Recital Programme Notes
Olivia Sham

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART Piano Sonata in D, K.284
(1756-1791) Allegro
Rondeau en Polonaise: Andante
Thema; Variationen I-XII

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART Ave verum corpus S.461a (arr. Liszt)

Franz LISZT ‘Aprés une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata;
from Années de Pelerinage Book II - Italie S.161

*** Interval ***

Robert SCHUMANN Papillons op.2
(1810-1856)

Michael FINNISSY Gershwin Arrangements
(b.1946) no.5 ‘They can’t take that away from me’

no.7 ‘They’re writing songs of love, but not for me’

Franz LISZT Réminiscences de Don Juan (Mozart), S.228

The notion of transformation cannot be ignored in Western art music. It is in their transformation of folk or popular music, literary texts, music by other composers, or even their own music, that composers often reveal their personalities. For some, transformation is subconsciously directed, while for others, the choice of material and the way it is re-created, can be a deliberate process that offers an insight into the composer as they wished to be seen.

~

The Sonata in D major, K.284, is one of eighteen piano sonatas composed throughout Mozart’s lifetime. This is an earlier effort, composed in 1775 for the Baron von Dürnitz, and in its brilliance, length and scale of conception, would have served as an ideal vehicle for Mozart’s own prodigious keyboard skill and growing compositional prowess. The buoyant opening movement evokes symphonic sonorities, and in its classical sonata form, the idea of transformation is already present, with the development of expository material, which is then recapitulated in the tonic key. The process of variation becomes more conscious in the second movement, where the polonaise dance theme is subjected to various alterations on each reiteration. Transformation unabashedly takes centre stage in the finale, where an apparently naïve opening theme, glinting with humour, is expanded upon in the large set of twelve variations that follow. Here, Mozart exhibits the virtuosity for which he was famous as a child prodigy, through his exuberant exploration of contrapuntal effects, textures and chromaticism, paired with the sharp sense of characterisation so clear in his operas.

The brief piece that follows offers some measure of repose; both for Mozart, and for the famously virtuosic pianist Liszt, who transcribed it for piano. The Ave verum corpus is a Eucharistic hymn, the text and translation of which is given below. Mozart’s simple choral setting (K.618) was composed only six months before his death. Strongly religious, Liszt was deeply moved by this piece, and in 1862 wrote it into an extensive musical description of the Sistine Chapel alongside Allegri’s Miserere. However, he also arranged it on its own, and it is this simple extract that is played here.

Ave verum corpus, natum
de Maria Virgine,
veter passum, immolatum
in cruce pro homine,
cuius latus perfuratum
fluxit aqua et sanguine:
esto nobis praegustatum
Liszt’s intense Catholicism played an important role in both his life and music. An early inclination towards the priesthood was checked by his success as a virtuoso pianist, when his colourful and glittering life in the public eye during his concert tours as one of the world’s greatest pianists cast doubt on his continued professions of faith. However, Liszt was in fact eventually ordained, and as Abbé Liszt, led an ascetic life in which he expended his energies helping others generously through his music. The combination of virtuosity and religiosity is nowhere more apparent than in one of his most significant pieces for piano, ‘Après une lecture du Dante’ (After a reading of Dante), from the Italian volume of the Années de pèlerinage (1858). Here, Liszt’s virtuosity evokes the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso as described by Dante in his Divina Commedia (Divine Comedy). The single-movement piece is fantastically programmatic, and almost seems improvisatory in the way sections are strung together. Nevertheless, a tight structure underpins it (Liszt subtitles the piece ‘Fantasia quasi Sonata’), most strikingly in the use of transformation as a variation-like technique, where a few themes are used to unify the piece, but constantly transformed—until barely recognisable—to suggest highly different ideas. The themes for the Inferno and the Paradiso sections are therefore essentially the same, despite sounding completely removed from one another. Through his musical composition, Liszt, like Victor Hugo in his poem of a similar title, offers his understanding of Dante’s work, and thus offers us a glimpse into his character.

~ Interval ~

Papillons, op.2 (1831) is one of Robert Schumann’s earliest compositions, and is a set of twelve brief pieces. The ‘papillons’ (butterflies) of the title might suggest nineteenth-century Romantic whimsy—indeed, the way the pieces seem to eccentrically ‘flutter’ from one to another has traditionally been seen as evidence of this. However, there is a deeper significance, for Schumann wrote in a letter of “a bridge to the Papillons: because we can readily imagine the psyche floating above the body turned to dust. You could learn a good deal from me about this, if Jean Paul had not explained it better.” Jean Paul was an author idolised by Schumann, and Papillons was directly inspired by his novel Flegeljahre, in particular the last scene, a masked ball. The various dances therefore depict both the ball and the changing emotions it triggers in the main characters—the two brothers Walt and Vult, and the object of their love, Wina—through various scenarios of confusion and deception. The notion of psychological change, of the metamorphosis a butterfly undergoes, is also suggested in the musical transformation of material throughout the piece.

The programme is extremely particular, as has been revealed by research into Schumann’s marked copy of Flegeljahre (the final scene clearly depicts the defeated lover departing to the chiming of a clock), but it was never explicitly revealed by Schumann, who wrote to a friend: “Aren’t the Papillons self-evident to you?” Secretive codes abound in Schumann’s highly personal music, making the choice of a masked ball setting revealing. While Papillons may be about Walt, Vult and Wina, in these ‘hidden’ characters something even more secretive lies: a hint at self-portraiture. This is especially so when one compares the marked contrast between what Schumann describes as “Walt’s poetic soul, and of Vult’s mordant temperament” with Schumann’s own division of his own personality into his alter-egos, the poetic Eusebius and fiery Florestan, as made clear in his writing, and musically, in Carnaval op.9. It is hardly surprising that in Carnaval, Schumann quotes from Papillons, and in particular the final scene becomes in the later piece the ‘March of the Davidsbündler [Schumann’s ‘secret society’] against the Philistines’.

English composer and pianist Michael Finnissy often writes music in which he transforms pre-existing material. While much of his music is incredibly complex, the two pieces offered here from his
Gershwin Arrangements (1975-88) are relatively simple. The originals by George Gershwin, which Finnissy used to hear as a child on radio and on the family phonograph, are clearly discernible, but the arrangements are distinctively new—darker-hued, more bittersweet, and on the verge of breaking apart. In his choice of original material to transcribe, and the way in which they are transcribed, Finnissy frequently makes statements both personal and polemically political. These song arrangements are no exception, especially when one takes into consideration Finnissy’s sexuality and the social context in which they were composed.

They can’t take that away from me

The way you wear your hat
The way you sip your tea
The memory of all that
No they can't take that away from me

The way your smile just beams
The way you sing off key
The way you haunt my dreams
No they can't take that away from me

We may never never meet again, on that bumpy road to love
But I'll always, always keep the memory of

The way you hold your knife
The way we danced till three
The way you changed my life
No they can't take that away from me.

They’re writing songs of love,
But not for me;
A lucky star's above,
But not for me.

With Love to Lead the Way,
I’ve found more skies of Gray
Than any Russian play
Could Guarantee.

I was a fool to fall
And Get That Way;
Heigh ho! Alas! And al-
So Lackaday!

Although I can't dismiss
The mem'ry of her kiss -
I guess she's not for me.

George & Ira Gershwin

In choosing to compose an operatic fantasy on themes from Mozart’s Don Giovanni, Liszt could hardly be unaware that he was affirming popular conception of him as a debauched womaniser. Despite seeming totally at odds with his sincere faith and firm moral principles, this was not unfounded myth. These characteristics, while contradictory, did seem to co-exist in his complex personality, just as the virtuoso pianist of crowd-pleasing fantasies also composed ‘serious’ music—although Liszt did retire from the concert stage in 1847, he by no means stopped playing the piano. The Réminiscenes de Don Juan is a virtuoso tour de force, weaving together variations on the seduction duet ‘‘À ci darem la mano’, Don Giovanni’s ‘Champagne aria’ (Fin ch’han del vino’, in which he sings about his conquests), and the music of the Commendatore where a statue of the dead figure rises to deliver justice.

Although Liszt’s operatic fantasies have acquired a reputation for empty brilliance, it was in fact rare for Liszt to merely string together popular tunes in the style of his contemporaries. His fantasies often add a layer of interpretation, and in the case of Mozart’s multifaceted opera, Liszt’s response, coupled with the extremities wrought by the incredibly difficult piano writing, is especially telling. The charming
seduction duet takes on darker overtones in the increased complexity that arises in the variations. The Commendatore's theme, which opens the fantasy, is far more significant than in the opera, and the D minor chromaticism evoking hell certainly corresponds to the Inferno of Liszt's Dante Sonata, coincidentally in the same key. Liszt directly juxtaposes the Commendatore’s damning music with the ‘Champagne aria,’ worked into a frenzied height. The implications of this are wide, and it is easy to hear Liszt, always attracted to the Faust legend, as a man torn by temptation in life and art.

© Olivia Sham