

Darkness Visible

When I listen to the slow movement of Schubert's *A major Sonata*, what strikes me most is not its sadness, though I certainly think it's some of the most soulful and heartbreaking music ever written. Nor is it the loveliness of the melody, which is undeniably beautiful. What strikes me most is the moment in the middle of the movement where the music descends into madness.

The movement starts with a sorrowful song, a lilting rhythmic figuration supporting it from below like the strokes of an oar. Suddenly the music stops and Schubert begins to roam through different keys, seemingly aimless, or as if lost. The music gets more and more agitated as blustering scales and chords appear and explode, their intensity and insistence suggesting mounting desperation. Brief attempts at calm are answered with outbursts of rage. Finally, and gradually, the wildness is tamed, as Orpheus tamed the demons of hell, and the sorrowful song returns.

The *A major Sonata* is largely a joyful and light-filled work, yet for a brief moment in the slow movement, Schubert allows us a glimpse into his inner world, into the soul of a desperate man who seems to know he has only a few weeks left. The episode is so shocking and so revealing that it informs the entirety of the piece. Even in the humorous and carefree scherzo, we hear a short burst of those blustering scales, reminding us what lies beneath.

This sense of darkness underneath the surface is what brings all the pieces in this recital together, and it is the reason I chose the title *Darkness Visible*. The original phrase is taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

*Yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all.*

It is also the title of the Thomas Adés piece in this program. To me, the title suggests the varieties of darkness hiding in plain sight underneath the surface of all these pieces, some enchanting, others threatening.

The poem *Clair de Lune* by Paul Verlaine and its dreamy and enchanting masked figures dancing in the moonlight inspired Debussy to write *Suite Bergamasque*, with its most famous movement sharing the name of the poem. Surrounding the justly famous *Clair de Lune* are three movements in a style of a mini baroque suite—a prelude and two dances, a minuet and a passepied. The darkness and the moonlight form an idyllic scene, yet Verlaine speaks of the costumed dancing figures as almost sad beneath their

fantastic disguises. Debussy paints this enchanting scene beautifully, and also manages to convey a sense of nostalgia and a tinge of sadness even in the most light-hearted moments. This is certainly a quality he shares with Schubert, who often smiles through tears.

The darkness visible in Thomas Adés piece is that of John Dowland's song from 1610 called *In Darkness Let Me Dwell*. Adés took this poignant song and, without changing a single note or rhythm, thoroughly transformed it into a modern and original piece. He *explodes* the song (to use his own word), and explores it in rapt slow motion, changing the textures, registers and dynamics so that the original song is dispersed and seems to be vibrating in the air, appearing to the listener as if from within a dream. The overall effect is both wondrous and haunting.

Maurice Ravel was profoundly interested in the works of writers who shared his fascination with the dark and fantastic, such as Edgar Allen Poe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Baudelaire. *Gaspard de la Nuit*, roughly translatable as *Treasurer of the Night*, is a collection of poems by the French poet Aloysius Bertrand, and the gothic and haunting quality of the poems found an immediate echo with Ravel, who chose three of them to form his own "piano poems" suite. In it, Ravel creates one of the most remarkable relationships between words and music in the history of instrumental writing, as he enhances the poems and brings their scenes to life more vividly than if they were happening before our eyes.

The first poem, *Ondine*, describes the eponymous water nymph who tries to seduce a mortal man to join her and live in the kingdom at the bottom of the lake. When the man replies that he is in love with a mortal woman, Ondine sheds a tear, then disappears with a burst of laughter into the water. Ravel portrays the watery kingdom magically, as he does the sad song of the mermaid, with its melancholy, sensuous beauty and threatening undercurrents. The piano here is transformed into water, which cascades and washes over and under Ondine's voice until finally the mermaid disappears into it.

The second poem, *Le Gibet* (the gibbet, or gallows) paints a morbid picture of, in the words of the poem, a "*bell ringing by the walls of a city below the horizon, and the carcass of a hanged man reddened by the setting sun.*" Ravel's music depicts this desolate scene remarkably, complete with the dusky colors of the setting sun and the chiming bells, which remain constant throughout.

Scarbo, the third poem, depicts a gnome that haunts the sleep of the narrator. He shrinks and grows at will, dances and jumps around the room, fades in and out of vision, and finally disappears into thin air, as if he had only been a dream. Ravel's *Scarbo* is significantly more devilish and frightening than Bertrand's, and brings to mind such characters as Faust's Mephistopheles and Schubert's Erlkönig. One can also hear echoes of the Spanish dances heard in Ravel's *Alborada Del Gracioso*, as well as the delirious waltz of his *La Valse*.

Gaspard de la Nuit is still considered one of the most difficult pieces in the piano repertory, and indeed Ravel, half jokingly, indicated that he wanted to write a piece that would be more difficult than Balakirev's *Islamey*. Yet this is no glitzy showpiece, but rather, as pianist Alfred Cortot said, "the most extraordinary example of instrumental ingenuity the industry of composers has produced."

A poem was also the inspiration for Benjamin Britten's masterful opera, *Peter Grimes*. George Crabbe's poem *The Borough*, adapted to a libretto by Montagu Slater, contains the story of Peter Grimes, an English fisherman who is driven to suicide by his fellow villagers after two of his apprentices die in accidental circumstances. Britten emphasizes the dark side of Man, the ease with which the inhabitants of the otherwise idyllic village turn against one of their own, and the relentlessness they exhibit in pursuing him. The music is at once beautiful and ferocious, and *Peter Grimes* became the most celebrated of Britten's operas, and is considered part of the standard repertoire.

British composer Ronald Stevenson created a short yet compelling fantasy on themes from the opera, and provided grateful pianists with one of the very few opportunities to play the music of Britten, who wrote very little for the instrument.

In the last year of his life, whether as a result of the deeply affecting death of his beloved master Beethoven, or the premonition of his own death a few months later, Franz Schubert's music embodied an increasing maturity and intensity as he confronted the concepts of life and death. That newfound awareness seemed to inspire the 31-year-old Schubert to compose, in an astonishingly short space of time, music that is otherworldly and sublime yet utterly personal and human. In that extraordinary year, Schubert seemed to arrive at a heightened sense of being. His emotions appear with more intensity and poignancy; the joy is more joyful, the sadness more heartbreaking, the darkness more desperate, and the light more luminous.

Despite the aforementioned darkness, by framing of the mournful second movement with the majesty of the first, the capricious humor of the third and the lyrical generosity of the last, Schubert creates the sensation of emerging out of darkness and into a warm light. But even in the light, darkness is, sometimes, visible.