

Programme Notes by Nicholas Ashton

This programme has been very carefully compiled from repertoire with a theme of water (in its various forms) running through it:

1. the sound of oars on the dark smooth surface of a Venetian canal;
2. the sound of distant thunder as portentous grey clouds gather;
3. the sudden, almost silent beginning of a snow-fall;
4. the imprint of solitary footsteps on a frozen surface of the fallen snow;
5. the glimpse of a rainbow;
6. the placid, glass surface of still, dark water;
7. the fantastical invocation of a water-nymph, depicted by two composers;
8. the sonic description of cascades of glittering water in fountains.

Of course, despite the specific references made by each composer to its theme, there is much more beneath the surface: each points to an expressive abstraction. The subject of where music has an intersection between its ability to evoke literal, physical phenomena - or remains an abstract medium - has been one of the major areas of serious academic thought for over a hundred years. It has gained particular currency in the past 50 years or so, and in no small part to the work of Raymond Monelle, with whom I studied at Edinburgh University. His investigations into the various theories of music signification, semiotics, and more recent offshoots (topic theory), were world-leading in the field, and I cherish the time I spent with him.

Felix Mendelssohn: Gondolierlied, op 19b No 6 (1830), G minor

This is the first in a series of three Venetian Gondolier Songs, or *barcarolles*, which Mendelssohn composed after visits to the lagoon city in the early 1830s. He included them in the collections of short piano works he entitled "Songs without Words", which form a kind of personal musical diary kept throughout his life. Although they are basically intended as salon music (designed to appeal to the many accomplished amateur pianists of the time as a sort of decorous female accomplishment), the best of them transcend the medium and attain a lyrical intensity on a par with Chopin, Schumann and Liszt.

Here, Mendelssohn evokes the gently repetitive sound of oar strokes on water and the sway of a gondola, over which the gondolier croons a melancholy melody. Beneath that, however, there is an undercurrent of sadness, of loss and of longing – and perhaps even an unsettling suggestion of ghosts and death, as anyone who visited Venice will have experienced.

Liszt: Nuages Gris (Grey Clouds – 1881)

If the introductory *Gondolierlied* may gently suggest something darker than an evening boating on a canal, this extraordinary short work, written in the last years of Liszt's life, surely evokes something far more sinister even than its title (just as the other Liszt work in this programme is far more than an evocation of shimmering, sparkling water fountains). These late works inhabit an intensely melancholy and introspective mood, and they are also extremely experimental in terms of tonality; they point unmistakably in the direction of the work of Schoenberg.

Although the starting point here is within a setting of G minor (leaving off from Mendelssohn), this ostinato, based on the G minor triad is immediately subverted with the alien augmented 4th, C sharp. This dissonance develops with falling chromatic augmented triads under which an ominous tremolo Bb-A bass rumbles. A brief, plaintive melody, set again over the initial ostinato, fails to resolve a defined key, and the final bars dispense entirely with resolution, disappearing, as it were, into an unanswered question.

Claude Debussy: Snow is Dancing (No 4 from Children's Corner)

The mood here perfectly captures that strange, magical moment when snow begins to fall; suddenly and almost entirely silently. Debussy achieves this by means of a constant background of staccato semiquavers, divided between the pianist's hands, over which he layers a skein of brief melodic contour.

A tiny, intensely plaintive middle section presents a sort of keening wail, cleverly contrasting the semiquaver ostinato with precisely drawn out triplet cross-rhythms, leading to a sudden central climax before returning to a repetition of the opening, gradually evaporating.

There is a perfection of pianistic writing here; Debussy demonstrating an infallible grasp of the possibilities of texture, dynamic and sonority, in a manner as remarkable and revolutionary as Chopin. Moreover, the approach to tonality is extraordinarily subtle; although the key is basically D minor (the tonality is only firmly realised at the end), the chromaticisms, a modal approach and the settling on remotely connected tonal regions, present a fascinating ambiguity.

Claude Debussy: Des pas sur la Neige (Footsteps in the Snow, No 6, Preludes, premier Livre)

The specific indication at the start of this is: "*ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé*", which I translate rather freely as: "*Here, the rhythm should evoke - in sound - an icy landscape; remote and profoundly sad*".

I quote the composer because his indication is so specific; he seems to want you to know exactly his thoughts in referring to the work. The great pianist, Alfred Cortot, also says of this work: "Faint tracks still showing after the departure of the absent friend, each one sadly awakening the memory of a happiness that is gone"; which brings the entire concept of Proust into the mix.

A question: Is this necessary? All we need to bring to this exquisite work are attentive ears and a direct connection to our imaginations and emotions. Moreover, Debussy's score, being so pin-point precise in his markings, requires that all the player really need do is to follow them as exactly as possible. No words - no reference point actually - are necessary.

The tonal basis is -again -the key of D minor, setting out in a rhythmic ostinato over which a melodic fragment floats, introducing harmonic ambiguity, which is further explored in unfinished modulatory passages drifting further and further away from the central tonality. It is only in the final bars that the key returns.

Gyorgy Ligeti: Arc-en-Ciel (Rainbow, from Etudes, premiere Livre)

This beautiful short etude represents an oasis of calm and introspection in the whirlwind of intense activity characterising the others in this, Ligeti's first set of piano studies. As with the Berio work following it, one of the main influences is jazz; in particular, he is influenced by the jazz pianist Bill Evans, whose reflective, lyrical, pared-down approach - with an intense concentration on tonal colour and shade - is painted by Ligeti in precise and detailed dynamic markings and texture.

Berio: Wasserklavier (1965, from Six Encores)

This is the third short work in a portmanteau series of six, each with a descriptive title, written by Berio for various colleagues and friends over a space of some twenty years. The pieces vary in technical difficulty, with two of them, *Luftklavier* (Air-Piano) and *Feuerklavier* (Fire-Piano) being the most exhilarating and demanding works, exploring timbre, rhythm and melody very much akin to Ligeti in his magisterial set of Etudes.

Wasserklavier is essentially a mood piece, with clever and exact precision in the notation, which, if exactly observed by the performer, should sound like subtle syncopation and rubato. The ruminative exploration of the key of F minor and an almost hoquet-like approach to jumping the melodic contour add to the air of improvisation, rather in the manner of the great jazz pianist Bill Evans, whom Berio greatly admired, the composer attempting to delineate in his score the unique characteristics of Evan's approach to sound; texture, tone quality and dynamic. The piece basically riffs, very quietly, and explores the beauty of the higher tessitura of the keyboard and around the key without modulation away from F minor.

The descriptive title (by the composer), is without explanation; my feeling is that evokes a pictorial image of a dark, still lake; no movement, scarcely a sound or ripple.

Maurice Ravel: Ondine (from Gaspard de la Nuit)

Gaspard de la Nuit is one of the most perfectly realised and most demanding works in the piano repertoire; and it was designed expressly to be that by the composer. Ravel certainly presents a new dimension, in range, to the technical challenges presented by Chopin, Liszt and Debussy, and these three composers were of great influence, with Liszt's *Douze Etudes d'execution transcendante* being a specific model. Ravel also had a keen eye on brilliant concert show pieces, such as Balakirev's *Islamay*, which were very popular in the early 20th century, and unfortunately have remained so.

Ravel approaches the piano and its technical possibilities in the manner of "a Swiss clockwork maker", as Stravinsky so accurately – and perhaps a little mordantly - put it; everything, from structural planning to harmonic plotting, texture, dynamic, rhythm, sonority and the complex intricacies of what ten fingers could achieve, is plotted out with fascinating precision.

There is a defined tonality, that of C sharp major, offset immediately by the sting of the minor sixth in the arresting opening ostinato; the subsequent interplay between major and minor, in a kaleidoscopic succession of tonal regions, forms the basis of the harmonic journey. The ostinato is constantly present as a background rhythm: xyxx/yxxy (crudely, the rhythm of the Cuban *rumba*). Ravel was very fond of ostinato as a structuring technique; he uses it most famously in *Bolero*, but it appears in other works (the piano concerto for the left hand, in *Daphnis et Chloe*, *L'enfant et les sortilèges*); its effect is hypnotic, and marks a certain obsessive character.

Unlike Debussy, who was a highly skilled pianist and wrote with an extraordinarily idiomatic and natural sense of the instrument, Ravel has an approach which is more artificial; he writes with extreme precision, but with little practical, physical sense of the hands on the keyboard. Thus, a challenge: This is what I have constructed; it is you, the pianist, who must find your way around it.

The reference for *Gaspard de la Nuit* is a set of three gothic, quasi-surreal poems from 1842 by Aloysius Bertrand, *Ondine* being the first, evoking the water-spirit of the title, who appears, capriciously enticing her quarry, firstly in raindrops beating on window panes, then in the rippling waves of a dark lake, in the rush of water of a stream, beseeching the victim to take her hand in marriage before disappearing, with mocking, shrieking laughter.

Claude Debussy: Ondine (Preludes Book 2, No 8)

The basis - at least in title - for this wonderful prelude, is the same as that of Ravel, although other composers and writers have been attracted to the myth. It was one of the inspirations behind the French play *Pelléas et Mélisande*, by Maurice Maeterlinck. Debussy used the play's text as the libretto for his opera of the same name.

Debussy's depiction is perhaps more capricious - and several shades warmer - than Ravel's *Ondine*, and the linking sections are more defined, but the subtlety is of the same calibre, and the sophistication of harmony and texture as extraordinary. Debussy writes much more comfortably for the pianist, yet the technical challenges are as equally extended.

An introductory, scherzando-like section, lilting playfully in 6/8 (and touching suggestively towards a tonality of D), gives way to a second, rather sinister, section, featuring a static rhythm with chromatic flourishes (Bartok must have had these in mind in composing the section "The Lake of Tears" in *Bluebeard's Castle*).

This tiny section serves to link the following; a third section, warmly set around D major, vaguely reminiscent of a romantic waltz, with quizzical syncopations; the fourth, an unsettling ostinato centred on the tonality of Eb; a beautiful, reflective fifth section modulating through a descending series of dominant major 9^{ths}, before a tiny and brilliant coda - a magical disappearing trick of arpeggios, alternating F sharp major and D major, with the final, exquisite flourish unequivocally in the latter.

Franz Liszt: Les jeux d' eaux a la Villa d'Este (from Part 3 of Years of Pilgrimage: Italy)

This work derives from the third collection of piano pieces, which Liszt entitled "Years of Pilgrimage", starting with the first, "Switzerland", the second, "Italy" and this, the third, also from that country.

During these years, Liszt was experiencing a profound spiritual transformation, and the works are as much a personal diary of this interior struggle as much as they are an almost impressionistic evocation of scenes and events: a storm, a funeral procession, the sound of bells, an evocation of mysterious, deep mountain valley, the sound of water in streams, fountains, waterfalls, the sound of cypress trees in the wind; these alongside more pointed religious references; St Francis, etc.

It is this intersection of reference and connection between the beauty and mystery of the real, outer world, juxtaposed with the spiritual, inner, which is both fascinating and moving. In this work, Liszt depicts, on the surface, the complex interplay of the system of water fountains (which still exist) at the Villa d' Este, but underpinning this, an extraordinary sense of longing, questing, for redemption - in the composer's case, for the solace of spiritual benediction.

The propulsion from the outset is an ascending series of broken/arpeggiated chords centred on a series of major dominant 9^{ths}, eventually alighting upon the home key, of F sharp major. However, this brief resolution continues to be unsettled; Liszt exploits the upper reaches of the keyboard until over halfway through the work, when a more sonorous episode, starting in D major, brings a richer depth to the texture. A passionate and dramatic central climax finally evaporates into an ethereal coda in Eb major, descending through G major, C major and Ab major, towards the final resting place of F sharp major.

