Piano Class Recital

Visions of Nature

Students from the studio of Eva Solar-Kinderman

Friday, January 20, 2012 at 8:00 p.m.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall
MacLaurin Building, University of Victoria
Admission by donation
www.finearts.uvic.ca/music/events

Program

Leoš Janáček
1854 - 1928

On an Overgrown Path (1801-1808)

Our Evenings
A Blown Away Leaf
Come With Us!
The Madonna of Frýdek
They Chatted Like Swallows
Words Fail!
Good Night!
Unutterable Anguish
In Tears
The Barn Owl Has Not Flown Away

Claire Huang
Jasmine Chung
Romaine Gehring
Laura How
Erik Leisinger
Jasmine Chung
Angel Huang
“anguished performer”
Louise Lu
Armand Saberi

Book II

Andante
Allegretto
Allegro

Romaine Gehring
Liam Gibson
Pamela Tai

In The Mists (1912)

Andante
Molto Adagio
Andantino
Presto

Romaine Gehring
Shane Beech
Louise Lu
Liam Gibson

Intermission
Leoš Janáček’s *On an Overgrown Path* and *In the Mist* are of course stylistically quite distinct from Robert Schumann’s *Waldszenen*. They are representative of very different historical periods, cultural traits, and most importantly different individuals. That being said, they are united by their shared theme of the forest or the outdoors. Nature is a recurring trope in much romantic art. This can partly be explained by the idea that in nature we see more clearly into our own interior worlds. In light of this, it is perhaps not so surprising that two men, different in so many ways, were both compelled to write cathartic music with a forest theme.

Although his professional life straddled the end of the 19th century and roughly the first three decades of the 20th, Janáček did not begin to become widely known until after 1910, with the success of his innovative operas. He composed relatively few works for the piano; in fact all of his piano music was published between 1901 and 1912. This was an important period in his development as a composer. His piano music is in many ways indicative of his efforts to forge a personal style. Prior to devoting his time to composition, Janáček spent a great deal of time collecting and studying Slavonic folk music. His knowledge, in particular of Moravian music, influenced his compositions and is one of the main attributes of his style.

Certain features typify Janáček’s piano music; single-line right-hand melodies with repeated accompaniment figures; short-breathed melodic units; sparse textures; accompaniment that assumes a very prominent role; an often improvisatory style; frequent ostinatos and tremolos. As previously mentioned, many of these elements are derived from Moravian folk music.

*On an Overgrown Path* was composed in part as an emotional outlet for Janáček, who was recovering from the death of his daughter Olga. *Book I* features programatic titles, depicting various scenes and reminiscences.

“Our Evenings” is a recollection of the evenings in the tiny village of Hukvaldy, where Janáček was born and where he often spent his summer vacations.

*A Blown Away Leaf* is a kind of love song; a young man thinks of his girlfriend when she is away.

The lightness of *Come With Us!* acts as a contrast to the pieces around. It is a gentle polka.

The village of Frýdek has a famous shrine that is visited regularly by pilgrims. Janáček said the opening of *The Madonna of Frýdek* represents the pilgrims going to the shrine, but what follows (the melody that begins in measure 5) has nothing to do with religion: a shepherd is merely playing a simple tune for himself. The first time you hear the shepherd’s melody it is from a distance, but with each repetition it appears closer.
They Chattered Like Swallows portrays the chattering of young girls.

Words Fail!, which some critics hear as a parody of someone stuttering, really depicts someone sobbing and trying not to. “Words fail” because the grief is too great for speech.

Good Night! is a little love dialogue between a boy and a girl.

Unutterable Anguish is a phrase Janáček constantly used when he wrote about Olga’s long final illness. The piece reflects his sorrow and anxiety during that terrible time.

In Tears has a certain resignation. As Janáček said, “This is crying with a smile.”

The Barn Owl Has Not Flown Away! draws on a Czech folk legend. When somebody is about to die, a barn owl lingers around the house and won’t go away. The repeated-note motif is the owl calling, and the calm chordal melody signifies resignation. During the recapitulation, the arpeggios from the opening are interpolated into the solemn chordal melody.

Book II contains five pieces, all of which are untitled. The brooding, melancholy mood of Book I persists, but without the programatic titles associated with each piece with a specific scene or idea. The musical language is similar, but there is an audible difference, as Book II sees Janáček coming closer still to his mature style. Only the first two pieces were actually finished; the others were left as sketches.

In the Mists in a way mirrors Janáček’s struggle to find himself as a composer. The pieces have an enigmatic quality to them, and feature harsh tempo changes, chopped-up harmonies, and fragmented melodies. When the work was completed in 1912, Janáček was still not well known as a composer, but In the Mist contains many of the stylistic traits that would be further developed in his chamber music and opera works.

The last piece of the group begins with an improvisatory phrase alluding to Moravian folk music. The accompaniment of the second section (Andante) recalls the accompaniment of The Barn Owl (no. 10 of On an Overgrown Path). Later, the music builds to a climactic outcry based on the repeated-note motif of the barn owl, which apparently has not yet flown away.

Schumann’s original ambition was to become a great piano virtuoso, but relatively early in his career, a hand injury made any further pursuit of technical mastery impossible. This prompted Schumann to turn his creative energy towards composing. The majority of Schumann’s early works were written for the piano, and while he later branched out and wrote in most of the principal genres of his time, he continued to be a prolific composer of piano music. Waldszenen was published in 1849, five years before Schumann’s famous suicide attempt and subsequent voluntary confinement to a mental institution for the remaining two years of his life. It is a typically romantic work: a varied collection of character pieces united by the programatic title “Forest Scenes”. The pieces are also related in a more concrete, musical sense. Certain musical fragments, called motifs, recur in various permutations throughout the cycle, creating a cross-referencing of motivic relationships. As well as motivically, the pieces are related in a large harmonic scheme of third-related keys, giving a sense of unity to the diverse collection.

The collection begins with Eintritt (Entrance), acting as a brief introduction to the work and inviting the listener into its woodland character.

Jäger auf der Lauer uses many rapid passages to energetically depict its subject matter: a hunter ambushing his prey.

The gently interweaving melodies of Einsame Blumen (Lonely Flowers) provide a welcome contrast to the excitement of the previous piece.

Verufene Stelle (Haunted Spot) illustrates the romantic fascination with the mysterious and even sinister aspects of both the natural world and our own human nature. Originally, several of the pieces in the collection had poetry attached to them, but prior to publication Schumann removed all of the poetry except for that which precedes Verufene Stelle. It is an excerpt from Friedrich Hebbel’s Waldbilder:

The flowers, even though they grow tall,
Are here as pale as death;
Only one in the middle
Is of deep red.
It did not get it from the sun
For the sun’s rays never touched it;
It got it from the earth,
For it drank human blood.

Another appropriate contrast is provided by Freundliche Landschaft (Friendly Landscape). The fluttering harmonies evoke a decidedly sunnier view of nature.

Simple human warmth and hospitality suffuse Herberge (Wayside Inn), perhaps providing a fire-lit respite from journeys through the forest.

Vogel als Prophet (The Prophet Bird) is musically puzzling, replete with skittering melodies that stop abruptly, and some distinctively dissonant harmonies.

The galloping rhythms and fanfare-like melodies of Jagdlied (Hunting Song) bring to mind a joyful and exhilarating chase through the forest.

Abschied concludes the work, acting as a farewell or departure, but also alluding to the possibilities of the future.

~ Liam Gibson & Eva Solar-Kinderman