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Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 333 by W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)

The Sonata in B-Flat Major, K. 333, composed in November of 1783, stems from the latter part of Mozart's compositional career. It is the thirteenth of eighteen piano sonatas and recognized as one of his more substantial works in the genre. Comprised of three movements, this work adheres skilfully to its expected form, while taking the listener on a voyage through Mozart's quintessential writing, filled with contrast, vocal lyricism, daring harmony, and unexpected drama.

The opening *Allegro* begins with an elegant first theme, characterized by numerous appoggiaturas. Light in texture, it is however not unadventurous harmonically as it makes its way to the second theme. Written in the dominant key, this contrasting theme is energetic and playful in nature, while continuing to highlight suspensions. One never feels very far from the opera house in Mozart's music, as demonstrated throughout the development, which takes a dramatic turn in its minor-key explorations. Mozart makes full use of the entire keyboard here and numerous syncopations against a restless accompaniment add to the increased tension. The recapitulation returns the listener to the graceful opening, bringing the movement to a serene and sunny close.

The *Andante cantabile* is a deeply expressive evocation of an operatic aria. The warmth and richness of the chosen tonic, E-flat major, give way to more polyphonic writing as the movement develops. Tenderness and lyricism are juxtaposed with intense chromaticism and bold modulations. A richly decorated return continues the highly vocal nature of this work, as anguish is eventually resolved with a gentle calm and stability.

The Sonata's finale, marked *Allegretto grazioso*, is an imaginative rondo, logical in its form yet remarkable in its spontaneity. Perhaps its most distinguishing feature is the concerto style of its repeated oscillation between 'solo' and 'tutti' textures, immediately displayed in the opening theme. The ensuing episodes each take on a unique character, some playful and charming, others more theatrical, with an occasional pause for reflection. Mozart exploits the full range of the keyboard with brilliance and frequent dramatic surprises. Just when expecting the movement to conclude, Mozart writes out an elaborate cadenza, complete with recollections to thematic material and a broad scope of colour, mood, and harmony. The coda, at

first ebullient, then tinged with nostalgia, brings this expansive composition to an emphatic close.

Barcarolle No. 3 in G-flat Major, Op. 42 by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

The *barcarola* – a song of the Venetian gondoliers – inspired many composers of the nineteenth century, including Liszt, Chopin, and Mendelssohn. Perhaps influenced by these earlier creations, Fauré wrote a group of thirteen Barcarolles; these span his career as a composer giving unique insight into the evolution of his distinct musical language.
The Barcarolle No. 3, Op. 42 is an earlier work, composed in 1885. The restrained beauty and charm of Fauré's writing shine through the extended melodic lines as they weave their way through intricate, polyphonic layers. Frequent modulations and shifts between major and minor harmonies create an ambiguous tonality, particularly as the work develops. The melody, often passed between the hands, is surrounded by arpeggiated figurations and counter-melodies derived from the barcarolle's traditional 6/8 meter. Described as being indifferent to pianistic display, Fauré is, however, often drawn to use of elegant and delicate ornamentation, which the pianist Marguerite Long poetically describes as "crowning the theme like sea foam on the edge of a wave". Emerging from a dream-like state, the work gathers intensity and grows towards a sweeping climax. A recollection of the melancholic lyricism of the exposition leads into a coda, which once again beautifully highlights the richness of Fauré's harmonic and melodic language.

Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60 by Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

The Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60 is one of Chopin's last major compositions, written just three years before his death. It is an expansive work, portraying Chopin's masterful writing and pianism, embodying an exceptional understanding of the technical and expressive capabilities of the instrument. Structured in three parts – ABA – it opens with a brief introduction before unveiling the theme, a beautiful melody written in the *bel canto* style. Repeated bass line figurations provide an undercurrent as the melodic material develops, often doubled in thirds or sixths, frequently and richly ornamented. The inner section, in A major, reveals a new melody, this time joined by a second voice. An intimate and tender duet is transformed into a more impassioned, soaring lyricism, displaying the full range of Chopin's poetry and artistry. The harmonic language is sumptuous and often dissonant. An ephemeral moment of tranquility blossoms into the reappearance of the principal theme, which returns with fullness and power alongside an elaborated accompanimental layer. Here, the music reaches its gloriously ecstatic peak. A brief coda brings this masterpiece to an exquisite close. Chopin regularly programmed the Barcarolle in his own recitals throughout London, Paris, and Edinburgh.

Quatre Chansons de Jeunesse by Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Quatre Chansons de Jeunesse is a collection of songs published posthumously in 1926. Comprised of four settings of poetry chosen from the writings of three French poets, they were written by a youthful Debussy between 1881-1884. Quatre Chansons include: *Pantomime* and *Clair de lune* by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), *Pierrot* by Théodore de Banville (1823-1891) and *Apparition* by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). Though early works, these songs already portray Debussy's exceptional ability to vividly illustrate text through musical means.

Pantomime portrays a series of four vignettes, depicting characters from the Italian Commedia dell'Arte. Pierrot is introduced as an ordinary fellow, drinking while eating paté; he is practical and is nothing like Clitandre, the young and hopeless lover. The musical introduction is jaunty and perhaps even slightly inebriated. We then turn to Cassandre, who sheds a tear for having disinherited his nephew; repeatedly descending chromatic scales in the piano underscore a caricature of the tears sliding down his face. Next we meet Harlequin, pirouetting four times while plotting the abduction of Columbine. The music suddenly takes on a very dreamy and tender quality as we are introduced to Columbine, listening to the voices in her heart. Just as abruptly, we are back to the charm of the opening, this time tinged with wistfulness as Debussy alternates between major and minor harmonies.

Inspired by the *fêtes galantes* of eighteenth-century paintings, *Clair de lune* illustrates a masked, musical interlude – a cast of characters singing of love and fortune – bathed in the light of the moon. Cascading triads, accompanied by a swaying dance-like gesture, create a luminous atmosphere with an exotic flavour. The piano is predominantly in a major mode, giving this setting a rather optimistic air, yet beneath the masks one is aware of sadness, accentuated by chromatic inflections, particularly in the vocal line. The "sighing" musical gestures intensify as the "fountains sob with ecstasy", before gradually disappearing into the beautiful moonlight.

Pierrot is a charming song in which Debussy uses a fragment of the familiar tune "Au clair de la lune". Despite the seemingly happy qualities of the melody – which is also employed as counter-melody and frequently punctuates the vocal line – the song is in fact written in a minor key. This perfectly portrays the paradoxical character of Pierrot, a clown with a rather sad disposition. Having performed at Harlequin's wedding, we encounter Pierrot strolling down the boulevard, deep in thought. A pretty girl teases him, yet he is indifferent. The music enters a more lyrical realm for a moment, as the mysterious moon shines its light upon the scene. In the final line of text, Banville makes a direct reference to Jean Gaspard Debureau – the French mime, famous for his portrayal of the sad and hapless clown.

Apparition is regarded as one of Mallarmé's most important poems. Full of lush imagery and rich atmosphere, the opening of Debussy's setting evokes an ethereal quality as the narrator begins to describe the occasion of his first kiss. The writing

for the piano corresponds marvellously to the allusions of the text, vibrantly portraying the sad moon, the tearful seraphims, and the dying viols. An impassioned recollection of the kiss is underscored by sweeping romanticism in the piano before reverting to quiet musings. A shift in tonal centre initiates a gradual gathering of intensity as the moment of the first encounter is recalled. A passionate effusion on the word "apparition" collapses into the dream-like atmosphere of the opening. The song fades into the distance as the piano's figurations conjure "white bouquets of perfumed stars… falling like snow".

Twelve Songs, Op. 21 by Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Rachmaninoff composed no less than 71 songs between 1888-1916. These often differ from his instrumental works in their more lenient approach to structure in favour of a closer reflection of poetry as well as melodic fluidity. The Twelve Songs, Op. 21 were completed by 1902, following a period of depression caused by the failed reception of his first Symphony in 1897. They are often interpreted as Rachmaninoff's reflections on loneliness and death.

Op. 21, No. 5 – *Lilacs* is a beautiful setting of text by the Russian poet, Ekaterina Beketova (1855-1892). It is an exquisite miniature portraying a subtle expression, at times joyful, then touched by sorrow as the text describes the search for seemingly elusive happiness. Typical of a Russian folk idiom, the melody progressively grows out of a variation of the opening figure.

Op. 21, No. 7 – *How peaceful…* (Glafira Galina; 1873-1942) corresponds to the previous selection in its pure and affecting beauty. The musical description opens in a subdued, simple manner, gradually brought to life as feelings and memories rise to the surface, prompted by a glance at a familiar scene of nature. The overall sense is one of tranquility, "Here is only God – and I, Flowers – and an aging pine, And you, my dream!".

Corelli Variations, Op. 42 by Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rachmaninoff's Op. 42 was written in the summer of 1931 and premiered by the composer himself in Montréal on October 12th of the same year. Rachmaninoff's last work for solo piano and the only solo piano work which he wrote after leaving Russia, the Corelli Variations are a series of 20 variations based on a theme, somewhat incorrectly attributed to Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). The melody in fact stems from a traditional Portuguese folk-dance known as La Folia, originating from the 16th century, which Corelli used in his Sonata Op. 5, No. 12.

Written in the key of D minor, this is a profound work characterizing the more introspective style of Rachmaninoff's late compositions. One finds greater concentration and economy than in his earlier writing, alongside a biting chromatic harmony, and distinct rhythmic incisiveness. The theme is simply presented and the variations maintain its underlying harmonic form. The first four variations

develop in dance-like fashion, the theme easily identifiable. The fifth variation introduces increased rhythmic complexity and an energetic change in character, which continues through to the outburst of the seventh variation. An enigmatic *Adagio misterioso* (Var. VIII) leads into the ominous character of Var. IX. Momentum begins to build again in Var, X, marked *Scherzando*, continuing through to Var. XIII, an agitated episode, blunt in nature. Here Rachmaninoff inserts a rhapsodic *Intermezzo* in an improvisatory style, exploiting the very outer ranges of the keyboard. Var. XIV presents the theme in D-flat major; though in a major key, the composer somehow manages to retain the pathos of the original theme, now enriched by the warmth of a chorale-like setting in a lower register of the piano. A beautiful, introspective variation follows (Var. XV). Energy is regained in Var. XVI, followed by the strikingly exotic nature of Var. XVII. Rachmaninoff's distinctive pianistic style returns in the last three variations, which become increasingly animated. Featuring brilliance and power these final variations culminate in a sheer and violent storm, juxtaposing the extreme registers of the piano. The Coda, a more subdued outpouring over an unrelenting, tolling pedal point, closes with one last statement of the theme, poignant in its sense of resignation and finality.