

Stephen Lewis, piano

4 PM, Sunday, May 21st, 2017

CPMC Concert Hall

Vier Klavierstücke, Op. 119 (1892)

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

Intermezzo in B minor
Intermezzo in E minor
Intermezzo in C major
Rhapsodie in E-flat major

Douze Études (1915)

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Pour les agréments
Pour les sonorités opposés
Pour les arpèges composées

Sequenza IV (1966; revised 1993)

Luciano Berio
(1925-2003)

- 10 minute Intermission -

Sonata in C minor, Op. 111 (1822)

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

I. Maestoso—Allegro con brio ed appassionato
II. Arietta—Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

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Program Notes

Johannes Brahms composed his **Vier Klavierstücke, Op. 119** in 1892 at the same time as the pieces in his Opp. 116, 117, and 118. Together, these sets represent Brahms' final works for piano and are widely loved by pianists for their subtlety and richness of expression; their balance of passion, nostalgia, and resignation. The *Intermezzo* in B minor takes one of Brahms' frequent compositional devices—the melodic use of descending thirds, as heard in the main theme of his Fourth Symphony—to a harmonic and textural extreme. The descending thirds are held and sustained, resulting in ambiguous ninth and eleventh chords that hover somewhere outside of traditional tonality. The middle section, a slow waltz, continues the autumnal feeling of the opening. The *Intermezzo* in E minor is furtive and agitated, a complex rhetorical argument that mostly bubbles beneath the surface. Its middle section is another waltz, but this time it seems more distinct than in the B minor *Intermezzo*; appearances are deceiving, however, as this waltz is actually a close variation on the opening theme. The C major *Intermezzo* again presents a contradiction: a breezy, carefree romp that is made up of highly irregular and sophisticated syncopations and phrase lengths. What could well sound fussy, though, feels natural and delightful. The *Rhapsodie* bursts out in an extroverted trek through many episodes of unbridled Romantic excess. Notably, the *Rhapsodie* uses an early example of the arch form that would later be used extensively by Béla Bartók, who was, not incidentally, an admirer of Brahms.

Claude Debussy was critical of the rigorous, rational German method of constructing musical works, preferring instead to evoke the mysterious logic of dreams in his music. Harmonies, melodic motives, and rhythmic devices recur again and again in Debussy's music, imitating the images that repeat in our dreams throughout our lives. In his *Études* (his final significant piano composition), Debussy produces some of his most successful imitations of dream logic. The *Étude* for ornaments ("agréments") links a series of distinct musical ideas in its middle section with a vague ostinato, much as doors in dreams often open to far distant (or even imaginary) places, while the *Étude* for opposed sonorities evokes the soundscape of dreams, going from unreal austerity to impossibly powerful sounds and back again. The *Étude* for composite arpeggios carves a narrative of references, beginning with an opening both startlingly modern and yet reminiscent of Chopin, moving through gentle dance rhythms, virtuosic Romantic sweeps, Spanish guitar serenades, and an ending dripping with nostalgia for the sublimity of Romantic mediant modulations, which by 1915 had long been a musical cliché. Debussy's focus on the sensuality of perception and the fluidity of musical form show him yearning to transcend the relentless teleology of the tonal music he was raised on; in his *Études*, he had some of his best successes.

Luciano Berio's Sequenza IV for solo piano deals with a very different problem than the other three pieces on this program: how to create coherence when not bound by any architectonic and teleological musical system (that is, meaningful differences that propel music forward or hold its motion back). In other words, how could Berio create a sense of *rightness* and *appropriateness* for events that happen in the Sequenza? If this were not to be successful, the Sequenza would simply be a collection of stuff that happens, and, based on how rigorously Berio developed strategies to lend it coherence, this was clearly not acceptable to him as an outcome. Berio's solution was to craft material that imitated the basic functioning of tonality but located in an atonal environment. First, there is a limited set of chords heard throughout the work that repeat in a rough cycle over and over again, with some especially important chords demarcating formal divisions much like the tonic, dominant, and other chords do in tonal music. Next, Berio draws the notes for the many fast figurations throughout the work from these same chords, adding non-harmonic notes in order to flesh out compelling gestures—again, this is modeled on tonal music. However, a major component of tonality was still lost in Berio's approach: why should any of these particular chords have any particular hierarchical relationship with any of the other chords? Berio found three solutions here that are quite common in much atonal, non-serial music: first, the assertion of an order that is repeated often enough to be the basis for anticipation; second, making use of a variety of chord types, from quasi-tonal juxtapositions of two triads to dense, chromatic chords to chromatic clusters of various sizes, allows for difference to be felt and anticipated; finally, Berio used *symmetry* as a brake on musical motion; whereas asymmetry tends to cause motion through unequal distribution of musical information, symmetry presents no good reason to keep moving forward. The major cadences in the Sequenza are moments that feature highly symmetrical chords and textures, with symmetry happening both vertically and horizontally.

The **Sonata in C minor, Op. 111** is the capstone on **Ludwig van Beethoven's** output of 32 published piano sonatas over his musical career. It is easy to see, in retrospect, why this particular work would be his final sonata: after hearing it, it is easy to wonder whether there is anything else to say. The sonata is made up of only two movements, a relatively uncommon structure for Beethoven (although Opp. 54, 78, and 90 all provide precedents). The first movement is a stark, stormy outburst dominated by a fixed sequence of fully diminished seventh chords and by a texture constantly threatening to burst into fugue. The overall mood of this movement is familiar from other famous sonatas by Beethoven—the *Appassionata*, the last movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*, the *Pathétique*—but here everything is condensed and abrupt. In Beethoven's early and middle period, his distinctive "surprises" exist in terms of dynamic and textural shifts, rather than in different styles or affects; here, the abrupt changes show Beethoven imitating the *empfindsamer Stil* of composers like C.P.E. Bach. The stormy, stately

introduction blends the Baroque French Overture with the Romantic imitations of nature through lightning and thunder effects, while the brief coda is a Beethovenian reimagining of the extended plagal cadences of the Renaissance and Baroque eras (both the introduction and the coda would influence Frédéric Chopin, who admired this sonata, in his second Sonata and his “Revolutionary” Étude respectively). This reengagement with earlier styles of music (especially that of Palestrina, J.S. Bach, C.P.E. Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart) is common in many of Beethoven’s late works.

The second movement is called an “Arietta,” or small aria, and in its style it resembles the noble arias of Handel’s operas. The melody of the aria is deceptively simple, with a broadly singing diatonic melody that never comes to rest on the tonic, but instead always ends on the dominant. This leaves the theme oddly elliptical, a feeling of incompleteness that Beethoven exploits in profound ways later in the movement. At first, the Arietta proceeds as a set of variations, each one speeding up the fastest rhythmic values by a factor of two but keeping the overall tempo the same. This type of variation is akin to an evolving fractal, though the fastest and most vigorous variation surprises modern listeners by sounding uncannily like jazz with its fast, swung syncopations. But the most extraordinary moment may be the trill: when arrived at, the long trill on the supertonic signifies the approach of a strong cadence—this is a convention found throughout music of the Classical era and signals the arrival of the long-delayed resolution. Here, though, the trill hangs on for too long, shifts modes (for the first time in this movement) towards C minor, and eventually wanders off to the completely different key of E-flat major, a moment underlined by an extraordinary triple trill. The section that follows, an extended descending fifths sequence that repeats too many times, shows the danger of transcendence: becoming completely unmoored, adrift, and lost. This quietly chaotic state is ultimately resolved when the main theme returns in C major, now intent upon extending and finishing its melody on the tonic. In typically Beethovenian manner, this resolution *still* gets delayed until the very final measures of the piece, making it all the more satisfying when it arrives.