

1 J. S. Bach, *Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother*

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750) is no stranger to appearing first on the programme of a piano recital, despite the fact that the instrument did not exist during his lifetime. He is remembered today for towering over his Baroque-era contemporaries with over 1000 compositions, each note perfectly selected.

The work presented here, *Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother*, BWV 992, is one of his earliest extant works. Purportedly, it was premiered by Bach himself around age 19 as his older brother Johann Jacob left to play the oboe in the military band of the Swedish monarchy. It is a lesser-known work, but that hasn't prevented recordings by such acclaimed artists as Angela Hewitt, Sviatoslav Richter, András Schiff, and Leon Fleisher. Its reduced polyphonic complexity (compared to *The Well-Tempered Clavier* or *The Art of Fugue*) lends it a certain approachable, even cute quality that can be lost in his more esoteric works.

The work is divided into six parts. The first, the most gentle, comes with the title "Friends Gather and Try to Dissuade Him". This highly-ornamented piece in B \flat opens the work sweetly and offers much room for expression.

The second piece leaves behind the tenderness of the first. "They Picture the Dangers Which May Befall Him" is a contrapuntal work in G minor with more gravity about it. After reaching its peak, it comes to an apparent end in C major, but this is not a resolution; it serves as the dominant for the third piece, "The Friends' Lament", in F minor. This is the darkest and deepest of the entire *Capriccio*. No chords are written; for much of the piece, only two slow voices are written, while other parts of the piece include figured bass indications to the performer. Some performers take this as a signal to improvise chords throughout.

The fourth, "Since He Cannot Be Dissuaded, They Say Farewell", could be accurately described as acceptance. The dreariness of the previous movement is gone, but not forgotten as the silver lining begins to be seen in this short section.

The fifth and sixth parts finally bring liveliness to the work. "Aria of the Postilion" and "Fugue in Imitation of the Postilion's Horn" both play on the motif of an octave, emulating the horn of the coach-driver.

2 Beethoven, *Piano Sonata No. 15 in D major*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827), beloved German composer of the classical era, needs no introduction. His nine symphonies, 32 piano sonatas, and 16 string quartets have solidified his place among not only history's greatest musicians, but among its most accomplished individuals of any study.

His *Piano Sonata No. 15 in D major* is maybe not among his best-known or most-often-performed, but it did manage to earn itself a nickname by the publisher: *Pastoral* (not to be confused with *Symphony No. 6, Pastoral*). The

work is clearly much more at peace than his previous, tempestuous 14th sonata (*Moonlight*), which offers one explanation for the name. On the other hand, Beethoven did have a known appreciation for nature, and suitably so, for his name essentially translates to “Ludwig from the beet fields”.

The first of the four movements sets up the peaceful nature perfectly. The bass, perhaps imitating a cello, maintains a steady tonic pulse while a long but simple melody floats above it, carried by rich harmonies. This movement deviates little from the serene mood of the opening until the development section is reached. It is only now that the intensity builds for the first time, as scale passages take us through a variety of minor keys. The opening melody becomes manipulated and warped until it reaches a boiling point, when it begins to evaporate away.

The second movement, an Andante in the tonic minor key, has been described by Maneli Pirzadeh as “psychologically healthy Beethoven, all things considered”. Indeed, the publication date of this sonata was 1801, a time when Beethoven’s hearing loss was already showing its influence in both his professional and social lives. He was maybe not quite yet the angry, spiteful composer that he has since been made out to be. A playful middle section separates the dark opening theme from its embellished melodic return.

The third movement brings us a lively change of pace with a scherzo and trio. The piece is short and fundamentally humorous, with the melody stated in descending intervals of an octave. Here, Beethoven shows his affinity for wide, sudden dynamic changes. The trio section is downright silly, with the same primitive melody repeated eight times with essentially no variation. It is not to be taken lightly however, as the mechanical left-hand patterns add a sense of drama (not to mention technical difficulty) to the movement.

The fourth movement, a rondo, looks like it might have been intended as a lively gigue, but he qualifies his *Allegro* with the added *ma non troppo* for the first time in his career. Thus we have once again a peaceful, relaxed dance movement that explores a variety of atmospheres and moods. This movement, after seeming to trail off, concludes in a wild coda unlike anything heard so far.

3 Debussy, *Étude no. 12 pour les arpèges composés*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was a French composer associated with the Impressionist style. His music represents one of the main stylistic forks to follow from the Romantic era and often uses atonal structures such as whole-tone, pentatonic, modal, and chromatic scales, open fifths, and long durations. Some of his best-remembered works include his *Preludes*, especially the *Sunken Cathedral*; the *Suite Bergamesque*, especially *Claire de Lune*; his symphonic poem *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, and the first of his two *Arabesques*.

The 12 *Études* were composed in 1915, placing them among his late works and his final works for piano. Debussy himself found the pieces quite difficult

to play, writing in a letter to Fauré that he was unable to perform them due to having inadequate piano technique. Possibly for that reason, he refused to add any finger indications into the music. In a foreword to the 12 *Études*, he wrote: “It is only logical that a single set of fingerings will not suit all shapes and sizes of hand. Let us find our own fingerings!”

As a whole, they are considered by many pianists to be his very finest work, and *Étude no. 12 pour les arpèges composés* is perhaps the sweetest of all. The piece begins unassumingly, lightly, delicately, and in the words of Jimmy Brière, “each note a pearl”. There is no mention of tempo at all. Soon, the meaning of the title becomes apparent, as the two hands rapidly arpeggiate lush chords with seconds and ninths, creating familiar Debussy colours. Hand crossings abound. The main technical challenge is the smooth cooperation of the hands while maintaining the perfect delicate touch.

4 Chopin, *Étude Op. 10, No. 5*

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) was a Polish composer and virtuoso pianist of the Romantic era. He wrote almost exclusively for the piano, but nonetheless he has gained recognition as one of the most historically significant musicians of the Romantic period and all of music history. He was a child prodigy who completed a musical education in Warsaw and left for France by the age of 20, where he became friends with many of his contemporaries, perhaps most notably Franz Liszt. Chopin’s best-remembered works include his *24 Preludes*, two sets of *12 Etudes*, *21 Nocturnes*, and many *Waltzes*, *Mazurkas*, *Polonaises*, and *Scherzi*. His works remain incredibly popular and are widespread in culture, including contemporary film and literature.

Among his most studied works by pianists are his 27 *Études*. Groundbreaking for their time, Chopin was among the first composers to bring the *étude* genre out of the practice room and into the concert hall with these fully-performable technical exercises. In the nearly 200 years since their composition, almost every one has earned an evocative nickname, conjuring every image from *Butterfly* and *The Bees* to *Winter Wind* and *Ocean*. (As with Beethoven, Chopin never chose these names himself.)

The meaning of the nickname of *Étude Op. 10, No. 5, Black Keys* is not subtle. It is set in the key of G♭ major and rarely strays from it, and so most of the piece (at any rate, the right hand) is played without using the white keys. This gives the piece a naturally playful sound using the pentatonic scale. The piece is a fine exemplar of Chopin’s writing for piano: simultaneously able to be witty and tender. Like Debussy’s *Étude no. 12 pour les arpèges composés*, this piece challenges the performer to maintain a light touch while moving quickly around the keyboard. It is one of his most popular *Études* and also one of his shortest; it’s over almost as soon as it begins - could it be an act of mercy toward the performer?

5 Scriabin, *Fantaisie in B minor, Op. 29*

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) was a Russian composer and pianist. A contemporary of the French Impressionist composers like Debussy and German Expressionist composers Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, he was the leading composer of Russian Symbolism. His early works were inspired by and followed after the later works of Chopin, notably, his set of 24 *Préludes*. Toward his later life, his musical style developed radically unlike any composer before or since. His set of ten piano sonatas are considered probably the most important contribution to the genre since Beethoven, and although he was forgotten shortly after his death, they are seeing a resurgence.

In his late years, Scriabin suffered from an unknown form of genius or dementia. He would routinely refuse to perform several of his works, including the Sixth Piano Sonata, claiming it was too diabolical. When coerced, he could only play a few measures of it before he began shivering uncontrollably. His final work, *Mysterium*, was intended to take a week to perform in the Himalaya Mountains involving dance, ritual, and color; and would culminate with the end of the world and the replacement of humans with “nobler beings”. Fortunately for us, Scriabin died in 1915, leaving it unfinished.

In 1898, he joined the faculty at the Moscow Conservatory, only six years after graduating himself. The structure of academia and his teaching responsibilities did not suit him, and as a result he was unproductive during this period, completely only two *Préludes*, the second symphony, and one other piano work: the magnificent *Fantaisie in B minor*, Op. 28.

Fantaisie bears many similarities to his second Piano Sonata, also called Sonata-Fantasy. They share a clear sonata form, tonal patterns, similar polyphony, and key relationships. Why he did not publish this as his fourth sonata is not clear, some speculate that he didn't want to publish a sonata with only one movement (although beginning with his fifth in 1907, none of them have more than one movement).

Although it is generally in his early period that the influence of Chopin is most evident, with these two pieces, Scriabin has apparently begun to make a departure from Chopin. Although Chopin wrote three works with “Fantasie” in their names (*Fantaisie*, Op. 49, *Polonaise-Fantaisie*, Op. 61, and *Fantaisie-Improvisation*, Op. post. 66), none of them bear much resemblance at all to what Scriabin called his “fantasies”. Chopin used the title as an indicator that the piece would break with the convention of unambiguously defined genres. By contrast, it appears that Scriabin gave this name to these pieces for poetic rather than structural reasons.

Although the piece begins clearly in B minor, we feel a sense of uneasiness as Scriabin moves from pre-dominant to dominant chords without ever resolving to the tonic chord. This is typical of the composer's style, and is one characteristic that produces a unique sound; some would call it dark while others describe it as floating. Before we're allowed to get fully comfortable, he has taken us to the relative D major and introduces a sublime melody that seems to carry on indefinitely. Never one to miss an opportunity, he soon introduces a counter-

melody underneath in imitation of the first. Bach himself would be impressed. The exposition comes to a triumphant conclusion.

A development style begins softly where the exposition left off, cycling through keys and slowly building momentum. A peak is reached near the end on a thunderous augmented 6 chord which mysteriously gives way into a recapitulation with added bass arpeggios. This opening material must be abbreviated, however, because we can no longer withstand the tension as the second theme emerges in a glorious B major climax, as though the composer himself were crying out. After the end of the recapitulation approaches, we hear what almost appears to be another development section, but it is only the beginning of a long and fanciful coda. Scriabin employs another of his usual techniques here, with a dominant pedal lasting over several pages before finally resolving the piece with the B minor harmony we've been waiting for.