

JENEBA KANNEH-MASON

piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Partita No. 5 in G major BWV 829

Praeambulum

Allemande

Corrente

Sarabande

Tempo di Minuetta

Passepied

Gigue

(approx. minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 17 in D minor Op. 31 No. 2 (“Tempest”)

Largo - Allegro

Adagio

Allegretto

(approx. minutes)

WILLIAM GRANT STILL (1895-1978)

Three Visions

Summerland

(approx. 4 minutes)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Préludes Livre I No. 8: La fille aux cheveux de lin

Préludes Livre II No. 5: Bruyères

(approx. 7 minutes)

FLORENCE PRICE (1887-1953)

Fantasie Nègre No. 1 in E minor

Andante - Tempo moderato

(approx. 7 minutes)

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major Op. 47

Allegretto

(approx. 7 minutes)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Partita No. 5 in G major BWV 829

The partita, in late Baroque parlance, was just another name for a dance suite, a multi-movement work made up of the four canonical dance forms — allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue — with the occasional addition of a prelude at the beginning and optional fancier dances (minuets, bourées, gavottes) called *galanteries* inserted right before the zinger finale, the gigue.

From 1726 to 1731 Bach published one partita a year as the first part of a collection that he called *Clavierübung*, i.e., “Keyboard Exercise.” And a good deal of exercise they did indeed provide to the middle-class amateur musicians who were their target audience. Remarkable for the extreme technical demands they place on the performer, these partitas also differ from Bach’s previous “English” and “French” suites in the choice of movements they add to the traditional sequence of dances.

The *Partita No. 5 in G major* is characterized by a twinkling bright mood, buoyant rhythms and an emotional tone somewhere between playful and endearing. Yet despite its childlike demeanour, this is not a suite designed for the hand of a child.

Witness the opening *Praeambulum*, with its stop-and-start gestures rife with a type of humour that would later be called “Haydnesque.” These opening bars act as a *ritornello* interlarding the dazzling array of ear-tickling scales and arpeggios that are the main course of this sonic feast.

1. Praeambulum



While such introductory movements were intended to serve as a kind of “warm-up” for the keyboardist’s fingers, rarely did they so accurately anticipate, as in this passage, the digital drudgery that would later be inflicted on young pianists by a certain Monsieur Charles-Louis Hanon (1819-1900).



And note that in Bach’s time, scales were normally played without using the thumb!

We then hop into the *Allemande*, with its characteristic 16th-note upbeat to the opening bar.

2. Allemande



The gentle rippling pattern of triplets used throughout provides ample fodder for audience members eager to tap their toes without risking injury to their ankles. These triplets are counterbalanced by elegant leaps in the two-voice texture, and the second section ingeniously inverts the opening material — a common technique in binary forms in the Baroque.



Next would normally come the French *courante*, but Bach chooses instead its livelier Italian cousin, the *Corrente*,

3. Corrente



which, in contrast with the allemande's emphasis on chatty runs, engages the ear with broken chord figures in repeated patterns of repetition.

The emotional heart of any suite is the *Sarabande*, although it is often more ponderous for modern listeners than some might desire, given its traditionally grave pace. But Bach's sarabande in this partita is actually quite dancelike, due to its recurring pattern of dotted rhythms and its pleasing three-voice texture that gives the impression of being in two voices due to the use throughout of 3rds and 6ths in the upper voice.

4. Sarabande



Here simplicity works to fashion elegance out of a few motivic elements to provide a bare-bones structure for the performer to embellish with tasteful ornamentation.

The *Tempo di Minuetto* movement is perhaps the “cutest” of all in this suite, coyly teasing the listener’s ear with a melody in duple metre that only occasionally catches up with itself to realize that it is actually in triple.

5. Tempo di Minuetta



The second of the *galanteries* in this partita is a *Passepied*, a faster version of the courtly minuet that derives from Breton country dancing.

6. Passepied



Metred in 3/8 rather than the normal 3/4 of the minuet, it has the strutting muscularity of a toy soldier on parade, with ornaments judiciously placed so as to reinforce its friendly swagger.

But for rhythmic drive, nothing can beat this suite’s *Gigue* finale.

7. Gigue



Structured as a three-voice fugue, with all the leaps you would expect from the genre, its second half renews the fugue with a varied inversion of the opening, but with the addition of “buzz” trills to give this finale a rough burnish of keyboard tone that repeatedly drills into the ear – and would do so quite thrillingly on a harpsichord – in passages such as this:



Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata No. 17 in D minor Op. 31, No. 2 (“Tempest”)

It says something about the dramatic and outright theatrical character of Beethoven’s musical ideas that so many of his piano sonatas have attracted descriptive titles. The motivation for calling Beethoven’s Sonata in D minor Op. 31, No. 2 the “Tempest” comes from his biographer, Anton Schindler, who believed the work to have been inspired by Shakespeare’s play of the same name, although not all modern historians agree.

Beethoven begins his sonata audaciously with a series of three contrasting musical gestures, in three different tempos, on the very first line of the score. A slow, rolling arpeggio outlines a major chord (*Largo*), followed by an anxious series of “mini-sighs” furiously fretting away in a minor key (*Allegro*), and then a final slamming-on of the brakes (*Adagio*) for the cadence.

Op. 31. N^o 2.

The musical score for the beginning of Beethoven's Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2, is shown. It is in D minor and 2/4 time. The score is divided into three sections: *Largo*, *Allegro*, and *Adagio*. The *Largo* section features a slow, rolling arpeggio in the bass. The *Allegro* section features a series of "mini-sighs" in the treble. The *Adagio* section features a final slamming-on of the brakes for the cadence. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, *cresc.*, and *sf*, and fingering numbers for both hands.

Beethoven certainly has your attention now, but what could possibly be going on here?

All is revealed when the movement gets underway. The arpeggio motive, now vehemently rising up from the bass like an imperious demand for answers, appears as the movement’s first theme, but at a faster tempo, with the “mini-sigh” motives (in augmentation) presented as the timorous pearl-clutching response to each explosive volley of anger.

The musical score for the beginning of the movement is shown. It is in D minor and 2/4 time. The score is divided into three sections: *a tempo.*, *m.f.*, and *p*. The *a tempo.* section features a fast, rolling arpeggio in the bass. The *m.f.* section features a series of "mini-sighs" in the treble. The *p* section features a final slamming-on of the brakes for the cadence. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *m.f.*, and *p*, and fingering numbers for both hands.

This bit of “sound theatre” may well have given Schubert the idea for a similar texture in the haunting slow movement of his last piano sonata, the Sonata in B flat D. 960.

While the first movement created its emotional payload by means of dramatic changes in tempo, the last movement *Allegretto* gathers in intensity by the opposite means: its manic repetition of the same hypnotic figure at an eerily constant pace.



It’s the aural equivalent of a Stephen King horror movie in which you keep hearing the same voice echoing over and over again in a circus house of mirrors, as if you were going mad.

Only in this movement, the voices are motivic, as Beethoven recalls the whimpering mini-sighs in the minor mode from the first movement in this finale’s second theme



and even includes echoes of the *Adagio* movement’s “drum roll” triplets for added measure.



And yet despite the gentle rolling pace of this *moto perpetuo* movement, it really is scary music, especially the ending, which simply disappears mysteriously down a fox hole at the bottom of the keyboard in its final bars, as if a ghost had just left the room by passing through a wall.

William Grant Still

Summerland from Three Visions

In the early part of the 20th century, William Grant Still contributed significantly to the Harlem Renaissance of Black culture in the 1920s and 1930s and was widely recognized as the dean of African-American composers, the first Black composer to conduct a major American symphony orchestra and the first to have an opera produced by the New York City Opera.


His *Three Visions* suite for solo piano was composed in 1935 for his wife, Verna Arvey, who premiered the work in Los Angeles in 1936. His daughter, Judith Anne Still, relates that the work tells

... the story of the human soul after death: the body expires, and the soul goes on to an apocalyptic judgment. If it is seen that the past life has been a good one, the soul may enter "heaven," or "Summerland."

Summerland is thus a musical picture of the beauty and peace to be found in the heavenly realm. Its neo-Romantic compositional style blends the harmonic idioms of classical music and jazz, immediately recognizable in the sound of its opening bars.

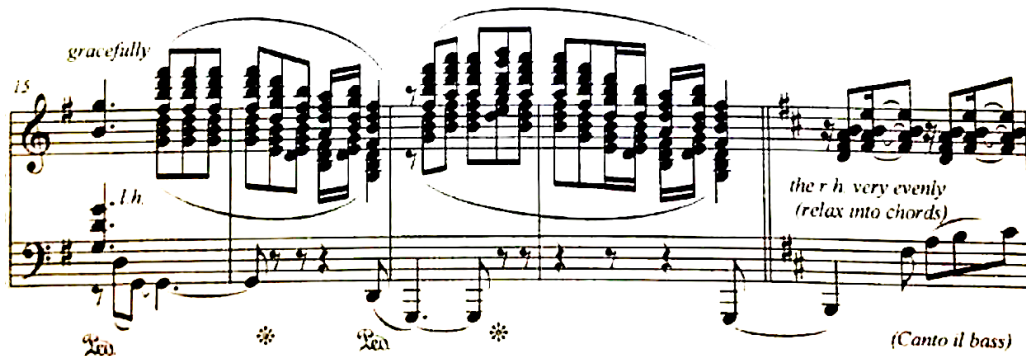
Summerland William Grant Still

Tranquilly ♩ = 44



pp smoothly and sustained

The blissful serenity of Heaven is evoked in the high register with this thickly textured but soft passage before the melody line is then transferred to the baritone range in the middle section.



15 *gracefully*

p the r h very evenly (relax into chords)

Ad lib. *Ad lib.* (Canto il bass)

Still never aimed to be an “avant-garde” composer. He wrote to please his audience, and while the style of this piece might immediately strike the ear as familiar from what might be called “piano lounge music,” it is more than likely that lounge pianists stole this relaxed jazz idiom from William Grant Still rather than the other way round.

Claude Debussy

Préludes Livre I No. 8: La fille aux cheveux de lin

Préludes Livre II No. 5: Bruyères

Debussy was the composer who was said to have freed Western music from the claustrophobic confines of “functional” harmony, the set of rules that for 300 years had governed which chords fit best with which others according to how well their bass notes got along.

Few works sum up Debussy’s practice in this regard more than his two sets of preludes composed between 1909 and 1913. This is music of infinite subtlety, much of it built up out of pianissimo melodic murmurs swimming freely in a watery, finely pedalled haze of blurry piano tone.

But not the pair of preludes chosen for this afternoon’s recital, both of which see Debussy returning to the more traditional texture of melody and accompaniment in his depiction of two scenes from the Scottish countryside. Each unfolds gently in an atmosphere of lyrical warmth, with folk-like modal melodies supported by pastel harmonies that often burst luminously bright at cadence points.

* * *

La Fille aux cheveux de lin (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) was inspired by a poem of the same name by French poet Leconte de Lisle (1818–1894) from the *Chansons écossaises* (Scottish songs) section of his collection entitled *Poèmes antiques* (Ancient poems), published in 1874.

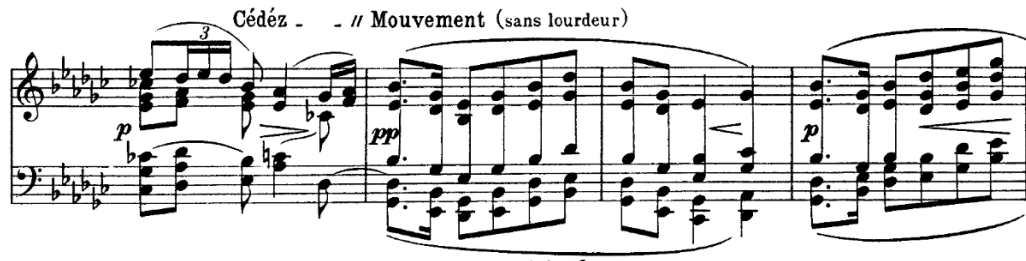
It opens with a pentatonic “gapped” melody that in its up-and-down motion suggests the carefree path of the golden-haired girl as she wanders alone in the Scottish countryside.

Très calme et doucement expressif (♩ = 66)



p sans rigueur

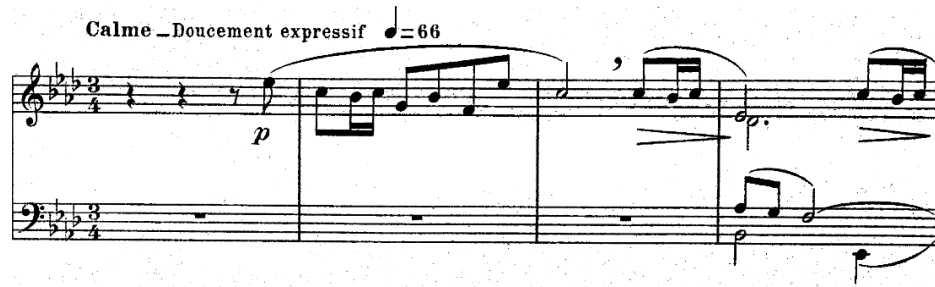
Contrast is provided in the hushed middle section with a fuller texture featuring Debussy's trademark streams of parallel chords.



With a dynamic level that never rises above mezzo-forte, this prelude is generously warm and lyrical throughout.

* * *

Another modal melody opens *Bruyères* (Heather), where we find ourselves out on the moors of the Scottish countryside.



The wide-open spaces described in the scene are evoked by the wide registral range of the score, which frequently has to be written on three staves.



Here the tone is nostalgic, with wandering spun-out melodies suggesting gentle breezes passing over carpets of purple-green vegetation covering the landscape and occasional flourishes in the upper register that might be a shepherd's pipes.

Florence Price

Fantasia Nègre No. 1 in E minor

Florence Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1887 and studied piano, organ and composition at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, graduating with honours in 1906. Life in the Jim Crow South was not easy for a well-educated African-American woman, so she eventually moved to Chicago in 1927 where her talents began to be recognized. In the 1930s she gradually rose to national prominence as a symphonic composer following the performance of her Symphony No. 1 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933.

In all, she composed over 300 works, including symphonies, works for piano and works for chamber ensembles. She was especially well known for her art songs and arrangements of spirituals, many of which were sung by the most celebrated singers of her day, including Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price.

Her musical style is conservative, firmly planted in the late Romantic era, but permeated with elements drawn from her African-American heritage. This mixture of European “high-art” and African-American popular musical styles is perfectly exemplified in her *Fantasia Nègre No. 1* (1929) that incorporates traditional spirituals and jazz dance rhythms into the structure of a typically 19th-century virtuoso piano fantasy.

The work opens in the classic manner with a series of introductory flourishes offering tantalizing hints in the left hand of the principal theme to come.

Fantasia Nègre

To my talented little friend, Margaret A. Bonds

Florence B. Price
(Feb. 9-10, 1929)
Helen Walker-Hill, editor

Andante
(♩ = 60: rubato)

This principal theme is the spiritual *Sinner, please don't let this harvest pass*, artfully harmonized with chromatic passing tones in the inner voices.



As the work progresses, it alternates re-statements of these themes and non-thematic sections featuring scintillating — one might even say “flashy” — piano figuration, at times inflected with harmonies we are more used to hearing in the music of George Gershwin. The piece ends, however, in a thunderous affirmation of the “flat-7” melodic minor scale in which the work’s principal theme is situated.

Frédéric Chopin

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major Op. 47

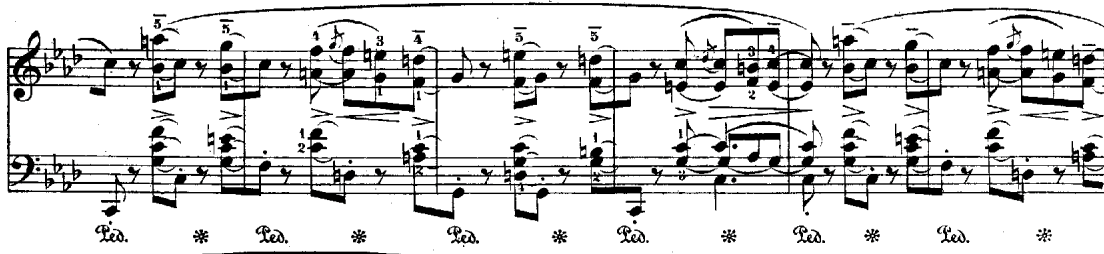
Chopin’s four ballades all share a tone of epic narration, but the third of the set, the Ballade in A-flat major Op. 47, stands apart for its bright sonorities and healthy, optimistic mood. It lacks the vehemence of expression that characterizes the other three ballades, Op. 23, Op. 38 and Op. 52, with their terrifying codas of whirlwind intensity.

The *Ballade in A flat* is dominated by two principal themes of contrasting character but united by common elements of basic melodic structure. The first, announced at the outset, is a songful melody that begins by rising up six scale notes, echoed by antiphonal responses in the left hand.



Its contrapuntal profile is that of two voices expanding out in opposite directions from a central point, a pattern that intensifies on the following page into celebratory cadences exploding out into ecstatic arpeggios to the low and high registers simultaneously.

The second theme changes the mood completely. It is a dancelike melody of instrumental character that descends six scale notes, outlined in a series of coquettish leaps made all the more coy by the constantly syncopated rhythm in which they are presented.



This second theme dips often into the minor mode but rarely stays there long, often slipping back into the major when cadencing. The minor mode is thus constantly restrained from taking on the mask of tragedy.

While the first theme remains elegantly static throughout the work, the second undergoes considerable development in a texture of ornamental figuration that dances alternately above it and then resonantly rumbles below. This development is the dramatic heart of the piece and immediately follows a third theme area of remarkable flamboyance, with extroverted multi-octave figuration issuing into joyously rambunctious passagework over large swaths of the keyboard.

The work ends with a kind of “apotheosis” of the songful first theme



in massively thickened chordal harmonies and a recall of the rambunctious spirit and exuberant figuration of the contrasting middle section.

Donald Gíslason 2026