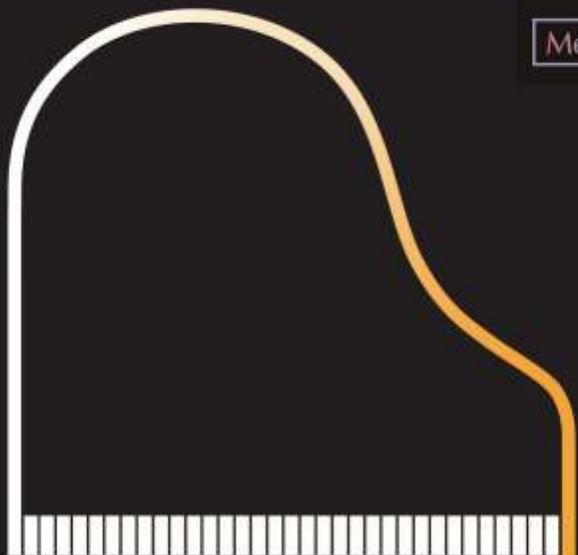


Meridian



CHOPIN

THE THREE PIANO SONATAS
LOUIS DEMETRIUS ALVANIS



FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

The Three Piano Sonatas

Frédéric Chopin's influence on the development of music in the 19th century was immense; employing a unique harmonic language enriched by chromaticism, he was the first composer to break away from the diatonic tonalism of the Viennese Classical masters. His immaculate style and effortless virtuosity paved the way for the piano to become the Romantic era's predominant means of musical expression. A new school of *cantabile* playing emerged through his example, changing the way future generations of pianists would approach the instrument.



The *Sonata No. 1 in C minor, Op. 4* was composed in 1827 while Chopin was still a student at the Warsaw Conservatory. It might not have reached our ears had Chopin's deathbed wish of destroying all his unpublished manuscripts been fulfilled. Maybe much of the music was not up to his exacting standards or, as was the case with this particular work, he may have felt it needed revision. Nevertheless, the Sonata eventually came into print in 1851 and its survival gives us a precious insight into Chopin's creativity at the start of his musical journey as a composer. His composition teacher of the time and the dedicatee of this Sonata, Józef Elsner, said of his pupil: "His is an exceptional path, because his talent is exceptional." The hallmarks of Chopin's highly personal style are already very much in evidence in his First Sonata, but one also gets the feeling that the youthful composer is weaving an original tapestry out of the various musical influences that were inspiring him at the time. The opening movement, for example, recalls the contrapuntal style of Chopin's idol, J. S. Bach. This is not a Sonata in the strictly Classical sense of the form; unconventionally, the first movement's main theme does not return to the home key of C minor in the recapitulation, appearing instead in B flat minor while continuing the

development's modulatory search for an eventual return to C minor. Both the second movement's *Minuet* and the *Finale* share a Schubertian element between them, the former's trio section bearing a resemblance to the octave passagework in the first movement of Schubert's Sonata in A, Op. 120, and the opening of the latter being reminiscent of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* in C, published in 1823. A richly expressive and beautifully polyphonic *Larghetto*, the third of the four movements, is remarkable for its quintuple metre. This is followed by a highly charged *Finale* in which Chopin brings virtuosic and technically demanding piano writing to the fore. While embracing aspects of technique which are to appear later in his *Etudes* Op. 10 and Op. 25, the Sonata reveals the lyrical turns of phrase, harmonic progressions and pianistic command that fully flowered in Chopin's mature masterpieces.

From 1831 Chopin based himself in Paris, the centre of European art culture, making his celebrated debut there the following year before an audience that included Liszt and Mendelssohn. He started to move in the highest circles, socialising not only with the nobility but also with some of the leading musicians, artists and writers of the time. In 1838 he began a relationship with the French novelist Aurore Dudevant (1804-1876) who wrote under the pseudonym George Sand. The liaison lasted nine years, furnishing Chopin with the artistic support and financial security vital for his creative endeavours.

The *Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 35* was composed in 1839 during Chopin's first visit to Sand's country estate at Nohant, a place where he was to write his finest music. The work was published in May 1841. The opening movement's span of expression is vast, ranging from the breathless agitation and high drama of the first theme to the heart-rending sentiment of the second. These contrasting emotions are further

enhanced by the use of impulsive rhythmic accents and intense chromatic harmonies. If the opening of the Sonata bears a passing similarity to Beethoven's Sonata in C minor, Op. 111, then his Sonata in A flat, Op. 26 may also be a likely source for Chopin's choice in the sequence of movements. In both works the *Scherzo*, placed second instead of the more typical third, is followed by a Funeral March. The Op. 35's *Scherzo* works up a storm in E flat minor, stretching the first movement's chromaticism even further. The reposeful and lyrical *Più lento*, in the relative major of G flat, provides refuge. The Sonata's focal point is the *Marche funèbre*, one of the most identifiable pieces of music ever written. It was actually penned in 1837, two years before the rest of the work, and the Sonata itself was evidently moulded around it. Poignantly, the *Marche funèbre* was performed alongside Mozart's *Requiem* at Chopin's funeral in 1849. In his Second Sonata he achieves unity through diversity, managing to create a sense of thematic coherence without being restricted by the traditional confines of Classical style. This was particularly difficult to perceive in Chopin's own time. Schumann famously criticised the piece, saying that it resembled the bringing together of Chopin's four most unruly offspring. Likened to a wind gusting over gravestones, the *Finale* was undoubtedly the most perplexing movement. Here, played by both hands in unison an octave apart, the texture is reduced to a single melodic line. Chopin's characteristic use of melody and his distinctive means of harmonic expression all but disappear in this tornado of turbulent chromaticism.

The *Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58* was composed in 1844 during Chopin's final stay at Nohant. The work is a product of his most mature style, and although it is also ostensibly in a minor key, its sound world could not be further removed from the desolate drama of the B flat minor Sonata's conclusion. The Third Sonata opens with an *Allegro maestoso* of unending melodic

resourcefulness where Chopin's love of polyphony and voice leading are given free rein. The four movements follow a similar order, with the sparkling *Scherzo* coming second, succeeded this time by the *Largo*. In the 19th century it was not uncommon for pianists to link movements harmonically by playing a short introductory passage which was usually improvised, a tradition which survived into the early part of the 20th century. Chopin actually notates this link at the start of the third movement, modulating dramatically from the brilliance of the *Scherzo's* E flat major tonality into the serenity of the *Largo's* B major. We enter the world of Italian opera with a sublime homage to Vincenzo Bellini, one of Chopin's closest friends and a composer he deeply admired (Chopin was subsequently buried beside Bellini at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris). The piano sings with supreme lyricism and tonal beauty in what is a consummate translation of the *bel canto* style. The dramatic *Finale's* main theme brings the Sonata back to its B minor origins. This darker rondo theme is interspersed with episodes in major keys giving the movement a feeling of struggle between major and minor tonality. In the end it is an affirmative B major *coda* that prevails, and the Sonata closes with a dazzling display of celebratory pyrotechnics.

Adonis Alvanis



Photo: Mahta Jahanstahi

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*For
Brian and Janice Capstick*

CHOPIN

The Three Piano Sonatas Louis Demetrius Alvanis

Sonata No. 1 in C minor, Op. 4

[1]	Allegro maestoso	9:39
[2]	Minuetto: Allegretto	3:50
[3]	Larghetto	3:45
[4]	Finale: Presto	6:38

Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 39

[5]	Grave - Doppio movimento	7:10
[6]	Scherzo	6:13
[7]	Marche Funèbre: Lento	8:24
[8]	Finale: Presto	1:30

Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58

[9]	Allegro maestoso	12:37
[10]	Scherzo: Molto vivace	2:24
[11]	Largo	9:58
[12]	Finale: Presto, non tanto	5:23



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CHOPIN: The Three Piano Sonatas
LOUIS DEMETRIUS ALVANIS - PIANO

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The Steinway concert piano
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for this recording is supplied and maintained by
Steinway and Sons, London.



p & m Meridian Records 2010
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Louis Demetrius Alvanis – Piano

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