

Sparks of Spirit

Klavierduo Neeb



Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

**Variations on an Original Theme
in A-Flat Major, D. 813**

- Thema. Allegretto 1:26
- Variation 1 1:14
- Variation 2 1:06
- Variation 3. Un poco più lento 1:38
- Variation 4. Tempo I 1:11
- Variation 5 1:56
- Variation 6. Maestoso 1:39
- Variation 7. Più lento 3:33
- Variation 8. Allegro moderato 4:05

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

**Concerto for 2 Harpsichords,
Strings and Basso Continuo
in C Minor, BWV 1062**

(Arr. for Two Pianos by Vincent Neeb)

- I. – 3:18
- II. Andante e piano 5:53
- III. Allegro assai 4:14

Max Reger (1873-1916)

Cinq pièces pittoresques, Op. 34

- I. Allegretto con moto 1:35
- II. Prestissimo 1:16
- III. Vivace assai 1:21
- IV. Andantino (con moto) –
Più presto 2:04
- V. Con moto (vivace) 2:19

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Suite No. 2, Op. 17

- I. Introduction 4:47
- II. Valse 6:25
- III. Romance 6:33
- IV. Tarantelle 6:20



“... but now I am able to find happiness and peace within myself ...”


Since 1822, **Franz Schubert** had repeatedly struggled with serious illness (probably syphilis); at the beginning of 1824 this had also become a great psychological burden which the composer could scarcely endure. However, in May of the same year, he was engaged by the aristocratic Esterházy family to give piano lessons to the two princesses Marie and Caroline at their country palace in Zselíz, Hungary (now Slovakia). This brought a happy turn of fortune: both, the stable income and the opportunity to escape the big city of Vienna for a few months, were rare exceptions in Schubert's life. Soon he fell in love with his aristocratic pupil Caroline Esterházy, but this had to remain hidden. In a letter, he confided his new inner attitude to his brother Ferdinand with the following words:

“Surely, these are no longer the happy days in which everything bathes in youthful glory, but the fatal recognition of a miserable reality, which, through my fantasy (thank God) I endeavour to beautify as much as possible. [...] but now I am more able to find happiness and peace within myself [...]. A grand sonata and variations on a theme of my own invention, both for four hands, which I already composed, can serve to prove this. The variations are a huge success.”

It is no coincidence that Schubert composed many works for piano four hands this summer: after all, the pupil with whom he was in love was a remarkably talented pianist, and playing the piano four hands with her was the only inconspicuous way of approaching her.

The above quotation undoubtedly refers to the **Variations on an Original Theme in A-flat major, D. 813**. The special circumstances of their composition, namely the unencumbered life at Zselíz Palace, unfulfilled love, and at the same time the possibility of being close to Caroline while making music together with her, seem to be reflected in the work. The character of the theme is elusive and ambiguous in several respects: we hear a march rhythm, but with its transparent texture and playful exuberance in the upper voice, there is nothing martial about this music. The cheerful character of the melody is countered in the middle voices by yearning suspensions and a chromatically descending line (*passus duriusculus*) from the tonic note to the fifth. In the second part, we hear brief dialogues between the two players in the form of a canon. The following eight variations each focus on the different – contrasting – aspects of the theme, forming a cohesive dramaturgical development. Variations Nos. 1, 2, 4, and 6 are sometimes playful and sometimes energetic or even grandiose, while Variation No. 3, with its sophisticated duet in the upper voices, paints a delicate picture of intimate passion. The fifth variation represents a low point in which the melody of the theme is shifted to minor and reduced to its essence, accompanied by only a repetitive formula – a song without words, as it were, a wonderful example of Schubertian melancholy. In the second part we can discern echoes of the already highly popular Allegretto from Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, which was written twelve years earlier. In the mystical, dreamy seventh variation, the focus is entirely on the chromatic voice leading and surprising harmonic twists, while the tonality remains unclear, up to the cadence point before the eighth and final variation. The latter sparkles with energy and *joie de vivre* – does Schubert find happiness within himself, or an escape into his imagination with which he tries to beautify reality?

Johann Sebastian Bach had to accomplish a tremendous amount of work in his initial years as Thomaskantor. The central focus was the composition of sacred cantatas for every Sunday and holiday. Only after several “cantata years” had been completed there was sufficient music continually available for the church services in Leipzig. This gave Bach the possibility to finally shift his focus back to secular instrumental music; when he took over the Collegium Musicum, a student ensemble of the highest level, this offered him the optimal opportunity to present his works publicly. Numerous instrumental concertos were premiered, including the well-known *Concerto for Two Violins in D minor, BWV 1043*. He later reworked it into a **Concerto for Two Harpsichords in C minor, BWV 1062** – also for the Collegium Musicum, probably with two of his sons as soloists. The



energetic outer movements outdo each other in boundless exuberance, while in the second movement a hovering, seemingly endless duet unfolds between the two solo parts. The concerto is opened by a striking theme, whose highest notes form a descending chromatic scale from the tonic note to the fifth (and then descending further diatonically to the tonic) – the same characteristic element used by Schubert, in the middle voice, in the theme of his variations!

Performing the original version of the concerto on modern concert grand pianos with string orchestra is problematic, given that the sound balance of this instrumentation differs significantly from that between two harpsichords and a string ensemble. However, an arrangement of the concerto for two pianos without orchestra is ideally suited to experience the beauty of the work, particularly in the details of the ingenious part writing.

In the nineteenth century Johann Sebastian Bach was an important role model for most European composers, but scarcely anyone was as deeply connected to his music as **Max Reger**. Already at the age of eighteen, Reger taught piano, organ, and music theory at the Wiesbaden Conservatory, but he regarded composing as his true vocation. In this field, in addition to some early praise (by Johannes Brahms, among others), he received increasingly negative criticism. This lack of success led to a crisis; added to this was the military service Reger had to perform, which, being physically unfit, he spent for the most part in the military hospital. In 1898, his sister finally succeeded in persuading her twenty-five-year-old brother – heavily in debt, alcohol dependent, and in considerable ill health – to return to his parents' home in the Upper Palatinate. There he recovered quickly, and the isolation led to a tremendous boost in creativity. In the following months, in addition to his first important organ works, he composed numerous piano works, including the **Cinq pièces pittoresques, Op. 34** for piano four hands.

“Reger registers at the piano”, wrote one critic about his piano playing. The notion that Reger was inspired in his compositions by the sonic possibilities of the organ is also evident in the *Cinq pièces pittoresques*. These five brief, extremely lively pieces are characterized by striking melodic ideas and sophisticated contrapuntal countermelodies as well as great contrasts in dynamics and articulation (similar to shifting between stops). In contrast to Reger's large-scale organ works, however, these have a rather comical or even ironic effect. Sometimes we seem to hear hints of Bavarian folk music before a few measures later, eruptions of sound of Regerian dimensions once again evoke the musical worlds of the turn of the century. It is possible that Reger was inspired by Emmanuel Chabrier's *Dix pièces pittoresques* – a piano cycle from 1880 which is largely unknown today, but received considerable attention from contemporaries and, due to its innovative content, had a similar importance for the development of French piano music as Claude Debussy's *Préludes* would have later.

While Reger was able to translate creative high spirits into maximum productivity in the Upper Palatinate, another composer of the same age found himself in an almost insurmountable creative crisis: **Sergei Rachmaninoff**, who had previously been considered a highly promising young composer in Russia, experienced a disastrous failure with the premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. Faced with the devastating judgment of the critics, he found himself unable to pursue his compositional activities further and fell into a depression. This worsened over three years until Rachmaninoff underwent treatment with hypnosis in 1900. This was actually successful: after a few months he began composing again and wrote the **Suite for Two Pianos, Op. 17** as well as the highly popular Second Piano Concerto, Op. 18. The premiere of the suite, which Rachmaninoff performed himself together with his cousin Alexander Siloti, “always remained symbolic of the renewal of life” for the composer.



NEEB PIANO DUO

Siblings Sophie (*2000) and Vincent (*1998) Neeb discovered the uniquely in-depth musical experience of playing together as a piano duo in their early youth. On the path of their artistic development, they have won many awards: among other honours, they won the competition at the International Piano Duo Festival Bad Herrenalb in 2013 as well as the WDR Klassikpreis of the city of Münster and the first prize of the Southwest German Chamber Music Competition in Bad Dürkheim in 2015. In 2017 they received the Primo Premio Assoluto in addition to numerous special prizes at the Concorso Pianistico Internazionale Roma for piano four hands. The following year they were named fellowship holders of the Hans and Eugenia Jütting Foundation; in addition, they are fellowship holders of the Yehudi Menuhin Live Music Now Association.

At the 2019 German Music Competition, they received several special prizes and a scholarship in conjunction with their inclusion in the Federal Selection of Concerts of Young Artists. Since then they have performed in renowned halls such as the Prinzregententheater Munich, the Sendesaal Bremen, and the NDR Landesfunkhaus Hannover as well as at prestigious festivals such as the Sommerliche Musiktage Hitzacker, the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, and the Cantiere Internazionale d'Arte Montepulciano.

Sophie and Vincent Neeb completed their piano duo studies with Shao-Yin Huang and Sebastian Euler at the Innsbruck Conservatory. They have received inspiration from other leading duos such as Yaara Tal and Andreas Groethuysen as well as from Hans-Peter and Volker Stenzl.

They received their first piano lessons from Stefan Flemmerer and were later junior students in Munich at the HMTM with Michaela Pühn. Vincent Neeb then studied at the same institution with Markus Bellheim and is now continuing his studies in Hanover at the HMTMH with Ewa Kupiec. Sophie Neeb began her studies with Sebastian Euler at the Innsbruck Conservatory and is currently continuing with Konstanze Eickhorst at the University of Music Lübeck.

audite

recording:
February 8 - 10, 2023
recording venue:
Sendesaal Bremen
recording producer:
Dipl.-Tonm. Ludger Böckenhoff
editing:
Dipl.-Tonm. Justus Beyer
photos:
schneiderphotography
art direction and design:
AB-Design, Detmold

audite

info@audite.de • audite.de
© 2024 + © 2024
Ludger Böckenhoff

Funded by the Minister of State for
Culture and Media as part of the
NEUSTART KULTUR initiative.

