

Date du récital/Date of recital: May 16th, 2024

Nom/Name: Jonathan Monro

Classe de/Class of: John Mac Master

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This year has been a physical and mental challenge that I, quite simply put, would not have been able to overcome had it not been for all the following heroic figures: John Mac Master, my teacher: thank you for keeping me level-headed when things looked bleak and for always challenging me when things were going well. Your guidance has been unparalleled. Julien LeBlanc, thank you for your wizardry at the piano and your expertise in collaboration. Christopher Knopp, you have been the ultimate collaborator – thank you for your incredible musicianship and support. Thank you, Theodora Nestorova, for your impeccable Russian and Czech diction coaching, and to Tracy Michailidis for the assistance with the Greek. Finally, my heartfelt thanks to all my student colleagues who made me feel like I belong in the voice department and that it wasn't a stupid idea to do this at 49 years of age.

INTRODUCTION

My recital features the works of composers who were also conductors. There were many reasons why I wanted to investigate these types of unique artists. First, my research deals with the communication between conductors, directors, and singers in opera rehearsals. I would argue that one way into an artist's psyche is through their work. Since most of a conductor's work is done in a closed rehearsal environment, the public only sees a small portion of their output. However, a *composer's* work is preserved in their music and, with any luck, is passed down through generations to be interpreted and presented to the public. So, through their music, these composer-conductors give us more insight into their respective artistic viewpoints, aesthetics, and personalities.

Second, I am a composer and a conductor, and I feel a particular kinship with these artists (although I would certainly not place myself on the same echelon). I remember the moment I made the conscious decision to let others interpret my pieces. The result was eye-opening and more liberating than I ever could have imagined. The performers brought a richness to my work and was an honour to witness. I hope that today, the composers would have been content with my interpretations.

Last, I am fascinated by these artists – all of them. As a former classical pianist, Mendelssohn and Rachmaninoff shaped my youth, Bernstein gave me a voice as a queer artist and empowered me to find legitimacy within the realm of musical theatre, Barber shamelessly captured his American identity through his music and encouraged me to trust mine as a composer, and Kaprálová is my new obsession: a brilliant, passionate soul who died all-too young, but left behind her pioneering spirit as both composer and conductor at a time when the world did not welcome women in either position.

Ravel will always hold a special place in my heart. His music inspired me as a pianist, pushed my limits as a composer, and is a delight to perform as a singer. Although he didn't consider himself to be a conductor or a pianist, he once turned to a conductor in a rehearsal for his G Major concerto and remarked, "What a pity, now it will be ruined." (Schwartz, 2008). We are lucky to have recordings of him leading orchestras and playing the piano as evidence of his deep understanding of music. The following notes will shed some light on my pieces. I hope you enjoy the read.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN – SIX SONGS

Mendelssohn Bartholdy is arguably the most famous conductor of the composers being featured today. There is even a conducting competition in his name. He also loved Italy and was quite taken by Venice, writing to his family that it was, "every possible delight I had imagined" (Appold, 2019). *Venetianisches Gondellied* captures the gentle lilt of the gondola on the canals of Venice, setting the tone for this nature-inspired set of pieces. The second song, *Der Mond*, is set to an undulating piano figure that feels like a heart full of anticipation as the full moon fills a quiet night sky. One of the first pieces I ever sang was Hugo Wolf's *Füßsreise*, and it was through that song I learned that there was a long tradition of walking and hiking in Germany. It is certainly reflected in the poetry and music; take Schumann's *Der Frohe Wandersmann* or *Kleiner Morgenwanderer*, Henschel's *Wanderlied*, or Felix's sister Fanny's *Wanderlied, op. 8 No. 4* as a few examples (Hatch, 2018). It seems only natural that Felix should try his hand at one as well. The song bursts with joy, flowers, and all the colours of spring. We move into autumn with *Im Herbst*, which explores the later years of life (I relate to this one). *Hirtenlied* compares love in the winter and love in the summer, clearly denoted with minor and major keys, respectively. Having covered all the seasons, we move into the supernatural elements of nature with displaced seasons, storms, and another type of devotion in Höltz's poem, *Hexenlied*, where pagan witches conjure up Beelzebub to fuel their fiery dance. An interesting fact: Mendelssohn was only 18 years old when he set the poem to music (Cal Performances, 2012).

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF – SEVEN ROMANCES

Russian composer and conductor Sergei Rachmaninoff is often identified by his extraordinary pianistic virtuosity, his seemingly endless melodic lines, and his lush, romantic harmonies. It may come as no surprise, then, that he composed more than eighty romances (Li, 2021)! I start my set today with one of his most popular: *Lilacs, op. 21 No. 5*. Set to Ekaterina Beketova's poem, delicate figures in the piano balance out the long vocal lines to capture the search for happiness in clusters of hidden lilacs. In *Arion Op. 34 No. 5*, "Arion" is a hymn, and, in this poem, one sung by a singer who has just been washed up on shore after surviving a shipwreck. It is dramatic, heroic, and full of tone painting, with massive arpeggiations and chromatics depicting the waves sweeping the captain off the deck. *Do Not Sing to Me, My Beauty, op. 4 No. 4* is dedicated to Rachmaninoff's wife, Nataliya Alexandrovna, and was written right before the flop premiere of his first symphony; an event that stalled his creative output for three years (Castillo, 2016). Although he wrote this at the age of 19, this work, in my opinion, shows all the signs of the master he would become. The piano writing is as orchestral as it is simple, effortlessly weaving between intricate inner voicings and simple open chords. The gentle repeated notes give the impression of stillness and nostalgia found in Pushkin's poem.

Meanwhile, Rachmaninoff enhances the dramatic vocal effect by ending the piece with high-register pianissimi.

How Nice It Is Here, often called *How Fair This Place*, *op. 21 No. 7* captures the perfect moment of natural beauty in Galina's poem, using a traditional Russian folk approach called *protызahnye* (Challis, 1989 in Bell, 2017). Rachmaninoff uses triplets in the piano and duplets in the voice throughout to create a floating effect, the one exception being on the words "and you", when the singer acknowledges his lover as the most important thing in nature. Is that romantic or what?! From exquisite beauty to heart-wrenching pain, *How Painful This Is*, *Op. 21 No. 12*, is one of Rachmaninoff's most dramatic settings, with "sobbing" minor seconds throughout the first two pages. After describing a pain worse than death, the final line of Galina's poem is, "I do not know why I feel sorry", which makes me believe that the poem and the song capture the desperation of depression. *That Day I Remember*, *op. 34 No. 10*, is about hearing someone tell you they love you for the first time. Rachmaninoff's twisting chromatics, unexpected rhythmic shifts, and tender treatment of the text capture the nerves, passion, and exquisite joy in the poetry. To final piece is *Spring Waters*, *Op. 14 No. 11*, which is about the thaw from winter to spring. However, it is categorized as a romance, so I interpret it as a metaphor for rekindled love.

LEONARD BERNSTEIN – LA BONNE CUISINE

Leonard Bernstein was a brilliant showman of a conductor, as evidenced by the recent movie *Maestro*, starring Bradley Cooper. YouTube videos abound of him conducting rehearsals, and, say what you will about his character, he was a hyper-intelligent, fast thinker, who was never afraid to share his musical opinions, many of which were incisively witty. This sharp sense of humour and rapid-fire approach is featured in this very short set of four pieces, inspired by famed French chef Émile Dumont's recipe book *La bonne cuisine française*. I find three things about this set particularly hilarious: 1. It is only four minutes long, 2. It is all about French cuisine but starts with an English recipe, and 3. The dedication says, "To Jennie Tourel, the only begetter of these songs", yet it was premiered by another Mezzo Soprano named Marion Bell (Leonard Bernstein Works, 2024). Any way you slice it, all four pieces are as delightfully original as the recipes that inspired them.

SAMUEL BARBER – MÉLODIES PASSAGÈRES

Rainer Maria Rilke was a German poet who moved to Switzerland toward the end of his life. While in Switzerland, he wrote over four hundred poems in French, many of which deal with mortality, as evidenced by one of his collections entitled *When I Go* (Beck, 2023). Samuel Barber always had a book of poems on his bedside table and comfortably read in French, Italian, and German (Platt, n.d.), so it perhaps comes as no surprise that he encountered Rilke's French works. The *Mélodies Passagères*, *Op. 27*, were curated by Barber and composed for his friends and collaborative duo Francis Poulenc and Paul Bernac, who premiered the work in 1952. The five songs, ironically, do not deal with any type of "travel". Rather, they follow Rilke's confrontation with mortality. *Puisque tout passe* ("since everything dies") suggests we must celebrate what we have while we have it. It is set to minor, major, and modal harmonies with moderate sixteenth-note figures that seem to emerge from the ether. *Un cygne* describes a swan gliding on the water as a metaphor for the duality of joy and doubt in life and death. Barber exquisitely sets this with a smooth-as-glass arpeggiated figure in the left hand of the piano and voice, sprinkled with small shimmers in the piano's right hand. *Tombeau dans un parc* deals with

the gut-wrenching loss of a child. The music is reverent and still, as the parent wishes for a dove's shadow to guard their child's grave. *Le clocher chante* is written from the point of view of a bell tower in Valais. Barber captures the daily ringing of the tower in the piano with huge chimes in the bass juxtaposed with clarion-like drops in the treble. The voice takes on the spirit of the bell tower and its joyful loyalty to the townspeople of Valais, capturing how humans often devote their lives to one source of fulfillment. *Départ*, the finale, paints a picture of someone's death. As the doubt overwhelms them, they tell their partner that they are headed to "a black point". Barber conveys this with complex, viciously intense harmonies until the end when the poem takes a sudden turn toward hope. Throughout the set, the vocal line sits mostly in the passaggio, as full of precarious vulnerability as the poems.

MAURICE RAVEL – FIVE GREEK FOLK SONGS

I've elected to perform these pieces as they were premiered in 1904, in their original language of Greek. What I find most impressive about this set is that Ravel maintains the integrity of the original melodies while supporting them with his trademark sound. Perhaps more impressively, he selected these five pieces from his original set of eight, the first five of which were written in only thirty-six hours (Nicholls, 2008). My interpretation of this cycle, and my guess as to why Ravel chose these five songs, is to capture a wedding day from morning to night. *Chanson de la mariée* depicts the excitement of young love, as a groom wakes his bride up on her wedding day, surprising her with ribbons for her hair. *Là-bas, vers l'église* describes two families devoutly heading to church. *Quel gallant m'est comparable?* compares the bravado and defenselessness of a groom standing at the altar. *Chanson des ceuilleuses de lentisques* is a dream-like pastoral about a young man seeing a beautiful woman collecting pistachios in a field. I view it as the groom standing at the altar, turning, and seeing his bride as she walks toward him. *Tout gai!* is a tavern dance complete with drinking and smashing plates, to end the wedding day! Opa!

VITEZSLAVA KAPRÁLOVÁ – TWO SONGS

Although Kaprálová tragically passed away two months after her marriage at only twenty-five years of age, she left over fifty extraordinary works behind (Cheek, 2022). Originally from Brno (then in Czechoslovakia), she studied conducting and composition at the Brno Conservatory and later at the Prague Conservatory and the École Normale in Paris, where her teachers included Charles Munch, Bohuslav Martinu, and Nadia Boulanger (Greenbank, 2021). *Sbohem a šáteček*, *Op. 14*, is set to a popular Czech poem by Vítězslav Nezval. Although Nezval dedicated the poem to France, Kaprálová's setting was inspired by "Prague. The most beautiful of all cities" (Cheek, 2022). "Sbohem" means "farewell", and she captures this farewell with a falling major second. This interval then becomes the motif for the entire piece, echoing throughout, as if overcome with goodbyes. She wrote this piece for voice and orchestra, and I've reduced her orchestration to five instruments to match her instrumentation for *Leden*, the second piece of this set, and the final piece of the program. *Leden* ("January") is another Nezval poem, albeit more surrealist than *Sbohem a šáteček*. It describes the frigid grip of January, complete with swirling frost on the window, like an "icy vase". Kaprálová uses undulating stillness sprinkled with an occasional twisting triplet figure to set the tone. The vocal line is mostly sustained, almost as if frozen. As the singer sees the icebound courtyard next to the boarded-up church, Kaprálová writes one vocal outburst on the words "I'm dying already". Despite the bleakness, however, the final chord leaves room for hope through the inevitability of spring. Or does it? You decide...

REFERENCES

- Appold, Juliette. 2019. "Mendelssohn and Venetian Gondolas | NLS Music Notes." The Library of Congress. February 6, 2019. <https://blogs.loc.gov/nls-music-notes/2019/02/mendelssohn-and-venetian-gondolas/>.
- Beck, Art. 2023. "Review: When I Go: Selected French Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke Translated by Susanne Petermann." Your Impossible Voice. May 2, 2023. <https://www.yourimpossiblevoice.com/review-when-i-go-selected-french-poems-of-rainer-maria-rilke-translated-by-susanne-petermann/>.
- Bell, Kathleen Mary. 2017. "Extended Program Notes for a Recital of Selected Vocal Literature." <https://doi.org/10.25148/etd.fi14050482>.
- Cal Performances Presents Program. 2012. Program. Program. *Cal Performances*. https://calperformances.org/learn/program_notes/2011/pn_piau.pdf.
- Castillo, Patrick. 2016. "Music@Menlo 2016 Concert Programs." Concert Programs. *Music@Menlo*. Vol. 2016. Accessed March 26, 2024. https://musicatmenlo.org/files/CP_IV_Notes.pdf.
- Cheek, Timothy. 2022. "Prof. Timothy Cheek Gives Us an In-depth Look at UMSO's New CD - University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance." University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. November 23, 2022. <https://smt.d.umich.edu/prof-timothy-cheek-provides-in-depth-look-at-new-uso-cd/>.
- Greenbank, Stephen. 2021. "Kapralova Waving Farewell NAXOS 8.574144 [SG] Classical Music Reviews: August 2021 - MusicWeb-International." August 2021. <https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2021/Aug/Kapralova-farewell-8574144.htm>.
- Hatch, Christopher. 2018. "Tradition and Creation: Hugo Wolf's 'Fussreise' - College Music Symposium." October 23, 2018. <https://symposium.music.org/index.php/28/item/2034-tradition-and-creation-hugo-wolfs-fussreise>.
- Li, Eryong. 2021. "On Dramaturgy of Russian Romances of S.V. Rachmaninov." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 13 (1). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v13n1.44>.
- Nicholls, Alison. 2008. "Cinq Mélodies Populaires Grecques (Ravel/Salzedo) - From CDA67725 - Hyperion Records - MP3 and Lossless Downloads." 2008. https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W11308_67725.
- Platt, Russell. n.d. "AllMusic | Music Search, Recommendations, Videos and Reviews." AllMusic. <https://www.allmusic.com/composition/m%C3%A9lodies-passag%C3%A8res-5-songs-for-voice-piano-op-27-mc0002361544>.
- Schwartz, Steve. 2008. "Classical Net Review - Ravel - the Composer as Pianist and Conductor." Classical Net. 2008. <http://www.classical.net/music/recs/reviews/p/pie00013a.php>.
- "Works | Works | Leonard Bernstein." 2024. <https://leonardbernstein.com/works/view/132/la-bonne-cuisine>.