



AUDIOPHILE EDITION

CHOPIN

Piano Concerto No. 2
Rondo à la Krakowiak
Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano'

Abbey Simon, Piano
Hamburg Symphony Orchestra • Heribert Beissel



Fryderyk Chopin (1810–1849)
Piano Concerto No. 2
Variations on ‘Là ci darem la mano’
Rondo à la Krakowiak

It is always difficult, in retrospect, to visualise the impact of a composer of genius upon his generation. Today Chopin is a ‘safe’ master, regarded as sentimental in certain quarters. In his day he was considered a revolutionary, a man of radical ideas, a dangerous influence, an undisciplined force. Franz Liszt once wrote a book about his friend – a book which George Sand delivered herself of the following delicious comment – ‘Un peu exubérant en style, mais rempli de bonnes choses et de très belles pages’ (‘a bit exuberant in style but full of good things and some very beautiful pages’). Chopin, wrote Liszt, was ‘one of those original beings, whose graces are only fully displayed when they have cut themselves adrift from all bondage and float on at their own wild will, swayed only by the ever undulating impulses of their own mobile natures!’ The irony in this statement, which has a certain basis in fact, is that not even Liszt realised that Chopin was, in his way, the most stringent of Classicists; that his sense of form was usually perfect for his ideas, and that those ideas were as pointed as Mozart’s and worked out in a masterly fashion.

The name of Chopin occurs constantly with still another of his contemporaries. That was Robert Schumann, who discovered Chopin for Germany in his famous ‘Hats off, gentlemen, a genius’ article in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of 1831. As Chopin’s compositions came off the presses, Schumann was waiting to review them in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, which he himself had founded. Like Liszt, Schumann echoed the idea of Chopin’s individuality and revolutionary daring. ‘Chopin may now publish anything without putting his name to it’, Schumann wrote. ‘He possesses such remarkable original power that, whenever it displays itself, it is impossible to be for a moment uncertain as to its source. And he adds to this an abundance of novel forms that astonish us as much by their tenderness as their boldness.’ When the two concertos came out, Schumann, writing under the name of Florestan, became almost hysterical. He began a tirade against those critics who refused to see Chopin for the genius he was. ‘What is a whole year of a musical paper compared to a Chopin concerto? What is a magister’s anger compared to poetic rage? What are ten editorial notes compared to an *adagio* in the Second Concerto? And believe me, Davidites, I should not think you worth the trouble of addressing did I not think you capable of writing such works as those you write about, with the exception, indeed, of a few, like this Second Concerto, which, united, we cannot hope to reach, save with our lips to kiss its margin.’ The language too is ‘un peu exubérant.’

The *F minor Concerto*, which Schumann said he could not reach save to kiss its margin, was one of Chopin's earliest works. Despite its opus number and numerical designation, it was composed before *No. 1*, the *E minor Concerto*, but was published after its companion. Chopin composed this, *Op. 21* in Warsaw, in 1829. It was not published until 1836. Immature Chopin as it is, it also is in its way a miracle. Scholars have traced various influences in the work, including that of Hummel, but the piano writing, the melodic ideas and the execution of them are virtually freakish. Remember that Chopin had been working most of his life – he was 19 when he composed the concerto – in Warsaw. He had not been exposed to the mainstream of mid-European culture, most of the great works of the repertoire were unknown to him, and the chances are that he was unfamiliar with the term ‘Romanticism’ except in a vague sense. And yet the

piano part of the *F minor Concerto*, technically speaking, could have been written in his maturity. To this day it sounds novel and brilliant, just as the harmonic language in which it is couched, in its richness and resource in modulation, can match most of his later works. Formally, the concerto is a different matter. Its structure is what one would expect from a student exposed to orthodox sonata form, and its orchestration is weak. After his two concertos, it is significant that Chopin never again attempted to write for orchestra. Conductors today seldom present the concerto in Chopin's original orchestration; they touch it up a bit, and wisely so.

But, fortunately, the fumbling orchestration makes no difference in the effect made by the concerto. The emphasis is all on the solo piano, which here is an orchestra in itself. Chopin, one of the three or four great pianists of his generation, wrote a solo part hand-tailored to his individual specifications. This solo part (and that of the *E minor Concerto*) extended the range of the instrument like no other work in the repertoire up to that time. Weber and Hummel had hinted at the forthcoming Chopin treatment (one wonders if, in 1830, Chopin had yet become familiar with Weber's piano music), but it took his peculiar genius to carry their contributions to the high-water mark of the Romantic school.

The *F minor Concerto* was first heard in Chopin's first public concert, in Warsaw, 17 March 1830. Chopin of course played the solo part. He was a popular figure in the city and the house was sold out. The public reaction was not all that he wished and he announced still another concert of 22 March. Again he played his concerto. In a letter to Titus Wojciechowski, his closest friend, he described both concerts. At the first one, he said, the first *allegro* of the concerto was 'accessible only to the few; there were some bravos, but I think only because they were puzzled: – What's this? – and had to pose as connoisseurs. The *adagio* and *rondo* produced more effect; one heard some spontaneous shouts... Elsner (Chopin's teacher) complained that my pianoforte was dull and that he couldn't hear the bass passages... At the next concert I played on a Viennese piano instead of my own. Diakov, the Russian general, was kind enough to lend me his own instrument, which is better than Hummel's; and consequently the audience, an even larger one than before, was pleased. Applause, exclamations that I had played better the second time than the first, that every note was like a pearl, and so forth; calling me back, yelling for a third concert.'

It was the *Adagio* of the concerto that seems to have made the biggest effect. Chopin told Titus that 'wherever I turn I hear only about the *Adagio*.' The previous year Chopin had confided to Titus that it had been inspired by thoughts of Konstancja Gładkowska, a young lady with whom the equally young Chopin had been badly smitten. Some critics hold it to be the crown of the concerto, with its calm opening and closing section (embellished with elaborate decoration) and its contrasting dramatic middle section where the piano ominously orates above a muttering orchestral tremolo. The first movement, in sonata form, is packed full of ideas, including one of the loveliest second subjects Chopin ever composed while the last movement is a glittering potpourri suggesting Polish national musical elements. There is a wonderful touch just before the coda, where the horns enunciate a theme twice, followed by an echo in the left hand piano part while the right hand is cascading down the keyboard.

In addition to his two concertos, Chopin wrote four other works for piano and orchestra. Like the concertos, they are all early works, designed primarily to launch the composer as a virtuoso. As Donald Francis Tovey observed, 'It was necessary for Chopin to compose works with orchestral accompaniment in order to assert his position as composer; otherwise the public, which is not easily persuaded that an artist can accomplish anything besides the first object that happens to have attracted attention, might have regarded him as a mere pianist.'

The phrase ‘with orchestral accompaniment’ was well chosen, for there is not a great deal the orchestra is required to do in these works and, indeed, in the last of them the orchestra is usually dispensed with altogether.

The earliest of these compositions, the *Variations on the duet ‘Là ci darem la mano’* from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, was the work that inspired Schumann's famous encomium ‘Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!’ when it was published as *Op. 2* in 1830; it was composed in 1827, when Chopin was only 17, and first performed by him in 1829. Curiously, Chopin did not work in the variation form frequently, and when he did it was rarely for piano solo. At 14 he composed a brief set of variations on an aria (*Non più mesta*) from Rossini’s *La Cenerentola* for flute and piano; at 16 he wrote his *Variations in F* for piano, four hands, and at 22 he produced what is not so much a set of variations as a simple potpourri for cello and piano on themes from Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable* (in collaboration with cellist-composer Auguste Franchomme). Apparently he wrote only two sets of variations for piano solo, plus the single variation for the Countess Belgioioso’s celebrated *Hexameron*.

The infectious tune of *Là ci darem* has inspired more than a few works in variation form, including a particularly charming one by Beethoven, scored for two oboes and English horn. From Chopin at 17, it brought forth an imaginative sequence of seven fairly elaborate variations which constitute the longest single movement he was to write in any form, except the very slightly longer first movement of the *E minor Concerto*. Although the orchestra plays a less important role in these variations than in a full-fledged concerto (or even in such similar works as the *Totentanz* of Liszt and the *Konzertstück* of Weber), it is far from a silent partner, and the sequence of tempi and moods is not unlike that of a typical early Romantic concerto. The layout of the work is as follows:

INTRODUZIONE

SETTING OF THE THEME

VARIATION I: Brillante

VARIATION II: Veloce, ma accuratamente

VARIATION III: Sempre sostenuto (for piano solo)

VARIATION IV: Con bravura

VARIATION V: Adagio

FINALE: Alla polacca

Chopin’s next two piano-and-orchestra works were both nationalistic in feeling and content: the *Fantasy on Polish Airs, Op. 13*, and the *Rondo à la Krakowiak, Op. 14*. Both were composed in 1828, the year Hummel visited Warsaw, and the 18-year old Chopin surely benefitted from the encounter with the kindly and renowned senior virtuoso. The *Fantasy*, as the title implies, is a melange of actual folk tunes, by turns sentimental and exuberant. The orchestral writing shows some imagination, with some particularly grateful passages for the flute and horn.

The *Krakowiak* is a Polish country dance characterised by its vigour. It originated in the district of Kraków. Chopin’s *Rondo in the Style of a Krakowiak* is a sparkling glorification of the dance form, more or less in the manner of Liszt's treatment of the *csárdás* in the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* and his *Hungarian Fantasy* for piano and orchestra.

Chopin returned Hummel's visit in 1829. On 11 August 1829 of that year he made his Viennese debut in the Kärntnertortheater, playing both the *Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano'* and the *Krakowiak*. He scored an enormous success, with the audience on its feet and the orchestra itself joining in the applause. The *Polish Fantasy* was given in his second Viennese concert, a week later. (The success of the two Polish-flavoured works in Vienna no doubt influenced Chopin's decision to cast the finales of both of his concertos in the form of Polish national dances.) When he played the *Fantasy* in Warsaw on 17 March 1830, and the *Krakowiak* there five days later, his compatriots went wild with enthusiasm. (Chopin had turned 20 on the first of that month.) Later that year, on 11 October, the *Fantasy* was featured in Chopin's farewell concert in Warsaw (to which he was never to return) as well as the programme he gave in Munich on his way to Paris, where his debut concert included the *Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano'*.

Richard Freed

Booklet notes reprinted from the original LP release

Abbey Simon

At the age of eight Abbey Simon (1920–2019) began private studies with Josef Hofmann and at ten was awarded a scholarship to study at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He studied with David Saperton, Dora Zaslavsky and Harold Bauer and also with Leopold Godowsky. At 19 he won the Naumberg Award which launched his career.

He made his New York recital debut at the Town Hall and during the 1940s played throughout America with many orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony and the Minneapolis Symphony. In 1949 he made his European debut (with concerts in Rome, Amsterdam, Paris and London) and subsequently toured the world playing in the Middle East, East Asia, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America.

In the early 1990s Simon was struck by a car in Amsterdam, causing severe injuries to his hands: the first three fingers of the right hand and the thumb of the left were severely damaged. Thanks to reconstructive surgery in Geneva he was playing at Carnegie Hall within only three months.

Simon was a pianist in the great Romantic tradition. His repertoire centred on Chopin, Schumann, Rachmaninov and Ravel, and he had a virtuoso technique which he employed with effortless ease coupled with a smooth, clear sound. The majority of his recorded output is on the Vox label. For Vox Simon recorded the complete works for piano and orchestra by Rachmaninov, the complete piano works of Ravel, and the major piano works of Chopin and Schumann.

Hamburg Symphony Orchestra

The Hamburg Symphony Orchestra has been an orchestra for the people of Hamburg since it was founded in 1957. The home of the concert orchestra has always been the Laeiszhalle, a venue steeped in tradition. Since the opening of the Elbphilharmonie it has been called Hamburg Symphony Orchestra – Laeiszhalle Orchestra.

Here the Symphony Orchestra and its artistic director Daniel Kühnel create popular subscription programmes and special concerts including silent films with live music. Highlights of the year include regular opera performances at the State Opera House or at the Academy of Music, as well as open-air summer concerts in the Town Hall courtyard. Since the 2018/19 season, the orchestra has been led by the world-renowned opera and concert conductor Sylvain Cambreling, who succeeded Sir Jeffrey Tate, who passed away in June 2017, and who has received considerable international acclaim for his rousing, imaginative and colourful performances.

With concerts of the highest standard, the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra has become an essential part of the city's musical life in recent decades. This claim is reflected in well thought-out programmes and the targeted selection of soloists and long-term artistic partners such as Martha Argerich. The musicians see themselves as a 'thinking orchestra' and, together with all the other players in the Hamburg music world, they want to give their city its own musical voice. With a wide range of educational opportunities, they are present throughout the city and bring the sound of Hamburg to the world on national and international tours.

www.symphonikerhamburg.de

Heribert Beissel

Heribert Beissel (1933–2021) studied conducting with Günter Wand at the Cologne College of Music, piano and composition with Frank Martin, and violin. He began his career as a conductor in Bonn upon winning First Prize for Conducting at the German Music Council competition. He was a recital accompanist and chamber musician at WDR Cologne for several years, and was principal conductor of the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra from 1971 to 1985. He was closely associated with the Hamburg State Opera during this period, as well as conducting the NDR Symphony Orchestra, and the choirs of SDR and NDR.

Beissel conducted extensively worldwide including in almost all of the nations of Europe, and appeared at festivals in Ravello, Ansbach, Bregenz, Flanders, Berlin, Istanbul and Schleswig-Holstein.

In 1986 he founded the Klassische Philharmonie Bonn with which he toured Germany's greatest concert halls. From 1991 to 1999 he was principal conductor of the Halle Philharmonic State Orchestra, and from 2001 to 2006 principal conductor of the Brandenburg State Orchestra in Frankfurt an der Oder, later becoming honorary conductor.

Heribert Beissel conducted a wide range of music from Bach to Debussy, and released several recordings on LP and CD, as well as making radio broadcasts. In 1998 he was awarded the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, and in 2012 the Order of Merit of Saxony-Anhalt.

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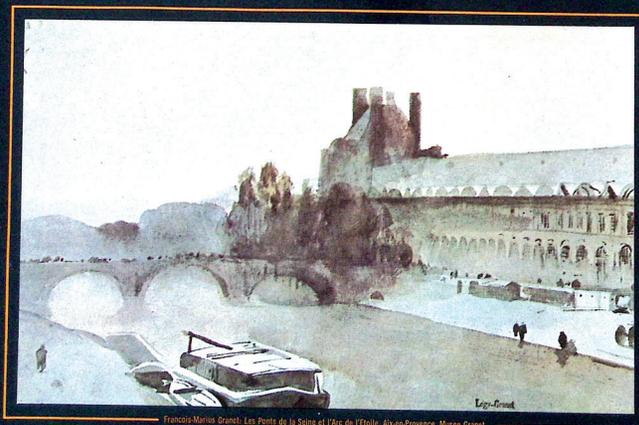


CHOPIN

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Hamburg Symphony • Heribert Beissel, Conductor

First Released in 1973 as SVBX 5126

Fryderyk Chopin was admired by Liszt for his individuality and revolutionary daring, and Schumann was wildly enthusiastic about the *F minor Concerto*, one of Chopin's earliest works. Despite the concerto's youthful origins this is a novel and brilliant piece, its melodic elegance, harmonic richness and magical *Larghetto* being a match for most of his later compositions. Chopin's other pieces for piano and orchestra were composed to launch his career as a virtuoso – the *Rondo à la Krakowiak* features a vigorous Polish country dance, and 'Là ci darem la mano' provides the inspiration for a set of variations on Mozart's famously infectious tune from *Don Giovanni*.

The Elite Recordings for Vox by legendary producers Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz are considered by audiophiles to be amongst the finest sounding examples of orchestral recordings

**Fryderyk
CHOPIN**
(1810–1849)

Complete Works for Piano & Orchestra • 2

	Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21 (1829)	30:10
1	I. Maestoso	13:35
2	II. Larghetto	8:34
3	III. Allegretto vivace	8:01
4	Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano' from Mozart's <i>Don Giovanni</i>, Op. 2 (1827)	15:17
5	Rondo à la Krakowiak, Op. 14 (1828)	14:19

Abbey Simon, Piano
Hamburg Symphony Orchestra • Heribert Beissel

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Producers: Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz • Engineering: Elite Recordings
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Booklet notes: Richard Freed
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