

Huntsville Chamber Music Guild presents

Beatrice Rana, piano

October 25, 2013

Program Notes

Regarding **Robert Schumann**, Scott Burnham writes: “He is an artist who relentlessly included everything that affected him in his art.” Schumann is the archetypal Romantic composer: each of his works is a highly subjective expression with a particular relationship to his life and the circumstances surrounding its composition. Among the Romantics, perhaps only Berlioz wrote music as charged with personal feeling and as encoded with specific meanings; and this is true from Schumann’s very first published work, the *Abegg Variations*, which he wrote at age 20.

The *Abegg Variations* is one of the finest first opuses in music history, keeping company with those of Beethoven (the first three piano trios), Schubert (*Erlkönig*), and Alban Berg (his piano sonata). The opening immediately transports us into the world of Jean Paul and E.T.A. Hoffmann—its waltz-like motion and dreamy atmosphere bring to mind the masked balls in Jean Paul’s novels, intense scenes of passion and intrigue. The musical notes themselves wear masks: they spell the name “Abegg” as A-B \flat -E-G-G. (In German musical notation, “B” represents our B-flat; our B-natural is rendered as “H.”) Composers had spelled out words in note names before—most famously, J.S. Bach signed his own name at the very end of the *Art of Fugue* as B \flat -A-C-B. But no one before Schumann had used such a figure as a theme for a set of variations. So why “Abegg”? The piece is supposedly dedicated to Countess Pauline d’Abegg, but scholars have discovered that this person was almost certainly an invention of Schumann’s. However, he did meet a pianist named Meta Abegg in 1830; they had no lasting relationship, but perhaps her reputed beauty was inspiring to the ardent young composer. Or perhaps he was just taken with her name—the matter will remain a mystery.

The piece itself is concise: the theme is followed by just three variations, which are capped by a lengthier finale labelled “alla Fantasia” in the score. Much of the writing is ornamental filigree, a feature less abundant in Schumann’s later piano music. Besides the wistful theme, among the work’s most distinctive sections is its second variation, an ingenious dialogue between the pianist’s hands. A remarkable moment occurs about halfway through the Finale: suddenly the music stops, two slow chords are struck, and the notes of the second chord disappear one by one—their order of *disappearance* happens to spell the name “Abegg” again! No composer before Schumann would have attempted such an eccentric, fanciful gesture.

The *Symphonic Etudes* is Schumann’s other most popular free-standing work in variation form—but it is remarkably different. Here, there is none of the lightness of the *Abegg Variations*; this is a heavy, dark piece, substantial in length and in texture. It is the work of a composer who has experience in large forms—it comes just after his *First Sonata* Op. 11, another architectural edifice. And it is the work of a composer who is aiming high, who wants to achieve the same technical stature as the masters of the past. This bid at structural rigor is evident throughout the work—there are canonic variations (in which the melody is imitated in another voice slightly later—a strict technique that looks back to the Baroque) and variations that mimic the sound of

archaic styles (for instance, the stentorian Variation VII). In Variation II, he moves the melody of the theme to the bass line and composes a new tune on top—a procedure that may sound dry on paper, but the music is so heated and heartfelt that one hardly even notices the careful patterning. This last description characterizes the piece as a whole: the *Symphonic Etudes* is one of Schumann’s most successful fusions of brain and heart, and it stands near the summit of the early 19th-century piano repertoire.

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Last week, HCMG audiences saw Sean Chen perform **Sergei Prokofiev’s** *Eighth Sonata*, the last of his “War Sonatas”; today, Ms. Rana plays the first of the group, the *Sixth Sonata*—a work with a radically different character. The *Eighth Sonata* is in three spacious movements, and the prevailing tone in the first two movements is lyrical and thoughtful; but the *Sixth Sonata* is in four movements, two of which feel spring-loaded with tension and nervous energy. This is explosive music, often on the brink of hysteria and chaos, all straight-jacketed inside Classical formal boundaries that are almost too stringently enforced. The result is a mood of controlled violence—an admirable musical analogue to the strategizing and calculation involved in the waging of war.

This music is not uniform, however; there is much variety in temperament throughout the lengthy piece. As early as the second major section of the first movement, we get some relief from the initial militancy; but though this theme is lyrical, it is not warm—rather, it’s like warmth from a distance, a pale, thin memory of home. It struggles to exist; it is the compact opening figure, vigorously rhythmic and largely invariant, that dominates the movement, driving the development towards a paroxysm of percussion.

The middle two movements are lighter, almost like character pieces from Prokofiev’s ballets. The delightful second movement is a delicate, coy number danced on tiptoe. The heart of the sonata is the third movement, marked “in the tempo of a slow waltz” and reminiscent of the magical waltz music in his *Cinderella*. *Cinderella* is dark-hued, but its apotheosis is redemptive, affirming that fairy tales do indeed come true; there is no such assurance in the *Sixth Sonata*, for the vision disappears and we are dropped right back into more frenzied contrasts and keyboard pyrotechnics in the fourth movement. This combination of breathless virtuosity and mechanized, brutal perpetual motion is typical Prokofiev piano writing; other famous examples are the *Toccata* Op. 11 and the third movement of the other “War Sonata,” the seventh.

As we listen to this muscular music, we might picture what Prokofiev himself was like at the piano, as described by the famous Russian pianist and teacher Heinrich Neuhaus:

Energy, confidence, indomitable will, steel rhythm, powerful tone (sometimes even hard to bear in a small room), a peculiar “epic quality” that scrupulously avoids any suggestion of over-refinement or intimacy (there is none in his music either), yet with a remarkable ability to convey true lyricism, poetry, sadness, reflection, an extraordinary human warmth, and feeling for nature. . .

Notes by Daniel Pesca