

Llewellyn Sanchez-Werner – May 14, 2017

Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

It is difficult for us to realize that in his lifetime, Bach's fame rested mainly on his virtuosity on the clavier (harpsichord) and organ, and less so on his compositions. This reputation was particularly true during Bach's younger years when he was employed as a church organist and court instrumentalist. At that time, any respectable keyboard player was expected to be accomplished at improvisation, an art in which Bach excelled beyond any of his contemporaries. The outlet for a musician's improvisatory skill was the fantasia, a genre whose history dates back to the Middle Ages. The Baroque transformed this form – if it can truly be called a “form” – by making it a vehicle to demonstrate more than mere technical dexterity. In addition to instrumental bravura and virtuosity, freedom of structure and the incorporation of several moods were all expected of the improviser. This is not to say that all fantasias were necessarily improvised; but they certainly were supposed to sound as if they were. The freedom of the fantasy was often contrasted with a fugue, regarded as the strictest of musical genres.

We do not know the circumstances for which Bach composed the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*. The latest scholarship places its composition during Bach's employment in the court of Weimar, between 1708 and 1717. Whether Bach performed the work in some improvised form before he committed it to paper is, of course, unknown.

Despite its improvisatory style, the *Chromatic Fantasy* is a work of highly complex structure. The *Fantasy* contains two distinct sections – one might even say movements: the first a bravura exploration of sharp dissonances and unexpected modulations; the second an almost operatic recitative that becomes increasingly elaborate. Bach uses the departure into unusual modulations as a means of creating extreme tension, consistently setting up the listener to expect one key and then suddenly shifting into a distant one. In the slow “recitative” he uses the vocal nature of the melodic line and its strange modulatory twists and turns to create an almost tragic mood.

The Fugue, based on a chromatic subject, is appropriately less wayward in tonal shocks to the system. But the nature of the fugue subject itself continues the emotional intensity created by the Fantasy.

Keyboard Sonata in C-sharp minor, R. 21
Keyboard Sonata in D-flat major, R. 88

Antonio Soler
1729-1783

Antonio Francisco Javier José Soler Ramos, usually known as Padre Antonio Soler, was a prolific Catalán composer whose career spanned the late Baroque and early Classical eras. He followed in the footsteps of Domenico Scarlatti, whom he described as his mentor, but there is no evidence that Soler ever was his pupil.

The most important compositions among Soler's over 500 works were his 150 keyboard sonatas probably written for his gifted pupil Don Gabriel, the son of King Carlos III. Don Gabriel must have inherited the talents of his grandmother, the Spanish Queen Maria Bárbara, who had co-opted Scarlatti to virtually compose for her alone.

Soler was also a major theorist – and polemicist in defense of his theories on harmony. Disputes became so heated that Soler used to be called *El diablo vestido de fraile* (a devil dressed as a monk).

Both of the sonatas on this program demonstrate many of the tricks of Scarlatti's trade: a single movement in binary form (the precursor of sonata form comprising two repeated sections), a plethora of themes, "Spanish" harmonies, virtuosic hand crossing and rapid repeated notes, and surprising modulations. In fact, modulation was the subject of one of Soler's controversial treatises, which taught how to modulate smoothly between any of the major and minor keys by the shortest route. Listeners can readily hear why the works were so controversial.

Caténaires

Elliott Carter
1908-2012

Elliott Carter was one of the true "Renaissance men" of the twentieth century. His career included teaching mathematics, physics and classical Greek at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md., in addition to teaching music at the Peabody Conservatory, Columbia, Yale and Cornell Universities. He was one of the many American composers who made the pilgrimage to Paris between the wars to study counterpoint with Nadia Boulanger, the famous French composition teacher, but quickly developed his own language, which for a number of decades became increasingly complex. In later works his style had become more tonal and accessible.

Carter composed *Caténaires* in 2006: "When Pierre – Laurent Aimard, who performs so eloquently, asked me to write a piece for him, I became obsessed with the idea of a fast one line piece with no chords. It became a continuous chain of notes using different spacings, accents, and colorings, to produce a wide variety of expression."

"The Alcotts" from Piano Sonata No. 2, "Concord, Massachusetts, 1840-1860"

Charles Ives
1874-1954

Characteristic of nearly all of Ives' works is the combination of wildly dissonant and seemingly unsystematic harmony, alternating with snatches of American patriotic folk songs and Protestant hymns. As meticulous and organized as he was in his business affairs, that is how disorganized he was with his music manuscripts. His major compositions had long gestation periods and were never "completed" to the composer's satisfaction, usually existing as a collection of penciled loose leaves. Throughout his life he worked and re-worked them, often adding or shifting whole movements, never fully satisfied with the final result.

The *Concord Sonata* had a torturous and long history before it reached its final form – and even this underwent further changes. Each of its movements originated from earlier ideas between 1904 to 1909 (sketches of an *Alcotts* overture, and *Emerson* overture or piano concerto, and a piece based on a Hawthorn short story). The final sonata was completed in 1915, but not published until 1947. Soon after finishing, Ives laid out the program, the aesthetics, some of the techniques, as well as his musical philosophy, in the book *Essays Before a Sonata*, completed in 1919 and published a year later. He added the following footnote to the introduction: "These prefatory essays were written by the composer for those

who can't stand his music – and the music for those who can't stand his essays; to those who can't stand either, the whole is respectfully dedicated."

Ives describes the Sonata as an “impression of the spirit of Transcendentalism which is associated in the minds of many with Concord, Mass., of over half a century ago.” The intellectuals described were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorn, Henry David Thoreau and – in the third movement *Scherzo* – the teacher and philosopher Branson Alcott and his wife, the novelist and poet Louisa May Allcott.

“Blue Skies”

Irving Berlin
1888-1989

Art Tatum, Jr.
1909-1956

A last minute addition in 1926 to Rodgers and Hart’s musical *Betsy*, “Blue Skies” was a smashing success but could not save the show, which closed after only 39 performances. The song took on a life of its own and a year later became a movie hit when Al Jolson performed it in the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*.

Everybody who was anybody in popular music took it up, including Arthur Tatum Jr.. Considered one of the great jazz pianists of all time, Art Tatum grew up as a child with perfect pitch, extremely limited eyesight and a very fast – but accurate – style of piano playing.

Tatum recorded “Blue Skies” first in 1933 and numerous times thereafter. His 1953 recording is considered a classic. He made complex improvisations on Berlin’s simple melody and, in true jazz fashion, his improvisations varied with each performance.

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Beethoven’s last five piano sonatas fall into what is generally agreed to be his “late” style. Together with the Ninth Symphony, the *Missa Solemnis* and the last five string quartets, they represent the composer’s most musically complex and emotionally intense creations. Written after he had become profoundly deaf and no longer able to continue his career as a virtuoso pianist, the last three sonatas in particular are also the most introspective, the composer’s dialogue with his instrument that he could only hear in his mind’s ear. The sonatas also represent the culmination of pianistic virtuosity. Beethoven began his career and maintained it, even in deafness, as the greatest performing pianist of his time. His final sonatas no longer took into consideration the abilities of even his most talented students, but were rather the ultimate in expression for himself alone.

Beethoven composed these three piano sonatas during and immediately following an enormously stressful period in his personal life, one that seemed to have sapped his creative energy for several years. Deprived of the joys of family life as husband and father, he invested all his love and concern in his nephew Karl, the son of his brother Carl Caspar. Upon Carl Caspar’s death in 1815, Beethoven was awarded joint custody of the boy with his mother, a woman whom Beethoven loathed and considered to be of loose morals, referring to her as the “Queen of the Night.” A protracted lawsuit for full custody ensued and dragged on for four and a half years. Although Beethoven eventually won full custody of Karl, he over-

protected the boy and bad-mouthed his mother to the point where Karl attempted suicide in 1826.

The Sonata Op. 111 was completed during January of 1822 immediately after Op. 109 and Op. 110, so that the three works are often thought of as a group. Consisting of only two movements, the Sonata has continually raised speculation – and rumor – as to why. Even the composer’s publisher, Moritz Schlesinger, first assumed that an allegro finale must have been inadvertently left out of the package containing the autograph score. Beethoven’s student and self-appointed factotum, Anton Schindler, made the questionable claim that when he asked Beethoven about a third movement, the composer barked at him that he was too busy with the Ninth Symphony to bother with it. But most of Schindler’s claims about Beethoven were later revealed as fabrications. Like the Sonata Op. 109, this Sonata ends with a set of variations that leaves the listener emotionally exhausted with its intensity. There is simply nothing more left to say.

After Op. 111, there is no evidence in the Sketchbooks that Beethoven even considered composing another piano sonata. The Sonata, however, recalls his early works in this genre in its key, C minor: Op. 10 No. 1 and Op. 13 (“*Pathétique*”). Since the Baroque period, composers had attributed emotional significance to keys and key relationships. C minor was Beethoven’s vehicle for greatest intensity.

The Sonata opens with a *Maestoso* introduction followed seamlessly by a stormy *Allegro*. The initial jagged and harmonically unstable descent of a diminished seventh is paired with an equally jagged double dotted rhythm. Beethoven had originally planned it to be a fugue – an unprecedented form for an opening movement and in keeping with his artistic goal of bring the fugue to new heights of musical and emotional complexity. Traces of its fugal origins remain in the transition to the lyrical second theme. The corresponding sketchbook contains his copies of the opening passages from the *Kyrie* from Mozart’s Requiem and the finale from Haydn’s String Quartet Op. 20, No. 5, two models that utilize the same subject as “And with his stripes we are healed” from *Messiah*. Subsequently, he revised the movement in both structure and theme, converting it into a sonata form with slow a introduction. He retained the melodic contours of the fugue subject, however, for both introduction and *Allegro*.

The final movement is in sharp contrast, consisting of an Arietta, marked *Adagio molto, semplice e cantabile*, with five variations in C major. The simplicity of the theme allows Beethoven to retain it as a subtle melodic scaffold that in no way interferes with his expressive excursions. As is true of so many sets of variations, the number of notes per variation progressively increases. But this is no flashy bravura piece, largely because the dynamic markings calling for expressive crescendos and decrescendos, as well as delicate pianissimos in the variations with the smallest note values. The variations increase in length and are characterized by repeated rhythmical figures in the accompaniment and later with sparkling trills, the by now characteristic juxtaposition of extreme treble and bass pairings, and startling dissonances. Starting with variation four, the repeats of the strains are not exact but are further embellishments. As the movement progresses, the simple theme itself is taken up in different voices booming out above or below the glittering accompanying trills. The movement ends with a coda played pianissimo and ending in a whisper.

Program notes by:
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn
Wordpros@mindspring.com
www.wordprosmusic.com