

## Program Notes

**Date du récital/Date of recital:** 15 Mai 2024 / May 15th, 2024

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**Classe de/Class of:** Stéphane Lemelin

*These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course.*

*Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.*

This recital program is a musical representation of my journey so far as a pianist. The three works I have chosen parallel my beginnings as a solo performer, my first encounter with collaborative piano through art song, and my passion for cello and piano duo repertoire.

The first piece on the program, Frédéric Chopin's Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60, is a nod to my origins as a solo pianist. One great lesson I have learned from many of my teachers is that in order to be a great collaborator with others, one must first become a great collaborator with themselves. This idea is particularly prevalent in this work as its rich orchestral-like texture and the interplay between melody and accompaniment demands a high degree of musical sensitivity and listening to oneself.

The second work, the song cycle *Proses lyriques* Claude Debussy, is an homage to my first foray into collaborative piano. At the age of twelve, I accompanied a singer for the very first time and fell in love with being a collaborative musician. This song cycle is a stunning example of how poetry, melody, and accompaniment can connect intimately. I am eternally grateful to singer and dear friend Odile Portugais for undertaking this complex and beautiful work with me.

The final work on the program, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Sonata in G minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 19, exhibits my affinity for collaborative repertoire with cello. This sonata is one of the most challenging works I have ever learned, and has pushed me beyond my perceived limits as a pianist and collaborator. I am extremely thankful for cellist Sophia Battel, who has made working on this piece an absolute dream.

This recital is a culmination of my roots and who I currently am as a musician. Many thanks again to my collaborators Odile and Sophia, as I (quite literally) could not have done this without you both.

### **Frédéric Chopin: Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60 (1846)**

Chopin composed only one Barcarolle in his lifetime, which has become one of the most well-known of its kind in the keyboard repertoire. The composer performed this work during his last concert engagement in Paris on February 16th, 1848. The barcarolle's origins can be traced back to folk songs sung by Venetian gondoliers. The mystical glamour of Venetian waters was a source of fascination for many European opera composers, who included adaptations of the

barcarolle in their operas as early as the late seventeenth century. The Venetian barcarolle style also appeared in songs of *Lieder* composers such as Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Rossini. These vocal melodies were eventually transcribed and adapted for solo piano during the nineteenth century, thus commencing a rich tradition of barcarolle works for the keyboard.

Although Chopin never visited Venice, he was evidently very familiar with the barcarolle genre as an operatic form. One work he often gave to his students to study was Mendelssohn's "Venizianisches Gondellied" from his *Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without Words). While Chopin's Barcarolle contains many traditional elements of the genre such as its rocking accompaniment, the work goes beyond its title in a captivating manner. The piece opens with a ringing C-sharp pedal point in the bass while a sequence of descending chords unfold overhead. After the introduction, the barcarolle-esque accompaniment emerges in the left hand which serves as the foundation for the rest of the work. Soaring above the lilting accompaniment are melodies reminiscent of the Italian vocal *bel canto* style, a nod to the barcarolle's beginnings in opera. A particularly enigmatic moment of the Barcarolle occurs part way through with an exquisite and sparkling melody that seems to be suspended in air. Chopin notably marked this section as *dolce sfogato*, which can be interpreted as "unbridled sweetness." This section gives way to a passionate recapitulation of the opening theme and the work culminates triumphantly with a cadenza-like flourish. Bursting with ardent lyricism and rich harmonies, Chopin's Barcarolle is a masterpiece that transcends the bounds of its genre.

### **Claude Debussy: *Proses Lyriques* (1895)**

Debussy's song cycle is unique in that the composer wrote the poetry for all four songs himself. The first two poems, "De rêve" and "De grève," were published in the Parisian journal *Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires* (Political and Literary Interviews) in December 1892. The following year, Debussy set all four poems to music. The latter two songs, "De fleurs" and "De soir," were premiered by Debussy with singer Thérèse Rogers at the *Société nationale de musique* (National Music Society) in February 1894.

The poetry contains heavy influences of late nineteenth century French Symbolism and lyrical prose style. Symbolism was a literary movement that sought to represent absolute truths through figurative language and metaphorical imagery. Symbolism is present in Debussy's poetry as it is rife with transportive imagery on eternal concepts such as love and death. The *prose lyrique* style merged aspects of both prose and poetry. This is evident in Debussy's work which contains free rhythmic structure but retains certain aspects of traditional French poetic rhythm.

The first song, "De rêve," explores the woes of an unattainable past dream, with its bewitching vocal melodies and dreamy appoggiated figures in the piano. Throughout the song, the piano line features a majestic fanfare melody that corresponds to the fabled Knights of the Grail mentioned in the poem.

In "De grève," a turbulent storm occurs at sea, illustrated by the rapid undulating figures in the piano. The poetry refers to an "*anglaise aquarelle*" (English watercolour) which may be an

allusion to the turbulent seascapes of English painter J.M.W. Turner, which Debussy was intimately familiar with.

The third song, “De fleurs,” personifies malicious flowers who torment the narrator. A weary and listless mood of *ennui* pervades the entire song which is represented through stagnant plodding chords in the piano part.

The final song, “De soir,” is a vision of a Sunday in the city. The bustling atmosphere is expressed in the piano with motoric repetitive patterns. This song transforms into a more serene and religious tone as the poetry references Sundays past. In the last verse, the singer makes a plea to the Virgin Mary to take pity on the people of the city and their hearts. The solemnity of this prayer is underscored by sparse octaves in the piano, and the song closes with the faint ringing of bells. Through its exceptional melding of poetry and music, *Proses lyriques* is a vivid journey of distinct colours and images.

### **Sergei Rachmaninoff: Sonata in G minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 19 (1901)**

Following the disastrous premiere of his Symphony No. 1 in 1897, Rachmaninoff suffered a serious bout of depression for three years which rendered him virtually unable to compose. After intensive hypnotherapy treatment in 1900, Rachmaninoff successfully returned to composition and premiered two works the following year— his Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 18 as well as his Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 19. These successful works ushered in a new era of compositional triumph for Rachmaninoff. The sonata is dedicated to the composer’s close friend, Russian cellist Anatoli Brandukov, and the duo premiered the piece in Moscow in December 1901.

As customary to Romantic-period sonatas, the work has four movements of contrasting form and *tempi*. The first movement is in standard sonata-allegro form. Following an anticipating and quiet introduction, the piano launches the cello into its soaring first theme with frantic staccato chords. In contrast, the second theme is more aching and lyrical. The second movement is a lively scherzo in rondo form. In the refrain, the piano part features an insistent triplet rhythm that is punctuated by the sporadic cello part. The contrasting sections contain more soulful melodies in the cello and harp-like chords in the piano.

The slow third movement, which is often performed by itself, features intimate and passionate dialogue between the cello and piano. There is a constant juxtaposition of duple and triple rhythms between the two instruments which creates a sense of subtle instability. The sonata concludes with a triumphant finale movement as the cello and piano make their way resolutely towards a climactic ending. Rich in symphonic writing and exquisite melodies, Rachmaninoff’s Sonata for Cello and Piano is a profound exploration of anguish, ecstasy, and triumph.

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