An Evening of Romantic Chamber Music

October 7, 2023
7:30 p.m.

Daniel Hall

Five Songs

Alan August, tenor
Stephen Siek, piano

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Nye poi krasavitsa **(O don't sing to me fair maiden), op. 4, no. 4**
Zdyes harasho **(It's beautiful here), op. 21, no. 7**
Vyesenniye vodi **(Floods of spring), op. 14, no. 11**

Nye poi krasavitsa (O don't sing to me fair maiden), completed in 1893, sets the poetry of Pushkin and is dedicated to Natalia Satin, the composer's future wife:

> Do not sing, beautiful maid, sad songs of Georgia in my presence.
> They remind me of another life and a distant shore.
> Alas, your cruel refrains recall to me
> The steppe, the night, and the moonlit features of a poor maiden who is far away.
> Seeing you, I can forget that dear, fateful vision.
> But you sing – and I imagine it again before me.
> Do not sing, beautiful maid, sad songs of Georgia in my presence.
> They remind me of another life and a distant shore.

Zdyes harasho (It's beautiful here) is a short essay in tonal color, setting the poetry of Countess Glafira Einerling, who wrote under the pseudonym "Galina." In this brief tale, the poet is alone, dreaming of his beloved, and Rachmaninoff compresses his melodic sentiments to an exquisite 22 measures:

It is beautiful here…
Look there, in the distance
Burns the river like a flame,
Like a flowered carpet lie the meadows,
White clouds above us…
Here there are no people…
Here there is silence…
Here there is only God – and I,
Flowers, and an aging pine,
And you, my dream!

Vyesenniye vodi (Floods of spring) sets the poetry of Fyodor Tyutchev, and it enjoyed immense popularity in Russia after it was first published in 1897. The substantial demands it places on the singer are matched by an unrestrained, virtuosic piano writing:

While snow still whitens the fields,
Torrents already resound with spring;
They run and awaken the sleeping shore;
They run and sparkle and proclaim,
They proclaim to all ends of the Earth:
"Spring comes! Spring comes!
We are Spring's young messengers,
She sent us ahead to say:
"Spring comes! Spring comes!"
And the gentle, warm days of May,
In a rosy, bright round dance,
Crowd joyfully behind her.

(All Russian song translations were adapted by Alan August from the word-by-word translations of Natalia Challis, *The Singer's Rachmaninoff*, Pelion Press, 1989, and Lawrence Richter, *Rachmaninov's Complete Song Texts*, Leyerle Publications, 2000.)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Widmung (Dedication), op. 25, no. 1

With the encouragement of his new wife, the former Clara Wieck, Schumann began writing songs in 1840, and by the end of the year he had composed no less than 138, leading later scholars to describe this as his *Liederjahr*, or "Year of Song." In March, he began composing the 26 songs that comprise his cycle *Myrthen*

("Myrtles," the blossom traditionally associated with marriage festivities) as a wedding present for Clara, and the most famous song from the set is *Widmung* ("Dedication"), which sets the poetry of German poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866).

Du meine Seele, du mein Herz,
Du meine Wonn', o du mein Schmerz,
Du meine Welt, in der ich lebe,
Mein Himmel du, darein ich schwebe,
O du mein Grab, in das hinab
Ich ewig meinen Kummer gab!
Du bist die Ruh, du bist der Frieden,
Du bist vom Himmel mir beschieden.
Dass du mich liebst, macht mich mir wert,
Dein Blick hat mich vor mir verklärt,
Du hebst mich liebend über mich,
Mein guter Geist, mein bess'res Ich!

You my soul, you my heart,
You my rapture, O you my pain,
You my world in which I live,
My heaven you, to which I aspire,
O you my grave, into which
My grief forever I've consigned!
You are repose, you are peace,
You are bestowed on me from heaven.
Your love for me gives me my worth,
Your eyes transfigure me in mine,
You raise me lovingly above myself,
My guardian angel, my better self!

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

***Zueignung* (Dedication or Devotion), op. 10, no. 1**

This early, intensely Romantic song of Strauss was written in 1885 and it sets the verses of Austrian poet Hermann von Gilm (1812-1864). It might be said that the text is quite mythical, a knight singing of his love to his lady, thanking her for making the sign of the cross over his drink and protecting him.

These two songs strike an unmistakable contrast between our time period and the more Romantic nineteenth century. These days, such confessions are considered a major *faux pas*, a turn-off. In that time, such a profession of love was *de rigeur* for a man to woo his woman.

—Alan August

Ja, du weißt es, teure Seele,
Daß ich fern von dir mich quäle,
Liebe macht die Herzen krank,
Habe Dank.

Einst hielt ich, der Freiheit Zecher,
Hoch den Amethysten-Becher,
Und du segnetest den Trank,
Habe Dank.

Und beschworst darin die Bösen,
Bis ich, was ich nie gewesen,
Heilig, heilig an's Herz dir sank,
Habe Dank!

Yes, dear soul, you know
That I'm in torment far from you,
Love makes hearts sick –
Be thanked.

Once, revelling in freedom,
I held the amethyst cup aloft
And you blessed that draught –
Be thanked.

And you banished the evil spirits,
Till I, as never before,
Holy, sank holy upon your heart –
Be thanked.

Vocalise, op. 34, no. 14 **Sergei Rachmaninoff**
(arranged by Jordan Owen)

Gia Sweitzer, soprano
Courtney LeBauer, violin
Ivana Carlson, violin
Hanna Dara, viola
Thomas Shoebotham, cello
Stephen Siek, piano

The Vocalise remains one of Rachmaninoff's most popular and enduring compositions. As most commonly used by singers, the term "vocalise" refers to any vocal exercise sung on a single syllable to strengthen some aspect of vocal technique, but numerous composers have also written wordless vocal compositions, even if only as portions of a larger work. In 1915, Rachmaninoff completed a song cycle he titled *Fourteen Romances*, and the Vocalise is the final entry in the set. He dedicated it to the Bolshoi's leading coloratura soprano, the Ukrainian-born Antoninia Vasilyevna Nezhdanova (1873-1950), who premiered it with the composer at the piano on January 24, 1916. The song was so well received that Rachmaninoff's friend, the musician and publisher Nikolai von Struve (1875-1920), suggested he orchestrate the piano accompaniment for strings, a version which is frequently heard today.

—Stephen Siek

***Fünf Stücke im Volkston*, Op. 102** **Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**
(Five Pieces in Folk Style)

I. Mit Humor ("Vanitas vanitatum") ("Vanity of vanities")
II. Langsam
III. Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen
IV. Nicht zu Rausch
V. Stark und markirt

Thomas Shoebotham, cello
Stephen Siek, piano

Robert Schumann's works for cello are rare, and what few there are were written in the composer's tortured late years. The *5 Pieces in Folk Style for Cello and Piano* (along with the more ambitious *Cello Concerto*) were composed in 1849-1850, when the composer was valiantly struggling with the specter of insanity that had begun to haunt him day and night.

Each of the *Five Pieces* possesses a distinctive character, and strong contrasts in mood, tempo and technique amongst the pieces lend the work its overall structure. Despite Schumann's fondness for programmatic titles and the allusion in the work's name to German folk music the pieces were not titled individually. Only the first piece received an enigmatic, atmospheric heading in Latin, *Vanitas vanitatum* ("Vanity of vanities") the incipit of *Ecclesiastes*, but possibly inspired more directly by the title of Goethe's poem "Vanitas! Vanitatum vanitas," a favorite of Schumann's.

The work was first played in 1850 by the cellist Andreas Grabau (to whom the work was dedicated) and Clara Schumann, at the home of friends in Dresden on the composer's fortieth birthday. Clara commented that she found in these short pieces "a freshness and originality that quite ravished" her. The work was published the next year, but the public premiere did not occur until 1859, three years after the composer's death, when Clara performed them with the noted cellist Friedrich Grützmacher.

—Thomas Shoebotham

--INTERMISSION--

Piano Quintet in E-flat, Op. 44 **Robert Schumann**

I. Allegro brilliante
II. In modo d'una marcia. Un poco largamente
III. Scherzo: Molto vivace; Trio I; Trio II
IV. Allegro ma non troppo

Courtney LeBauer, violin
Ivana Carlson, violin
Hanna Dara, viola
Thomas Shoebotham, cello
Stephen Siek, piano

Schumann's Piano Quintet is often viewed as one of the greatest chamber works from the nineteenth century. If the year 1840 might be considered the composer's "Year of Song," by 1842 he had embarked on what is often called his "Year of Chamber Music." That summer, he composed no less than three String Quartets, and by September, he had begun his Piano Quintet in E-flat—the first work to merge a string quartet with the piano—and he completed it only weeks later in early October.

He dedicated the work to his wife, Clara, one of the most acclaimed pianists of her day, and she was scheduled to premiere it on December 6 at the Leipzig home of Henriette Voigt, another skilled pianist who often hosted elegant musicales with her husband. But unfortunately, on that evening Clara—now five months pregnant—fell ill, so the work's first performance was rescued by their close friend Felix Mendelssohn, a magnificent pianist who virtually sightread the difficult piano part with near-flawless accuracy. A month later, on January 8, 1843, Clara was credited with the work's formal premiere at Leipzig's famed *Gewandhaus*, one of Germany's preeminent concert halls, and she always held the work close to her heart, performing it frequently throughout her long career.

While the Piano Quintet certainly adheres to Classical forms, most listeners may be far more captivated by the endless stream of lyrical melodies that flow continuously from

its four movements. Throughout the entire work, Schumann's imagination seems inexhaustible, and he even allows each of the five instruments to share the soloist's spotlight, while his ensemble writing is often so rich that it sounds virtually orchestral. The second movement, which has at times been described as a funeral march, features a haunting violin solo enriched by the composer's effortless resolution of stark, at times even grating, dissonances. The Scherzo which follows is a wild, frenetic romp, with the piano and the strings often erupting into explosive virtuosity, while the Finale is a masterpiece, as the haunting theme introduced in the piano is passed among the instruments in seemingly endless modifications. The work concludes with a massive double fugue which revisits the principal melody from the first movement, but this long-revered Baroque device in no way sounds pedantic. Instead, it forms a powerful climax to one of the grandest chamber works from the Romantic period.

—Stephen Siek