

Program notes

Aleksandr Tian's Piano Junior Recital "Toccata": Evolution of genre through the centuries

1. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), Toccata in C Minor, BWV 911

This toccata is one of the set of keyboard toccatas written by Bach in his younger years. Along with the other three toccatas from same series BWV 912, BWV 913 and BWV 914, it is the best example of what was known in Bach's music as the *stylus phantasticus*: an imaginative and fanciful way of composing that was full of surprises.

The kapellmeister Johann Mattheson wrote that musicians could use it to demonstrate their skill, "as all sorts of unusual paths, hidden embellishments, ingenious turns and ornaments are produced, without really observing the beat and key, [...] without a theme or subject being developed; now fast, then slow; now in one voice, then in four".

And this is precisely what happens in BWV 911. Bach opens with an agitated, monophonic quasi-improvisation that seems to have no time signature, continues in polyphony and comes to a halt again soon afterwards. Then a four-part adagio unfolds, which revolves around harmonic timbres and unusual paths. This is followed by a 2-sections fugue theme, which dominates the rest of the piece. Bach combines and alternates it with other musical ideas. Just as everything is well under way,

the fugue thins out to a monophonic passage of notes and the conclusion seems to have been reached.

But wait! Bach's imagination has no limitations. The fugue starts up again and moves through a stream of ingenious turns and ornaments, filled with fierce self-confidence, towards the end.

2. Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), "Jeux d'eau

Ravel composed *Jeux d'eau* ("Water games") while a student at the Paris Conservatoire and dedicated it to his teacher, Gabriel Fauré. Franz Liszt's *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* was an inspiration for Ravel who described his musical depiction of water:

Jeux d'eau, appearing in 1901, is at the origin of the pianistic novelties which one would notice in my work. This piece, inspired by the noise of water and by the musical sounds which make one hear the sprays of water, the cascades, and the brooks, is based on two motives in the manner of the movement of a sonata—without, however, subjecting itself to the classical tonal plan.

Virtuosic rippling cascades of sound, glissandi, chromatic scale runs, and irregular rhythms evoke the fluid sounds of water in this musical tone poem that inspired Debussy to compose his piano solo, *Reflets dans l'eau*, on a similar theme. Major seventh chords, the juxtaposition of two harmonies, and chromaticism display Ravel's rich harmonic language. In his manuscript Ravel included a quote from Henri de Régnier that captures the ebullient splashing spirit of the music: "River god laughing as the water tickles him . . ."

3. Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), Nocturne in C Minor op.48, no. 1

The melody of the Nocturne in C minor unfolds *lento* and *mezzo voce* (slowly and half-voice). The opening notes do not flow, but fall – amid rests – like heavy signs of an exhausted person. Tadeusz Zieliński described that the melody of the Nocturne ‘sounds like a lofty, inspired song filled with the gravity of its message, genuine pathos and a tragic majesty’. With every bar, the melody moves closer to the point of culmination, before falling downwards in a tense, expressively rhapsodic recitative and immersing itself in the contemplative sounds of a chorale. The chorale gradually grows in strength, despite the fact that the violent music of double octaves forces its way in between its chords. André Gide called this moment ‘the sudden irruption of ... wind-blasts’. For the reprise of the opening theme, Gide found the following description: ‘a triumph of the spiritual element over the elements unleashed at the beginning’. There is indeed something uniquely grand in the way the form here masters the emotions, which are packed with the sound expression.

Kleczyński heard in this music ‘the soul’s disquietude’. Marcell Antoni Szulc had the impression that ‘this magnificent hymn is proclaimed not by a feeble piano, but by a mighty organ – midst the sound of trombones and kettle drums’. Ferdynand Hoesick recalled that the C minor Nocturne in Paderewski’s rendition gave the impression of a true ‘eroica’ among Chopin’s nocturnes.

4. Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), "Toccata" in D Minor op.11

Sergei Prokofiev's Toccata was composed in 1912. Prokofiev himself premiered the work some years later in December 1916. Similar to some of his contemporaries like Ravel and Khachaturian, Prokofiev's Toccata is a development to the toccata form made famous by the likes of J.S Bach (which we have heard in the beginning of the recital). This toccata is highly technically demanding, thus making it a favourite showcase piece amongst virtuoso pianists. Although Prokofiev premiered the piece, even he struggled to get all the way through the piece, because even though his technique was good, it takes a real master to accomplish this work.

Toccata is built on a repetition of rhythms in a perpetuum mobile structure that is constant throughout. The opening sees persistent repetition of the note D, which is interchanged between the right and left hand. The octave jumps here are then subtly changed as harsh dissonant chords break the perfect octaves. There is a sense of anxiety and tension in this piece, and the opening motor rhythms employ this atmosphere.

Chromatic leaps and syncopated rhythms begin to overlay, with Prokofiev quickly changing the hands to catch the pianist out. The development of the theme consists of descending chromatic figures and lots of contrary motion movement. The hands begin to musically argue as the dissonances become more aggressive. The constant hammering of the repeated rhythms slows down until a short

pause is heard. The scalar movement begins to ascend before a huge glissando sweeps up the piano to end on a top D.