

Piano Music of Bach, Bartok and Brahms.

J.S. Bach, Partita no. 5 in G major, BWV 829

- 1 Praeambulum 2:30
- 2 Allemande 4:58
- 3 Corrente 2:17
- 4 Sarabande 4:08
- 5 Tempo di Menuetta 2:18
- 6 Passepied 1:49
- 7 Gigue 3:54

Bela Bartok, "Out of Doors" Suite

- 8 With fife and drum 1:44
- 9 Barcarolla 2:12
- 10 Musettes 2:56
- 11 The Night's Music 5:23
- 12 Chase 2:19

Johannes Brahms, Four Ballades, op. 10

- 13 no. 1 in D minor "Edward" 4:45
- 14 no. 2 in D major 7:06
- 15 no. 3 in B minor (Intermezzo) 3:44
- 16 no. 4 in B major 9:08



Matt Bengtson, pianist

Matthew Bengtson has a unique combination of musical talents ranging from extraordinary pianist, harpsichordist, and fortepianist to composer, analyst, and scholar of performance practice. He studied piano as a Harvard undergraduate with Patricia Zander, and earned his masters and doctoral degrees at Peabody

Conservatory, studying with Ann Schein. He has worked with a wide range of outstanding pianists, including Herbert Stessin, Claude Helffer, Robert Levin, Stephen Drury, Philippe Entremont and Malcolm Bilson. As a winner of the La Gesse fellowship, he has been presented in concert festivals in France and Italy, at the French Embassy in Washington, DC, at Monticello, and in solo recitals at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall. He has performed numerous times on the Star Series of Reading and with the Reading and Pottstown Symphonies, having won the Reading and Pottstown Symphony Concerto Competitions. In 2001, Mr. Bengtson spoke on The Mazurkas of Karol Szymanowski as a Lowens Award finalist for The American Musicological Society, Capital Chapter; in 2002, he recorded these mazurkas for his first commercial CD. In 2003 his efforts were awarded with the Wilk prize for research in Polish music. As an advocate of both contemporary and rarely performed music, he commands a broad and diverse repertoire, ranging from Rameau to Ligeti. In addition to concertizing, Mr. Bengtson serves as a faculty member of Settlement Music School in Philadelphia and as a staff pianist at the Curtis Institute of Music.

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Matt Bengtson
concert pianist

Among Bach's six keyboard partitas, the fifth in G major has one of the sunniest dispositions. From the rhetorical brilliance of the opening *Praeambulum* to the exhilarating contrapuntal complexity of the concluding *Gigue* (a double fugue), this delightful partita has always been a favorite of both performers and audiences. Some other noteworthy features of the suite include the substitution of the lighter Italian *Corrente* for the more typical French *Courante*, and a most enigmatic *Tempo di Menuetta* — not really a minuet — but rather a play on the rhythmic ambiguity of 6/8 and 3/4.

Modern-day Bach performance on the piano is as open and exciting a pursuit as ever. The achievements of the

historical performance movement can leave us much better informed about performance style; it would be a pity not to take advantage of this. Speaking from the perspective of an enthusiastic harpsichordist, I believe it is valuable to incorporate the positive features of early instrument practice — a sense of weight and balance, an awareness of ornamentation and registration, and especially a well-informed use of articulation — rather than a negative approach, which forbids the use of voicing, coloration, dynamics, and pedaling, for without these one might as well not play the piano at all!

A suite of an entirely different kind is Bartók's *Out of Doors*. This music is indicative of Bartók's close kinship to folk music and of his sense of the picturesque. Indeed, the label of "impressionism" should not be the exclusive province of the French, for what page of Debussy

could be more genuinely "impressionistic" than the fourth piece, "The Night's Music?" This masterpiece casts a truly magical spell with its eerie evocations of nocturnal wildlife in the countryside.

The suite is also typical of Bartók's approach to structure, for the five pieces are arranged into a symmetrical arch shape. "Musettes," with its repetitive bagpipe drones and shimmering ornaments, is in third place, at the axis of symmetry. In second position, corresponding to the Night's Music, we find the "Barcarolla," which is not a graceful, Italianate gondolier song as in Chopin, but rather a disquieting, undulating piece in the uneven, constantly shifting rhythms of a stormy sea.

On the outside we find the two most rhythmical movements, which may be low on profundity but are high in spirits. The opening movement is an evocation of music from the distant past: "With fife and drum." Little imagination

should be required to conjure a vivid image from the sounds of the bass of the piano. The concluding piece is a boisterous, rather frantic "Chase" that playfully depicts animals running amok. It is a wild goose chase for the pianist too, as its virtuosic demands are formidable.

Part of the music's "modernism" (or, rather, its primitivism?) is its concentration on non-tertian intervals. The outer movements often feature the interval of a ninth; the Barcarolle offers fourths; the Musettes, fifths clashing with tritones; and the Night's Music, semitone clusters.

The *Four Ballades, op. 10*, are clearly the work of the ardent young Brahms, full of passion, drama, and lyrical beauty, characteristic of the full flowering of German Romanticism. Brahms's Ballades aim to tell stories through music — as do the more well-known Chopin Ballades — but the specific stories are generally unknown, with the exception

of the first one, "Edward," based on a Scottish ballad. In it, Edward's inquiring mother wonders why his sword is stained with blood. As her questions become more and more persistent, the horrible truth comes out: he has killed his father. The intense drama of the music befits the tale. The second Ballade is the most varied of the set, and has all the makings of a bedtime story, with various dramatic episodes, though everything ends quite peacefully, and the child presumably has fallen asleep.

The third piece is not really a Ballade at all, but a fiery Intermezzo filled with angular rhythmic displacements. Its interlude, however, reflects the majestic spaciousness characteristic of these Ballades. The fourth Ballade is clearly a sung story rather than a spoken one, with an accompaniment texture that is typically Brahmsian. The most extraordinary feature of this work is its concluding section in triplets — a pro-

longed, intimate and rather austere spiritual meditation. It is both sublimely beautiful and deeply moving.

In much of Brahms's music, and in the Ballades in particular, little emphasis is placed on overt virtuosity by the pianist. Nevertheless, this music is by no means easy to play, as it makes strong demands on a performer's maturity and musicianship. One communicates through the command of pacing, of profound lyricism and Romantic ardor. For these reasons, all the selections on this disc are offered in complete unedited sessions as in a live performance, valuing organic coherence over technical perfection. Although a listener seeking blemishes will certainly find them, I hope that anyone interested in the impact of the music will be rewarded by this policy.

Recorded at Peabody conservatory and West Chester University. Sean Finn and Robert Rust, recording engineers. Steinway pianos. Booklet notes by Matthew Bengtson. ©Matthew Bengtson, 2004. www.matthbengtson.com Publicist: Trish Doll, Publicity Works 717-445-6377