

Huntsville Chamber Music Guild presents

**Sean Chen, piano**

October 19, 2013

### *Program Notes*

The early music of **Alexander Scriabin** is indebted to Chopin and Wagner; the late music of Scriabin is a world all its own with no precedents and few antecedents, a bizarre sonic landscape of mysticism, rapture and despair, all enveloped in perfumed sensuality. The *Waltz* Op. 38 falls somewhere between these two styles. Certainly the genre pays homage to Chopin, for any keyboard waltz must acknowledge Chopin as its forbearer—if Johann Strauss, Jr. is forever known as the “Waltz King,” Chopin might be aptly described as the “*Keyboard Waltz King*.” But after just a phrase of the Scriabin we are far from Chopin’s salon; this is overripe music, so decadent that it barely hangs together. The left hand lays down the accustomed waltz pattern, but the right hand drifts over top dreamily, conforming to neither the harmony nor the beat of the parts below. Later, the music swells enormously and launches from the intimacy of the opening out into the ether, a gesture that Chopin would have never employed in a small-scale dance form. It is in these such passages that we catch a glimpse of Scriabin’s late style on the horizon; within a few years, he will describe this delirious effect in his *Poem of Ecstasy*:

*Delighting in this dance,                   choking in its vortex.*  
*Unmindful of goals                       beloved aspirations*  
*Spirit surrenders to playful drunkenness.*  
*On powerful wings                       it speeds*  
*Into realms of new discovery*  
*Of Ecstasy.*

“Impromptu” means “improvisation”; so, listening to **Frédéric Chopin**’s four works bearing this title, we might picture him seated at the piano informally, letting his fingers and his whims carry him along. Each of these pieces seems to spin out spontaneously, organically—indeed, there are so few signs of compositional effort that it’s easy to take these graceful arabesques for granted. Despite their lightness and their simple form—each is in three parts, ABA, with the central episode contrasting with the framing material—they are Chopin of fine vintage, and every turn of phrase benefits from his inimitable touch.

The first and third are similar in character: both feature an ornate, highly inflected melody winding above a fluid accompaniment. Their middle sections introduce just enough contrast to keep the music interesting—but not so much angst that the small, delicate forms shatter. The second impromptu has the boldest contrasting section, which makes it the most dramatic of the lot; the opening music cannot return unchanged after the central outburst, so the last section becomes a denouement rather than a mere recapitulation. The fourth, the *Fantaisie-impromptu*, was the first to be written, but it was published posthumously. Why Chopin didn’t publish it sooner is a mystery, for it is a dazzling, memorable work, and it is now among his most popular. Especially beautiful is the way its central cantilena, so tranquil in the midst of the work’s turbulence, returns to close the piece.

**Maurice Ravel** composed his magnificent “poème chorégraphique” *La Valse* for Serge Diaghilev, the great impresario whose Ballets Russes was responsible for the commissioning and premiering so many innovative works: Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *Rite of Spring*; Debussy’s *Jeux*; Satie’s *Parade*; and Ravel’s own *Daphnis and Chloé*. Unfortunately for Ravel, Diaghilev was unimpressed when Ravel played *La Valse* for him in Paris in April 1920; the young composer Francis Poulenc was present, and he describes the scene memorably:

*Ravel arrived, his music under his arm, and Diaghilev said to him: “Well, my dear Ravel, how nice to hear La Valse.” And Ravel played La Valse. . . Now, I knew Diaghilev very well at that time, and I’d seen his false teeth move, I’d seen his monocle move, I’d seen that he was very embarrassed, and I’d seen that he didn’t like it and that he was going to say “No.” When Ravel had finished, Diaghilev said to him something which I thought was very true. He said, “Ravel, it’s a masterpiece, but it isn’t a ballet. It’s a portrait of a ballet, a painting of a ballet. . . ”*

Ravel was hurt by this encounter, and the two never worked together again. And what a shame Diaghilev didn’t mount *La Valse*. Listening to the piece, one can imagine the way the dancers would drift onstage at the beginning, coalescing and gradually starting to sway and spin as the music morphs into a waltz. But this is not a Viennese waltz circa 1870; this is 1920, immediately after the First World War, and so it is a haunted memory of a waltz. (Perhaps this is what Diaghilev meant by “a portrait of a ballet.”) Ravel disliked overly political interpretations of *La Valse*—but, near the end, when the music’s frenzied eroticism transforms suddenly into sheer terror and violence, it’s hard not to hear *fin de siècle* extravagance erupt into bloodshed and war. Understood in its historical context, *La Valse* becomes not only a ravishing piece but also a powerful portrait of Europe on the brink of collapse which twists and corrupts the waltz—the iconic 19th-century dance—until it disintegrates.

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**Sergei Prokofiev** wrote his sixth, seventh and eighth piano sonatas between 1939 and 1944, commencing work on all three at the same time; and they were published with consecutive opus numbers, 82-84. Because their composition coincided with the Second World War, they are popularly known as the “War Sonatas”; certainly the unease and coiled aggression that characterizes the sixth and seventh sonatas justifies this nickname. (HCMG audiences will have a chance to hear the *Sixth Sonata* next week on Beatrice Rana’s program.) But the *Eighth Sonata*, the largest of the trilogy, is different in temperament, especially in its first two movements. The opening movement is unusually long-breathed, symphonic in scope, by turns introverted, searching, lyrical, dark-hued, restless—there is nothing else like it in Prokofiev’s solo piano music.

Pianist and Prokofiev scholar Boris Berman has shown that parts of the material in this movement and the next were salvaged from a different project that never came to fruition: incidental music for the Pushkin plays *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*. Berman identifies the theme of the second movement as the music that was to accompany the ball scene in *Onegin*—and how well that would have worked! The *Andante sognando* is like a faded postcard, a simple reminiscence between the two more emotionally-charged movements that flank it. It has both the gentle lilt of a slow waltz and the stately bearing of a minuet.

The third movement breaks the spell cast by the earlier movements; here, all the energy and fire of Prokofiev’s piano writing is on full display, and there is no lack of technical hurdles. As the movement progresses, there is more and more combative music, and we start to hear why this sonata, like the others in the trilogy, is indeed a “War Sonata.” The central episode is pompous and ironically self-important at first, but it grows into something truly frightening, with percussive low attacks and vertiginous scales that simulate the whistle of falling bombs. Most thrilling of all is the very end—the music seems to burst into flames, and, following a frenzied blast of trumpet calls, it crashes to a close.

*Notes by Daniel Pesca*