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In October of 1802, Ludwig van Beethoven penned a letter to his brothers, later known as his "Heiligenstadt Testament". In this correspondence, the composer confesses his progressing deafness, contemplation of suicide, and his resolve to overcome his afflictions in order to fulfil his artistic destiny. With the testament's ink barely dry, Beethoven set to work, writing to his publisher only days later: "I have composed two sets of variations, one consisting of eight variations and the other of thirty. Both sets are worked out in quite a new manner…I can assure you that in both works the style is quite new for me". The two compositions referenced are the beloved *Eroica Variations, Op. 35,* and the lesser known ***Six Variations in F major, Op. 34.*** Indeed, both works depart from the eighteenth-century approach to variation composition. Unlike previous variations sets, which typically remained in the key of the theme for the entirety of the work, each variation in Beethoven's *Six Variations in F major* modulates to a new key, often without preparation. After the theme in F major, we modulate to D major, G major, E flat Major, and C minor, until we come full circle and arrive at the home key once again for the final variation and coda. Also deviating from Classical norms, each variation introduces varying tempi and time signatures. The cumulative effect gives the impression of a suite of contrasting character pieces, rather than a variation set. Unified by a mutual thematic and harmonic structure, the variations encompass a dramatic range of characters from the bubbling, sparkling first variation to the funeral march fifth variation.

Brahms' final years were marked by an omnipresent foreshadowing of death. One can hear the composer's contemplation of mortality in the ***Fantasies, Op. 116,*** crafted only five years before his passing. Brahms' final work, composed amidst the funeral of his lifelong companion, Clara Schumann, was a set of eleven chorale preludes for organ, the last of which is titled, "O welt, ich muss dich lassen" (O world, I must leave you). In the same year, Brahms also composed "O Tod, wie bitter bist du" or "O death, how bitter you are" as part of his *Vier ernste Gesänge* (*Four Serious Songs*). Among the many musical elements evoking death in the *lied*, an abundance of sighing, descending thirds takes center stage – a symbolic musical gesture that becomes synonymous with death in late Brahms and absolutely saturates the music of the *Fantasies, Op. 116.* In fact, one year after the *Fantasies, Op. 116* completion, Brahms asked his publisher, Fritz Simrock, "by the way, has it struck you that I have clearly said my farewell as a composer?"

Upon first glance, the title of the composition is quite perplexing, considering that the work consists of three *capricci* and four *intermezzi.* The "fantasie" description likely refers to the remarkably evocative and imaginative characters and atmospheres that the pieces conjure. Clara Schumann found the work to be "a true source of…everything, poetry, passion, rapture, intimacy, full of the most marvelous effects". The opening "Capriccio in D minor" bursts forth with fiery, explosive drama. Robust textures summon orchestral-like forces from the instrument and pervasive rhythmic and metrical ambiguity cause the music to sound restless, even tormented. After the decisive conclusion of the first capriccio, the "Intermezzo in A minor" reveals late Brahms at his most contemplative and introspective. Within the bittersweet lyricism and poignant mixing of major and minor, light and shadow, one can perceive, as poetically articulated by Sir Stephen Hough, 'the light fade and the extinguishing of Brahms' final cigar'. The following "Capriccio in G minor" returns to the impassioned, sweeping sonorities of the first capriccio; however, amidst the struggle, a noble chorale emerges, offering hope of a peaceful outcome. Then comes a trilogy of intermezzi. Through its delicate textures and sighing melodic gestures, the "Intermezzo in E major" gives the impression of a tender nocturne. In the succeeding "Intermezzo in E minor", Brahms crafts a ghostly, eerie atmosphere through perturbed rhythmic ambiguity, mysterious and chromatic harmonies, and an ominous, meandering melody. The final "Intermezzo in E major" sounds as a lush, hymn-like chorale. Although harmonic phrases often lead in unexpected directions, the music is at times tender and loving, as well as heroic and noble. The closing capriccio returns to the impassioned torrents of sharp, anguished harmony heard in the first capriccio, but eventually arrives at a triumphant resolution following prolonged struggle.

If a single word could describe the music of Claude Debussy, it would undoubtedly be "imagination". In *fin-de-siècle* French parlance, the word "estampes" would instantly conjure the genre of "print", particularly Japanese woodblock printing. This artistic act of capturing a vivid scene, particularly one exotic to the perceiver's realm of experience, is the underlying concept behind Debussy's suite, ***Estampes***. Each movement is a sonic "print", a postcard from travels in some foreign land...except the composer never actually traveled to the regions that *Estampes* evokes. Debussy never journeyed to Java or Indonesia, of which the sounds of "Pagodes" are greatly indebted. Given the intoxicating *habanera* rhythms of "La soirée dans Grenade" ("An Evening in Grenada"), it is also shocking that Debussy only momentarily set foot in Spain. In fact, the composer only spent one afternoon in the country, crossed the border by foot, traveled approximately three miles to San Sebastián to watch one bullfight, and was back in France in time for supper. Yet, in the words of the Spanish composer, Manuel de Falla, "Claude Debussy wrote Spanish music without knowing Spain". It was Debussy's miraculous imagination that facilitated his colorful construction of foreign worlds in sound.

"Pagodes" refers to the architectural structure commonly found in Southeast Asia, although the music explicitly realizes Debussy's pianistic imitation of the Javanese gamelan orchestra. Debussy accomplishes this effect through a complex interweaving of musical materials. Each line has a unique timbre, rhythmic personality, and pitch range. The cumulative impression evokes a serene symphony of gongs, much like the gamelan orchestra that Debussy first encountered at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris. "La soirée dans Grenade" ("An Evening in Grenada") features the alluring rhythms of the habanera – a dance that aroused the imaginations of numerous French composers, most notably Georges Bizet within the famous opera, *Carmen*. A haunting chant melody, tinged with melismatic Arab flavors, soars above the smoky, distant habanera, not without the occasionally strum of a guitar. In the final piece of the set, we return home to France. One can hear the gentle patter of raindrops in the *toccata* like figurations of "Jardins sous la pluie" ("Gardens in the Rain"). As the storm brews, cascades of luscious harmony swirl around two French children's songs: "*Nous n'irons plus aux bois*" ("We'll not return to the woods") and "*Dodo, l'enfant do*" ("Sleepy, the child will soon sleep"). Through a series of ascending arpeggios, the sun emerges from the clouds, and the piece concludes with a luminous, ascending sweep.

Within the nocturnes, Frédéric Chopin offers an intimate glimpse into his inner world. As the name suggests, the nocturnes are all evocative of the evening, although no two are alike. Some call to mind the vivid hues of a radiant sunset or the mystery and menace of a black, stormy night. Chopin's nocturnes conjure nightmares, dreams, dusk and twilight tableau, and everything in between – perhaps even a steamy Texas evening? The musical narrative of the ***Nocturne in B major, Op. 62 No. 1*** commences with the presentation of two yearning chords akin to the opening of a stage curtain. After a brief pause, an operatic melody emerges above an intricate texture of entangled countermelodies. One can discern the presence of multiple singers in this aria so lavishly infused with the sensuous lyricism of Chopin's favorite *bel canto* operas. In an impassioned middle section, a seemingly unending melody takes flight above pulsing, syncopated chords. Eventually, the primary theme of the nocturne appears once again, full of perfumed ornamentation, delicate flourishes, and fluid sequences of trills that mimic the *vibrato* of a lyric soprano.

Far from the balletic frolicking and capricious antics of the Classical *scherzo*, Chopin's scherzi typically explore pianistic strength and ardent lyricism – at once emotionally extraverted and volatile. Of the composer's four pieces in the genre, however, the ***Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Op. 54*** is the most optimistic and buoyant. Two contrasting types of scherzi emerged during the Romantic era. Some are imbued with nocturnal lyricism and demonic rhythmic jesting (the "Dream of a Witch's Sabbath" scherzo from Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* comes to mind). Others feature a lighter, fantastical atmosphere, akin to the fairytale world of Felix Mendelssohn's scherzo from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example. It is this later type that best describes Chopin's E major scherzo. Within the scherzo, crystalize arabesques and scampering rhythms emit an elusive and playful character that, in climatic moments, becomes momentarily exuberant and jovial. An expansive middle section sounds full of poetic and passionate lyricism. In the words of the Polish musicologist, Mieczysław Tomaszewski, the E major scherzo is "close to the fairytale sphere, though devoid of elves and goblins, it is brighter than the others, written with a finer, lighter pen, though it too occasionally reminds us of the existence of shadows and frights".

Isaac Foreman, June 2023