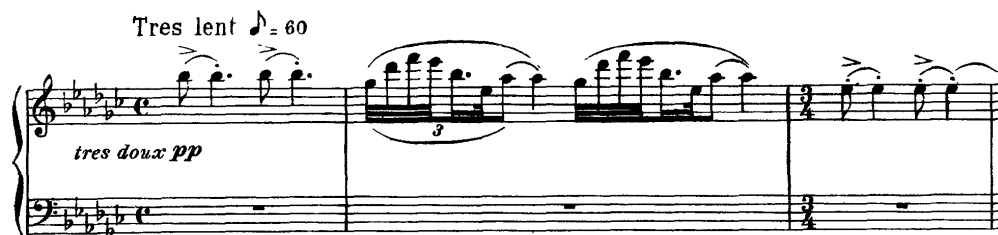
Ravel was a member of an avant-garde coterie of musicians, writers and visual artists who jocularly called themselves *Les Apaches*, Parisian argot for “ruffians” or “hooligans”. Between 1904 and 1905 he composed *Miroirs*, a suite of five pieces, each describing “in a mirror,” as it were, a fellow member of the club. While the connection with individual personalities is unclear (and may even have been fanciful), these pieces remain among the most pictorially vivid—and technically challenging—in the piano repertoire.

Ravel vividly depicts the irregular flight of night moths in the first piece of the set, *Noctuelles*, which opens with a busy blur of chromatic flutter extending over vast swathes of the keyboard but centring on the upper range.



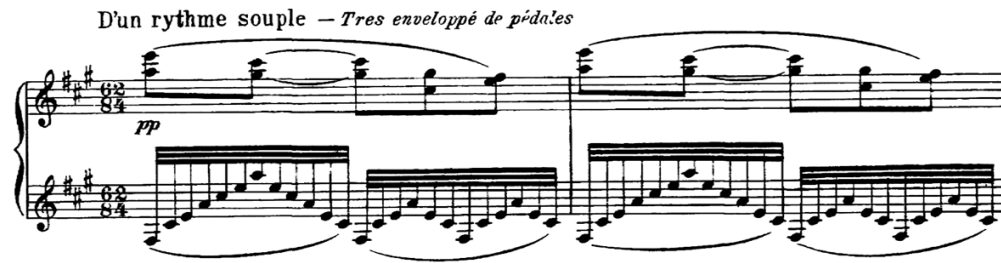
The unpredictability of the moths' flight is depicted in phrases of uneven length that rev up out of the blue in rapid-onset crescendos, with brief silences punctuating the succession of sweeping phrase gestures. The moths seem to settle on some object of mothy interest in the slower-paced central section, but soon lose interest and flit back to life in the closing section.

Ravel described *Oiseaux tristes* as “birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer.” As the piece opens we hear one solitary bird, singing alone at first but soon joined by others.



Fauré describes the texture as follows: “Fundamentally Ravel set store by the player bringing out two levels: the birdcalls with their rapid arabesques on a higher, slightly strident level and the suffocating, sombre atmosphere of the forest on a lower level which is rather heavy and veiled in pedal without much movement.”

Une Barque sur l'océan paints the image of a boat floating and gently rocking on the ocean waves. Ravel opens his depiction with a three-layered soundscape.



A rich carpet of arpeggios sweeping up and down in the left hand suggests the action of the waves, while a chiming sequence of open intervals in the upper register outlines the vast expanse of the sea. Meanwhile, an unpredictable third voice emerges clearly but irregularly from the mid-range. Ravel uses virtually the entire range of keyboard colours in this scintillating depiction of the sea as a gentle giant cradling mankind in its embrace.

Alborada del gracioso is a satirical portrait of a character from Spanish theatre, the crude and clownish *gracioso*, the equivalent of Beaumarchais' Figaro but a touch more malevolent and mischievous. He is pictured singing an *alborado*, or morning serenade.



The strumming of the guitar and distinctive punchy rhythms of Spanish folk music permeate this piece, the most 'pianistic' in the set. Among the technical challenges keeping pianists practising after midnight are extended passages in rapid-fire repeated notes and double glissandi in 3rds and 4ths played by the right hand alone.

The suite ends with *La Vallée des cloches*, a multi-layered sonic depiction of the lingering overtones of bells hovering in the air.



Sonorities based on 4ths and 5ths evoke the muffled metallic resonance that drifts in every direction as bell-clappers in towers near and far strike their target.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Scherzo No. 1 in B minor Op. 20

The scherzos of Chopin are a long way from the ‘joke’ movements that in the sonatas and symphonies of Beethoven took the place of the minuet. In his scherzos Beethoven had replaced the stiffness of courtly decorum with a new idiosyncratic freedom of expression that opened the door to displays of personal whimsy and jovial, good-natured ribbing. In his scherzos, however, Chopin kicked down the door to announce a new level of emotional intensity, a new wider playing field for what was possible on the keyboard at the extremes of musical expression.

Belying his popular image as the composer of exotic, delicately perfumed salon pieces, Chopin’s scherzos are muscular essays in pure pianistic power, projecting real anger, defiance, and even ferocity. Only the last of them, the Scherzo No. 4 in E major Op. 54 displays any of the mischievous but innocent scamper that was to define the genre in the hands of Mendelssohn.

The *Scherzo No. 1 in B minor* dates from Chopin’s trip to Vienna at the age of 20, during which time the Warsaw uprising against Russia, often associated with the composer’s *Revolutionary Étude*, made return to his Polish homeland impossible and his exile in Paris virtually inevitable. Is there bitterness in this piece, an angry resolve? The stinging opening chords leave us room to suspect both.

The main musical idea pursued from the outset is a nervous, petulant figuration split between the hands that rises from the lowest to the highest reaches of the keyboard in the space of a single phrase. In the first section of the scherzo this madcap scramble of notes alternates in its impetuous course with pauses for moody moments of reflection and plangent pathos.



Rapid figuration of this sort, stretching over a 10th in each hand, defines the new world of technique that Chopin was introducing into modernism pianism, first glimpsed in the wide-spanning arpeggios of the C major étude from the composer’s collection of Op. 10.

The trio middle section provides extreme dramatic contrast in the form of a lullaby: the old Polish Christmas carol *Lulajże Jezuniu* (Sleep, Little Jesus), with its hypnotically lulling rhythm and comforting pedal note in the bass.



The return of the agitated opening section brings a take-no-prisoners approach to the proceedings when it drives forward into a coda of unusual vehemence, nipping like a mad dog at the heels of the advancing harmonies in a series of off-beat accents. It ends as it began, with a brace of dramatic chords to provide an uncompromising 'Amen' in the minor mode to this turbulent work.

Program notes by
Donald G. Gíslason 2023