

FRÉDÉRIC FRANÇOIS CHOPIN

(1810-1849)

- 1) **Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60 (9:03)**
- 2-5) **Four Mazurkas, Op. 17 (13:52)**
No. 1 in B-flat major (2:13)
No. 2 in E minor (1:54)
No. 3 in A-flat major (4:48)
No. 4 in A minor (4:48)
- 6) **Berceuse in D-flat major, Op. 57 (5:02)**
- 7) **Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23 (9:39)**
- 8-10) **Three Mazurkas, Op. 50 (11:26)**
No. 1 in G major (2:22)
No. 2 in A-flat major (3:09)
No. 3 in C-sharp minor (5:49)
- 11) **Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 9, No. 2 (4:22)**
- 12) **Nocturne in B major, Op. 9, No. 3 (6:32)**
- 13-15) **Three Waltzes, Op. 64 (7:51)**
No. 1 in D-flat major ("Minute Waltz") (1:34)
No. 2 in C-sharp minor (2:59)
No. 3 in A-flat major (3:14)

Chopin lived only 39 years, but that short span fell at the high tide of musical Romanticism, an intellectual attitude that welcomed his distinctive voice and which he in turn came to represent as a defining force. He was born on March 1, 1810 (probably; the register of births said February 22 but was almost certainly wrong) in Żelazowa Wola, thirty miles west of Warsaw, to a French father and a Polish mother, and he was baptized Fryderyk Franciszek, which he later adapted to Frédéric François. He achieved fluency as a pianist while a teenager, and when he was 15 he saw a work of his appear in print as his Op. 1. In 1829 he triumphed in a concert tour to Vienna and in the winter of 1830-31 he returned there for a follow-up visit.

He would never again see his homeland. A week after he arrived in Vienna, Poland erupted in political uprising. Chopin gradually made his way to a new life in France, though he remained fiercely allied to Polish revolutionary ideals. In the cultural hotbed of Paris he was greeted by a circle of artistic luminaries that included Bellini, Meyerbeer, Berlioz, Liszt, Heinrich Heine, Victor Hugo, and the cross-dressing authoress George Sand, who became Chopin's unlikely yet intimate companion. His distinctive pianistic style captivated everyone. "Let us imagine," wrote Robert Schumann, "that an Aeolian harp had all the scales and that an artist's hand had mingled them together in all kinds of fantastic decorations, but in such a way that you could always hear a deeper fundamental tone and a softly singing melody—there you have something of a picture of his playing." Ignaz Moscheles, one of the era's keyboard

luminaries, found him “perfectly unique among pianists.” “His outward appearance,” Moscheles reported, “wholly corresponds to his music, so delicate and dream-like is it. He played at my entreaty and only now do I comprehend his music and the enthusiasm it arouses among the ladies. His *ad libitum* playing, which in other performers of his works veers into a chaotic lack of beat, is simply bewitching originality. The dilettantishly hard modulations, which still give me pause when I play his compositions, do not grate when he plays them, as his delicate fingers flit through them like the feather-light feet of elves.”

This was Romanticism itself. Chopin's status was enhanced by his exotic origins, his refined but aloof character, and—sad to say—his ongoing struggle against tuberculosis, considered the most Romantic of deadly diseases. Already before his death, in Paris on October 17, 1849, he was considered a singularly exquisite specimen among composers, a figure marked by extreme subtlety and hyper-sophistication. He was already well along the path to becoming a cliché, and the increasingly hackneyed viewpoint was rarely questioned in cultural circles for well over a century thereafter. “After playing Chopin,” Oscar Wilde confessed in 1891, “I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed.” The fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn explained in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), “I love the angelic in his figure, ... that rejection of material experience, the sublime incest of his fantastically delicate and seductive art.”

And yet, if we look back at the comments of Schumann and Moscheles, we see that during his lifetime Chopin had not yet been turned entirely into a stereotype of frailty and melancholy. Schumann found that his “fantastic decorations” adorned “a deeper fundamental tone”; Moscheles noted that if his playing was “dream-like,” it pointedly did *not* veer “into a chaotic lack of beat.” If later generations tended to view him principally as a musical dreamer (if one who could transform temporarily into a passionate revolutionary), his contemporaries had not yet lost sight of his sturdiness as a composer. Although few music-lovers automatically cite Chopin as a model contrapuntalist—he did not busy himself writing fugues, after all—he was a great one, and there is probably not another figure of his generation whose voice-leading is so consistently pristine. The tension between liberty and solidity is an essential engine of his work. As ensuing generations grew to view the Romantics as unfettered rhapsodists, and Chopin as the most fragile and otherworldly of the bunch, they may have lost sight of the tremendous architectural strength that his contemporaries also viewed as part of his genius.

The works performed in this recital cover all of Chopin's maturity, from two of his Op. 9 Nocturnes, written between 1830 and 1832 (just after he settled in Paris), to the Berceuse (1844), the Barcarolle (1845-46), and the Op. 64 Waltzes (1846-47), composed during the twilight of his career. Most of Chopin's music is distributed among piano genres represented by numerous pieces in his catalogue: mazurkas, nocturnes, polonaises, waltzes, preludes, etudes. His Barcarolle and Berceuse, however, are unique

entries in terms of genre, at least if we don't look beyond the names he gave them. The title of the Barcarolle suggests the lilting songs sung by Venetian gondoliers, and two of his other pieces actually are barcarolles, too, if not so named: his 1826 Variations in D major for Piano Duet and his 1829 *Souvenir de Paganini*, both of which are based on the famous tune "Le Carnaval de Venise." Barcarolles are usually written in 6/8 time. Chopin sets his in 12/8 meter, which is not much different in practical terms but may imply longer-spanning phrases. The lines are indeed extended here, reminding us again of Chopin's affection for *bel canto* opera. He labored over this piece for a year, constructing a dramatically involving, ultimately ecstatic movement out of what seem relatively inconsequential materials. For a description we turn to an admirer from a later generation, Maurice Ravel:

"The theme in thirds, supple and delicate, is constantly clothed in dazzling harmonies. The melodic line is continuous. One moment an idea breaks free, hangs suspended and falls softly, drawn down by magic chords. The intensity builds. A new theme appears—one of magnificent lyricism, completely Italian. All grows quiet. From the depths arises a shimmering passage which soars on precious, tender harmonies. We dream a mysterious apotheosis."

Chopin's Berceuse, however, is a unique entry in terms of genre, although this lullaby is effectively a set of variations (which is what the composer

initially intended to title it), making it one of a handful of Chopin's works in variation form. The left hand repeats a one-measure rocking figure almost unaltered from the beginning to the end of this *Andante* while the right hand weaves in improvisational style above.

Separating them in this recital are Chopin's Four Mazurkas, Op. 17. The Romantic generation evinced a taste for exoticism, and Chopin answered to this most especially in his mazurkas, whose quirky contours reveal folk inflections from the composer's native Poland. They are the most represented genre in his oeuvre: he published 41 of them, and another dozen or so remained in manuscript at his death. Triple-time mazurkas reached deep into Poland's folk heritage, traced at least into the seventeenth century and existing in both slow and fast tempos. In the nineteenth century they became popular high-society dances in Eastern Europe, retaining the historical possibilities of various tempos. The Four Mazurkas, Op. 17 (from 1832-33), cover considerable territory. The first piece of the set (*Vivo e risoluto*) is aristocratic and straightforward, preparing the way for the more introspective second (*Lento ma non troppo*) and the curiously questing and chromatically serpentine third (*Legato assai*). The fourth (again, *Lento ma non troppo*) is hard to pin down in its emotional tone, though surely it encompasses sadness and even despair, notwithstanding the ambiguity afforded by its conclusion on an unstably voiced major chord.

Chopin began sketching the first of his four Ballades in 1831 and appears

to have finished the piece four years later. In 1836 he played it privately for Schumann, who declared it a work "closest to his genius." Chopin suggested to him that each of the four Ballades related to a different poem by the Polish nationalist poet Adam Mickiewicz, although if he revealed precisely which poems he had in mind Schumann failed to relay the information to posterity. That hasn't kept musicologists from speculating, and some believe that the G-minor Ballade depicts Mickiewicz's 1828 poem "Konrad Wallenrod," which had so resonated with its readers that it helped inspire the Polish uprising of 1830—the one that left Chopin stranded as an expatriate.

The Op. 50 Mazurkas followed in the ensuing decade, in 1842, and, as with the Op. 17 Mazurkas, the set is designed to cover a span of character: a sturdy, self-possessed opener (*Vivace*); a gorgeous, melodious middle piece (*Allegretto*); and a texturally and harmonically complex finale (*Moderato*) that seems cryptic as it grows from Bachian imitation to a broad climax, and then recedes to a contemplative ending.

The piano nocturne was a relatively new genre in 1830, when Chopin probably made his first essays in the genre. Many eighteenth-century composers had written pieces called *notturmo* or *Nachtmusik*, but the title typically referred to the time of day in which the work would be played, rather than to any inherent quality. The direct progenitor of the Chopinesque nocturne was John Field, an Irish pianist-and-composer who wrote the first of his 16 nocturnes in 1812, while based in Russia. These works

defined the nocturne as a gently ruminative "night piece," most often displaying a gracious, lyric melody over an uncomplicated accompaniment that involved arpeggios in the left hand. Chopin played Field's nocturnes, although reports suggest that he spruced up the melodies by improvising considerable decoration. He would publish 18 nocturnes in his lifetime (a few others were issued posthumously), beginning with the group of three he assembled into his Op. 9 and dedicated to Camille-Marie Pleyel, who had married into the Pleyel piano-making family. The second piece in the set is one of Chopin's most famous *Andantes*, a testament of his fondness for Bellini-style *bel canto*. The third is marked *Allegretto*, and a brief right-hand volley at one point is marked *scherzando*, not typical indications for a nocturne; they make this a relatively playful night-piece. Although its central section (*agitato*) seems troubled, this nocturne begins and ends with material of a more genial caste, richly embroidered with Chopin's signature fioraturas. The first of Chopin's nocturnes to appear in print, the Op. 9 set was issued in Leipzig at the end of 1832. A few months later a London publisher offered them under the title "Murmures de la Seine," to the composer's intense displeasure.

The Op. 64 Waltzes begin with Chopin's most famous contribution to the genre, the so-called "Minute Waltz," which it would be pointless to try to actually squeeze into a minute, although its tempo is *Molto vivace* and it is undeniably short. The also-famous waltz that follows it (*Tempo giusto*) is related in key (its C-sharp being enharmonically identical to the D-flat of the "Minute Waltz"), but its mood is quite different, conveying a degree

of Slavic melancholy. The third of the Op. 64 Waltzes (*Moderato*) brings us near to the end of Chopin's life, to a time when he was suffering the physical torment of his fatal disease—a fact that underscores the extent to which musical compositions are not necessarily works of autobiography. Here Chopin appears entirely carefree, his imagination fixing on a dance informed by unfettered joy. He included the first of the Op. 64 Waltzes (and the Barcarolle, too) on his last Parisian concert, which took place February 16, 1848, at the Salle Pleyel before an audience of 300, who demanded that the Waltz be repeated.

—James M. Keller

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With a career that has spanned over 25 years, American pianist Anne - Marie McDermott has played concertos, recitals and chamber music in hundreds of cities throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. Most recently she performed Bernstein's *Age of Anxiety* with the German National Radio Orchestra at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. Her early career was nurtured by Susan Wadsworth and her agency, Young Concert Artists. The breadth of Ms. McDermott's repertoire matches that of her instrument, spanning from Bach, Haydn and Beethoven to Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and Scriabin to works by today's most influential composers — Aaron Jay Kernis, Steven Hartke, Joan Tower and Charles Wuorinen, among them. As an Artistic Director, Ms. McDermott leads the Ocean Reef Chamber Music Festival in Florida and the Avila Chamber Music

Celebration in Curacao. Beginning with the 2011 season, she is also the Artistic Director of the Vail Valley Music Festival in Colorado, and the Mainly Mozart Festival in San Diego. As an Artist Member of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Ms. McDermott has been featured in retrospective series devoted to the music of Prokofiev and Shostakovich. She released her first recording in 2005 - Bach's Partitas and English Suites, which was the Editor's Choice in Gramophone Magazine. In 2008 Bridge Records followed with a recording of *Gershwin's Complete Works for Piano and Orchestra* with the Dallas Symphony, also named Editor's Choice by Gramophone. About her last recording of the *The Complete Prokofiev Piano Sonatas* (2009, Bridge Records), Gramophone wrote "we have waited a long time for an American pianist of this stature."

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