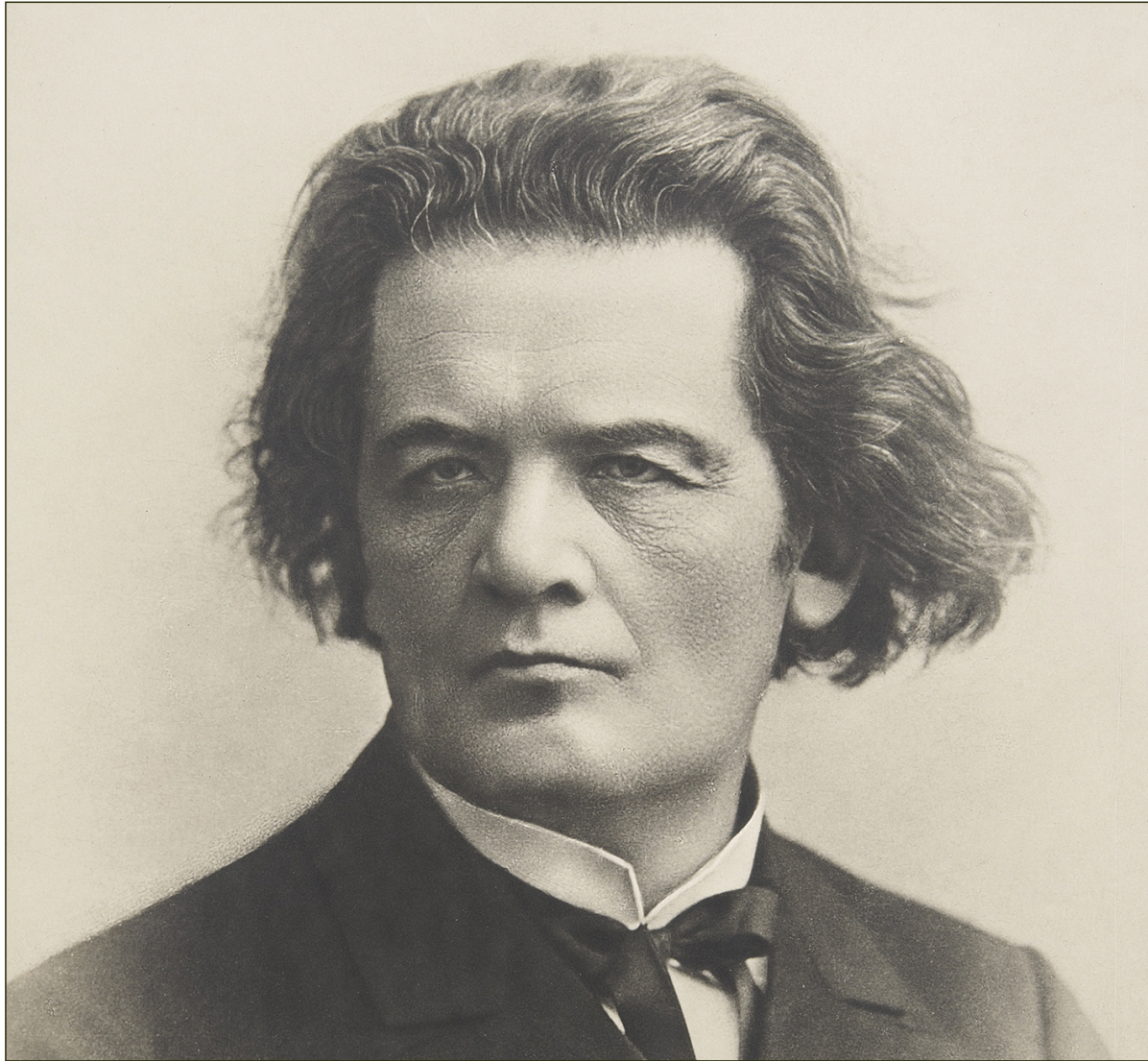


**NAXOS**

**ANTON RUBINSTEIN**  
**Piano Sonatas Nos. 3 and 4**  
**Han Chen, Piano**



## Anton Rubinstein (1829–1894)

### Piano Sonatas Nos. 3 and 4

Few figures of the 19th century embodied the contradictions of Romanticism more fully than Anton Grigor'yevich Rubinstein. Pianist, composer, conductor and pedagogue, he stood at the heart of Russian musical life for nearly half a century. After early studies with Alexander Villoing and formative years in Berlin, Rubinstein's cosmopolitan outlook – rooted in German classicism yet infused with a distinctly Slavic temperament – found institutional expression in his founding of the Russian Musical Society (1859) and the St Petersburg Conservatory (1862). His influence on generations of Russian musicians, not least Tchaikovsky, was profound.

Rubinstein's reputation as a performer was legendary. His elemental intensity, improvisatory fervour and refusal to play a work the same way twice created an aura of unpredictability that audiences found electrifying. He combined a vast dynamic range and resonant sonority with a kaleidoscopic tonal palette, enriched by a noble, vocal lyricism imbued with the influence of the great singers of his day. This potent blend of Beethovenian breadth and Romantic spontaneity earned him the sobriquet 'Van II' from Liszt.

As a composer, Rubinstein's considerable output – operas, symphonies, chamber music, songs and concertos – reflects both his astonishing facility and the inconsistencies born of such fluency. As one of the first in St Petersburg to make a professional career from music, he wrote continuously throughout his life, often dashing off songs, piano albums or salon pieces with dazzling speed, secure in the knowledge that his reputation would ensure publication and profit. While Tchaikovsky admired Rubinstein's brilliance, he lamented his habit of composing with too much haste and too little revision, noting that inspired ideas were often weakened by careless construction.

Rubinstein himself acknowledged this tension in *Gedankenkorb* (1897), admitting that the velocity of his work often prevented the refinement and nuance he desired. His piano sonatas, long overshadowed by his concert virtuosity and grand choral works, reveal a composer of formidable structural intelligence and emotional depth, intent on uniting intellect and passion within a symphonic conception of the keyboard – a creative personality driven by relentless energy, capable of moments of genuine inventiveness, yet frequently undermined by a *laissez-faire* approach to craft.

It is within this lineage that Han Chen frames his interpretation of Rubinstein's *Piano Sonatas Nos. 3 and 4*, tracing the composer's evolving lexicon across more than two decades of artistic maturity. Composed between 1855 and 1877, these works chart Rubinstein's evolution from fluent early-Romantic songfulness to a more dramatic and architecturally ambitious style. Chen's performances illuminate this rarely heard synthesis of structural rigour and lyrical expansiveness – qualities that place the sonatas squarely at the intersection of Romantic drama and Classical form.

The sonatas also lay bare Rubinstein's aesthetic incongruities: invention set against convention, grandeur offset by occasional prolixity, and moments of real skill emerging from familiar formulas. All the hallmarks of his idiom are present – capacious sequences, opulent textures, declamatory diminished sevenths and climactic passages that verge on the monumental. Yet within this bravura language lie flashes of individuality and poetic sincerity that anticipate later Russian pianism.

*Piano Sonata No. 3 in F major, Op. 41* (1855) – Rubinstein's own favourite among the four – stands at the threshold of his compositional maturity. Written shortly after his extensive travels abroad – including a five-to six-month stay in Weimar with Liszt, followed by periods in London and Paris – it also came in the wake of his controversial Viennese journal article criticising the state of musical life in Russia.

The opening *Allegro risoluto e con fuoco* combines Mendelssohnian clarity with Schumannesque ardour, the thematic material treated with a confident pianistic sweep. The *Allegretto con moto*, a buoyant march-scherzo, provides one of the composer's most graceful inspirations: tautly constructed, rhythmically alert, and refreshingly free of the metaphorical padding that critics often lamented in his larger works. The *Andante* unfolds as a song without words, tender and unforced, before the *Allegro vivace* (opening in F minor but ending in F major) rekindles the sonata's vigorous momentum in a finale that balances sparkling virtuosity with lively thematic interplay.

Written more than two decades later, *Piano Sonata No. 4 in A minor, Op. 100* (1877) represents Rubinstein at the height of his creative command. Here, the majesty of conception and the gravity of tone suggest a composer grappling with the piano's expressive possibilities. The *Moderato con moto* unfolds with orchestral scale, its motivic transformations driving a sustained narrative arc, while the *Allegro vivace* follows with mercurial lustre and rhythmic vitality, offsetting the solemnity of the opening. The *Andante* offers a moment of lyrical repose – its sustained melodic lines and harmonic subtlety among Rubinstein's most heartfelt writing – before the *Allegro assai* reinvigorates the narrative trajectory with taut energy and cyclic recall, binding the sonata's material into a cohesive and thrilling resolution.

Though seldom performed today, these sonatas offer a compelling portrait of a musician whose imagination oscillated between public eminence and private poetry. They distil the paradoxes that defined Rubinstein's art: the tension between intellect and impulse, Germanic structure and Russian ardour. In their finest moments, these sonatas transcend their debts to Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Chopin, revealing the radiance of a voice too long eclipsed by its own virtuosity – restless, oratorical, and intensely human.

**Dr Emer Nestor**

## Han Chen



Photo: Zhenwei Liu

GRAMMY Award-nominated pianist Han Chen is a fearless performer with seemingly limitless imagination and uncanny energy, playing scores old and new with rare rigour and insight. His performance of Florence Price's *Piano Concerto in One Movement* alongside the Malmö Opera Orchestra led by John Jeter (Naxos 8.559952) was nominated in the Best Classical Instrumental Solo category at the 2026 GRAMMY Awards. Chen's musical vision is manifest in his four solo Naxos albums, focusing on Liszt (8.573415), Rubinstein (8.573989), Adès (8.574109) and Ligeti (8.574397). He has appeared as a soloist with the Calgary Philharmonic, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra, China National Symphony Orchestra and Xiamen Philharmonic. Gold medallist of the 2013 China International Piano Competition and a prizewinner at the 2018 Honens International Piano Competition, Chen studied with Yoheved Kaplinsky, Wha Kyung Byun and Ursula Oppens at The Juilliard School, New England Conservatory and CUNY Graduate Center. Han Chen is a Steinway Artist.

[www.hanchenpiano.com](http://www.hanchenpiano.com)

Anton Rubinstein stood at the heart of Russian musical life for nearly half a century and had a profound influence on generations of Russian musicians, including Tchaikovsky. His piano sonatas reveal a composer intent on uniting intellect and passion within a symphonic conception of the keyboard. With its heroic, noble themes, the *Third Piano Sonata* was Rubinstein's own favourite of the set. The final *Piano Sonata No. 4* represents the composer at the height of his creative command, pouring a lifetime of emotions into a single piece and distilling the paradoxical tensions between intellect and impulse, Germanic structure and Russian ardour. *Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2*, played by Han Chen, can be heard on 8.573989.

Anton  
**RUBINSTEIN**  
(1829–1894)

	<b>Piano Sonata No. 3 in F major, Op. 41 (1855)</b>	<b>27:21</b>
❶	<b>I. Allegro risoluto e con fuoco</b>	<b>8:37</b>
❷	<b>II. Allegretto con moto</b>	<b>4:02</b>
❸	<b>III. Andante</b>	<b>7:04</b>
❹	<b>IV. Allegro vivace</b>	<b>7:38</b>
	<b>Piano Sonata No. 4 in A minor, Op. 100 (1877)</b>	<b>43:41</b>
❺	<b>I. Moderato con moto</b>	<b>16:44</b>
❻	<b>II. Allegro vivace</b>	<b>6:59</b>
❼	<b>III. Andante</b>	<b>11:42</b>
❽	<b>IV. Allegro assai</b>	<b>8:36</b>

**Han Chen, Piano**

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