

Brendan  
Nguyen  
piano  
master's recital  
february 5, 2010



Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata No. 13 in E-flat Major "Quasi una fantasia", Op. 27/1

I. Andante - Allegro - Andante

II. Allegro molto e vivace

III. Adagio con espressione

IV. Allegro vivace

George Crumb

A Little Suite for Christmas, AD 1979

I. The Visitation

II. Berceuse for the Infant Jesus

III. The Shepherds' Noël

IV. Adoration of the Magi

V. Nativity Dance

VI. Canticle of the Holy Night

VII. Carol of the Bells

INTERMISSION

Domenico Scarlatti

Sonata in G minor K. 30, L. 499, *Fuga Moderato*

Salvatore Sciarrino

Notturmo III, *Non troppo lento*

D. Scarlatti

Sonate in C Major K. 132, L. 457, *Cantabile*

S. Sciarrino

Due Notturmi Crudeli Nr. 1, *Senza tempo e scandito*

D. Scarlatti

Sonate in D minor K. 141, L. 422, *Toccata*

S. Sciarrino

Due Notturmi Crudeli Nr. 2, *Furia, metallo*

Beethoven was 31 years old when he was writing Op. 27. He had been living in Vienna for eight years and was firmly established as one of the best pianists around. Unfortunately, his ever-worsening deafness began to gnaw at his conscience. Frustration turned into dark depression. Playing the piano was one of the few ways he had left to communicate as he wished. Consequently, the piano sonatas became much more than lucrative performance opportunities. They were a place for Beethoven to express himself freely without the encumbrance of speech.

*If I had any other profession it would be easier,  
but in my profession it is a terrible handicap. As  
for my enemies, of whom I have a fair number,  
what would they say?*

*- L.v. Beethoven*

The indication “Quasi una fantasia” advertises the work as a departure from strict large-scale form. This sonata was conceived more as a whole piece rather than separate episodes. Rather than beginning with a fast movement, the piece opens with an almost improvisatory dialogue full of charm and warmth. Themes are not heard in full and formally developed as they are in conventional sonata form. Rather, new elements are introduced at will, taken over by something completely different only to reappear a little while later in a different form. Also typical are quick, unannounced changes in tempo, mood and key. The result is an elegantly witty and joyous work, completely antithetical to its counterpart Op. 27 No. 2, the famously lugubrious and menacing “Moonlight” Sonata. In many ways Op. 27 No. 1 is much more elegant and poetic than the “Moonlight” Sonata, a notion that is unfortunately overshadowed by the latter’s fame.

American composer of avant-garde music and Pulitzer Prize laureate George Crumb was initially influenced by the music of Anton Webern, but went on to explore unusual timbres, often times asking performers to play their instruments in unconventional ways.

His *Little Suite for Christmas, A.D. 1979*, a 'holy tone-poem' is filled with transcendent echoes of ancient rituals and wild dances. This suite is conceptually related to the Nativity frescoes of the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy. This private chapel, painted by Giotto (finished in 1305), follows through a series of separate panels the lineage and conception of Jesus Christ, incidents in his life and his crucifixion and resurrection. Each movement is entirely distinct, but like the Beethoven, sections flow into one another producing in an incredibly eclectic listening experience.

One can hear the influence of Olivier Messiaen's "Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus" both in terms of the music as well as subject matter, though what makes *A Little Suite for Christmas* distinctly George Crumb is the use of extended techniques. Reaching into the piano to pluck, strum and mute strings, the instrument played in this way manages to mimic the sounds of harps, bells, and otherworldly resonances. These foreign sounds are both beautiful and haunting, full of imagery and mystery.

*In a broader sense, the rhythms of nature, large and small - the sounds of wind and water, the sounds of birds and insects - must inevitably find their analogues in music.*

*- George Crumb*

The titles of many of Sciarrino's pieces revolve around the concept of night. His nocturnes, unlike those of Chopin or John Field contain a significance paradox: these pieces are not intended to depict the night, but rather they seek to give an indication, an allusion to a poetic meaning. These pieces extend to the limits of perceptibility, right up close to the point of silence, seeking to look into the space of the mind, and also to the extremes of the piano's register and volume. Sciarrino said with regards to the Notturmi: "Any piece entitled 'Nocturne' implies an element of violation, setting itself outside the time of normal daily life. Human activity strongly reflects the division between light and dark, and darkness is always associated with that which is negative. However, beyond any specific negative values, for the person who chooses not to think, uncertainty is in itself negative. Precisely by means of darkness one is led to the most problematical uncertainty of all: the impossibility of distinguishing death from life."

Notturmo III was composed in 1998. In his own words: "It consists of a landscape articulated in time, interwoven with various moments from the same trajectory. That's to say we hear static elements pulsating together, placed over their own descent." Sciarrino employs the subtle noises of the piano mechanism - peppering the landscape of the piece with clicks that leave eerie resonances in the open strings held by the piano's sostenuto pedal. Not being particularly prominent they call for a sensitivity almost at the physical limits of the performer, instrument and also of concert halls.

*Those sounds that no one produces have  
always fascinated me: the ghostly creakings  
of the night.*

*- Salvatore Sciarrino*

The Due Notturmi Crudeli (“Two cruel nocturnes”) constitute a turning point in the cycle of Sciarrino’s Notturmi: relationships and contrasts are emphasized, and the atmosphere darkens considerably. Unlike the other more placid nocturni, these two have more in common with his sonatas which are famous for their virtuosity and threatening tone. The first is a clanging fanfare of sounds that seems to exist not in the piano, but in the space above and around it. With overtones constantly interacting and constantly fed by more and more waves of sound, the resulting effect is sonically more chaotic than the constantly repeating chords would imply.

The second of the two is an adrenalin-fueled march into oblivion. The athleticism demanded of the performer is outrageous, as the hands must leap up and down the keyboard rapidly while performer’s center of balance is constantly thrown off. The chromatic phrases leap out of unpredictable registers while the ever-changing harmony of the clamoring chords leaves the listener with the unpleasant taste of metal.

The three Scarlatti Sonatas presented here are of varying mood and scope. The first, a labyrinthine and dramatic fugue, followed by the remarkably profound C Major Sonata. The last of the set is a brilliant tarantella, famous for its brisk repeated notes and impulsive arpeggios. My decision to pair Sciarrino with the Sonatas of Scarlatti might seem odd. The differences between the music of these two great Italian composers is obvious at the superficial level; separated by almost 400 years, there should be no surprise there. However, there is an elegance of composition, focus of intent, and style of narrative that I believe both composers share - a sort of musical heredity. My hope is that the listener will be shocked not only by their differences, but also by their similarities.

Brendan Nguyen







