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# Introduction

## The Descriptive Piano Fantasia

As listeners of what is typically assumed to be absolute music, we vacillate between embracing the elusiveness of meaning and seeking narrative specificity. The prevailing analytical methods tend to favor the abstract, leading us to focus on music's quantifiable, indeed data-driven aspects: motive, theme, form, harmony (or absence thereof), and texture. The result of such an approach to the instrumental repertoire is that for a long time we have tended to reject extramusical interpretations. Even so, we often resort to verbal cues to describe the music, and as performers we envision specific images or progressions of certain emotional states that help us convey the dramatic trajectory of a piece to our audience. Finally—and somewhat paradoxically—there is no dearth of literary writing, often contemporary with the works being discussed, that seeks to “explain” instrumental music. Given this uneasy interpretive balance between the elusive and the explicit, it comes as no surprise that in recent decades, scholars of musical semiotics have sensed the obvious gap in contemporary reception and busied themselves with theorizing conceptual frameworks for musical meaning and narratives in the music of the Western concert canon.

What is missing from the discussion is an understanding of the thick *musical* context of these canonical works: the popular and ephemeral music that was enjoyed by listeners but soon forgotten and superseded by newer, more fashionable compositions. To ignore music that was intended for nothing more elevated than entertainment and delight, or for celebration and commemoration of social, political, and patriotic events, or (when it did appear in print) for immediate commercial gain, is to concoct a historical narrative that disregards a large segment of Western musical culture. To be sure, most of this music did not rise to the quality of the repertoire we study, cherish, and perform, but it just as certainly did influence it.

In an effort to provide some of the missing background, this volume is devoted to the forgotten repertoire of descriptive piano fantasias, a commercially successful genre of episodically constructed narrative pieces for the piano, characterized by the presence of brief verbal descriptions appearing throughout the score as subtitles or captions. These short texts explain precisely what the music is intended to depict or, in some cases,

which elements of the narrative are taking place as the piece progresses, in what amounts to a preemptive analysis of sorts. Much is to be learned from these pieces about the tastes of the musical public and the raw materials on which master composers—inevitably, given the times and places in which they lived—would draw.

A certain discomfort with openly depictive and programmatic music has a long history among composers and critics alike. In his sixth symphony, Beethoven carefully labeled his evocations of the quail, nightingale, and cuckoo in the third movement, not to mention the storm in the fourth, yet on the work's title page he sought to nuance the distinction between “feeling” and “depiction” (the former considered to be a legitimate poetic goal, the latter shallow and naïve). Robert Schumann used plenty of evocative titles for his piano pieces but was chided by Clara for doing so; moreover, although he never saw fit to review any descriptive music for piano, he offered his own narrative description of Chopin's variations on Mozart's “Là ci darem la mano” (op. 2, for piano and orchestra) in his enthusiastic review of the work. Still, despite his own use of titles and his invention of a plot for Chopin's piece (and another for Schubert's op. 33 waltzes), Schumann's 1835 review of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* made clear that he disapproved of explicit narrative in music. After outlining the program for the work, he wrote:

All Germany sniffed: to our minds such indications have something undignified and charlatanic about them! In any case the five principal titles would have sufficed; the more exact circumstances, although interesting on account of the personality of the composer who experienced the events of his own symphony, would have spread by word of mouth. In brief the sensitive German, averse to the subjective as he is, does not wish to be led so rudely in his thoughts; he was already sufficiently offended that Beethoven in the *Pastoral* Symphony did not trust him enough to divine its character without assistance. . . .

But Berlioz wrote for his own Frenchmen, who are not overly impressed by modesty. I can imagine them reading the program as they listen and applauding their countryman who so accurately pictured the whole. By itself, music does not mean anything to them.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld (New York: Pantheon Books, 1946), 180.

## 1. The Battle of Prague (ca. 1788)

František Kocžwara

**Slow March**

5

9

13

**Largo**

17 Word of command

22 First signal cannon The bugle horn call for the cavalry

*p* *f* *p* *f* *p*

*f* *f* *p* *f* *p*

### 3. La journée d'Ulm (1805)

Daniel Steibelt

#### Explication des pédales Explanation of Pedal Signs

- ☒ Signe pour la pédale du jeu de buffles  
Symbol for the celeste (moderator) stop
- ⊕ Signe pour la pédale qui lève les étouffoires  
Symbol for the damper pedal
- ⊕ Signe pour la pédale de la harpe  
Symbol for the lute stop
- ✻ Signe pour ôter la pédale qu'on employait  
Symbol for raising the pedal just used

#### Allegro maestoso

L'Empereur donne l'ordre du départ  
The Emperor issues marching orders

Départ des troupes  
Departure of the troops

Marche de Grétry: La garde passe  
Grétry's march from *Les deux avares*: "The watch is passing"

## 7. Une promenade sur le Nil (1833)

Andantino

Félicien David

Départ  
Departure

pp

pressez jusqu'au  $\text{cresc.}$

This system shows the beginning of the piece in 2/4 time, key of D major. The right hand features a melodic line with a crescendo leading to a fermata. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes.

Allegretto non troppo ( $\text{♩} = 84$ )Les rameurs  
The rowers

6

*p* *f*

This system begins at measure 6. The tempo is marked Allegretto non troppo with a quarter note equal to 84. The piece is titled 'Les rameurs' (The rowers). The music features a dynamic contrast from piano to forte.

12

*p* *f* *p*

This system covers measures 12 to 17. It continues the rowing theme with alternating piano and forte dynamics.

18

*f* *p* *f*

This system covers measures 18 to 23. The dynamic pattern of forte and piano continues, maintaining the rhythmic character of the rowers.

24

*p* *f* *p*

This system covers measures 24 to 29. The piece concludes with a final dynamic contrast of piano and forte.

## 14. Koncert nad koncertami (ca. 1910)

Marjan Signio

Ochoczo  
Zestfully

Było cymbalistów wielu,  
Ale żaden z nich nie śmiał zagrać przy Jankielu.  
Wiedzą wszyscy, że mu nikt na tym instrumencie  
Nie wyrówna w biegłości, w guście i w talencie.  
Proszą, ażeby zagrał, podają cymbały;  
Żyd wzbrania się, powiada, że ręce zgrubiły,  
Odwykł od grania, nie śmie i panów się wstydzi:  
Kłaniając się umyka. Gdy to Zosia widzi,  
Podbiega i na białej podaje mu dłoni  
Drażki, którymi zwykle mistrz we struny dzwoni,  
Drugą rączką po siwej brodzie starca głaska  
I dygając: „Jankielu, mówi, jeśli łaska!  
Wszak to me zaręczyny: zagrajże Jankielu!  
Wszak nieraz przyrzekałeś grać na mym weselu?”

Jankiel niezmiernie Zosię lubił: kiwnął brodą  
Na znak, że nie odmawia: więc go w środek wiodą,  
Podają krzesło, usiadł, cymbały przynoszą,  
Kładą mu na kolanach. On patrzy z rozkoszą  
I z dumą: jak weteran w służbę powołany,  
Gdy wnuki ciężki jego miecz ciągną ze ściany,  
Dziad śmieje się, choć miecza dawno nie miał w dłoni,  
Lecz uczył, że dłoń jeszcze nie zawiedzie broni.

Tymczasem dwaj uczniowie przy cymbałach kłęczą,

Many men played the dulcimer;  
With Jankiel present, though, no one would dare.  
Nobody, it was known, could match his bent  
For skillful handling of that instrument.  
They passed it to him, begged him to take part.  
The Jew, though, said his hands were stiff, his art  
Was rusty—plus, the masters’ presence awed him.  
Politely he refused. When Zosia heard him  
She hurried up; in his pale palm she laid  
The hammers he hit the strings with when he played.  
With her other hand she touched the old man’s beard  
And curtsyed. “Please, dear Jankiel,” she implored,  
“I’m getting engaged. You often promised you  
Would play at my wedding. Oh, please, Jankiel, do!”

Jankiel liked Zosia hugely; he agreed  
With a brief nod. Forward, then, he was led;  
They sat him down, gave him the dulcimer.  
He looked at it, pride and pleasure in his air,  
Like a veteran who once more receives the call:  
His grandsons heave his sword down from the wall;  
The old man smiles—it’s long since he last held it  
And yet he’s confident he still can wield it.

At first, two students kneel upon the ground

# Critical Report

## Sources

Our sources for the pieces in this volume are in most cases the first (often only) editions, or at least very early ones if primacy cannot be determined. Repertoire of this ephemeral nature did not necessarily receive the most rigorous editorial control, which means that the years of publication or printers' plate numbers are often missing, and that when more than one edition of a piece is to be found, it is very possible that some kind of piracy or (to put it in a more positive light) a certain casualness about copyrights might have been involved. This is especially true with the best-known of these selections, František Koczwara's *The Battle of Prague*: first published ca. 1788, it soon reappeared in a bewildering number of casually documented editions and arrangements. Although this and most other works in this volume are based on prints, one exception, as noted in the introduction, is Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wély's *Une messe de minuit à Rome*, which was written by hand into a friendship album.

The text of the title page of each source is transcribed here, including dedications (where they exist). We preserve the original orthography ("compo'd," etc.) for the title page transcriptions but modernize all such archaisms in the captions within the scores. In two cases, Koczwara's *The Battle of Prague* and Daniel Steibelt's *La journée d'Ulm*, a secondary source has been cited as well; for these works, therefore, the primary source is referred to as "source A" and the secondary as "source B."

### 1. *The Battle of Prague* (ca. 1788)

Dates for the early publications of this work, the most famous and widely distributed of the descriptive fantasias, are difficult to assess, though *Grove's Dictionary* mentions an extant copy of the Irish edition of this piece (published by John Lee of Dublin) dated 1788.<sup>1</sup> According to the same article, Koczwara was in Ireland in 1788, and in 1790 he was invited to return to London to serve as violist in "Gallini's orchestra at the King's Theatre." The printing upon which we are basing our edition, source A, was published in Dublin by Edmund Lee (who often issued publications in conjunction with his brother John Lee) and is dated to the 1790s. While other contemporary

publications of this piece often included violin and basso parts for a piano trio (or trio sonata) manner of performance, and some even added a drum, this print has the keyboard part only. The title and publisher information is placed at the top of the first page and reads:

THE BATTLE OF PRAGUE | A SONATA FOR THE PIANO FORTE  
OR HARPSICORD. | DUBLIN. Publifh'd by EDMUND LEE (N<sup>o</sup>.  
2) Dame Street near the Royal Exchange. | Of whom may be  
had The BATTLE of ROSBACH compo'd by C: E: BACH  
with the greateft variety | of other NEW MUSIC & choicest  
ton'd Grand & Small Patent Piano Fortes. &c.

The explicit mention of the anonymous and uncomfortably similar *Battle of Rosbach* (see the discussion in the introduction under "The Music of This Edition") further supports the proximity of this print to the first edition. This suspicious and uncredited dependence of *Prague* on *Rosbach* (in addition to the scandalous circumstance of his death) may give some indication why the same Grove article quoted above closes with a curt description of Koczwara as "a clever vagabond, and a dissipated creature."

Another print of this work, source B, has also been consulted in order to include the fourteen-measure coda that appears in many later editions. This source also provides some other readings as noted in the critical notes. The title page of source B reads:

The | BATTLE OF PRAGUE, | a favorite | SONATA, | for the |  
PIANO FORTE, | BY | KOTSWARA. | Ent. Sta. Hall. Pr. 2— |  
London. | G. Walker & Son, 17, Soho Square.

The address of the publisher helps to date this print, given Frank Kidson's comment that "in 1824 [Walker] appears to have entirely removed to 17, Soho Square, where, as George Walker & Son, the firm existed for some time."<sup>2</sup>

### 2. *La mort de Louis Seize* (1794)

There is no indication that this work, one of a number of pieces published in France that in effect commemorated the death of the *ancien régime*, ever received a second printing. The original score includes violin accompaniment for *ad libitum* performance; in accordance with our

1. *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. J. A. Fuller Maitland (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser Company, 1922), s.v. "Kotzwara."

2. Frank Kidson, *British Music Publishers, Printers and Engravers: London, Provincial, Scottish, and Irish* (London: W. E. Hill & Sons, [1900]), 134.