

EMA NIKOLOVSKA, mezzo-soprano
CHARLES RICHARD-HAMELIN, piano

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Im Frühling D 882
Dass sie hier gewesen D 775
Herbst D 945
Der Unglückliche D 713
(approx. 16 minutes)

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

June from The Seasons Op. 37b
(approx. 5 minutes)

MARGARET BONDS (1913-1972)

Songs of the Seasons
Poème d'Automne
Winter Moon
Young Love in Spring
Summer Storm
(approx. 10 minutes)

Intermission

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Images oubliées L. 87
Lent
(approx. 4 minutes)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Ariettes Oubliées L. 60

C'est l'extase langoureuse

Il pleure dans mon coeur

L'ombre des arbres

Chevaux de Bois

Green

Spleen

(approx. 16 minutes)

NIKOLAI MEDTNER (1880-1951)

Twilight Op. 24 No. 4

Sleeplessness Op. 37 No. 1

(approx. 9 minutes)

NICOLAS SLONIMSKY (1894-1995)

Five Advertising Songs

Utica Sheets and Pillowcases

Pillsbury Bran Muffins

Vauv Nose Powder

Children Cry for Castoria

Make This a Day of Pepsodent

(approx. 10 minutes)

Franz Schubert

Schubert is credited with single-handedly transforming the German Lied from a form of home entertainment mostly cultivated by amateurs, and largely ignored by serious composers, into a worthy vehicle for artistic expression at the highest level. What distinguished Schubert's contributions to the genre was the way in which he brought the full range of musical resources — harmony, texture and declamatory style — to bear on the expression of the poetic text.

Im Frühling (In spring) was written in 1826, to a poem by the young German philologist and lovelorn poet Ernst Schulze (1789-1817), whose poem reflects on the bittersweet legacy of love as both blissful memory and painful remembrance, with the glories of springtime allegorically standing in for the beloved.

Schubert's vocal line is as carefree as the natural setting it describes



but reacts with quicksilver changes in tone colour shrink-wrapped to changes in the text. This is a strophic lied, with the same basic music repeated, but with a different piano accompaniment for each stanza — the only occasion in which Schubert structured his keyboard accompaniment as a theme and variations.

To add a bit of life to the storytelling, in the second stanza the piano adopts this delicate figuration on the same harmonies as the first stanza, but gently enlivened by a jolly stride-bass down below.



The following stanza, with its darker message of *Es wandeln nur sich Will' und Wahn* (Only will and delusion change) is a minor-mode variant of this, with added oomph in its syncopations. And this, in turn, returns to the major mode for the final stanza, in which the singer wishes to be a bird on a branch, singing of his love *den ganzen Sommerlang* (all summer long).

Dass sie hier gewesen, set to a poem by the Orientalist German poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), tells an olfactory tale of love's presence — and absence — as sensed through a fragrance drifting in the wind. It is an *Ostwind* (wind from the East) that tells the singer that the beloved has been nearby and that inspires the shocking, almost Wagnerian dissonances that begin the lied.



The singer's own tears, related in the second verse, are just as insubstantial as the scent of the loved one that has seemingly just passed by — and the love that has passed out of existence.

This is a strange poem indeed, full of hesitations and mysterious probing thoughts. In the end, it asks the question *Schönheit oder Leibe, ob versteckt sie bliebe?* (Can beauty or love really be concealed?).

Schubert evokes the bewilderment of the singer with dissonances and remote key relations, but the thought of love's presence, *dass du hier gewesen [bist]* (that you have been here) he paints with the arrival into the purest C major.



Herbst (Autumn) is a setting of a poem by composer, critic and poet Ludwig Rellstab (1799-1860), famous for his comparison of Beethoven's Sonata in C# minor, Op. 27, No. 2 to the dreamy glimmerings of Lake Lucerne bathed in moonlight.

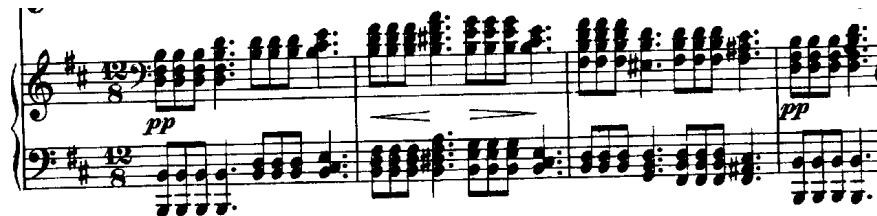
Rellstab is in a somewhat less daydreamy mood in this poem, another Nature allegory, with the fall season a stand-in for the bitter emotions of a life deprived of love. Schubert's evocation of the scene is shiver-inducing in its vividness. The chill winds of autumn are ever-present in the tremolos trembling through the piano's introduction.



The piano's bassline, ominously roving through the notes of the E minor scale, dogs the vocal melody, always just a few steps behind, echoing its fatal despair.

Der Unglückliche (The unlucky one) is a kind of dramatic cantata for voice and piano setting a text by Caroline Pichler (1769-1843), a novelist and society hostess whose salon was for many years at the centre of Viennese cultural life and where Schubert's songs were often performed.

The poem's rather morose text lays out in sections the fate of a person buried in regret at growing old, with love's bliss and the joys of a happy life only a distant memory. The different sections of the lied are each given a contrasting character, from the funereal pacing of the opening, with its Fifth-Symphony knock-on-the-door motive



to melodramatic tremolos, evocative of night fears and peace of mind robbed by sleepless nights.



While it is the voice that carries the thoughts of the poem, it is the piano throughout that carries their emotional meaning. Memories of love and happiness bring a quickening of the singer's heartbeat.



But there is no happy ending in this poem, and when the singer laments in the final verse that *Mir schlägt kein Herz mehr auf der weiten Welt* (No heart now beats for me in the whole wide world), it seems as though the piano accompanies the singer down to the grave.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

June from *The Seasons* Op. 37b

In 1875 Tchaikovsky was commissioned by St. Petersburg publisher Nikolai Bernard to compose 12 small character pieces for piano, one for each month of the year. The collection was published in installments on the first of each month over the course of the year 1876 in Bernard's musical-theatrical journal *Nuvellist* (Нувеллист) and issued as a separate collection at the end of the year under the title *The Seasons* (Времена года).

June has proven one of the most popular of the set and has appeared in numerous arrangements for various ensembles. Its relationship with its subtitle, *Barcarolle*, is perhaps explained by the epigraph supplied by Bernard above the score, a quotation from the nineteenth-century Russian poet Aleksey Pleshcheyev (1825-1893).

Выйдем на берег, там волны
Ноги нам будут лобзать.
Звезды с таинственной грустью
Будут над нами сиять.

Let us go to the shore, there the waves
Will kiss our feet.
The stars with a secret sadness
Will shine upon us.

Written in a simple ternary (A-B-A) form, this piece is intimate with a kind of gloomy sweetness about it. It opens with a wistful little melody in G minor over a gently rocking, “barcarolle-ish” left-hand accompaniment.



A bit of choppy water is encountered in the slightly more animated middle section in G major, which is dominated by drone tones in the bass.



The piano textures of the piece are slightly un-idiomatic for the instrument. But then again, Tchaikovsky’s “native” instrument was the orchestra, and one can easily hear this as a kind of “piano reduction” of a work conceived in orchestral terms, with various sections of the orchestra in conversation with one other.

Margaret Bonds

Songs of the Seasons

Composer, pianist and educator Margaret Bonds (1913-1972) was a figure of major importance in American Black culture of the twentieth century. Born in Chicago into the household that sheltered composer Florence Price (1887-1953) after she had moved north to escape the racism of the American South, as a young girl, Bonds was taught piano and composition by Price.

She went on to earn her Bachelor’s and Master of Music degrees at Northwestern University, although she had to commute 20 miles every day to class because she was not allowed to live on campus. She later pursued postgraduate studies at Juilliard with composer Roy Harris, among others.

Margaret Bonds wrote more than 200 compositions for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensemble and solo piano, including about 100 songs in many styles, at least half of which were inspired by the poems of her close friend, the poet Langston Hughes (1901-1967).

Her songs combine European and African American musical traditions, with a heavy emphasis on the latter. They feature the sounds of spirituals, ragtime, blues and especially jazz but with harmonies occasionally based on 4ths or extended 3rds chords (9ths, 11ths, 13ths). Major and minor tonalities alternate with modal and pentatonic scales. And of course there are “blue” notes in her melodies.

* * *

Her song cycle *Songs of the Seasons* was commissioned by tenor Lawrence Watson in 1955 and premiered by him the following year at Town Hall in New York. It comprises four songs set to texts by Langston Hughes. *Poème d'automne* and *Winter Moon* date from the 1930s while *Young Love in Spring* and *Summer Storm* were composed especially for the song cycle in 1955.

Poème d'automne, although set in the fall season, has the sultry pacing and slow swagger of *Summertime* from *Porgy and Bess* (1935).

Its ecstatic, soaring vocal lines are intensely expressive but nonetheless relaxed and laid back. Note the bluesy inflection that paints the phrase “heavy with color” in the opening line:

The autumn leaves are heavy with color

The piano part is conversationally attentive to the voice, supporting it with chromatic harmonies as richly colourful as the autumn leaves being described.

Winter Moon is only 14 measures long, but its virtually static vocal line, backdropped by gently ringing open intervals in the piano accompaniment, paints a vivid picture of the moon, coldly distant, hanging motionless in the sky.

Young Love in Spring gives pride of place to bright high sounds, in both the voice and piano, sounds that, combined with a wide-ranging rhapsodic vocal line, convey burgeoning excitement at the arrival of spring. Quartal harmonies make for abundant “sunshine” in the piano accompaniment.

Love is in full bloom in the concluding song, ***Summer Storm***, the longest song of the set and perhaps the most vivid scene, with its evocations of the rumbling of thunder, sudden darting strikes of lightning, a gentle falling rain and the carefree mood of a couple of lovers skipping down a dusty road hand in hand.

Claude Debussy

Images oubliées L. 87

I. Lent

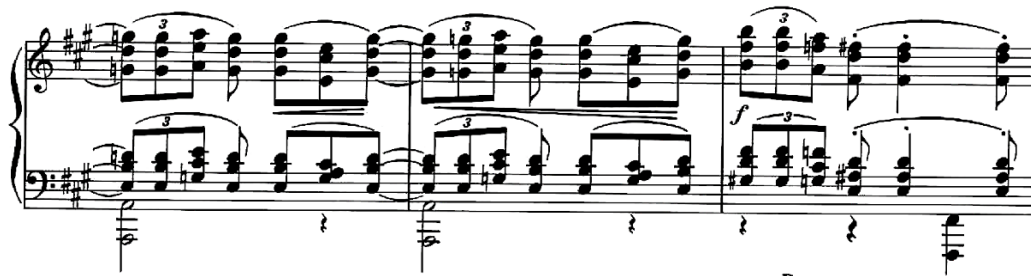
In late 1894, Debussy composed a set of three pieces that he called *Images*, dedicated to Yvonne Lerolle, the 17-year-old daughter of the painter Henri Lerolle. In his dedication Debussy called them “conversations between the piano and oneself,” the sort of thing suitable for playing “on a rainy day.”

As occasional compositions, these pieces were never meant for publication and sat in the private collection of pianist Alfred Cortot until they finally appeared in print in the 1970s, with the word *oubliées* (forgotten) added by the publisher.

The first piece in the set, marked *Lent (mélancolique et doux)* begins with a simple daydreaming melody that will recur throughout the piece.



The middle section of this short piece brings heightened dynamics, softened, however, by Debussy’s trademark marshmallowy streams of parallel chords.



But the piece ends in the same mood of “rainy-day” reverie with which it began.

Claude Debussy

Ariettes Oubliées L. 60

Debussy's *Ariettes oubliées* (Forgotten little airs) date from the mid-1880s and were published in 1903, dedicated to Mary Garden (1874-1967), the so-called "Sarah Bernhardt of opera," who sang Mélisande in the composer's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902).

The texts are taken from an 1874 collection of poems entitled *Romances sans paroles* featuring the hypersensitive poetic imaginings of the leading French symbolist poet of *fin-de-siècle* decadence and aesthetic hedonism, Paul Verlaine (1844-1896).

The texts as a whole appear to have as their theme the toll taken on the sensitive individual by affairs of love, especially those experienced in a natural setting, each flutter of the heart being a debilitating jolt to the nervous system, each love affair a Jane Fonda workout for the sensory apparatus.

The first song in the set, *C'est l'extase langoureuse* (It's languorous ecstasy), is a case in point. It opens with two accelerating descending lines, one in the piano followed by another in the voice, that resemble a matched pair of tired sighs.

The image shows a musical score for the song "C'est l'extase langoureuse" by Claude Debussy. The score is written for voice and piano. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/8. The tempo/mood is marked "Lent et caressant". The piano part begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic. The vocal line starts with a *p* (piano) dynamic and is marked "rêveusement". The lyrics are: "C'est l'ex - ta - se lan-gou - reu - se" and "Lan - guid - rapt - ure, bliss of dream - ing,". The score features descending melodic lines in both parts, with the piano accompaniment consisting of chords and single notes, and the vocal line consisting of a series of descending eighth notes.

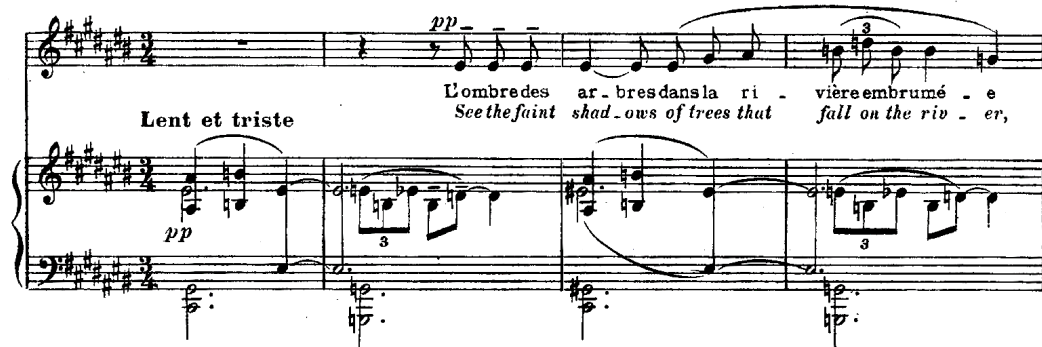
The entire song barely rises above a *piano* in its timid observations of a natural world in sympathy with the love the singer feels. The word setting is exquisitely delicate and precise, the harmony filled with those soft sugary 9th chords with which Debussy loves to plushly upholster his scores.

Il pleure dans mon cœur (My heart weeps) is another nature scene with raindrops in the symbolic role of love tears. A constant patter of them fills the middle register with an ostinato of quivering 16ths.



While the subject of the poem is the sadness of love, the lush harmonies of this song tell us that the singer is more puzzled than wounded by her situation.

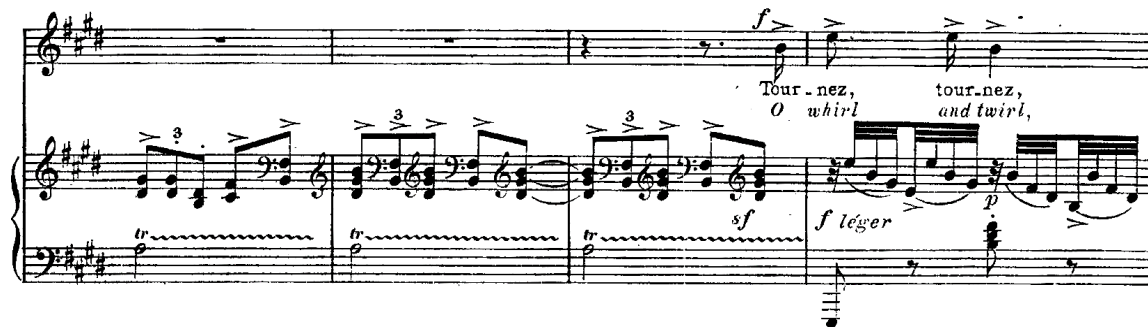
However, the next song, *L'ombre des arbres* (The shadow of the trees), does strike a more mournful, or at least a pensive tone. The melodic line is almost static, enervated and lethargic, like a person staring at something in disbelief.



The scene is set next to a large tree beside a river. The quotation from *Cyrano de Bergerac* atop the score explains the situation:

The nightingale from a top branch looks down [into his reflection] and believes he has fallen into the river. He sits atop an oak tree but still fears that he will drown.

Debussy then yanks us from our torpor with the excitement of the fourth song, *Chevaux de bois* (Merry-go-round), with its buzz-saw trills and sonorous open-5ths in the bass.



The scene rushes past us as it would were we ourselves on the carousel. The frenetic activity hides a dark secret, however, revealed at the end as the escapist motivation for all this giddiness:

L'église tinte un glas tristement. The church sadly tolls a death knell.
Tournez au son joyeux des tambours! Turn to the joyous sound of the drums!

The puzzlingly entitled **Green** explores the skipping heartbeat and wildly wandering thoughts of puppy love.



The excitement only relents at the thought of resting the singer's head on the sleeping breast of the beloved.

The collection ends with **Spleen**, which describes a relationship edging towards crisis. There is a deadness in the voice at the opening.



The doubts mount throughout, building up to a great climax, but eventually ending, mid-measure, with an indifferent "Hélas," a Gallic sigh which might correspond in contemporary terms to a big ... Meh!

Nikolai Medtner

Nikolai Medtner, like his friend and compatriot Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), composed well into the twentieth century in the tonal idiom of nineteenth-century Romanticism, an idiom that both composers had learned as gold-medal-winning students at the Moscow Conservatory. Many of Medtner's 106 songs feature the piano as an equal partner with the voice, heavily clad in rich figuration, often rippling with polyrhythms, and deeply sonorous in the lower regions of the keyboard — characteristics which earned him the title “the Russian Brahms.”

* * *

Twilight (Сумерки) features a text by the Russian diplomat and poet Feodor Tyuchev (1803-1873) and like many of Tyuchev's poems, it situates us between two contrasting poles of existence — the worlds of waking and sleeping.

Exquisitely shrink-wrapped around the text in a fixed pattern of successive 4/8, 5/8, 6/8 and 5/8 measures, the music seems anything but irregular in pulse because our ear is enchanted by the harmonic sequences supporting the opening “sigh” figure, which recurs throughout.

The musical score for 'Twilight' (Сумерки) by Nikolai Medtner. The score is in B-flat major and 4/8 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics in Russian and French. The piano accompaniment is marked 'pp sempre sordamente' and 'espressivo'.

The poem expresses, in an ecstatic blend of longing and peacefulness, the urge to lose oneself in another world:

Всё во мне, и я во всем! Everything in me, and I in everything

* * *

Sleeplessness (Бессонница), set to a text by the German poet and translator of Russian poetry Friedrich Fiedler (1859-1917), begins with the metallic chiming of a clock, a reminder of the relentless passage of time. This is a message that the singer desperately does not want to hear.



The singer's concern, it turns out, is for the meaning of a life that will eventually end, to be replaced by a new generation, with only the clang of the clock's tolling to mark its passing. At the conclusion of the song this thought fades slowly into the distance with the wordless humming of the singer, a frequent device in Medtner's songs.



Nicolas Slonimsky Five Advertising Songs

Pianist, conductor, composer and musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky was born in 1894 in the Russian capital of St. Petersburg, where he received his musical education, notably from his aunt, Isabelle Vengerova (1877-1956), who would later go on to help found the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He arrived in the United States in the early 1920s and achieved pre-eminence as a conductor, a teacher and an engaging writer on music.

He is especially well known for his contributions to musical lexicography, having edited both Thompson's *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians* and Baker's *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. He earned the affection of the present writer for his mischievous *Lexicon of Musical Invective* (1952), a compendium of the nastiest, most mean-spirited reviews given to famous composers throughout history.

As a music educator, he was not above poking a bit of fun at the pretensions of classical music and its professional practitioners. In so doing he opened a career path for figures such as Victor Borge, Anna Russell, Peter Schickele, Gabriel Kahane and the odd resident musicologist of a flourishing local recital society.¹

Witness his parody collection of music composed in 1926 to texts found in the advertisements columns of the *New York Post*, collected together under the title *Five Advertising Songs*. As it were vain to attempt to improve on the insights of such a superb liner and program notes writer as Mr. Slonimsky concerning his own work, his remarks alone must here suffice to inform us.²

When I came to America from darkest Russia in 1923, I instantly succumbed to the unique poetry of commercial advertisements in the gaudy pages of American magazines. Cynicism came much later. I set to music some of the most uninhibited outpourings of the advertising Muse. I can even claim priority as composer of the first advertising songs designed for concert performance.

The Pepsodent song was on a par with the best fourth-rate Italian operas, full of emotional bel canto. The sheets of Utica were spread with the artiness of a slightly adulterated Schumann.

The Bran muffin ad bore a banner headline: "And Then Her Doctor Told Her ..." showing a bearded Germanic physician pointing an ominous index finger at a dejected but beautiful female sufferer slumped in an armchair. One could expect the worst, but the doctor in the ad was concerned only with correcting the lady's "faulty elimination." I borrowed the theme from Rachmaninoff's C Sharp Minor Prelude to depict her condition in suitable dramatic terms.

There followed "No More Shiny Nose!," attesting to the durable effect of the powder. In the Castoria song, the climax came with the cry, "Mother, relieve your constipated child!" A parlando recitative against a dissonant tremolo reassured the parents that Castoria did not include harmful drugs or narcotics.

Donald G. Gislason 2024

¹ With respect to classical parody, it behooves us to decline comment on the showman-like exertions of Liberace, the bone-dry wit of whose piano "stylings" largely escaped the notice of discerning critics, and indeed appears to have remained hidden from the artist himself.

² Quoted from: <https://cosmicspy.bandcamp.com/album/five-advertising-songs>