

Sundays@Noon

Hugh Lane Gallery – 11th April 2021

Billy O'Brien, Piano

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

Sonata K.208

Sonata K.127

Born in Naples to a family of professional musicians, Domenico Scarlatti established himself as a virtuoso harpsichordist and prodigious composer. In Rome he took the position of *maestro di cappella* to Maria Casimira, the exiled former Queen of Poland, and assistant and then successor to the head of the Cappella Giulia. He later served as Master of Music in the Royal Court in Lisbon before settling by 1733 in the Royal Court in Madrid.

A composer of sacred music, opera and instrumental music, he is probably most famous for his 555 keyboard sonatas. A group of 30 were first published as *Essercizi* (exercises), each with its own technical challenge for the performer. In the earliest of these Scarlatti establishes a formal model which is followed almost invariably; a binary structure with repeats, typically linked to the dance suite. Even in their most developed form these pieces relate to a single stylistic model, identified by Ralph Kirkpatrick (the K in their categorisation derives from his name) as the *basso continuo*. The practice of improvising an accompaniment on a bass line was the stock-in-trade of every professional musician; and this structure formed the basis of Scarlatti's sonatas, exemplified by both sonatas K.208 and K.127. K.208 uses a very simple basso continuo over which a long cantabile line sings, creating a tone of tranquil simplicity. Contrasted is the A flat major K.127 sonata which has a bright, dance-like, limpid character.

Sebastian Adams b.1991

2021.1

'The germ of this idea came in a moment of rest during a very intense outdoor experimental music project. We needed to move a battered upright piano to a beach by foot, for one of the events, and it was waiting in my house until we were ready to move it. At a time when I had absolutely no headspace, a glimmering little melody came fully-formed out of nowhere, but I had no idea how to turn it into a piece as when I messed around with it I couldn't seem to stop it looping back on itself: which I knew is not what I wanted.

Since January, I've been teaching classical analysis to second year students and so I've been going

back over sonata theory and exploring it in a lot of depth. In the end, that's what helped me articulate the piece: it tries to emulate the wit and focus with which composers like Haydn treated their material, and it's shaped a little bit like the Scarlatti sonatas Billy is also playing in this concert, although with a much more squiggly ending! This is the first completely notated piece I've composed in about two years and this fairly conscious way of thinking about the way short piano movements were written in the 18th century probably came out of a process of reteaching myself how to write! And it also came from my admiration of the kind of clear but unforced expression that Billy performs with.'

Sebastian Adams

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Une Barque sur l'Océan

'Miroirs (1905) forms a collection of pieces for piano which mark a change considerable enough in my harmonic evolution as to have disconcerted the musicians, up to now, most accustomed to my style.' M. Ravel.

Miroirs is a collection of five pieces for solo piano; *Noctuelles*, *Oiseaux Tristes*, *Une Barque sur l'Océan*, *Alborada del Gracioso* and *la Vallée des Cloches* composed between 1904 and 1905. Each piece is dedicated to a member of *les Apaches*, an avant-garde group of artists who met regularly in Paris to discuss their work and share ideas.

ne Barque sur l'Océan (a boat on the ocean) seems to recall the impressionistic depictions of natural phenomena in, for example, Debussy's *Images*, or Ravel's earlier *Jeux d'Eau*. The sighing E-C# minor third (possibly representing the boat) over F# minor-7th arpeggiated harmony of the opening creates a nostalgic and melancholy tone. Cascading and rippling arpeggios, the use of the extremes of the piano and sensitive pedaling combine to depict sensuous qualities of water; gushing in torrents, waves crashing and receding, spraying, gently rocking, still. This atmospheric material is punctuated by sorrowful fragments of the opening melodies in different registers, marked *très expressif*. The work is dedicated to Ravel's friend, the painter Paul Sordes.

Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)

Sonata in B minor op. 58

Allegro Maestoso

Scherzo: Molto Vivace

Largo

Presto ma non troppo

‘The later B minor Sonata op.58 takes a step closer to the German tradition, achieving in its first movement in particular a process of continuous development and transformation of motifs, a close integration of melody and accompaniment, and a density of contrapuntal working which are in every way worthy of Brahms. Here Chopin tackled the historical archetype of the most celebrated and prestigious of classical forms on its own terms, so to speak, and emerged victorious.’ (Jim Samson)

Written in 1844 and dedicated to Countess Émilie de Perthuis, the Op. 58 Sonata is one of Chopin’s largest-scale solo works, encompassing the breadth of the composer’s sonic language and formal structures. As Jim Samson states, the first movement conceptually looks back to the Germanic tradition. The first subject confidently asserts a dark, *maestoso* theme in B minor which gives way to a beautiful and poetic second subject in D major. The development section is densely contrapuntal, using mostly the first subject with fragmentary interjection from the second. This material reaches its culmination in a luscious and warm statement of the second subject in B major, leading to the triumphant conclusion of the movement in the tonic major.

The fleeting Scherzo in E flat creates an atmosphere that recalls the butterflies of Ravel’s *Noctuelles*, transiently flying in and out of focus. The central trio section in B major contains warm and reflective chorale-style writing, exploiting the piano’s sonorous potential in the deeper tenor and bass registers.

After a stormy introduction, the Largo submits to an expansive, nocturne-like melody which is suspended above a steady, dotted accompaniment in the left hand. The tone is of tenderness and love, and this leads into a profound and contemplative central section in E major. This is almost like a deconstructed chorale, a sustained soprano line over a descending arpeggiation of the inner parts. The opening melody is reprised to close, this time with a gentle Barcarolle-style accompaniment in triplets.

The finale is wild and demonic in character, using the 6/8 metre of a ballade with a rondo structure. It contrasts the menacing, malevolent material of the opening theme with sparkling filigree passagework. The piece concludes triumphantly with a fiery coda in the tonic major.

Notes by Billy O’Brien

Sources: Malcolm Boyd and Robert Pagano in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, ‘Scarlatti, (Giuseppe) Domenico’ <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.6002278251>

Jim Samson in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, ‘Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek’ <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51099>

Manuel Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018)