



# THE HUMAN CONDITION THROUGH CLASSICAL MASTERPIECES

*A course in classical music appreciation*

**Lectures by Jonathan FIELDS, musician and composer**

***Music of Memory: Chopin, Schubert, Dvorak, Rachmaninov***

Tuesday, June 21, 2010

Em Lee Concert Hall, Turtle Bay Music School, New York, NY

**Crossroads:** Welcome on behalf of Crossroads New York Cultural Center. I am pleased to introduce the third in a series of four talks by Mr. Jonathan Fields on the human condition through classical masterpieces. Tonight's talk is entitled *Music of Memory: Chopin, Schubert, Dvorak, Rachmaninov*.

The focus of this series of talks is not just musicology or musical history in a strict technical sense. Rather, the emphasis is on discovering the very foundation of music, viewed as the most sincere and moving expression of human experience, of the universal human desire and expectation for beauty, for happiness, for a mysterious Other who will fulfill the promises of the heart. In this sense, the work of the great composers represents a prophecy of the ultimate meaning of human existence and history.

To help us with this discovery we are fortunate to again have with us composer, music teacher and lecturer Mr. Jonathan Fields.

**Fields:** This is the third in a series, and I couldn't believe how much I've had to squeeze in today. Just a review, basically what's developed from the first two lessons is an immensely powerful musical language. We saw Bach codified it, and Mozart and Beethoven took it to its expressive height. We talked about the sonata form which is the form of music that most of these composers were using, Mozart and Beethoven in particular, and remember there's a first subject, second subject, themes, characters that are in constant dialogue with each other, and the music gives a sense that the drama of life is expressed through it, and somehow listening to this music we're moved and changed and brought into a deeper dialogue with life ourselves. That's what I'm trying to show.

Now the next thing that happens after the classical masters is known as the Romantic Era. They are just fantastic composers. We're going to see how music moves ahead. These are the inheritors of Mozart and Beethoven. They did some wonderful, wonderful things a little bit differently, and this is also the beginning of the era of what we could call the Bohemian artist. Before we had the employed artist that worked for the Church or noblemen, who constantly had to put out lots of works just to make the cash. Beethoven was well known. At this point you're going to have the real Bohemian.

The first person we're going to talk about is Schubert who actually was alive when Beethoven was alive. Schubert lives only 31 years; it's just extraordinary—he writes 900 works before he dies, and we're going to hear works he wrote at 24 years old. The problem is (and next week I'm going to talk about the breakdown of language when we talk about the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) here you have a language so developed that a 24-year-old is already a man, already knows his heart, already has a serious relationship with reality, and can express it as a poet. The top point of his language is beauty. These composers understand that the whole human journey, including its agony, can be expressed with beauty, can be almost enfolded in beauty, so the human journey has meaning, has a sense of bringing you to recognize something that holds it together. We're going to listen to two pieces by Schubert, but I thought that Rita could just read...here's where I think you're beginning to feel the

Romantic ideal, a remembering (memory wasn't the right word I used in the title), longing for something, and Schubert wrote a lot of songs. Also in the Romantic age melody, cantata becomes deeper, the singing melody develops. All of these composers are incredible melodists. So here are the lyrics, the words, the poem that Schubert set to music in his *Wanderer*. This I think identifies his ideal:

*...and amid my sighs I ask constantly: where?/The sun no longer warms me./The flowers are withered, life faded, /and all words sound hollow. /Everywhere I am a stranger./Where are you, my beloved land?/Sought, imagined and never found?/Land, land green with hope,/Land where my roses bloom,/Where my friends are,/Where my dead rise again, /Land where my language is spoken, /O land, where are you?/I wander in silence, unhappy,/and amid my sighs I ask constantly: where?/The wind answers:/"There, where you are not, there is happiness". (...)*

So this longing for an absent good, something there beyond, a happiness, but not possessed. Let's start with a piano piece. These are works that were written the year before he died, when he was 30, and he wrote two sets of impromptus which sound improvisational, but I think when we listen to this you're going to hear what he's talking about. These are very easy to follow. You hear this beautiful melody of the left hand of the piano, it's like life moving, going on, and the melody just goes ahead without rush, not trying to push into us, just feeling life and dialoguing with life. Then there's a middle section where the difficulties occur. We're talking about two themes, and here's a middle section where there's more drama and then it goes back to the original melody.

[plays music] The melody unwinds, unfolds...the beauty of life and its fragility...remember when we were talking about harmony and being taken on a journey?...these are different views...the constant movement beneath and the current...going back to major...this is the soft light...Schubert's great because he can move into music with melodies of life and the instability of life...back to the original melody...now he's getting quiet and reflective...

Schubert had very close friends. He lived a Bohemian life. He didn't have much money. He used to beg for it from his brother, but he had a few very, very close friends and they would get together—poets and other artists, and he would play for them. He wasn't a great pianist. He didn't play outside. He never wrote piano concertos, but he wrote a lot of music like this. And his group of friends, (at this time there was also the beginning of the bourgeois culture; it was really beginning to grow in Europe—kind of a superficial view of life), and so the artists began to feel conditioned to somehow hold on to their hearts, hold on to this deeper way of feeling life.

Now I want to play just a little bit of his most famous work which he wrote a few years earlier which is *The Unfinished Symphony* just to show you that he's not just a floaty, lyric...he has the technique; he knows Beethoven's language, and what's great about Schubert is that he grew up in Beethoven's shadow, but was able to develop a completely other type of music that many of these Romantics thought was greater than Beethoven's music. This is his 8<sup>th</sup> *Symphony*, this is the *Unfinished Symphony*. He doesn't use sonata form the way Beethoven or Mozart did where you have the first theme, then a little journey away from the theme, and then it would prepare the second theme. With Schubert it's as if these things erupt in his heart and they just come out spontaneously—first theme, second theme, and there's even a earlier very low, foreboding, dark...he even said after this, "For many years I sang songs, but if I wanted to sing about love, I only knew how to express pain, and if I wanted to sing about pain, it was transformed into love, and thus love and pain divided my soul between them." And this describes this work very much. It starts very dark and then there's this searching restless, wandering feeling, and then there's one of the most famous themes in Western music—just life as it should be or a beautiful memory of how wonderful life is and should be, and what lies beyond. But then this pain comes, and you're going to hear it. He builds it to a huge degree of intensity, of anguish even, and that's how far we'll go with this.

[plays music] The low basses...restless feeling...the cry, like a sigh...it's like some land beyond the horizon,

some unknown land in his heart...it's occurred...that's what this language can do...another melody...these are the cellos playing the melody, a rich, rich, low melody...this is conducted by Herbert von Karajan, the best performance...and do you hear how it's performed?...the ebb and flow?...it's not all loud and soft...remember we talked about how the melodies go to the high point?...now it stops...like Beethoven...the theme continues...chord progression...the second theme...the woodwinds...what started in the beginning, that low foreboding sense, reality is just going to fall apart, and he's going to cry with all his heart...scream with pain...listen to this...high strings...the low strings answer...more intense...but he's not done with this side of life...heroic journey...

That's the first movement, but not the whole thing. The themes are repeated, but this ends very tragically. This doesn't end positive; there's no positivity in it at all, but for someone like Schubert who said, "It is granted or rather required of us that we delight in the innocent joys of life with moderation, with a cheerful spirit and in gratitude to God. All the more reason why we should not lose heart in a sad circumstance, for sorrows too are a blessing from God and leave whoever is capable of persevering with unshakable faith to the most sublime destiny," the language includes all parts of life because there's a certain destiny at the end; it's leading somewhere. Whatever happens leads toward that beautiful land. That's what's different. These men, the Romantics believed that the land exists. They may not possess it, they may feel the pain of not possessing it, but it's an awareness of an absent good. It's similar to the blues in America. The blues—that cry for that absent good; Thomas Aquinas said that's what sadness is, the cry for an absent good.

Since we left with this intensity, I was going to go to Brahms, but I'm going to go to Chopin instead, and for that I'm going to have my son, Justin Fields, play one of the Preludes because my son has practiced this piece, and I saw a piano here, a Steinway piano. Justin, did you want to say anything? Chopin is a marvelous, marvelous Romantic artist. Also Schubert in the end of his life before he died started studying fugues of Bach, and he said, "Oh my God! This is what I was missing!" Remember we talked about the fugues? Every musician when they discover the fugues feel like a part of their heart is unlocked. But Schubert died before he was able to study this. Chopin hated every other Romantic composer. He loved Bach and he loved Mozart. He was a very refined Polish gentleman who while he was a genius, he wanted to find his way in the world, make his way in the world, so he left Poland. And of course it was a very unsafe situation. Russia took over his hometown; he was never able to return home again. He went to Paris. He was a lover of George Sand, a female French writer, and that didn't work out. Nothing seemed to work out for him. But his music did. He has a huge amount of piano works. The piano at this point has become technologically strong, like the piano we have today, so Chopin is the father of modern piano technique, and all the stuff he invented. He was greater than Beethoven. This is really a new world of mastery, and even Liszt studied at his feet because Liszt was a banger. Remember we talked about cantabile? There is always the melody. And that's why he loved Mozart and Bach, structure and melody, so that the emotion isn't indulgent; the emotion always expresses something that we all have. It's a deeper understanding of sadness that we all have. So this language he gave to the piano. He wrote 24 preludes in honor of Bach in major and minor keys. This is the famous one in C minor.

[goes to blackboard] This is how we musicians look at the music structurally; we use these little Roman numerals and these tell us what chords are being played. I'm not going to tell you what they are but this is just to demonstrate for example, when someone says, "Jonathan, can you play this at my wedding?" And I just start writing chords. I don't write the name of the chords; I write the numbers because the singer might want it in a different key and I don't want to tie it down. Once I get this thing together, I can fake playing this Chopin piece just knowing this interior structure. It's called chord progression. This is the first four measures, basically 12 bars that are going to be repeated four times, that will become a content that Chopin is able to give us with 12 measures of music, and Justin did tell me, "This shows the weight, the heaviness and weight that sadness can have." Go ahead Justin.

[Justin Fields plays Chopin's *Prelude in C Minor*]

Justin is perfect for this type of music. It's kind of his theme song. Thank you, Justin. That was great. Here's the next one you're going to learn. I was just listening to it today and it blew me away. It's Chopin's favorite composition, and it's a ballad. The ballad is kind of freer impromptu; they're not all sonata forms anymore. These are different types of forms. He wrote waltzes which are charming; he wrote nocturnes; he wrote sonatas also, and Mazurkas—dances from Poland. He's the first nationalist composer and was born in 1810, by the way, and he dies at about the age of 45 or 46. He had tuberculosis; he was a very sick child. He writes in his diary, "Sadness has invaded me. Why?" And I think his music is a working out of this question.

This is a ballad, but like the sonata has two major themes that are both developed, and then there's a kind of a third theme that you'll hear. Then it goes back to the other two themes, then there's a coda, but this is an amazingly virtuosic work. This is from where Rachmaninov jumps off; this is where every pianist jumps off from after this. And just to hear these almost jazz-like breakouts with the right hand, kind of flurries...but he was not a Romantic in the sense; he was fragile like all the guys—Schumann, Liszt, but they were too touchy-feely for him. Bach was his man—he believed in structure and story, how to tell a story, like *The Raindrop* where he played beautiful melodies, but the real focal point is this one note which really is this intense kind of staying with his heart, the serious needs of his heart. But he is like that in everything—the left hand is always very steady, keeping a very straight beat, and then he'll improvise over the top of it so there's something really objective and true that he's working with because he wants to develop a story that's a dialogue and it's not just losing yourself in feelings or losing yourself in virtuosity, not so easy to do. His work habits...he would improvise and people would hear him improvising, but then it would take him hours and hours and days and days to put it down on paper, and he would torture himself until he got it exactly right. Schubert, by the way, wrote the other way—it came into his head and he wrote it down. He worked furiously and fast and simply. Chopin is the other way. He gets the conception, but he can't let go of it until it's exactly describing what he wants to describe in his experience. I compose more like that, but without the brilliance.

[plays] Listen to this melody...again, it's a land that exists somewhere...he can't find it in life, but it exists...he's still developing the theme...the dance...there's a bell tone, it's up high, it's a Chopin invention...this is the second theme...a new melody...first theme...listen to the dissonance...the clashing chords...Chopin has a heroic side too...there's the bell sound up high...hear Rachmaninov?...now he's back in Poland...he's just having fun...the second theme...he's fallen in love with that theme...I'm falling in love with it too...first theme...his energy now is rejuvenating...first theme...different chords now, a little more disturbed...dissonance...there's the coda...the dancers from Poland, the East...wait...

It wasn't the sonata form we were listening to, but an incredible musical genius. You could follow the story; it wasn't all over the place, even with all of what seems like improvisation. It feels like it's improvised music, but every one of those notes is written down. He also dies young; he dies of tuberculosis. Again he does remind me of the jazz guys in New York in the 50s whose lives were a wreck, but they were so faithful to the language of beauty, so faithful to the language of their hearts. It's like Beethoven when he was going deaf, he said, "Music is going to keep me in reality." And thank God it did! Look what these artists have given to us. I'm almost happy they had such miserable lives. No, I'm not happy, but it's just that for them all the experiences of their lives fed their creativity. That's why today there's so little creativity because you're not allowed to be sad; you're medicated; you're not allowed to feel all the experiences of life, so there's no language for what you don't experience. There is a pure connection between human experience and this incredible musical language that has been developed.

I wanted to play Brahms, but we just don't have enough time. Brahms is the last German before the way of thinking about music changes. We'll talk about this next week. But Brahms is trying to keep alive the flame of this "absolute music"—music that describes the human journey, personal; for example, Chopin—people said of his music, "this is Chopin's biography; this is Chopin." And that was the point for composers—to express their life, their experience and its beauty, its ultimate meaning. Brahms tries to hang on to that, but the German

tradition is kind of falling apart. But he discovers, almost by chance, this Czech peasant composer named Antonin Dvorak. Brahms falls in love with the way the melody is—there's so little abstract thinking about it; it's just simple, beautiful music. His colleagues said, "Oh, this is so simple and sloppy. The forms aren't right. He's a Catholic Czech." And Brahms stood up for Dvorak. I was going to play Brahms 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony which Dvorak loved. He loved it, and that moved Brahms so much. He said, "I'm happier that Dvorak loved my 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony more than any review I get in the *New York Times*," or whatever the paper was back then! And the two developed this amazing friendship. It's because of Brahms that we know Dvorak. Brahms opened up the whole European world, England and eventually America knew him. Dvorak lived on 17<sup>th</sup> Street and he invented American music, basically.

I want to play something that he wrote right after Brahms gave him success. He worked very hard, he had no money and he couldn't get married until he was successful. He was teaching and he played the viola in orchestras. He was just struggling to get anywhere. His family had no money. He came from peasant stock. And Chopin and Dvorak and also the Russians, they begin to say, "We don't need German music anymore. German music is getting weird. We want to draw on our folk tradition, the melodies that come from our tradition of our village, our religious life, everything that's ours. We're going to invent a new music that doesn't draw on these European forms, yet is going to be as expressive." These composers bought into the fugue. They're trying to get new ways for orchestras to be able to motivate themselves without counterpoint. The colors, brilliant colors, like the colors in a village festival, and all the people dressed in their traditional clothing, they try and make the orchestra sound like that. You've heard Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, things like that. You hear the colors of the village life, and they're trying to describe this. It's not so much about the inner soul. They feel that their personal, individual life is very connected to the people and this makes their music live and grow while German music begins to dissipate.

I'm going to play the *String Serenade*, which is the year after he became famous. He was very happy and this is one of the works from that period. I'm just going to play one movement. It's very mysterious; it's a waltz tempo. It's only for strings. You'll hear this very odd sort of melody which comes from the kind of folk melodies—everyone played an instrument or sang in church. After church they would sing and play until 8 in the morning—the entire village. Music was pouring out of those people. It marked everything. So he has that type of gypsy feeling to him, but he also studied the classics; he also tried to bring the European thing in. This is how he solved it. So here's the *String Serenade*, a strange, mysterious theme, then there's a kind of lighter theme trying to avoid being the seriousness of life, and then in the middle you're going to hear Dvorak pulling in our hearts in that kind of sadness. The Eastern Europeans are known for intense sadness, they can be very sad, and then, abruptly they'll do a very fast dance. So a lot of Eastern music has this abrupt change between very slow, tragically sad, to joyful or erupting with dance.

[plays music] This is a different language...new theme...the second section...nostalgia...there's a joy in this music, a sense of peace...he writes a piece about marriage...Dvorak is a composer who writes about daily life...back to the first theme...he's serious...the lighter, freer...it's amazing, a composer when he gets hold of a theme, it begins to live in you...major chord.

I'm just going to play one more thing by Rachmaninov. I don't have time to play everything. You're just going to have to know that he wrote great piano concertos, but Rachmaninov is interesting. He ends up having to leave Russia at the Revolution. The first piano concerto he writes in 1901. He's another wreck of a person. The second piano concerto is full of Russian themes, again fast, slow, you can feel the concerto is not like Beethoven's where you hear the soloist kind of flaunting...it's again this idea that comes from belonging to a tradition and a people. The thing that was great about Rachmaninov, he had so much passion for life and for music. What Rachmaninov used to do is in the morning he'd go to the monastery and just listen and listen and listen to the monks, the religious tradition, and in the evening he'd go to concerts, and at night he'd go to bars and hear the gypsies. He needed all those things. It must've been such an incredible place to be. He drank all

that in and all that became his inspiration. After the Russians, the Eastern Europeans...Dvorak you already know came to America and he heard the spirituals and he said, "Here is your national music." Since he understood his heart so well growing from the embrace of a people, he heard exactly the same type of human sentiments in spirituals. And the *New World Symphony* is composed to show that. The New York intellectual community pooh-poohed it and said, "We're not going to listen to music of black people." And he said, "I don't care. This is your music. This is the best music that's here." And then you hear 20 years later Gershwin and Copland and Duke Ellington following his cue. And then also Dvorak's amazingly descriptive in his composing, he wrote a lot of film scores, his famous theme, he understood that America is a young, wonderful country; he loved the ideal of freedom, but he thought the human person in America was alone. If you think of how he described it in *New World Symphony* you really feel that sense of the American individual alone.

Rachmaninov's greatest work is considered his religious work. We started with the cry of anguish from Schubert, and I'm going to play *Bogorodice Djevo* much slower than we do in our choir. It's a Russian choir and you can feel the vastness of the Russian steppe. You hear it in every single note and chord. *Bogorodice Djevo* is the "Hail Mary" and it gets to this huge crescendo, "Pray for us sinners." But as I already said at the beginning, for a composer, the heart is one; secular music and sacred music is the same thing for a true human being because the heart's drama...when you're not in front of a presence that you can cry to...maybe it's a little different, but you still cry in front of your mother when things go wrong, but they have such a secure feeling that their mother is there that they cry louder because they want their mother to hear them. So listen to the drama of how Rachmaninov builds this. This is 1910, he leaves the country, and has a sadness, a longing for his homeland. He doesn't compose much. He even writes to the *New York Times* about Russia, how horrible they are. He's kicked out of Russia and they burn all the conservatories, so they erase him from his own land. But it doesn't matter what a totalitarian state can do if someone can compose this because it will pass from one person to the next, and the heart will stay alive, and that's what's going to survive and in the end Rachmaninov is not desperate. In the end he gives this to us and says, "Here. Nothing will destroy this."

[plays *Bogorodice Djevo*]

Rachmaninov says, "I'm not a composer that produces works on preconceived formula or theories; music in my view must be the expression of the complex personality of the composer. Music must express the land of his birth, his loves, his religiosity, the books that have influenced him, the art he loves; it must be the sum total of his experience. Music is born only in the heart and it is addressed to the heart. It is love. Music's sister is poetry and its mother is the heart."

That's it.