poetry is at times rough, at times romantic, and purposefully set in archaic language. The first two titles translate as “Dark Tarantella,” and “Night and Moon”; the fourth as “Distant Voices.” “Calasciunate” refers to a type of dance in triple meter, while “Lariulà” is a cry that pervades the refrains of many of the Neapolitan songs. All of the poems deal with difficult or impossible loves, filled with jealousy, infidelity, and pining for the unattainable.

The poem “Tarantella Scura” is narrated by a volcanic, volatile, jealous, unfaithful lover who predicts “a pointed knife” and an ending “covered with blood.” The verses are punctuated by a refrain about laughter, dance, and song. Perhaps the strongest correlation between di Giacomo’s text and the music comes in the second movement, “Notte ‘e luna,” where the moonlight and the wind that the poet begs for news of his beloved are much in evidence. Di Giacomo’s “Calasciunate” is a series of four vignettes about love; Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s music evokes the serenading of a guitarist accompanying a series of song-like dances, including a Tarantella that sneaks in from time to time. The fourth movement, “Voce luntane,” bears as its subtitle one of the most famous of all Neapolitan songs, “Fenesta che lucive” (“The shining window”), a song about the death of the singer’s beloved. The movement is based on this song as well as on material taken from throughout the rest of 
Piedigrotta 1924.

“Voce luntane” ends with a black-key glissando to be played “like a falling star.” The final movement begins by mixing the sound of morning bells with high birdsong before leading into a bumptious dance.

An extensively marked up score to 
Piedigrotta 1924 is included in the University of Colorado’s Ricardo Viñes Piano Music Collection; Viñes gave the Paris premiere of the work and seems to have held it in high regard.

Franz Schubert composed three grandly scaled piano sonatas in 1828—the final year of his life; the last of these, in B-flat major, is widely considered his greatest work in the form. All of the movements share thematic material that is based on meditative turns around a single pitch—songful and ruminative in character in the first two movements, dance-like in the last two. A third theme in the first movement—an ascending triadic figure in Schubert’s favorite dactylic rhythm—refers to his song “Der Wanderer,” a figure and idea often associated with the composer and his music, evoking an ultimately frustrated search for fulfillment. Commentators have suggested that the sonata reflects Schubert’s acceptance of his impending death, given the otherworldly beauty of the first two movements. The first is in an extended sonata form, featuring three themes in three different keys in its exposition. The second movement, in the harmonically distant key of C-sharp minor, reveals one of Schubert’s most haunting melodies, joined to a mysterious, rhythmically obsessive accompaniment. The final two movements take us into the world of dance, mixing cheerfulness and drama, the ethereal and (in the finale) the earthiness of Central European folk music.

David Korevaar, 2009
Program

Variations on a Hungarian Song, Op. 21, No. 2 (before 1861) Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)


Piedigrotta 1924: Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968)

Tarantella scura

Notte 'e luna

Calasciuanate

Voce luntane (Fenesta che lucive…)

Lariulà!

—INTERMISSION—

Sonata in B♭ Major, D 960 (1828) Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Molto moderato

Andante sostenuto

Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza

Allegro, ma non troppo

Program Notes

All of the music on this program takes some level of inspiration from folk or popular music, whether overtly, as in the works on the first half of the program; or more subtly, as in the Schubert Sonata, whose last movement has characteristics of the composer’s Hungarian style, and all of which is imbued with a Viennese sense of song and dance.

Published in 1861, Brahms’s extroverted and virtuosic Variations on a Hungarian Song, Op. 21, No. 2, features a tune in which the bars alternate between 3/4 and 4/4 time. The D major theme is short and quick, and is immediately followed by a series of variations (1-6) in D minor. Variations 7 and 8 slow down the tempo and return to D major. Variations 9-13 mix major and minor, and abandon the irregular meter of the theme in favor of a simple duple meter. The quick succession of short variations holds together with a logic that is reminiscent of Bach’s D-minor Chaconne and Beethoven’s C minor Variations. References to Beethoven continue into the coda, with a nod to the finale of the Ninth Symphony (also a set of variations in the key of D major).

Ernő Dohnányi was born in Pressburg (modern-day Bratislava) in 1877. He had a great early success with his first Piano Quintet, op. 1 — a work recognized and promoted by Brahms. At the Budapest Conservatory, he was classmates with Bartók, who looked up to the already successful Dohnányi as a role-model. Dohnányi rapidly rose to become one of the most important musical figures in Hungary, conducting the symphony, running the conservatory and the national radio, and sitting in the Hungarian Senate. At the end of World War II, he found himself a refugee, caught between the Nazis and communists, and was discovered in a displaced persons camp in Austria by his Hungarian-American student Eduard Kilenyi, who was with the US Army. After a brief stint teaching in Tucuman, Argentina, Dohnányi was brought to the United States to teach at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Composed in 1916, the Variations on a Hungarian Folk Song summarizes Dohnányi’s pianistic and compositional heritage—an amalgam of Brahms, Liszt, and Hungarian nationalism. The folk song is initially presented as a simple recitation of block chords in E minor without meter; the harmonic progression is similar to Bartók’s settings of folk material from the same period. The first five variations alternate slow and fast tempi until the slow, chordal fifth variation. The sixth through ninth variations increase in tempo and virtuosity, culminating in a cascade of octave chords. The final variation is a richly harmonized and ornamented reprise of the theme, now in E major, followed by a last, simple recitation of the original theme punctuated by quiet arpeggios.

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco was born in Florence in 1895 of a family that had settled in Italy after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. He is best known today for his guitar music—inspired by Segovia, whom he had met in 1932. In 1939 he left Italy because of the anti-Jewish racial laws promulgated by Mussolini, and like many composers who fled fascism at the time, settled in Hollywood where he quickly became an important composer of music for the movies. Both John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith were his pupils.

His first piano works—written just after the First World War—are marked by a penchant for impressionism and poetic titles. Piedigrotta 1924 represents a departure from that model: it is a virtuosic evocation of the annual Neapolitan song festival that had been held for years at the church of Piedigrotta, earthy and thoroughly Italian in style. The titles of each of the movements refer to poems by the Neapolitan dialect poet, songwriter, journalist, and essayist Salvatore di Giacomo (1860-1934). Di Giacomo’s

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