

TONY SIQI YUN

piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Herr Gott, nun schleuß den Himmel auf BWV 617 (arr. Busoni)

(approx. 4 minutes)

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la Solitude S. 173/3

(approx. 17 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 21 in C major Op. 53 “Waldstein”

Allegro con brio

Introduzione. Adagio molto

Rondo. Allegretto moderato

(approx. 25 minutes)

Intermission

LUCIANO BERIO (1925-2003)

Wasserklavier from 6 Encores for Piano

(approx. 3 minutes)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5

Allegro maestoso

Andante espressivo

Andante molto

Scherzo. Allegro energico

Intermezzo. Andante molto

Finale. Allegro moderato ma rubato

(approx. 38 minutes)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Herr Gott, nun schleuß den Himmel auf BWV 617 (arr. Busoni)

The *chorale*, a hymn setting of pious verse in simple note values, was a central element in the Lutheran church service of Bach's time. Whether sung in unison by the congregation, sung in four-part harmony by the church choir, or artfully refracted into a complex web of contrapuntal lines on the organ as a *chorale prelude*, it presented to the congregation the word of God in the vivid pictorial rhetoric of a musical setting.

The organ *chorale prelude* served both a practical and a theological purpose. It reminded the congregation of the hymn tune they were about to sing by projecting it out as a *cantus firmus* (fixed melody) in long note values against a backdrop of smaller note values that were either derived from the same melody or that symbolically commented on it.

But this distinctive “layering” of different note values in the texture was not just a clever musical device. Rather, it was a theological statement about the cosmos, with God and Man musically depicted in a hierarchy of spiritual importance. The long-held notes of the *cantus firmus* in the highest register symbolized the timeless eternal presence of God in the universe, while the chattering contrapuntal accompaniment gave voice to human striving here on Earth below.

* * *

Herr Gott, nun schleuß den Himmel auf (Lord God, open now the gates of Heaven) uses a hymn melody composed in 1620 by German composer Michael Altenburg (1584-1640).



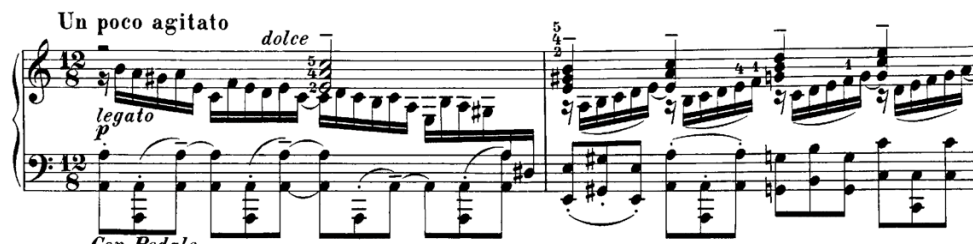
The German text is from the Song of Simeon or *Nunc dimittis* of the Vulgate (Luke 2:29-32) in which Simeon pleads to be admitted into Heaven after beholding the newborn Christ child in the Temple — a plea that symbolizes the spiritual thirst of the pious Christian to be united with God.

* * *

Bach's setting from his *Orgelbüchlein* (Little Organ Book) places the plaintive chorale melody at the top of the texture in long, magisterial half and quarter notes, with scurrying 16ths underneath representing the squirrely anxiety of the impatient Christian and large leaps in the bass symbolizing his soul's attempt at leaping up to a higher spiritual plane.



The piano version of this organ work comes from the collection of *Ten Chorale Preludes* published in 1898 by the pianist, composer and indefatigable Bach transcriber Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924).



In order to increase the sonic resonance of his piano transcription of this work to organ-like proportions, Busoni fills out the harmony in the treble and reinforces the foot-pedal line in the bass with octaves.

Franz Liszt

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la Solitude S. 173/3

The intersection of literature and music was one of the hallmarks of the Romantic era. A striking example is Liszt's *Benediction of God in Solitude*, part of a cycle of piano pieces composed between 1845 and 1852 entitled *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, referencing a collection of poems of the same name by Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869).

In his collection, Lamartine waxes rapturous over the divine presence in all creation, and Liszt — who, as a teenager, had wanted to become a priest, and who was later to take minor orders in the Catholic Church — could not be more in tune with the ecstatic sensations experienced and emotions expressed by the poet. He even provides a quote from Lamartine's poem *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la Solitude* at the head of his own eponymous keyboard hymn, one that begins: *D'où me vient, ô mon Dieu, cette paix qui m'inonde?* (Whence comes, oh my God, this peace that floods over me?)

* * *

Liszt's pianistic ode to having some "alone time" with the divine unfolds in an A-B-C-A form: its opening section returns after two intervening episodes.

The texture employed in the opening section is identical to that of Liszt's *Liebestraum* No. 3 with a single line of melody walking calmly through the baritone register, enveloped by a deliciously dreamy ripple of celestial keyboard colour above, and the fatherly warmth of a deeply sympathetic bassline below.



And as in the *Liebestraum*, Liszt's melt-in-your-mouth harmonies provide voluptuous moments of pleasure with virtually every change of chord.

A *lunga pausa* leads to an *Andante* episode based on a quietly questioning dotted motive with a serenely stable pedal point in the bass, emblematic of the reassuring presence of the divine.



A second *lunga pausa* separates the first from the second episode, one that introduces an intimation of yearning, fully exploited at the return of the opening theme.



This final section reaches an emotional climax that might seem to be in contradiction with the work's theme of peaceful contemplation. But this explosion of emotion undoubtedly evokes the last line of the work's quotation from Lamartine: *Un nouvel homme en moi renaît et recommence*. (A new man is born within me and starts off anew.)

Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata No. 21 in C major Op. 53 "Waldstein"

Beethoven's Sonata in C major Op. 53 was composed in 1804 and dedicated to his friend and patron Count Ferdinand von Waldstein. Its "revolutionary" character is evident in many ways, not least of which is its technical difficulty. In this work, Beethoven is no longer writing for a community of music-loving amateurs but rather scaling his musical thoughts to the abilities of professional pianists. The rhetoric is more emphatic, the dynamics more extreme, and their range enlarged to envisage performance in a public venue, not just in a private home.

Revolutionary as well is the type of figuration that Beethoven uses to create new types of sounds on the keyboard. The luminous timbres of the work's last movement in particular, with its many trills shimmering in the mid-range, prefigure the similar "walls of sound" that will later inhabit the finale of Beethoven's last sonata, the Sonata in C minor Op. 111.

This concentration on sound effects is evident from the opening bars of the first movement, which present to the ear a mysterious pulsing sensation, softly murmuring in the low register and ending in a questioning little "tail" figure that is answered in reply by a chipper "chirp" in the upper register.



This is not a “theme” in the traditional sense but rather a grab-bag of musical motives — pulse, tail and chirp — that Beethoven will make much of in the development section of this movement. Adding to the air of mystery is how harmonically unstable this opening is, moving through key after key until it finally arrives at an oasis of tranquillity in the simple songful melody of the second theme — a real one this time. The five-note melodic descent that begins this second theme is, of course, merely the first theme’s “chirp” motive in longer note values.



Motivic economy is also the watchword for the development section, which tosses the “tail” and “chirp” motives back and forth, like the antiphonal responses of various orchestral sections, until the time comes for more “sound theatre”. Notice how precise Beethoven is in notating the exact keyboard resonance he wants in his treatment of this triplet motive from the exposition.



The development ends with an utterly thrilling crescendo of rumbling in the bass and tweeting in the high treble to lead into the recapitulation. But Beethoven is not finished yet. He adds a massive coda to the recapitulation, and then starts the exposition all over again. But this time he plays “bad cop”, with brutal off-beat accents distorting the delivery of “tail” and “chirp” alike until a concerto-style cadenza brings more buoyant impulses to the fore and the movement concludes in a mood of energetic but playful nostalgia for the thematic terrain covered and conquered.

Beethoven had originally written a much more substantial second movement — which survives as his *Andante favori* — but was persuaded by friendly criticism to replace it instead with a brief *Introduzione*, the “introductory” function of which is obviously to prepare the ear for the finale.

This preparatory movement bears the tempo indication *Molto adagio*, marking an extreme contrast with the fast-paced animation of the first movement. This is a very “philosophical” movement, quietly posing, in a deep baritone voice, enigmatic musical questions that it never manages to answer.



The questions gradually become ever more insistent, gnawing away at the harmonic fabric with tritones and augmented intervals until the transition to the finale, which must count as one of the most magical moments in the piano literature for its transmutation of pathos into bliss.



The warm and relaxed refrain melody of the *Rondo*, which follows on immediately, begins on the same note with which the *Introduzione* ends. The bell-like timbre of this melody is enhanced by Beethoven's pedal markings, which create a blurry pool of overtones from the overlap of different harmonies under the same pedal marking.



Soon Beethoven makes this theme even more thrilling by adding a trill in the high register while the theme chimes in above, its melody notes falling like raindrops an octave higher (both trill and melody notes played by the right hand) while ecstatic runs trip up and down in the left hand below.

As a contrast to all this sweet honey and jam, Beethoven gives his episodes a dark minor-mode colouring and serious character. Sir András Schiff describes the first as a kind of Russian dance, while the second is a stomping battle scene of clashing contrapuntal lines.

Frequently acting as a boundary marker between sections is this bold and hefty multi-register cannonade booming out in the rhythm of the opening refrain.



At its final return, the refrain theme is dolled up in trills once again and an extended version of the “Russian-dance” episode is even recalled to do Slavic-style seated high kicks to foment as much keyboard mayhem as possible.



Finally, a *Presto* coda breaks out, featuring an unprecedented passage in octave glissandi for both hands.



And after another page and a half of trills and excited thematic review, the work stomps to its conclusion with a rousing “So there!”

Luciano Berio

Wasserklavier from 6 Encores for Piano

The Italian composer Luciano Berio had a gift for aphorism, for saying much and suggesting more in a brief span of time. His *Six Encores*, written between 1965 and 1990, represent well Berio's fascination with the piano as an instrument that generates pure *sound* rather than harmony or polyphony. Each piece demonstrates a single *process* at work, the unfolding of a single formal principle. The first two pieces in the set, for example, are concerned with the resonance that lingers when a piano key is played and not released.

Wasserklavier is devoted to water and has been called “a loving forgery”. It re-imagines the Brahms *Intermezzo in B flat minor* Op. 117, No. 2



and the Schubert *Impromptu in F minor* Op. 142, No. 1



by passing their motivic components through a “refracted” contemporary lens.



The descending 2nds of the Brahms *Intermezzo*, in particular, seem to come at the ear as if from a kind of funhouse distorting mirror.

Johannes Brahms

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5

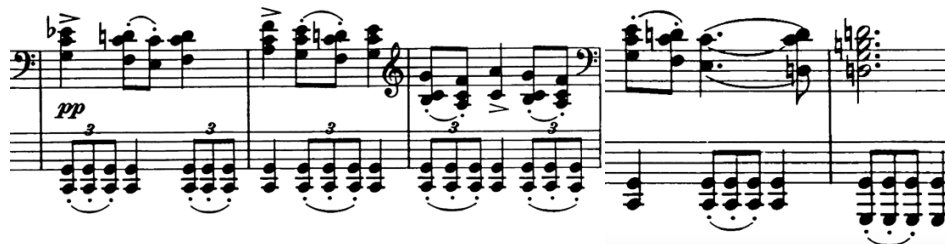
The Sonata No. 3 in F minor is a *big* work, sprawling over five movements instead of the traditional three or four, and counts as Brahms’ largest single composition for solo piano. Written in 1853 when the composer was only 20 years old, it is remarkable for not only how authentically it imbues Classical forms with Romantic passion but also for the sheer intensity of its rhetoric and the vast tonal canvas over which it projects its musical ideas.

The writing is symphonic in scope with textures spread wide over vast swathes of the keyboard but especially resonant in the lower register, where Brahms' trademark "elephantine" chords often make life difficult for pianists with a left hand smaller than a catcher's mitt. Performing this work requires a degree of physicality which is rare in the piano repertoire, and some of its keyboard gestures are not just sweeping, but utterly wild.

None are more so than the opening bars of the first movement, where a chromatically descending bass line unleashes sonic rebounds ever higher into the upper register.



Having laid claim to virtually the entire span of the keyboard with this introduction, Brahms then settles in to present the movement's first theme, a sullen, smouldering little affair in 6ths accompanied by murmuring triplets in the bass that some have heard as a distant reference to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.



After many fits and starts, a more tranquil second theme makes its appearance. Note the wide hand position required in both left and right hands.



The development section behaves in a manner well understood by volcanologists: alternating moments of pastoral calm, inspired by the second theme, with eruptions of terrifying vehemence and ferocity inspired by the movement's opening bars. The recapitulation, however, puts things right and ends vigorously on a note of triumph in the major mode.

* * *

The second movement proclaims its inspiration as being the poem *Junge Liebe* (Young love) by C. O. Sternau, the pseudonym of poet Otto Julius Inckermann (1823-1862).

The inspiring lines of this love poem appear above the score, breathing the following sentiments:

*The evening dims, the moon is shining,
There two hearts united in love
Blissfully hold each other close.*

Brahms paints the lovers' cozy embrace in a pattern of falling 3rds shadowed, as inseparably as the lovers themselves, in 10ths by the lower voice.

Der Abend dämmert, das Mondlicht scheint
Da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe vereint
Und halten sich selig umfängen. Sternau

Andante espressivo

A tinkling music-box passage in the high register gradually brings us to the movement's second theme in 6ths, which will alternate with the first as the movement progresses.

Poco più lento *Äußerst leise und zart*

sempre Pedale

But softly poetic and intimate as these themes are, the love they describe cannot save itself from plunging into full-on passion in an extended coda that “elopes” from the A-flat tonality in which it began to end in the second theme's warm and cuddly key of D-flat.

* * *

In case anyone had drifted off into a reverie of peace and bliss while listening to this movement, Brahms wakes us up with an exhilarating *Scherzo* full of demonic energy and virtuoso swagger.

Allegro energico

sempre Ped.

Fortunately, though, the middle-section Trio provides a hymn-like moment of repose for startled listeners to regain their composure and to prepare for the return of the opening fireworks.



Normally in a standard four-movement sonata this third-movement *Scherzo* would be followed by the finale, but Brahms inserts an *Intermezzo* with the apparent aim of catching us up with developments concerning our second-movement lovebirds. And the news is not good.

Entitled *Rückblick* (Backward glance) it “looks back” at the falling-thirds theme that opened the second movement and reinterprets it as a funeral march, complete with ominous drumroll-32nds.



The grief expressed in this movement is palpable.

* * *

The last movement is a rondo with an eccentric opening refrain theme, one that with its many syncopations and changes of register seems to be toying with its listeners by playing a game of “hide the beat”.



The intervening episodes are much less hectic, the first being simple and songful and the second a stirring patriotic anthem that makes you feel like you should stand up and hold your hat over your heart while it plays.



Maybe this is because its concluding phrase sounds so much like the Haydn melody used in the Austrian imperial anthem *Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser*.

But this movement is not about the episodes, it's about that rascally refrain that, no matter what breathing space is allowed, always pops up to rough up the texture with its pesky syncopations and dotted rhythms. And yet, even the sharply chiselled musical features of this refrain are smoothed over in the exhilaration of the finale's whirlwind coda that brings the movement, and the work, to a hectic but exuberant close.

Program notes by
Donald G. Gíslason 2023