

Arnold Schoenberg *Verklärte Nacht Op.4*

Instrumentation: Two parts each of violin, viola, cello & double bass. 30 minutes

Arnold Schoenberg was arguably, the most influential composer of the 20th century. His fame arose from his rejection of tonality and the creation of the twelve-tone/serial method of composition. But Schoenberg started as a Romantic composer and as revolutionary as the twelve-tone method was, its development was influenced by the two greatest German Romantic composers. One of them was Richard Wagner, who was as revolutionary in the 19th century as Schoenberg would be in the 20th. In terms of musical language, Wagner's most influential work was the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. Its extensive chromatic passages and tonal ambiguities don't resolve until the very last bar of the opera. In a sense the music of *Tristan and Isolde* is the beginning of the end of tonality.

The other composer that influenced Schoenberg was the apparently conservative Brahms. In "*Brahms the Progressive*" a lecture he delivered in 1933, Schoenberg claimed the uniqueness of Brahms' music is predicated on a principle of composition which he called "developing variation". With this technique all the material of a musical work arises from a simple thematic cell. This cell is then varied and transformed organically throughout the piece. Schoenberg acknowledged the importance of Brahms's "developing variation" in formulating his own principles of serialist technique.

The string sextet *Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night)* written in 1899 is one of Schoenberg's earliest works. It is deeply rooted in the romantic era and not surprisingly, is one his most popular works. It is a programmatic work inspired by the poem it is named after, which is taken from the volume *Weib und Welt (Woman and the World)* by the expressionist German poet Richard Dehmel. This collection of poems sparked instant controversy due to its frank depictions of eroticism and marital relations. It also led to Dehmel being prosecuted twice for obscenity and blasphemy and for the poems to be censored by the Prussian authorities.

The poem depicts a man and a woman walking through the woods on a moonlit night. The woman reveals that she is pregnant with another man's child, a man she never loved, prior to meeting her current companion. After a long pause of brooding meditation, the man resolves that their love will make the child theirs together. The unborn child, the man, the woman and the night itself, are transformed from darkness to light.

Schoenberg, a largely self taught composer, created *Verklärte Nacht* during a three-week period in September while vacationing in Payerbach, a town south of Vienna. Alexander Zemlinsky (Schoenberg's only composition teacher) and he, often vacationed together. On this occasion they were accompanied by Zemlinsky's sister Mathilde. The intimate setting of this summer stay amid his deepening feelings for Mathilde, resonated with the poem's themes of redemption and transfiguration in love. While Schoenberg and Mathilde married a couple of years later, *Verklärte Nacht* foreshadows the eventual love triangle Mathilde formed with their close family friend, artist Richard Gerstl.

Verklärte Nacht was premiered in March 1902 at the Vienna Musikverein by the Rosé Quartet. The leader Arnold Rosé was the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic (and Mahler's brother-in-law). The quartet was augmented by Franz Jelinek (second viola) and Franz Schmidt (second cello). This work's advanced harmonic language, featuring extensive chromaticism and dissonances, contributed to a mixed audience and critical reception. While some critics praised the work's emotional depth and orchestration, most of them savaged its richly chromatic language. Moreover, they considered it inappropriate for the content of Dehmel's poem to be set to music. Thanks to the Rosé Quartet championing the work, it slowly started to gain popularity. It also stayed close to Schoenberg's heart. Seventeen years later he arranged it for string orchestra, the version presented in tonight's concert.

The music of *Verklärte Nacht* is rich and complex, full of nuance and subtle articulation, a variety of sonic effects, frequent key and time signature changes, the score dense with intricate musical directions. In a manner unique to early Schoenberg, it melds the variation structure of Brahms with the uninhibited sensual sonorities of Wagner, and thus reconciles the two poles of late 19th century musical aesthetics. The composer and author

Allen Shawn, regards *Verklärte Nacht* as a herald of the extreme organic unity of Schoenberg's later serial style.

The work is structured as a single continuous movement which draws on the programmatic narrative of Richard Dehmel's poem, dividing the work into five sections that parallel the poem's five stanzas. These can be summarized as: dark natural setting; a woman's plea; illuminated natural setting; a man's reply; transfigured natural setting. Schoenberg's music moves from a brooding introduction through the angst-ridden confession and the deeply loving reply, to the final transfiguration into radiant grace and serenity. Despite the dense chromatic harmony, the music reflects the fundamental dramatic transfiguration of the poem. The first half is based in D minor (the woman's plea), whereas the second half is in D major (the man's reply). The opening theme's first setting appears in the moody dark, while at the end of the work it reappears bathed in shimmering light.

Richard Dehmel *Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night)* (Stanley Applebaum translation)

Two people walk through a bare, cold grove;
The moon races along with them, they look into it.
The moon races over tall oaks,
No cloud obscures the light from the sky,
Into which the black points of the boughs reach.
A woman's voice speaks:

I'm carrying a child, and not yours,
I walk in sin beside you.
I have committed a great offense against myself.
I no longer believed I could be happy
And yet I had a strong yearning
For something to fill my life, for the joys of
Motherhood
And for duty; so I committed an effrontery,
So, shuddering, I allowed my sex
To be embraced by a strange man,
And, on top of that, I blessed myself for it.
Now life has taken its revenge:
Now I have met you, oh, you.

She walks with a clumsy gait,
She looks up; the moon is racing along.
Her dark gaze is drowned in light.
A man's voice speaks:

May the child you conceived
Be no burden to your soul;
Just see how brightly the universe is gleaming!
There's a glow around everything;
You are floating with me on a cold ocean,
But a special warmth flickers
From you into me, from me into you.
It will transfigure the strange man's child.
You will bear the child for me, as if it were mine;
You have brought the glow into me,
You have made me like a child myself.

He grasps her around her ample hips.
Their breath kisses in the breeze.
Two people walk through the lofty, bright night.

Igor Stravinsky

Concerto in E-flat Major for Chamber Orchestra “Dumbarton Oaks”

Instrumentation: 1 flute, 1 clarinet on B-flat, 1 bassoon, 2 horns, 3 violins, 3 violas, 2 celli, 2 double bass. 16 minutes.

There are many compositions named after rivers, mountains and cities, but hardly any about gardens. *Dumbarton Oaks* is probably the only garden to have a whole composition dedicated to it. Situated in the Georgetown neighbourhood of Washington, DC, it was the estate of Mildred Barnes Bliss and Robert Woods Bliss. The Blisses were enthusiastic art patrons who hosted frequent musical soirées. The house which is now a museum and the surrounding gardens, gifted by the Blisses to Harvard University in 1940, are spectacular. The estate was also the site of a series of historic conversations in late 1944 that led to the founding of the United Nations.

Dumbarton Oaks was commissioned by the Blisses in 1937 to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. Stravinsky began the concerto in the spring of 1937 in Annemasse in the Upper Savoy region in France, near the sanatorium where his daughter Mika was ill with tuberculosis. Stravinsky completed the concerto in Paris a year later but then his own bout of tuberculosis prevented him from traveling to conduct the premiere. This took place on May 8, 1938 in the Music Room at Dumbarton Oaks and in the composer's absence was led by Nadia Boulanger.

Stylistically, *Dumbarton Oaks* belongs to the composer's neo-classic period. Neo-classicism in music was a reaction against the unrestrained emotionalism and perceived formlessness of late romanticism. With this twentieth-century trend particularly so in the interwar period, composers sought to return to aesthetic precepts associated with the broadly defined concept of "classicism". Namely order, balance, clarity, economy, and emotional restraint. Stravinsky who was one of the most important representatives of this trend, turned to earlier musical forms and aesthetics, re-imagining them through a modern lens. This period yielded works of elegant clarity and compositional wit, drawing inspiration from Baroque and Classical models while retaining a distinctly 20th-century edge. Stravinsky acknowledged the inspiration for *Dumbarton Oaks* were Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. In his notes to the concerto, he says: "...[it was] perhaps, the most difficult time of my life. I played Bach very regularly during the composition of the Concerto and was greatly attracted to the *Brandenburg Concertos*. Whether or not the first theme of my first movement is a conscious borrowing from the third of the *Brandenburg Concertos*, however, I cannot say."

The concerto is written for 15 instruments, all of which are treated as quasi-soloists in the style of a concerto grosso. The first movement - *Tempo giusto* - launches the concerto with rhythmic urgency and contrapuntal brilliance. The rhythmic drive is relentless with Stravinsky's signature syncopations and asymmetrical groupings creating a sense of constant propulsion and surprise. The opening theme of Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto is "concealed" in the viola part of the opening bars but becomes more obvious as the movement progresses. The central part of the movement features a short fugue, that most baroque of techniques.

The second movement – *Allegretto* – is joined to the first one by eight bars of quiet chords. Where the first movement contains contrapuntal elements, the second is decidedly more Classical in style while wandering into the twentieth century. The first movement treats the ensemble as a whole, while the second features the individual instruments. As an example, the clarinet solo enters and is then joined by the flute. The flute is also featured in another filigreed solo with the flute dancing over the main theme.

The final movement - *Con moto* - brings the work to a vigorous and rhythmically complex conclusion. Opening with nervous, syncopated gestures, it weaves an intricate interplay between instrumental lines and sudden shifts in metric emphasis. Motifs are constantly reconfigured in kaleidoscopic variation. The music builds toward a brilliant finale, marked by Stravinsky's signature mix of mathematical clarity and propulsive energy.

Sergei Prokofiev

Piano Concerto No.3 in C major Op.26

Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 flutes (both = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (bass drum, castanets, cymbals, tambourine), and strings. 30 minutes

Prokofiev's five piano concertos hold as important a place among his compositions as the piano concertos of Beethoven do for the latter. One could also argue that the Prokofiev and Beethoven works are equally important to the piano repertoire. Like Beethoven, Prokofiev first made a name for himself as a pianist and most of his early keyboard works were written to provide a way to display his own brilliant technique.

Uncharacteristically for Prokofiev, the gestation of the Third piano concerto was unusually long. He began working on the concerto as early as 1913 when he sketched a theme with variations. The eventual second movement of the concerto was developed from this idea. He revisited his sketches in 1916/17 and added themes for the first movement, but then stopped working on the concerto while devoting himself to concertizing and other compositions. In 1921 Prokofiev found himself in need of a piano work for his upcoming American tour and so returned to the concerto project. He completed it while vacationing in Brittany that summer.

Prokofiev premiered the Third concerto on December 16, 1921 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Frederick Stock, and a month later he performed it in New York. The initial reception was mixed with the Chicago critics mildly positive and the New York ones, mostly scathing. It wasn't until 1922 that the Third concerto gained major momentum after a lavishly praised performance in Paris conducted by Serge Koussevitsky. After that it went on to become one of the most popular piano concertos of the 20th century.

The Third piano concerto is a work in which romanticism, classicism and modernism are finely balanced, and technical virtuosity is seamlessly blended with liquid lyricism and pungent harmonies. Prokofiev himself was somewhat taken aback by the technical challenges, and shortly before the concert's premiere he wrote to Koussevitsky: "*My Third Concerto has turned out to be devilishly difficult. I'm nervous, and I'm practicing hard, three hours a day.*"

While the concerto is a quintessential reflection of Prokofiev's modernist style, it is also a fine example of neoclassicism. Not only is it cast in three movements in a fast-slow-fast tempo format, it also manifests itself in the structure of each movement.

The first movement - *Andante-Allegro* - is a study in contrasts. It opens with a haunting theme in the clarinets which is then taken up by the flute and violins. One might expect a grand symphonic piece to follow. However, Prokofiev's signature humor soon becomes apparent as the introduction is cut short by a fast, rising motion in the strings, which in turn makes way for the piano's entry. The piano and orchestra enter a dialogue until the piano prepares for the second theme with a march-like climax. A sardonic second theme is presented by the oboe paired with castanets. The central section of the first movement features a more introspective version of the opening themed in the piano, followed by a virtuoso passage in which the pianist plays several lines of octaves interwoven with notes above or below, in triplets, traveling up and down the keyboard with the hands usually on top of one another. The movement ends with a spectacular coda driving at breakneck speed to the final thump of the bass drum. As Prokofiev described it rather understatedly, "The movement ends with an exciting crescendo."

The second movement - *Tema con variazioni* - is a theme with five variations and a coda. The theme is a gavotte, an old French baroque dance form introduced by the orchestra. Prokofiev seems to have had a soft spot for this dance form as he used it for the third movement of his (1917) Classical Symphony. He used the form in some of his ballets as well. The piano with the first variation, expanding on the original theme with bold flourishes and grand chords. In the second variation the piano plays broken octaves, while the trumpet jarringly intones the theme in a clashing key. At the end, a quiet chord clears the air before proceeding to the third variation, in which the piano plays a forceful passage of offbeat accents and dissonances while the woodwinds intone fragments of the theme. The fourth variation, a dialogue between piano and orchestra, is the slowest and perhaps most interesting musically. It is marked *Andante meditativo*, and is imbued with a dreamlike character. The final variation takes the form of a Russian dance in which the piano displays impressive virtuosity. The movement concludes with the return of the theme in the orchestra, accompanied by the piano.

The final movement comes with the indication *Allegro non troppo* – Prokofiev described as “a quarrel between the piano and the orchestra”. It opens with bassoons and strings playing the main idea of the movement in a rather lurching march, with three beats to the bar rather than the four of a march. The piano joins in the intense parade. A second idea introduced by the orchestra displays the composer’s famed gift for soaring lyrical melody in the best of heartthrob Russian romanticism. The piano responds to this second theme in a mocking and enigmatic manner before launching into a grandiose amplification of the lyrical theme. The return of the main theme gradually transforms the quarrel into a struggle; a display of high-flying pianistic virtuosity that drives frenetically toward a thunderous final C major chord.