

2-1-1998

## Susan Becker, piano

Department of Music, University of Richmond

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### Recommended Citation

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UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND  
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC



Susan Becker, piano



FEBRUARY 1, 1998, 3 PM  
CAMP CONCERT HALL  
BOOKER HALL OF MUSIC  
GEORGE M. MODLIN CENTER FOR THE ARTS

## SUSAN BECKER

Born and raised in Iowa, *Susan Becker* began musical studies on violin at age 3 and piano at age 7. She holds degrees in piano performance from Oberlin Conservatory, Indiana University, and the University of Minnesota, as well as a degree in East Asian Studies from Oberlin College. Her principal teachers have included Robert Shannon, Edward Auer, Margo Garrett, and Lydia Artymiw. She has performed throughout the country as a soloist and chamber musician, and in addition to standard repertoire, she is also devoted to the performance of contemporary

music. She has participated in numerous music festivals, many involving the world premieres or recordings of contemporary works. She has coached compositions with George Crumb, Shulamit Ran, and Oswaldo Golijov among others. Her commitment to new music is an ongoing focus of her career, represented by recent appearances with the Minnesota Contemporary Ensemble, the American Composers' Forum, and CURRENTS. She is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Piano at the University of Richmond.

YOU ARE INVITED TO A RECEPTION  
IN BOOKER HALL LOUNGE  
IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THIS AFTERNOON'S CONCERT

## PROGRAM

Variations Sérieuses, Op. 54

Felix Mendelssohn  
(1809-1847)

Partita #4 in D Major, BWV 828

J. S. Bach  
(1685-1750)

Ouverture

Allemande

Courante

Air

Sarabande

Menuet

Gigue

## INTERMISSION

Images, Book 2

Claude Debussy  
(1862-1918)

Cloches à travers les feuilles

Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut

Poissons d'or

Rain Tree Sketch II  
(in memoriam Olivier Messiaen)

Toru Takemitsu  
(1930-1996)

from Etudes-Tableaux, Op. 39  
#8 in D Minor  
#9 in D Major

Sergei Rachmaninoff  
(1873-1943)

## PROGRAM NOTES

After I chose the works for this recital, I became fascinated by how each one controls the flow of time. The Mendelssohn Serious Variations, written in 1841, reveal the extent to which he loved the even, regulated, highly ordered structure of Baroque music. (Given that Mendelssohn was passionate about the works of J.S. Bach from early in his life, it then seemed natural to place a work of his next to some of Bach's music.) These are, however, character variations in the Romantic spirit. The theme is a chorale in the solemn key of D minor, and except for one Adagio variation in D major, he does not stray from the home key. The theme is a kind of processional with some surprising harmonies which Mendelssohn uses to wonderful effect in the 17 variations and passionate coda. Within the architecture of the set of variations, Mendelssohn builds several times from slow variations through faster and more virtuosic ones, exploring every possible texture and "orchestration" for the piano. Lyrical variations alternate with strictly contrapuntal ones (Var. 10 is a miniature fugue) but the basic structure of the theme is never altered until the coda sweeps it away, bringing the piece to a powerful close.

Bach published 6 keyboard partitas as his Op. 1, calling them Book 1 of his *Clavier-Ubung* ("practices," or "exercises"). The D major partita is the fourth of the group. Bach published these partitas as a sort of compendium of all the possible ways to construct a

keyboard dance suite. The D major partita reflects the French style of keyboard suites, with its subtle rhythmic shifts and elaborate ornamentation. Each partita has a distinctive opening movement, and this partita opens with a French overture, with its slow, ornate opening giving way to a faster contrapuntal section that lasts to the end of the movement. In the Allemande and Sarabande, Bach takes control of ornamentation, leaving very little to chance and writing out two extremely ornate slow dances which float and pirouette above a constant anchoring bassline. The Allemande is one of the most profound movements Bach wrote for keyboard. The Courante is an exercise in rhythmic subtlety—the undercurrent of this dance constantly shifts from groups of three beats to groups of two beats. Its lively character contrasts well with the depth of the Allemande. After this comes a so-called "galanterie," or optional dance, added for special character. The Air has a flirtatious character that invites lots of ornamentation. After the Sarabande's thoughtfulness, Bach closes the partita with a pair of dances: the Menuet and Gigue. The Menuet is in a moderate tempo and invites ornamentation; the Gigue is exciting and closes the suite with boundless energy. Each dance obeys strict rules of structure, and within each the basic pulse of time is never lost. Mastery over the marking of time is at the heart of this elaborate and beautiful set of dances.

If the first half of the program is about regulated time and counterpoint, the second half is about defying time and about the sheer beauty of "timeless" sound. The Debussy Images, book 2, were written in 1907 and published and premiered the following year. Each piece is an evocation of a poetic image. The first piece, "Bells through the leaves," reflects Debussy's passion for Asian musical sonorities—it makes use of the whole-tone and pentatonic scales (sounds Debussy loved when he heard the music of the Javanese gamelan). These remove the sense of motion toward any one harmony; sounds exist for the sake of their own beauty. The middle section of the piece provides the dramatic climax of the work, building in intensity to rich fortissimo chords, which fade back into the distance as quickly as they appear. It has been said that Debussy's friend Louis Laloy (a scholar of non-Western music and Debussy's biographer) also contributed to the spirit of the piece in the form of a letter: he wrote of being in a small town in the French countryside on All Saints' Day and how beautiful it was to be in the midst of all the church bells ringing out from every corner of the town. This atmosphere is captured beautifully by Debussy, and the combination of this imagined sound and the ethereal sounds of "Asian" modes creates a lush and beautiful work.

The second piece in the set ("And the moon sets on the temple that was") is very much like the first in its nature: it seems to drift free of the ticking flow of time. The title is quite poetic in itself,

and Debussy gives the piece a meditative spirit, drawing on the Asian sonorities and imagery which he loved so much. The title directs the piece on a very deep, almost unconscious level, making it a dreamlike work of intense beauty and stillness. This piece is dedicated to Louis Laloy, the man whose impression of church bells gave inspiration to the first piece of this set.

The final piece, Goldfish, is of a very different character. It is flirtatious and light-hearted, and its technical demands are among the most difficult Debussy ever created. A Japanese lacquer painting in Debussy's possession of two goldfish in a river is often credited for inspiring the piece. It is dedicated to Ricardo Vines, a Spanish pianist who debuted many of the greatest solo piano works of Debussy, Ravel, Albeniz, and their contemporaries. The rippling runs and trills and tremolos in this work evoke the flow of water and the effortless motion of the fish as they occasionally swim or hover in the reeds. It is a visual and sensual fantasy-piece; it is capricious and adventurous, running forward and stopping short, playfully full of life and dodging any concern about the passage of time.

I chose this brief Takemitsu piece for several reasons: it is a meditative, very spiritual piece; it is an homage to Messiaen, a compositional mentor to Takemitsu (and a favorite composer of mine as well); it experiments with the perception of time and of sound and silence at the boundary where they meet;

and I find it to be a work of extreme beauty in its calm, introspective, and peaceful nature. Takemitsu was introduced to Messiaen's music by a friend in 1950, and for the rest of his life he felt strong ties to the spirit of Messiaen's music and, at a deeper level, to Debussy's works also.

On hearing of Messiaen's death in 1992, Takemitsu chose to write a short work in homage to the spirit of the man and his music. (The title is drawn from a short story by his close friend, Japanese author Kenzaburo Oe.) It is a study of stillness, of the initiation and decay of sound, and escaping any awareness of the passage of time. It is written in several sections of various tempos, centering around a rising three-note cell which appears several times in several forms throughout the work. The gentle dissonances and sense of quiet meditation seem to stop time as each sound is allowed to speak and die away.

The nine Etudes-Tableaux of op. 39 are from the years 1916-1917; they are Rachmaninoff at his best. All nine etudes are intensely colorful and imaginative, more hinting at moods than portraying any specific image. These etudes, along with his set of songs, op. 38, were the last substantial pieces he composed before leaving Russia to escape the war and political chaos which

were quickly engulfing the country. (Except for the Corelli Variations, op. 42, written 15 years later, these pieces also represent the last significant works he wrote for solo piano.) They are pieces all about huge gestures, hyper-Romanticism, and the freedom of rubato, pushing and pulling at bits of time all through every phrase of every piece.

Etude #8 is an evasive, almost nonmelodic piece, drifting through changing textures, flexible tempos, and lush harmonies. Threads of melody appear and disappear back into the flowing texture, creating a watery, color-driven etude whose focus is its mood rather than thematic development. The unpredictable nature of flickering emotions give the piece a sense of constant flux.

Etude #9 is subtitled "Tempo di Marcia." This piece, however, does all in its power to avoid the regular rhythms of a typical march—it constantly changes meter, from the chiming chords at the opening to the rousing end. Rachmaninoff also shifts accents off the strong beats of the measures, syncopating patterns over and over until any sense of regular marching time is lost completely. Its breathless ending provides a powerful, exciting, and defiant close to the entire set of etudes.