

Rentaro Taki - “Moon Over The Ruined Castle” (1901) arranged by A. Yashiro, embellishment by S. Chan.

In 1901, the Japanese composer Rentaro Taki (1879-1903) composed the melody for “Moon over The Ruined Castle”. It was without words, intended for a music instruction book for junior high school children. The original melody had a chromatic note that did not fit the Asian or Japanese tonal scale. The chromatic note was later altered for the Japanese pentatonic pattern. Lyrics were also added later by poet Bansu Doi reflecting the destruction by internal wars in the 1860s, as Japan moved towards a modern society. Doi’s lyrics were inspired by a poem etched onto a fallen castle’s wall. The nostalgic poem was actually written by a female fighter who was also a gunnery instructor. Because of the long Japanese occupation of Taiwan in the early 1900s, this song is also very well known by the Taiwanese people. The great American jazz musician Thelonious Monk, recorded this song on his album named “Straight No Chaser” of 1967. It is a wonderful jazz version.

Arnold Bax - “Elegiac Trio” for Flue, Viola and Harp (1916)

Arnold Bax (1883-1953) was an English composer born in south London. From a well-to-do family, his teenage years were spent in a mansion in Hamstead. After attending the Royal Academy, he was able to concentrate solely on composing. He traveled widely, including in Dresden, Germany and Ireland where he returned frequently to a favorite coastal village in Donegal. He immersed himself in everything Irish, its Atlantic coast, the language, literature - inspired by Yeats’ poetry. He became close friends with several key nationalist and literary figures including Padraig Pearse. The Easter Uprising in Ireland and the resulting execution in 1916 of his friend Pearse undoubtedly affected him. The Elegiac Trio for Flute, Viola and Harp was written as a memorial. The melodic pairing of instruments can be heard in sections - alternating between the three instruments. Reflective in nature, it is a beautiful work celebrating Bax’s deep affection for the Irish.

“Jasmine Flower” and excerpt from Giacomo Puccini’s opera “Turandot” (1924/1926)

The Jasmine Flower, is probably the best known Chinese folk song around the world, created during the Qing dynasty in the 1700s. The words are:

好一朵美丽的茉莉花 What a beautiful Jasmine Flower
好一朵美丽的茉莉花 What a beautiful Jasmine Flower

芬芳美麗滿枝桠 Fragrant and beautiful buds fill all branches
又香又白人人誇 Sweet scent and so pure white that everyone praises!
讓我來將你摘下，送給別人家 Let me come and harvest you, to gift to the others
茉莉花阿，茉莉花 Jasmine Flower, Oh, Jasmine Flower!

Familiar to many children, the song has been adapted for piano and other instruments. Choirs all over the world have also sung many beautifully harmonized versions of it. Our arrangement of the original song is from a piano book by Taiwanese composer Ma Shui-Long. A harp part is added by S. Chan, to imitate the guzheng, a zither-like old Chinese tabletop plucked string instrument, very similar to the Japanese Koto as well.

The Italian opera composer Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924), came across “Jasmine Flower” on a Swiss Music box belonging to his friend Fassini. He then used it several times in his last opera “Turandot” in 1924. In the opera, the very cruel Chinese princess Turandot kills every suitor by making them answer three impossible riddles, until finally a Persian prince succeeded. Sadly, Puccini died before he could finish this opera, another Italian composer Franco Alfano completed it in 1926. Unlike Puccini’s “Madame Butterfly” set in Japan, “Turandot” is rarely performed. Though both have strong and authentic Asian flavors.

This excerpt is arranged from Puccini’s opera scene “Mountains of the East”. The harp imitates bells with overtones at first, creating exotic parallel “Jasmine Flower” songs in two different keys. In Puccini’s opera scene, the melody is altered very slightly, yet the underlying harmony changes the tonality significantly.

“Sakura Sakura” Traditional Japanese Folk Song

The song depicts the short season in the spring when flowering cherry trees blossom everywhere; and “Hanami”, the Cherry Blossom Festival. One of the most significant symbol of world peace was the gifting of 3,000 flowering cherry trees in 1912 from Japan to Washington, planted everywhere near the DC Capitol mall. From which, we now have a “Hanami” too in DC every spring! This beautiful arrangement of the song by Yashiro captures the mystic as well as the sounds of the ancient instrument koto (a zither) of Japan, imitated by the harp.

One translation of the words is:

Sakura, Sakura, in fields, mountains and villages.
As far as the eye can see.

Is it mist, or clouds?
Fragrant in the rising sun.
Come now, come now,
Let's go and see them.

“Little Sis Rainbow” Traditional Mongolian Song

Little Sis(ter) Rainbow is a charming Mongolian song often sung by Chinese children, as it is simple in both melody and words. However, it does express a bit of melancholy in a later verse, where the lovers have been separated. “Little sister” does not literally mean a sibling, it is used often as an endearing term for a maiden. In this song, it is describing a person in love with the young lady in red and rainbow colors. The words are:

紅彩妹妹 嗯唉嗨啲 Little Sis Rainbow, oo-la-la
長得好那麼 嗯唉嗨啲 Has grown into such fine form, oo-la-la
櫻桃小嘴 嗯唉嗨啲 Red cherry lips, oo-la-la
一點點那麼 嗯唉嗨啲 So very petite, oo-la-la

三月裡來桃花開 Comes March, peach flowers are blooming
我和妹妹成恩愛 Little Sis and I have fallen in love
八月中秋月正圓 At mid- August festival, with the perfect moon
想起了妹妹淚漣漣 Thinking of little Sis, tears streaming down my face

Florence Price, “Ticklin’Toes”

American composer Florence Price (1887-1953) was one of the most outstanding composers of her time. In 1932, her “Symphony in E minor” won the Wanamaker competition, and was then premiered by the Chicago Symphony in 1933! It was the very first time a piece by an African American woman was played by a major symphony.

Florence Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, studied in Boston at the New England Conservatory. After establishing a successful teaching career in Georgia, she later returned to Little Rock with her husband, a lawyer. In 1927, after a series of racial incidents and the lynching of a black man in Little Rock , the family moved up north to Chicago. The marriage ended by 1931 due to financial hardship and her abusive husband. During this difficult time, with her two daughters, she lived and

worked together with Margaret Bonds, a student, also an accomplished African American composer. Through Bonds, she met two towering figures, poet Langston Hughes of the Harlem Renaissance and the singer contralto Marian Anderson. Prominent and Influential in the arts and literary world, they were very much admired and valued, especially in Europe where Marian Anderson had many successful concerts. The friendship aided in Florence Price's creative energies and career developments.

“Ticklin’Toes” is reflective of Price's African American roots. The syncopated rhythms and melodies exude cheer and humor, is reminiscent of ragtime music, the precursor of jazz as well.

Claude Debussy - Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (1915)

No 2 of six chamber works dedicated to and in honor of his wife Emma

- I. Pastorale: Lento, dolce rubato
- II. Interlude: Tempo di Minuetto
- III. Finale: Allegro moderato ma risoluto

Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) was a French composer whom many have described as impressionistic, similar to French artist Claude Monet and others.

During troubled times in Europe around 1914 with World War I, Debussy intended to write a set of six sonatas of varied chamber combinations. Inspired by and aimed to preserve the French Baroque tradition, he instructed the publisher specifically, to list these as "by Claude Debussy, the French musician".

In 1915, second of the set, the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp was composed. Because of his poor health from colon cancer, Debussy never completed the set. He said of the trio "...is so terribly melancholy, I can not say whether one should laugh or cry, perhaps both at the same time?"

Some exotic flavors in Debussy's works actually came from his fascination with East Asian music, which he described as instinctual connection with tiny sounds of nature, like the sea and winds of the leaves. In 1889, during the world fair in Paris, Debussy heard the Indonesian musicians of Java playing their gamelan music. Mesmerized, he spent days listening and studying its structure. Very fortunately, the Paris Conservatory of Music was also given a set of gamelan instruments by the Dutch, acquired during the Dutch occupation of Indonesia. Gamelan ensembles are composed of percussive sets of gongs, metallophones, xylophones, bamboo flutes,

string instruments (rebab) etc. Debussy absorbed these musical elements and aesthetics, not only making his own music unique and exotic, he forever changed the musical landscape in the world, away from the dominating Germanic influences.

“Pastorale” opens with a beautiful, dissonant melody by the harp, joined by the flute with filigree, followed by the viola which joins and eventually leads to a resolution. Flowing melodies and accompanying ripple-like figures continue before a joyful dance section enters. The beginning motifs return before the movement ends. Ambiguity abounds, yet always with sparkling energy contrasted with calming colors.

“Interlude” with Tempo di Minuetto pays tribute to the earlier Minuet dance form, but is lyrical and thoroughly "modern" in its harmony, with whole tone scales and exotic sonorities.

“Final” uses a whole range of string effects - sharply accented plucked pizzicato, ponticello for high pitch overtone, harmonics for whistling on the viola, and marked strumming in the harp. The flute adds wind power with its extended range, trading off with viola and harp, at times doubling in unison for tonal color blending.

Masterfully composed, Debussy set the standard of this unique instrumental combination, for all composers to aspire to.