

Libor Novacek plays Debussy, Janacek, Ravel and Martinu

The compositions on this CD were written between 1905 and 1926. I have long planned to record them, because I believe that there are wonderful links of culture and folkloric tradition between their composers. In addition, I have decided to write my own programme notes in order to offer something of an insight into my fascination with the stylistic and aesthetic virtues of these wonderful composers flourishing in two sides of Europe on either side of the First World War.

Leos Janacek's (1854-1928) **Sonata 1.X.1905** (also known as a 'Scene from the Street') was written between 1905 and 1906, and its music depicts Janacek's own reaction to the dramatic force of Czech patriotism. Janacek, an active Slav, was a strong supporter of an independent Czech language, a trait he held in common with the majority of the great Czech artists of his time.

In 1905 Brno's Czech minority petitioned for a Czech University. The immediate consequence, on October 1, was a protest rally organized by the Brno Germans. The next day, both the police and army were called out to suppress a Czech counter-demonstration, in which a 20 year-old apprentice was fatally wounded.

The sonata originally had three movements, but Janacek burnt the third movement on the day of the premiere, feeling that his work compared unfavourably with works by Novak and Suk performed in the same programme. He later attempted to destroy the entire manuscript in the Vltava river. Luckily, one of Janacek's students managed to copy the first two movements, although the third movement, which is believed to be a Funeral march, was lost forever.

The first movement, which bears the title '*Presentiment*', is an extremely emotional composition, where outbursts of passion and fear are abruptly alternated with calm song-like motifs.

Within the first few bars, the composer sets the whole mood: the dark and tragic opening E flat minor chord and distant sounding upper melody combine to create an atmosphere of total despair. This sombre mood is followed promptly by a fast accentuated figure. These concise and abrupt juxtapositions are a hallmark of Janacek's ability to represent emotion in music.

The second movement, '*The Death*', is a harrowing and sombre adagio, also in E flat minor. The composer uses a five-note rising motif, which is disturbed by a sharp dotted chordal figuration, exacerbating the funereal mood. The whole movement slowly builds to its climax, which is expressed by a left-hand dotted figuration underneath powerful right-hand chords. However, this climax is interrupted by the return of the original theme, which successively disappears into the single E flat minor chord first heard at the beginning of the first movement, providing a pleasing symmetry.

I have always found Debussy's (1862-1918) hypnotic and colour-rich compositions seductive. One of the first pieces that I ever learnt was his suite 'Children's Corner', and my admiration for his music has grown ever since.

Debussy's **Preludes Book II** were composed between 1910 and 1912 and are almost neo-classical in their use of a Baroque idiom. However, Debussy's 12 preludes are unique

in their depiction of colour and nuance, using an economy of means and tonal brilliance found in the best impressionist paintings. Yet Debussy's innovatory idea of providing the title at the end of each piece gives the interpreter and listener discreet help in the form of poetic and visual association.

La Puerta del Vino was inspired by a postcard of the Alhambra Gate in Granada that Manuel de Falla sent to Debussy. This piece is full of guitar-like effects and its sensuous Habañera dance rhythm and temperament, together with the use of tritones, lend this piece an extraordinary mood.

'General Lavine - Eccentric' is written in the form of an African-American dance 'Cake-Walk'. It is a character-portrait of Edward Lavine, one of the most celebrated figures in international Vaudeville of the time. This is one of the most humorous and witty compositions I know, and is one of only a few pieces in which Debussy depicts a human character.

La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune depicts the scene (described by Rene Pauax in the magazine 'Le Temps') of a crowd of people watching the moonlight from the terrasse in India during the coronation of King George V as Emperor of India. Its extreme tenderness and exotic mood create a musical version of a photographic still in its evocation of a spellbound crowd of onlookers.

'Ondine' is a wonderfully distinguished portrait of the sinister world of demons and nymphs: the innocent dance-like beginning, followed by a seductive quicker section, carries the listener on waves and cascades of liquid sound, and the nymph's moaning song implores and lures us to step into the water. Her ambiguous character is wonderfully characterised in the coda, where Debussy uses a bitonal combination of D major and F sharp major arpeggios.

Les tierces alternees could be considered a premonition of Debussy's later interest in the piano technique developed in his Etudes. This is the only prelude that is not programmatic in character. However, it requires a virtuosic keyboard technique and fast interplay between the two hands.

Feux d'artifice is an effervescent and fiery display of technical flair and virtuosity. The atonal nature of this prelude reminds one of the textures of Liszt, and technical elements such as glissandi, cadenzas, octaves and chords create a wonderful depiction of a fireworks display. The dynamic contrasts, cascades of figuration and passages of colourful harmony are all rounded up by a short quotation of the 'Marseillaise' at the end, concluding the whole set of twelve preludes.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) experienced great tragedy between the years 1914 and 1917, losing his mother and many friends during the war. This sense of loss and sadness inspired him to write the suite **Le Tombeau de Couperin**.

The title 'Tombeau' (tombstone) had been used since the Baroque period, notably by composer and clavecinist François Couperin, who used the title for funereal panegyric compositions. However, most of Ravel's music has a generally positive if slightly imperturbably melancholic feel. Its classical, dance-suite architecture and the near ascetical, crystal-clear and disciplined musical language shows Ravel turning away from his usual colour-rich and virtuosic musical patterns.

The *Prelude's* 'Perpetuum mobile' and fast passage-work that accompany the simple melody evoke harpsichordal technique but also combine the diatonic and polytonal. Its simplicity and drifting movement create a wonderful prologue for the following Fugue.

The *Fugue* starts with a two and three-note descending motif which in its stark mysteriousness provides an illusion of the voice from Hades. Two more plangent and overlapping voices take up the ghostlike main theme.

The *Forlane's* slow rocking motion, its bizarre harmonies, archaic cadences and refined dissonances link gently with the mood of the preceding Fugue. An exotic melody over a simple chordal accompaniment leads to a middle section that evokes an atmosphere of an old Italian Court band in its imitations of oboe, clarinet and flute timbres. A following fanfare-like section merges into the final open-fifth E chord, thus restoring the sensation of emptiness and melancholy.

'*Rigaudon*' is the first up-tempo dance in this suite. Its joyful and buoyant mood introduces the new technique of rapid hand interchange but it is interrupted by a slower middle section, whose Eastern character illustrates the sinewy movement of a charmed snake!

The *Menuet's* calming and graceful flow allows the lyrical and expressive right-hand melody to expand above the string-like bowing gestures of the accompaniment. The middle section introduces a Musette, which imitates the sound and fifth-laden characteristic of French bagpipes before returning to the original theme, which calmly ends on double trill.

The virtuosic and fiery *Toccata* is not only a very challenging piece to play, but it also provides a thrilling end to the suite. Fast-repeating ostinato notes and chords and a driving forward motion build up to the grandiose climax.

Bohuslav Martinu's (1890-1959) talent and his ability to cross genres made him one of the most original and versatile composers of his time. Unfortunately, apart from a few famous compositions, very little of his music has reached the wide audience it deserves. His compositional development takes us on a journey through various stylistic influences: English madrigal, French Impressionism, Neoclassicism, Jazz, and the influence of Stravinsky are always closely linked to the Czech and Moravian folk traditions which permeate all his compositions.

In October 1923, Martinu left his homeland to study in Paris with Albert Roussel in order to gain experience and inspiration from the French Impressionists such as Ravel and Debussy as well as the so-called 'Paris Six' that included Milhaud, Honegger, Poulenc and Satie. But he was also keen to leave behind the deeply nationalistic tradition that influenced Smetana and Dvorak, and his interest in Jazz helps lend his compositions a uniquely refined blend of diverse musical traditions, marking him out as a truly inimitable, idiomatic and individual artist.

The **Three Czech Dances** (composed in 1926 in Paris) are an interesting metamorphosis of a traditional Czech dance called 'Matenik' (Confusion or Muddle Dance), whose frequent tempo and time signature changes made this form of dance very popular with the peasants of Eastern Bohemia, fast spreading to other regions and all social classes. Martinu's writing in these pieces can be variously described as light-

hearted and virtuosic but also harmonically and rhythmically rich, and displays signs of his musical blossoming and the new compositional direction that he had gained in his new environment.

In '*Obkrocek*', (or 'Over-the-step' or Round Dance), the metre curiously shifts between 2/4 and 3/4 time, combining Jazz-derived embellishments and a virtuosic cadenza. Unusual and unexpected accents and humorous alternating polyrhythmic motifs enrich this piece with an exceptional character.

The '*Dupak*' (Stamping Dance) is distinctive thanks to its surprisingly placed emphases on various chords or notes, which act as an 'idée fixe' of this piece. These loud 'thuds' represent the stamping of the dancers. This mood disappears in the fast middle section, an '*Allegro Vivace*'. Here, the dance reaches a head-spinning and whirling climax, only to hand over to a short and calming quotation of a folk tune, before the recapitulation of the first theme brings the music to a syncopated close.

The *Polka* starts with an unusual short atonal accelerating introduction that leads into a delicate and melodic faster section. A subsequent humorous middle part introduces a short ditty, which is almost immediately and masterfully transcribed into a variation. The crazy whirl of the ending, with its ascending octave passage and final simple C major chord, concludes these three exciting and spontaneous dances.

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