

PROGRAM NOTES

Oiseaux Tristes

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Ravel entered the Paris Conservatory at the age of 14 and benefitted from the best instruction the institution had to offer. He made acquaintances with Chabrier and Erik Satie, and from each of them developed a flair for non-conformity, quite the opposite of the technical discipline he was accustomed to at the Conservatory. He also acquired a taste for harmonic exploration. Completed in 1905, *Miroirs* illustrates Ravel's further expansion in technical means and a broadening of expressive scope. By their titles and their emotional contents, they assert a divergence from mere dependence upon Debussy-like models. *Oiseaux tristes* is particularly stimulating in its foreshadowing of polyharmony. Ravel dedicated the five pieces of this piano cycle *Miroirs* ("Mirrors") to five of his closest friends who were also members of the Paris artists' circle, the Apaches. *Oiseaux tristes* ("Sad Birds") is dedicated to pianist Ricardo Viñes. The translated title speaks for itself. The listener will hear the flitting of the birds in the circular ascent of the five-note pattern in the right hand, followed by the descent of the birds as the left-hand creeps along the lower register of the piano, until their melancholy turns to madness with screeching diminished chords pounding away on the upper register in a frenzy. The piece is perhaps dedicated to his pianist friend, for its pianistic qualities, as tonality and harmonic progressions are challenged, while maintaining an occasional lyrical quality that holds the listener just enough without being quite too daring. "Sad birds" brings us to sadness but does not quite make us cry – a rather dichotomous trick by the crafty French composer.

Sonata No. 14 in C Minor, K. 457

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Molto allegro

Adagio

Allegro assai Agitato

Mozart composed a total of 18 original solo piano sonatas between the years 1774 through 1789, with the latter half being primarily during the last seven years of his life while he lived in Vienna. He composed Sonata No. 14 in C minor, K. 457 in Vienna in October of 1784. His next piano sonata would not be composed until 1788, rendering this Sonata No. 14 as a piece to cap off the first decade of his piano sonata writing. Considering his first Sonata No. 1 in C Major was composed in Autumn of 1774, it is perhaps quite fitting that his last sonata of the decade would be composed in its parallel minor, C Minor. One could also argue, however, that Mozart just fancied the key of C, as he composed a total of four piano sonatas in the key of C, and one, No. 14, in the key of C minor. Imagine being Judith DiBona, an Accounting Manager at Eastern College in St. David's, Pennsylvania, who in July of 1990, while rummaging through an old safe at the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary looking for legal documents, stumbled across a manila envelope entitled "Sacred Music" on the outside. As an amateur pianist herself, her curiosity was piqued, so she opened the folder, and was privy to an amazing discovery. Among the gospel hymns are five older music manuscripts, including a chorus "Scenda propizio" by Haydn, one leaf of an orchestral work by Johann Strauss, a pencil arrangement of a recitative and aria from Handel's *Rinaldo*, and most intriguing of all, a bound manuscript labeled "Fantasia and Sonata in C minor" that the amateur pianist herself recognized as Mozart's great pair of piano works, K. 475 and 457. Further analysis of the bound work determines that Mozart composed the music of the second movement at a different time than that of the outer movement, leading music experts to opine that Mozart may have

initially conceived the Sonata in two fast movements, though no other Mozart piano sonata follows this scheme. Another explanation would be that he composed the slow movement first as a teaching piece of his student, Therese von Trattner, to whom he dedicated the piece. Another fascinating discovery shed light on Mozart's compositional process. Mozart composed an initial set of variations on the main theme, but later wrote out a final revised set of variations including embellishments not only for the first two reprises but also for part of the coda. This indicates that Mozart's changes through additional dynamics, refinements in texture and sonority and intensifications in rhythm and harmony, as well as significant revisions to the melody and formal structure, allowed him to take a set of lovely initial variations and combine them into a more cohesive whole, resulting in the final well-packaged three-movement Sonata listeners will hear today.

Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 23

Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)

To love and appreciate piano music is to love and appreciate Chopin. He was an exquisite pianist to the rare few who were fortunate enough to hear him perform during his lifetime, which cost the music world a sad loss when he died in 1849 at the tender age of 39. It is well documented that he was plagued with poor health for most of his life, and therefore could not sustain the demands of a touring concert pianist, unlike his counterparts Beethoven and Liszt. Instead, Chopin preserved his precious energy by limiting his piano performances to intimate parlor settings with close friends within the music community and focused more on teaching his devoted students and composing music solely for his instrument of choice, the piano. For this reason alone, it can be argued that he had a connection with his piano compositions in a way that other composers of various instruments just did not possess. Chopin's **Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23**, is one such example of this symbiotic relationship between pianist and composition. Since the late 18th century, the musical term Ballade has meant a setting of a literary ballad, a narrative poem, in the musical tradition of the Lied, or to a one-movement instrumental piece with lyrical and dramatic narrative qualities reminiscent of such a song setting, especially a piano ballad. The Oxford Dictionary of Music defines a ballade as a term "given by Chopin to a long, dramatic type of piece, the music equivalent of a poetical ballad of the heroic type." In a word, Chopin's pioneer Ballade No. 1 is epic. It opens with an ascending broken Neapolitan chord, a favorite of the languid composer. As Karol Berger describes in her article entitled, *The Form of Chopin's Ballade, Op. 23*, the "main musical discourse of the G-Minor Ballade, the Moderato, is framed on both sides, by the Largo introduction, and the Presto con fuoco coda. Chopin begins the storytelling in a gentle soft demeanor, takes the listener through a wild journey of enflamed tempestuousness with harmonic dissonance and chromatic octaves, playful antics and carnival-like rhythms, long arpeggiated left hand waves against the most lyrically pristine melody, all while leading his main characters right into the fire to be devoured by flames for the most fantastic finale. This piece is a story, and it will require patience of its listeners, but much like any story, something new and interesting and charming will be found with each listen.

Sonata in C Major, K. 159

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

The **Sonata in C Major, K. 159**, composed by Domenico Scarlatti, opens with the left hand and right hand lined up closely to one another in parallel fashion, playing a succession of descending thirds, immediately pleasing to the listener's ears, and in the familiar key of C Major. Scarlatti, in typical Baroque fashion, frosts the ends of his four-bar phrases with trills, turns, and the occasional grace note. The left and right hand take turns playing the longer descending melody line, with the left hand afforded

the opportunity to bring out the longer notes. Scarlatti opens this piece with a jubilant energy in a major key and with one small change to the parallel minor, he deepens the mood of the piece with this one theoretical shift in keys. The minor section of the piece continues to pattern itself after Theme 1, repeating the descending melody line in the left hand. Scarlatti's ABA form concludes in a dramatic rapidly descending, scalar passage that begins in C minor but then ends in a major scale, reminiscent of a technique used by composers called a Picardy Third, in which a major chord of the tonic at the end of a musical section that is minor is used to achieve resolution, by raising the third of the minor triad by a semitone to create a major triad, as opposed to the minor chord the listener is expecting to hear. This creates an element of surprise in a piece, and Scarlatti perhaps uses this scalar transition to return to the tonic key of C major. Though the return to the main theme provides familiarity, Scarlatti continues to entertain the pianist as well as the listener with right hand leaps spanning over an octave to outline a C-Major chord in the higher register of the piano, while the left hand brings out two-note slurs.

Harmonies du Soir

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Liszt had an uncanny sense of the 'topography' of the piano. It may have been a result of his ability to reach well over an octave quite comfortably. Particularly, his fourth fingers were unusually long and that created difficult fingerings for pianists with smaller hands. However, as difficult as his passagework may be, they are truly pianistic. Compared to even Chopin, who perhaps wrote passages against, rather than for, the piano, Liszt's passagework is often simpler to play than Chopin's, although it may sound more difficult. Like Chopin, Liszt also chose to compose etudes, also known as studies for the piano that were not only meant as an exercise for the pianist to improve technique but could also stand on their own as musical repertoire to be thoroughly enjoyed by the listener. Liszt studied under the great master of technical exercises, Carl Czerny, and his influence is omnipresent in the large set of 12 Transcendental Etudes, referred to as "Transcendental" because one would have to be "other-worldly" to play them. The opening of *Harmonies du Soir* creates an ethereal effect through hypnotic broken chords that display a unique sonority through slight harmonic changes. Liszt then introduces the first main theme, but in the left hand first, as it builds while the right hand crosses over with "bell-like" octaves. As the piece progresses, interpolated between the recurring melody are chromatic passages of diminished chords set against triads that require the hands to be interchangeable at times, passing like ships in the night, nearly colliding with one another. A second theme is then introduced in an unexpected manner, and it ultimately builds to the most technically difficult and physically demanding section of the piece. This virtuoso showcase will not be lost on the listener and the performer will be challenged to accomplish large successive jumps with massive chords in both hands. Harmonies of the evening drape across the finale of this piece, as light slips away and the music fades into the dark.