

Polonaise Fantaisie
op. 61 Nocturnes, op.
Andrew Rangel 55, no. 2, op. 62,
no. 2 Prelude, op. 45
Etude in F minor, op
posth., Bolero, op. 19
Ballades, op. 23, op.
47, op. 52 Chopin



STEINWAY & SONS

A Chopin Recital

Andrew Rangell

1	Polonaise-fantaisie in A-flat major, Op. 61	14:31
2	Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 55, No. 2	5:38
3	Bolero, Op. 19	8:01
4	Nouvelle Etude No. 1 in F minor	3:23
5	Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23	10:28
6	Prelude in C-sharp minor, Op. 45	5:42
7	Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major, Op. 47	8:41
8	Nocturne in E major, Op. 62, No. 2	5:59
9	Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52	12:44

Playing Time: 75:08



Designs of Grandeur

Frédéric Chopin left the world at the age of 39, in the year 1849. By the early 1840s he had long been a preeminent figure in the elite musical circles and salons of Paris — partly for his unique pianism, but also for his prodigious contribution to existing smaller forms of piano music: preludes, etudes, waltzes, nocturnes, impromptus, mazurkas. A contribution, be it said, which amounted in many cases to virtual ownership. During the last eight years of his life (six working years; he essentially stopped composing by 1847) Chopin suffered the death of his father and, also, of a best friend; he

endured an increasingly problematic relationship with George Sand; and he struggled daily against a fatal tubercular condition. Yet during these years, even while his overall output slackened, Chopin undertook compositional challenges of unprecedented difficulty and complexity, producing two major sonatas and an ever more ambitious series of large-scale, single-movement works; these include the A-flat and F-sharp minor polonaises, the F minor Fantasy, the A-flat and F minor ballades, and the Barcarolle — each groundbreaking in a different way. In their conceptual daring and architectural grandeur, these creations put completely to rest the dubious but long-held view of Chopin as the poetic miniaturist — and they provide a vivid and haunting intimation of what might have followed had Chopin lived longer.

POLONAISE FANTAISIE, OP. 61

Written in 1846, the *Polonaise Fantaisie* is the last, longest, and most visionary of Chopin's late, extended-form efforts. There is evidence (sketches, letters) that this work came at great cost for its exacting and relentlessly self-critical author. There was no precedent for its radically unorthodox form. Only a year after Chopin's death, Liszt (a close, if competitive, colleague) recoiled from the work's extreme moments of despair and delirium, deploring, in print, these aspects as "largely unfavorable to art." (This from the creator of the phantasmagorical B minor sonata, composed only three years later...) At the turn of the twentieth century, James Huneker pronounced that "the *Polonaise Fantaisie* is just beginning to be understood." At the turn of the twenty-first, astute modern critics (Charles Rosen and others) accounted the work a singular masterpiece. I'm with them — but the fact is that this piece is intrinsically and unavoidably a challenge for listener and performer alike, because of its extreme length, tonal restlessness, and near surfeit of material. What can we say, then, of its form? Let us try to simplify. Four areas stand out. First, the atmospheric introduction — in which various motivic fragments are made, gradually and wonderfully, to coalesce into the polonaise rhythm of the main theme. Second, the initial presentation and exhaustive, free-form development of this theme. Third, the still center of the piece — a hushed and suspended B major interlude (with echoes of the introduction). Last, the bravura recapitulation of both major themes — fused together in the tremendous final section. What enlarges, deepens and complicates the experience of this journey is the distracting proliferation of new themes and events in the areas immediately surrounding the central slow section. Suffice it to say that while each new theme is arrestingly beautiful, each event (two flashbacks included) highly compelling, the work's final unifying coda ends up being delayed almost to the breaking point. I repeat, almost. Much of the magic of this work, in fact, lies in the subtle interrelatedness of these floating interior musics.

NOCTURNE IN E-FLAT, OP. 55 NO. 2

This nocturne, compact and concentrated, eschews the contrasting middle section characteristic of most of Chopin's nocturnes, and it features, front and center, a display of counterpoint unique among them. In the two upper voices we hear a sustained and varied duet, which is supported by a wide-ranging and chromatically sophisticated bass accompaniment figure. This lavish production (introduced briefly and adroitly by a single high B-flat followed by a richly cadential trill) is brought to a long swooning close by a final (also contrapuntal) arabesque-like, filigree passage.

BOLERO, OP. 19

Chopin's Bolero is to me a marvelous curiosity. Subtitled "Souvenir d'Andalousie" by one publisher, it has the rhythmical ring of a polonaise, and the fluid drama of operatic fantasy. Its principal theme has something of an Iberian flair and flavor, a little reminiscent of Sarasate. Impulsive yet dramatically thrifty, this brilliant vehicle, without probing depths, makes the most of its flashy material. I love it.

ETUDE IN F MINOR, OPUS POSTHUMOUS

In the wake of Chopin's titanic twenty-four etudes (Opp. 10 and 25), three smaller studies known as "Trois Nouvelles Etudes" were composed in 1839 — an intimate appendix of sorts, bearing a certain resemblance to the fleeting preludes of Op. 28. This F minor etude pits a sinuously expressive, wandering triplet melody against an undulating quadruplet accompaniment figure. Within this spare and sustained texture a disquieting and hypnotic journey unfolds. Strange and unexpected harmonies hint at the tragic — but only hint.

THE BALLADES

The multi-dimensional form of the ballade seems to have been freshly minted by Chopin. He composed four — over a decade or so (roughly 1833-43) — each one distinct from the others. What do they share? All are extended narratives, complex and fluid; thematically rich and event-filled, but not sectionalized; balanced yet not conventionally symmetrical; evolving continuously and with cumulative significance and intensity. All are cast in 6/4 or 6/8 meter, with quiet opening themes of a repetitive, directionally uncertain nature, and with a strophic quality befitting the commencement of a story or legend. (The first and fourth carry introductions.) As in sonata style, two thematic groups in contrasting tonalities are presented — but these are developed, varied, and interwoven in ways which depart from the sections and symmetries typical of the sonata. In particular, the full scale recapitulation, as such, is absent here. In the Ballades, Chopin's impulse is lyric, the musical scenery operatic, the pianistic diapason enormous.

BALLADE IN G MINOR, OP. 23

Of the ballades, the first, from about 1833, has reaped the greatest popular acclaim. It is the composer's earliest mature essay in extended form: a high-profile, high-spirited melodrama — with a goodly dose of pianistic panache on display. And Chopin scored a bulls-eye. The brief and bardic introduction, in three tiny segments, does not waste a note. The main theme bespeaks pain and portent; the second is a melting barcarolle. Their interwoven developments are both extravagant and well plotted; the coda, effectively furious, also appends its own closing recitative, at once a final variation on the opening theme, and a distant echo of the introduction. An exquisite detail easy to take for granted is the subtle floating counterpoint of the second theme's linear accompaniment — a perfect foil to the dramatic chordal accompaniment of the first theme. So well made is this warhorse that I like to call it "a masterpiece even though everybody thinks so."

BALLADE IN A-FLAT, OP. 47

The third ballade (1840) is, of the four, the most purely elegant, gracious, and aristocratic. Dramatic opposition of themes has here been largely muted, de-emphasized; indeed, the first and second themes are closely related, not only in mood, but by shared scalar motion (ascending in the first, descending in the second) of a gentle nature. The flight of an animated waltz, in the approximate center of the piece, provides the first strong contrast of rhythmic impulse, while extending the predominant good nature of the work. It remains for a short development of the second theme (beginning in C-sharp minor, *più mosso*) to precipitate a building energy to the end. The climactic return to the tonic key of A-flat compresses two themes within the space of the final page. To me, there is a particular, and satisfying, roundedness in the overall symmetry of this piece.

BALLADE IN F MINOR, OP. 52

By far the longest and most elaborate ballade, the F minor is, by common consensus, the summit and summation in this form — and in its labyrinthine journey perhaps more truly a kindred spirit to the Polonaise Fantaisie. It is elevated throughout by the most imaginative and masterful examples of thematic variation. The floating introduction is brief, but pregnant with possibility: its repeated notes are echoed in both major themes; and later the entire introduction makes a magical, unexpected full appearance in the center of the work. Here it is followed by a delicate cadenza, and a quietly startling fragment of the first theme treated in imitative counterpoint. These events — which lead to a last recapitulation of the opening theme — constitute one of the most astonishing sequences in Chopin, or in any music. The list of excellences and innovations in this work is far too long to include here. But the whole is yet greater than the sum of the remarkable parts.

PRELUDE IN C-SHARP MINOR, OP. 45

This single elongated prelude was composed in 1841, several years after the celebrated collection of Op. 28 — a circumstance which seems, unfortunately, to have resulted in the eclipse of the one by the many. But this improvised meditation, with its Brahmsian textures, possesses the majesty and mystery to stand proudly alone. Gently descending sets of triads constitute a perfect introduction, the more so since this descending motif appears also within the main body of the work. Only once is the prevailing arpeggiated figuration interrupted — by the increasingly urgent buildup of a chromatic, chordal cadenza. In the last subsiding bars, echoes of the opening are heard — at a distance.

NOCTURNE IN E MAJOR, OP. 62 NO.2

Chopin's last nocturne is one of his least sentimental and least melancholy. Presented in ternary form, it features a noble, song-like and declamatory theme, presented first in three variations (with a masterful episode inserted between the second and third). Much later, a final variation arrives — as a poignant recapitulation over a dominant pedal. The agitated and harmonically volatile B section incorporates upward scalar motion first heard in bar 3 of the opening theme. In the recapitulated A section, an early return to the key of E allows Chopin to provide a long and delicious (yes, even sentimental) reinforcement of this tonic key. The minute "perdendo" coda is touching indeed.

— Andrew Rangell



Andrew Rangell

One of our most eloquent interpreters of the major keyboard works of Bach and Beethoven, pianist Andrew Rangell is also acclaimed for recordings of music ranging from Sweelinck, Farnaby, and Gibbons to Nielsen, Ives, Enescu, Bartók, Janáček, Schoenberg, Christian Wolff, and many others. A decade ago, Mr. Rangell's two-disc recording of Chopin's complete Mazurkas was hailed by *Gramophone* as "the humble mazurka taken to new heights of variety and sophistication."

Andrew Rangell made his New York debut as winner of the Malraux Award of the Concert Artists' Guild, and has since performed and lectured throughout the United States, and in Europe and Israel. He has also taught on the faculties of Dartmouth, Middlebury, and Tufts University. In the 1980s, already recognized as a distinctive recitalist and collaborative artist, Mr. Rangell gained national attention — and the award of an Avery Fisher Career Grant — for his vivid traversals of the complete Beethoven sonata-cycle in New York, Boston, Cleveland, Rochester, Denver, and other U.S. cities. A hand injury sustained in 1991 forced Mr. Rangell to gradually alter the trajectory of his career, and eventually to place his highest priority on recording. In recent years he has created several DVDs for children — integrating his special talents as author, illustrator, narrator, and pianist.

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Photo: Robert Benson Photography

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This recording is for my dear friend Jerri Witt.



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