

The Romantics

The fantastic to the sublime



Chopin ~ Grieg
Brahms
Rachmaninov

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The fantastic to the sublime

For this concert I have chosen piano works by four giants of piano literature's golden age. This historic period is known as the Romantic Period; whether any of these composers identified with the term is its own topic. Romanticism was a deep rejection of the Industrial Revolution and embraced the burgeoning of Humanism, similar to today's struggle with A.I. One of the main tenets of this emerging cultural shift was the resonance of nature as the essence of the divine. "A direct consequence of the reaction against the Enlightenment's orderliness was a savoring of chaos, obscurity, and ambiguity that comprise the theme we call 'The Seductiveness of Mystery.' The enticement of the mysterious came from every corner of the Romantic's experience, from the mysteries of the inner psychological domain (the unconscious and dreams), to those within nature's vastness, to the mystical side of religious devotion."¹

The human impulse to dominate fellow humans was keenly felt by these composers, especially Chopin, who spent his adult life exiled in Paris after witnessing Czarist Russia's repeated domination of Poland, his home country. Music was also a refuge from worldly pain, which Chopin certainly would have understood as he battled with tuberculosis from the age of nineteen until his death from the disease at thirty-nine.

Brahms was rooted in the ideas of Humanism and the inspiration of the natural world. Brahms was a scholar of the music of antiquity in addition to having a comprehensive understanding of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Brahms possessed an extensive knowledge of current and historic literature and poetry. He, like Goethe, the 18th century's Germanic Shakespeare, embraced the rationality of the enlightenment in its forms of artistic expression, yet Brahms explored the subjectivity of an individual's emotional world with all of its many complexities, both noble and primitive.

Grieg was an avid mountaineer and built his beloved home, Troldhaugen, in the Norwegian countryside as a refuge and creative homestead for composition and revitalization. Like Brahms, Grieg enjoyed the discovery and study of his Scandinavian folklore, poetry and literature as a means of inspiration. Unlike Brahms, Grieg enjoyed the playful fantasy associated with the imaginary aspects of these ancient tales.

Rachmaninov carries Brahms' exploration of our humanity's emotional world to an expansive, epic landscape. He captured the soul of his homeland and melds it to his longing for the lost Russia of his youth. He was composing at a time when Russian art, literature, architecture and music looked for inspiration from a long history, not primarily from European influences. Rachmaninov and Grieg shared a melodic sweetness in their sound-worlds inspired by the mythic aspects of folklore. Brahms and Grieg celebrated the roots of their countries' folk music and literary traditions.

All four composers were concert pianists. Chopin, Brahms, and Rachmaninov, unlike Grieg, were exceptional pianists and each contributed to the development and exploration of the instrument's potential. All were deeply connected to the countries of their birth. Chopin and Rachmaninov would continue to express their deep connection for their respective countries while in exile, Chopin in France and Rachmaninov in America.

Why the romantics? My inspiration for this concert came from an increasing awareness of the lack of healthy emotional interaction and more disturbingly, a lack of emotional literacy, in our world. The act of being present - either as performer or listener - heightens our awareness of our best selves.

Music can capture the truest poetry of the human condition. The composer performs the act of marrying one sound to another sound in connection with, or rejection of, a history of sounds while absorbing the world. As nineteenth century composers became more aware of articulating their interior worlds, so too was their expansion and investigation of emotional expression in their harmonic languages. They created sound for the nourishment of the soul.



С. П.

CONCERT PROGRAM

Fryderyk Chopin

1810-1849

Fantasia-Impromptu

op. 66

Edvard Grieg

1843-1907

Etude

op. 73, no. 5

Nocturne

op. 54

March of the Dwarfs

op. 54

Fryderyk Chopin

1810-1849

Nocturne in B major

op. 32, no. 1

INTERMISSION

Fryderyk Chopin

1810-1849

Military Polonaise

op. 40, no. 1

Johannes Brahms

1833-1897

Intermezzo

op. 118, no. 2

Ballad

op. 118, no. 3

Sergey Rachmaninov

1873-1943

Prelude

op. 23, no. 4

Prelude

op. 23, no. 5

As you make your way through the program notes you will see references to the key in which the pieces are written.

Attached you will find a nineteenth century guide to possible reasons for the choice of keys.

Chopin, Brahms, and Grieg lived in the nineteenth century, while Rachmaninov lived in the twentieth century, but with a nineteenth-century ear and sensibility.

Cover Photo:

Upper Fall of the Reichenbach: Rainbow by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1810)

AFFECTIVE MUSICAL KEY CHARACTERISTICS

The association of musical keys with specific emotional or qualitative characteristics was fairly common prior to the 20th century. It was part of the shared cultural experience of those who made, performed and listened to music. When Mozart or Beethoven or Schubert wrote a piece in $A\flat$ major, for example, they were well aware that this was the “key of the grave” and knew that many in their audiences were aware as well. We lose a part of the meaning of their music if we are ignorant of their affective choices. Although these characteristics were, of course, subjective, it was possible to conceive of each key as unique because each key actually sounded distinct within unequal temperaments. When equal temperament became the dominant tuning after 1917, the aural quality of every key became the same, and therefore these affective characteristics are mostly lost to us. (*The Piano's Ivory Cage*, David Loberg Code, Western Michigan University)

One of the most influential descriptions of characteristics shared in German-speaking cultures in the late 18th and early 19th century was from Christian Schubart's *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1806).

C major: Completely pure. Its character is innocence, simplicity, naïvete, children's talk.

C minor: Declaration of love and at the same time the lament of unhappy love. All languishing, longing, sighing of the love-sick soul lies in this key.

D \flat major: A leering key, degenerating into grief and rapture. It cannot laugh, but it can smile; it cannot howl, but it can at least grimace its crying. Consequently, only unusual characters and feelings can be brought out in this key.

C# minor: Penitential lamentation, intimate conversation with God, the friend and helpmate of life; sighs of disappointed friendship and love lie in its radius.

D major: The key of triumph, of hallelujahs, of war-cries, of victory rejoicing. Thus, the inviting symphonies, the marches, holiday songs and heaven-rejoicing choruses are set in this key.

D minor: Melancholy womanliness, the spleen and humours brood.

E♭ major: The key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation with God.

D# minor: Feelings of the anxiety of the soul's deepest distress, of brooding despair, of blackest depression, of the most gloomy condition of the soul. Every fear, every hesitation of the shuddering heart breathes out of horrible D minor. If ghosts could speak, their speech would approximate this key.

E major: Noisy shouts of joy, laughing pleasure and not yet complete, full delight lies in E major.

E minor: Naïve, womanly, innocent declaration of love, lament without grumbling; sighs accompanied by few tears; this key speaks of the imminent hope of resolving into the pure happiness of C major.

F major: Complaisance and calm.

F minor: Deep depression, funereal lament, groans of misery and longing for the grave.

F# major: Triumph over difficulty, free sigh of relief uttered when hurdles are surmounted; echo of a soul that has fiercely struggled and finally conquered lies in all uses of this key.

F# minor: A gloomy key, it tugs at passion as a dog biting a dress. Resentment and discontent are its language.

G major: Everything rustic, idyllic and lyrical, every calm and satisfied passion, every tender gratitude for true friendship and faithful love; in a word, every gentle and peaceful emotion of the heart is correctly expressed by this key.

G minor: Discontent, uneasiness, worry about a failed scheme, bad-tempered gnashing of teeth, resentment and dislike.

A b major: Key of the grave. Death, grave, putrefaction, judgment, eternity lie in its radius.

A b minor: Grumbler, heart squeezed until it suffocates, wailing lament, difficult struggle, the color of this key is everything struggling with difficulty.

A major: This key includes declarations of innocent love, satisfaction with one's state of affairs; hope of seeing one's beloved again when parting; youthful cheerfulness and trust in God.

A minor: Pious womanliness and tenderness of character.

B b major: Cheerful love, clear conscience, hope, aspiration for a better world.

B b minor: A quaint creature, often dressed in the garment of night. It is somewhat surly and very seldom takes on a pleasant countenance. Mocking God and the world, discontented with itself and with everything, preparation for suicide sounds in this key.

B major: Strongly coloured, announcing wild passions, composed from the most glaring colours. Anger, rage, jealousy, fury, despair and every burden of the heart lie in its sphere.

B minor: This is, as it were, the key of patience, of calm awaiting one's fate and of submission to divine dispensation.

Translated by Rita Steblin in *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, UMI Research Press (1983).

Fryderyk Chopin 1810-1849

BIOGRAPHY

Fryderyk Chopin was known as gentle, aristocratic, snobbish, and an elegant artist. He was a child prodigy who began his musical education in his native Poland before traveling throughout Europe. By the age of nineteen Chopin had written two piano concertos that would become embedded in the piano repertoire. He ventured to Vienna, then the musical capital of Europe, only to realize the Viennese public tired quickly of new talent and he would have greater opportunities in Paris, the intellectual and artistic capital of Europe in the nineteenth century. Chopin settled in Paris but remained close to his family through regular correspondence. Chopin never returned to Poland.



Fryderyk Chopin at the piano by Eliza Radziwiłłówna (circa 1826)

Chopin's father was an educator and thought to be descended from the French aristocracy. Chopin was fortunate to have his father guiding him through a comprehensive education at a private academy. Chopin's mother was very beautiful with a fine singing voice. She was a good pianist and often accompanied Chopin's father, who played the flute.

Chopin had three sisters. One sister in particular, Ludwika, remained devoted to her brother during his lifetime and continued to preserve his legacy after his death.

Chopin was nearly engaged in his youth, but was rejected by the girl's family due to his precarious health. His health, however, did not stop George Sand, the bold and iconoclastic French romance novelist, from pursuing the composer many years later, a true tale of opposites attract. The relationship lasted nearly to the end of Chopin's life, until a rupture with Sand over Chopin's vehement disagreement with Sand's treatment of her children. Chopin never had children of his own. He died in Paris on October 17, 1849. A vast funeral was held at the Church of the Madeleine. Chopin requested Mozart's setting of the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass be performed at his funeral. Famously, his sister Ludwika carried his heart back to Poland, as he requested. His remains were buried at Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Chopin greatly admired the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Mozart of the earlier Baroque and Classical periods. Their influence is evident in Chopin's graceful, symmetrical phrases and the similar use of keys and musical forms. Chopin was fascinated by the sound of the mid-nineteenth century piano, particularly those of two Parisian manufacturers, Pleyel and Erard, which supplied Chopin pianos throughout his career.

The design of these instruments was rooted in the French clavecin, a type of harpsichord that was more delicate than its German and English equivalents. There is no doubt that the translucent sound of these French pianos was an inspiration to Chopin. With them he created a sound-world that inspired generations of composers.

PIECES

Fantaisie-Improptu op. 66

An impromptu is an improvisational work with a freer form than other musical pieces. Contrary to the typical impromptu, the *Fantaisie-Improptu* is in ternary form. The tempo marking of the A section is marked *Agitato* (restless, hurried), which Chopin achieved with the use of a cross rhythm device: one hand plays three notes as the other hand plays four notes simultaneously. The contrasting B section is a charming nocturne with a beautiful *Bel Canto* melody (a style of opera Chopin was fond of) accompanied by an arpeggiated base. The A section returns and the piece concludes with a dramatic unwinding of the *Agitato* with a brief echo of the B section's melody.

This piece was not meant for publication; it was commissioned in 1834 by his patron, Mme la Baronne d'Este. Contrary to Chopin's wishes, an earlier sketch of this piece dated 1835 was published posthumously in 1849 by Julian Fontana, a dear friend, pianist, lawyer, executor to Chopin's estate, copyist, and composer in his own right. The d'Este edition, which scholars believe to be the finished edition, was purchased at auction in 1960 by the great Chopin interpreter Arthur Rubinstein.

Nocturne in B major op. 32, no. 1

Chopin's musical legacy is the piano, and the most intimate of his piano compositions was the nocturne, a musical form he raised to great artistic expression. The nocturne, which simply means "night song," was created by the Irish composer and pianist John Field. Chopin, who was known to compose late into the night when the world was still, composed twenty known piano nocturnes using Field's characteristic elements, but Chopin's gifts as a composer of great melodies, along with his new harmonic language, brought the form to a highly sophisticated level.

Nocturne in B major was written between 1836-1837. The melodic quality of this nocturne is at once sweet and melancholy. Could the B major *Nocturne* op. 32, no. 1, be a musical retelling of the intense relationship he was developing at the time with the writer George Sand? "Sand makes several attempts to attract Chopin down to Nohant in 1837 - she finally meets him again in Paris in the summer of 1838, when they become lovers. Delacroix paints his well-known portrait of Sand and Chopin, which is cut into two separate images after the painter's death -"¹ Or possibly the piece reflects Chopin's love of his mother, as the nocturne is a tribute to the moon - long associated with maternal love - and a symbol of the vast unknown. "Her singing voice would have been among the first sounds that the infant Chopin heard. One of her favorite songs was the Polish melody; 'Już miesiąc zeszedł' ("The Moon Has Risen"), which Chopin later incorporated into his youthful *Fantasy on Polish Airs*, op. 13."² The Chopin nocturnes could be thought of as a lifelong journey to celebrate and recreate the visceral memory of his mother.

The night was used by the romantic poets to symbolize infinite mystery and a longing for eternal peace from the hardships of life. Given Chopin's constant health concerns these literary themes would have been well known to him and what better musical form than the nocturne to express his joy, hope, and anguish?

The form of this nocturne is traditional. A right hand melody is accompanied by an arpeggiated left hand accompaniment that is periodically punctuated by a melodic filigree characteristic of Chopin's compositions. The piece concludes with an unusual disruption of the atmosphere. The listener is left wondering why this agitated fragment was not heard earlier and is further surprised by the final chord in the relative major key of B Major. The tempo is marked 4/4, establishing a stable, rhythmic architecture. This nocturne is the perfect marriage of Chopin's Slavic soul with French refinement - Chopin as the poet of the piano.

Military Polonaise op. 40, no. 1

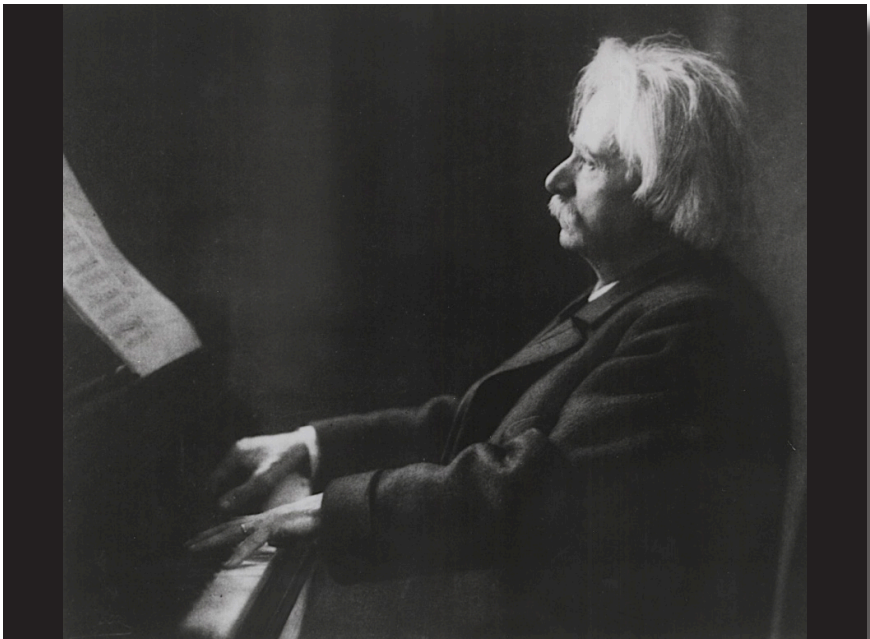
The *Military Polonaise* was written in 1838, a year after the *B Major Nocturne*, and dedicated to his friend Julian Fontana. Chopin uses the Polish dance form, the polonaise, to express an elegant, triumphant, and heroically defiant atmosphere - a protest piece. "During the September 1939 German invasion of Poland at the outset of World War II, Polskie Radio broadcast this piece daily as nationalistic protest, and to rally the Polish people."³

The meter is the traditional 3/4 of the Polish polonaise. The first beat is stressed and the subsequent beats are smaller "steps." Often the dance forms used by Chopin inspired the phrase lengths and the gesture of the sound. Chopin utilizes two keys in the piece. The form is ternary. The opening A section is in A major, while the middle trio B section is composed in the key of D major. The opening theme returns to end the piece in A major. Classical phrase structure is used to heighten the drama. Here Chopin uses the piano to imitate an orchestra with bold chords and bright sounds throughout. Drums are a constant punctuation in the B section and are brought front and center with a descending drum roll trill to the musical climax of the piece in *fff* (extremely loud), a dynamic mark rarely used by Chopin. One could easily imagine this piece as the centerpiece for a triumphant military ball.

Edvard Grieg 1843-1907

BIOGRAPHY

Edvard Grieg was born to a Scottish father and a Norwegian mother on June 15, 1843 in Bergen, Norway. The family business was mercantile trade. Grieg's mother was a fine singer and an accomplished pianist who would become Edvard's first music teacher. "It was Edvard's mother, especially, who realized that there was something unusual about Edvard's talent, for his musical imagination and joy in creating were evident in the fact that he liked nothing better than to sit and daydream at the piano. He hated lifeless scales and exercises."¹ Grieg showed a genuine desire to study piano and a precocious interest in creating his own pieces. On his mother's side he was related to Ole Bull, a Norwegian musician, composer and preservationist of Scandinavian folk music. "Grieg reported, among other things, that in Valestrand Ole Bull 'used to take me with him down into a deep, almost inaccessible "cave," as he called it, and there he played for me the trollish Norwegian



Photograph of Edvard Grieg taken by E. Bieber (1907)

melodies that so fascinated me and awakened the desire to have them as the basis for my own melodies.'"² Ole Bull recognized Grieg's musical gifts and helped his family arrange a comprehensive music education. Grieg was born at a time of rising nationalism in politics, literature, and music throughout Europe and Scandinavia. Grieg was surrounded by folk music, folk culture, and possessed a desire to explore, understand and preserve the essential character of Scandinavian musical traditions.

Grieg married his first cousin Nina, a professional singer. Many of the numerous songs for piano and voice written by Grieg were sung by his wife. "*The Melodies of the Heart* of opus 5 - all to texts by Hans Christian Andersen - were finished in December, 1864, and a more beautiful engagement present can scarcely be imagined."³ The young couple had one child, Alexander, who died of meningitis at one year old in 1869. They would have no more children.

The Grieg's had a rich musical life in Norway and Europe. Edvard would often travel to promote his music either as pianist or conductor. On one of these trips he met Johannes Brahms and the two men eventually formed a friendship that lasted until Brahms' death in 1897. "Now for the first time I see and feel how whole he was both as an artist and as a human being as far as I knew him. How glad I am to have been so fortunate as to have known him!"⁴ In 1907, after a planned musical tour of England was canceled due to illness, Grieg died of heart failure on September 4, 1907 in Bergen. Grieg would be remembered around the world for his *Peer Gynt Suite* and his *Piano Concerto in A minor*.

MUSICAL INFLUENCES

There are clear similarities and influences between Grieg and Brahms. "In his basic orientation as a composer Grieg, like Brahms, leaned toward the classical. Imagination was held in check by a concern for clarity and restraint in such a way as to avoid exaggeration. But as a child of Romanticism he was, of course, a person of deep feeling, prone to varying moods:" "The artist is flexible,' he wrote to Monastier-Schroeder on August 22, 1903, 'and his task is to give expression to contrary views.'"⁵ Grieg was

also influenced by Chopin and Tchaikovsky's musical languages. In his youth, and as an older composer, Grieg admired and paid tribute to Chopin's music and contributions to the piano. In 1887 Grieg, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky met and shared their interest in the folk music of their native countries. All three composers nurtured a devoted, healthy nationalism, in contrast to the divisive nationalism emerging in their countries.

PIECES

Etude op. 73, no. 5

The *Etude op. 73, no. 5* in F minor is one of Grieg's last pieces, written between 1901-1905; it pays homage to Chopin's monumental collections of etudes. The frantically spinning melody in the right hand is accompanied by dotted rhythm arpeggios in the left hand. The pattern design in the A section is transposed to a higher pitch in the B section intensifying the emotional expression as the piece reaches its climactic passage of chromatic runs and punctuating chords. The A section returns unchanged until a slight chromatic shift propels the spinning rhythm into a higher register, driving the piece to its melodic finale.

Nocturne op. 54

The *Nocturne op. 54* has several musical and literary influences. This piece has many of the characteristics of a traditional nocturne as refined by Chopin: a beautiful melody, various harmonic accompaniments - especially the arpeggio - and a relatively contained musical form. The form is ternary as *March of the Dwarfs*. Grieg employs the use of parallel keys A major and A minor, also a device he uses in *March of the Dwarfs*. The musical trill plays a specific role in this nocturne: several beautiful bird calls. When I first learned this piece as a student, I was struck by these trills and somewhat bothered by them, until I realized they reminded me of the story *The Nightingale* by Hans Christian Andersen, which I read as a child. I was unaware when I first studied the Nocturne that Grieg and Andersen were friends, and I could not help but imagine Andersen's conscious or unconscious influence on Grieg's fertile imagination.

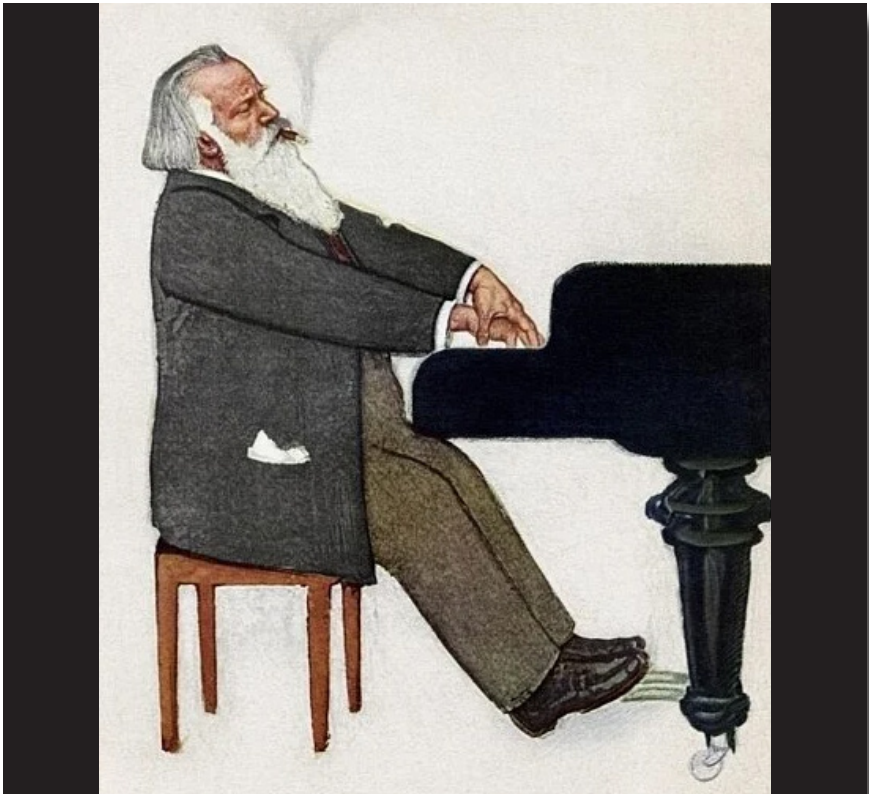
March of the Dwarfs op. 54

The *March of the Dwarfs* op. 54, written 1891, is considered the finest opus of Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*. Similar to Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, the *Lyric Pieces* are a collection of miniature character pieces in various opus numbers spanning Grieg's career. *March of the Dwarfs* has echoes of Grieg's perennial favorite with audiences, *The Peer Gynt Suite*, which was arranged for orchestra, solo piano and piano duet. This piano gem recalls Peer's adventures with the dwarfs and has all the charming folklore fantasy and melodic beauty of the Suite. The A section is articulated with rhythmic virtuosity and alternating staccato eighth notes in ascending and descending patterns for the left hand. The right hand melody is a series of rapid descending chromatic chords. The A section winds down, nearly disappearing before the B section emerges. The listener is treated to a magical landscape of sound inspired by Norwegian folk melodies. Grieg creates a sparkling effect with the use of ascending arpeggios for both hands at various points in the B section. The melody's magic recedes as the A section returns; it is seemingly back to work for the dwarfs. Grieg composed this piece using the parallel keys D major and D minor. The A section utilizes D minor in a dramatically driven mood, while D major is used in the B section to transport the listener in the most colorful departure. "Grieg frequently attempted to create links in motives and themes between the various sections. The middle section, for example, might be built on an augmentation or a diminution of the themes of the first section, perhaps in a parallel or relative key."⁶

Johannes Brahms 1833-1897

BIOGRAPHY

Brahms was born into near poverty in the slums of Hamburg on May 7, 1833. His father was musical and his mother was very intelligent. Despite economic hardship Brahms was surrounded by musicians and the most current books of his time. As a teen Brahms was a voracious reader of the German Romantics and possessed a keen curiosity for Roma tunes with their complex and hypnotic rhythms. For Brahms, folk music held the key to human nature and a nation's identity. Brahms had a desire to understand and preserve the Germanic musical past and to mine its essence for inspiration. Although he was inspired by folk music, he was not considered a nationalistic composer.



Brahms At The Piano by Willy Von Becherath (1911)

In his early twenties Brahms left Hamburg to establish his career as a pianist and composer by seeking out Robert and Clara Schumann. On the first day after he met Brahms, Robert Schumann wrote in his diary: "Visit from Brahms, a genius"¹ It was the beginning of a close emotional and artistic relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann that would last the rest of Brahms' life. Robert Schumann publicly praised the young composer and helped establish Brahms' reputation in the highest musical circles in Germany and Austria. Brahms had a romantic attraction to one of Schumann's daughters that never resulted in marriage. Some have speculated that Brahms was in love with Clara, but no evidence of a consummated relationship exists. Brahms remained a bachelor and lived most of his adult years in Vienna conducting several choruses and orchestral ensembles. He died of cancer in Vienna on April 3, 1896.

Brahms was a gifted pianist, conductor, and musicologist, as well as a prolific composer of symphonies, choral works, lieder, solo piano music, chamber music, a violin concerto, and two extraordinary piano concertos. He brought a rich, new harmony to the classical forms he had inherited from the great masters. Brahms was a composer of the human condition. "Brahms wrote to provide sustenance for the here and now. His music seeks to give beauty, nobility, a sense of meaning, to the brute fact of human existence."²

MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Johann Sebastian Bach's music had the greatest influence on Brahms as did the long shadow of Beethoven. Brahms expanded Beethoven's world of sound to epic proportions. Brahms and Grieg, two of the composers on this program, shared a need to preserve their culture's musical heritage. They were aware of one another and became friends later in life. "Grieg played '*Bridal Procession*' from opus 19, and Brahms his *G minor Rhapsody*. I had the impression that neither liked the other's pieces. On the other hand, Brahms spoke very warmly to me about Grieg's *Ballad*, opus 24. Only much later in Vienna [in 1896] was a very cordial relationship established between them."³

PIECES

Intermezzo op. 118, no. 2

The two pieces in this concert from opus 118 represent Brahms' most beautiful melodic writings. The *Intermezzo* is a nostalgic lullaby written in the key of A major with a meter of 3/4 time. This is a late work and distills the best of Brahms' composing technique into a refined miniature within a ternary form. Brahms created an elegant song without words, a memory poem to lost love, a musical elegy.

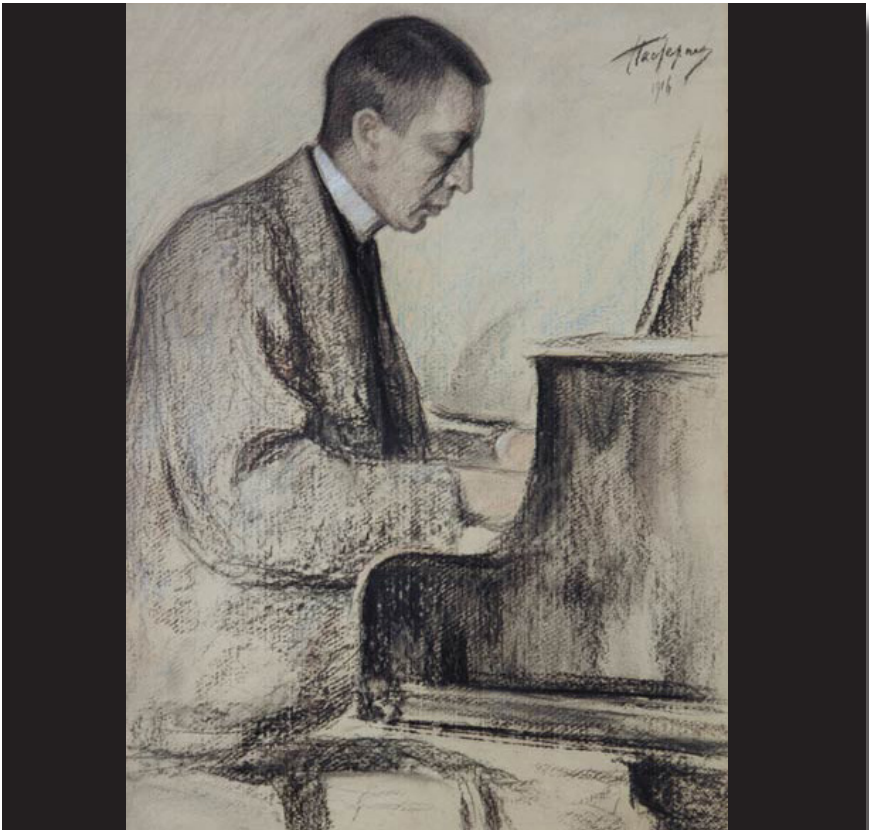
Ballad op. 118, no. 3

Brahms' *Ballad* is written in the key of G minor. This work is also in ternary form. The opening notes of the A section bring the listener into a whirlwind of extroverted rhythm. The B section is a carefree energetic Csardas, or Roma dance, that contrasts with the dramatic A section. In the B section a sweet melody of hypnotic joy in the key of B major floats on top of the arpeggios of the left hand. The A section returns and completes the piece with a highly charged coda, bringing the frenzied scene to a close. The form of the *Ballad* has roots in the Medieval storytellers of the Scottish troubadours, which Brahms would have been familiar with. The sections are composed in high contrast: dark drama versus joyful abandon. "Indeed the characteristic rhythmic vitality of Brahms' music surely stems from a new balance between the regular pulses of beat and bar and the musical elements that can be played off against them." "Brahms wrote to provide sustenance for the here and now. His music seeks to give beauty, nobility, a sense of meaning, to the brute fact of human existence."⁴

Sergey Rachmaninov 1873-1943

BIOGRAPHY

Rachmaninov was born into a family of high ranking military professionals. Each parent brought considerable wealth to the marriage in the form of estates; Rachmaninov was born on one of them. He was one of three children. Rachmaninov's father squandered the bulk of the fortune and reduced the family to living in a small flat in the city of St. Petersburg. Sergey was an industrious student and excelled at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The Rachmaninov family spent their summers at Ivanovka, a summer house that provided the young composer the quiet solitude he needed to rejuvenate from the stresses of the city and create.



Portrait of composer Sergey Rachmaninov by Leonid Ossipowitsch Pasternak (1916)

Rachmaninov left Russia at the age of 44 as a result of the Russian revolution and never returned. He eventually settled in New York City, building a new life within a small Russian community. Rachmaninov was determined to support Russian expatriates in America. "He continued his work for Russian sufferers with two benefit concerts, one on the 2nd of April 1922 for the American relief Administration and the other on the 21st of April for the relief of Russian students in the USA."¹ Rachmaninov's concern for his homeland is evident in his open letter from 1931 published in the *New York Times*: "At no time, and in no country, has there ever existed a government responsible for so many cruelties."² The Soviet music ministry's response was to officially ban the study of Rachmaninov's music.

He had several offers to conduct American orchestras, but instead decided to pursue a career as a concert pianist. Rachmaninov had a good marriage and two daughters he adored. Until WWII the family spent summers in Switzerland in a home Rachmaninov had built as a retreat for his family and as a refuge in which to prepare his repertoire for the upcoming concert seasons. In his later years he was unable to compose with the freedom and abundance of his youth as his concert career consumed most of his time. He would revise and edit earlier works for his performances and for publication during his expat years. One of the last of the great romantic composers, he produced an enormous output for solo piano, two pianos, piano duets, choral works, concertos, symphonies, and songs for voice and piano. The emotional directness of Rachmaninov's music continues to communicate with modern audiences. He died in Los Angeles in 1943 of lung cancer.

MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Rachmaninov's musical influences were primarily his Russian forefathers: Mussorsky, Metner, Balakiev, Glinka, and most especially, Tchaikovsky. "Even his earliest works, composed while he was still a student in the 1880s and treading grounds that had already been well worn by Tchaikovsky, Schumann and Chopin, the essential tastefulness - and often the drama - of Rachmaninov's style is revealed in embryo."³ "Like Chopin, Rachmaninov wrote preludes in all the major and minor keys...But perhaps it is the most

popular, the *G minor (no.5)*, which best illustrates the direction of Rachmaninov's style in the set." ⁴

Chopin's music was a mainstay of his recital repertoire. One can imagine Rachmaninov's affinity with Chopin's compositional style as well as Chopin's pianistic elegance to be a comfort at the end of his concert career. His last concert in 1941 featured the *Funeral March Sonata in B flat minor*.

PIECES

Prelude op. 23, no. 4

This prelude was composed in 1901 and is written in the key of D major. Rachmaninov dedicated it to his teacher, Alexander Siloti. (Siloti would also leave Russia and settle in New York City where he taught at Juilliard.) Rachmaninov uses broken triplet arpeggios to establish the rhythm and atmosphere of this prelude. The melody enters with a sweet longing. Similar to the *Songs Without Words* of Mendelssohn or the *Lyric Pieces* of Grieg, Rachmaninov creates a mood piece. The theme reappears in variation with different accompanying textures in the left hand. Secondary themes emerge and dissolve. The harmonic development leads the melody to an ecstatic climax before receding into a landscape of breezes, resulting in calm resolution.

Prelude op. 23, no. 5

The *Prelude* no. 5 was composed in 1903, two years after no. 4. The A section is set in 4/4 time with a crisp, march rhythm. The primary key is G minor. The B section is a sweeping romance, nocturnal in character, with an arpeggiated base and a Slavic, melancholic melody. Once again we hear the use of ternary form. Much like Brahms' *Ballade* the pianistic texture is orchestral. High energy pushes the outer extremes of voluminous sound. This prelude echoes the revolutionary characteristics of Chopin's *Military Polonaise*. The proportions of sound throughout the piece are reminiscent of Rachmaninov's second piano concerto. We also hear the influences of the vast diversity of cultures throughout Russia.

FOOTNOTES

Statement of Purpose

1. Stein and Spillman, *Poetry into Song* (Oxford University Press, Inc. 1996) 10

Chopin

1. Alan Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2018), Table of Contents
2. Alan Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin*, 31
3. Fryderyk Chopin (2023) Wikipedia. Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chopin>

Grieg

1. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg* (University of Nebraska Press, 1988)
2. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 57
3. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 63
4. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 348
5. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 400
6. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 401

Brahms

1. Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (Schirmer Books A Division of Macmillan, Inc.) 15
2. Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms*, 401
3. Berenstad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg*, 25
4. Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms*, 385, 401

Rachmaninov

1. Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninov* (Schirmer Books, 1994) 57
2. Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninov*, 64
3. Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninov*, 79
4. Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninov*, 84