



LINN

Frédéric Chopin
Reminiscences

Artur Pizarro *piano*



ARTUR PIZARRO

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|--|------|---|------|
| 1. Grande Valse Brillante in E-flat Major,
Op. 18 | 5:57 | 8. Nocturne in D-flat Major, Op. 27 No. 2...7:22 | |
| 2. Valse in A-flat Major, Op. 69 No. 1
'Valse de l'adieu' | 3:21 | 9. Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9 No. 2..... | 5:13 |
| 3. Grande Valse Brillante in A-flat Major,
Op. 34 No. 1. | 5:53 | 10. Polonaise in A-flat Major,
Op. 53 'Héroïque' | 7:26 |
| 4. Valse in E-flat Major, Op. posth. | 2:25 | 11. Mazurka in A-flat Major, Op. 24 No. 3..... | 1:51 |
| 5. Fantaisie-Impromptu in C-sharp minor,
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| 6. Nocturne in B Major, Op. 62 No. 1..... | 8:35 | 13. Mazurka in B-flat minor, Op. 24 No. 4 | 4:58 |
| 7. Nocturne in C-sharp minor,
Op. posth. 'Reminiscences' | 5:32 | 14. Mazurka in B-flat Major, Op. 17 No. 1..... | 2:27 |
| | | 15. Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 ... | 9:59 |
- Total Running Time:** 78 minutes

Recorded at Potton Hall, Suffolk, UK
from 17–24 June 2004

Produced by Philip Hobbs

Engineered by Julia Thomas

Post-production by Finespice, UK

Original cover image by Sven Arnstein

Design by gmtoucari.com

Frédéric Chopin

Reminiscences

Piano: A Window to Chopin's Soul

'I am helpless, sitting here powerless, suffering through the piano, in despair....' wrote Frédéric Chopin in 1831 in Stuttgart, after the fall of Warsaw to Russia. And in a letter to his confidant Tytus Wojciechowski: *'I tell my piano the things I used to tell you'*. Indeed, it is the intimacy and the rapport between the Polish pianist-composer and his instrument that have made him known as *'the poet of the piano'*. Chopin's anthropomorphic attitude towards the piano is an important clue to the understanding of his style, of the origins of infinite richness of his emotional vocabulary and the narrative eloquence of his writing, both in contrast with his increasing public reticence. At the age of eight when he made his public debut, he wrote to his father: *'I could express my feelings more easily if they could be put into notes of music...'*. Of the few chosen soulmates he felt enough at ease with to disclose his innermost thoughts and emotions, the piano was his most faithful and steady companion. The instrument became the vehicle he needed to express non-verbally his anguish, nostalgia and inner torments, and the result was a unique musical language, firmly rooted in eighteenth-century aesthetics and theory, blending a

post-Classical attitude with an idiomatic sensitivity *par excellence*. 'Counterpoint should lie at the heart of stable musical structures', said Chopin to the painter Eugène Delacroix. This language often relies upon a strong narrative aspect, perfected through his study of the declamatory qualities of *bel canto* stars such as Rubini, Pasta and Malibran. Chopin's fondness for a common nineteenth-century French expression '*dire un morceau de musique*' (to 'tell' a piece of music) and his frequent use of it can be seen as a further clue to understanding his perception of the musical interpretative process.

Therefore, although the apparent syllogistic identification of thought and feeling in Chopin's definitions of music as '*the expression of thoughts by sounds*' and '*the manifestation of our feelings through sounds*' may appear coincidental and contrived, it is likely not. Even more interesting in this context is Chopin's third definition of music, as the '*indefinite (indeterminate) language of mankind*'. This is not because it uses a clichéd, fallacious and Eurocentric metaphor of the universally recognised '*language*', but because it suggests Chopin's personal difficulty in rationally expressing his own emotions. One can thus understand George Sand (real name Aurore Dudevant, a writer and Chopin's companion for nine years) when she observed that Chopin's '*advice on the real issues of life is worthless. He has never faced reality, never understood human nature in the slightest.*' One should consider this an eminently qualified statement, coming from a person whose spiritual bond in her nine year relationship with Chopin was so strong that Sand, one of

the most emancipated women of her time, with an extensive list of lovers before and after Chopin, went along with his physical discomfort and lived for the last seven of those years in almost perfect celibacy (with probably one minor affair).

However, Chopin's spontaneous and instinctive reactions, alluded to by Sand and also demonstrated in his correspondence, even when tempered by social conventions and the inner imperative to maintain his appearance and social standing, were the very traits that made him shirk the pretentiousness of large social gatherings and appear self-centred and aloof. He was too well-educated to refuse outright the often annoying and heavy-handed attention that was regularly lavished upon him by his well-wishers, even in the last stages of his progressive sickness, but he would conceal his feelings under a mask of politeness and observe the customary salon *mêlée* with disdain and bitterness. One can only imagine how painful all the necessary socialising might have been for Chopin if Sand was warning even a friend such as Delacroix not to bring strangers to hear him play because he was '*terrified of outsiders*'. Chopin's student Zofia Rosengardt wrote:

There is a strange mixture in his character, vain and proud, loving luxury and yet disinterested and incapable of sacrificing the smallest part of his own will or caprice for all the luxury in the world. He is polite to excess and yet there is so much irony, so much spite inside it.

The spite must have come from the fact that Chopin himself understood perfectly the merciless and ridiculous logic of the

society he depended upon: *'You are at once credited with more talent if you are heard at a soirée of the English or Austrian ambassador's.'*

Some analysts, such as Theodor Adorno, might not have been aware how conscious Chopin was of his ambiguous and ambivalent position. Adorno, a philosopher with a Marxist bent, was not interested in the survival need of the nineteenth-century artist and, not aware of Chopin's sarcastic attitude towards his own conformity, focused his criticism on communism's favourite ideological target, elitism, albeit by association:

Chopin's aristocratic side was the very one to invite socialization. Countless millions hum the melody of the Polonaise in A-flat Major, and when they strike a pose of a chosen one at the piano to tinkle out some of the less demanding *préludes* or *nocturnes*, we may assume that they are vaguely counting themselves with the elite...

The social criticism of Chopin's milieu notwithstanding, it is beyond doubt that he was considered by many, not the least by a contemporary reviewer of the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, as the finest pianist of his time: *'In future when the question is asked, "Who is the greatest pianist in Europe, Liszt or Thalberg?", let the world reply "It is Chopin!"'*

The Parisians' fascination with Chopin was a tribute to his individuality. His playing was described as having *'the style of Cramer and the touch of Field'* (Kalkbrenner). Chopin's unique *rubato* evoked Baroque vocal music and its freedom of inflection,

his sound was based upon the notion of *'singing with the fingers'*. The intimacy and emotional intensity in his music were dubbed *'poetry of feeling'* (Heine) and his refined use of pedal reflected his statement that *'the correct employment of it remains a study for life'*. Chopin abhorred rough sound, referring to it as *'a dog barking'*, and explored the newest developments in piano construction, which included a full seven octave keyboard and heavier felted hammers. He often played pianos by Graf and Pleyel, occasionally using Erard for a more brilliant sound and later showing an interest in Broadwood. This exploration also resulted in new pianistic textures and the related enrichment of piano technique, facilitated by the extraordinary suppleness of his playing apparatus. The suppleness, though, was not restricted to his hands and arms: according to his student Adolph Gutmann, Chopin could place his legs over his shoulders like a clown.

The emotional and dramatic suggestiveness of Chopin's style, be it of lyrical, epic, folkloric or bourgeois origin, has marked virtually all nineteenth- and early twentieth-century piano music, and although he never recognised so-called programme music and the intention to present concrete extra-musical ideas and images, his music is nevertheless replete with autobiographical elements. Its trademarks – the feeling of sincerity, spontaneity and improvisational spirit – utterly belie the arduousness of the author's compositional process and his striving for perfection, seen in frequent alterations made in various manuscript and printed sources.

The C-sharp minor 'Lento con gran espressione' written in 1830 is a good example of the trouble this process still causes when trying to establish a definitive version. Its autograph is in Majorca and is very different from three other extant copies. A copy belonging to Miliy Balakirev, who played it in public in Warsaw, is titled *Reminiscences: Nocturne pour le piano*, but it is a copy of a version belonging to Oskar Kolberg, where the designation 'nocturne' appears for the first time. The piece was composed in Vienna and was one of several sent to Maria Wodzińska for her album (at the time when Chopin still harboured hopes of marrying her).

The Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9 No. 2 was composed between 1830 and 1832 and bears an unmistakable similarity to John Field's works. In essence it is an operatic aria transcribed for keyboard and uses progressive complexity in ornamentation as its principal developmental tool.

The Grande Valse Brillante in E-flat Major, Op. 18 was probably finished in 1833, during a very prolific summer that saw Chopin move to a new stylish apartment in Paris, in rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. This was the first waltz he authorised for publication. In it he followed the structure of Weber's *Aufforderung zum Tanz*, the announcement section being followed by various themes and a coda in *stretto*. With this piece Chopin embraced the lightness of salon music and kept its atmosphere and dance conventions without sacrificing artistic quality.

When teaching the Mazurka in B-flat minor, Op. 24 No. 4, composed in the same year, Chopin offered very specific advice on the timbre of the third section (bars 54-62) where the opening unison ('*women's voices in the choir*') is answered by chords ('*a [full] mixed choir*') and demanded absolute sound control or, as Chopin's student Wilhelm von Lenz put it: '*One was barely allowed to breathe over the keyboard, let alone touch it!*'

The Fantaisie-Improptu in C-sharp minor, Op. 66, composed a year later, also followed some pre-existing models, in this case Moscheles' Improptu in E-flat, Op. 80 and Schubert's Improptu in E-flat, Op. 90 No. 2.

The atmosphere, gestures and the potpourri form of the Grande Valse Brillante in A-flat Major, Op. 34 No. 1 are reminiscent of the Op. 18 waltz, while the minutely detailed corrections on the engraver's manuscript, especially in the left-hand and the final section, demonstrate well Chopin's perfectionism. The waltz was composed in 1835, also the year of the Valse in A-flat Major, Op. 69 No. 1, known as the 'Valse de l'adieu' and the Nocturne in D-flat Major, Op. 27 No. 2. Beginning with this set, Chopin wrote nocturnes in contrasting pairs, with greater individual weight.

The Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 (occasionally referred to as being in D-flat Major) was written in 1837, at the time when Chopin was in a dreadful state of mind, after finding out that he should abandon all hope for marriage with Wodzińska. The clue to the piece is

its opening motif that, according to the composer, *'must be a question'*. Lenz reports the composer demanding the interpretation *'...be a house of the dead'*, and the cantilena be produced thinking of *'[the singer] Pasta, of Italian song! – not of French vaudeville'*. Perhaps the most poignant comment on the demonic power of this piece came with Schumann's rhetoric question *'How is gravity to clothe itself if humour wears such dark veils?'*

'Héroïque', the Polonaise in A-flat Major, Op. 53, took form at the same time (1842-43) as the fourth ballad and the fourth scherzo. Already the contemporary accounts of its performance invoked images of patriotism, nationalism and the call to arms. Chopin seemed to be unhappy when the piece was played fast and did not increase volume much in the octaves (Gutman/Niecks). According to Liszt, the composer often played the episode in F minor (bars 138-151) *'like the muffled rumbling of a distant cannon'*. In this polonaise, Chopin no longer used the form of the early Warsaw ones and instead reinterpreted it as an evocation of past splendour and a symbol of Poland, a true agent of cultural nationalism. Indeed, works like this one became a model for composers who referred to their own native folk music and thus launched the so-called 'national schools'.

The Nocturne in B Major, Op. 62 No. 1, written in 1846, is another good example of the modern scholar's problems with finding the ultimate version of a piece, where a particular section (bars 53-55) have undergone various modifications from the initial sketch through the

autographs and proofs. All the corrections were entered by Chopin himself, but in the end we are left with several equally valid versions that the composer even posted at the same time to different destinations.

What better way to leave Chopin than by remembering the text of a cantata for male voices and guitar, composed in 1830 by Józef Elsner, Chopin's principal teacher, on the occasion of Chopin's departure from Poland: *'While you are away, may your heart remain ever with us'*. After all the years of not summoning up the courage to visit his country, this message must have echoed in Chopin's mind to the extent that, after his death and according to his own wishes, his sister Ludwika Jedrzejewiczowa took his heart in a jar of spirit and, hidden under her dress, smuggled it across the border of the Russian empire to Warsaw. Years later it was built into the walls of the transept of the Holy Cross church in Krakowskie Przedmiescie (a suburb of Warsaw).

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