

CHOPIN  
THE NOCTURNES

Nancy Tsou



# “So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul should be resurrected only among friends.”

*from 'Portrait of a Lady' by TS Eliot*

Serenades are music for the evening and nocturnes are music for the night. Mozart's *A Little Night Music* is a nocturne and so is J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* which sent the good Count to sleep. But from the end of the eighteenth century the notion of night itself began to change, and Chopin's *Nocturnes* were an agent in this change.

The new sciences of the Enlightenment had transformed how Europeans understood the human mind when it is awake and sensing the external world. Novalis' *Hymns to the Night*, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* attempted, instead, minute recreations of our interior lives. These Romantics brought back their private dream worlds across the gates of sleep into the waking world we all share.

In the daylight, our dreams during the night appear vague and grey. But to our sleeping selves they are quite as brilliant and real as our waking experiences. But, of course, no scientist has yet taken a light-meter across the gates of sleep to measure the brightness of dreams.

The issue is vital. Is a dream a faded shadow of our waking passions, or is

it as vibrant or more vibrant than the waking world? Is dreaminess really a property of dreams themselves, or is it just a word used by the waking self for whatever it can hardly remember? On the answers to these questions may depend the dynamics and intensity with which a pianist plays a Chopin Nocturne.

These Romantics are hypnotists. Through metre and rhyme, or rhythm and harmony, they induce a slowing of respiration and the heart beat in their listeners. So we cross the Lethe stream of reverie, and beyond it is a great stillness. Within this stillness the often violent phantasmagoria of the artist is enacted. For as long as that state of stillness is maintained by the listeners, the artist has power over their minds and can lead them to realise the most fantastical imaginings. And that is how Chopin's *Nocturnes* seemed to their nineteenth century critics. The critics were possessed by them as by magic. They found extraordinary parallels to describe their raptures, not always in a good way!

**Op.9: No.3.** (Field created the Nocturne form.) Where Field smiles, Chopin makes a grinning grimace; where Field sighs,

Chopin groans; where Field shrugs his shoulders, Chopin twists his whole body. *Rellstab.*

**Op.15: No.1.** He was first to surround a note with diamond facets and to weave the rushing floods of his emotions with the silver beams of the moonlight. *Ehlert.*

**Op.27: No.1.** A description of a calm night in Venice, where, after a scene of murder, the sea closes over a corpse and continues to serve as a mirror to the moonlight. Kleczynski. Its psychological tension is so great at times as to border on a pathological condition. There is unhealthy power in this nocturne, which is seldom interpreted with sinister subtlety. *Huneker.*

**Op.37: No.2.** We know Chopin's fondness in general for spangles, gold trinkets and pearls. He has already changed and grown older; decoration he still loves, but it is of a more judicious kind, behind which the nobility of the poetry shimmers through with all the more loveliness: indeed, taste, the finest, must be granted him. *Schumann.* Do not tarry too long in the treacherous

atmosphere of this Capua – it bewitches and unmans. *Niecks*.

Chopin wrote more than twenty nocturnes and they are all substantial compositions. Few nocturnes were composed for the piano after Chopin. So it was a major form for him and one peculiar to himself and Field. Of these two, Chopin realised the potential in the nocturne form for the desperate and the macabre, and above all for the tremendous. In a fanciful passage, Wittgenstein imagines a picture of Beethoven composing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. He then tries to imagine a picture of Goethe composing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony!

Like him, I find this impossible but I have little trouble imagining the Chopin of the Nocturnes doing so. A single piano achieves symphonic and choral effects of that order again and again in the briefest times.

"Chopin's *Nocturnes* give us everything we want from music and they give it to us instantly," says Nancy Tsou. Schopenhauer had argued that the greatness of Beethoven's Ninth

Symphony was the length of the struggle within each movement before its resolution. The resolution achieved by a dancehall tune in five minutes was correspondingly trivial. The *Nocturnes* show that Schopenhauer was wrong. The time taken does not contribute to the power of the effect.

"Like an actor the pianist needs an inner poise before the Nocturne begins" says Nancy. "I am standing on ice. What follows is constantly and astonishingly inventive. But it is so economical and so precise that it is a completely coherent sequence. The *Nocturnes* are like the fugues of J. S. Bach. But the range of emotional colours in the Nocturnes is overwhelming." Nancy's art is to make all these colours blaze within the strictest elaboration of form. Dynamically and dramatically, she dares more in the Nocturnes than most performers.

NOTES BY DR. ROGER SWORDER

Nancy Tsou\* was born to a diplomatic family of the Republic of China (Taiwan). Her father was a well known Diplomat-Scholar Chou Yun-ting, who was honoured by the Republic and the People's Republic of China. Her mother was the accomplished traditional painter, Jane Lo Chou, who has exhibited widely in Asia and Australia.

Nancy began her musical education at age five, in Argentina, and continued her studies in Melbourne and New York. She was awarded a scholarship to study at the Conservatorium of Music at Melbourne University where she gained her Master of Music degree. She has since been on the faculty staff at Melbourne, Monash and Wollongong Universities.

Professional engagements have included solo recitals in Australia and overseas, among them are several tours with the Queensland, NSW, ACT and the Victorian Arts Councils, performing extensively in each state to laudable reviews.† She has also taken part in many Arts Festivals, such as the Chinese Arts Festival and the Brunswick, Kyneton,

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*Nancy Tsou*



Bendigo, Swan Hill and Ballarat Arts Festivals.

Nancy has also toured China and performed solo recitals and given master classes at five of the most prestigious conservatoriums, among them, the Shanghai Conservatorium and the Central Conservatorium in Beijing. In Taipei, she performed to a packed audience at the Taipei Arts Centre.

However, Nancy likes to share her playing with smaller audiences, thus creating a more intimate atmosphere reminiscent of the soirées of the 19th century. Among these highlights are the series of six Piano recitals she performed in Como House, Toorak, Melbourne in recent years.

Nancy has recently been appointed Principal Pianist with 'Rewire', a non-profit organisation specialising in Music as a Healing Art and regularly donates her art to the sick, the elderly and the infirm. Also with 'Rewire', Nancy is planning a piano competition with no age limit, to encourage music making across the whole community.

(Nancy has asked herself if she was wise to choose in life this most difficult of tasks, among others which could have been hers? To

unhesitatingly select the most splendid of human endeavours and then to realise it? She wonders how far she chose her art and to what extent it chose her? Vocations are mysterious and enigmatic!)

\* Tsou is pronounced 'Zo'

† [nancytsou.com](http://nancytsou.com)

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“Mozart, as always triumphed. The bitter-sweet opening theme and its uncomplicated variations constituted ‘a gem of purest ray serene’ as Ms Tsou caressed each lovely phrase. She is patently in love with this Rondo and convinced her audience of its radiance and beauty.”  
*Professor David Walter, Julliard School of Music, New York.*

“Her work had a true vision of the Romantic spirit of the music – its inner poetry, as so many people call it.” *Kenneth Hince, The Age*

“As Ms.Tsou gave herself over to each note, even the virtuosity – impressive as it was - was rendered insignificant by the sense one got of the composer at work. It was as if the works were making themselves then and there.” *The News, Ballarat*

“Seldom is such quality playing heard outside the major concert halls ... a highlight of the State Festival.” *Castlemaine Mail*



- 1 Nocturne, Op. Posth: in C sharp minor
- 2 Nocturne, Op. 9: No. 1, in B flat minor
- 3 Nocturne, Op. 9: No. 2, in E flat major
- 4 Nocturne, Op. 9: No. 3, in B major
- 5 Nocturne, Op. 15: No. 1, in F major
- 6 Nocturne, Op. 27: No. 1, in C sharp minor
- 7 Nocturne, Op. 27: No. 2, in D flat major
- 8 Nocturne, Op. 32: No. 1, in B major
- 9 Nocturne, Op. 32: No. 2, in A flat major
- 10 Nocturne, Op. 48: No. 1, in C minor
- 11 Nocturne, Op. 55: No. 1, in F minor
- 12 Nocturne, Op. 55: No. 2, in E flat major
- 13 Nocturne, Op. 72: No. 1, in E minor

Frédéric Chopin  
(1810-1849)

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Nancy Tsou  
*piano*