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### **Till Fellner and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4**

The works featured in tonight's concert had an obvious common thread: at the premiere, they received a very bad reception from the public. Although distant in time and different in style, each of them was greeted with jeers and severe criticism, as well as the Beethoven's *Concerto* and Debussy's *Nocturnes*, to say nothing of Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin*. The newspapers reported that the audience walked out, indignant, and the music caused scandal, whistles, even political incidents. Such was the reaction to the audacity and imagination of these composers, long considered classic masters of the concert program. Could it be for fear of the novelty and difficulty to face the unknown world of sound? For us, today, it is not clear what was the cause of the trouble to the audience of these work's premieres. But, in confidence, are we really different? Could it be that we are also suspicious of facing the new?

### **Debussy (1862-1918)**

#### *Nocturnes*

##### *1. Nuages*

##### *2. Fêtes*

"This is nice...but absurd in theory." So said Guiraud, Debussy's teacher, commenting on the early works of the young composer. Never mind, "just listen; the pleasure is the rule », was Debussy's answer. A new aural sensation, sound in itself will be the composer's Credo in his search for new tone colors, associated with poetry and visual arts.

Composing his three *Nocturnes* (1899) at the turn of the century, Debussy was still far away from the spirit of romanticism. At the breaking point with the tonal domination, he avoided any thematic development, blurring the melody, splitting the rhythm, wandering between undefined tonalities. Enough to give his contemporaries a huge sea-sickness.

To begin with, the composer conceived the work for the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe: "I am working on three nocturnes for violin and orchestra that are intended for you...This is, in fact an experiment in the various arrangements that can be made with a single color – as a painter might make a study in gray, for example." (1894). Ultimately, he decided to recast this music for orchestra alone, keeping the title, although the usual name nocturne conveyed a different meaning, usually applied to the single-movement character piece for solo piano.

The expression is evocative of the night, misty lights and foggy dreams. What did Debussy say about it? Concerning *Nuages* (Clouds): "The unchanging aspect of the sky, and the slow, solemn movement of the clouds dissolving in gray tints lightly touched with white." The visual impression is founded on colors in monochromatic shades with predominant gray, resulting in an effect of changing illumination, very close to the Whistler's *Nocturnes*, which inspired Debussy. The encounter between the musician and the painter was not just a coincidence. Debussy met Whistler at the

Mallarmé's circle of artists and was a great admirer of his paintings. A number of them bears musical titles, such as *Symphony in White* (1864), *Harmony in blue and silver* (1865), *Nocturne in Gray and Gold* (1874). In spite of the close affinity and the composer's poetic and pictorial allusions, Debussy's compositions are free from any device alien to the very nature of the music.

All Debussy's friends from the Mallarmé's circle were innovators, seeking the break-up of the traditional use of words in poetry and in narrative literature, followed by the painters, on the path to abstraction. The composer transposed their innovative ideas in his music. The subtleties of poetic expression and elliptic suggestion found their analogy in suspended cadences and in pianissimo shades on the verge of silence. The gradation of single color in painting, the subtle *clair-obscur* effects inspired a new world of sonorities, scintillating and velvety orchestral sound, the flow of evasive modulations, without tonal roots, free of the temporal sense, as with no beginning and no end.

The medieval technique of organum, polyphonic composition in perfect intervals, creates the impression of suspended time. There is no sense of harmonic progression: consecutive fourths, fifths, and octaves are static, avoiding tension and resolution. The melodic shapes of the cor anglais hover in the transparent orchestration. A hint of pentatonic mode and the insistent presence of the triton are elements of stability. Could it be a reminiscence of exotic music? The effect is magic.

The second *Nocturne, Fêtes* (Festivals), enters in the dance, as in a dream. It is "the restless dancing rhythm of the atmosphere interspersed with sudden flashes of light. There is also an incidental procession (a dazzling imaginary vision) passing through and through and mingling with the aerial daydream; but the background of uninterrupted festival is persistent with its blending of music, and luminous dust participating in the universal rhythm of all things." (Debussy) Contrasting with the grayness of *Nuages*, the orchestration of *Fêtes* uses a wide range of colors, shaping the musical material with timbres, instead of the thematic growth. The orchestra of Wagnerian dimension is treated with a subtlety of a jeweler: muffled brass instruments, strings divided up into ten sections, a light touch on percussions (cymbals and timbales), and finally, celesta, harp and glockenspiel produce a glistening spatial effect with their pearl sound. No way to resist pleasure and emotion.

In order to give a reference point to the listener, *Nocturnes* are in a symmetrical tripartite form: A - B - A'. The ultimate concession to the traditional structure.

The last piece of the Debussy's part of the program is a miniature for solo flute, *Syrinx*, an allusion to a legendary figure from Greek mythology. According to the story from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, the nymph Syrinx was pursued by the amorous Pan, god of woods and pastures. No longer able to escape, she changed into the reeds growing on the river bank. Disappointed, thinking of the nymph, Pan gathered reeds of different sizes, from which he made pipes, inventing the musical instrument that was named syrinx after her, or Pan flute, after the god himself.

*Syrinx* was originally composed as a part of incidental music for an unfinished play, *Psyché* by Gabriel Mourey. Finally, Debussy dedicated the piece to the flautist Louis Fleury who premiered it in 1913. The score was written without bar lines or breath marks and the melody moves as an arabesque in a weightless space. There is no tonal gravity center, the

music disintegrates into chromatic particles, the free rhythm flowing as carried by the wind. Three minutes out of time, out of space. Varèse and Berio, are they so far away?

To conclude with Debussy, why not quote Érik Satie, who, under the pen name Erit Satis (*that's enough*), better than anyone, sums up Debussy's heretical audacities in music, the same breakings which made him a forerunner of modernity ?

Conservatoire's Catechism

1. Thou shalt adore God-Debussy only,  
And copy him perfectly.
2. Thou shalt never be melodious  
In fact of by condonement.
3. Thou shalt abstain from planning ever,  
So as to compose with more facility.
4. With great car thou shalt violate  
The rules of the old primer.
5. Thou shalt use consecutive fifths  
As well as consecutive octaves.
6. Thou shalt never – oh never –  
Resolve a dissonance in any manner.
7. Thou shalt never end a piece  
With a consonant chord.
8. Thou shalt accumulate ninth-chords  
Without any discrimination.
9. Thou shalt not desire a perfect concord  
Except in marriage.

*Ad Gloriam Tuam*

(*La semaine musicale*, Paris, 1927, Posthumous publication)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

***The Miraculous Mandarin***, Suite (1927)

Bartók's score, "grotesque pantomime" for the theatre, went through a lot of troubles, raising scandals and uproars, incidents and rebukes, and finally banishment on radio programs. From its catastrophic premiere in Cologne, in November 1926, and the following year in Prague, it was marked by formidable struggles. The audience hissed at the music and the staging alike. The Budapest productions were cancelled, first by political and religious authorities (1931 and 1941), and in 1950, five years after his death, the work was forbidden by the communist leaders. Audacious, gloomy, dreadful story, there was no attractive charm for the usual theater and concert-goers. The issues were both the fantastic tale, its characters from the bottom of society, implicit social criticism, and the music, with brutal dissonances, harsh rhythm and striking, unusual sonorities. Under different circumstances, the *Mandarin* might have marked musical history, in the same way as Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. Coming after his ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1916) and his opera *The Bluebeard Castle* (1918), *The*

*Miraculous Mandarin* was his third theater score. The composer considered it as “the best work I have so far written for orchestra”. Working on the orchestration score, Bartok began to doubt the possibility of ever getting the work on stage, and as early as 1927, he adapted the pantomime score in an orchestral suite. It is in this version that *The Miraculous Mandarin* has become known.

Bartók, man and musician, was a solitary character, with high moral integrity, in art as well as in life. Secret and silent, everything he wanted to express is to be found in his music. At the cross roads of the East and West, between the folk tradition and classical heritage, Bartók's style was a synthesis of invented peasant melodies, classicism and modernism. He experimented with extreme compositional practices, as well as rhythmic complexity and polymodality. The critics were harsh, using almost the same words written to comment Beethoven a hundred years earlier, or Debussy, Bartók's model: “modern ugliness” in tune with the “cult of the wrong notes”. He was in good company, but it was of little use. What was it in his work causing such lack of understanding?

The one act pantomime was based on a fantastical story by Melchior Lengyel, Hungarian writer, inspired by a dramatic Chinese tale. In few words, here is the plot: in a sordid part of a big city, three tramps force a girl to lure passing men inside to be robbed. Her first two victims are penniless; the third, rich mandarin, is seduced and embraces the girl. He is caught in the trap; the thugs attack and rob the mandarin, and try to kill him three times, but he seems to be immortal, still longing for the girl. Only after she accepts his embrace, the mandarin falls lifeless to the ground.

The story is dreadful, gloomy, and the music is dense. Rebelling against academic conventions, Debussy like Bartok choose to break free from harmonic tonality and thematic growth. Concentrated on the essentials, on the opposite side of the grandiloquent late romanticism, he invented powerful melodies, founded on modal and pentatonic games, similar to those in Oriental folk traditions. In this work, their linear pattern is adapted to the polytonal and polymodal structures, with extreme chromatic tensions. The resulting sharp dissonances produce unusual sound effects. Although melodic lines and harmonic structures never entirely abandon the tonality, they impose a strong, lapidary expression. The listener doesn't come out of this encounter unharmed.

After this pantomime, Bartok never again attempted to compose for the musical stage.

### **Beethoven (1770-1827)**

#### **Piano Concerto N. 4 in G-major, Op. 58**

Icy concert hall, four hours of endless program<sup>1</sup>, unprepared orchestra, audience devoid of interest for the new music, and a pianist – Beethoven himself – at odds with the orchestra and unforeseen events. Everything was set for a huge fiasco, which didn't fail to occur. It was on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1808, in the *Theater an der Wien*. It was Beethoven's last appearance as soloist with an orchestra.

The audience was quite unconcerned about this music and the critics didn't dare to utter a word. It was only a few months later, in Leipzig, that the work created interest. A review in the May 1809 edition of *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, generously used superlatives, stated : “The most recent of Beethoven's piano concertos in G...is the most admirable, singular, artistic and difficult work he has ever written.” Not

enough to inspire other pianists, who almost totally ignored the concerto for a quarter of the century. Owing to young Felix Mendelssohn, the concerto was performed in Leipzig in 1836. ( Indeed, Mendelssohn was destined to accomplish similar rescue services for other forgotten masterworks: after Bach's *Matthews-Passion* in 1829, came Beethoven, Haendel and Schubert...). Robert Schuman was present at the concert, reporting that he listened the concerto in such awe, without even breathing.

Indeed, the concerto follows non-traditional paths, far from the sparkling virtuosity preferred by the audience. From the very opening, stated by the piano solo, the keynote of the movement is meditative and serene, very different from the character of earlier Beethoven's concertos. The simple chords of the piano alone, like a subtle improvisation, invite the orchestra to join the music. In a magnificent crescendo of the whole orchestra begins a dialogue, gradually introducing the first theme, while the piano unfolds its rich potential until the fortissimo. The movement concludes with a brilliant soloist cadence, just before the return of the initial tonality.

Beethoven freely followed the structure of the sonata form; its innovative features are determined by the apparent improvisatory character of the themes and the depth of musical content. The *Appassionata* was composed at the same time; no wonder that Beethoven's concerto took the same untried path.

Contrasting with its dark sound colors, the slow movement, *Andante con moto*, leaves to the unisson strings the poignant opening of the dialogue with the soloist. As a reminiscence of old baroque concertos, there is an opposition between the solo and *tutti*, although the tone is clearly romantic. The score, with its rhapsodic rhythm, suggests the vocal recitative inspired by the opera, and with the orchestra, creates a dramatic atmosphere, sometimes associated with the legend of Orpheus taming the wild beasts with his lyre. But this sublime movement doesn't need any story; its intensity raises a deep emotion, such as only music is able to awaken.

The concluding rondo enters without transition in the dance with a very rhythmic theme, twirling around between the piano and the orchestra. The soloist introduces the second sparkling theme, in the echo game with the *tutti*. As indicated by the title, *Rondo vivace*, the third movement is in traditional rondo form, bursting with energy and full of wit. There is a marvelous concordance between piano and orchestra.

An absolute masterpiece.

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<sup>1</sup> The program consisted only of Beethoven's works, all of them a premiere : *The Fifth and Sixth Symphonies*, *Aria Ah, Perfido!* (Op. 65), *Gloria* and *Sanctus* from the *Mass in C* (Op. 86), *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major* (Op. 58), *Fantasy for piano solo* (Op. 77), and finally, *Choral Fantasy in C minor for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra* (Op. 80).