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West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021
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presents

Bantry and Beyond

Solos

12. Twelve Seasons

Filmed at the Budapest Music Centre

Zoltán Fejérvári

Ravel

Le Tombeau de Couperin

Tchaikovsky

The Seasons Op.37a

Maurice Ravel [1875-1937]

Le Tombeau de Couperin [1917]

1. *Prelude*
2. *Fugue*
3. *Forlane*
4. *Rigaudon*
5. *Menuet*
6. *Toccata*

...a perfect expression of our culture and our tradition

Alfred Cortot, pianist

Ravel grew up in a period where French 'cultural confidence' was decidedly uneasy. A humiliating defeat to Germany in the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War was the backdrop to a sense in musical circles, that French music was being outshone and displaced by German music. French composers, such as Ravel and Debussy were keen to stamp a more distinct identity on French music and looked to the past for inspiration, particularly to the French court at Versailles under Louis XIV and XV, a time of great cultural sophistication in France and a high point of French Baroque music. Francois Couperin [1668-1733] was the King's Organist under Louis XIV and was most famous for his extensive harpsichord oeuvre. His harpsichord collections were characterised by fanciful imagination, meticulous craftsmanship and clarity – it's easy to see why his music appealed to Ravel. Ravel's piano music is noted for its transparency and the meticulous technique needed by the performer.

The tombeau means 'tomb' in French, but was also a French musical term for a memorial piece or collection. In the original publication, Ravel had drawn an urn for the cover art. He wrote this piece in 1917, not only mourning for his mother's recent death, but also having seen horrific scenes in the War where he was an ambulance driver. Each of the six movements is dedicated to a friend who died in the War. So while this suite is an homage to Couperin and to French music, it is also a deeply personal tribute to his friends, and the patriotism that fed into his inspiration was no doubt felt by his audience. Yet, the suite is not melancholy or heart breaking. While there are certainly tender moments, the overall impression is celebratory and the final Toccata ends with an almost triumphal flourish. But it is not a propaganda piece, glorifying the dead or war or nationalism, but rather a celebration of culture, past and present, of creativity and joy and life. It is almost the antithesis of both requiems and war music.

This Tombeau is a mastery of synthesis between the old and the new. The textural clarity and modal touches throughout are very Baroque, while the harmonies, chromaticism and the wide use of the full piano register are distinctly contemporary. These elements are juxtaposed in different ways, displaying diverse piano techniques and capabilities. The form is that of a Baroque suite, with six movements, opening with a Prelude. The harpsichord-like sequences in this opening movement, the constantly running figurations are Baroque, as are the mordent ornaments that lend such delicacy to music of that era. But the chromaticism gives the opening a 20th Century flare.

The Fugue is reminiscent of Baroque organ music, with a strong inner part – three distinct voices moving in and out together in counterpoint. The contracted register gives a greater tranquillity to this movement compared to the agile fingering needed for the Prelude. Syncopated accents give a modern flavour to this very traditional movement. The organ-like techniques will be visited again in the fifth section, the Menuet, where the rhythmic low register left hand part is reminiscent of an

organ's pedal part, working with a traditional homophonic chordal texture and step motion that reinforce the ghost of the great age of organ music, with a slow build-up of power and sound.

The middle two movements are a salute to 18th Century dance music. The Forlane is decidedly jazzy, yet there are clear influences from one of Couperin's forlanes, which was an Italian dance popular in the French court. The cadences are archaic and the middle-section has clear dancing qualities. The Rigaudon is another dance, originally popular both at court and as a folk dance. Ravel's Rigaudon has ambiguous phrasing opposing the nostalgic cadences.

The final section, the Toccata is highly complex with rapid movement and rhythms interspersed with grounding chords that are very harpsichordy. The toccata as a form was traditionally virtuosic, free form and a chance to showcase difficult keyboard techniques. Menacing low register passages are followed by exquisite high register rippling passages. The ending is gloriously triumphant and one can see a happy Baroque organist crashing onto his heavy keys.

Helen Dawson

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky [1840-1893]***The Seasons Op.37a*** [1875-1876]

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| 1. January: By the Fireside | 5. May: Starlit Nights | 9. September: The Hunt |
| 2. February: Carnival | 6. June: Barcarolle | 10. October: Autumn Song |
| 3. March: Song of the Lark | 7. July: Song of the Reaper | 11. November: Troika |
| 4. April: Snowdrop | 8. August: Harvest | 12. December: Christmas |

This collection of piano solos was commissioned and published by the St Petersburg journal, *Nuvellist*. A rather strange myth has arisen about their composition – that Tchaikovsky instructed his valet to remind him each month to compose the next piece, which he would then dash off. This is completely untrue – Tchaikovsky may have intended to write the twelve pieces in this way, but other compositions and commitments got in the way. The last seven were written altogether, between orchestrating *Swan Lake* and before a tour abroad. After an earlier section went astray because a friend neglected to forward it to the publisher, Tchaikovsky may have decided not to try and send them back while touring but to get them all off to the publisher as soon as possible.

Tchaikovsky is not well known for his solo piano repertoire. Although he learned piano as a child, his primary interest was in orchestration. He was the first great Russian symphonist, but he seldom dedicated much time to solo piano. His approach was quite traditional, writing to satisfy the tastes of the 19th Century, for short pieces of salon music. And indeed the nature of the commission was such that playability and charm were called for, rather than being a platform for great expressiveness and virtuosic playing.

Each month is given a subtitle and Tchaikovsky's compositional objective seems to have been to create an atmosphere around each movement – January: *By the Fireside* gives a sense of comfort and ease, while March: *Song of the Lark* is melodious and gentle for the singing bird interspersed with sections of quicker rhythms, evoking a bird in flight. Tchaikovsky was a master of melody and it is through the right hand melodies that he creates the atmosphere of starlight in May: *White Night* while clever uses of a rhythm in the syncopated left hand of August: *The Harvest Song* give us a busy, hurried atmosphere. Tchaikovsky may have felt it a misfortune in September: *Hunt* that he could not orchestrate – the piano mimics a horn signalling the start of the hunt, which continues throughout the movement driving the music forward.

Helen Dawson

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