

Meridian

Fryderyk Franciszek
CHOPIN

Ballade No.1, G minor, op.23

Ballade No.2, F major, op.38

Ballade No.3, A flat major, op. 47

Ballade No.4, F minor, op.52

Polonaise-Fantaisie, A flat major, op.61

Barcarolle, F sharp major, op.60

Fantaisie, F minor, op.49

Sung-Suk
KANG



Chopin - Poet of the Piano

Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin, the Polish composer and virtuoso pianist, was born on 1st March 1810 in Zelazowa Wola (near Warsaw) and died on 17 October 1849 in Paris.

He was one of the great masters of romantic music, and even though he composed predominantly for the piano, his unique qualities as a composer made a huge impression on Schumann, Liszt, Debussy, Wagner and Schoenberg, amongst others.

He studied exclusively in Warsaw and heard visiting artists like Hummel and Paganini during his early years. His first international exposure as a pianist-composer was in Vienna in 1829, where he gave several concerts, performing his own works and improvisations.

He was generally very warmly received by the critics, although some did criticize the “small tone that he drew from the piano.” He returned to Vienna the following year, but ultimately settled in Paris late in 1831. His successful debut there in early 1832 was attended by Liszt and Mendelssohn and this established his reputation in his adopted city. Paris was at that time home to several intellectuals and artists like Berlioz, Delacroix, Gautier, George Sand (with whom Chopin fell in love), Hugo, Liszt, Meyerbeer, Rossini, et al. Chopin taught the piano extensively, and continued to compose. Robert Schumann was particularly fond of Chopin’s compositions and reviewed them in his journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

Even though Chopin performed very few concerts during his lifetime, he is nevertheless hailed as one of the greatest pianists ever to have lived. His contribution to the development of piano technique, as evidenced especially in his early works (Etudes, Concertos), innovations in harmony and promotion of the piano as a ‘singing’ instrument, marked a decisive turning point in the instrument’s development during the 19th Century.

His approach to the piano was influenced by bel canto opera, and although he himself sadly never wrote a single opera, was overwhelmed by the long, soaring melodies of Bellini’s operas.

In addition to the ‘bel canto’ treatment of his melodic lines, Chopin was, despite his frail and sickly nature, also capable of explosive bravura in his compositions. His music contained much power and drama and his later compositions introduce polyphonic textures, just like Beethoven, who included fugues in his last sonatas.

Chopin’s career as a concert pianist came to a virtual halt upon migrating to Paris and he instead devoted much of his time to teaching a variety of pupils: from the Parisian elite to serious piano students. In addition to requiring his students to learn lots of Bach and Mozart, he also composed diverse pieces for them to play, amongst these the preludes, nocturnes, waltzes, impromptus, and mazurkas, whose style and taste are influenced by the Parisian salon.



The works presented on this CD showcase Chopin's larger and more sophisticated compositions, seemingly too profound for the salon, which demonstrate his ingenuity with 'improvisation on a fundamentally simple, classical formal principle' the principle of departure and return (The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians).

The Four Ballades, namely in G minor, Op. 23; F major, Op. 38; A-flat major, Op. 47; and F minor, Op. 52 were composed between 1831 and 1842. Written as individual compositions, the Ballades are widely performed by today's concert artists, sometimes separately, and often as a set.

The term 'ballade' evolved from a popular dance-song in the 12th century to lyric poetry and a form of vocal music at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century. Chopin developed this genre into piano music by integrating dance elements into its themes, while developing a variety of narrative-like passages. Some claim that these works may have been influenced by poet Adam Mickiewicz's 'Ballady i romance', and Robert Schumann wrote in his book, 'Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker' that He (Chopin) also mentioned the idea for his ballads had come to him from some of Mickiewicz's poems.

Structurally these pieces remain entirely original, as no two are composed in the same way, even though they are all in compound duple time with contrasting themes, and contain fiery, technically difficult coda passages. Moreover, they possess an improvisatory feeling throughout. Chopin was the first composer to compose a Ballade for a solo instrument, and this served as an inspiration for Liszt and Brahms, among others.

The first Ballade, composed in 1835, is in three part form. It opens with an impressive introduction before the dark main theme, and lyrical second theme are presented. These themes are separated by stormier material and the piece concludes with a turbulent coda.

Chopin used a similar scheme in his second and fourth ballades.

The second Ballade is dedicated to Robert Schumann, who had earlier dedicated his 'Kreisleriana, Op. 16' to him. In this Ballade there is a more marked contrast between the opening peaceful theme and the succeeding stormy section and although essentially a turbulent piece, it concludes in a subdued manner, reminiscent of the beginning.

The third Ballade, in contrast to its predecessors, is much more optimistic.



In the fourth Ballade, Chopin utilized melodic variations, including polyphony, combined with much drama and mystery that lead to a turbulent coda, complete with demanding passages in thirds, octaves and other nimble passage work.

Improvisatory elements are also evident in both the 'Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49' and 'Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61', majestic compositions that demonstrate Chopin's mastery of harmonic developments.

The 'Fantaisie', composed in 1841, begins with a haunting funeral march that serves as an introduction, which is then followed by a tempestuous, extreme sequence of ideas that includes an inspiring quiet middle section in a remote key. Despite all the solemn turbulence, it nevertheless ends in a triumphant manner.

The 'Polonaise-Fantaisie', composed between 1845 and 1846, clearly departs from Chopin's previous polonaises, in that it opens with an improvisation seeking its main tonality before introducing the actual polonaise theme. A complex harmonic development takes place, and similar to the 'Fantaisie', it also includes a chorale-like middle section shortly before yet another triumphant and exciting ending.

The 'Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60' is by contrast much simpler, both musically and structurally. The barcarolle earned its popularity as a Venetian boat song of 18th century and was subsequently utilized to great effect in romantic opera, usually to

communicate melancholy and other sentimental emotions. Mendelssohn, Faure, and Anton Rubinstein, among many others, composed 'instrumental' barcarolles, but this particular Barcarolle by Chopin is arguably the most famous of them all.

This gorgeous work was completed in 1846, just three years before the composer's death.

After a brief introduction, in which the left hand introduces the 'boat accompaniment', the main theme, a smooth, simple and lyrical duet, is introduced. In the middle section Chopin takes the listener on a journey of various keys whilst at the same time introducing new melodic material. A recitative serves as an interlude to return to the main theme, this time presented in with a much denser texture.

Chopin performed this Barcarolle in a private concert on 16 February 1848, his last performance in Paris. The program included a Mozart Trio, movements from his Cello Sonata and the Berceuse. Reports say that Chopin, whose health had deteriorated rapidly by then, could no longer play louder than 'pianissimo' even in the more expansive sections of the Barcarolle. It was a very depressing sight for all those who witnessed the event.

When the revolution erupted a week later, Chopin travelled to England upon the invitation of a wealthy Scottish pupil. Despite his illness, he still managed to perform around London, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh.



Chopin returned to Paris late in 1848 and would never compose nor teach again, on account of his failing health. He died on 17 October 1849 and his funeral was attended by almost 3000 people.

He is buried at the Père-Lachaise cemetery.

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Sung-Suk Kang

Ever since the age of 8, Sung-Suk Kang dreamed of being a concert pianist. She was soon accepted into what is now Seoul Institute of the Arts, where she had her first formal piano instruction.

While still a teenager, Sung-Suk left Seoul to study in Singapore, where she became one of that city's most sought-after young concert artists. Following a recommendation from John Edwards in Singapore, Sung-Suk successfully applied to the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester, as a student of Derrick Wyndham, whose pupils included Stephen Hough and Peter Donohoe. "I was seventeen, it was my first time in Europe. I was overwhelmed by the challenge and the excitement of it all. I fell in love with the RNCM and was astonished at its facilities: brand new Steinway grand pianos in the practice rooms, a beautiful new concert hall and a high-tech opera theatre. It was like a dream come true."

Winner of several scholarships, Sung-Suk had a busy time in Manchester working for internal and external engagements.

After graduating, Sung-Suk was invited to join Paul Badura-Skoda's elite class at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, whose members included winners of the Clara Haskil piano competition. She was soon invited to work alongside Badura-Skoda, as his assistant.

"Studying with Badura-Skoda was a new experience. He had a method which took time to get used to, but which gradually changed my way of playing. It was based on a simple theory of heavy and light touch, using the weight of the finger - on a strong beat playing with more tone and on a weak beat with less. It sounds very simple, but applying this to every single note among the different voices in the music is difficult. Getting it right makes a huge difference, enabling you to produce beautiful phrases and lines. It was especially fascinating to apply this to a fugue by Bach, where the different voices sing separately and clearly yet mingle together. In Chopin, Badura-Skoda's teaching was all about balancing chords, understanding the rubato required and playing with a special 'Chopin tone'. And I learnt so much about Mozart: I began to hear comments after my Mozart concerts, that there was a discernable 'Badura-Skoda sound.'"

After being awarded her diploma in Vienna, Sung-Suk was selected along with a small number of musicians from America and Europe to attend the professional performers' course at Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada. "The facilities and the setting are magnificent. We were able to concentrate on developing as concert artists and had many opportunities to perform as soloists and chamber musicians with established artists from around the world."



Buoyed by this experience, Sung-Suk returned to Vienna to prepare for the Schumann competition in Italy, where she took first prize. Her win brought a string of engagements around that country.

Following a period in Paris studying contemporary French repertoire, (“composers like Messiaen and Boulez fascinated me, but I’d never had the time or even the courage to learn their music. I had a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture in Vienna and earned money by doing occasional teaching at one of the conservatoires”), Sung-Suk took part in the Hennessy Mozart competition where again she was a finalist.

Sung-Suk soon married: an Italian conductor, with whom she settled in Vienna and had two children. For a while the piano took a back seat, but she soon returned to the concert platform with the Mozart K466 concerto in Prague with the Prague Mozart Orchestra.

Sung-Suk has since developed a career embracing both solo recital/concerto work and chamber music. “My approach to music is constantly evolving. When I was younger my goal was to become the best player. I was very competitive. As I grow older I enjoy simply the fascination of making music; of discovering new things in familiar repertoire. My life-experience has developed my inner world and affected my approach to interpretation to simply reflect who I am. Piano playing is not

just about using the fingers, but the body and the mind. I tell my students to let their fingers be the point of conjunction between the heart and the piano. There’s something magical about performing. It should never become routine. I feel the urge to communicate, to reveal my spirit and to incorporate myself into the score, with both the intellectual and passionate traits of my interpretations reaching out to the audience. There’s simply nothing like sharing with other people a range of emotions through the universal power of music.”



“A true artist, a pianist of uncommon
sensitivity and refinement.”
Paul Badura-Skoda



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Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin: Piano Works
Sung-Suk Kang

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| [1] Ballade No.1, G minor, op.23 | 9:33 |
| [2] Ballade No.2, F major, op.38 | 8:04 |
| [3] Ballade No.3, A flat major, op.47 | 7:38 |
| [4] Ballade No.4, F minor, op.52 | 11:05 |
| [5] Polonaise-Fantaisie, A flat major, op.61 | 12:33 |
| [6] Barcarolle, F sharp major, op.60 | 8:29 |
| [7] Fantaisie, F minor, op.49 | 12:45 |

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