

SONATAS AND PRELUDES

Diane Walsh, piano

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

1 - 4 Sonata for Piano, Op. 26 (1949) (19:21)

- 1 I Allegro energico (6:59)
- 2 II Allegro vivace e leggero (2:21)
- 3 III Adagio mesto (4:46)
- 4 IV Fuga. Allegro con spirito (4:59)

Frank Martin (1890-1974)

5 - 12 8 Preludes for Piano (1947-1948) (22:17)

- 5 I Grave (3:10)
- 6 II Allegretto tranquillo (1:53)
- 7 III Tranquillo ma con moto (2:15)
- 8 IV Allegro (1:14)
- 9 V Vivace (1:54)
- 10 VI Andantino grazioso (1:40)
- 11 VII Lento (5:44)
- 12 VIII Vivace (3:48)

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

13 - 16 Sonata No. 2 in d, Op. 14 (1912) (18:22)

- 13 I Allegro, ma non troppo (6:27)
- 14 II Scherzo. Allegro marcato (2:05)
- 15 III Andante (4:33)
- 16 IV Vivace (5:01)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

17 - 19 Sonata for Piano (1926) (13:03)

- 17 I Allegro moderato (4:40)
- 18 II Sostenuto e pesante (4:23)
- 19 III Allegro molto (3:48)

SONATAS AND PRELUDES

These works by Barber, Martin, Prokofiev and Bartók all date from the first half of the twentieth century and are the products of highly individual struggles to create a modern aesthetic for the piano. For all their innovations, the pieces also reveal their debt to the piano's late nineteenth-century heritage as a solo instrument that, in emotional expression and dynamic scope, ranged from the intimate and deeply personal to the grandly orchestral. This is not surprising, given that all of these composers were accomplished pianists determined to break new ground without completely abandoning the virtuoso tradition of Chopin and Liszt.

Samuel Barber began taking piano lessons at age six and started composing a year later. He enrolled at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia when he was fourteen, and studied piano, composition and voice. He wrote his *Sonata for Piano* after he completed his military service in the Air Force at the end of World War II. The *Sonata* displays a rigorous classicism and confident grasp of compositional techniques, and has become a twentieth-century classic of the piano literature from the moment of its premiere in Havana on December 9, 1949 by Vladimir Horowitz. What makes the piece so satisfying to play and to hear is the careful balance between the brilliant and the poetic, and Barber's deft fusion of contemporary techniques with those of the past three centuries. He uses the sonata form, waltz, passacaglia, recitative, scherzo and fugue with great effectiveness; he also employs an original use of 12-tone technique, using several tone rows but treating them freely rather than strictly, sometimes breaking them up into groups of three or six notes.

The first movement is in the serious key of E-flat minor and uses a nervous dotted-rhythm theme of descending and ascending minor seconds, which is contrasted with the lyrical arpeggiated triplets of the second theme. The second

movement offers a quick, delicate scherzo that alternates between double and triple meter and seems to evaporate almost as soon as it has begun. The third movement, *Adagio mesto*, is a passionate lament in the form of a passacaglia, with a tone row used as the ostinato bass line while the melody limps and wails towards an anguished climax before dying away. The last movement is an exuberant four-voice fugue, often extracted and played as an independent piece, and is familiar to a generation of competition-bound pianists as a fiendish finger-breaker. The bouncy, staccato fugue subject contrasts with murmuring legato episodes, and both could almost be riffs in a 1940s jazz club. After a huge buildup of sonority and a cascading cadenza, the theme is piled up vertically in a tower of overlapping entrances, and the sonata ends powerfully with the fugue subject stated in forceful octaves.

Frank Martin, born in 1890 in Geneva, developed after years of experimentation a distinctive harmonic language that utilizes 12-tone techniques without actually being atonal. His *Eight Preludes* are a product of his mature period, dating from 1948, when the composer was living in Holland. The preludes also owe an obvious debt to Chopin's *Preludes* in their coloristic and emotional variety. The set is dedicated to the pianist Dinu Lipati.

The sonorous chords of the first prelude serve as an austere introduction to the set, leading to a brooding No. 2, which moves crab-like, the pianist's hands intertwined as they shift through the harmonies, ending in a muffled climax. No. 3 gives us a twentieth-century transfiguration of Chopin's familiar *Prelude No. 4* in E minor, having the same structure and melodic contour. No. 4 is a mysterious, uneven march, with no written meter. No. 5 finally releases some of the suppressed emotional energy, exploding in a relentless tarantella. No. 6 is an enigmatic two-part canon, using a twelve-tone row for the subject. No. 7, the longest and most

emotionally powerful, features an extended solo for the left hand, later repeated with right-hand obligato. The set concludes with a glittering *Vivace* in 18/16 time.

The Prokofiev *Sonata No. 2* is the earliest of these four works, dating from 1912 and premiered by the composer in 1914 at the Evenings of Modern Music in St. Petersburg. Like so many of Prokofiev's early works, it was ridiculed as unintelligible and ultra-modern by the critics and the conservative Russian musical establishment, and the sonata was, indeed, replete with sarcasm and daringly distorted harmonies for their time. Prokofiev's "wrong-note" dissonances may occasionally sound almost old-fashioned to us now, but the tremendous vitality of his writing remains irresistible.

Though the first movement is in sonata form, any thought that it might proceed conventionally disappears by the eighth bar, with a clangorous outburst of accented minor seconds. The tender theme before the development section is reminiscent of the "Fate" motive from *Carmen*, and is hauntingly reprised in the last movement. The second movement scherzo was begun in 1904 as an exercise for his composition class at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he was a rebellious student. His interest in sardonic humor and driving rhythms is already evident, and in the cross-handed leaps and rapid chord changes it is easy to imagine Prokofiev's delight in his own pianistic prowess as well as in shocking his teachers. The bleak third movement *Andante* combines a trudging figure in the bass with a mournful melody in the treble. The undulating second theme is written in 7/8 meter, with a pedal point of G-sharp underpinning the fluctuating harmonies above it. The last movement is a lively tarantella, with a jazzy subordinate theme accompanied by a bassoon-like staccato bass line.

Béla Bartók premiered his *Sonata for Piano* in Budapest on December 8, 1926. He had been a sickly child, and as a conservatory student had been forced

by ill health to interrupt his studies for a therapeutic trip to Italy to escape the harsh Hungarian winter. But he recovered his health enough to become a brilliant pianist, even performing the daunting Liszt *Sonata in B minor* at his debut recital. Power and endurance are certainly required in his own sonata as well.

The first movement's tonal center is E, but sharply slapped chord clusters create an impression of uncompromising dissonance. The movement seethes with energy, its piston-like rhythms alternating between violent outbursts and more playful, dancing interludes. My teacher at Juilliard, Irwin Freundlich, used to joke that the second movement was the ugliest slow movement ever written. But the challenge to the performer is to find the tragedy and the tenderness behind the steely dissonances and painfully stark repetitions. The opening melody is an E in the right hand repeated twenty times before resolving a step down. Heavy, slow-moving chords create a cumulative hypnotic effect, and reach a gradual crescendo with a slowly rising scale in the middle voice. The movement closes with a subdued, shortened reminiscence of the opening repeated notes, and ends abruptly on an accented E-flat. The final movement is a modified rondo, in which all three of the main themes alternate, connected by a recurring repeated-note vamp. The first theme, in octaves, strongly resembles the Christmas carol "Good King Wenceslas," and its shifting meter and modal scale remind us of Bartók's lifelong interest in collecting and recording the folk melodies of Eastern Europe. The second theme is similar to the first, and quickly moves in a precipitous acceleration to the third motive: violent chordal leaps outward with both hands. Each theme undergoes variation, appearing upside down, in a different register, or embellished with bird-like twitters, and traditional techniques of peasant village musicians, such as chanting a capella or improvising on flute and violin, are invoked. The sonata ends with the outward-leap motive breaking out into a frenzied peasant dance.

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For all their modernity and experimentation, from Bartók's machine-like rhythms to Prokofiev's bad-boy pranks, these composers express themselves with great emotional directness, in much the way that Brahms, on the brink of a new century, forged an exciting new approach to harmony while continuing to honor the basic structures that had served Beethoven. These pieces are vibrant reminders that for Barber, Martin, Prokofiev and Bartók, the musical world of Brahms, Liszt and Chopin was not so distant.

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Diane Walsh regularly performs solo recitals, chamber music and concertos worldwide. She has played concertos with the San Francisco, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Austin, Delaware and Syracuse symphonies; the radio symphonies of Munich, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Berlin; and with orchestras in Brazil, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Russia. She has given solo recitals in New York City at the 92nd Street Y, the Metropolitan Museum and Merkin Concert Hall; at the Kennedy Center in Washington, Orchestra Hall in Chicago, Wigmore Hall in London, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Philharmonic Hall in Leningrad, the Rudolfinum in Prague, the Mozarteum in Salzburg, and in other major cities throughout the United States, Canada, Venezuela, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands.

Ms. Walsh has appeared at many festivals and chamber series, including the Bard Festival, Marlboro Festival, Santa Fe Festival, Skaneateles Festival, Mainly Mozart, Strings in the Mountains, Da Camera of Houston, Prussia Cove in England and the Chopin Festival in Marienbad, Czech Republic. Guest appearances include those with the Mendelssohn, Brentano and Lydian String Quartets, St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble and the Orpheus Chamber Ensemble. She is a member of the quintet, La Fenice.

A winner of the Munich International Piano Competition, the Salzburg International Mozart Competition, and the Naumburg Award for Chamber Music, Ms. Walsh also won the top prizes in the Concert Artists Guild International Competition and the Young Concert Artists International Auditions. She was a finalist in the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and won that competition's chamber music prize, and she was a prizewinner in the J. S. Bach International Competition in Washington, D.C., the University of Maryland International Competition and the Busoni International Competition in Italy.

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