

Westminster Conservatory at Nassau

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Program Notes

Minute Waltz, opus 64, no.1 - Frédéric Chopin (1810-1843)

While growing up in Poland Chopin absorbed the sounds and rhythms of the popular dance forms, which include mazurkas, polonaises, and perhaps the most popular waltzes. He brought the rather simple style of the waltz from an accompaniment for dancing to that of a concert-worthy performance piece with elegance, charm, and brilliance.

The Waltz in D-flat is given the nickname Minute Waltz not because it should be played in that span of time, but because it is short and small - minute. It also has the nickname Waltz of the Little Dog. Chopin's lover, George Sand, had a dog named Marquis, who often chased its own tail while running around the house. This playfulness inspired the composition of the piece.

Chopin wrote 25 waltzes of which 18 survive. He only allowed 8 of these to be published as he was often critical of his own works. Many of his waltzes were given as gifts; he would often give the same piece to several friends and alter each version in terms of dynamics, articulations, or add and delete entire phrases or sections.

Fantasie-Impromptu, opus 66 - Frédéric Chopin

Chopin wrote the Fantasie-Impromptu, the first of his compositions in this genre, in 1834 at the age of 24. An impromptu is a composition intended to produce the illusion of spontaneous improvisation. This piece is known for its cross rhythms (polyrhythms) in the opening theme and for its lyrical melody of the slower middle section. The work was never published by Chopin. It is thought that he found the harmonies too similar to those in the third movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. It was finally published in 1855, six years after Chopin's death and against his wishes. At the time of publication, the word Fantasie was attached to the original name of simply, Impromptu.

Arabesque no.1 - Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Claude Debussy composed two arabesques between 1886 and 1891, making them among his earliest works and examples of impressionistic music. Impressionism was a short period of music around the late 19th and early 20th centuries focusing on the mood and atmosphere of a subject rather than its details. The term arabesque is used to describe a type of design in architecture and paintings; it features complex, interwoven lines that create spiral-like designs. In music an arabesque often refers to compositional devices such as counterpoint or rapidly changing harmonies that intertwine with one another.

In this arabesque Debussy uses triplets, polyrhythms, and alternation between the hands to create this spiraling, ornamental effect. In addition, Debussy enhances the music with unusual chord combinations, ambiguous tonalities, and unresolved chords.

Prelude in C-sharp Minor, opus 3, no.2 - Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was one of the finest pianists and composers in music history. This prelude was composed in 1892, soon after he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. It has become one of the world's best-known pieces, yet he received only 40 rubles payment - the equivalent of about 14 dollars today! He was so often asked to perform this work that he said, "many, many times, I wish I had never written it."

The piece is organized into three sections. The first is a bell-like motive evoking the Kremlin's solemn carillon chimes and feels like a procession. The middle section is highly agitated, frantic, and passionate before returning to the main theme in the final section with grandeur and power. In the coda there is a return to a mysterious and reflective quality to the music.

Sunken Cathedral (La Cathédrale engloutie) - Debussy

Debussy wrote 24 short preludes for the piano. The Sunken Cathedral was published in 1910. The music is based on the myth of Ys, a sunken city off the coast of Northern France. Within this city a sunken cathedral will rise from the depths on clear mornings when the sea is transparent.

The beginning of the piece slowly and gently brings the cathedral out of the water using open fifths to allude to church bells in the distance. As the music progresses, the feeling of the church rising higher is reflected in the intensification of the rhythms and the volume. At the loudest point Debussy uses an organ pedal effect to show the church has emerged. Gradually the cathedral sinks back into the deep, murky, ocean floor, and only the church bells are heard from a distance.

Etude, opus 10, no.12 - Chopin

Chopin's 24 piano etudes can be considered the basis for the modern technical approach to playing the piano. Unlike etudes written before Chopin, which were pieces solely to emphasize and develop a particular technique, Chopin's etudes are fully developed concert pieces. They are still considered the most challenging and evocative pieces in the piano repertoire. Some are so popular that they have been given nicknames, such as this etude, the Revolutionary.

This piece was composed around the time of the November uprising of 1831 in Poland, which was an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Russian rule. It is impassioned with an emphasis on the left-hand technique, powerful right-hand chords and striking dynamic shifts.

Nocturne in E-flat Major, opus 9, no. 2 - Chopin

A nocturne is a composition that evokes the night and features a singing melody over an arpeggiated or chordal accompaniment. Chopin's 21 nocturnes are considered among his finest short solo works. This reflective and elegant nocturne is structured into two main sections that become more varied and ornamented with each restatement of their theme. The music builds to a dramatic coda which includes a four note cadenza that repeats faster and faster, creating a feeling of anticipation and uncertainty, but suddenly slows and ends quietly.

Claire de lune - Debussy

Clair de lune (Light of the Moon) is the third part of the 4-part *Suite bergamasque* written by Debussy and published in 1905. This piece is based on a poem by the French poet Paul Verlaine. Debussy also made two settings of the poem for voice and piano. As with many of Debussy's works, nature is the inspiration. The beautiful melody of the opening evokes stillness and meditative calm. The piece gradually increases in tempo, texture, and volume, giving the impression of wind moving the water into rougher seas, which again calms by the end.

Polonaise in A-flat Major, opus 53 - Chopin

A polonaise is a traditional Polish dance form and perhaps the most distinctive and important of the styles. It was often used as a celebratory march at weddings, grand society events or aristocratic events.

Chopin transformed his polonaises into heroic epics, evoking the love he felt for his native Poland and its struggle with oppression from neighboring countries. The A-flat polonaise, composed in 1842, is perhaps his most well known and admired work. (Many refer to it as "THE polonaise", ignoring the fact Chopin wrote 17 others!) Its main theme is instantly recognizable and is deeply emotional and powerful, earning its nickname of "Heroic Polonaise".

E.A.