

TRUE NORTH VARIATIONS

The modern piano can accommodate music of all genres, places and times, so it's the natural instrument for a humorous, pocket-sized tour of music history from the 1600s up to now. I needed some kind of common thread, a melodic theme as connective tissue, speculatively re-imagined in the style of various composers. As this was a production for the CBC, I decided "Oh, Canada" - the Canadian national anthem - was a melody most listeners would know.

Purcell

"Fairest Isle" from Purcell's "King Arthur" opens and closes the cycle of variations. The first three notes are a bit of an alliteration with the Canadian anthem; its lyrics and atmosphere suggest to me the lifelong desire to travel toward something beyond words. As a native German, adopting Canada as my new home has been an important part of my life journey.

JS Bach

Bach simply had to be part of this segment and I decided a chorale prelude would fit the bill nicely. I've used what organists call the "Pachelbel technique", which means that the entry of each line is prepared in a way that anticipates the beginning of the upcoming chorale melody. In four parts, with the tune simply stated in the treble over a walking bassline, the piece mimics some famous models of the master's own hand.

CPE Bach

Carl Philipp Emanuel lived through a revolution - a generational search for freedom from the past while still acknowledging the importance of its singular cultural heritage. In this segment the anthem is realized in its minor version. Much of the tune is heard in the bass, as though the challenge is accepted, but only defiantly and with rebellion. The episodic, almost psychedelic nature of the musical language suggests the inner turmoil of the late 18th century's exploration of the "Sturm und Drang".

Mozart

Preparing this variation felt blessed by a certain ease, as though Mozart's language and "Oh, Canada" were a natural fit. I wanted to express harmonically rich progressions with only two parts and opted for a carefully sculpted, lucid and crystalline structure.

Beethoven

Here's another instance where it felt more appropriate to take the melody into the minor. Toward the end there's a short modulation into the parallel major key, but only for a moment - like a glimmer of hope - before it returns to the inconsolable darkness of the beginning. The tune is hidden, woven into dreamy arpeggios revealing micro-motives on a rhythmically delayed bassline, as though it moved on uncertain ground.

Mendelssohn

This variation is in the form of a “song without words”. I tried to replicate the composer’s intricate balance of musical texture: Colourful and generous harmonic progressions, an inner logic in the movement of contrapuntal voices and always a beautiful melody. The attentive listener may notice that this is the only variation with a few bars of pre- and postlude to the theme - extra bars built on the chord changes of the “Wedding March” from “Midsummer Night’s Dream”, a personal gesture of reverence. After all, if it weren’t for my Albertan spouse, violinist Chloe Meyers, I wouldn’t have become a Canadian.

Chopin

The realization of this variation as a “valse sentimentale” became a tangible, even haptic experience for me. I realized how closely the musical language of certain composers is connected to improvisation, how improvisation and composition benefit from and even need one another. Chopin’s writing is so intrinsically pianistic that one could say it is solidified improvisation.

Scriabin

This movement turned out to be the most challenging. I tried to keep the melody within the boundaries of tonality, yet stretch those limitations and take chromatic progressions to the maximum. I wanted to avoid resolutions and keep the motion suspended, resist gravitation until forced to yield to the power of the cadence. The challenge was to match Scriabin’s peerless melange of melancholy and zest for life, his emotional vehemence and fragility.

Messiaen

The voices of birds star in this variation (and give the name to the entire set). All of the cited species are native to Canada, their voices serving as an avian counterpoint to the harmonically broken and alienated, but still present, melody.

Weimann

Unlike some of the previous variations which I ended up writing out, this one was approached like an unplanned sailing into the blue.