



CHOPIN  
*sans*  
CHOPIN

Adam Golka



<b>Gabriel FAURÉ</b> (1845–1924)		
1	Nocturne No. 4 in E flat major, Op. 36 (c. 1884)	[6:50]
<b>Johannes BRAHMS</b> (1833–1897)		
2	Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4 (1851)	[9:41]
<b>Natalia JANOTHA</b> (1856–1932)		
3	Mazurka in E minor, Op. 6, No. 1 (1894) *	[3:46]
<b>Alexander SCRIBIN</b> (1872–1915)		
4	Fantasie in B minor, Op. 28 (1900)	[8:40]
<b>Roman MACIEJEWSKI</b> (1910–1998)		
5	Mazurka No. 13, 'Upon Evening' (1990)	[3:57]
<b>Manuel PONCE</b> (1882–1948)		
6	Balada Mexicana (1915)	[7:37]
<b>George GERSHWIN</b> (1898–1937)		
	3 Preludes (1926)	[6:23]
7	No. 1 (Allegro ben ritmato e deciso)	[1:30]
8	No. 2 (Andante con moto e poco rubato)	[3:40]
9	No. 3 (Allegro ben ritmato e deciso)	[1:12]

<b>Władysław SZPILMAN</b> (1911–2000)		
10	Mazurka in F minor (1942)	[2:15]
<b>Nikolai KAPUSTIN</b> (1937–2020)		
	8 Concert Etudes, Op. 40 (1984)	[6:22]
11	No. 7, 'Intermezzo' (Allegretto)	[3:47]
12	No. 8, 'Finale' (Prestissimo)	[2:35]
<b>Total Timing:</b>		<b>[56:23]</b>

**Adam Golka** *piano*

\* Première recording

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Maciejewski *Mazurka No. 13, 'Evening'* Polskie © 2019 Wydawnictwo Muzyczne Edition

Ponce *Balada Mexicana* © 2000 Primera edición

Szpilman *Mazurka in F minor* © 2011 Boosey & Hawkes • Bote & Bock

Kapustin *8 Concert Etudes* © 2016 Schott Music GmbH & Co., KG, Mainz

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All photos by **Kinga Karpati** and **Daniel Zarewicz**

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## CHOPIN *sans* CHOPIN

Gabriel Fauré paid lifelong homage to Frédéric Chopin by composing in forms that are iconically associated with the Polish master, most notably in his lifelong cycle of *Nocturnes*, where the genre is infused with Fauré's singular harmonic and melodic voice. While some of Fauré's later *Nocturnes* expand the form to a grand scale and push on the limits of tonality, the *Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 36* focuses instead on subtle shifts of emotion through ingenious harmonic shading and gauzy, moonlit sonorities. Rather than telling a story through continuous melodic invention, as does Chopin, Fauré opts for utter melodic simplicity and repetition while weaving a magical web of chords slipping voice by voice into deliciously exquisite amalgamations. Though the middle of the work does swell into romantic ecstasy, Fauré's world to me is often peculiarly meditative, asking the modern listener to slow down, and therefore I felt this *Nocturne* would be a beautiful welcoming gift for this journey.

Johannes Brahms certainly adored Chopin, and many don't realize that Chopin was a standard feature of Brahms' pianistic performing repertoire. He edited Chopin's works for new editions, and he even made a transcription of Chopin's *Etude in F minor, Op. 25*. The puzzling thing about Brahms' *Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4*, his earliest major work, is that he allegedly denied Chopin's influence on the piece. The story goes like this: an unknown, 20-year-old Brahms made a potentially big career move when he visited Weimar to meet

the already legendary Franz Liszt, only for the encounter to go to hell within a few days. While Liszt was very impressed by the youth's *E flat minor Scherzo* (Brahms was too nervous to play it himself, so Liszt sightread it for assembled guests and acolytes), Brahms seemingly felt no remorse for falling asleep during Liszt's performance of his own *B minor Piano Sonata*, just one of many examples of his blatant disrespect towards the older composer.

One of Liszt's disciples present during Liszt's sight-reading of Brahms' *Scherzo* was the Swiss pianist-composer Joachim Raff, who noticed parallels between the Brahms and Chopin's *Scherzos* and questioned the young Brahms about it. I personally don't know how to reckon with Brahms' response that he wasn't familiar at all with Chopin's work. There is no doubt in my mind that Brahms knew Chopin's *Second* and *Third Scherzos* when he composed this piece. The repeated, questioning opening motif seems to be an echo of Chopin's *B flat minor*, and the red-hot octave passages seem to summon the very flames of Chopin's *C sharp minor*, not even to mention the suspicious quote of Chopin's *Waltz in C sharp minor, Op. 64, No. 2* and in the same key of C sharp minor. Brahms' *Scherzo* as an isolated dramatic form seems to scream 'Chopin!'

I'd obviously be remiss to skip over Polish composers in this tasting menu, and I've designated Poles as the resident mazurka experts. However, rather than obvious choices such

as Ignacy Jan Paderewski or Karol Szymanowski, I offer figures who suffer undeserved obscurity. For instance, I am stunned to have found the lovely 1894 *Mazurka in E minor* by Natalia Janotha, and I appear to be the first pianist to have recorded it. Janotha was a character and a half by all accounts, as can be deduced from the stories of her public concerts accompanied by pet cats and dogs, and her scandalous lawsuit accusing a baroness of attempting to poison her black cat, curiously named Prince White Heather. She was even forcibly deported from England during World War I, though that seems to be through no fault of her own. Her overbearing mother was no walk in the park either, and I highly recommend reading the endlessly entertaining and boastful articles about her child prodigy daughter's encounters with kings and queens and other celebrities, but more importantly to me, the description of Natalia's studies with Clara Schumann (look up *The Girl's Own Paper*, 1890). Janotha may even have taken lessons with Brahms, and her father Juliusz was Paderewski's teacher. She was clearly a remarkable pianist, as you can tell from her über-virtuosic 1904 recordings and her dazzling résumé. The *Mazurka in E minor*, while outdated for its time, is artfully composed, with interestingly temperamental twists and spicy turns. In fact there are actually two versions of the piece, one published in a British Victorian ladies' journal (the same one in which her mother bragged about her), and also one from Breitkopf and Härtel. In the spirit of musical freedoms of that time, I have combined my favourite things from both to make a version that is most convincing to me.

Alexander Scriabin is a composer who was not merely inspired by Chopin, but who nearly drowned in his reverence for Chopin's music. By the time he found a way forward from composing unmistakably neo-Chopinesque sonatas, etudes, preludes, and mazurkas, he found himself abandoning tonal music altogether, and eventually conceived a week-long, multi-sensory work that was intended to be played in the foothills of the Himalayas in order to bring on the end of the world. That piece was, perhaps thankfully, never finished but might it suggest that chasing away Chopin's ghost might have given him a little grief? Scriabin's Fantasy in *B minor*, *Op. 28* belongs to his early Chopin-inspired period, and in my opinion is an underrated gem. Certainly one can detect Chopin's *B minor Sonata* hovering nearby, especially in the sprawling, soaring second theme melody, which for me is one of Scriabin's most inspired inventions. The form of the work is also interesting because the recapitulation is not a mere repeat of earlier musical material, but a build-up to a rapturous elation which foreshadows the apocalyptic visions of Scriabin's future works. This emotional variation within a repetitive structure echoes some of Chopin's formal innovations too, such as the variation elements in the *F minor Ballade*.

Back to unjustly neglected Poles. Roman Maciejewski followed Chopin's footsteps in treating the form of the mazurka like his own personal diary, composing and revising a lifelong cycle of 40 pieces that explore and develop new potential in Chopin's genre. As with Fauré and the *Nocturnes*, he takes some of his *Mazurkas* to far grander proportions than Chopin's, and also



beyond the limitations of tonality. The *Mazurkas* are hard to date with exactness because of Maciejewski's habit of endless revisions and his lack of opportunity to publish punctually. However, Maciejewski's *13th Mazurka*, subtitled *Wieczorem*, or *Upon Evening*, probably comes from his time in Sweden, to which he emigrated at the start of World War II. Surprisingly, in Sweden Maciejewski befriended the great film and theatre director Ingmar Bergman and composed music for Bergman's stage productions. In '*Wieczorem*', one can certainly hear the influence of Maciejewski's earlier time in Paris, where he studied with Nadia Boulanger and met Igor Stravinsky, Francis Poulenc, and Darius Milhaud, to name only a few. I hear Maurice Ravel in his harmonic language, but the compositional blueprint is undoubtedly closest to the *Mazurkas* by Szymanowski, whom Maciejewski not only admired but whose honour he defended and suffered for: Maciejewski was expelled from Warsaw Conservatory for participating in a student strike that demanded the reinstatement of Szymanowski as the school's dean.

I have tremendously enjoyed Manuel Ponce's *Balada Mexicana* ever since I first heard a Mexican friend play it during my teenage years. I later learned that its two main themes are Mexican folk songs: *Me de he comer un durazmo* ('I shall eat that peach,' in the outer sections) and *Acuerdate de mi* ('Remember me,' middle section and coda), both gorgeously romanticised and embellished into a thrilling narrative. The score of Chopin's *Third Ballade* must have been near Ponce's piano when he conceived this piece, in terms of its form, charm, and poetic spirit.

George Gershwin's iconic *Three Preludes* might raise a few eyebrows when being posited as Chopin-inspired, but I dare anybody to tell me that the serpentine left hand of Gershwin's *Second Prelude* is not a deliberate homage to Chopin's *Second Prelude*. Not only did Chopin dabble in harmonies that opened the door for the development of jazz, but remember that George Gershwin, an American brought up by Eastern Europeans, was very well-versed in the music of Chopin, especially thanks to his studies with Charles Hambitzer. Certainly the melodic genius and the potential of conjuring up a potent poetic universe within only a few phrases, which Chopin does so timelessly in his *24 Preludes*, was not lost on the brilliant Gershwin.

The third and final mazurka on this album is also by a remarkable Polish figure, undervalued for his musical contributions but world-famous because of his tragic misfortunes during World War Two. Władysław Szpilman, known to most through Adrien Brody's portrayal of his harrowing story in Roman Polański's 2002 film *The Pianist*, was not only a highly-respected pianist (he studied with Artur Schnabel) but as a composer of piano pieces, orchestral works, music for television, film, and radio plays, and even hundreds of cabaret songs much beloved in Poland. In Szpilman's 1942 *Mazurka in F minor*, one can perhaps feel the intersection of those songs with a deep longing for Chopin's music, which was banned during Poland's occupation by the Nazis. This tiny *Mazurka* evokes heartbreaking tales in its two modest minutes.

Piggy-backing on the mention of cabaret influences in Szpilman,



you also might not infer what unusual circumstances lie behind the American musical theatre charm of Nicolai Kapustin's *Intermezzo* or the funky Brazilian rhythms of his *Finale*. These two pieces are the last from a set of *Eight Concert Etudes*, in which the Donetsk-born Kapustin cleverly fuses his traditional, classical Moscow Conservatory training with his voice as one of the pioneering figures of Soviet jazz. However, Kapustin didn't particularly enjoy improvising and therefore didn't formally consider himself a jazz pianist. Instead he composed well over 100 opuses of timeless classical forms like sonatas, concertos, as well as preludes and fugues, all works of staggering

complexity and astonishing craftsmanship. The *Concert Etudes* use Chopin's *Etudes* as formal and pianistic models, however opening the harmonic and rhythmic door to create what is essentially un-improvised jazz. This unusual path of formally notating jazz apparently actually helped Kapustin to escape some of the terrible persecutions by Soviet government of jazz artists, and to me 'escape' might be the operative word in describing his music: it's astonishing how Kapustin could muster up such marvelously optimistic musical energy within an environment hell-bent on repressing freedom, joy, and any influence from the decadent West.

## Personal Reflections

*Chopin sans Chopin* ('Chopin without Chopin') is a highly personal project for me. It's a collection of relatively short works that, first of all, I simply love and want to share. Although on an initial glance, the pieces on the album may seem unconnected, in fact all the seemingly disparate roads lead to one place: the manifest influence of Frédéric Chopin. It is moreover a group of works that perhaps represents something about my musical development, my grapples with identity, and my journey with Chopin's music, of which I have yet to record a single note.

Born in Texas to a family of Polish musicians, I didn't speak English until I started kindergarten, and as I navigate this world I have always felt that I have one foot in America and the other in Poland. I am by no means alone in being a multicultural American who doesn't fit neatly into any one cultural category, and I was frequently asked in my hometown of Houston where I was from, based on the English I spoke. On the other hand, in Poland, where until recently there has been far more cultural homogeneity than in the US, the feeling of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider was always palpable for me, ever since I first stepped foot there in 1991 at the age of four. I spent most of my childhood summers in Poland, where I could experience, in real time, the remarkable shifts of a Poland emerging from grey decades of oppressive leadership within the Soviet bloc into an increasingly prosperous international powerhouse. As a kid back in the 90s I'm sure I stuck out like a sore thumb in Poland, with my American clothes and my trouble pronouncing proper Polish L's, yet I was Polish enough

to figure out how to amalgamate into it all.

Interestingly, the last notes of *Chopin sans Chopin* were recorded exactly one day before I started a new experiment in my life: after a lifetime of living only in the US, I decided I would move some of my belongings to Warsaw and make it my part-time home base. In fact, much of the post-production work on the album was done in Poland, so the album actually became a soundtrack for my new life chapter. Although my Polish continues to improve, people in Poland still sometimes ask where my accent is from, and why I have an old-fashioned way of phrasing certain things, since the Polish I learned at home doesn't reflect the modernisation of the language in recent decades.

Although the Poland of today is an unrecognizable environment compared to the one my parents left in 1979, one thing remains unalterable: the culture-wide adulation of the great national hero, Frédéric Chopin. (Polish people of course prefer spelling it Fryderyk: why should we dwell on the fact that his father was in fact a Frenchman?) Chopin's platinum status within the international canon of master composers is beyond dispute. His work is what I call magic music, and it gives goosebumps equally to musicians, musicologists, and those who possess little or no musical expertise. He was a pioneer of musical form, a genius of melodic invention, a visionary of voice-leading and harmony, and he helped humanity evolve a gorgeous new physical art of touching piano keys in a way



which has never been surpassed in its elegance and creativity. Of course, his personal veneration for Poland, its values, and his immortalisation of Polish dances hasn't hurt the national euphoria that his name generates. I never fail to notice that I fly in and out of Chopin International Airport and eat snacks in the Mazurka Lounge. It's a rare status for a long-passed classical musician to enjoy.

Being born not only Polish, but moreover the child of a pianist and a piano technician, I was aware of Chopin's towering importance as early as I was aware of anything. My childhood home could have charged admission price as a Chopin museum. We had on display every imaginable Chopin book, score, painting, and sculpture (a mould of his hand was always nearby). My musical diet as a child was mainly Chopin, and by the time I could give a full-length piano recital, at around age eleven, it was an all-Chopin program. To be honest, I felt the Polish pride associated with Chopin as both a gift and a curse. Before I knew it, during my teenage years my ego started crumbling at the thought of being an inadequate player of Chopin's masterworks, and I rebelled by turning my attention obsessively and almost aggressively to other corners of the repertoire.

Ruminating on the impact Chopin has had on the international history of music is my own peculiar way of wading upstream towards the river's source, towards Chopin, and towards my Polish heritage. Besides three Polish composers, the album features representatives from multiple European nations and

also, symbolically for me, from America and Mexico, which was never far geographically nor culturally from my mind. My parents and older brothers lived in Mexico before my birth and spoke Spanish when they needed to childproof their conversations from me when I was little. The backstory is that my Dad managed to take my family out of dark times in Poland by landing a job as a trombonist in the Veracruz Symphony. When the orchestra's sudden bankruptcy in the early 80s coincided with martial law in Poland, they packed the car, drove to Texas, and successfully sought political asylum in the US. I was born a few years later.

Another personal thread is the way my own story also intersects indirectly with Szpilman's, not only because of our shared musical lineage (Artur Schnabel was my musical 'grandfather' via Leon Fleisher), but also in the way I belatedly learned about my own Jewish heritage. When I first saw *The Pianist* in theatres in 2002, I had no idea that I was on the eve of learning a major family secret that was closely tied to that horror: my family had been kept in the dark about my beloved Grandmother's real name, Stern, and her tragic wartime circumstances, about which she had chosen not to speak to us until 2004. We suddenly learned of countless Jewish relatives who knew much about us and of whose existence we had been completely unaware.

All in all, *Chopin sans Chopin* for me is a love letter to Chopin that comes with a little bit of baggage. The hypothetical message might go like this: 'Maestro Chopin, I love you, but

it's not always easy being Polish and shaking off all the trouble created by your popularity.' More importantly than attaining agency in my unique Chopin tribute, I think this album is a meditation on how mysteriously and magisterially inspiration can travel through time and across borders, from one soul to

the next, despite all of humanity's foibles and partitions that try in vain to interfere. Therefore, I hope you can listen to it not only with pleasure but perhaps with some sense of awe at this uncanny and wondrous phenomenon.

Adam Golka, 2025



Pianist **Adam Golka** leads a rich artistic life as orchestral soloist, recitalist, chamber musician, recording artist, pedagogue and innovator. A first-generation American, born to Polish parents, Golka has performed with many of the major orchestras around the world including the San Francisco, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and Seattle Symphonies, BBC Scottish Symphony, National Arts Centre Orchestra (Canada), Warsaw Philharmonic, Shanghai Philharmonic, Orquesta Filarmónica de Jalisco (Mexico) and Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (Colombia).

Ever since winning the 2nd China Shanghai International Piano Competition at the age of 16, Golka has been in demand as a recitalist having performed at the acclaimed Alice Tully Hall, Musashino Cultural Civic Hall (Tokyo), Het Concertgebouw's Kleine Zaal (Amsterdam) and Jardin du Luxembourg (Paris). Golka has also given recital débuts at Tonhalle Zürich in Switzerland and Klavier-Festival Ruhr in Germany at the invitation of the legendary pianist Sir András Schiff, as part of his Building Bridges concert series. In 2009, Golka was awarded the Max I. Allen Classical Fellowship of the American Piano Awards.

In 2020-21, Golka took on the monumental feat of performing the eleven-hour entirety of Beethoven's 32 *Piano Sonatas* live in three different cities, revisiting a challenge which he first accomplished at the age of 18. To mark the occasion, Golka created a film series called *32@32* (available on YouTube) in which he explores the *Sonatas* in conversations, not only with musical legends, but with extramusical personas such as an astrophysicist, a painter, a magician and folk dancers.

Golka maintains a rich life as a chamber musician performing regularly with the Manhattan Chamber Players, in duo recitals and chamber music festivals worldwide including the renowned Marlboro Music Festival. Golka serves as Artistic Advisor to the Krzyżowa-Music Music for Europe Chamber Music Festival in Poland.

As an Artist-Teacher at the Longy School of Music of Bard College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Golka is passionate about the future of classical music. In addition to formal studies with José Feghali and Leon Fleisher, Adam had the privilege of being mentored by Alfred Brendel for nearly a decade.

Golka has premiered works by his friends Michael Stephen Brown, Andrea Casarrubios and Michelle Barzel Ross and he recently gave the world première of Daniel Crozier's piano concerto *Dreams After El Greco* (2025). He records for First Hand Records (UK) and along with this present album, *Chopin sans Chopin*, Golka will release *Young Brahms, Steel and Fire* in 2026.

When Golka is not at the piano or staring at a musical score, he loves reading, art exhibits, long aimless walks, swimming laps (not butterfly), pour-over coffee and delicious Indian restaurants. He considers his daily practice of the Feldenkrais Method an essential aspect of his physical, mental and musical well-being.

[adamgolka.com](http://adamgolka.com)



[FHR62]

**Robert SCHUMANN (1810-1856)**

An Anna II

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 11, 'Grosse Sonate'

Fantasiestücke, Op. 12, No. 1, Des Abends

6 Gedichte und Requiem, Op. 90, No. 6

Abendlied, Op. 85, No. 12, (arr. Adam Golka)

*'These are performances of poetry and sensitivity' (Classical CD Choice)*



[FHR101]

**Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)**

Piano Sonatas, Vol. 1

Piano Sonata Nos. 5–8

*'Remarkable first volume in a series that I will follow step by step' (Artamag)*

*'Golka's well-oiled fingers navigate the Beethoven's first-movement technical provocations fluently' (Gramophone)*