

Rita Reichman

*Pianist*  
*The Chopin Collection*



**move**

**M**any of the world's finest pianists become specialists in interpreting one composer or period, but Rita Reichman is outstanding for the breadth of her repertoire.

Her concerti include Ravel, Bartok, Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Schumann and she has selected master works of Chopin for her solo CD, *Rita Reichman on Chopin*, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his death. World renowned Chopin teacher Mieczyslaw Horszowski taught Rita when she attended the acclaimed Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Horszowski's mother had been a pupil of Chopin.

Rita also studied with the legendary Rudolf Serkin at the Curtis Institute and she became the Institute's youngest graduate at 17, winning the highest award for the most promising and outstanding pianist. Four years later she received her Master's degree from the Julliard School.

A child prodigy, Rita made her first public appearance when she was three, playing Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata* on television in Australia. At 10 she made her American debut with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and gave a solo performance at 11 with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Rita has performed with many of the world's leading conductors and in recital in France, Italy, America, Poland, Sweden, Austria, Canada, Israel, South Africa, Belgium, China and Australia, twice performing in the White House for the President of the USA, and was invited to perform for Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

She has extensive Chamber Music and teaching experience. Having studied with members of the Beaux Arts Trio, the Galimir, Budapest, and Guarneri String Quartets and I Solisti di Zagreb, she became a founding member of the Chagall Ensemble in 1988 which was hailed as Australia's most exciting and outstanding chamber group.

That same year Rita was a judge of the inaugural Chopin competition in Australia, and for the ABC "Young Performers" competition.

She has conducted Master Classes at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, the University of Michigan, USA, and Muelenberg College, Pennsylvania.



# Rain of Silvery Fire – *The Chopin Paradox*

by Cyrus Meher-Homji

Chopin has always been something of a paradox. As one of the canon of 'great composers' he, unlike many of the others, is singular in writing almost exclusively for one medium – the piano. The salon associations of his music – the pianistic limp-wrist so to speak – concealed the iron backbone of his utterances. Put into perspective, the piano was merely a fashionable salon instrument at the beginning and into the middle of the 19th century. And Chopin had to earn his keep. If the grand ladies of the salons were prepared to swoon to the beauty of his music – and pay him respectably to do so – why would he refuse? While most composers entered through tradesmen's doors, Chopin walked with countesses, princesses and the very milieu of Parisian high society. It does not mean that he enjoyed the atmosphere, the social flippancy, so to speak: 'I am up to my neck in evening parties, concerts and dances, but they bore me to death ...' he wrote.

With the passing of time, the paradox recognised, Chopin has emerged as much less effete a composer. But the dichotomy always will – and should, perhaps – remain. His Mazurkas were described as 'guns buried in roses'. Or take the

phrase that so beautifully describes that combination of coolness and an underlying seething passion – 'Rain of silvery fire'. 'Rain', 'roses', 'fire' – these objects clearly point to Chopin's poetic muse, his ability to express narrative or verse through the medium of a solo instrument. It is thus so often that he is considered one of the keyboard's most 'natural' writers.

But therein too lies a paradox. A great performance of Chopin may reveal a sense of struggle but rarely discloses the mechanical difficulty of his writing. For while Chopin, one of the great league of pianist-composers, knew the piano inside-out, he did so much more than his knuckle-breaking-obsessed predecessors, Mocheles and Hummel among them. For a start, he abhorred displays of digital virtuosity for their own sake. 'Simplicity is everything' he wrote. 'After having exhausted all the difficulties, after having played immense quantities of notes, and more notes, then simplicity emerges with all its charm, like art's final seal. Whoever wants to obtain this immediately will never achieve it: you can't begin with the end. One has to have studied a lot, tremendously, to reach this goal; it's no easy matter.'

As was to be expected, parallels were drawn between Chopin and his contemporaries, almost always in Chopin's favour. 'The difference between [Kalkbrenner] and Chopin was remarkable,' wrote F.-Henry Peru, a student of both composer-pianists. 'The latter never played his works twice with the same expression, and yet the result was always ideally beautiful, thanks to the ever-inspiration, powerful tender or sorrowful. He could have played the same piece twenty times in succession, and you would still listen with equal fascination.' Or, more floridly, in the words of Alfred James Hipkins, a staff member of Broadwood pianos and Chopin's preferred piano tuner: 'Chopin never played his own compositions twice alike, but varied each according to the mood of the moment, a mood that charmed by its very waywardness; his playing resembled nothing so much as the tender delicate tints seen in mother-o'-pearl, and rendered apparently without the least effort.'

The composer Pauline Viardot, speaks about the "spianato" (literally spinning) aspect of his writing, '[In Chopin's works] when huge slurs extend over entire musical periods they indicate this spianato



# Impromptu in

playing, without nuances or discontinuities in the rhythm – impossible for those whose hands are not graced with perfect suppleness.’

Given that so much of Chopin’s music has that ‘spun’ quality (its direct precedent, even inspiration, being the bel canto writing of Bellini and Donizetti) it is surprising that Chopin used the title only once in his oeuvre – for the *Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise*. Apart from the three sonatas, the *Andante Spianato* is one of Chopin’s larger-scale works in what was, essentially, an output of short works. But short only in time span, for here again is another paradox: short in clock time, long-range in musical structure. Or as Schubert’s friend Holzappel would reminisce about the composer, ‘He was a little man, but he was a giant’.

And expansive (if not gigantic) is indeed the scope of the *Andante*, which floats songfully over a rippling accompaniment. Again and again Chopin would urge his pupils to listen to the great opera stars of the day. ‘You have to sing if you wish to play,’ he would exhort.

Travelling through the 18th century with the works of J.S. Bach, Telemann, Mozart and Weber, the *Polonaise* found its own voice in the music of

Chopin. He wrote seventeen of these – fifteen individual ones and two fused with other forms. The *Polonaise-fantaisie*, Op 61 is really a fantasy on the *polonaise* idea and the *Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise* is really a two-movement piece fused together with a bridge passage. It is proudly and fervently Polish.

Fusion of forms was not uncommon for Chopin. Although now regarded as belonging to the ‘set’ of four *Impromptus* (although these were written at different times), the *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, whether or not for its ‘I’m always chasing rainbows’ over familiarity, is the most popular. Ironically, Chopin had for it such little regard that it remained unpublished during his lifetime. Its fluttery outer sections with tricky rhythmic coordination between the two hands enclose a rapturous centre.

And rapture really is the essence of the magnificent *Barcarolle*, Op 60 – Chopin’s only tribute to Venetian waters. He struggled with the piece, working on it intermittently from the autumn of 1845 to the summer of 1846. It is speculative whether one can ‘hear’ the sense of struggle in the music inasmuch it is speculative to what extent a composer’s personal surroundings leave a mark on

the music he writes at the time. Suffice to say that this is no picture of unruffled aquatic calm, and that the passion which seethes beneath its undulating rhythm nobly rides the piece to its ecstatic close.

Rarely did Chopin compose works on an *ostinato* and the little *Berceuse*, Op 57 is one such – an iridescent set of variations on a constant tonic-dominant pattern, that ‘rain of silvery fire’.

If the sentiments of this piece are unashamedly showy, Chopin’s nocturnes are – and here again we have that paradox – pieces of the night in the sense of both calm and storm, at times in the single piece. The D flat major Nocturne (Op 27 No 2) though, is serenely elegant.

The *Ballades* and *Scherzos* are yet further exemplifications of the ‘He was a little man, but he was a giant’ syndrome. A question mark hovers around the reason why Chopin chose the term ‘Scherzo’ for the four pieces he thus named (as opposed to, say, the *scherzo* in his third piano sonata). Apart from the occasional playful figuration that informs all four pieces, there is nothing coquettish about their mood or intent. The B flat minor piece imbues elements of the hectoring

# Impromptu in C major

(near the beginning), the ingratiating (development), heroic, sinister and excitable (coda) whirling the piece into a final shout of glory, all within a span of some ten minutes.

The Ballades are perhaps, considered as a set, less urgent if no less intense than the Scherzos. The fanciful stories built around them contemporaneously or posthumously were seldom by Chopin himself, who, for all his picturesque imagination, rarely felt the urge to attach pictorial images to his music. Completed in Paris in 1835, the first Ballade combines elements of sonata, variation and rondo. Its 'legendenton' (to steal an expression from Schumann's Op 17 Fantaisie) is implicit and its recapitulation reverses the order of the opening themes, rising in emotional temperature to a climax of passionate declamation.

Like the Ballades, Scherzos and Impromptus, the Waltzes punctuated different stages in Chopin's life and career. They are seldom Waltzes for the ballroom – their whirl and passion too tiring, too intense perhaps for the casual dancer. Op 34 No 1 is one of Chopin's most extrovert outings in this genre.

Would we call Chopin a romantic? With all the romantic illusions spun around his life (the leaking roof in Majorca where he composed the so-called 'Raindrop' Prelude; the affair with George Sand which scandalised Parisian society) and the soulful qualities of his music which we today identify as 'romantic', it wouldn't seem an unreasonable epithet. Yet, in his day he found little empathy with other aspects of the Romantic movement, gravitating towards Mozart and Bach (cf. the intricate counterpoint in the first movement of the B minor sonata). To take that paradox even further, surely, he was for his time a modernist. The astonishing and mystifying finale of the B flat minor Sonata, the enigmatic structure of the Polonaise-Fantaisie bear witness to this. Yet for all its temporal flexibility, its refusal to be stylistically pigeonholed, and, on the other hand, its powerful Polish sentiments, Chopin's music speaks a universal voice.

Debussy – whose teacher Marmontel prepared an edition of his teacher Chopin's works – is often credited with the dawn of modernity. But he repeatedly, both in and out of the context of this

attribute, would look back over his shoulder to the Pole. 'Chopin,' he would say, 'is the greatest of us all; for through the piano alone he discovered everything.'

© 1998 Cyrus Meher-Homji



A bronzed plaster cast of Chopins hand.



*"She is a true master of the keyboard ... the piano was playing belle canto."*

Radio Warsaw, Poland

*"...has a profound musical understanding..."*

Rudolf Serkin

*"She is a remarkable talent and I have watched her grow into an outstanding artist."*

Mieczysław Horszowski

# Rita Reichman

## *The Chopin Collection*

**move**

- |   |  |       |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Scherzo NO 2 in B flat Minor Op. 31                        | 11'13 |
| 2 | Berceuse Op. 57  | 4'21  |
| 3 | Grande Waltz Brillante in A flat Major Op. 34 No 1         | 5'37  |
| 4 | Barcarolle Op. 60  | 8'28  |
| 5 | Fantaisie - Impromptu in C sharp Minor Op. 66              | 5'26  |
| 6 | Ballade No 1 in G Minor Op. 23                             | 9'15  |
| 7 | Nocturne in D flat Major Op. 27 No 2                       | 5'15  |
| 8 | Andante Spianato & Grande Polonaise in E flat Major Op. 22 | 13'50 |

*Scherzo No 2 in Bb Minor Op. 31* 63'32

Producer - *Maria Vandamme*

Engineer - *Richard Girvan*

Co-ordinator - *Robyn Barrett*

Design - *Ben Chong*

Photographer - *Serge Thomann*

Recorded at the ABC Studios, Southbank, Victoria, on the D Steinway 488220