

ETUDES

In the days when government subsidies kept postal rates low enough to allow national magazines to flourish, I remember seeing an ad that pictured a callow lad enthusiastically sitting himself at an upright piano under a caption that read, "They all *laughed* when I sat down to play!" The secret of the young man's instantaneous social success was that he had made himself a piano virtuoso by taking mail order lessons -- and the ad's reliability as a source of amusement for approximately everybody in my misspent youth group indicated that all of us had shared the dream of finding a slovenly way to acquire sufficient skill to slip onto a piano bench and convincingly fake a few bars of boogie-woogie, Carmichael and Loesser's *Heart and Soul*, or even the inevitable *Chopsticks*.

Such transformations would have been rarer than Jekyll into Hyde had not the modern "piano-forte" evolved out of the booming industrial revolution round the end of the 18th century, providing newly enriched Middle Class shopkeepers and factory owners with their own semi-portable living room equivalent of the ballroom orchestras a swiftly diminishing landed gentry could no longer afford to keep. Instead of hiring musicians by the platoon to play for parties and ceremonies, a single family member or friend -- suitably trained (even by correspondence) -- could mount the piano bench and shake the hall with music.

Into the middle class townhouse (in the wake of the parlor piano) followed volumes of "studies" -- "etudes" if you're French -- each etude promising (if *suitably practiced*) to develop the player's skill at performing a specific pianistic trick. As Chopin (whose music's discussed later in these notes) re-invented keyboard sonority by finding compositional structures that reveal the piano's hitherto untapped intrinsic capabilities -- not just as an all-purpose keyboard, but *as itself*: an instrument capable of peculiar rings and resonance -- he reconceived the "etude", not merely as a tediously repetitious exercise routine, but as a performance artwork, capable of expressing emotion and dramatic meaning.

From their first meeting, Chopin, the charmingly shy and publicly withdrawn Pole, and the dramatically seductive Hungarian virtuoso, Franz Liszt, formed a mutual admiration society -- though not one without the usual interpersonal annoyances and irresolvable disagreements. While Chopin ridiculed Liszt's pianistic posturing and flamboyant attitudes, he swooned at the Hungarian's feats of technical legerdemain, his prodigal musicianship, the heights of spiritual dramaturgy he could evoke.

Unlike Chopin, Liszt forsook the coupling of the spontaneous dramatic improvisation typical of Germanic tone poems with the attempt to aurally evoke natural scenes and human emotional states so characteristic of many French composers; both tendencies were developments generally resisted in Chopin's carefully crafted miniature experiments in dance and classical form. But Liszt could not help but be awed by Chopin's dazzlingly harmonious chromaticism and the profundity of his subtle modifications of the classical models to create Romantic effects.

Liszt wished to sire a breed of "Chopianistic" etudes that would employ sound-producing techniques like a master painter exploits brush strokes, engraving a sonic scene in the listener's mind. Such etudes would be to mere exercises like Czerny's or Hanon's as a student's plan for her dorm room would be to Michaelangelo's *Sistine* sketches. He differentiated his sort of grand pianistic etude from the mere exercise by describing it with the adjective, "transcendental."

CECILE CHAMINADE

While we'll return to Liszt's conceptionalization when Lisa's program presents it, it now becomes clear why the Frenchwoman, Cecile Chaminade (1861-1944), found it necessary to amend the title of the etude that Lisa Lanza performs with the adjective "Concert"; she needed to assure us that her composition is no mere "practice piece": it is a "symphonic" exploitation of pianistic technique to create a life-enriching emotional experience.

Chaminade was a phenomenon in her time, not quite alone in being a French female composer, but still a scandalous figure today for the repeatedly and enthusiastically recommitting the "sin" of writing what was called "salon music" -- music that, from the very cover design on its sheet music, tried to "seduce" the listener into a gracious (but not especially pretentious or portentous) listening experience: elegant, amusing, attractive -- in a word, what most of her critics fail to realize is simply and quintessentially "French": the style we find as early as Saint-Saens, subsequently epitomized by Ravel's idol, Chabrier, then gently haunting the lilt and charm of Gabriel Faure and presaging the nonchalant pose of "Les Six" -- the sextet of post WWI French composers who (inspired by the iconoclastic, irreverent Erik Satie) exchanged the solemn pretensions so revered by the Germans for moods humorous to every degree, brimming with more-than-passing references to music hall *chansons* and even jazz, and aspiring to melodic and structural simplicities that approached profound elegance.

One can't help seeing residual chauvinism in the disdain in which those who aren't too busy enjoying its charms to pay any attention to detractors hold her music today. Her father forbade her -- despite her early display of prodigal gifts (she started by writing nocturnes and slumber songs for her pet dogs and cat) -- to study music until no less an expert than Georges Bizet (who had heard the eight-year-old girl play some of her sacred music) persuaded him to; Mr. Chaminade thought music a discipline unfit for "wives and mothers" and never allowed this third of his four children to actually enroll at the Paris Conservatoire. The two courses she was allowed to take were instructed privately, the "salon-ish" Benjamin Godard coaching her in composition.

The Magner works catalogue (W), a reasonably comprehensive listing of all her works, has only recently appeared, finally allowing us to accurately assess her achievements. While most of her published works -- over 200 pieces -- featured prominent piano parts, she also wrote over 125 art songs; these genres provided a solid foundation for her popularity.

In days when every parlor had its piano, sheet music in these genres sold like hotcakes -- by that I mean that her most popular composition, the *Scarf Dance*, sold over five *million* copies as *sheet music* (with Earth's human population now *three times* what it was just after WWI -- when Chaminade enjoyed her greatest popularity -- that would count as *fifteen million* copies in print today). My mother used to play *Scarf Dance* out of a sheet music book called something like *World's 100 Greatest Piano Classics* that stayed in print for over 50 years!

While "only" 171 of her piano works seem to have been published, she also completed some major symphonic compositions, most of which remain in manuscript: a ballet, a comic opera, a dramatic symphony, a piano concertstueck. Many of these were well-received when they premiered in the 1880's but -- aside from writing a second piano trio -- she never seems to have attempted the same major form twice, probably because sufficient interest to revive any of the larger works she completed never materialized. She felt the reason for that was more likely sexual politics than any lack of inherent compositional merit.

In 1902 the Paris Conservatoire commissioned her large-scale swansong, a Concertino for Flute and Orchestra (or Piano), Op. 107, eleven years before her prolific accomplishments and their international success led to her admission to the Legion of Honor, the French equivalent of knighthood. In the late twenties -- among the last compositions her deteriorating health allowed her to complete -- several of her sacred works appeared in print, including a major organ collection of 12 pieces: *The Sacred Nave*, and a mass.

Like Liberace half a century later, it seems she cried about that all the way to the bank. Due to what sexists might refer to as her father's typically masculine financial improvidence and the unequal disposition of the estate at his death in 1887, Cecile was left with providing a living for herself and her aging mother. She turned this minus into a plus by generally abandoning her attempts at large-scale composition and devoting herself to composing fairly brief piano pieces with attractive programmatic titles that exploited her remarkable ability to create memorable melodies, the kind you want to have boring into your brain like an "ear-worm" after hours spent playing her music over and over as you practice it.

Not only was Chaminade a best-selling composer and popular pianist, she was considered -- with her charm, beauty, self-reliance, and creative intellectual achievement and commercial success -- a leading female role model in an age when feminists were agitating to create occupational opportunities for women throughout the economy. By 1904, over 100 Chaminade Clubs had been organized throughout the United States, acting as performance venues -- not only for the composer on her tours -- but for other performers when Chaminade was out of town. There may have been as many as double this number of clubs at one time, although they had largely disappeared or been rededicated to more general purposes by the time of her death during WWII.

Her health having been in decline for many years due to a bone disease that seems to have been aggravated by winter climate, she relocated to Monte Carlo, where her success had made it possible for her to buy a small villa. While living in a tiny independent Principality on the Riviera coast of Vichy France spared her the most direct rigors of the Nazi occupation, the liquidation of the Enoch firm that published her work, owned by persons of proscribed ancestry, cut her off from any royalty income. At any rate, she died 54 days before the process of Allied Liberation, with its stresses and strife, really began.

Her First Collection of 6 Concert Etudes, opus 35, were published by Enoch in 1886, the year before her father died, while she still had one foot in the concert hall and the other in the salon. Each had a genrifying title: #1) Scherzo {Joke}, #2) Automne {Autumn}, #3) Fileuse {the silk-reeling girl}, #4) Appassionato, #5) Impromptu in F Major, and #6) Tarantelle, the last of which she later orchestrated for symphonic performance. #2 -- Automne -- was considered the best known of all Chaminade's work"... Surpassing *Scarf Dance*??? Well, maybe it got more concert performances.

Doubtless owing to the popularity of the First Collection, a Second Concert Etudes Collection was published by Enoch in 1912, but it consisted of other "character pieces" called *Etudes* (but not "*etudes de concert*") -- each with its own categoric subtitle -- when they were first published separately over the 20 years between 1890 and 1910: the Etudes Symphonique, Melodique, Pathetique, Romantique, Humoristique, and Scholastique.

The Impromptu from the first set seems to be an essay in arpeggios and trills: flocks of broken chords seem to wing skyward, each trilling to its fellows on the way. A recurrent melodic

fragment makes me think that the American songwriter Harold Arlen must have known this piece, as what sounds like the opening strain of "Somewhere over the rainbow" keeps wafting through the arching rapid note-ripples.

It's obvious from the symmetry, haunting sonority, and terse economy of this piece that Chaminade knew her business. That most of her later pieces were careful not to tax the instrumental proficiency or structural comprehension of her many fans doesn't demonstrate the technical weaknesses her critics snipe about but, rather, a wisely professional skill at extracting maximal aural results from miniatures that present minimal risk of performance embarrassment for her amateur customers. This early piece -- an impressive recital piece from her concertizing days -- is a fully virtuosic solo vehicle that transcends all barriers: bold yet structurally cohesive, impressive while laden with heart-stopping beauty.

FRANZ LISZT

Like so many others of my generation, after leaving the Army in the late Sixties, I spent a little time trying to investigate what science, if any, lay behind astrology. The only currently demonstrable physical connection I could find between celestial phenomena and human nature lay in what's called "solar astrology": the variety that correlates personality type with which season of the year the sun was actually in (i.e., the altitude of the sun *above* the Tropic of Capricorn or, conversely -- which is the same thing astronomically -- *below* the Tropic of Cancer) in short: "the *sun sign*" at a person's birth.

In contrast "sidereal astrology" considers the *actual zodiacal constellation* the sun is currently riding across at the time at the time a person is born: "the *star sign*", to be the principal celestial personality determinant. What effect stellar radiations -- if even significant -- have on human behavior has not yet, to my knowledge, been scientifically measured.

But we do uncontroversially know that the solar season generally predicts what kind of weather the world will be having, and this very well could -- even should -- be one of many factors that play a large part -- either directly or through the moods of the important people in its life who cluster around a newborn child -- in each infant's first experiences of life. As it reacts to the weather, the natural and manmade environment, and the people around it, the first steps in forming its personality will be taken.

To bring point to this discussion: my appreciation of the life and work of Franz Liszt (1811-1886) has been heightened by the fact that both he and myself -- together with Sarah Bernhardt among other celebrities (and nonentities) -- share the same birthday: October 22, the same point in the same "*sun sign*".

Aside from the fact I am a well-proportioned midget and he was of graceful height and bearing, that his talents were organized while mine are trapped somewhere in the neighborhood of Asperger's Light, that -- while our hands are similarly long-fingered -- mine move with glacial torpor while his were harnessed quicksilver; aside from all this, we have a lot in common: we are torn between intense passion and ascetic withdrawal, we are obsessed with the marriage of beautifully orderly music to the vicissitudes of a gripping story-line, we seek to guide our volatile personalities into lasting, loyal relationships.

In '60's parlance, our "sun sign" is Libra on the cusp of Scorpio: he an expatriate Magyar soul lost either in the fleshpots of Paris or in the quiet, medieval university cloisters of Weimar, me a Southern California cosmopolitan happily exiled to the cultural Mecca (?) of Bremerton.

Call it Byzantine or bipolar: caught in such a web of contradictory yearnings, it isn't surprising that Liszt was fascinated with recreating the 48 preludes and fugues of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavichord* in a set of "Chopianistic" studies he split into (surprised?) two contrasting sets: one dedicated to the inspiration for his "show-business" persona whose demonic appearance and commanding hauteur we can immediately visualize when we close our eyes during Liszt's *First Piano Concerto*; this set Liszt called the *Transcendental Etudes on Themes of Paganini* and it did not appear until his compositional facility had improved enough to incorporate many of the dazzling instrumental effects with which Liszt awed vast European audiences. (For a contrasting earful of his humbler self: the gratuitous teacher and helpful patron he later became, just listen to his *Second Piano Concerto*.)

His second collection of *Etudes* he simply called *Transcendental*. He "completed" them for the first time (that is, he finished his first crack at the quarter-set that was all his inspiration would supply in 1826 at age 16: and they wouldn't be revised into becoming *actually* pianistically transcendental for another thirteen years -- or be recognized as having done so by receiving that name for yet another thirteen!).

Published as *Etude en douze exercices*, they were ordered by the Cycle of Fourths that is the "grandma" of all key sequences ("grandpa" is the inverse Cycle of *Fifths*) starting at C major, followed by its relative minor (the minor scale with the same signature), then rising to a similar pair a fourth above (at F major/D minor), and so "forth" four times more. A typical teen of greater reach than grasp (though incredible promise), Liszt had pulled himself little past imitating the inspired tedium of his teacher Czerny's famous drillbook on that first etudic attempt. But, then again, his meeting Chopin was five years in the future.

In 1839 -- two years after Chopin published his *12 Etudes, Opus 25*, and six after the Pole's first dozen virtuoso studies, *12 Grandes Etudes, Opus 10*, the Hungarian published *12 Grandes Etudes* (though announced as 24 etudes, Liszt ended up publishing only a revision of his first collection under the same title Chopin had affixed to *his* opus 10). Using the same description Chopin had at least applied to his early volume at least indicated that Liszt was attempting something more along the line Chopin had pioneered: that it would be more *grandiose* than Czerny -- and even the Liszt himself of thirteen years earlier.

While Liszt's recast etudes still bore no programmatic titles, they'd all been revised and inflated to entangle the mere piano student in a maze of technical difficulties; and hence, they intimidated all with less than Lisztian virtuosity -- and that was everybody! Indeed, it had been Liszt's release -- the previous year -- of his Paganini *Etudes* for publication (again not as prolifically as planned: this time whittled down from an announced dozen to a merely flabbergasting six) that had raised the bar on pianistic performance standards so drastically that, by 1851, Liszt felt obliged to publish his Paganini evocations in re-engineered and simplified versions for pianists with only ten fingers (under the title *Etudes d'Execution Transcendante d'apres Paganini*).

Still, the difficulties of negotiating even *those* Paganini Etude versions impelled Busoni -- the same who translated the Bach *Chaconne* into the pianistic version heard in this concert -- to spend intervals over a busy decade clearing them of difficulties so (by 1923) they'd be sufficiently simplified for even virtuosos to play.

The same way -- *again* in the year (this time 1852) following another of his Paganini Etude publications -- Liszt issued *Etudes d'Execution Transcendante*, in the final form that's best-known today. While little compositional detail has been changed -- just pianistic difficulties eased and transitions smoothed, now -- three years after the death of Chopin (who would have thought them cheaply sensational) -- all but two (#s 2 and 10) have received "programmatic" titles: that is, they have been given titles identified with a story or "program" that Liszt means to suggest the music should be heard to dramatize.

Such a suggestion is often considered an imaginative straightjacket by critics and a misrepresentation of the compositional process by most composers. Composers mostly discover musical ideas by *musical* means: instrumental or theoretical experimentation rather than a *literary* process, in which musical ideas are chosen for their ability to illustrate -- or emotionally mime -- program points. To the listener, however -- especially in the case of *new* music, where melodic concepts, harmonic and structural effects may be jarringly disorienting -- a program can offer an appreciative lifeline, a way of gleaning a meaningful emotional experience from what may seem an aural morass.

So, these etudes are not only "transcendent" in pianistic technique, they transcend merely abstract sonic contour to arrive at a pictorial or even dramatic meaning. The eleventh transcendental etude -- which Lisa shares with us -- is called "*Harmonies du Soir = Evening Harmonies*". This title not only evokes the harmonious close to what seems the crystal clear heat of a Summer day, it hints at perhaps a warmth of human harmony, the friendly harmony between companions --even lovers -- that may bring a satisfying day to a spiritually relaxing close.

The etude starts with vacuous single-finger notes at octaves as if to clear our ears, then quietly scurrying thirds, shyly fleeing what? Firmer single notes like belltones with arpeggiated flourishes finally set us up in a sort of key, introducing a serenading exercise in mellifluous parallel triadic chords, this time with octave chimes above: could they be cutting lines of cirrus clouds across a sunset sky? After a return to earth with Liszt's infamous flying octaves, an ecstatic -- but curiously detached -- theme, richly haloed in arpeggios, is released like an offering... only to dissipate on the night breeze. A lonely yearning return to the triadic passage, then more octave single notes, and an almost comically abashed but assertive little themelet with gently spasmodic accompaniment brushes against us, circling us suspiciously, only to whirl away in abandoned -- immensely confident -- self-assertion, its power building through low running octaves and insistent hammering on each pivotal thematic note until an ecstatic -- even religious -- catharsis, full of the familiarly Lisztian sound and fury, is finally achieved. We hear the parallel triadic melody return: sympathetic, fulfilled. Wisps of the various themes retreat into a mysterious sort of sympathetic union and, like the last flash of a setting sun, retreat into what must be intended to be taken for a concluding "Amen."

J.S. BACH CHACONNE BWV 1004, #5

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When you hear serious musicians talk about "the chaconne [said like "shack-on"]" without any qualification like a composer's name or name of source work, you can almost bet they mean the "chaconne" movement from Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)'s "*Partita #2 for Solo Violin*" [5th movement of #1004 in Schmieder's *Bach Works' Catalog* (either 'S' or 'BWV' catalogue)].

While Bach's *6 Suites for Solo Cello* are the principal cornerstone of all music for that larger

instrument, there can be some reasonable question whether the master's parallel work for the violin, the *6 Sonatas & Partitas for Solo Violin* (three of each work, sequenced as three pairs of one *Sonata* and one *Partita* each), exploit the characteristics of the instrument sufficiently to constitute the only guide an aspiring player would need to master any demand encountered on the violin: one might also study Paganini's *24 Caprices*, for instance.

But the keystone in this triumphal arch of violin literature is the Chaconne movement apparently tacked on as an essentially incredible finale to what seems a perfectly satisfactory (and for J.S. Bach, that means "masterfully delightful") partita.

(The *Partita*, since we're preoccupying ourselves with matters of form, is a sort of suite apparently named for the fact it comes in "parts" rather than a single movement; to go further and suppose that, in the partita, the movements might be more contrastingly differentiated than in the *suite* (French for "whole") where they might be better blended or even "schmeered" is to impose greater consistency than can be fairly expected of a composer (whose publisher might retitle the piece anyway to encourage sales -- assuming the composer, unlike poor unappreciated J.S., could even *get* a publisher); the legendary *Sonatas & Partitas* circulated for a century in manuscript copies among violinists who could wangle one. This *Partita*, in short, was a *Partita* because J.S. Bach said it was -- and who can get more authentic than that.)

Similarly, another question arises about the suitability of calling this a *chaconne* rather than a *passacaglia* as pieces in either form are built on repeating a bass line (or "ground bass") to which melodic variants are harmonized on higher pitches, the whole thing building rather hypnotically to a grand crescendo, much as a classic "be-bop" tune is improvised by a jazz musician to the chord progression or "changes" of a pop standard or hit usually culled from the Great American Songbook.

Rather than referring you to Alec Wilder's chamber jazz miniature, "Pop, what's a passacaglia?" -- which actually *is* an example, we could defer to the formal definition that -- rather than pulsing in the common time of a jazz standard, both *chaconne* and *passacaglia* scan in triple meter and some sources say the *chaconne*'s in major mode, while the *passacaglia*'s in minor. But the latter definition wasn't applied by J.S. Bach: the "Bach *Chaconne*" in *D* starts in *minor*, climaxes in *major*, and subsides back into *minor*, thus proving once again that genius is a rule of its own.

The *Partita* #2 -- which we *can't* hear in a piano recital because, so far as I know, nobody thought it important enough to transcribe for solo piano -- runs the same gamut (to different music) of dance types as the *2nd Suite* we've already heard, save for the opening *Prelude* and the

two *Bourees* the *Partita* omits. Then, after its *Jig* (*Gigue* in France), for nearly a quarter-hour the action-packed *Chaconne* winds through 29 repetitions (and if you're counting, you're missing a cataclysmic catharsis!) of its lumbering ground bass chorus, while the upper voices go completely ape building a sort of fireworks cathedral.

All the simultaneous notes this eruption required were not easy to play on a single baroque violin with its highly arched bridge and curved bow and -- when Bach was being rediscovered by romantic musicians -- realization became even tougher because violinists of that day were already using the straight-backed bow we currently employ! Frankly, it was impossible.

Violinists -- being unprincipled cheats at heart -- had to break up the chords (called “multiple stops” on the violin) and figure out ways to “fan” or stagger them in clunky sub-groups.

As Bach gained stature with each successive generation, the idea of being able to hear the *Chaconne* as something like a musical experience rather than the violinistic equivalent of a gladiatorial free-for-all gained importance. The most successful attempt -- though controversially anachronistic -- at transcribing the *Chaconne* to be played on a piano was the work of one Ferruccio Dante Michelangelo Benvenuto Busoni (1866-1924), a true cosmopolitan born in Florence, raised in Austria, whose career gradually took him north to Russia, where he married a Swede, finally settling in Berlin (though he spent World War I in neutral Switzerland).

Not content to merely become a brilliant concert virtuoso -- which he was -- Busoni championed early 20th century music and composed piano music himself -- including the hour-long “Skyscraper” *Piano Concerto* that features a men’s chorus in its finale, and operas like the unfinished *Doktor Faustus*. In the process, his mass appeal faded, but he gained an enduring reputation as a teacher of aesthetics, acting as mentor to composers like Kurt Weill, whose radical musicals in Germany and, -- after escaping Hitler -- the U.S., introduced songs like “Mack the Knife”, “Speak Low”, and “My Ship.”

When he prepared a seven volume edition of Bach’s works for the piano, its third volume included his transcription of the *Chaconne*, which dated from about 1897. In presenting it, Busoni commented on a characteristic of Bach’s style which I call “contrapuntal implication” -- not “imitation” but “implication”...

The idea is that J.S. created melodies so strong, sequences of intervals so memorable, that only a fragment could suggest or *imply* to our ear that it’s hearing the *whole* tune: our melodic memory will fill in the rest. You’ll understand this process better if you try singing a Bach piece in a chorus; everybody who’s ever sung along with Handel’s *Messiah* knows what a kick it is, but Bach is such a powerful experience I met a guy who got “saved” just singing in the Chorus of a production of the *St. Matthew Passion*.

What Bach did was compose *every* part so it becomes “*the melody*”, so that it makes sense in the *time* dimension: *horizontally* as you read the music. Everybody has a sort of “blended solo”. But these parts also make sense in the *harmonic* dimension: *vertically* as you read the music. The art that makes Bach the composer’s composer is that he knows how to deal out the notes of each of his chords to the musical voices playing or singing it in a melodically memorable way that makes each one feel like “the star.”

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Now, in the *Chaconne*, we’re so strongly aware of the incessant tread of the ground bass that it becomes much easier to sense what note each voice of a given chord must move to so it will sound “in tune” as a member of the next chord. But suppose (because the violinist that’s supposed to play the *Chaconne* has just run out of fingers) this note simply *cannot be sounded*. Our ear, almost magically, will try to *fill it in*, as *contrapuntally implied*.

What Busoni did to transcribe the *Chaconne* for piano was to listen to his mind’s ear for these *implications* and *write them out*. The Busoni transcription, though musicologically suspect (1. it was for an instrument (grand piano) unimagined by Bach, 2. it was written out by a musician who *was not* Bach, 3. even the piano didn’t have enough notes to realize *all* the implications of Bach’s counterpoint), spread the renown and appreciation of the *Chaconne* so well in an age (the early 20th century) when baroque music in general was pretty well forgotten, that it even

suggested to another Italian composer, Alfredo Casella (1883-1947) that he might extend this implicative process successfully enough to magnify the *Chaconne*'s performing forces from a single violin to a modern symphony orchestra, which he duly accomplished --duly acknowledging Busoni's conceptual contribution.

Hold onto your hats, folks, while you let Bach/Busoni blow you away via Lisa Lanza.

CHOPIN NOCTURNES OPUS 9 Nos 1 & 3

Witty pianist Oscar Levant (the virtuoso pianist who adlibbed "Did I ever tell you about my command performance for Hitler?" in Hollywood's *An American in Paris*) once quipped, "Just think of it, when Mozart was my age, he'd been dead ten years!" Not only W.A. Mozart (1756-'91), but Levant's fabulously gifted friend George Gershwin (1898-1937), and the "Pole of Paris", Frederic Chopin (1810-'49): all died within a couple of years of entering their fourth decade. All three were admired pianists and Chopin -- as a composer who wrote mainly for his instrument -- was a master of the small form.

A Polish folkdance called the mazurka seems to have been his favorite: at least we know 57 he wrote -- (or at least we know of them) -- usually published in suite-like foursomes, each mazurka located in its opus number in a role as dramatically calculated as a sonata movement. Chopin's next favorite forms seem to have been preludes and etudes; he wrote a few more than a couple of dozen of each.

Then there were forms that at least excited him enough to be attempted nearly twenty times each: the grandiose Polish dance, the polonaise -- into which Chopin often projected his patriotic feelings, the Polish folksong -- preserving the soul of his national poetry in its native language, that scandalous Viennese dance sensation: the waltz, and -- as a form he filled 21 times -- the nocturne, a piece evoking the romance and mystery of night. With few exceptions -- and perhaps because he felt the gentle touch they required was a pianistic technique he best exemplified -- the nocturnes were the only works of his he demonstrated for his beloved students.

This form was developed by the Clementi piano company's young Irish demonstrator, John Field (1782-1837), and his own compositions in it made him a sensation throughout Europe,

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particularly in the East: Russia -- where he settled, and Poland -- where Chopin saw him and, though critical of Field's straight-forward, harmonically unsophisticated language, was profoundly affected by the Irishman's quiet, dreamlike performance style and its almost hypnotic effect on the fashionably "with-it" romantic audiences of his day.

From the opus 9, Chopin's first published set of noctunes -- which appeared during the first year the composer lived in Paris -- Lisa Lanza has chosen to perform only the first and last ones. Why? Because the second, in the key of E-flat major -- halfway across the scale from the keys of the outer nocturnes she plays -- has become one of the composer's biggest hits, available today as recorded in almost any collection, but the other two -- while not as blatantly tuneful or as readily available -- are more emotionally involving and structurally complex. They deserve special attention and appreciation as displays for other facets of the composer's genius than his strictly melodic gifts.

While Chopin detested his works getting laden with programmatic associations, I simply can't

avoid thinking of the scratch of tree branches against a window pane in the night breeze as I recorded hear the first prelude's introduction establishing its dark B-flat minor tonality. Then the piece seems to enter a human space full of warmth, but also oddly tainted with a darkly gentle shadow of misunderstanding. This resolves with some passion as the scene fades and we refocus on the window pane, to closing chords intoning like a drawing curtain.

As the third nocturne establishes the utterly contrasting "bright" key of B major, its little trills, lengthening to runs in repetition, remind me of the way raindrops -- on panes of the same window -- roll downwards to form little rivulets. The emotional drama beyond the panes is more complex: an airy, graceful theme emerges from the trilling one, full of hope and simple aspirations, only -- once it's fully developed and repeated -- to be interrupted by a stormy, almost violent, agitated bridge section that reaches a climactic statement, only to subside again -- back into the hopeful theme, that's whirled into a transcendent coda for a brief instant before the composer refocuses on the rivulet-like passages and gently joins his chordal curtains behind them.

"POLITICAL" DISCLAIMER #1

In the process of writing about the *Toccata for Piano* of Aram Ilyitch Khachaturian, some people may think I am discussing "politics". That is not my intention. I think I'm only talking about things that happened to composers whose work I generally like. But, in a lot of places you wouldn't expect to find it -- especially in the 20th Century -- politics have forced their way in on people, whether they liked it or not.

Just think about poor Mozart, even further back, having -- only shortly before the French Revolution -- made a "progressive" play by Beaumarchais into an opera. Did Viennese aristocrats who could have kept him going feel like commissioning music from a composer who may have helped send to the chopping block a daughter of Austria's beloved empress? "Of course!" say modern critics. How would *you* feel?

Yes, I talk about many things that, as well as music, *affect* music (and that could hit just about everything human-affecting) in my little essays. I do it, not to fill up your head with what I think, but to get you to find out what you think about our complex lives and their aspects for yourself.

If you, even once, say to yourself, "There's something wrong with what that guy just wrote, but what?" about what I write, I'd feel like I've gotten you moving toward a track that will get you into the composer's skin and, thus, help you feel the music more deeply. I don't like hearing people constantly telling us to trust them to tell us what's what and what's not. I say, "Trust nobody, especially me. Try and figure out who sent me and why. Check any fact that seems *really* important out for your self. But this is what seems to be going on."

The person who sent me is Lisa Lanza. I like the way she plays piano and I want you to like it, too. I try to promote her playing without telling a single untruth. If that's why she generally likes what I write about music, I won't argue. I don't know whether she likes anything I say about politics because she won't talk about it. I don't even know if she's conservative or liberal because she won't talk about it. I don't *really* know if I'm conservative or liberal... and I *do* talk about it.

Frankly, I don't know or care about her politics or represent them in any way because I *do* know she likes some dogs and some people. I'm not always sure she likes me. And she usually likes her husband and most music I think is important. But I also know all -- if any -- political views in this essay are mine, all mine.

My views on modern Russian history largely reflect those of the guy who taught me two quarters of it at UW, the late Dr. Donald Treadgold, whose textbook, *Twentieth Century Russia*, was dismissed by the Soviet Consul-General in New York City as being "too factual." But Dr. Treadgold seldom talked about music. Most of what I think about it came from record jacket liner notes, my own listening, and gossip with other "freelance musicologists" (a.k.a., "classical record nerds [formerly, "classical record nuts]").

My studies of World History in General have convinced me that The Chief Lesson of 20th Century History is: "If anybody tells you that all -- or even most -- and, possibly, *any* -- human problems can be solved if we only kill off some certain select people, *run* like a tornado *away from them!*" Even if it solves one problem, all the killing you have to do is certain to create other problems, if only in your dreams. If there's any hidden message in my attempts to make sense of 20th Century music (and I think there's generally a lot in that wonderful, earnest classical music), that's it.

AND NOW . . .

TOCCATAS (Khachaturyan & Ravel)

As the choppy clash of savage orchestral rhythm helps the Flying Karamazov Bros. start filling the air with whirling juggling pins or we watch a globular interplanetary vehicle silently ply the spaceways to the achingly lonely keening of icy strings in Stanley Kubrick's Cinerama epic, *2001*, we are hearing contrasting strains from music of Armenia's best-known composer, Aram Khachaturyan (1903-'78).

Both the thrilling *Sabre Dance* and the lovely but lonely *Adagio* just cited come from a ballet originally called *Happiness* in 1939, but when expanded to 3 acts in 1942 was retitled *Gayaneh*, a title it kept for its 1957 final version. Almost never actually danced as a ballet in its earlier versions but often heard in parts of the three dance suites extracted from it for which its music had been slightly revised -- as it has, indeed, also been for each stage version -- the real problem *Gayne* (as its title was more commonly transliterated from the USSR's Cyrillic alphabet phonetics) had, the one that had forced it into revisions, stemmed from its time and country of origin.

When you live in a country whose government is dedicated to -- above all -- proving itself infallible, you cannot be dancing to a scenario which has your countrymen and women embracing allies from a country which has turned out to be your enemy since its libretto was firmed up, unless your audience is capable of degrees of logical gymnastics impossible even to artistes of the Bolshoi or Kirov troupes.

Political incorrectness in the Soviet Union (1922-1992) usually turned out to be even more lethal in the arts than banality or lack of originality; it became almost unavoidable when dealing with

almost any nearly contemporary subject during the topsy-turvy rule of Josef Stalin (a pseudonym the Georgian Josip Djughavili had adopted in his Revolutionary Days, thus making him [as his last name translates] precede Superman as the original “Man of Steel”), particularly during and around the days of WWII (for the USSR, 1939-5) when nations could and did change roles several times a decade.

As long as the Soviet state existed, Khachaturian (in today’s transliteration with a “yan” ending) was known as a composer from the Soviet nation of his birth: Georgia, for he hailed from the Armenian ghetto in Tiflis, Georgia’s capital -- rather than in his deeper identity: as a descendant and cultural heir of people who’d inhabited the first Christian nation on Earth, Armenia. In some ways Georgian nationality proved a professional advantage when Khachaturian’s countryman, Stalin, quietly took political control of all of what was once Russia and its Empire, subjecting what had become the USSR under Vladimir Lenin to a rule that historical investigation is continually proving to have been irredeemably despotic.

Old World Georgia dances to intoxicating rhythms that puzzlingly resemble those of the Western Hemisphere’s Afro-Latin music. But Armenia’s people have been singing, dancing, and playing exotic improvisatory *melismas* that give an original twist to more Middle Eastern ethno-music for over three thousand years. Stalin, himself all too familiar with Russian conceits of cultural superiority, offered all natives of the old Empire’s cultural backwaters an equal opportunity to benefit from Russia’s world-famous cosmopolitan artistic institutes (providing they proved suitably loyal to him), and Khachaturian became -- thanks to his roots in Armenian folklore and Georgian address -- one of the first beneficiaries of Soviet diversity affirmation to achieve international renown.

Starting as a cellist at somewhat advanced age, he quickly proved himself possessed of musical gifts befitting a prodigy, especially adept at pouring Armenian folk rhythms and melos into Western classical forms, even as Brazilian Heitor Villa Lobos (1887-1959) was simultaneously doing in Paris with his own ethnically diverse national blend of native music.

The classic Bachian *toccat*a had taken a name derived from the Italian word for “touch” in apparent reference to the days of human-pumped organs, when notes had to be fist-hammered and one -- not to mention a *series* -- so brief the whole sequence could be no more than merely “touched” heralded at least a novelty, if not a downright *miracle* in organ technology!

Khachaturian obviously sensed the similarity of the antique baroque form to the hypnotically swirling dances of his Armenian heritage and -- while studying with Nikolai Myaskowski (1881-1950) at the Moscow Conservatory -- managed to exploit his discovery in the 1932 attempt that Lisa plays for us, a student work that would have marked its composer as watchworthy had it succeeded in *only* this.

But budding Soviet composers were not merely destined to become accomplished professionals in search of a personal audience: they were state employees, salaried to rally public enthusiasm for the government and its often unpopular policies. Khachaturian’s teacher, Miaskovsky (different transliterations, remember, yield different spelling) -- as a loyal Soviet artist -- turned out 27 symphonies, each one a sort of diary of its era, in my opinion recording what might be -- not necessarily *the composer’s* reactions -- but feelings typical of any ordinary Communist Party functionary to the events and propaganda around him.

Remembering the vital role *topicality* -- as well as “correctness” -- played in Soviet aesthetics,

we can fully appreciate Khachaturian's achievement in his little *Toccata*. Between 1928 and 1932, Stalin's regime imposed the first of many successive Five Year Plans on the Soviet Union. Under these economic regimes, Stalin attempted to bodily lift the Soviet peoples into the industrialized 20th Century. State industries were constructed overnight, gargantuan public works attempted to create hitherto non-existent national infrastructure, and farming activities were consolidated on vast collective farms -- an effort demanding vast sacrifice from every social sector, which -- because of basic Communist misunderstandings about the motives and methods of agriculture -- produced tragically meager results.

So Khachaturian's vibrant showpiece not only brilliantly displays his folkloric heritage, but the notion that it might also depict the greatest public effort of his times seems inescapable. Against throbbing mechanistic chords, we hear the joyous rattle and clatter of conveyors, feel the awe as great musical structures rise, looming, out of nothing. Yet, too, we hear a distant rustle accompanying several almost anguished melismatic, ascending and descending folk motifs, wordlessly weaving and yearning, bewitched by an unnamed despair that's quickly masked by the chattering of more, even shinier machinery.

Considering the vivid, dramatic musical material he could construct and the almost visual imagery it conjures, we're very little surprised he wrote over 25 film and 20 theatrical scores in an almost sixty year career. But what's more surprising is that -- with not only ballet music from *Gayne*, but music for the play, *Masquerade*, and a concerto each for piano and violin (the last also adapted for flute) among the top 40 in their respective categories -- at least in his lifetime, this composer's other works are virtually unknown, even in his own country.

The problem lies -- I think as an enthusiastic fan of his most neglected works -- with what I refer to as the "chicken' Khatcha-torian Syndrome." To appreciate the appropriateness of this almost unforgivably unbearable wordplay, we must realize that anyone who attempted any significant musical innovation in a country like the Soviet Union -- whose music establishment required accessibility, familiarity, even instant recognizability to increase its *popularity* and, hence, its propaganda appeal (i.e., "audience penetration" in Madison Avenue-ese) -- was courting artistic (though seldom physical) euthanasia.

Khachaturian was actually engaged in a rather impressive sort of experiment in non-stop rhythmic and melodic melisma that was producing explosive -- even dumbfounding -- works like his *Third Symphony* (1947), subtitled *Symphony-Poem for full symphony orchestra* (including 10 woodwinds, 11 brass, and other usual suspects) , *pipe organ*, and *15 trumpets* and, to much lesser extent, the *Cello Concerto* (1946) that preceded it. Just seven weeks later, *Symphony #3* became the principal piece of evidence labelling Khachaturian a "decadent formalist" and bringing his membership in the USSR composer's union -- a union which he helped create -- under review, pending public, abject apology.

He wasn't alone, as these charges were all part of Stalin's campaign to bring the USSR's intelligentsia back under tight postwar rein -- a death-dealing effort known as the "*Zhdanovschina*" (i.e., "Dirty deeds of Zhdanov") after its instigator (and nearly-last intentional victim). The soon-to-be "elected" head of the Composer's Union (replacing Rheinhold Gliere), Tikhon Khrennikov (1913- ???) expressed his emphatic disapproval of Shostakovitch (1906-1975)'s rather ironic *Symphony #9* (according to excessively accurate interview/biographer Solomon Volkov) by enthusiastically jumping up and down on top of its recently-published score.

[When I saw Khrennikov in 1961 at a seminar conducted as part of the Los Angeles International Music Festival, he seemed just as enthusiastic: like a dog in point, lurching forward in his chair, he just managed to remain seated as he heatedly attempted (in erratically translated Russian) to refute Scottish avant-garde composer Iain Hamilton's assertion that the contemporary composer had no obligation whatever to create music that took social needs into consideration.

Khrennikov, still Composer's Union head almost a decade after Stalin and longer, had accompanied Azerbaijani composer Kara Karayev to Los Angeles, where both conducted new works: Khrennikov his *Second Symphony* and Karayev the *Seven Beauties* ballet. Festival Director Franz Waxman was reciprocally invited to tour the Soviet Union conducting *his* works - which he did, also managing to research authentic Crimean themes there for his music to J. Lee Thompson's *Taras Bulba* (UA '62), a score that might have been composed by a man who'd read the Gogol novel in its original Russian, Bronislau Kaper, had he not been bogged down scoring the monumentally disorganized *Mutiny on the Bounty* (MGM '62).

But, to return to Moscow: 1948...]

Serge Prokofiev (1891-1953), ailing from complications of an oddly "premature (1945)" downstairs fall, and his wife had produced an especially suspicious adaptation of *War and Peace* (1943) and other, older works -- excessively modern one way or another -- fell under suspicion, prompting review and revisions that were only halted by Prokofiev's death on the same day as Stalin. Khachaturian's old teacher, Miaskovsky, was also seriously ill; while accused of little more than a few *outré* chords in his *Eighth String Quartet* (1942), it's my own pet theory that Stalin may have suspected the composer was trying to get his goat by honoring a man the dictator secretly abominated but had to publicly pretend to extol.

Miaskovsky's *Opus 61*, a patriotic wartime cantata called "*Kirov Is With Us*" (1942), praises the vigilance of the Leningrad party boss whose assassination in the early '30s Stalin has been widely thought to have plotted -- though he expressed deep grief over the death, punished the unlikely culprit, and even named a class of self-propelled guns after the "martyr". Whatever truth lies in my (not exceptionally bizarre) hypothesis, Miaskovsky pleaded that his illness prevented his repenting his musical "crimes", finished several (but not excessively important) works, and died before he could recant -- even if he'd ever wanted to. Stalin relented by permitting a posthumous award of the Stalin Prize to Miaskovsky's 27th Symphony.

The condemnation told Khachaturian his whole plan for the rest of his life work: to write classical music in the musical language of Armenia, was futile, steeped in grotesquely deformed delusions of beauty and humanist majesty that were deeply anti-social. Deeply shaken by the actual physical damage and social isolation to which he'd exposed his family, he was unofficially exiled to Armenia to immerse himself in the music of his people as part of his rehabilitation (somewhat like condemning a nudist to the beach at Cannes).

But he emerged from this personal trial with a career-saving notion for his next project. He told Khrennikov he wanted to write a ballet about Spartacus and the Third Servile War: the most famous slave revolt in ancient Roman history (-72 - -70). Khrennikov told him he'd do better sticking to events closer to his own time and place.

But Khachaturian was well aware what pitfalls of "incorrectness" get attached to dramas dependent on events in living memory about which orthodox views can startlingly change. A composer with his rap sheet couldn't afford anything ideologically "iffy"; Khachaturian managed to quote one of Marx's writings in which the fountainhead of Communist thought

claimed his own personal *hero* was Spartacus; when Khrennikov heard that particular verse in what amounted to secular scripture, the *apparatchik* ordered Khachaturian to begin work his biographical ballet *immediately*.

Stalin had already been dead a year when he finished all its *four* acts to Nikolai Volkov's scenario and Nikita Khrushchev's "thaw" was already underway when it was first staged in 1956, to worldwide acclaim. Unfortunately, most of what was distinctive and exciting about Khachaturian's style had been painstakingly removed from the composer's *Spartacus* music, a testament to the Khachaturian's sincere repentance that he had bitten the bureaucratic hand that somewhat generously fed him between threats.

But good news was that the ballet was so spectacularly staged, so thrillingly danced, that most people never really noticed its music and even fewer cared that it sounded like a pastiche from a circus review. Unfortunately, bad news was that the ballet toured so widely that real music lovers and -- worse -- critics who never heard -- or remembered -- any of Khachaturian's really masterful work, thought of *Spartacus*, "chicken Khachaturian" if there ever was any, as the composer's "mature face".

I even feel that fellow Moscow Conservatory graduate and Soviet Composers' Union member Alex North -- surely on conversational terms with, if not a personal friend of the older Khachaturian -- may have produced far more substantial musical treatment of the *Spartacus* story in his thrilling score for Dalton Trumbo's Hollywood screen adaptation of Howard Fast's historical novel, directed by the young Stanley Kubrick (Universal '60).

It was too easy for musical cogniscenti to forget Khachaturian's three symphonies -- if they'd *ever* really heard them: 1935's diploma piece, "*Armenia*"; 1943's wartime memoir, "*The Bell*" and 1947's notorious "*Symphony-Poem*", finally published when it was a decade old and not recorded for over a decade more.

They'd almost certainly never encountered his splendid 1932 *Trio for Clarinet, Violin, and Piano*, or his arresting 1933 *Dance Suite* for orchestra, both expertly written and tastefully sensuous, and -- while they'd certainly encountered *pieces* of *Gayne* -- as a whole a true 20th Century dance masterpiece lay unperformed, despite excerpts having become celebrated international hits when played almost to death out of context. There were the crowd-pleasing *Piano* and *Violin Concerti*, so full of rambling melody it was hard to judge anything about their construction except their outstanding dramatic value -- and, of course, the politically scarred but cerebrally vibrant *Cello Concerto* was a piece it seemed nobody wanted to play, much less really hear.

No sooner had *Spartacus* been submitted to Khrennikov's people: 1954 -- even before it was staged -- than Khachaturian was officially rehabilitated: named a People's Artist of the USSR. A year after his second ballet started playing, in 1957, Khachaturian's *Gayne* -- finally with a "correct" libretto -- was revised, its music "tempered" to add conventionally balletic scenes and interludes to the spectacular folk dances that made it world famous, although it never achieved the popularity in this form as when favorite parts were played as *ad hoc* suites.

Khachaturian, now secure in a nation that allowed an established composer at least *some* slack when it came to experimentation -- and even as suppressed masterpieces like Shostakovich's *Fourth Symphony* (1936) and Prokofiev's *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* (1938) were finally being premiered -- , decided he would try to return to his own

personal project: to find a way of using the western symphonic apparatus to tell the Armenian story in an Armenian musical language.

Starting about 1961-2, Khachaturian essentially returned to the concerto form with a new kind of one movement hybrid concert work that he called the "*Concerto-rhapsody*". In a non-stop melismatic outburst, wildly virtuosic exercises would erupt from one of the Soviet Union's outstanding instrumental soloists, accompanied by violent but seductively syncopated orchestral rhythms -- as from a Near Eastern rhythm section.

After a little more than 20 minutes, the dazzling, nearly incandescent outburst subsides, leaving its audience near exhaustion, but deeply moved by the virtuosity and feeling expressed, its faith in human endurance -- its heroic ideals transcending all suffering -- renewed. The composer's first "*Concerto-rhapsody*" was for Violin and Orchestra, his next -- for Cello and Orchestra -- premiered in 1963. Finally, came the "*Concerto-rhapsody*" for Piano and Orchestra, in 1965.

After a final revision of *Spartacus* in 1968, the composer's concert works came few and far between, principal attention being paid to a triad of solo string sonati that matched another earlier triad with piano accompaniment and complement several extant solo piano works and early duet pieces for violin and piano -- but none of his chamber works is heard as frequently as they probably deserve. Aside from his comparatively large output of dramatic scores, the list of Khachaturian's works is nearly exhausted when we list an orchestral *Concert Waltz* dating from 1955 and a student-days' *Double Fugue for String Quartet* that got revised into a *Recitative and Fugue*, also for String Quartet, in 1967.

What -- aside from both residing in Paris during the 1920's -- did the American writer and outdoorsman Ernest Hemingway (1898-1961) and the diminutively elegant French/Basque composer Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) have in common? They did die within a year of the same age, Hemingway being born the same year as Ravel and Ravel dying the same year as George Gershwin. But the significant artistic commonality is that both served as ambulance drivers (though Hemingway's rank in the Italian Service may have exempted him from such duties) in World War I.

Neither artist escaped the scourge of such duty that few whispered of -- especially in the innocent days of their youth: psychological trauma. Hemingway discussed it generally in his novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and with the way wars create it in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Ravel did it in two pieces of music: the shatteringly ironic choreographic poem for orchestra *La Valse* (1919-'20, for 2 pf.'21, as ballet '28) and the wistfully nostalgic agony of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17 for pf, orch'd '19 w/o Fugue [orch'd David Diamond '<96] & Toccata w/Rigaudon & Menuet juxtaposed, ballet of orch'd sects. w/o Prelude & Fugue '20.)

This superficially charming little suite -- its soothing warmth massaging away all grief, while it chokes back resentment of all seemingly useless pain -- is patterned after the baroque suites of which our opening Bach example is typical, though the dance forms it employs are of specially French origin.

Each movement -- including a Forlane as third movement in addition to the sections cited just above in the work's evolutionary description -- was dedicated to a figure in French music who died in what was then called the Great War -- placing them, so to speak, as an offering "at the tomb of Couperin", [presumably that of Francois Couperin "Le Grand" = "the Great" (1668-

1733), the most accomplished in a dynasty of French composers comparable to -- and excelling in number, if *not* in accomplishment -- the Bach's of Germany]. The emerging impression is almost that the movements' dedicatees have been sacrificed on the very altar of French music.

But Ravel is never solemn or tedious; his sacrificial victims are pictured as they were in life: vital, humorous, charming, seductive and -- in the final Toccata -- capriciously daring. The subject of this portrait seems to have been, in civilian mufti, a music critic. So much greater is Ravel's loss made to us now by the music as it must have felt to him then, but even more powerfully the music forces us to feel the overwhelming vitality of life, its pleasures and -- certainly in this dazzlingly desperate toccata, grasping for the opportunities left in even a few more moments of existence -- its accomplishments.

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