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Tamás Vásáry rose to prominence as a virtuoso pianist in Soviet-dominated Hungary, but flourished internationally in the 1960s and '70s following his departure to the West. In the late '70s he turned to conducting and toured extensively in that role, especially in the U.S. As a pianist Vásáry is best known for his interpretations of Chopin, though he also garnered acclaim for his Rachmaninov, Liszt, Brahms, Mozart, and Bach. Vásáry has exhibited a fairly lean and crisp style suited for both Baroque and Classical works, as well as lush, lyrical manner appropriate for Romantic and post-Romantic music. His Rachmaninov features broad tempos and creamy textures, while his Chopin is a bit understated but always sensitive to the composer's shifting moods. As a conductor Vásáry is known for broad repertory as well and has made several notable recordings with the Budapest Symphony Orchestra (Beethoven symphony cycle), Northern Sinfonia (Chopin concertos), and the Bournemouth Sinfonietta (works by Honegger and Respighi). Vásáry's recordings are available on DG, Chandos, Decca, Globe, Hungaroton, Supraphon, and Brilliant Classics.

Tamás Vásáry was born in Debrecen, Hungary, on August 11, 1933. He was a child prodigy, debuting at eight in a performance of the Mozart D major Concerto, K. 107. He briefly studied with Ernő Dohnányi and then, at 14, captured first prize at the 1948 Liszt Competition. Vásáry studied music in Budapest at the Franz Liszt Academy under József Gát. Later on at the Liszt Academy, Vásáry served as assistant to Zoltán Kodály, who mentored the young pianist. In 1956, the year of the failed Hungarian Revolt, Vásáry fled Hungary and settled in Switzerland. His career soon flourished: after his first recording (1958, on DG) and his debuts in London (1961) and New York (1962), Vásáry rose to international renown. Vásáry debuted as a conductor in 1971, but received his first appointment in 1979, as co-artistic director of the Northern Sinfonia, serving until 1982. From 1989-1997 Vásáry was principal conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and from 1993 served as music director of the Budapest Symphony Orchestra.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Vásáry also guest-conducted various ensembles, including the major orchestras of New York, Baltimore, Detroit, London, Paris, and Berlin. He also continued to appear as pianist, sometimes conducting from the keyboard. In the new century Vásáry has remained active, working with, among other artists and ensembles, the Zoltán Kodály World Youth Orchestra, which he founded in 2006.



Chopin

Piano Concerto No. 2

Andante Spianato & Grand Polonaise

Nocturne

Tamás Vásáry, piano
Janos Kulka conducts the
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra



HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS

The Concerto in F minor, the first of Chopin's two concertos (though published as the second), was written between the early autumn of 1829 and the early spring of the following year. It was composed in accordance with the requirements of the genre, in line with the model derived from Mozart, but adopted directly from Hummel, whose influence is clearly discernible. There is no doubt that the pianistic texture of this work was shaped by the technique termed *style brillant*. It should be added, however, that in both Chopin's concertos (written on a single wave of inspiration), the 'brilliant'-style virtuosity was taken to its pinnacle. It was also overcome, by restoring to the themes a Classical, Mozartian simplicity (in the *style brillant*, they were often somewhat pretentious or banal) and by infusing the whole work with typically Romantic expression, no longer sentimental, but perceived as poetical.

When listening to works that could have served as exemplars for Chopin, such as concertos by Hummel, Moscheles, Ries and Kalkbrenner, we gain quite a peculiar impression. Every so often, we come across phrases, passages or sections that are ostensibly identical to those in Chopin. But only ostensibly, as they are lacking distinctness, colour and personal, individual expression. They are pale, conventional, external and superficial. All those composers, whose works we most often encounter solely in 'historical' concerts, speak the same language as Chopin, with the same set of idioms of pitch motion and rhythm. Yet he not only speaks, he has something essential and highly original to say to us. 'I say to the piano what I would have said to you many a time', he related to Tytus Wojciechowski. The music of his concertos expresses his personality. From beyond the conventions and the language of the epoch, Chopin's face peers out, and at the same time a genre of Classical structure and 'brilliant' texture is transformed into a Romantic genre. The typical structure of the cycle, comprising *Allegro – Adagio – Presto*, turns into the structure *Maestoso – Larghetto – Vivace*, in which *Maestoso* means a lively or a pondering march, the *Larghetto* is a nocturne, and the *Vivace* is a dance – a stylised kujawiak.

The first movement of this triptych, marked with a *maestoso* character, suffused with expression that oscillates between Classical loftiness and Romantic enthusiasm, proceeds according to the principles of the *sonata allegro*. The exposition presents the themes, the development transforms them beyond recognition, and in the reprise they meet once again, although altered somewhat. Also in keeping with a convention established in *concerto allegros*, the themes are shown first in the orchestra, and only then in the piano. The opening theme, which is also the main one (in F minor), proceeds in the rhythm of a mazurek that is now songful, now solemn. Its head motif, in a dotted rhythm, becomes a ubiquitous motto throughout the whole *allegro*.

In the orchestra, the initial theme of the *Allegro* appears modestly and almost imperceptibly. In the piano, however, it is impressively announced. It resounds in silence, against the background of the orchestra, which is suddenly hushed.

Immediately after the initial theme, Chopin has the pure, songful complementary theme sound for just a brief moment, bringing to mind the melodies of Mozart's concertos. This theme develops into a swinging cantilena, before fading away.

The theme set against the opening theme, in a different mode and key, proceeds in A flat major. It is of a romance-nocturne character, thereby presaging the concerto's middle movement, *Larghetto*. In the orchestra, were it not for the piercing tone of the oboe, it would pass all but unnoticed, as it only really blooms in the piano. This theme also resounds in silence, like a nocturne.

The exposition is followed by the development. Its opening introduces a mood of meditation or reflection. But just a moment later a frenzy of figuration is unleashed. An unchecked stream of piano sonorities flows through nearer and more distant keys. In the orchestra, we hear fragmented motives from the themes presented earlier.

The development ends with an explosion of sonorities in the full orchestra. Then, after a quieting and relieving of the tension, the reprise appears, and so the return of the themes that were presented at the beginning. This time, they are all spliced together. The contrasting theme stands opposite the initial theme just a moment after its

reappearance. There then ensues a moment of mysterious concentration.

The second movement of the Concerto, the famous *Larghetto*, is its central part. One might say that the whole work owes its *raison d'être* to this movement. The opening bars in the orchestra already lead us into a different time and a different dimension: half-real, half-oneiric. Of the piano's entrance, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz said that it 'sounds like the opening of a gate to some haven of love and peace'.

The *Larghetto* has the character of a nocturne and the form of a *grand da capo arioso*. Its principal theme appears twice more. On each occasion, Chopin has it played *molto con delicatezza*, yet each time he arrays it in new, increasingly airy ornaments. The third time, the phrase originally comprising eight notes gains the form of a wave, expressed by a forty-note *floritura*. An inimitably Chopinian mood is forged.

That dreamy atmosphere forms the framework of the *Larghetto*. It is filled by music that is thoroughly different, although still adhering to the same, supremely Romantic poetic. Agitated, violent sonorities burst in. Chopin has them played *con forza* and *appassionato*, as if some hitherto suppressed plenitude of emotion was being revealed at that moment.

Among those to use a piano recitative against the background of an orchestral tremolando in a similar way were Ignaz Moscheles, in his Concerto in G minor, and Ignacy J. Dobrzyński, in his Concerto in A flat major, though the way they did it cannot compare with Chopin.

The third movement of the F minor Concerto, the movement that closes the work, is a Rondo, as the genre's convention dictates. It thrills us with the exuberance of a dance of kujawiak provenance. It plays with two kinds of dance gesture. The first, defined by the composer as *semplice ma graziosamente*, characterises the principal theme of the Rondo, namely the refrain.

A different kind of dance character – swashbuckling and truculent – is presented by the episodes, which are scored in a particularly interesting way. The first episode is bursting with energy. The second, played *scherzando* and *rubato*, brings a rustic aura. It is a cliché of merry-making in a country inn, or perhaps in front of a manor house, at a harvest festival, when the young Chopin danced till he dropped with the whole of the village. The striking of the strings with the stick of the bow, the *pizzicato* and the open fifths of the basses appear to show that Chopin preserved the atmosphere of those days in his memory.

The opening key of the Rondo finale is F minor, a key with a slightly sentimental tinge. According to Marcell Szulc, it brings 'wistful reflection'. But the Concerto ends by shaking itself out of reflection, nostalgia and reverie, with the appearance of a horn signal denoting the start of the dazzling coda and the entrance of the simple, cheerful key of F major.

On the grand stage of the National Theatre, the F minor Concerto was heard in Chopin's first truly grand concert, on 17 March 1830. That premiere was preceded by two semi-private rehearsals: the first in February, among family and close friends; the second at the beginning of March, also in the Chopin's drawing-room, in the presence of the musical elite of Warsaw: Elsner, Kurpiński and Żywny. On that occasion, the orchestra part was played by chamber forces.

The Concerto in F minor became a point of departure for the Romantic concerto, together with the Concertos in A minor by Schumann and in G minor by Mendelssohn. Zdzisław Jachimecki noted that its unique poetry may have been determined by 'its certified provenance from personal experience'. There is no denying it: the F minor Concerto does indeed come across as a work of youthful inspiration, set in flight by the emotions of a first love.

This work was inspired by Chopin's feelings for Konstancja Gładkowska, but it was published a few years later with a dedication to Delfina Potocka.

Chopin

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Nocturne

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1. Piano Con 2 Maestoso
2. Piano Con 2 Larghetto
3. Piano Con 2 Allegro Vivace
4. Andante Spianato Grande Polonaise
5. Nocturne

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