

The opening of Smetana's ***The Moldau*** (named after the river in Czech Republic) is perhaps the most perfect depiction of an element of nature in all of Romantic music. From the first measures, one cannot escape imagining the water streams forming into a smoothly flowing river. Through this tone poem, the composer takes us on a journey through his beloved fatherland along the Moldau River, which crosses through the entire country as a main artery, portraying scenes such as hunt, farm wedding, mermaids in the moonlight, rapids, and culminating at the river's wide current.

The Moldau is the second in the set of the six symphonic poems titled *Má Vlast (My Fatherland)*, but over the years it has become so popular that today it is mostly performed on its own.

Les Preludes is the third and best known of Liszt's thirteen Symphonic Poems (term invented by the composer). While the powerful orchestration and perfectly balanced structure of the piece remind one of Beethoven and Berlioz, one cannot escape the sound that would become known as "Wagnerian", such as in the majestic "Question" theme appearing after the introduction and concluding the piece. The work portrays the passionate and stormy with the intimate Liszt, often using the same thematic material in highly contrasting sections. This trait is a kind of a trademark of the composer; his ability to invent new expressions for the same themes is never-ending!

In dealing with the challenges of sharing the keyboard in the piano-four-hand repertoire, pianists cannot stop admiring Liszt's pianistic writing – capturing the best elements of *Les Preludes'* orchestral colors, while laying out the texture in the most comfortable arrangement among the four hands. As in his works for solo piano, the hands fall in love with the piece!

Allegro molto vivace is one of Tchaikovsky's most uplifting movements, yet a part of his most tragic composition. The Sixth Symphony has a curious story of the composer's trip to America. Tchaikovsky was invited to conduct the inaugural concerts at the newly built Carnegie Hall along with Walter Damrosch. When the two had dinner one night, Tchaikovsky told Damrosch about the works he was composing, particularly the new Symphony: "it has the program, which I am not revealing." Damrosch then offered to conduct the premiere in New York, which Tchaikovsky happily accepted. However, Tchaikovsky ended up conducting the premiere himself in St. Petersburg, and a few days later he had died.

The news spread all over the world, reaching and saddening Damrosch as well. However, three weeks later, he received a package in the mail, which contained the score and the parts of the Sixth Symphony. To Damrosch this was "a voice from the dead." This was the last composition published in the composer's lifetime.

The entire symphony was written out for piano four hands by the composer, yet the third movement translates the most colors and orchestral effects into the instrument.

Ravel's dazzling ***La Valse: poème chorégraphique pour orchestre*** was conceived as a ballet commissioned by the founder of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev. However, after first hearing the work in a two-piano version, Diaghilev said that it was a "not a ballet. It is a portrait of ballet" – a comment that effectively ended the relationship between

the two. *La Valse*, written shortly after World War I, has resemblances to the great Strauss waltzes, yet with a clear statement on where the new music is headed, especially with its harmonic developments. It begins with a conception-like vagueness of a waltz and ends nearly destroying the form.

Ravel had written the piece for the full orchestra, but also arranged it for the two pianos and the piano solo. The piano-four-hands version on this recording comes from Ravel's lifelong friend Lucien Garban upon the request of the composer himself.

Composed in just a few weeks, the most popular American work for soloist and orchestra – ***Rhapsody in Blue*** – was actually not planned on happening. In the winter of 1923, the bandleader Paul Whiteman approached Gershwin with an idea of a large scale piano-and-orchestra work for an all-Jazz concert in February 1924. Given the nature of the short notice and the expected revisions to the score, Gershwin politely declined. However, a few weeks later, during a billiards game, George's brother Ira stumbled upon a *New York Tribune* article promoting the Whiteman concert, where the last paragraph mentioned Gershwin working on a new jazz concerto. Confused, Gershwin called Whiteman the next morning and found out that Whiteman's rival, Vincent Lopez, wanted to steal the idea of the concert, so Whiteman had no choice. This finally pushed Gershwin to compose the work.

He plotted the piece on a train trip from New York to Boston and scored the original for two pianos. Whiteman's arranger Ferde Grofé finished the orchestration eight days before the premiere.

Due to the immense popularity of the work, there have been numerous arrangements made, including this four-hand version by Henry Levine.

Having already established themselves as solo artists, the **Shelest Piano Duo** brings to the performance stage inventive programs of four hand music. The Ukrainian born husband and wife team of Anna and Dmitri Shelest are rapidly gaining a reputation for offering performances that help to create a greater understanding of the piano in particular, and the performing arts in general. First Prize winners of Bradshaw and Buono International Piano Competition, Shelest Piano Duo made their Carnegie Hall debut in 2011 and appeared at the venue annually since.

Described by **The New York Times** as a pianist of "a fiery sensibility and warm touch", **Anna Shelest** began her career with a performance at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris when she was eleven years old, and an orchestral debut with Kharkiv Symphony Orchestra the following year in a performance of Rachmaninoff First Piano Concerto. Since then, she has performed throughout the world as both a soloist and chamber musician, including appearances with the Cincinnati, Montreal, and Netherlands Symphony Orchestras, as well as the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. Her recent debuts included performances at Alice Tully Hall, Stern Auditorium at Carnegie Hall, The Kennedy Center, and the Wiener Konzerthaus. Her discography includes recordings of works by Rachmaninoff, Mussorgsky ***Pictures at an Exhibition***, and ***"Spirit and Romance"*** – featuring Schumann Sonata Op.11 and piano transcriptions by Liszt and Busoni.

Dmitri Shelest is a top prizewinner of Bartok-Kabalevsky-Prokofiev International Piano Competition, Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) Piano Competition, Eastern Music Festival Concerto Competition, World Piano Competition, and Iowa International Piano Competition, among others. After graduating in 2005, he pursued a post-baccalaureate degree in Entrepreneurship in the same school, receiving the second degree in 2008. Since then, he has been active as a soloist, chamber musician, and a teacher.