

Program Notes

Much of what we know about the musical life of Europe in the 18th century comes from the voluminous travel journals of Charles Burney, scholar, critic, and sometime composer. Among his works are four sonatas for piano four-hands, which he published himself in 1777. They are probably the earliest works composed in this format. Four-hand piano music became enormously popular in the 19th century, not for concertizing, but for playing at home. Parent and child, brother and sister, even sweethearts could squeeze together decorously on the bench. The division of labor made it easier for modestly endowed amateurs to tackle complex pieces. Especially popular were transcriptions. Orchestra and opera repertories were growing exponentially, but opportunities to hear new works might be rare. You would learn the symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms, the operas of Verdi and Wagner, by playing them. The expanded Romantic orchestral palette didn't fit easily on two staves; with four you got a better sense of how it sounded. Tonight's program holds one-and-a-half orchestral transcriptions (more on that later); the rest of the works were composed directly for four hands.

Schubert's F Minor Fantasie is one of his last and greatest works. He dedicated it to his pupil Karoline Esterhazy, with whom he was in love, and which may explain why he chose the four-hand format. The title implies a freely structured single movement work. We get the latter, but its four distinct sections are essentially four movements joined together in quasi-sonata form, with an opening allegro, a largo, a scherzo, and a fast finale. Material from earlier in the piece recurs in the final pages, and there are unifying rhythmic, intervallic, and gestural elements throughout. Schubert played it in public with his colleague Franz Lachner in May 1828. He died six months later.

Most of Mendelssohn's works for four-hand piano are transcriptions. The two which aren't were both published posthumously. This one has a confusing history. Until recently it was known as "Allegro brillant" and based on an autograph manuscript dated 23 March 1841; that manuscript, from a library in Cracow, lacks the introductory Andante. Another autograph, dated only three days later and located in a Paris library, includes the Andante, and its Allegro section differs significantly from the Cracow version. Because the Paris manuscript is laid out properly for playing (the first and second piano parts on facing pages) and apparently represents the composer's later thoughts, it is now the preferred version. Still, "brillant" accurately describes the Allegro section, which is fiendishly difficult. We can picture Felix and his sister Fanny, both brilliant pianists, seated side by side, whipping through it.

Donald Wheelock wrote *Mind Games* on commission from the Muller/Steigerwalt Duo. They were planning a recording on the theme "In Your Head." Wheelock had composed an orchestral work, *After-Images*, the first movement of which seemed appropriate to that theme, and in a considerably expanded arrangement for piano four-hands it became the first movement of *Mind Games*. The succeeding movements were newly composed. The composer writes that for most of the movements, the titles he chose generated the music. "All are tonal pieces with the exception of 'Panic,' which is very chromatic and dissonant -- think of the feeling you'd have half way to the airport, having realized you'd left your passport in your desk drawer at home. Still, except for 'Panic,' the music of *Mind Games* is pretty traditional."

Dana and Gary are the dedicatees of Lewis Spratlan's *Dreamworlds*. He writes, "This piece probes the dreams of three very unlike figures: St. Francis of Assisi, Hitler, and a nameless bureaucrat. Each movement emerges from some primordial, universal dream tissue, within and against which the actual dreams play out." You can probably imagine the dreams of the first two. As for the third, "Our poor bureaucrat is just trying to be good and efficient, but she's not well prepared and makes embarrassing mistakes that frustrate her, in her dreams, to entropy and paralysis ... pleasant dreams lead her to indulge her romantic side and ultimately to all-out romantic passion, which all too quickly subsides. She stays in bed a bit late. Finally the dream tissue melts away and she's left to go back to work."

Ravel was attracted to the waltz. As early as 1906 he had conceived a waltz-based work provisionally entitled "Vienna," and in 1911 composed Noble and Sentimental Waltzes; like many of his works, the latter originated as a piano piece, and was orchestrated later. *La Valse* was commissioned by Diaghilev for his famed Ballets Russes, but when Ravel and a colleague played it for him in a two-piano version, Diaghilev rejected it, saying it wasn't ballet music. The rift this caused never healed. Ravel's preface to the score reads: "Through whirling clouds, waltzing couples may be faintly distinguished. The clouds gradually scatter: one sees at letter A an immense hall peopled with a whirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth at the fortissimo letter B. Set in an imperial court, about 1855." The work has often been interpreted as an allegory of the collapse of European civilization culminating in the First World War. Ravel repeatedly rejected this reading, but it's hard to shake. Lucien Garban, who transcribed many of Ravel's works for four hands, made this version in 1920 when *La Valse* was hot off the press.