



≡ Vassily Primakov ≡

piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Three Intermezzos, Op. 117

1. I. Intermezzo No. 1 in E-flat Major (5:10)
2. II. Intermezzo No. 2 in B-flat Minor (5:15)
3. III. Intermezzo No. 3 in C-sharp Minor (7:16)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Four Ballades

4. I. Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 23 (10:00)
5. II. Ballade No. 2 in F Major, Op. 38 (7:30)
6. III. Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47 (8:07)
7. IV. Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52 (11:56)

Aleksandr Scriabin (1872-1915)

Sonata No. 4 in F-sharp Major, Op. 30

8. I. Andante (2:57)
9. II. Prestissimo volando (5:13)

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Chopin – Brahms – Scriabin

Chopin seems to have invented the term *Ballade* to describe the four compositions in this recital, though it was enthusiastically taken up – with different layers of meaning – by subsequent piano composers. His motives for choosing this title have long been a subject of debate, but it is most likely that he wanted to free himself from the need to follow any pre-existing genre, while allowing himself to express, on a fairly large scale, a complex of ideas that contrasted the epic or heroic on one hand with the lyrical or plaintive on the other. Thus the ear does not search for structural reference points, while rapidly accepting that these pieces often seem to enshrine the principle of two contrasting subjects so characteristic of sonata form, though the tonal relationships that unfold in them are not characteristic of sonata-style movements. That dualism, instead, is combined with a marked sense of narrative, of a tale being told, of consequences being worked out. Of course the term 'Ballade' immediately evoked literary parallels – for example with the medieval ballad-poetry of Britain and northern Europe which had become so popular since the 18th century and had influenced many modern writers, not to mention theorists of literature such as Johann Gottfried Herder.

Such ballad poetry was one of the well-springs of the Romantic movement in literature, and a

thoroughgoing Romantic composer like Chopin clearly responded to that. On the other hand, claims that his own *Ballades* were directly inspired by the poems of his compatriot Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) are difficult to substantiate. If they seem to 'tell a story' they are not doing so in any detailed programmatic sense. But like sonata movements they manifest a unity and integrity, and a scope of development, very different from the popular dance genres – such as the waltz – to which Chopin frequently refers in them.

Chopin wrote the **Ballade No. 1 in G minor, op. 23** in 1835-36 during the composer's first sojourn in Paris. He dedicated it to the Hanoverian ambassador to France, the Baron Stockhausen. Of all the four *Ballades* it seems to show most clearly the narrative quality associated with the new genre, and there is a tradition that it was inspired by Mickiewicz's poem 'Conrad Wallenrod', a tale of the Lithuanian resistance against the Teutonic knights which was intended as a metaphor of the contemporary struggles of Poland against the Russian Empire. After a short, rather stern introduction – a quasi-recitative spanning the keyboard, and approaching the tonic G minor from well outside – Chopin introduces his first main theme, which itself has something of a quality of dialogue or conversation. There is a suppressed suggestion of a waltz to it, and its poignancy is sharpened by filigree ornamentation as it becomes more

agitated and passionate. The joyously lyrical second theme, which appears in the relative major (E flat), comes as a complete contrast. There is a tense and dramatic central section in which the first theme is transformed into a coruscating stream of semiquavers in bravura style, more like a variation than a sonata development. The 'recapitulation' is a mirror of the exposition, the E flat second theme appearing first, this time in heroic style, before the hesitant and pathetic first subject: both are heard in somewhat varied form. A jagged coda, marked *Presto con fuoco*, brings the piece to a thrilling and ultimately tragic end.

The **Ballade No. 2 in F major/A minor, op. 38** took Chopin a considerable time to compose: begun in 1836 it was only completed in 1839 after being worked on in France and finished on the island of Majorca, where Chopin was then living with George Sand. Chopin dedicated it to Robert Schumann (who had already dedicated his *Kreisleriana* to Chopin), who curiously found it 'less artistic' than *Ballade No. 1*. It is also from Schumann, and specifically in connexion with this work, that we receive the intelligence that Chopin had been inspired by the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz – apparently in conversation. Chopin mentioned Mickiewicz's ballad 'Switez', in which maidens fleeing from a besieged city drown themselves in a lake, only to be reincarnated as flowers at the water's edge. Once again there is no sense that, if Chopin was inspired by a particular story, that he was trying to reproduce it in his music. The main feature of the F

major *Ballade* is the dramatic contrast between the calmly ruminative, folk-like melody that sets the serenely melodious tone the opening section, and the sudden passionate, hectic explosion that follows it – as violent an outburst as Chopin ever wrote. The opening theme tries but fails to reassert itself, but has lost its previous innocence, as is shown by repeated nervous chromatic shadings. In fact in this section Chopin varies and develops the folk-like theme in several directions, without creating separate variations on it. The whole tonality of the work has now been changed to A minor, and there is to be no return to F major: the wrathfully agitated second theme returns and drives to a feverish climax and catastrophe, after which a wan echo of the opening tune brings the piece to a close.

If the first two *Ballades* occupy a fairly tragic emotional stance, **Ballade No. 3 in A flat, op. 47** is the most lyrical of the series. The piece was composed during 1840-41 and dedicated to Mademoiselle Pauline de Noailles. As before, there are two principal themes, but the sense of a contrast or opposition between them is replaced by a more unified feeling. The whole work has a dance-like character, but is prefaced by a long and elegant introduction which establishes a thematic character of its own and adumbrates the lilting motion of the whole design, against which Chopin plays many rhythmic games and capricious roudades. The charming first theme has an easy, swaying motion as if the listener is

being carried along on horseback, and it is the 'journeying' quality of the music that supplies the hint of narrative in this case. The second theme is more floridly abandoned, with its ceaseless flow of figurations, trills and expressive modulations. The two themes are combined in a more dramatic development in C sharp minor, the roulades of the second theme becoming chromatic thickets through which the first must force its way, leading to the main climax of the work, after which there is a brief but flamboyant coda.

The last of Chopin's *Ballades*, **No. 4 in F minor, op. 52**, composed in 1842-3 in Paris and Nohant, is the longest, and generally considered the greatest of the four: it has been described as the most musically intense and technically demanding of his compositions and requires exceptional pianistic skills. Chopin dedicated it to the Baroness Rothschild, who had invited him to play at her estate on the outskirts of Paris. There is a tradition that the piece was inspired by Mickiewicz's poem 'Budri', in which a father sends his three sons abroad to fight the enemy; instead, each one returns with a Polish bride. Throughout, this Ballade displays a highly developed variation technique and a mastery of counterpoint with which the composer is not always associated, but which may be ascribed to his intense study of J. S. Bach. (It was this aspect of the piece which prompted the British composer Ronald Stevenson to make the principal thematic complex the

subject of his *Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin*.) In fact the introduction, main theme and secondary theme are all subjected to intense development through variation which results in a cumulative impression of great breadth.

The introduction in fact begins in the major mode, declining to the minor for the appearance of the first theme, which seems to exude a Slavic melancholy. The melody is treated to two variations before the contrasting, predominantly chordal second theme appears. The central section is again based on the first theme, and Chopin unusually reprises the music of the introduction here as well. Further variations of the first theme alternate with developments of the second theme, leading to a recapitulation of both and a *stretto* climax. Towards the end, a shockingly inconclusive cadence is interrupted by a few soft chorale-like bars before a headlong, highly contrapuntal coda that is astonishing in its bravura and sense of danger.

Johannes Brahms wrote his first set of *Ballades*, op. 10, at the age of 21 in 1854: he would later say that he knew of the existence of Chopin's *Ballades* at that time, but had not seen or heard them. Certainly there are clear differences between his conception and Chopin's. Brahms's *Ballades* tend to be simpler, ternary-form pieces rather than the complex forms of the Chopin *Ballades*. He seems to have understood the title 'Ballade' as

suggesting a form and mood evocative of ballad poetry – specifically the poetry of the Scottish borders, of which he was very fond: and in the case of the D minor *Ballade*, op. 10 no. 1, the literary origin is much more certain than for any of the Chopin *Ballades*, for the title-page proclaims it to be 'after the Scottish Ballad *Edward*'. Brahms knew this Border Ballad in Herder's German translation.

We find traces of this ballade-like conception even in the very late groups of piano pieces, his opp. 116-119, which Brahms composed between 1891 and 1893 (by which latter year he was sixty years of age). Although only the op. 119 group contains an actual *Ballade*, the set of **3 Intermezzi, op. 117**, partake of similar features. They could be considered a triptych of lullabies. In fact the first, in E flat, is headed by lines from an actual Scots lullaby, from the Border Ballad 'Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament' – once again, in the German translation of Herder – and its unforgettable tune, a middle voice gently rocked within a repeated octave span, fits the words like a glove. The central section descends to a dark E flat minor tonality which increases the poignancy of the lulling reprise, with its cunningly interwoven imitation.

The second *Intermezzo*, in B flat minor, wrings music of plaintive delicacy from a simple falling-arpeggio figure that melts, with fluid grace, through a succession of tonalities: and the piece traces a miniature sonata

design, with a more smoothly flowing second subject in D flat. Development and reprise merge into one another through spiralling arpeggio figuration: the coda finally imposes tonal stability in the shape of an uneasy pedal F, over which the second idea dies away. Like the first piece, the final *Intermezzo*, in C sharp minor, evokes a ballad character, though this time without a specifically indicated subject. This is a comparatively spacious movement, beginning sombrely and *sotto voce* with a quintessentially Brahmsian theme presented in severe octaves. On later appearances this melody becomes an inner voice against a rich harmonic background; there is a strongly contrasting middle section in A major, whose gently syncopated figuration and octave displacements create a twilight world of almost impressionistic gleams and half-lights. At once one of the darkest and most beautiful of Brahms's late piano pieces, this work seems to have had an especially personal significance for him. (He once referred to it as 'The lullaby of all my griefs'.)

While the sheer virtuosity of the performer who can surmount the most difficult technical challenges in the service of a musical idea is a quality that is impressive in itself, virtuosity *per se* has often been an object of puritanical suspicion: from Brahms, among others, despite his own pianistic powers. Yet while this may be true of certain of Liszt's works, for example, for Chopin virtuosity was essentially the handmaid of expression, the

most fluent and effective way of putting across the sheer immediacy of his music's emotion. And in Alexander Scriabin – on whose early development Chopin and Liszt were the primary and decisive influences – virtuosity is innate in the musical ideas themselves: it is the medium of communication with the divine, the portal to Nirvana. Thus in Chopin we find the virtuoso as poet, the creator of exquisite and deeply expressive messages that touch the heart. But in Scriabin the virtuoso metamorphoses into a prophet, his music speaking with a strange intensity as it seems to presage revelation of a new cosmic order.

In the **Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp, op. 30** we seem to witness that metamorphosis taking place. Begun in 1899 but only completed in 1903, it marks a definite transition in Scriabin's aesthetic. By this time he was an established composer with two symphonies and a piano concerto to his name, but he was also in the toils of a love-affair with his pupil Tatyana Schloezer which would soon lead to separation from his wife Vera, and increasingly involved in theosophy and esoteric speculation which was leading him to an apocalyptic worldview in which the artist would be the saviour of mankind. In the Fourth Sonata his early, Chopinesque style is being transformed, under the influence of the composer's new harmonic discoveries, into something rich and strange and ecstatic. The unusual two-movement form, as well as balancing repose against energy,

also seems to symbolize the polarity of the past and the future. Moreover the movements are played without a break and cyclically bound together by their motivic content, creating what is essentially a two-part single movement.

The *Andante* first movement is redolent of reflection and nostalgia, yet in its very first bars the new harmonic language, with chords built upon the interval of a fourth, also seem prophetic of something new. The mood is dreamlike, apparently languid, but not depressive: as the sense of key becomes attenuated and diffused, there are attempts at flight – a long-standing Scriabinesque metaphor for spiritual liberation – made by the ecstatically-floating melodic lines. This liberation and sense of flying is triumphantly achieved in the *Prestissimo volante* second movement, with its unusually clipped and choppy rhythm. The spiritual fervour detectable in the *Andante* here breaks its bonds and takes off in a scintillating enactment of vertiginous ascent. This is one of the most joyous and emotionally unencumbered pieces that Scriabin ever wrote, and despite the chromatic expansion of the harmony the goal is a final blaze of his favourite, shining F sharp major tonality. The motif of the rising fourths with which the work opens is equally active in this movement, and reaches a *fortississimo* apotheosis in the victorious final bars.

Notes by Malcolm MacDonald



Since the release of his recording of the Chopin Piano Concertos in 2008 (BRIDGE 9278), Vassily Primakov has been hailed as a pianist of world class importance. *Gramophone* wrote that "Primakov's empathy with Chopin's spirit could hardly be more complete," and the *American Record Guide* stated: "In every piece his touch is perfect. Since Gilels, how many pianists have the right touch? In Chopin, no one currently playing and recording sounds as good as this! This is a great Chopin pianist." *Musica Web-International* called Primakov's Chopin Concertos CD "one of the great Chopin recordings of recent times. These are performances of extraordinary power and beauty." In 1999, as a teen-aged prizewinner of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Primakov was praised by Donald Rosenberg of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: "How many pianists can make a line sing as the 19-year-old

Moscow native did on this occasion? Every poignant phrase took ethereal wing. Elsewhere the music soared with all of the turbulence and poetic vibrancy it possesses. We will be hearing much from this remarkable musician."

Vassily Primakov was born in Moscow in 1979. His first piano studies were with his mother. He entered Moscow's Central Special Music School at the age of eleven as a pupil of Vera Gornostaeva. At seventeen, after a summer at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, he came to New York to pursue studies at the Juilliard School with the noted pianist, Jerome Lowenthal. At Juilliard Mr. Primakov won the William Petschek Piano Recital Award, which presented his debut recital at Alice Tully Hall. While a student at Juilliard, aided by a Susan W. Rose Career Grant, he won both the Silver Medal and the Audience Prize in the 2002 Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition. Later that year Primakov won First Prize in the 2002 Young Concert Artists (YCA) International Auditions, an award which presented him in solo and concerto performances throughout the USA. In 2007 he was named the Classical Recording Foundation's "Young Artist of the Year."

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