

NOTES for APRIL 4. 2019

In 1805 the German composer, essayist and director of the Halle salt mine, Johann Reichardt, reviewed the recent publication of J. S. Bach's works for solo violin. I have quoted his words before because they seem particularly appropriate to the Chaconne from the D minor Partita which he called "*perhaps the greatest example in any art form of a master's ability to move with freedom and assurance, even in chains.*" The chains were first of all that he was writing for unaccompanied violin, but also, in this movement, that he was using a very constrained form – sixty-four variations over a constantly repeating four measure chord progression. The great nineteenth-century Bach scholar Philip Spitta thought the result "*a triumph of spirit over matter.*" The reaction of other nineteenth and early twentieth-century composers is interesting. Mendelssohn and Schumann added discreet piano accompaniments to make it more acceptable to nineteenth-century audiences. Brahms, in contrast, devised his own chains by arranging the piece for the piano left hand alone. The virtuoso pianist Ferruccio Busoni – his parents also named him optimistically Dante Michelangelo Benvenuto – decided to translate the eighteenth-century technical brilliance required by the original Bach into full-blooded nineteenth-century pianistic virtuosity, leaving few holds barred, and ending up with, in Lutoslawski's words, "*an extraordinary piece, but a piece of Busoni, in fact.*"

Busoni, who was born in 1866 in Empoli, close to Florence, studied piano first with his father and then at the Vienna Conservatory. Throughout his life he combined a career as a pianist with the production of a large body of compositions, and he was an innovative writer on music and aesthetics. After a brief period teaching in Moscow, he moved to the United States in 1891 to take up a position at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston and it was while he was there that he wrote the Chaconne transcription. He had previously arranged a number of Bach's organ works for piano and took a somewhat similar approach with this very different violin work, expanding on some of the contrapuntal ideas that were only hinted at in the original, and frequently aiming for organ-like textures.

The word Impromptu suggests something improvised, unplanned, spur of the moment, but this is not the impression given by the eight pieces by Schubert with this title. Perhaps, because the idea of calling these highly individual and carefully organized compositions Impromptus was originally the publisher's, and he was simply following the dictates of the market – there had been works by that name fairly recently and he was hoping to cash in on the trend. Schubert seems to have accepted the name, however, and adopted it for the later works in the set. The eight works were all written in 1827 and were published in two collections of four, the second posthumously. The work on today's programme is the first in the second set.

In January 1787, Mozart made a trip to Prague where his opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, had been a great success. He was greeted warmly, gave a concert at which a new symphony (the "Prague") was given and he performed a number of times as a solo pianist. To cap it off he received a commission for a new opera,

which was to be *Don Giovanni*. Shortly after his return to Vienna, he entered into his personal catalogue of compositions the opening phrase of the Rondo on today's programme. There is some suggestion that what we have today is a carefully revised version of something that Mozart improvised in one of his Prague concerts. The nineteenth-century theorist Adolf Bernhard Marx made the grand claim that this was one of Mozart's best works, and Hermann Abert draws attention to its "*exotically tinged theme*," and the "*impassioned tension that is maintained through the whole movement, without ever achieving any resolution in an optimistic sense*."

Liszt's self-identification as a Hungarian composer, and the use of supposed Hungarian elements in his music is a complex and somewhat fraught topic. Suffice here to say that the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* date from the composer's years as a travelling virtuoso in the 1840s and that the published versions probably grew out of improvisations that he gave on these tours. A number of these pieces, including No. 12, were later orchestrated by Liszt and Franz Doppler.

I was taken to task as a teenager at a summer music school for suggesting that because Charles Rosen, one of the staff, had a week without teaching or master classes, he was on holiday. "*Nobody who is playing the Hammerklavier next week is on holiday*," I was informed. I had never heard the piece, indeed I had never heard of it before, but the scathing tone of voice told me that here was something I ought to know about; the fact that it had a formidable sounding German name made this even more essential. I later learned that the title is just a name for the piano of Beethoven's day and is part advertising and part a somewhat joking nationalistic pride on the composer's part. Beethoven headed the manuscript of this sonata and its immediate predecessor with the words *Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier* – in other words Grand Sonata for the Pianoforte. In a letter of January 1817, written in Beethoven's slightly laboured comic vein to his publisher Sigmund Anton Steiner – he calls him "*our most excellent Lieutenant General*" – he requests that in future all published works with the titles in German are to use the word "*Hammerklavier*" instead of "*Pianoforte*." He signs the letter the "*Generalissimo*." So this title might have been attached to any number of Beethoven's later sonatas, although even following this letter, Steiner was far from consistent in this regard. But as Lewis Lockwood has pointed out, it is appropriate that this sonata in particular should have a distinguishing nickname, since it is a work built on a symphonic scale, and it "*is a turning point in Beethoven's third maturity and in the history of the piano sonata*." For Rosen, the work was not so much a turning point as an "*an extreme point in Beethoven's style*," the attempt to produce a new and original work of uncompromising greatness. That Beethoven felt he had been successful is revealed by his words to Artaria, who published the work in 1819, "*Now there you have a sonata that will keep the pianists busy when it is played fifty years hence*." And as today's concert testifies, not just fifty years, but two hundred years hence.

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