

# Chopin

Ian Hotham



ballades and scherzi

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In taking the title of 'ballade' for what was effectively a new genre of piano works, Chopin grappled with a host of existing literary and musical associations. It was in the remarkable flourishing of early romantic poetry that the ballad (essentially a revived medieval form) was highlighted, particularly in contrast to the lyric. This contrast in turn resonated in the development of the nineteenth century art song, many of which were set in the 6/8 or 6/4 metres characteristic of Chopin's ballades. With such references implicit in their title, it is not surprising that these pieces take on something of the early romantic preoccupation with the narrative capacities of music.

It is commonly thought that the ballades were inspired by, if not specifically programmatic to, poems of the Polish patriotic poet, Adam Mickiewicz. Formally rhapsodic, unfettered by any particular rules, each piece within the four seems to follow a different emotional story. Chopin of course avoided any direct reference to programmatic associations, allowing his titles to allude only to the most generalised aspects of literary inspiration. However, the use of end-weighted, goal-oriented structures reinforces the sense of an underlying narrative plot, as does the focus on thematic variation and transformation. At the very least, it is possible to hear each ballade as a description of the journey and interaction of two contrasting themes.

The first Ballade was composed at roughly the same time as the first Scherzo, and this pair represents Chopin's earliest mature essays in extended forms. Their appearance established two independent genres, contrasting for the most part but with a basis in the same stylistic background. Where the scherzos take on a clearly delineated, fundamentally simple structure, the ballades exhibit a through-composed, integrated framework in which the various thematic transformations are able to take place fluidly with fewer

formal restraints. This culminated in the last of the four ballades, the Ballade in F minor (Op. 52), written in 1842 and characterized by an extremely complicated form combining elements of sonata, variation and rondo structures.

The Scherzo movement in sonatas and symphonies had its origin in the Minuet and Trio, the usual form of the third movement in large-scale works from the classical period. Owing largely to Beethoven for its practical development, a *scherzo* usually takes on something of the light, humorous aspect of its literal derivation from the Italian – a musical joke. However, essential to its eventual configuration was a succession of contrasting ideas in opposing moods, and it was this aspect of the form that Chopin referred to in titling his *scherzi*.

Although expanded by repetitive structures, Chopin retains the basic three-part design of the *scherzo*, as well as its triple metre. Some more specific characteristics of the Beethovenian model are also preserved, most notably contrasts in articulation and *sforzando* markings. These aside, however, Chopin's modifications to the light-hearted middle movement were so radical that his four scherzi confused not only his contemporaries, but also later critics and musicologists. There remains little of the musical 'joke' in these works – rather they are characterized by a powerful, almost ferocious freneticism.

The central feature of Chopin's reinvention of the Scherzo as a large-scale independent form, then is the element of contrast. Each of the four pieces is characterised by an opening gesture - a presentation of fragmentary, discontinuous motives immediately pointing towards juxtaposition and contrast as essential to the organization of musical materials. These discontinuous gestures are a particular rarity within Chopin's *oeuvre* and to begin four works in such a way further signifies the importance of the role of formal contrast in the framework of the composer's new genre.

It seems clear that Chopin regarded the independent scherzo as an entirely separate genre, very much removed



from the scherzo-movements in his sonatas and marked by a kind of musical material uniquely its own. The four are undoubtedly amongst the composer's most individual, characteristic and dramatic works and, together with the four ballades, stand among the most significant accomplishments of Chopin's output.

*Steve Hodgson*

## Ian Holtham

Dr Ian Holtham is Senior Lecturer in Music at the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, where he also Heads the Keyboard Department and the areas of Practical Music and Performance. During the first half of 1999 he was invited to become the inaugural Head of Studies at the Australian National Academy of Music in addition to his position as Senior Lecturer at the University of Melbourne. He is Chair of the Victorian branch of the Australian Music Examinations Board and also Chair of the Piano Committee of the Federal Board.

Ian Holtham worked with Peter Feuchtwanger, Geza Anda, as well as with Geoffrey Parsons and Enrique Barenboim in Europe for over five years during the 1970s. He also studied Composition and Conducting at the Guildhall School of Music. He has performed throughout Europe, Asia and Australia and has broadcast with the ABC since the late seventies appearing as a soloist with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, as well as with regional orchestras.

Dr Holtham has published a seminal text on **The Essentials of Piano Technique**, and was piano adviser and contributor to the **Oxford Companion to Australian Music**. He has officiated at almost all the major Eisteddfodau and has co-ordinated and judged the major musical awards and scholarships within Australia. Since 1995 Ian Holtham has released a solo piano CD each year. His first, **études**, contained the compete Études of Chopin, Opus 10 and Opus 25, paired with four Godowsky transcriptions of the études. This and his subsequent CDs, **Imo Pectore**, **Pictures** and **Act of Homage**, **A Liszt Recital** and **Giants in the Land** have all been received with considerable critical acclaim.

Recorded in Melba Hall, University of Melbourne in 2002 on the 'Jost' Steinway Model D,  
No 552477

Recorded by Thomas Grubb  
Produced by Vaughan McAlley  
Photograph of Ian Holtham by Joe Castro  
Cover photograph by Howard Birnstihl  
Program notes by Steve Hodgson

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**CHOPIN** 1810-1849

## complete ballades and scherzi

- 1** Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23 8'49"
- 2** Ballade No. 2 in F major, Op. 38 7'04"
- 3** Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20 7'59"
- 4** Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 31 9'37"
- 5** Ballade No. 3 in A flat major, Op. 47 7'05"
- 6** Scherzo No. 3 in C sharp minor, Op. 39 6'49"
- 7** Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Op. 54 10'55"
- 8** Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52 10'10"

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