Emerson Fellowship Recital
April 15, 2005
Lindy Blackburn, piano

Haydn
Sonata in E-flat Major, Hob. XVI:52
Allegro
Adagio
Presto

Rachmaninoff
Etude-Tableaux in e-flat minor, Op. 39, no. 5

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J.S. Bach
Prelude and Fugue in C Major, Well Tempered Clavier, Book II, no. I
Prelude and Fugue in e minor, Well Tempered Clavier Book I, no. X

Chopin
Nocturne in D-flat Major, Op. 9, no. 2
Scherzo in c-sharp minor, Op. 39

Joseph Haydn (1732 - 1809) composed his final three solo piano sonatas in London from 1794 to 1796. Of the three, the E-flat major sonata holds a special place in both popularity and influence. The manuscript shows the three sonatas dedicated to Theresa Jansen, a young and talented pianist, not yet thirty years old. Miss Jansen (soon to be Mrs. Bartolozzi), who was a star student of Clementi and a good friend of Haydn's, received more dedications from the composer than anyone else. Strangely enough the E-flat sonata was first published by Artaria & Co., Vienna, in December 1798 with a dedication to Mademoiselle Madalaine von Kurzbock while Mrs. Bartolozzi was living in France. It is not known if Haydn had provided the manuscript, but if he did he may have expected the chaos of the Napoleonic wars to prevent word from getting around. However, Mrs. Bartolozzi made an unexpected trip to Vienna around the same time, and upon seeing her sonata already printed acted very quickly to announce and publish, "A New Grand Sonata for the Piano Forte composed Expressly for Mrs. Bartolozzi by Joseph Haydn, M.D. Op. 78."

Haydn no doubt had her virtuosity in mind, as well as the capabilities of the new English grand piano when he wrote the E-flat sonata. The new grands had greater dynamic range and fuller sound than the cheaper fortepianos which were common in the homes of most amateurs. The first movement takes advantage of this with its strong ceremonial opening. Following is an extroverted and motivic arrangement characterized by contrasting dynamics and dotted rhythms. After a solid finish in the tonic key, one cannot help but be taken off guard by the unexpected shift with the slow movement to the Neapolitan major, E. The beautiful and improvisational second movement gives way to a highly rhythmic and compact Finale providing a virtuoso end for this monumental work.
Sergei Rachmaninoff’s (1873 - 1943) Nine Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39, composed in 1916-17, marked the ending of over a decade of extremely productive and focused writing for the then 44 year-old composer. Russia, at the time, was in political turmoil leading up to the famous October revolution of 1917 and the creation of the Soviet state. Uncomfortable with the societal developments around him, Rachmaninoff left Russia with his family and whatever belongings he could manage in December on a concert tour and never returned. Leaving whatever dwindling resources in the estate he had behind, he turned toward a career focused on concertizing for the remainder of his life, living his final years as a celebrity in the United States.

The chaos in Russia, First World War, and recent news of his father’s death all help explain the pervasive dark character of the nine etudes in the set. The e-flat minor etude, angry and dramatic, is largely chordal with strong melodic lines all too characteristic of the composer. If Rachmaninoff is said to have introduced his style in the first symphony and second piano concerto, the Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39 is where that musical development ultimately led.

Within the half-century following Johann Sebastian Bach’s (1685 - 1750) death, the Well Tempered Clavier (Book I) had arguably become his best known work, and it continues to be one of his most famous to this day. As the title suggests, Bach makes use of all available major and minor keys in this collection of 24 preludes and fugues, taking advantage of the equal treatment of the new tuning. Bach was not alone in this endeavor, but the WTC served as a model for similar compilations from later composers. The WTC is dated 1722, though it is sure to have existed previously in parts as small, possibly teaching pieces composed over a period of time. Many had gone through substantial revision, some transposed to fit into the framework of the collection.

The e minor prelude and fugue are particularly interesting. The prelude, the most revised in the entire collection, originally consisted of merely chords in the right hand and an arpeggiated bass. The famous arioso melody, which grew more ornamented as time went on, was added later, as was the Presto second half. The layered construction of the first half of the prelude helps to give it a unique feeling, with a trio of individual voices carried through to the entry of the Presto. The voices remain throughout the Presto, despite initial differences of appearance, and the Presto serves to connect the prelude to the fugue both harmonically and rhythmically. The e minor fugue is notable in that it is the only two part fugue in the entire collection of 48. This allows Bach to explore dramatic counterpoint, containing remarkable passages of parallel octaves (meas. 19 and 38). The ending of the fugue, originally conceived as a dotted-half note chord, was later changed to its abrupt arpeggiated state, more in character with the rest of the piece.

Bach seems to have never officially produced a complete autograph copy of his second collection of 24 preludes and fugues, now known as the Well Tempered Clavier, Book II. Even more than the first book, the second is composed of diverse movements, probably written over a comparable timescale. Bach opens this collection with a grand, noble prelude in C major, in contrast to the simple arpeggiando prelude of Book I. The prelude is almost fugue-like in its use of four strict parts. The somewhat imposing prelude is balanced by a three part fugue. Written in 2/4 time, and making frequent returns to the principal key, the fugue has a much lighter personality than its companion.
Frederic Chopin (1810 - 1849) composed his famous c-sharp minor scherzo during a romantic getaway with his newly found love, novelist George Sand, in the winter of 1838-1839. The two had traveled to the Spanish island of Majorca to escape the distractions of Paris, and were staying in a former monastery near the city of Palma. The weather, however, turned wet and miserable, and the weak Chopin's health declined dramatically. The people, too, were distrustful of anyone showing signs of tuberculosis, as well as anyone not Catholic or Spanish speaking. The severity of their unfriendliness was such as to prompt George Sand to write, "One would need ten volumes to give an idea of the baseness, the bad faith, the egoism, the foolishness, the spitefulness of this stupid race, thieving and bigoted." Despite the challenges, Chopin and George Sand enjoyed their isolation together, while Chopin was impressively productive – finishing the 24 Preludes, as well as the Polonaise in c minor and the Ballade in f minor.

Chopin begins his C-sharp minor scherzo with an elliptical opening, a favorite of his that avoids immediate presentation of the tonic and instead lets the harmony build gradually. The striking double octaves along with the huge opening chords led to snide remarks concerning Chopin's dedication of the work to his student Gutmann, who apparently had few reservations about using his large and powerful hands. Still this deviant scherzo is known to be one of Chopin's finest works. In reality the scherzo has comparably close ties to its roots as the second movement of Beethoven's sonatas. After the scherzo, with its main theme and development, lies a trio section in D flat, chorale-like in character with beautiful Chopinesque chords and figuration. The scherzo returns briefly to be followed by the trio, this time in the relative E major, and contemplative development to e minor. Following is a surprising reminder of the main chorale theme contained in an extended blooming passage held in C sharp major that finally breaks away into the bravura coda.

The D-flat nocturne dates a few years earlier to the autumn of 1835 during Chopin's stay in Paris. It beautifully compliments the companion nocturne no. 1 in c-sharp minor, which is filled with emotional strain. The D-flat nocturne in comparison is open and warm, while showing extraordinary delicacy and smoothness.

Lindy Blackburn is currently a second year graduate student at MIT where he is pursuing a PhD in Physics. He began piano studies at the age of five. He currently studies under David Deveau, and is a member of the MIT Chamber Music Society. Previous teachers include Inessa Litvin and Leonid Levitsky.