

Ronald Farren-Price
plays Chopin



FREDERIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Much of Chopin's music was written for sophisticated Parisian tastes and was used in teaching his advanced pupils. So idiomatically personal is his music that it seems to have no sources in earlier music. However, there were three composers to whom Chopin claimed allegiance. One was Mozart, whose innate perfection and clarity of expression always inspired Chopin. Another was the Irish composer John Field, whose romantically oriented nocturnes were models which Chopin developed. The third was Johann Sebastian Bach, whose contrapuntal works, especially his 48 Preludes and Fugues, were constantly studied by Chopin. There were other composers for whom Chopin seems to have felt little empathy. One was Schubert, the style of whose piano works he found wooden and inelegant, while another was Beethoven, of whom Chopin is reported by Delacroix to have said 'Beethoven turned his back on eternal principles'.

Nocturne in F minor, No. 15, Opus 55 No. 1 (1843) *Andante*

Nocturne in E-flat major, No. 1, Opus 55 No. 2 (1843) *Lento sostenuto*

Chopin was about thirty-three when he wrote these nocturnes, dedicated to

his Scottish supporter and pupil Jane Stirling. Both are austere but intricate and have suffered from an unenthusiastic press. The influential American writer on Chopin, James Huneker, suggested both need not detain the pianist or listener and slightly dismissed them. That was at the turn of the century. But the situation is now the reverse.

The first is admired for its interesting form, opening with a short halting figure that immediately returns to its beginning as if to endlessly repeat, but imperceptibly expands with figuration that slowly becomes more and more powerful in its expressiveness. In an unusual way the music does not fully return to its opening subject. Instead, it is drawn only briefly to view, and the piece eventually ends quite differently from the way it began.

In the second nocturne, a little masterpiece of continuous variation, the chaste melody, the subtle accompaniment and the counterpoint of a middle voice, all appeal to the severe tastes of today. Chopin creates a continuous texture of limpid melody above a subdued but moving bass that colours the melody with dissonance, and within these two extremes, the upper and lower boundaries, a third and middle voice enters to add the most subtle chromatic counterpoint. At the time of writing this nocturne Chopin had subjected himself

again to study counterpoint. Out of that study came the unorthodox and original contrapuntal flow and rhythmic complexity of this work. In our time this nocturne has come to be described as one of the most beautiful and flawless in the whole series.

Sonata No 2 in B-flat minor (Funeral March), Opus 35 (1839) *Grave; Doppio movimento; Sostenuto, Scherzo, Marche funèbre, Presto*

Robert Schumann, who had much insight into the music of Chopin, established a negative tradition of appreciation for this sonata by judging it by the principles and expectations of the Austro-German tonal and developmental sonata. That it appeared not to have coherence is summed up in Schumann's comment that it contains 'four of Chopin's most unruly children under the same roof'. In recent years much effort has gone into rebutting this notion by showing that there are many subtle relationships between the various movements. But this sonata does not develop in the synthetic manner of the German tradition, rather it contrasts organically separate elements, genres, as an adaptation or reworking of the baroque suite as a set of contrasting genres.

Chopin's sonata is an original response to what had become an orthodox form. Its approach is directly established throughout the first movement which is based on the contrasts offered, not by tonal changes, but by textural changes. After a brief but imposing four bar introduction, three different textures, pianistically different textures because seeing as much as listening is important in this sonata, contrast an urgent short-breathed motif against a long drawn out lyrical section which in turn is followed by a shifting chordal sequence. Climaxes come from working these three segments against each other, allowing their repetitions to outdo each other. It is not a compositional procedure by argument so much as by gesture, and formal coherence comes from seeing the contrasts, not just as contrasting sounds but as contrasting ways of playing, of the frenzied movement of the hands and arms in one part as against the almost static inaction of the hands and arms in another.

The second movement, a muscular scherzo and song-like middle section, takes the idea of contrast to an extreme. Its outer parts are aggressive and violent, reaching beyond acceptable rhetorical limits. The inner part is more subdued than even a cradle song. The first and second movements are linked by

temperament and are jointly needed one after the other to convey an ascending pitch of romantic frenzy, sufficient, some might say, to kill the pianist! The funeral march, which gives the sonata its name, was the point of departure for the work and was composed two years before the other movements. It comes as a sorrowful stillness after the scherzo, with a tread of gloom. Even greater distance exists between the funeral march and its 'trio' than did between the scherzo and its middle section. It is the remoteness of a beatific vision seen beyond the plodding immediacy of the muffled footsteps in the slow march. It is a consolation beyond words.

The fourth of the 'unruly children' would, if it stood alone, be a study or a prelude (which, that it should end the sonata, is a nice irony). It is a snake, a twisting, turning, slithery line, played at the octave throughout, with subtle shifts of phrasing and implied harmony, a remarkable, unexpected, and extraordinary conclusion. Schumann should have the last word. He called it a 'sphinx with a mocking smile'.

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Ballade No. 4, Opus 52 in F minor (1842)

Andante con moto

The fourth Ballade, written when Chopin was thirty-two, is regarded as one of his greatest works. The piece has a unique structure and is based on variations of two major themes, but with other passages that fill out the work and give a bravura character to parts within it. The Ballade has one of the most arresting openings. It is as if the music is being coaxed out of the air into our presence.

The first theme enters after the magical opening as a series of haunting phrases over a waltz-like accompaniment. This is then repeated and varied and brought to a gradual climax. The second theme then appears. In its first appearance it is in an unadorned state, its simplicity contrasting with the elaborate passage-work which precedes, and then succeeds, its entry. There are more variations on the first theme before the second theme reappears enveloped by an elaborate running accompaniment. The swirling accompaniment takes over and comes to a climax of rapid chords followed by a long pause. Out of the stillness come five very soft sustained chords. Thereafter a vigorous last section brings the work to a virtuosic end.

There are many features of this work

that have transfixed Chopin's admirers: the clusters of asymmetrical notes that nevertheless create coherent phrases, the rich contrasts of harmony that hold to a tonal centre, the stern counterpoint that pervades every bar without dissolving the rhythmic pulse, and the overall sweep of its gigantic form. The Ballade rings with the distinctive piano sounds that only Chopin creates.

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Two Polonaises, Opus 26: No.1 in C sharp minor; No.2 in E flat minor.

In the years that elapsed between the publication of his first Polonaise (Opus 22, 1830) and the two to be heard in this programme, Chopin underwent considerable emotional turmoil – private, professional, and political. These two works (Opus 26, written in 1834-35) reflect the new expressive profundity he had acquired.

Previously the polonaise had been above all a dance form to Chopin, but in these two works he transforms them into subtle vehicles of deep feeling. The rhythm remains, of course, but the dance character disappears.

In the first Polonaise, the strikingly strong rhythmic swing of the opening four bars (fortissimo and allegro appassionato) gives way to an earnest

question and a timid response. A repeated rhythmic figure, increasing in volume, is interrupted by right-hand flashes and followed by a simple melody of great tenderness. The trio is characterised by a treble-tenor opposition, like a solo voice and 'cello obbligato in contrapuntal friction. Like many of Chopin's early works based on dance forms, this Polonaise has an indefinite ending.

The second Polonaise contrasts strongly with the first, being in turn mysterious and aggressive. We must remember that Chopin was greatly affected and preoccupied at this time by the oppression of his native Poland. Hence the names by which it is known, the Siberian or the Revolt Polonaise. It has a discontented, surly opening, ominously suppressed by the pianissimo playing. It has been described as being 'full of conspiracy and sedition', and its progressive atmosphere may be likened to the menacing rumbling of a volcano, then a wild shriek, an explosion, agitation, martial music, clattering weapons and trumpets. A brooding work, it undoubtedly expresses Chopin's sadness at the thought of his compatriots being deported in chains to Siberia.

Nocturne in B Flat Minor, Opus 9, No.1
Larghetto

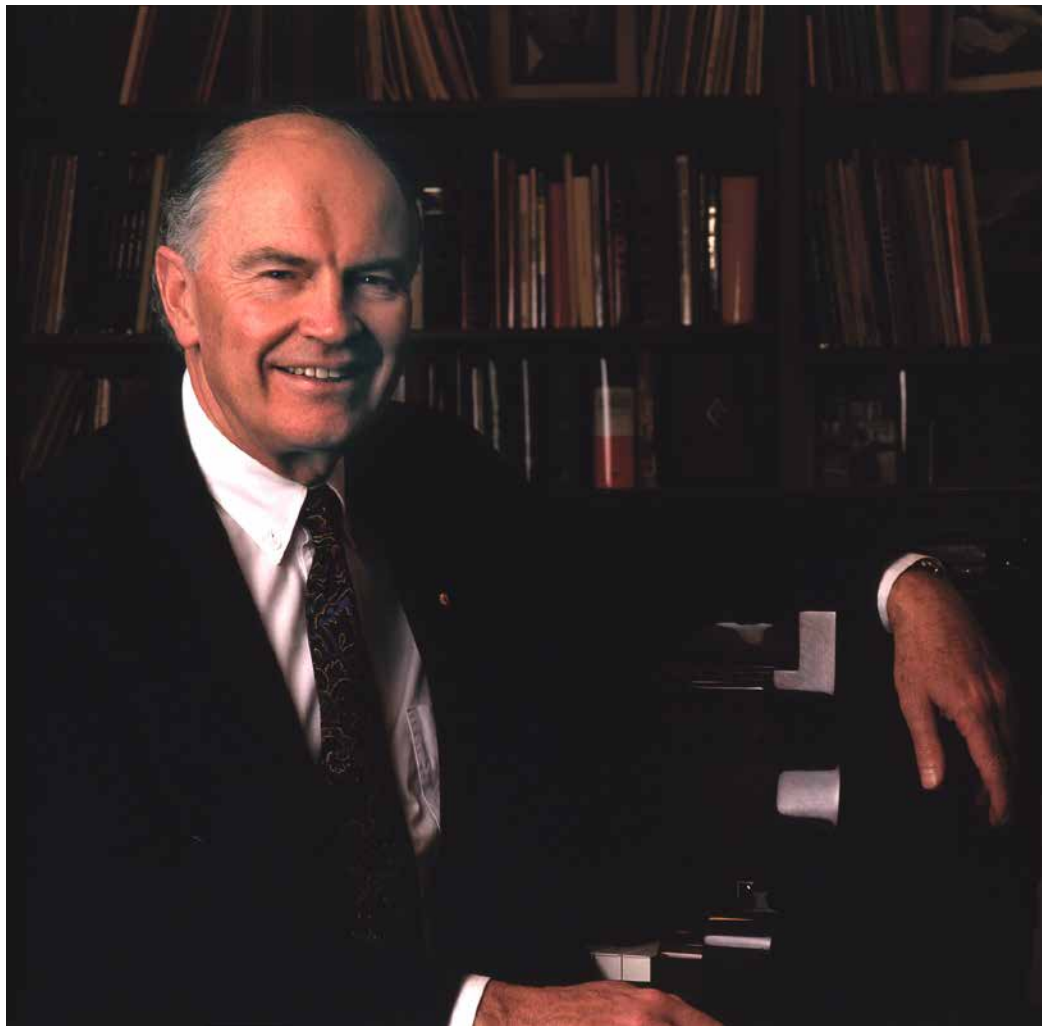
This Nocturne, probably written in 1832, was Chopin's first published composition in the form popularised by the Irishman John Field, whose influence is seen in Chopin's decision to try his hand at creating this kind of quiet, descriptive, reflective, tender, atmospheric 'night-piece', with the melody in the right hand accompanied by a figure in the left. But the rhythmical independence of the hands, as heard in the opening bars, is a major feature of Chopin's own individual style. By the elegance, depth, voluptuousness and drama of this Nocturne, Chopin raised the form to a new level of pianistic exploration and expression. He dedicated Opus 9 to the brilliant young pianist Camille Pleyel, who reduced Hector Berlioz to a brief spell of suicidal despair.

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Ronald Farren-Price

“... This (Chopin) is home territory for Farren-Price ... he expounded all works with convincing warmth and a controlled virtuosity ...” — Clive O’Connell, writing in *The Age*, on Ronald Farren-Price’s concert in The Melbourne International Festival of the Arts, 1993, which included the Sonata in B flat minor and two of the Nocturnes on this disc.

Ronald Farren-Price has given annual recitals to Melbourne audiences for almost four decades. Additionally he has toured abroad, often several times each year. He has appeared both in recital and as concerto soloist in the major concert halls of over forty countries including Carnegie Recital Hall New York, Queen Elizabeth Hall London, Tchaikovsky Hall Moscow, Philharmonic Hall St Petersburg, Brahmsaal Vienna, and Teatro Colon Buenos Aires. As an Australian instrumentalist his twelve tours of the former USSR, now the CIS are a unique success. He has played to capacity houses in the finest musical centres of Russia and



has even been mobbed by enthusiastic audiences.

He was made an Honorary Professor of the Tianjin Conservatory of Music, the oldest in China, following two tours where he was invited to give masterclasses and recitals in the Beijing Concert Hall and in Tianjin. He has performed in Japan and South-East Asia including

Vietnam where he gave recitals in the Hanoi Opera House. As the first Australian pianist invited there he made history by performing the first concert telecast live in Vietnam.

In addition to his career as a concert pianist, Farren-Price is Associate Professor and Head of Keyboard in the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, where he has taught many of the finest younger Australian pianists. His own early training culminated in winning the prestigious Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Concerto Competition. He studied in London, Stuttgart and New York on a scholarship

personally given by the legendary pianist Claudio Arrau. Ronald Farren-Price was awarded the Order of Australia for services to music.



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Sonate No 2 in B-flat minor (Funeral March), Opus 35 (1839)

- 1** Grave; Doppio movimento; Sostenuto 8'14"
- 2** Scherzo 7'17"
- 3** Marche funebre 9'44"
- 4** Presto 1'45"

- 5** **Nocturne** in B flat minor, Opus 9, No.1 Larghetto 5'36"
- 6** **Nocturne** in F minor, No. 15, Opus 55 No. 1 (1843) Andante 5'14"
- 7** **Nocturne** in E-flat major, No. 1, Opus 55 No. 2 (1843) Lento sostenuto 5'10"
- 8** **Polonaise** Opus 26: No. 1 in C sharp minor 8'16" *
- 9** **Polonaise** Opus 26: No. 2 in E flat minor 9'43"
- 10** **Ballade** No. 4, Opus 52 in F minor (1842) Andante con moto 12'36"

* This work also appears on REFLECTIONS, a collection of fifteen short piano masterworks by twelve composers (MD 3117)

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