



Chopin

showcase

move

Ian Holtham: piano

1 March 2010 marks the bicentenary of Chopin's birth. The genesis of this recording was to assemble a number of the composer's most attractive and original works as a mark of homage to one of the most outstandingly innovative and important composers for the piano who has ever lived. The CD contains a unique compilation: everything that Chopin ever wrote involving the designations, *fantasy* and *impromptu*, works into which he poured both love and intensity. In addition the recording includes the only work in which Chopin composed in every key, creating a sound world to characterise every tonality: the magical and comprehensive preludes Opus 28, Chopin's own homage to Bach.

24 Préludes, Op. 28

The twenty-four Preludes were written between 1835 and 1839 though the intensity with which Chopin wrote these wonderful gems accelerated in the winter of 1838-1839 when Chopin escaped from the Parisian winter to Majorca with the turbulent George Sand and her equally troubling children. Historically, a prelude was a brief, often improvised, introduction to some larger work, setting the mood, and perhaps more prosaically testing the quality or tuning of the instrument. In Chopin's Préludes, the influence of J.S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Klavier* is clear, most obviously in the progression through each of the 24 major and minor keys, though Chopin eschews Bach's directly chromatic coverage in favour of the more artistically subtle principle of key relativity through the cycle of fifths. This connection underscores the astonishing changes in idiomatic keyboard writing in the mere one hundred years since Bach's achievement.

A more subtle influence resides in Chopin's characterisation of each key: the arpeggiated harmonies of C major; the melancholy of B minor; the serene warmth of F sharp major; the grave strength of C minor; or the pastoral quality of F major. Chopin was a master of the compositions which had focussed, miniaturised intensity, giving each prelude the concentration of a mood or idea.

The details of the individual preludes are as follows:

No. 1 in C major *Agitato*

The arpeggiated waves and harmonic design of this brief prelude resonate with J.S. Bach's first prelude of his *Well-Tempered Klavier*.

No. 2 in A minor *Lento*

In the next three preludes, Chopin utilises different ostinati figures as bass accompaniments to the right-hand melodies. This one features a rocking, brooding stasis.

No. 3 in G major *Vivace*

A rippling bass supports a poised right hand melody dotted with anticipations.

No. 4 in E minor *Largo*

This celebrated prelude features a plaintive melody over repeated left-hand chords. It was performed, with Nos. 6 and 20, at Chopin's funeral service.

No. 5 in D major *Allegro molto*

Rapid semiquavers coruscate in both hands with the hint of a melodic fragment pointing through in cross-rhythms.

No. 6 in B minor *Lento assai*

An arching, melancholy cello melody waxes and wanes under an insistent treble of repeated quavers.

No. 7 in A major *Andantino*

In three lines, Chopin has sketched a delightful yet melancholy dance: part waltz, part mazurka.

No. 8 in F sharp minor *Molto agitato*

A brooding alto melody, brought out by

the right hand thumb, is surrounded by a turbulent cloud of notes.

No. 9 in E major *Largo*

This majestic prelude resounds with both hands in the bass register.

No. 10 in C sharp minor *Allegro molto*

A skittish contrast to the preceding prelude, a light treble figure cascades over split chords.

No. 11 in B major *Vivace*

This is a poignant yet amiable prelude which seems almost locked in repetition until its brief life simply expires.

No. 12 in G sharp minor *Presto*

This powerfully insistent prelude features rapid treble repeated notes over a thick repeated chordal texture.

No. 13 in F sharp major *Lento*

One of the longer preludes of the set, and in ternary form, this prelude is a compressed nocturne.

No. 14 in E flat minor *Allegro*

Enigmatic and surging, this prelude growls in octaves in the bass, providing an unsettling contrast to the preludes each side of it.

No. 15 in D flat major *Sostenuto*

The only prelude to have acquired a nickname, the popular *Raindrop* prelude, it has a dramatic middle section and features a repeated A flat/G sharp drone.

No. 16 in B flat minor *Presto con fuoco*

After six accented chords, a flurry of right-hand semiquavers explodes over a leaping bass.

No. 17 in A flat major *Allegretto*

Repeated chords support a plangent treble melody. It concludes with the toll of eleven low, bell-like A flats.

No. 18 in F minor *Allegro molto*

Like an enraged recitative, this prelude unfurls with motifs which are abrupt and dissonant.

No. 19 in E flat major *Vivace*

This is the most etude-like of the preludes where rapid triplets fill a counterpoint of treble and bass, conveying the impression of a genial melodic line.

No. 20 in C minor *Largo*

Grave, fortissimo chords subside to a pianissimo in an utterance as dramatic as it is brief. Both Rachmaninoff and Busoni used these dramatic twelve bars as the theme for sets of variations.

No. 21 in B flat major *Cantabile*

A poised melody hovers over an ever-shifting bass as it grows in dramatic power.

No. 22 in G minor *Molto agitato*

Surging and turbulent, a left-hand theme in octaves co-exists with energised right-hand chords.

No. 23 in F major *Moderato*

A delicate filigree of arpeggios cascades over a jaunty bass. The prelude ends surprisingly with an emphasised flattened seventh, so turning a straightforward ending into unresolved anticipation.

No. 24 in D minor *Allegro appassionato*

This magnificent conclusion consists of a relentless and enormously difficult left-hand ostinato under a melody which has the drama and dignity of a Greek oracle, interspersed with trills, cascades and runs. Three electrifying bass notes conclude the work.

Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49

The Fantasy in F minor was composed in 1841, when Chopin was 31 years old. It was dedicated to Princess Catherine do Souza, a pupil of Chopin of whom he remained fond and continued to teach until his death. This masterpiece is structured in an advanced kind of sonata-rondo form of Chopin's invention and it opens with a kind of ethereal funeral march which dissolves into a series of harmonic shifts before revealing the work's main theme, a hauntingly lyrical melodic line which will appear in three keys throughout the work. The charm quickly shifts to gestures of mounting virtuosity which finally herald a more triumphant march, thus tying the central structure of the work to the opening. At the heart of the Fantasy lies a beautiful, brief chorale-like section – though in triple time – in B major, the tritone of F minor. After the stillness

of this brief interlude, earlier material is recapitulated, still more grandly arranged, before settling into A flat major for the briefest of references to the slow section and the swirling arpeggiation, also from earlier material, which closes the work with a conclusive, highly unusual cadence. Franz Liszt is said to have believed that the Fantasy depicts elements of the turbulent and passionate affair between Chopin and George Sand.

Impromptu No. 1 in A flat major, Op. 29
Impromptu No. 2 in F sharp major,
Op. 36
Impromptu No. 3 in G flat major, Op. 51
Fantasy-Impromptu in C sharp minor,
Op. post. 66

Composed between 1837, when the first impromptu appeared, and 1843, when the third impromptu was written, the works which bear the name impromptu have certain features in common. All have some sense of improvisational fluidity in keeping with the word impromptu's original sense. All have a certain lightness to them redolent of the nineteenth-century salon which was the most comfortable environment for Chopin himself as a performer. All four works are structured in a highly discernible ternary form where lyrical middle sections express extreme creative contrast to the more florid outer sections, nowhere more clearly conveyed than the famous middle section to the Fantasy-Impromptu. However, the outer sections of the wonderful second impromptu display a level

of compositional originality which places that work almost on a par with the Ballades in the glorious unfolding of unified thematic material. The first and third impromptus convey a sense of lyrical charm, simple directness of musical thought and unfailing pianistic invention.

Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat major,
Op. 61

At the time of writing this astonishing work, which was published in 1846, Chopin famously wrote, 'I am writing something I do not know how to name'. Dedicated to one of his pupils, a not infrequent practice with Chopin, this work ranks amongst the greatest of his mature output. In the very opening moments the nature of the title is made explicit: the arresting rhythmically-dotted polonaise fragment followed immediately by the arpeggiated fantasy which covers nearly the entire gamut of the keyboard. There is a central theme which will run throughout the work, though it has an inherently fragment-like quality and ushers in many sections of extraordinary harmonic and thematic daring. And the most settled moments are those of the central lyrical B major section, the same key Chopin used for a similar purpose in the F minor Fantasy. Even so, even this middle section dissolves into harmonic uncertainty before moving revealing one of the most poignant themes Chopin ever devised. Structurally, harmonically and in the rapidity of cascading emotional changes, this work predicts the experimentation of a later

century. In it Chopin is prophet, poet and visionary architect.

One of Australia's most important and distinguished artists, Ian Holtham has long had a special relationship with the great composers of nineteenth century pianism and with Chopin in particular. Ian Holtham's recorded output includes the complete Etudes Op 10 and Op 25, the complete Ballades, the complete Scherzi, the complete Preludes Op 28, the complete impromptus and various other works which all provide a discography unique in Australian pianism.

Ian Holtham's achievements across a variety of musical areas make him one of Australia's most significant musical figures. He is Professor of Music at the University of Melbourne where he has had responsibility for Australia's largest and most distinguished piano school for over a decade and is the Associate Dean (Academic) of the University's newly formed Faculty of the VCA and Music. He is the Federal Chair of the Australian Music Examinations Board and has performed, taught, and adjudicated in Australia, Asia, Europe and the USA since the early 1970s. Ian Holtham is a Steinway Artist and records for *ABC Classics* and *Move*.

Ian Holtham: piano



- 24 Préludes, Op. 28**
- 1 **No. 1 in C major** *Agitato* 0'29"
 - 2 **No. 2 in A minor** *Lento* 1'52"
 - 3 **No. 3 in G major** *Vivace* 0'52"
 - 4 **No. 4 in E minor** *Largo* 1'12"
 - 5 **No. 5 in D major** *Allegro molto* 0'34"
 - 6 **No. 6 in B minor** *Lento assai* 1'38"
 - 7 **No. 7 in A major** *Andantino* 0'49"
 - 8 **No. 8 in F sharp minor** *Molto agitato* 1'42"
 - 9 **No. 9 in E major** *Largo* 1'08"
 - 10 **No. 10 in C sharp minor** *Allegro molto* 0'29"
 - 11 **No. 11 in B major** *Vivace* 0'29"
 - 12 **No. 12 in G sharp minor** *Presto* 1'16"
 - 13 **No. 13 in F sharp major** *Lento* 2'43"
 - 14 **No. 14 in E flat minor** *Allegro* 0'26"
 - 15 **No. 15 in D flat major** *Sostenuto* 4'03"
 - 16 **No. 16 in B flat minor** *Presto con fuoco* 1'13"
 - 17 **No. 17 in A flat major** *Allegretto* 2'22"
 - 18 **No. 18 in F minor** *Allegro molto* 0'51"
 - 19 **No. 19 in E flat major** *Vivace* 1'17"
 - 20 **No. 20 in C minor** *Largo* 1'52"
 - 21 **No. 21 in B flat major** *Cantabile* 1'23"
 - 22 **No. 22 in G minor** *Molto agitato* 0'40"
 - 23 **No. 23 in F major** *Moderato* 0'59"
 - 24 **No. 24 in D minor** *Allegro appassionato* 2'37"
- 25 **Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49** 12'16"
- 26 **Impromptu No. 1 in A flat major, Op. 29** 3'42"
- 27 **Impromptu No. 2 in F sharp major, Op. 36** 6'14"
- 28 **Impromptu No. 3 in G flat major, Op. 51** 4'41"
- 29 **Fantasy-Impromptu in C sharp minor, Op. post. 66** 4'43"
- 30 **Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat major, Op. 61** 12'08"

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Notes by Ian Holtham

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Recorded and engineered by Thomas Grubb

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