Symphony Center Presents

Sunday, May 28, 2017, at 3:00

Piano Series

MAURIZIO POLLINI

Music by Frédéric Chopin

Two Nocturnes, Op. 27
No. 1 in C-sharp Minor
No. 2 in D-flat Major

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52

Berceuse in D-flat Major, Op. 57

Scherzo No. 1 in B Minor, Op. 20

INTERMISSION

Two Nocturnes, Op. 55
No. 1 in F Minor
No. 2 in E-flat Major

Sonata No. 3 in B Minor, Op. 58
Allegro maestoso
Scherzo: Molto vivace
Largo
Finale: Presto, non tanto

This performance is made possible by a generous gift from Richard and Mary L. Gray.
Frédéric Chopin
Born February 22, 1810; Zelazowa-Wola (near Warsaw), Poland
Died October 17, 1849; Paris, France

Two Nocturnes, Op. 27

COMPOSED
1835

Contemporary accounts of Frédéric Chopin’s piano playing invariably refer to the extreme delicacy of his touch, the beauty of his tone, and the poetic quality of his expression. Those characteristics are faithfully reflected in the twenty-one nocturnes that he created between 1827 and 1846. Chopin derived the name and general style for these works from the nocturnes of John Field, the Irish composer-pianist who spent most of his life in Moscow and Paris. Both composers were influenced in the rich harmonies and long melodic lines of their nocturnes by the bel canto operatic style that was popular at the time; however, Chopin’s examples exhibit a greater depth of expression and a wider range of keyboard technique than Field’s works. The introspective moods of the nocturnes pierced to the heart of the romantic sensibility, and, along with the waltzes, they were Chopin’s most popular works during his lifetime.

The Nocturne in C-sharp minor, op. 27, no. 1, of 1835, regarded by many as Chopin’s finest work in the form, is, according to critic Alan Rich, “a powerful, virile outcry, one of the most personal utterances in the entire realm of piano music.” It is shrouded by a mood of disquiet so strong that pianist-educator Ernest Hutcheson said it creates “an atmosphere of morbid pessimism, heavy and oppressive.” The attempt to rise to heroic declamation in the middle section founders and breaks into a sobbing recitative-cadenza before the opening music returns.

The Nocturne in D-flat major, op. 27, no. 2, dedicated to Countess Therese Apponyi, wife of the Austrian ambassador to Paris and a frequent hostess to the composer, is one of Chopin’s most entrancing crepuscular evocations. Its long, graceful arch of melody recalls the lyrical flights of contemporary bel canto opera (Bellini was a good friend and sometime duet partner at the Parisian salons), though the rapturous mood and exquisitely varied figurations could have originated with no one but Chopin. After hearing Chopin play this work, Charles Hallé, the English pianist-composer whose name is memorialized by Manchester’s chief orchestra, wrote, “He carried you away with him into a dreamland, in which you would like to dwell forever.”

Claude Debussy, who undertook an edition of Chopin’s works in 1914, said that this piece is “among the most beautiful music ever written . . . which often takes flight toward the forest of As You Like It, where the fairies alone hold sway over our minds.”
Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52

A “ballad,” according to the Random House Dictionary, is “a simple, narrative poem of popular origin, composed in short stanzas, especially one of romantic character and adapted for singing.” The term was derived from an ancient musico-poetic form that accompanied dancing (“ballare” in medieval Latin, hence “ball” and “ballet”), which had evolved into an independent vocal genre by the fourteenth century in the exquisitely refined works of Guillaume de Machaut and other early composers of secular music.

The ballad was well established in England as a medium for the recitation of romantic or fantastic stories by at least the year 1500; it is mentioned by Pepys, Milton, Addison, and Swift, often disdainfully because of the frequently scurrilous nature of its content. The form, having adopted a more refined demeanor, became popular in Germany during the late eighteenth century, when it attracted no less a literary luminary than Goethe, whose tragic narrative Erlkönig furnished the text for one of Schubert’s most beloved songs.

Chopin seems to have been the first composer to apply the title to a piece of abstract instrumental music, apparently indicating that his four ballades hint at a dramatic flow of emotions such as could not be appropriately contained by traditional classical forms. (Such transferral of terms between artistic disciplines was hardly unknown during the romantic era. Liszt, the first musical artist in history with enough nerve to keep an entire public program to himself, dubbed his solo concerts “musical soliloquies” at first, and later gave them the now-familiar designation, “recitals.” (“How can one recite at the piano?” fumed one British critic. “Preposterous!”) Brahms, Liszt, Fauré, Grieg, Vieuxtemps, and Frank Martin all later provided instrumental works with the title of ballade.

In his ballades, “Chopin reaches his full stature as the unapproachable genius of the pianoforte,” according to Arthur Hedley, “a master of rich and subtle harmony and, above all, a poet—one of those whose vision transcends the confines of nation and epoch, and whose mission it is to share with the world some of the beauty that is revealed to them alone.” Though the ballades came to form a nicely cohesive set unified by their temporal scale, structural fluidity, and supranational idiom, Chopin composed them over a period of more than a decade. He once suggested to Robert Schumann that he was “incited to the creation of the ballades” by some poems of his Polish compatriot Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), whom he met and played for in Paris around 1835.

The English composer and author Alan Rawsthorne noted, however, that “to pin down these ballades to definite stories is gratuitous and misleading, for in suggesting extra-musical connotations the attention is distracted from the purely musical scheme which is . . . compelling in itself and completely satisfying.” Rather than obscuring the essential nature of these pieces, the apparently opposing views of Schumann and Rawsthorne lead directly to the very heart of Chopin’s achievement: the near-perfect melding of romantic fantasy and feeling with an Apollonian control of form and figuration. By no other composer in the history of the art has the delicate balance between emotion and intellect been so finely achieved as by Chopin—heart and head are weighed perfectly in his, the most precisely calibrated of all musical scales.

The Ballade no. 3 in A-flat major, op. 47, one of Chopin’s best-loved creations, was composed during the quiet and happy period he spent with George Sand in Paris in 1840–41. Upon its publication in 1841, it was dedicated to Pauline de Noailles, whom Antoine-François Marmontel, in listing Chopin’s pupils, referred to as one of the composer’s “disciples afféctionnées.” The work reportedly was derived from Mickiewicz’s Ondine, which Laurent Cellier paraphrased:
On the shores of a lake, a young man pledges fidelity to a young girl. Doubting the faithfulness of men, despite the protestations of her lover, she disappears and returns in the bewitching form of a water sprite. As soon as she tempts the young man, he succumbs to her charms. To expiate his sin, he is dragged to the bottom of the water and condemned to a breathless pursuit of the sprite, whom he can never catch.

The Ballade no. 4 in F minor, op. 52, dates from the summer of 1842, when Chopin was staying with Sand at her country villa in Nohant, near Châteauroux, some distance south of Paris in the province of Berry; she and Delacroix, a house guest at the time, provided the work’s first audience. The composer performed the work with great success at his public concert with Pauline Viardot at the Salle Pleyel on February 21, 1842; Breitkopf and Härtel issued the score that same month. The composition was dedicated to Baroness de Rothschild, one of Chopin’s earliest and most ardent Parisian patrons.

No poetic source is known for the Fourth Ballade, nor is one really needed for this music of drama and authority that is so richly expressive of feelings hardly capturable by words. The pianist and scholar Paul Badura-Skoda spoke of the music’s “real explosive power”; Chopin’s biographer Casimir Wierzyński called it “a true musical novel, boundlessly rich.” It is a fitting capstone to this superb collection of masterworks, of which Frederick Niecks wrote, “None of Chopin’s compositions surpass in masterliness of form and beauty and poetry of content his ballades. In them he attains the acme of his power as an artist.”

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**Berceuse in D-flat Major, Op. 57**

**COMPOSED**
1843

The term “berceuse” is derived from the French word for “rocking chair,” and denotes, in music, a “cradle song” or “lullaby.” Chopin’s op. 57 is the best known of such works, though there are also examples by Liszt (for solo piano), César Cui (for violin and strings), Fauré (one in the *Dolly* Suite and an independent Berceuse for Violin and Piano), Benjamin Godard (from his opera *Jocelyn*), and Stravinsky (in *The Firebird*). These pieces are generally characterized by a sweet, simple melody draped across a gently rocking, repetitive accompaniment.

Chopin’s berceuse dates from 1843, when he was living quietly in Paris and Nohant under the protection of George Sand. The piece was published in May 1845 with a dedication to Elise Gavard, one of his favorite pupils, whose brother, Charles, became a close friend and stayed constantly at Chopin’s bedside when life was draining out of the composer in the autumn of 1849. Chopin seems to have valued his berceuse highly, choosing to include it on what proved to be his last concert in Paris, at the Salle Pleyel on February 16, 1848, and for many of the recitals on his punishing tour to England and Scotland later that year.

Chopin’s berceuse is one of those seemingly impossible formal and stylistic achievements that only the greatest masters can realize. The structural foundation of the work is a virtually unchanging bass melody, a so-called ground bass, a technique upon which some of the most erudite and disciplined specimens of baroque music were erected. Above this repeating pattern, Chopin placed sixteen tiny variations of the right-hand theme. Despite—almost in defiance of—this recondite formal process, the berceuse is one of Chopin’s most gossamer creations, made more from fleeting thoughts and wisps of feelings than from sounding notes. “Such poetry defies analysis,” was the only explanation that Arthur Hedley could advance of the berceuse in his biography of the composer. “Who will cut open the nightingale’s throat to discover where the song comes from?”
James Huneker could barely contain his rapture in mere words when discussing the berceuse:

The rhythm never alters in the bass, and against this background, this monotone of a dark, gray sky, the composer arranges an astonishing variety of fireworks, some florid, some subdued, but all delicate in tracery and design. Modulations from pigeon egg blue to nile green, most misty and subtle modulations, dissolve before one’s eyes, and for a moment, the sky is peppered with tiny stars in doubles, each independently tinted. It is a miracle.”

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**Scherzo No. 1 in B Minor, Op. 20**

**COMPOSED**

1830–31

Chopin departed from Warsaw in November 1830 for his second visit to Vienna, hoping to further his career as a virtuoso pianist by building on the success that he had enjoyed in that city a year earlier. His hope was in vain. The Viennese were fickle in their taste for musical culture, and Chopin had expended his novelty value upon his first foray, so he found little easy response there to his attempts to produce some concerts for himself.

His difficulties were exacerbated by the Polish insurrection against Russian oppression that erupted only days after he arrived in Vienna. Conservative Austria was troubled by the anti-monarchial unrest to its north, and feared that the tsar might petition them for help against the uprising. Polish nationals in Austria were therefore thrown into an uncomfortable situation, and Chopin took considerable care in expressing his patriotic sympathies too openly.

In addition, he was worried for the safety of his family and friends in Warsaw, and sorely missed a sweetheart for whom he had hatched a passion shortly before leaving. He vacillated about returning home to join the cause, and actually started out on one occasion, but quickly changed his mind and retreated to Vienna.

(Years later, George Sand said, “Chopin is always leaving—tomorrow.”)

On Christmas Day 1830, he wrote to Jan Matuszyński that he was cheered by visiting friends, “but on coming home I vent my rage on the piano. . . . I have a good cry, read, look at things, have a laugh, get into bed, blow out my candle, and dream always about all of you.” In addition, he was earning no money, and became depressed enough on one occasion to write, “To live or die—it is all the same to me.” He wallowed in indecision for another six months, unsure whether to head to London or Munich or Milan, but finally settled on Paris, where he arrived in September 1831. Within a year, he had become one of the most acclaimed musicians in France.

Though Chopin composed little during his difficult time in Vienna in 1830–31, he did write the first of his scherzos, a work of strong, almost violent emotions that may well reflect some of his frustrations of those months. The “scherzo” as perfected by Beethoven has about it an air of humor, or at least *joie de vivre*, that is reflected in its name, which in both German and Italian means “joke.” There is, however, little lighthearted sentiment in the outer sections of Chopin’s Scherzo in B minor (“How is ‘gravity’ to clothe itself, if ‘jest’ goes about in dark veils,” Schumann wondered), but the central portions of the piece turn to sweeter thoughts by presenting a sumptuously lyrical theme derived from the old Polish Christmas song “Sleep, Baby Jesus.”
Two Nocturnes, Op. 55

COMPOSED
1843

The two nocturnes of op. 55 date from the summer of 1843, when Chopin was staying with George Sand at her country villa in Nohant. The set was dedicated to Jane Maxwell Stirling, a lady of Scottish ancestry who became Chopin’s student during her extended stay in Paris. She apparently fell in love with her teacher, but his emotional involvement never mounted beyond the friendship stage, though rumors that they were to be married circulated with some frequency during those last years of Chopin’s life. (“She might as well marry death,” the feeble composer told one of his students.) Chopin visited England and Scotland under Stirling’s sponsorship and care in 1848, and received a gift of 25,000 francs from her the following year, when his ruined health prevented him from teaching or composing.

Chopin’s characteristic balancing of heart and head, of feeling and intellect, is demonstrated by the F minor nocturne, op. 55, no. 1, which breathes an air of what Frederick Niecks termed “tear-laden sweetness,” yet is so precisely built from the varied repetitions of its soulful opening phrase that Herbert Weinstock called it “a marvel of miniature construction.” The noted English composer, pedagogue, and music scholar Lennox Berkeley wrote that the E-flat major nocturne, op. 55, no. 2, “is one of the most beautiful and flawless in the whole series—a small masterpiece in which technical skill and inspiration go hand in hand.”

Sonata No. 3 in B Minor, Op. 58

COMPOSED
1844

Chopin first met the flamboyantly iconoclastic novelist George Sand late in 1836 at a party given by Franz Liszt. Their friendship deepened into sincere if tempestuous and unconventional love during the following months, and Sand served for the next decade as Chopin’s muse and protectress. Beginning in 1839, they escaped from the summer heat and dust of Paris to Sand’s country villa at Nohant. The composer’s biographer William Murdoch described the château there as,

a large, rambling house, surrounded on all sides by lawns, flanked by flowers, shrubs and trees, very much like an English country house that is carelessly looked after. Matthew Arnold wrote of it as “a plain house by the roadside, with a walled garden.”

In the distance, beyond the fields and meadows, was the River Indre. One had a feeling of roominess and comfort and complete freedom from care.

Nohant met several needs for Chopin: it gave him a place to unwind from his busy schedule of wintertime teaching and socializing (the private soirées at which he played provided much of his livelihood during his years in Paris—he did not perform a single public concert between 1842 and 1848); it provided the time and secluded venue he required for composition; it offered a chance to meet at leisure with friends, including Delacroix (seen on page 28), who drew a portrait of the composer at Nohant; and it served as a personal sanatorium, where Sand mothered his frail constitution and sustained his spirit. Just as the couple was preparing to leave for Nohant in May 1844, Chopin learned that his father had died in Warsaw. The news devastated him, exacerbating the tuberculosis that was beginning to sap his strength, and Sand took him to Nohant as soon as he had recovered.
sufficiently to travel. She was concerned enough over his health and state of mind that she wrote to his mother, suggesting that a visit from the family might help to restore him. It was agreed that his sister Ludwika, who had not seen Chopin for fourteen years, would travel to Paris with her husband, Kalasanty.

Sand wrote back that the guests would stay first in her Parisian apartments and then continue to Nohant, but went on to warn Ludwika not to be too frightened by her brother’s appearance: “You will find my dear boy weak and much changed since you last saw him, but please don’t be alarmed about his health. It has been pretty much the same for the last six years, during which I have seen him every day. I hope that with time his constitution will be strengthened, but at least I am sure that with a regular life and care it will last as well as anyone else’s.” Chopin was stirred enough by the news of Ludwika’s visit that he started to compose again, and began sketching a large Piano Sonata in B minor in July.

Early in August, Chopin hurried to Paris to meet Ludwika and Kalasanty. Brother and sister fell tearfully into each other’s arms, and Frédéric celebrated their reunion by shepherding the couple around Paris—sightseeing, attending *Les Huguenots* at the opera, arranging soirées to show her off to his friends, and visiting the aristocrats in whose apartments he performed. Chopin was worn out after two weeks of this hyperventilated activity, and gladly took Ludwika and Kalasanty to Nohant. They were welcomed effusively, and the company spent the next three weeks touring the neighborhood, listening to Sand read from her writings, engaging in dramatic improvisations and dancing, and joining in informal concerts. Chopin was greatly revived in mind and body (Sand later wrote to assure Ludwika that she was “the best physician he has ever had, because merely speaking to him about you is enough to restore his love of life”), and returned to his B minor sonata with enthusiasm after his sister’s departure at the beginning of September.

The work was completed by the time he returned to Paris in late autumn. The summer of 1844 was the last one of unclouded happiness that Chopin was to spend at Nohant. His relationship with Sand, already strained by that time despite the care, love, and financial security she brought to him, began to deteriorate seriously soon thereafter, and they were largely estranged within two years. The break affected him profoundly both spiritually and creatively, and the B minor sonata was the last large-scale piano work that he composed before his death in 1849.

The key of B minor was virtually unprecedented in the classical piano sonata literature—no such works by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, or Hummel exist in that tonality. (Liszt did not begin his B minor sonata until 1852.) Chopin apparently chose the key for both the darkly colored emotional ambiance it creates for the music and for the opulent sonorities it allows to be drawn from the piano. Both of these qualities are evident in the opening movement, which is marked by the rich figurations, precise motivic control, and melodic fecundity that characterize the creations of Chopin’s fullest maturity. Formal delineation is provided by the contrasting second theme, an arching lyrical inspiration buoyed by a rippling arpeggio accompaniment.

The remainder of the movement proceeds according to the traditional sonata model, except for the not unimportant point that the main theme is omitted in the recapitulation, which therefore begins directly with the lyrical subsidiary subject. The compact scherzo balances its mercurial outer sections with a smoothly flowing melody in the baritone range for the central trio. The Largo, reminiscent in its rapt eloquence of Chopin’s finest nocturnes, was judged by Alfred Frankenstein to be “one of the high points in all of Chopin and in all of the music of the romantic era.” The closing movement, compounded formally of elements of sonata and rondo, is febrile and almost tempestuous until it turns to the brighter tonality of B major for its energetic coda. “In subject matter, in handling, in scope, and in sheer sonorous beauty,” wrote Herbert Weinstock, “the finale is one of the major musical achievements after Beethoven. It entitles Chopin to a place with all masters of imagination and form.”

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Richard E. Rodda is a former faculty member at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Institute of Music, and provides program notes for many American orchestras, concert series, and festivals.