

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 13 March 2025
7.30pm

Eric Lu piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 1 (1835)

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

4 Impromptus D935 (1827)

No. 1 in F minor: Allegro moderato • No. 2 in A flat: Allegretto • No. 3 in B flat: Andante • No. 4 in F minor: Allegro scherzando

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin

Barcarolle in F sharp Op. 60 (1845-6)

Polonaise in B flat Op. 71 No. 2 (1828)

Polonaise in F sharp minor Op. 44 (1841)

Polonaise-fantaisie in A flat Op. 61 (1845-6)



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When John Field published his first three piano nocturnes in 1814, the genre title was already familiar, associated especially with a species of vocal-instrumental serenade popular in the late 18th Century. Likewise, the 'nocturne style' of pianism was by no means a novelty. However, it was really only in **Chopin's** 3 Nocturnes Op. 9, published in 1832, that genre title and style came together. The Op. 9 established an archetype we all recognise, where vocal imitation is defining, facilitated technically by the development of the sustaining pedal, which made possible a widespread arpeggiated accompaniment. Once its connotative values had been established, the title 'nocturne' could then attach itself to music of varied form and character. From Op. 27 onwards, Chopin published his nocturnes in contrasted pairs rather than in groups of three. The two of Op. 27, composed in 1835, are perfectly complementary, the darkly brooding C sharp minor of the first transformed enharmonically into the consolatory D flat major of the second. We will hear the C sharp minor, which encloses within its lyrical outer flanks a faster, more dramatic middle section, culminating in a brief waltz-like episode in D flat major, a gesture reminiscent of both the First Ballade and the Second Scherzo.

It has often been noted that among the earliest pieces to carry the genre title 'impromptu' were the Impromptu, Op. 7 by the Czech composer Jan Václav Voříšek (1791-1825), himself a friend of **Schubert**. However, these pieces, composed in 1822, were actually named by the publisher rather than the composer (not uncommon at the time), and this was also the case with Schubert's 4 Impromptus D899, composed in 1827. It was only with his second set, the 4 Impromptus D935, from later in the same year, that Schubert himself opted for this genre title. It is worth noting that on the autograph he originally numbered the pieces 5 - 8, suggesting that he intended them as a continuation of the earlier set. They were published posthumously in 1839. The four impromptus follow very different formal schemes, but their mutual compatibility, thematic links and overall tonal organisation encourage us to hear them as a true cycle rather than just a collection. The most complex in formal design is the first, which unfurls its sonata-like thematic working at a leisurely pace and within a characteristically spacious tonal architecture. The second and third pieces are a sedate minuet and trio and a theme and variations respectively, while the fourth is a bravura finale, somewhat akin to a sonata rondo.

Italian vernacular traditions – Sicilian and Venetian, respectively – make just two major appearances in Chopin, the Tarantella, Op. 42 of 1841 and the magnificent Barcarolle, Op. 60, one of three great extended works of the composer's final years. Composed in 1845-6, the Barcarolle stands proud as a solitary and majestic work, accepting the untroubled disposition of the genre, but carrying its gentle, swaying lyricism through to powerfully climactic perorations in the final stages. Following the brief introduction, Chopin allowed the popular genre to

dictate a relatively static left-hand layer, over which the melody unfolds (in characteristically sweet parallel thirds) in extended arcs. It is later subject to variation of several kinds, ranging from the ornamental elaboration of minor details to the transformation and enlargement of extended paragraphs.

The connotations of the title 'Polonaise' need to be carefully considered in the final three works of this programme. Chopin's polonaises were composed in two distinct phases. The early ones, composed while a teenager in Warsaw, were not submitted for publication by the composer himself, though three were issued posthumously (and arbitrarily grouped) by Julian Fontana as Op. 71. These early polonaises, including the B flat major, command all the techniques of right-hand virtuosity associated with the 'brilliant style' of composers such as Hummel, Weber and Field, all of whom also wrote polonaises. It was, after all, a cosmopolitan genre, albeit with *couleur locale*. When he returned to the polonaise as an exile in Paris, Chopin studiously rejected these cosmopolitan associations to create a quite new genre, a powerful symbol of cultural nationalism. These later polonaises are characterised by a 'massive', orchestral-sounding sonority and by rhetorical gestures in which individual moments are invested with conspicuous power and energy, standing out in sharp relief against less differentiated backgrounds. The Polonaise in F sharp minor, Op. 44, composed in the summer of 1841, is characteristic, but uniquely it also embeds a mazurka in a poetic, oneiric middle section: a conjunction of Poland's two most emblematic national dances.

There is a narrative about Chopin's polonaises that describes an ever-increasing complexity through the series. This culminates in the great Polonaise-fantaisie, Op. 61, a dance poem in free form that was to be his final extended work for solo piano (that Op. 61 is invariably included in editions of the polonaises strengthens this narrative). It is, however, a narrative in need of revision. Chopin remarked in his correspondence not just that he had great difficulties with the composition of Op. 61, but that he could not decide on its title. Because he wrestled with the work for 18 months, there is more sketch material than is usual for Chopin. And if we examine this material, we learn that he was really composing a Fantasy, similar in conception and even in tonal organisation to the Fantasy, Op. 49, and that he added the polonaise rhythm – the semiquaver bounce – to the principal melody as an afterthought; note that it does not return in later sections. The sketches also help us understand how the formal complexity of this great work took shape, as Chopin 'stretched' the initial ternary design by inserting nocturne-like paragraphs, and by bringing back the slow introduction just before a transcendent reprise, where the polonaise theme and the 'slow movement' theme are drawn together in a gesture of apotheosis.

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