

Program Notes

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): The Story of Babar the Elephant for piano and narrator (1940) with words by Jean de Brunhof

In 1940, Francis Poulenc was living in the countryside outside Paris, composing less tonal music that veered toward atonality. This style challenged what was considered appropriate for French concert halls. One day, his three-year-old cousin Sophie, who did not appreciate this musical style, placed her copy of “Babar the Elephant” upside down on the piano’s music stand and said, “Play this.”

Poulenc improvised an accompaniment to each scene and Sophie was thrilled. Before long, everyone in the neighborhood came by to hear the new piece. Poulenc wrote the music down and dedicated it to his young cousins and neighbors.

The beloved character “Babar the elephant” was created by Jean de Brunhof and his wife Cecile in 1931. The Story of Babar is the first of six Babar books that de Brunhof wrote and illustrated. Paul de Brunhof continued his father’s work after Jean’s death in 1937. Paul created a complete elephant world with Babar as king of the elephant nation. More recently there have been a Babar movie, a television series, and various Babar merchandise.

Poulenc uses various devices to paint the scenes of Babar’s life. Slow, low piano tones suggest lumbering beasts. High staccato notes suggest the call of birds. An extended use of the sustain pedal blurs the scene, creating the mists of the jungle or the warmth of sleepy elephant dreams.

Poulenc’s approach thus uses mostly color, rather than melody to illustrate the story. This contrasts with Prokofiev’s “Peter and the Wolf,” a better-known children’s story that Jack and I performed at our last concert. In that piece, every animal had a distinctive, sing-able theme.

Even though the Poulenc’s themes are more challenging to hear than Prokofiev’s, there *are* some to listen for. Babar’s opening theme, so joyful and warm, will re-appear sadly when he remembers his mother. And the lullaby she sings as he rides on her back will reappear in loud urgency when the elephant mothers search and call for their children.

Frederick Chopin (1810-1849): Two Nocturnes: Op. 48 No.1 (1841) and Op. 55 No.1 (1833)

During his lifetime, Chopin’s Nocturnes were his best loved compositions. They are free, romantic and imaginative songs without words. The Nocturnes were influenced by the long, singing melodies of the romantic Italian operas that were popular in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century.

The Nocturnes are also among the most complex of Chopin’s works. Perhaps the prevailing slow tempos gave more room for experimentation. Or perhaps the title gave Chopin incentive to rhapsodize and allowed him to move freely in imaginative forms, with more daring harmonies than any of his contemporaries.

The Great C-minor Nocturne Op.48 is a dramatic masterpiece. The piece begins as a call and response. After reaching its first climax, it returns to its formerly calm character with a slow chorale distinguished by large, broken, arpeggiated chords. These are interrupted by ever-more-urgent chromatic figures

until the original call-and-response theme returns in double time accompanied by a complex harmonic structure.

The F-minor Nocturne Op 55 No.1 is a short, melodious piece structured as a typical Nocturne in ABA form. It begins with a soft walking tune that repeats in several variations with increasing ornamentation. The central section is faster and louder, a wake-up call. The first melody returns briefly in its original form before it is swept away in an ever-faster series of flourishes.

Frederick Chopin: Scherzo No. 3 Op 39 (1838)

The Scherzo is traditionally a light, joyful piece played in $\frac{3}{4}$ (waltz) time, and used in the central movements of a sonata or symphony to replace the more stately minuet. Scherzo means “joke” in Italian, and sometimes the phrase scherzando is used to indicate that a passage is to be played in a joyful manner.

As the 19th century developed, composers began writing darker, more intense scherzos. Beethoven’s symphonies and string quartets contain such movements. Chopin continued this trend, writing four dark and dramatic scherzos between 1831 and 1842.

Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor is structured in ternary (ABA) form, as is traditional for scherzos and minuets. The piece begins with two ambiguous chromatic calls. Neither the key nor the meter is apparent. After a short introduction, the resolute main theme begins followed by a fugue-like section that never develops into a full fugue.

The slower middle (B) section contains a rising call in the lower register followed by a glimmering waterfall response in the treble. The difficult passagework in this section is

reminiscent of the wind theme in the “Winter Wind” Etude (Op.25 No.11), that Chopin composed three years earlier.

The call-and-response becomes more quiet and sustained at the end of the central section, but then the original dark theme reappears to take charge. The last section is a fiery coda that burns ever more brightly until a dramatic final statement of the main theme and two final chords.

Improvisations on Themes Suggested by the Audience

The Theme and Variations is a form as old as music itself. Originally, it was an improvisation – someone took a tune and created a piece of music in an impromptu performance, just as many jazz artists still do today. Eventually, composers began to write down their variations, grouping them to form a satisfying whole. True to its improvised beginnings, there are no real rules in writing this type of piece; you can play the tune backwards, upside down, borrow its rhythms and harmonies to make new tunes – just about anything goes.

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