

Eric Guo In Recital Programme Notes

Chopin, Etude in E-flat minor, Op. 10, No. 6

The twelve etudes of Opus 10 were written 1829-32, as Chopin was entering his twenties and moving between Warsaw and Vienna before settling in Paris. Already we hear the distinctive voice of a mature artist. A nocturne-like theme sings in the top voice of this Etude, supported by a shifting tenor line moving in constant sixteenth notes. It builds to a cry of distress but resolves on a chord of hopefulness.

Chopin, Four Mazurkas, Op. 17

Mazurkas as music of the peasant folk of the Polish countryside were a part of Chopin's childhood experiences, as were the stylized mazurkas popular in the salons and theatres of Warsaw. This set, written far away in his new home of Paris, maintains links with the rhythms and gestures of the original folk dance but goes beyond the norm in richness of harmony, texture, and variety of expression. The B-flat major Mazurka contrasts its resolute A section with a flirtatious middle section played over an E-flat pedal. The E minor Mazurka begins passionately but playful moments often intervene; the middle section has the droning open fifths of folk music. The third Mazurka in A-flat major has the snapping rhythms and harmonic pedals typical of folk mazurkas, while sophisticated harmony moves to distant E major for the central trio. The A minor Mazurka begins and ends in Lydian mode, enhanced with melodic arabesques to create a wistful mood.

Chopin, Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44

Nohant, south of Paris in central France, was the summer home of Aurore Dudevant, Chopin's partner who was better known by her pen name George Sand. It was here in 1841 that Chopin completed this large-scale Polonaise, known by the nickname "Tragic." Chopin told his publisher that this was "a kind of fantasy in polonaise form;" it has the rhythms and heroic character of the traditional Polish dance, but the middle section does some genre bending as we hear a gentle mazurka in A major, like fond memories of home, starkly contrasting with the intensely militaristic opening. Inevitably, the sweeping scales and pounding octaves of the Polonaise return for a devastating conclusion.

Chopin, Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 45

Alongside the Op. 44 Polonaise, Chopin wrote this Prelude in the summer of 1841, published that fall as a stand-alone piece. It has the character of an improvisation, beginning with simple parallel chords introducing a sustained, expressive melody. There is no contrasting middle section, but rather it modulates continuously from one key to another, moving toward an ecstatic cadenza with lush chromatic harmonies and then dying away.

Chopin, Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52

Chopin's four ballades are among the first instrumental pieces with that name, and apparently were inspired by the narrative ballad poems of his Polish compatriot Adam Mickiewicz. Although Chopin did not leave any clues about the specifics of the stories he may have had in mind, the alternation of lyric, epic and dramatic sections in these extended pieces invites each listener to create their own story.

This Ballade was completed in 1842, during the time of his relationship with George Sand, when he spent winters in the social whirl of Paris and summers at her house in the country. It is the longest, the most contrapuntal, and the finest of his ballades. An introduction leads to the evocative first theme which immediately is treated to a series of variations--we get a detailed description of the main character before moving to the simpler second subject in B-flat major. A development leads seamlessly to the return of the introduction and theme one, heard first in canon and again in a decorated version. Theme two acquires a whirling left-hand accompaniment; then a few hushed chords create a pause before the cataclysmic coda.

Chopin, Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35

Grave – Doppio movimento
Scherzo
Marche funèbre: Lento
Finale: Presto

The famous funeral march in the third movement of this sonata was written two years before the rest of the piece. In 1839, during his first summer at the country home of George Sand, Chopin added the other three movements. An ominous announcement in four measures of Grave creates a solemn atmosphere. The breathless first theme of the Allegro, based on short motivic fragments, is like a desperate plea. By contrast, the second theme is a soulful nocturne. The development builds to an exciting climax, urged on by repeating motives of the first theme. The recapitulation is famously truncated by omitting the first theme, moving directly to the sustained second theme and then rushing on triumphantly to the final cadence.

The Scherzo is fiery and grim, set in relief by the quiet lyricism of its middle section. The iconic "Marche funèbre" follows, in many ways the central movement of the cycle. The doleful march with its inexorable left-hand ostinato frames a nostalgic middle section. The last movement is unusual; rather than balancing the substantial first movement, it is a short postlude to the march, an eerie perpetual motion with the hands always playing a single line one octave apart.

Chopin, Impromptu No. 3 in G-flat major, Op. 51

Chopin's Impromptus share a sense of elegant spontaneity and are arranged in expanded ABA form with a coda. Sections of brilliant figuration, often in triplets, alternate with melodic episodes. The Impromptu in G-flat major (1842) shows the increasing complexity of Chopin's later works, with sophisticated harmonies and a

texture with many thirds and sixths. It begins with lively triplet rhythms in both hands. Its central trio melody sings in the cello range and then the dreamy first idea is back.

Preludes, Op. 28, Nos. 19-24

Chopin completed this set of twenty-four Preludes during his ill-fated vacation on the usually-sunny island of Majorca in 1838, as the rain fell in torrents and his tuberculosis worsened. As far as we know, he never performed these miniatures as a cycle, but rather would choose a small group of them, or mix up a few with things like etudes and nocturnes. His decision to call these pieces “preludes” is in homage to Bach who wrote two sets of preludes and fugues using all the keys. Most of the preludes are very short, based on a single idea, establishing one mood, and brought to a close with a striking cadence. Today we hear the last six of the set, beginning with the lively E-flat major Prelude and moving around the circle of fifths to conclude passionately in D minor, with spectacular flourishes rising and then ultimately falling five-and-a-half octaves to three devastating low Ds.

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