Robert Holm Program Notes "Classical and Romantic Piano Fantasies" 2/18/2025

Fantasies and Toccatas from the Baroque era were loosely-organized one-movement multi-sectional pieces often alternating between imitative techniques and virtuosic passages that show off the touch of the performer. Franz Josef Haydn's **Fantasy in C major**, Hob. XVII: 4, also known as "Capriccio," follows this tradition with a witty theme treated imitatively balanced by passages featuring wide-ranging arpeggios. Completed near the end of his full-time employment with the Esterhazy family in 1789, Haydn used the Austrian folk song *D' Bäurin hat d'Katz verlor'n* ("The farmer's wife has lost her cat") for his melody and wrote the publisher, "In a moment of great good humour I have completed a new Capriccio for fortepiano, whose taste, singularity and special construction cannot fail to receive approval from connoisseurs and amateurs alike." The piece ends with 32nd-note falling passages that may be interpreted as octave glissandos, composed 15 years before Beethoven would make the technique famous in the "Waldstein" Sonata.

"My angel…my everything…my happiness…my solace" are terms of endearment found in a ten-page love letter to an "immortal beloved," discovered among Ludwig van Beethoven's belongings after his death. Of at least five possibilities for whom these passionate outpourings were intended, many believe that the intended recipient could have been Josephine Brunsvik or her sister Countess Thérèse Brunszvik to whom Beethoven's **Sonata in F-sharp major, op. 78** was dedicated. Composed in 1809, three years before the "Immortal Beloved" letter was written, Beethoven's two-movement sonata is noted for its brevity--only two movements long--and is likely to be performed "quasi fantasia" without a noticeable movement break. The opening movement begins with a short *Adagio* introduction followed by an unusually beautiful and lyrical theme for Beethoven. Like the "Appassionata" Sonata composed just before it, Beethoven chooses to repeat the Development and Recapitulation as well as the Exposition, recalling the binary approach to binary form common in early Classical composers. After a jaunty three-chord exclamation borrowed from the first movement, the Finale, based on a snippet of "Rule Brittania," features chains of two-note slurs which are at once hilarious and boisterous.

Often considered the Romantic counterpart to Beethoven's C-sharp minor *Sonata quasi Fantasia*, op. 27, no. 2, "Moonlight," Felix Mendelssohn's **Fantasy in F-sharp minor, op. 28** follows the same formal plan: slow-medium-fast without obvious movement breaks. Mendelssohn's work on a "Sonata écosaisse (Scottish Sonata)" and his Scottish Symphony began in 1828-1829, but when Mendelssohn sent the Fantasy for publication four years later, he dropped the subtitle. As in the "Moonlight" Sonata, The Mendelssohn's slow movement is followed by a moderately paced dance piece in a major key. In the case of the Fantasy, the trio of the second movement resembles a Gavotte and is full of Bach's contrapuntal influence. The tumultuous finale resembles Beethoven's masterpiece in many ways, especially at the end with plummeting passagework and heavy final chords. Felix's older sister Fanny wrote to her brother regarding this piece in 1834: "your Sonata in F# pleases me very much and I play it assiduously, for it is—à la Felix—very hard."

The compositional background for the **Symphonic Etudes, op. 13** is likely the most complicated of all Robert Schumann's works. In 1834, Schumann met Ernestine von Fricken, became secretly engaged to her, and included a cypher of her hometown ASCH in his most famous piano piece *Carnaval*. In the same year. Ernestine's father Baron Ignaz Ferdinand von Fricken sent Schumann a theme and variations for flute and piano. While Schumann criticized the theme itself, he decided to use it as the basis for his Etudes and Variations; in fact, the first edition includes a footnote stating the theme was contributed by an "amateur composer." Schumann set out to compose a work starting with the Baron's funereal theme, followed by a number of variations, and finishing with a triumphant finale. In all, Schumann completed 14 variations of which five were never published during his lifetime, added Etudes III and IX, which though similar to the theme are not true variations, and concluded the piece with Etude XII which is actually a variation on a theme by Heinrich Marschner, a German Romantic opera composer. It took approximately three years before the work was published the first time in 1837 and a second edition without Etudes III and IX was issued 15 years later. Today, most editions publish the Theme with 12 Etudes and an appendix with the five posthumously published Variations. This large-scale variation set has been compared with Bach's epic Goldberg Variations, especially where Bach's 16th of 30 variations resembles a French Overture style which serves to "restart" the lengthy piece; Schumann was inspired to do the same in Etude VIII. Because many performers today find all of the Etudes and Variations intriguing, it is up to the interpreter to place the Variations among the Etudes. In this performance, the five posthumous Variations will be heard after the French Overture Etude VIII. Then, after the nocturnal Variation V in D-flat major, the piece will resume from Etude IX through the Finale.