

# FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN & FRANZ LISZT

## COMPLETE MUSIC FOR CELLO AND PIANO

### The Fischer Duo

Norman Fischer, cello

Jeanne Kierman, piano

### Chopin: Sonata in g minor, Op. 65 (26:27)

- 1 I Allegro moderato (10:48)
- 2 II Scherzo (5:05)
- 3 III Largo (4:01)
- 4 IV Finale: Allegro (6:18)

- 5 Liszt: La lugubre gondola (8:59)
- 6 Liszt: Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth (6:09)
- 7 Chopin: Polonaise Brillante, Op. 3 (9:07)
- 8 Liszt: Romance oubliée (3:33)
- 9 Liszt: Élégie No.1 (5:36)
- 10 Liszt: Élégie No. 2 (5:03)
- 11 Chopin: Grand Duo Concertant (12:17)

## LISZT AND CHOPIN: COMPLETE MUSIC FOR CELLO AND PIANO

Born 19 months and 357 miles apart, Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and Franz Liszt (1811-1886) became the two pianistic giants of the 19th century and together changed the future of piano playing. Although the two moved to Paris around the same time and became friends, their careers took very different paths. Chopin, born in Poland, was reclusive and turned more towards composition and the development of his own brand of pianism. He rarely ventured out onto the concert stage (he only played about 30 public performances), preferring the more intimate setting of the salon. Liszt, on the other hand, was a Hungarian extrovert, who played in public as often as he could, reveling in the adulation accorded the greatest keyboard virtuoso of the era. The bulk of Liszt's compositional output in the early years (while Chopin and he were friends) was transcriptions of other composers' works. When opportunities arose for them to write for the cello, each responded in a unique way. For Liszt it was an intimate expression of inner serenity; for Chopin it was an opportunity for extravagant virtuosity. In other words, the music on this recording showcases the more extroverted side of the introvert Chopin and the more introverted side of the extrovert Liszt.

For two composers who were so closely associated with solo keyboard music, the choice of writing for the cello marked an interesting departure. Of Chopin's four extant chamber works, three are for cello and piano. In each case it is clear that his motivation stemmed from friendship, tempered by a knowledge of the player's virtuosity. Chopin dedicated the *Op. 3 Polonaise* to the Polish virtuoso Joseph Merk, and both the *Grand Duo Concertant* and *Sonata in G minor* were written for his close friend, celebrated Parisian cellist, Auguste Franchomme. As a result, the works demonstrate the full range of virtuoso

playing for both instruments.

Liszt's interest in the cello seems linked to his appreciation of the tenor/baritone singing quality of the instrument. His earliest foray into cello composition occurred in 1857 with a transcription of Wagner's "*O du mein holder Abendstern*" from *Tannhäuser*, the manuscript of which is now lost. The other extant works, including those on this recording, date from the last 12 years of Liszt's life and are typical of his most mature style, featuring an advanced harmonic vocabulary, combined with sparse textures and spare melodic writing.

Fourteen years after the beginning of his friendship with Auguste Franchomme in 1832, Chopin turned a final time to writing for the cello. Instead of showcasing the virtuosic characteristics of the two instruments in a salon-style work, Chopin chose the most serious idiom: a four-movement sonata. Much had transpired in the intervening years – frequent illness, suffering and a deteriorating love affair – but Franchomme's friendship remained steadfast. Chopin could not know that this *Sonata in G minor* was to be the last work he would write (1846), the last work he would play in public (1848), and the last work he would hear at his deathbed (1849).

The first movement is an extensive sonata form that integrates the two instruments seamlessly both in melodic and accompanying figurations. The second movement is an energetic scherzo with a glorious cello melody in D major as its trio counterpart. Chopin clearly had Franchomme's beautiful legato as his inspiration when he composed the slow movement – a Nocturne in B-flat Major. The final movement starts in G Minor, and is brilliantly complex and rhythmically exciting. In the coda, Chopin changes the key to G Major only to surprise us at the very end with a plagal cadence, as if to say "Amen".

The image of a Venetian hearse – a gondola painted and draped in black–

was particularly striking to Liszt while he was visiting his son-in-law, Richard Wagner, during Wagner's final illness in Venice. Liszt wrote two versions of *La lugubre gondola* for piano solo, one before Wagner's death and one after. It is this second version that Liszt transcribed for cello and piano (this was the preferred medium by the composer), and it is one of his most strikingly personal masterpieces. In the haunting opening recitative the attentive listener can hear oblique references to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. The second theme offers a beautiful cello melody over a piano ostinato, which produces unusual dissonances, and the middle dolente section explores alternating major and minor chords to create an eerie musical chiaroscuro. The opening motive returns in a climactic appassionato, and the coda brings in a series of slow processional minor chords, much like a funeral dirge.

Nonnenwerth is a tiny island in the Rhine River, which consisted of only a few fishermen's cottages and a half-ruined convent, which Liszt leased as a quiet summer-time haven for his children and his lover, the Countess Marie d'Agoult, in the years 1841–43. (It was at Nonnenwerth that the legendary Roland-Charlemagne's nephew – was to have died of love). After visiting Liszt on the island, the Prince Felix Lichnowsky of Prussia was inspired to write a poem about Nonnenwerth and its legends, which Liszt set in 1841 as the beautiful song *Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth*. In 1880, he reconstructed the present version of *Nonnenwerth* for cello and piano.

"The *polonaise* was for the young Chopin what the 'characteristic' suite was for the young Schumann: a form into which he could most easily pour his musical personality and instrumental virtuosity", writes Alan Walker, in *Frédéric Chopin: Profiles of the Man and the Musician* (London, 1966). After making some early attempts at writing solo piano polonaises while still in Poland, Chopin sat down to write a more substantial one in 1826: "Here I have written an 'alla Polacca'

with accompaniment for the violoncello. It is nothing more than a glittering trifle for the salon, for ladies. I wanted Princess Wanda, the daughter of the cello-playing Prince, to learn it. She is still very young- perhaps seventeen- and beautiful; it is a real delight to set her delicate little fingers to rights." The following year Chopin added a lyric introduction, and having dedicated it to the prominent Polish cellist Joseph Merk (whom Chopin admired greatly) published in 1831 as his Op. 3. In the version performed on this recording, some of the more accompanimental cello figures in the original are augmented to mirror the piano's virtuosity (as done first by cellist Emmanuel Feuermann in the early 20th century).

Liszt's *Romance oubliée* was originally a song, setting a poem written by Grand Duchess Carolina Pavlovna in the late 1840s. Liszt writes in a letter from the Villa d'Este in Rome to Olga van Meyendorff: "A publisher has come upon some at least 25-year-old sheet album and wants to publish it. I protest against outdated things, and so I have rewritten the *Romance oubliée*, which I here enclose. If it does not displease you, I shall transcribe it." The transcription for cello and piano dates from 1880. It opens with a tender melody, and after a short cadenza, the cello settles into the playing of arpeggios against the piano's chordal backdrop (reminiscent of similar writing for the solo viola in Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*).

*Élégie I* was written in 1874 for the memorial service of Countess Nesselrode, and it was originally scored for cello, piano, harp and harmonium. The Countess was a patron of Liszt and a student of Chopin, and according to one source, was known as the "Czar's spy in crinolines".

Liszt writes about the work: "Originally it was to have been called 'Lullaby in the tomb', but later I felt this to be forced and simply wrote: '*Élégie*'". This work is in three sections with a unified theme, and represents a prime example

of Liszt's late period fascination with semitonal relationships.

Lina Ramann, Liszt's first biographer and dedicatee of the *Élégie II*, writes in her journal of 1883 "the aged Liszt had wished to write elegies all the time, since his whole existence had become elegy." Liszt wrote this second *Élégie* in 1877, at the Villa d'Este. Like the *Élégie I*, it is in three sections and 3/4 time, but it takes on a quality of a distant waltz and is not so dark in mood as its predecessor.

Paris was the musical mecca of the first part of the 19th century, and any pianist had to make an impression there in order to have an international concert career. Thus, Chopin left his native Poland in 1831, to penetrate the inner circle of the salon and to be seen at the Symphony and the Opéra. The big operatic hit that year was Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, and Chopin writes: "It is a huge masterpiece of the modern school in which devils, forming the huge chorus, sing through speaking trumpets and spirits arise from the grave in groups of fifty or sixty. On stage there is a set which towards the end is transformed into the interior of a church brightly lit up....and most remarkable of all, with a grand organ whose sound, from the back of the stage, is stunning and virtually drowns the orchestra. Meyerbeer has made himself immortal." In that same year, at a party at Liszt's house, Chopin met the famous cellist August Franck. They walked afterwards to Chopin's apartment where Chopin played the piano, and afterwards Franck apparently exclaimed, "I understood him immediately!" It was only natural that the two new friends would collaborate in the composition of the *Grand Duo Concertant* in the popular 'opera fantasy' genre. Whether Franck and Chopin jointly composed this piece or whether Franck merely gave Chopin technical advice on writing for the cello is not clear, but ultimately it seems irrelevant when hearing this charming and witty work.

The hero's struggle between Good and Evil is the theme of Meyerbeer's opera. *Robert le Diable*, the son of a sinister fiend and a virtuous noblewoman, is, upon entering manhood, befriended by his wicked father in disguise, who tries to turn Robert to 'the dark side'. His mother, anticipating the actions of the fiend, sends Robert several letters from her deathbed, using a virtuous young maid as a messenger. The climax comes as Robert is forced to make his decision. The Chopin/Franchomme duo makes the most of this drama. After an extended piano introduction, the cello enters with Robert's 'Romanza' from Act I, followed by the 'Terzetto' between the virtuous maid and a chorus of male admirers (the repeated spondaic "E's" are her words "No, No, No, No"). The Andante cantabile is from Act V when Robert decides to take the path of Good (note the change of mode to major), and concludes with the Act I Terzetto, resplendent with virtuoso flourishes for both cello and piano.

—Norman Fischer

Founded in 1971, **The Fischer Duo** has delighted lovers of chamber music across the country with performances described as "boldly imaginative and technically assured," (*Boston Globe*), "intense and persuasive" (*Gramophone*), and "Soaring lines with both beauty and intensity" (*New York Times*).

The Fischer Duo has been widely praised by music critics for its choice of repertoire. Thoroughly versed in the classical repertoire of Brahms, Beethoven and Schumann, The Fischer Duo has acquired an equally impressive reputation for rediscovering neglected works of the past (Busoni, Boulanger, Foote, Liszt) and for commissioning new pieces. "One felt like applauding The

Fischer Duo before they even played a note for programming rarely-heard cello music by Chopin and Liszt," wrote a reviewer in the *Washington Post*.

The Fischer Duo is also known for enlightened residency work. The United States Information Agency (USIA) selected The Fischer Duo as Artistic Ambassadors. As such, they toured South America and South Africa, receiving the highest ratings for musical maturity and open access to audiences.

The critic from the *Toledo Blade* summed up a concert experience with the Fischer Duo: "If there were a prize for 'Most Elegant Sound by a Chamber Group', The Fischer Duo would surely win it. The two together have a sort of slow-burning combustion on stage that makes for some really exciting and spontaneous music. This is a pair that really knows their repertoire, and more importantly, knows how to absorb an audience into their own musical universe."

**Norman Fischer** first appeared on the international concert stage as cellist with the Concord String Quartet, an ensemble that won the Naumburg Chamber Music Award, an Emmy and several Grammy nominations, recording over forty works for RCA Red Seal, Vox, Nonesuch, Turnabout and CRI. *The New York Times* recently wrote, "During its 16 years, the supervirtuosic Concord String Quartet championed contemporary work while staying rooted in the Western tradition."

In addition to performing the standard concerti, Mr. Fischer has premiered and recorded many new scores for cello and orchestra including Robert Sirota's *Cello Concerto*, Steven Stucky's *Voyages*, Augusta Read Thomas's *Vigil* and Ross Lee Finney's *Narrative* (both recorded with the Cleveland Chamber Symphony).

Norman Fischer's chamber music expertise has led to guest appearances

with the American, Audubon, Blair, Cavani, Chester, Chiara, Ciompi, Cleveland, Enso, Emerson, Juilliard, Mendelssohn and Schoenberg String Quartets, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Chamber Music International, Context and Houston's DaCamera Society. He frequently appears in performances of 18th and 19th century music played on period instruments, and with pianist Jeanne Kierman and violinist Andrew Jennings, performs as The Concord Trio, a group that has played together for more than thirty years.

A devoted teacher and mentor to young players, Mr. Fischer has been on the faculty of Dartmouth College and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and is currently Professor of Violoncello at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Since 1985 he has taught at the Tanglewood Music Center, in Lenox, MA, where he is Coordinator of Chamber Music and Strings.

**Jeanne Kierman** is a graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the Dalcroze School, and the New England Conservatory. Ms. Kierman studied with William Masselos, Miles Mauney, Victor Rosenbaum, and Menachem Pressler. Formerly on the faculties of the Oberlin Conservatory and Dartmouth College, Ms. Kierman has made a professional specialty as a player and teacher of ensemble repertoire. For ten years she toured extensively under the sponsorship of the New England Foundation and the Vermont Arts Council as a member of the Alcott Piano Quartet. She has performed for Da Camera of Houston, Mohawk Trail Concerts, Chamber Music Ann Arbor, Skaneateles and the Marrowstone Festival among others. In the summer months, Ms. Kierman works with high school students in piano chamber music at the Greenwood Music Camp in Massachusetts and performs with The Concord Trio. Ms. Kierman has written about her experiences as a collaborative pianist for *Piano and Keyboard Magazine* and has recorded for Northeastern Records and Gasparo Records.

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Piano technician: Dean Shank · Piano; Hamburg Steinway D, 1984 (491220)

This project would not have been possible without the encouragement, love, and support of our dear friend Judy Sherman. Marty Merritt and Tom Littman helped in all matters dealing with Stude Concert Hall and we are indebted to the constant generosity of Shepherd School of Music Dean, Robert Yekovich and the Shepherd School staff.

One man who uniquely embodied the combination of thoughtful introspection and extravagant extroversion was our dear friend Michael Hammond (1932-2002). His vision and enthusiasm were a constant inspiration. The Shepherd School of Music at Rice University was very blessed to have him as its leader and we are sad that his tenure as chairman at the National Endowment for the Arts was so brief. He died only a few weeks after we finished this recording and we would like to dedicate it lovingly to his memory.

*-Norman Fischer and Jeanne Kierman*

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