

PROGRAM NOTES BY THOMAS CHRISTENSEN

Tonight's concert features a range of "four-hand" music played by two pianists, sometimes on the same keyboard, sometimes on two pianos. For most of us today who play a little piano, playing a piano duet might well bring back distant childhood memories of sitting at the keyboard with a sibling or friend and pounding out a rousing march of Schubert, or perhaps a rendition of "Heart and Soul." It was a configuration that seemed conducive to fun, frivolity, and friendship.

But while the piano duet has always retained something of a sense of amateurism to it, it was a medium that was more important to the history of the piano than one might guess. As old as the pianoforte itself, it held immediate appeal to the first generation of composers and performers for this instrument.

The program opens with an early **Sonata in B-flat Major** by Mozart that illustrates wonderfully the appeal of the four-hand configuration. Composed when he was just 18 years old, Mozart certainly would have first played the work with his sister Nannerl who would take the upper (primo) part and himself playing the lower (secondo) part. (It was one of four sonatas that he composed in this medium.) The animated dialogue between the two players in which Mozart's exquisite melodies are traded off is a typical feature of the early piano duet. At the same time, the sonata conveys beautifully the sense of sociability and friendship that was an important appeal to performers.



Franz Schubert at the piano.
(*Schubertiade*, Julius Schmid, 1897)

For Franz Schubert, the piano duet held a special place of affection and importance. No composer ever took the medium as seriously as he did, with over three dozen publications in this format. ("Vier-Händige" music was some of the most commercially successful that he was able to publish in his lifetime.) It is not hard to understand his attraction to the duet form with a little armchair psychoanalysis. As a notoriously introverted and insecure personality, the duet seemed a perfect medium for expressing – and experiencing – the kind of intimate friendships, collaboration, and sociability that he longed for his whole life. (We might understand

through the same reasoning why the concerto – with its drama of antagonism and competition – never appealed to him as a composer.)

The great **F Minor Fantasie** was composed by Schubert in 1828, that tragic yet miraculously productive final year of his life. Through-composed so that all four movements are connected without a pause, there is a sense of foreboding and doom throughout the music. The achingly haunting melody of the opening movement (which will return at the end of the final movement as a kind of apparition) sets the mood. If there are moments of respite from the almost relentless darkness of the music (the lyrical secondary themes in his favorite harmonic oasis of the flat submediant, or the animated scherzo of the third movement), a sense of anguished despair never lies far below the surface as the music progresses through its seemingly preordained fateful journey. The dramatic fugue that opens the final movement with its painful, angular subject and breathtaking modulations suggests where Schubert might have developed as a composer were he granted a few more years to live. But it was not to be. It is not hard to hear in this final work – as with so many others he composed at just this same time – a composer who in his final months of frailty perceived his approaching death, a fate he seems to meet first with desperate denial, and then ultimate acceptance and serenity.

PROGRAM NOTES



La leçon de piano,
Gustave Caillebotte, 1881.

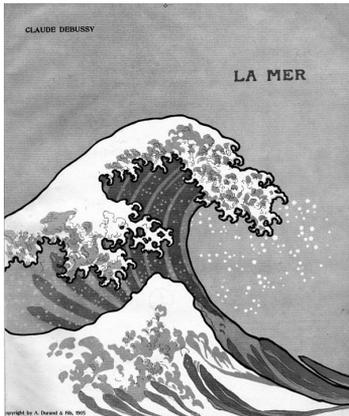
If the piano duet became a favored medium of sociability and *Bildung* for a growing class of bourgeois amateur musicians in the nineteenth century, there was another catalyst for the four-hand configuration that is perhaps less well recognized today. It became a means by which generations of pianists gained musical literacy by playing through the endless number of arrangements of concert, operatic, and chamber music that were transcribed for two players sitting at the same keyboard. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of the four-hand transcription in this regard. There is scarcely any concert or stage music from the long nineteenth century that was not churned out for a growing public of amateur pianists in the guise of these duet arrangements. By 1860, one trade journal inventoried over 60,000 differing four-hand transcriptions in print – and that is just for German-speaking lands!

The variety of these transcriptions can defy our imagination. To begin with the most celebrated example, all of the symphonies of Beethoven were arranged multiple times for four hands. By the turn of the twentieth century, ambitious pianists had at least two dozen differing arrangements of all nine symphonies transcribed for four hands to choose from. The same was true (if with slightly reduced numbers) for his orchestral overtures, the string quartets and trios, the five piano concertos, his two masses, and even his opera, *Fidelio*. The quantity of these transcriptions far exceeded in sales and profit those of the “original” versions. And this was so for just about every other composer in the nineteenth century – and their publishers. As soon as a major instrumental or operatic work was premiered, one was likely to find an arrangement for piano soon for sale. Before the age of the radio and phonograph, the piano duet was the primary means by which most musicians got to know this repertoire.

Wagner’s own transcription of his overture to the opera *Tannhäuser* is a perfect example of how the four-hand transcription economy served a purpose of both profit and promotion for a composer. Unlike the more celebrated virtuosic arrangement of the overture for a solo pianist by Franz Liszt, which was of course celebrated because virtually no other pianist but Liszt had the technical skill to play it, Wagner’s arrangement was meant to be played (and purchased!) by pianists with more human capabilities at the keyboard. Of course, it was still not easy to play. But with the instrumental parts now divided more or less equitably between two individuals and four hands, one could at least make a go of it. In any case, the point was not so much to produce a finished product for public performance. The four-hand piano arrangement was solely for domestic consumption; struggling through the notes was all part of the process of getting familiar with the music. Anyway, how else was one going to ever get a chance to hear the music in its original glory? Operatic productions of Wagner’s operas were few and far between during his lifetime. The piano transcription brought music from the public sphere (the concert hall and opera house) into the domestic space of the bourgeois parlor.

Of course, the four-hand transcription was not without its drawbacks. No one conflated it with the experience of attending a concert or going to the opera in person. As a number of critics would repeatedly scold, the piano arrangement was a very imperfect replication of the original. It inevitably had to leave out details of instrumental voicing, register, and texture. Most egregiously, according to a number of its critics, the piano arrangement white-washed all the rich orchestral colors into

monochromatic uniformity. The result was often compared to another object of bourgeois cultural commercialism: the engraving, or lithograph, through which classical paintings and frescos were reduced and reproduced in mass numbers to be pinned on the walls of the home. Both sacrificed something of the color and texture of the original for the sake of domestic circulation.



Cover of the 1905 edition of *La mer* for orchestra, based on Hokusai's *The Great Wave*.

For those listeners who know Debussy's great orchestral triptych, *La mer*, hearing an arrangement for duo pianos might make for a jarring experience. After all, there was probably no composer who agonized more over the details of color and timbre with his orchestration than Debussy. How could the subtle nuances of his instrumentation ever come across when played on the piano? (We sometimes forget that the piano is, above all, a percussion instrument!) Again, we might be reminded of the analogy of the engraving; it is as if one would try to reduce to black and white etchings the tonal subtleties of Monet's *Water Lilies*.

For a skilled piano arranger, though, there are ways to make listeners forget for a moment that they are not listening to the original music. André Caplet was close friend and collaborator with Debussy. An active composer himself, he had actually orchestrated some of Debussy's piano works. Here, Caplet works in reverse, and arranges his friend's great orchestral score

for duo pianos. (For works like this, the value of two pianos over the four-hand duet is the room it gives performers, where voicings and orchestral lines are not easily limited to discrete halves of the keyboard.)

Caplet's brilliant arrangement illustrates some of the ways a skilled piano arranger can compensate for its loss of color. Borrowing techniques of pianism pioneered by Liszt in many of his own arrangements and fantasies of symphonic and operatic music, Caplet writes out gossamer-like piano figurations and tremolos for the pianists to play shaped by subtle dynamic shadings, pedal fluttering, and judicious use of the sustain and *una corda* pedals. All of these are pianistic techniques that can help the pianists to convey – or perhaps, to conjure – orchestral sounds in the ears of listeners.



Woodcut of Till Eulenspiegel from 1515.

Though of a very differing compositional pedigree than Debussy, Richard Strauss was also celebrated in his life for his virtuosity as an orchestrator. Particularly in his early tone poems, Strauss pushed the limits of instrumental sound and complexity well beyond where even Wagner had left off. *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (Till Eulenspiegel's merry pranks), Strauss's tone poem on the fifteenth-century folktale, was issued shortly after its orchestral premiere in 1895, as was the custom. The arranger was Otto Singer, who made something of a career in the business with his hundreds of piano transcriptions of the classical symphonic literature, many of which are still available today in reprint editions of Schirmer and Peters.

PROGRAM NOTES

With these last two works of Debussy and Strauss, we have clearly moved past the amateur genre of the mid-nineteenth-century duet transcription. While orchestral music continued to be transcribed for various configurations of piano replication well into the twentieth century (all the symphonies of Mahler, for example, were available as transcriptions for four and sometimes even eight hands), it was music that few amateur pianists were probably able to play. In any case, they increasingly did not need to. By the time of Mahler's death in 1911, both the radio and the gramophone were beginning their lives as vehicles of cultural dissemination. Now it was becoming possible for anyone to hear an orchestral performance in their own home without having to pluck the notes out themselves on the out-of-tune upright piano near the back of the parlor. Of course, this democratization of listening came at a cost, making the consumption of classical music in mechanical reproduction – as Walter Benjamin famously diagnosed it – passive, and even soulless.

Today it might seem that the prospect of resurrecting the social ritual of the four-hand piano transcription is a remote one. In our own age of digitally reproducible music, not to mention the decline of the piano as an indispensable piece of furniture in the bourgeois household, it has seemingly lost both its relevance and its motivation. But in a concert such as the one we listen to tonight, we may get a sense of what we're missing. Perhaps it may even inspire a few of us to go back home and look through Grandma's old piano bench to pull out some faded duet music and give it a try ourselves. Don't worry about the mistakes. It's all part of the pleasure and pain. The innocent piano duet, we might find, allows us not only to make the music ourselves, but to make it our own.

Thomas Christensen is the Avalon Foundation Professor of Music and the Humanities at the University of Chicago. He is also a passionate devotee to the playing and collecting of four-hand piano transcriptions. An extensive study he wrote on the culture of the duet transcription can be accessed as "Four-Hand Piano Transcriptions and Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Musical Reception." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52/2 (1999), pp. 255-98.
