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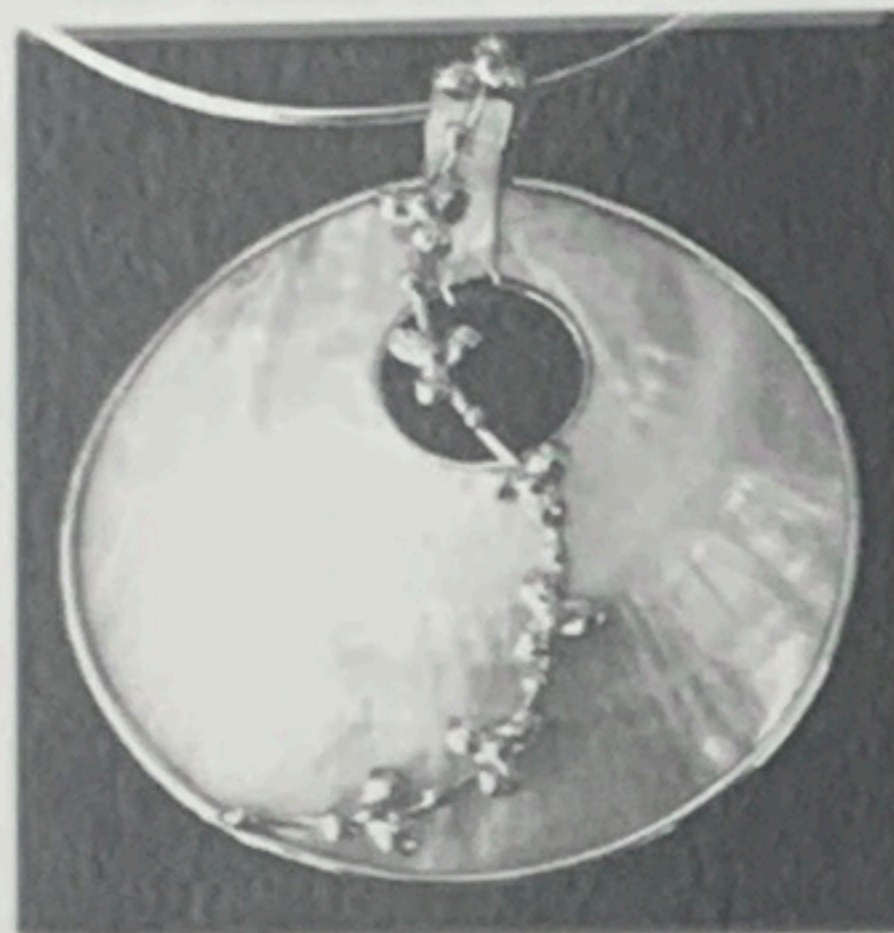
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change his mind two bars later. When Haydn crashes unexpectedly into B major, in my view he transmogrifies the light-hearted humour into black comedy, as the 'accident' sounds as if the performer is experiencing severe memory lapses (especially when he emphasises the last 'crash' with a ritardando).

Mazurkas, Op.33

I find that the Mazurkas contain some of the greatest variety of ideas and moods in Chopin's work. They are outrageous but precious little beauties, sometimes encapsulating overwhelming poignancy and nostalgia, as in Op.33, no.4 in B minor, or full of exotic flavour and exhilarating dance rhythms, as in Op.33, no.2 in D Major. The dance aroused deeply rooted memories of childhood and national pride in Chopin, and he poured some of his most sincere and profound emotions into these pieces, composed throughout his life. Although the origin of the Mazurka is a Polish folk dance (mazurek), Chopin only used the rhythms as a point of departure to create independent worlds of his own. He became a true and original master of the Mazurka form as we know it in classical piano literature, and many composers, including Scriabin, adapted the approach later.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Mazurkas from Op.3

Apart from being a composer-pianist, poet, solipsist, semi-, neo- and theo-philosopher, musical thaumaturge and mystagogue – and those were only his part-time jobs – Scriabin was, above all, a visionary ahead of his time. One fact about Scriabin is, however, paramount: not many composers went through such a radical evolution in compositions and philosophical ideas. This can be clearly observed in these pieces. In 1888 to 1889, while studying at the Moscow Conservatory, Scriabin composed these ten little musical treasures. They show Scriabin's most poetic and innocently charming qualities – a rare combination and one seldom encountered in his later works. Rarely performed, they have misleadingly been labelled 'faded valentines' and seen as less interesting imitations of Chopin's more 'authentic' creations. However, while Scriabin's deep admiration for the Polish master was incontrovertible, the Mazurkas speak in Scriabin's own most intimate and adventurous language, using the typical Mazurka dance elements as its matrix.

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Gaspard de la Nuit

This triptych, which Ravel started composing in 1908, is based on three poems by Aloysius Bertrand whose text, a favourite of the Symbolists, had been the starting point for Baudelaire's poetry and had influenced an entire generation of writers, including Rimbaud,

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Mallarmé and Max Jacob. The three poems are: 'Ondine', about a water fairy luring the listener to join her in the depths, 'Le Gibet', where a bell tolls while the body of a hanged man dangles from a gibbet, and 'Scarbo', about a small fiend, half goblin, half-ghost, that terrifies a man in his home. The dark resonances of dream, magic and evil spells from Bertrand's poems must have affected Ravel all the more deeply as his father was mortally ill at the time. This piano piece marks the summit of Ravel's output for solo piano and is hardly paralleled in all piano literature for its complexity and technical demands. However, to regard it merely as a virtuoso showpiece is to do it an injustice. Apart from the technical difficulties, the virtuosity also consists in the immense range of sonorities required to impart to these three pieces magical effects of light and shade.

The iridescent 'Ondine' is a perfect representation of Bertrand's poem:

– Listen! Listen! It is I, it is Ondine who, with drops of water, rustles the resonant diamonds of your window illuminated by the muted moonbeams; it is the lady of the manor, dressed in moiré, who from her balcony contemplates the starlit night and the slumbering lake.

Each ripple is a sprite which swims in the current; each current is a path which meanders about my palace of water at the bottom of the lake, built within the triangle of flame and earth and air.

– Listen! Listen! My father beats at the groaning waves with the branch of a young alder; and my sisters, with their foamy limbs, caress the cool islets of herbs and waterlilies and gladioli, which shame the bearded, deciduous willow with its nets forever cast.

Through her murmured song she pleads with me to accept her rings for my finger, to become the husband of a water-nymph and with her visit the palace and become king of the lakes.

And, because I replied that I loved a mortal, she – vexed and sulking – shed a few tears, then burst into laughter ... and vanished in a white spray which trickled down my blue window pane.

The way Ravel evokes the shimmering moonlight on the lake with a tongue-twister of a rhythm in the right hand (which is much harder to play than it sounds) is a stroke of genius. There is a gradual awakening (typically Ravelian) until the climax which corresponds to the phrase 'And, because I replied that I loved a mortal'. After Ondine sheds a few tears in the right-hand solo, there comes her burst of laughter and sudden disappearance.

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