THURSDAY, JULY 7 :: 7:30 PM

Kirill Gerstein, piano

PIANO SONATA IN F-SHARP MINOR [1903-4]
Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)
Allegro
Vivo
Andante –
Allegro

PIANO SONATA IN C MINOR, D. 958, OP. POSTH. (1828)
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
Allegro
Adagio
Menuetto: Allegro
Allegro

:: INTERMISSION ::

SONATA IN B MINOR, S. 178 [1852-3]
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

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The piano was Stravinsky’s instrument; he never played another. And, since he composed at the piano throughout his life, the instrument became the springboard for virtually all his compositions. He liked to experiment in a tactile way on its keys, analyzing textures, sonorities, harmonies and so on, before putting pen to paper. He started piano lessons at nine and later took instruction from a pupil of the great Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein. But it was not piano technique in the manner of a Chopin or a Rubinstein that Stravinsky was seeking. He had no intention of using his skills at the piano as a passport to success in the salons of St. Petersburg!

“I was brought up in an atmosphere of musical achievement [his father was a leading bass-baritone at the Mariinsky Theater] and inherited a natural capacity for transmitting my feelings into music,” Stravinsky told Gramophone magazine in 1934. For Stravinsky, the piano stimulated that capacity and became the means to an end: composition, rather than concert performance. French pianist composer Jean Wiener observed Stravinsky at work early in his career: “He worked at his piano as though in a rage,” he noted. Then, to Robert Craft, Stravinsky said: “Each note that I write is tried on [the piano], and every relationship of notes is taken apart and heard on it again and again.” It becomes clear that Stravinsky the composer thought orchestrally at the piano and, conversely, quasi-orchestral sonorities can be heard in his piano music.

His parents, meanwhile, encouraged studies in law and Stravinsky found himself at the University of St. Petersburg, while also taking private lessons in harmony (the formality of which he rebelled against) and personal exploration into counterpoint, which he relished. Through the help of a fellow law student, Vladimir, the youngest son of Rimsky-Korsakov, the independently minded Stravinsky was able to play some of his early compositions to the famous composer. In return he was counselled to avoid the Conservatoire (where Rimsky-Korsakov actually taught), continue to take private harmony and counterpoint lessons and seek advice for himself when needed, all the while continuing his law studies. By 1903, Stravinsky had begun work on what he termed a full-size sonata for piano. “I was constantly confronted by many difficulties, especially in matter of form,” he wrote in his autobiography.

Two weeks of intense study with Rimsky-Korsakov must have convinced the composer to take Stravinsky, whose father had by now died, under his wing and give him three years of weekly tuition (until his own death in 1908). The Sonata in F-sharp minor was one of several compositions created under Rimsky’s guidance. Stravinsky clearly worked hard to produce a substantial work, perhaps one that he intuitively felt he had to complete in order to move on.

Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, part of a family photo, taken just weeks before Rimsky’s death in 1908

“My Rimsky was deeply sympathetic, deeply and unshewingly generous, and unkind only to admirers of Tchaikovsky . . . I was accustomed to dine with the Rimsky-Korsakov family after my lessons . . . Rimsky was a strict man and a strict, though at the same time very patient, teacher. His knowledge was precise, and he was able to impart whatever he knew with great clarity . . . I am grateful to Rimsky for many things, and I do not wish to blame him for what he did not know; nevertheless, the most important tools of my art I had to discover for myself.”

Memories and Commentaries - Igor Stravinsky & Robert Craft

The first of its four movements opens with a forceful, commanding, theme, determined to make a big statement. Its assertive character is exploited across the full keyboard until it cools and subsides to a Chopinesque tarantella-like finale where Schubert explores extremes of modulation and extremes of the keyboard to such a degree that it can, at times, seem as though four hands are playing.

Franz Schubert composed three towering piano sonatas in 1828, the last year of his life. They were only published eleven years later and are therefore given the rather ominous looking opus posthumous designation. They progress from the tragic and brooding C minor (D. 958) to the emotionally wide-ranging A major (D. 959) and to the meditative and peaceful B-flat (D. 960). Schubert worked on all three at the same time, sketching, revising, composing hurriedly in ink on different sizes of manuscript paper, clearly in a feverish state of mental exhaustion. This final trilogy of sonatas is one of the most striking accomplishments in the entire piano repertoire.

What drove Schubert in this intensely creative and innovative period? Performers and publishers were growing his music. His health was in decline and syphilis had caused all his hair to fall out. His circle of friends was growing smaller. Being unskilled in business matters, his financial position had become desperate. For the final three months of his life, he moved into the Viennese residence of his brother Ferdinand, at Kettenbrückengasse 6. In this apartment, with its piano standing in a corner then, as it does to this day, Schubert wrote these magnificent piano sonatas, evidently knowing that death was not far away. Beethoven had died one year earlier, in the same city; Schubert had been a pallbearer at his funeral. Unlike Brahms, Schubert was not inhibited by Beethoven’s legacy. He was able to take inspiration from Beethoven’s rhetoric and from his dialectic way of composing, replacing Beethoven’s affirmative statements with more open-ended questioning and contradictions.

The opening of the C minor sonata, D. 958, right away recalls the music of Beethoven, specifically his 32 Variations in C minor. But where Beethoven constructs taut, complex musical architecture with clearly defined structures, Schubert is quite independent. He strives after the unattainable and frequently takes us on a path where time, in its normal sense, is suspended. The slow movement, the only real Adagio among Schubert’s mature sonatas, encapsulates the contrast between the mystery of a noble theme – which constantly strives to modulate into ever distant keys and to lose itself in terms of real time and place – and the grim reality of agonized, repeated chords, which force us back to reality. In the short subdued, even melancholy Menuetto, Schubert avoids obvious symmetry, and a restless, rather elusive feeling is created, particularly when the flow is held up by short pauses. The restlessness reaches fever point in the galopping, tarantella-like finale where Schubert explores extremes of modulation and extremes of the keyboard to such a degree that it, at times, seems as though four hands are playing.

Franz Schubert

PIANO SONATA IN F-SHARP MINOR

PIANO SONATA IN C MINOR, D. 958, OP. POSTH.
Franz Schubert [b. Vienna, Austria, January 31, 1800; d. Vienna, November 19, 1828] Composed 1828, 29 minutes

This Vivo is a joy. Its scherzo-like, rhythmically playful outer sections are complemented by a hymn-like central trio section. The last two movements are played without a break. The Andante is more of an agitated intermezzo than slow movement and it flows effortlessly into an Allegro finale.

Stravinsky believed that his early Sonata had been lost – “fortunately lost” – after he left Russia in 1914. “It was, I suppose, an inexplicable imitation of late Beethoven,” he said half a century after composing it. Unknown to Stravinsky, the work was preserved, along with other early manuscripts, across several public libraries in the USSR (modern-day Russia). The sonata survived in a manuscript belonging to its dedicatee, Nikolai Richter, who gave the premiere in February 1905. It was only published three years after the composer’s death in 1974.
SONATA IN B MINOR, S. 178
Franz Liszt (b. Raiding/Debrecen, Hungary, October 22, 1811; d. Bayreuth, Germany, July 31, 1886)
Composed 1852-3; 31 minutes

Few composers could better express the varied and often conflicting sides of their personalities in music than could Liszt. And nowhere does Liszt encapsulate this better than in the great Piano Sonata he completed in 1853. Alternately heroic and self-questioning, impetuous and disciplined, passionate and otherworldly, the sonata is one of the great works of 19th century romanticism. Setting aside the 1,300 other piano works he composed, if Liszt had written nothing else, his genius would be recognized based on this sonata alone.

Its immediate starting point is the Wanderer Fantasy by Schubert, a work that Liszt had recently arranged for piano and orchestra. From Schubert, Liszt took the idea of a single large-scale structure, with a unifying theme that recurs in different transformations. Liszt, however, goes much further. His Sonata can be broken down into the usual four movements, enclosed by a prologue and epilogue. But it also functions as a single, giant (30-minute) structure in traditional sonata-form. The first section, Allegro energico, is the exposition, itself in sonata form. In the second section, Andante sostenuto, the development begins, in ABA form. Then comes more development – a Fugato, in scherzo ABA form. And then the fourth section, Finale, the recapitulation, again in sonata form. There are other ways of analyzing the sonata. But its unity and the masterly way in which Liszt binds the varying moods of a large-scale sonata within a single framework are immediately apparent when listening.

Musicians were not always of this opinion. Schumann, to whom the Sonata is dedicated, never heard a note of it as he was already confined to an asylum by the time the sonata arrived at his residence. His wife, the virtuoso pianist Clara Wieck, thought it ‘too awful’ and ‘merely a blind noise.’ Brahms fell asleep when Liszt played the Sonata to him. Even 30 years after it was written, the renowned Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick was overcome with ‘irresistible hilarity’ when listening to the piece. It took Horowitz to bring the work to the attention of the concert-going public, back in the 1930s. Nowadays, most virtuoso pianists include it in their repertoire and few piano competitions take place without at least a handful of performances of the Liszt Sonata.

— Program notes © 2022 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca

ABOUT THE ARTIST

KIRILL GERSTEIN, piano

First Prize Winner of the 2001 Arthur Rubinstein Piano Competition and an Avery Fisher Grant recipient, Kirill Gerstein has entered the highest ranks of international stars. From Bach to Adès, Gerstein’s playing is distinguished by a ferocious technique and discerning intelligence, matched with an energetic, imaginative musical presence that places him at the top of his profession. He performs in both recital and orchestral solo appearances around the world, as well as numerous festivals. Born in Russia, Gerstein studied classical piano, but taught himself to play jazz by listening to his parents’ extensive record collection. After coming to the attention of vibraphonist Gary Burton, Gerstein came to the United States at 14 to study jazz piano at the Berklee College of Music. After completing his Berklee studies and the Boston University program at Tanglewood, Mr. Gerstein returned to his classical music studies at the Manhattan School of Music, earning both Bachelors and Masters of Music degrees by the age of 20. Gerstein is currently on the faculty of Kronberg Academy and Professor of Piano at Berlin’s Hanns Eisler Hochschule. In 2021, he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the Manhattan School of Music.