

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 6 April 2023  
7.30pm

Garrick Ohlsson piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in F Op. 15 No. 1 (1830-2)

Nocturne in B Op. 9 No. 3 (1830-32)

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

Fantasy in F minor Op. 49 (1841)

Scherzo No. 3 in C sharp minor Op. 39 (1839)

*Interval*

Impromptu No. 2 in F sharp Op. 36 (1839)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor Op. 58 (1844)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Scherzo. Molto vivace •  
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Presto non tanto*

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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 the early 1830s that genre title and style came together in a significant way. In this respect, the relationship between the first two sets of nocturnes **Chopin** authorised for publication is a telling one, and it is revealing of his approach to genre more generally. In the 3 Nocturnes of Op. 9, published in 1832, he effectively formalised the genre, and at a time when most pianist-composers were rather permissive about genre titles. Thus, Op. 9 No. 3 conforms to an archetype we all recognise today, where the idea of vocal imitation is defining, facilitated (indeed enabled) technically by the development of the sustaining pedal, which made possible a widespread arpeggiated accompaniment. In Op. 15, published a year later in 1833, he then demonstrated that the title 'nocturne', once its connotative values had been established, could attach itself to music of varied form and character, and even to pieces that seem blatantly to defy the expectations aroused by their title. Of the Op. 15 set, it is only the second in F sharp major that retains a close contact with the model established in Op. 9. The first in F major is really a pastorale which encloses a sharply contrasted etude, while the third in G minor sets a mazurka alongside a chorale.

This highlights yet another aspect of Chopin and genre. By allowing generic fragments to slide in and out of different contexts, he assigned to genre a powerful communicative function. Thus, we find a chorale in a nocturne, a funeral march in a prelude, a waltz in a mazurka, a barcarolle in a ballade. It is worth noting that these 'guest' genres are drawn from what we may loosely call the popular culture of the time, and that as such they are grounded in social functions such as dance, worship, mourning and procession. A case in point is the slow introduction to the great *Fantasy* Op. 49 (1841), a work that stylizes the practice of postclassical keyboard improvisation and unites it with the sonata principle of Viennese classicism. In the introduction, the move to F major signals a slow march of a kind contemporary listeners would have recognised from French opera, Meyerbeer in particular. Such popular genres were part and parcel of the postclassical pianism of the 1820s, and it is significant that two of Chopin's late works, the *Berceuse* Op. 57 (1844) and the *Barcarolle* Op. 60 (1845-6), assign them newfound dignity and status. In the *Barcarolle* the familiar rocking accompaniment and 'sweet' parallel thirds associated with the gondolier's song are recontextualised, and the result is one of the masterpieces of 19th-century piano music. The calculated ambiguity of design, and at the same time

the luminosity and strength, of this work really does lift Chopin's music to a new plateau of creative achievement. One commentator has referred to a 'last style'.

'How is gravity to clothe itself if humour wears such dark veils?' This was Robert Schumann's reaction to the first of Chopin's scherzos, and it speaks volumes about his characteristic subversion of generic expectations. The third *Scherzo* of Op. 39, in C sharp minor, is as close to Liszt as Chopin ever came, both in the bravura octave passages of its outer flanks and in the delicate washes of colour in the trio, a 'hymn' in the tonic major that recalls the Polish carol at the heart of the first *Scherzo*. Characteristically, there is an unexpected opening of the form, transforming the scherzo and trio *schema* into a more ambitious and sophisticated design. There are 4 scherzos in all, as there are four ballades and four impromptus, and in each case the title conveys a specific, though not a conventional, generic meaning. Thus, the second *Impromptu*, Op. 36 in F sharp (1839), establishes a clear relationship to the other three impromptus, even down to thematic cross reference. It has a tripartite design, with the third section elaborating the opening ostinato-based melody in a series of variations, somewhat akin to baroque 'divisions'. The middle section in D major is another of those marches unmistakably related to contemporary opera, very similar in character to the one in the *Fantasy* Op. 49.

Chopin's first piano sonata was a student work, and is seldom performed today. Of the other two, it is the B flat minor Op. 35 (1839), the so-called *sonate funèbre*, that is by far the more unorthodox (Schumann referred to its four movements as 'unruly children under the same roof'). As in the *sonate funèbre*, the *Scherzo* of the B minor Sonata Op. 58 (1844) precedes the slow movement, and also as in that work the principal thematic group of the first movement is omitted in the reprise. However, in other respects the B minor is a very different order of sonata, taking a step closer to established Austro-German traditions than its predecessor. This is especially the case in the first movement, whose continuous development and transformation of motives comes close to a process of 'developing variation' that would later be associated with Brahms. Likewise, the slow movement theme has something of the measured, stately tread, the classical poise, of a late Beethoven or late Schubert adagio, and the sonata-rondo *Finale* is at the very least a more conventional way to end a sonata than the muted, understated finale of the *sonate funèbre*. In Op. 58, Chopin tackled the historical archetype of the sonata on something like its own terms and emerged triumphant.

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