

METAMORPHOSIS

Bartok | Granados | Schumann



Kennis Ang, Piano

Wednesday, 27 April 2022 | 8.20pm
YSTCM Concert Hall

Biography

A multiple national and international award winner, Kennis Ang started her formal music education at the age of 7, and has not looked back since. She is currently under the tutelage of Professor Thomas Hecht at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, Singapore.

Kennis won third prize in her first piano competition when she was 9 (1st International Chopin Piano Competition, Singapore) and has since received numerous awards for her performances at piano festivals and competitions, such as the National Piano and Violin Competition, the biennial SMTA Performers' Festival, Young Talents Project and Yamaha Piano Competitions.

After clinching the second prize in the 3rd F.J. Benjamin-SYT Music Competition, she was awarded a scholarship of \$10,000 to further her musical skills. Always on the lookout to improve on her pianistic skills, she has also participated in a number of masterclasses by renowned artists such as Kerill Gerstein, Zhang Haochen and Aaron Shorr, just to name a few.

Among the many concerts Kennis has performed since an early age, one of her most memorable ones was for the late President Nathan at President's Challenge 15th Anniversary Commemorative Dinner at The Istana.

Kennis enjoys playing the flute and exploring different music genres during her free time. She believes that music tells stories that cannot be told through mere words, and hence loves to share them with the audience during her performances.

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Out of Doors, Sz.81

"I cannot conceive of music that expresses absolutely nothing"

Bartok's inquisitiveness and curiosity was truly evident throughout his life. He was constantly on the search for new forms of tonality and never stopped experimenting with different compositional techniques. Folk music, however, always had a special place in this patriot's heart, and he often included folk music elements in his works, even after discovering his own modern music style of composition as he matured.

The suite comprises 5 movements, depicting various nature scenes from a primitive Hungarian village. Each movement is characterised with its own unique "title" which is brought to life through the various musical elements. The first movement opens with loud crashes and bangs imitating the sounds of "Drums and Pipes". Bartok imaginatively viewed the piano as a percussion instrument, evident in the strong and heavy rhythmic sense in this movement. The melodic and harmonic vocabulary in this movement is rather limited, with a heavy use of tonal clusters, minor and major 2nds to bring out its intended atmosphere.

This is heavily contrasted by the "Barcarolle" (Boat Song), evoking an image of a single boat gently rocking on a still lake in the wee hours of the morning. This movement contains many different musical motifs that overlap, each depicting a different element in the darkness. For instance, the oozing undulations in the left hand could depict the slow-moving waves (and possibly sludge) as the boat drifts gently on it.

"Musettes" serves as a refreshing change to the dark and eerie atmosphere created by the previous movement. A musette is a "bellow-blown bagpipe", a wild primitive instrument which was common in folk music then and widely used in processions. It can be said that this movement has practically no 'melody'. Instead, it portrays a small procession of bagpipes coming from afar as they pass through a village. As the procession gets nearer, the bagpipes get louder and higher in pitch, drawing us as listeners right into the midst of this procession and unique sound world that is unfamiliar to most of us today.

The title says it all for the next movement - "The Night's Music", in which Bartok sought to re-create the sounds of the forest at night. It starts with quiet clusters in the left hand, conjuring an atmosphere of darkness and eeriness. To mimic the evocative sounds of nature, Bartok layers many different musical motifs, each depicting a certain aspect or

creature in the night, such as the “twittering, chirpings and croakings of nocturnal creatures”, as described by Halsey Stevens, a renowned Bartok scholar.

The suite ends off with “The Chase”, an extremely energetic fast-paced piece known to be a true test of technicality and endurance. Bartok spares no slack for the left hand, giving it an awkward ostinato accompaniment which doesn’t stop nor breathe at all throughout the movement. To me, this is the perfect representation of the immense panic felt from the impending danger during the relentless and unyielding chase. The anxiety-inducing fragmented right hand passages represent the panic and screams for help amidst the breathlessness and chaos of the chase.

ENRIQUE GRANADOS (1867-1916)

Valses poéticos

“But Granados... ah, Granados. The incurable romantic, the piano-poet, the Spanish Grieg.” - BBC Music Magazine

Granados was born in Lèrida, Spain into a military family, and had a special love for his country and its culture. He was never interested in politics, but promoted Spain’s culture with great pride in many of his compositions. A shy and rather introverted man by nature, he would often hold on to things he had grown fond of, re-using them and over-repeating them - evident in how many of his compositions have uncanny similarities and resemblance to one other. Even though Granados was a proficient pianist himself, he didn’t care as much for technical brilliance and bravura as compared to the other composers in his time. Instead, he often used memorable folk-like melodies accompanied by simple yet lush harmonies, to create the intimate sound world he so found comfort in and was known for.

His *Valses poéticos* is a strong example of his compositional style. Comprising 8 short “poetic waltzes”, the piece utilises simple and rather predictable harmonic progressions, largely heartwarming and extremely pleasant to listen to. Lots of recurring elements can be found across the dances, such as parallel major and minor key modulations, or how the dances are structured in either two or three-part forms throughout the suite. While the piece may not be so much of a challenge technically, the difficulty of capturing the pure simplicity of the dances with stylistic awareness and accuracy cannot be overlooked.

One can safely say that as repetitive and simple as the dances may seem, this suite never gets boring as each short dance brings something different and fresh to the table. After a boisterous intro, *Vals melódico* ushers in a beautiful lyrical melody in A major with a seemingly simple accompaniment, before continuing to the noble and poised *Vals apasionado*. This is followed by a deep, expressive and mournful *Vals lento* in D minor. The next two waltzes belong to the same key of Bb major - *Vals humorístico* being more bright and humorous, and *Vals brillante* taking on a triple meter waltz pattern alongside a gorgeous melodic line. Next comes the tranquil and reflective *Vals sentimental* in F# minor, contrasted strongly by the quick and light *Vals mariposa* which follows, also probably the most technically challenging waltz and also in F# minor. *Vals ideal* features many playful figures that dart around the keyboard, before seamlessly easing into the *Final*. Here, we are transported back to the memorable and lyrical first waltz (*Vals melódico*) as an epilogue to the entire suite.

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Fantasie in C major, Op.17

“Perhaps the most impassioned music I have ever written.”

Schumann, the exceptionally ingenious and gifted composer, the maker of some of the most intimate, emotional and passionate romantic masterpieces known to us today. However, Schumann's life was not a smooth-sailing one. Battling a plethora of mental issues which tormented him on a daily basis, Schumann passed away at the early age of 46 in an asylum, which he was admitted to after an attempted suicide in the later part of his life. Music often served as his emotional outlet as he struggled to express the anguish and pain he was facing at any point of time. Even his aspirations of becoming a concert pianist were dashed when he permanently injured his hand, forcing him to turn entirely to composing. These immense struggles led him to create and name two 'musical personalities' (Florestan & Eusebius) in many of his compositions, reflecting his 'manic-depressive' split personality. Florestan represented the extroverted Schumann, filled with passion and exuberance. In contrast, Eusebius represented the introverted, thoughtful and reflective Schumann. Thus, Schumann's works were not merely music compositions. They were autobiographical, and reflected his deepest and most heartfelt emotions - a lens into his soul.

The Fantasie in C, initially referred to as “three poems called Ruins, Triumphal Arch, and Constellation”, was one of Schumann's most personal and heartfelt works. This masterpiece was originally planned as a tribute and contribution to the building of

Beethoven's monument in Bonn, a project which was planned by Franz Liszt back then. However, more importantly, this was composed during a painful enforced period of separation from the love of his life, Clara Wieck, after her father violently objected to the idea of them being together and forbade them from meeting. Dejected and uncertain of the future, Schumann poured out his heart into this musical love letter - a true culmination of fiery passion, delicateness and virtuosity.

The first movement was referred to by Schumann as the most passionate he had ever composed; a lament on Clara's account. Starting off with a fiery and furious rolling dominant 9th chord in the left hand, the Clara theme (the descending five-note motif in octaves) makes a grand entrance with a strong sense of yearn. Violent mood changes make up this movement, notably the middle section - titled "Im Lengendenton" (In the Character of a Legend), a nostalgic and sentimental breath of fresh air from the whirlwinds of turbulence prior to it. The movement ends with an Adagio coda which Schumann intended as a secret love message to Clara; a quotation from Beethoven's "An die ferne Geliebte (to the distant beloved)", saying "Take, then, these songs, beloved, which I have sung for you".

Clara commented that the second movement of this Fantasy made her "hot and cold all over" - majestic heroism and boastful grandiose accompanied by military-like dotted rhythms etch throughout this piece, contrasted strongly by a lyrical and emotional short middle section. The movement ends with an exuberant and celebratory coda, featuring unforgiving and awkward leaps that would put any pianist in great trepidation.

The last movement is an indescribably intimate and tender finish to the fantasy, often referred to as "an extended song without words". Dreamy and peaceful with a tinge of longing sadness, it is a hushed utterance of the composer's deepest desires and agony. The depth and sensitivity required here may have very well been the reason why Franz Liszt, to whom this Fantasy was dedicated, chose never to perform this work in public as he believed that a large audience would not be able to comprehend this complexity and inner turmoil that lay behind Schumann's every note. Sheer and utter fulfilment concludes the movement, where peace is finally attained after the long arduous struggle of the entire fantasy.