

CHOPIN

Mazurka in C sharp minor Op.63 No.3
Waltz in A flat Op.42
Mazurka in A minor Op.17 No.4
Nocturne in C sharp minor Op.27 No.1
Ballade No.3 in A flat Op.47

MOZART

Sonata in A minor K.310
Allegro maestoso
Andante cantabile
Presto

CHOPIN

Nocturne in E Op.62 No.2
Polonaise-fantasy in A flat Op.61

Chopin and Mozart: the juxtaposition may seem surprising, but it is entirely apt. Among all his great predecessors who made a substantial contribution to the keyboard repertoire, Chopin felt the greatest affinity to Bach and Mozart. It was hardly by chance that as he composed his 24 Preludes Op.28 in his monastic cell in Majorca, he had by his side the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Bach, which was likewise written systematically in all the major and minor keys. As for Mozart, it was above all his more melancholy side that appealed to Chopin. Mozart's Piano Trio K.542 features an episode in its finale which turns to a dark C sharp minor – a key much more characteristic of Chopin than of Mozart – and we seem momentarily to peer across the years to the music of the Polish composer. And the manner in which the intricate ornamentation in Mozart's Rondo for piano in A minor K.511 is purely functional rather than merely decorative is again something that looks forward to Chopin.

The key of A minor was one that Mozart seldom used, and apart from the Rondo K.511 his only important A minor work is the turbulent piano

sonata K.310, composed in the summer of 1778. The previous autumn Mozart and his mother, Maria Anna, had set off on an ill-fated tour that was to take them to Paris by way of Munich and Mannheim. They eventually reached the French capital on 23 March 1778, but already by the beginning of May, Maria Anna was feeling unwell, and over the following weeks her condition deteriorated. She died on the evening of 3 July. It was during this unhappy time that Mozart composed the Sonata K.310 – the first of his two minor-key piano sonatas. Its unusually impassioned character has sometimes been attributed to the loss of his mother, though that tragic event does nothing to account for the exuberance of some of Mozart's other music of the same time – notably the 'Paris' Symphony K.297. And no doubt, Freud would have had a field day with the fact that the first work Mozart composed following the death of his father nearly a decade later was the – admittedly excruciatingly unfunny – 'Musical Joke' K.522.

The 'Allegro maestoso' tempo marking at the head of the opening movement of the Sonata K.310 is an unusual one for Mozart, and it provides a hint of the weight of the music's sonorities. The crunching discords of the pulsating left-hand accompaniment to the main theme – more akin, we might think, to the guitar-like sounds of Domenico Scarlatti than to Mozart – are remarkably astringent, and music unfolds not in regular patterns of four bars, but in asymmetrical five-, three- and even seven-bar phrases. Moreover, although the theme is punctuated by a quieter idea, it is one whose overlapping, dissonant sighs are no less plangent than the material that surrounds them. In the central portion of the piece the music reaches a peak of violence, and its dynamic contrasts, with *pianissimo* and *fortissimo* in direct juxtaposition, are of an extreme that will not readily be found elsewhere in Mozart. Virtually the whole of this development section unfolds in a vertiginous stream of semiquavers, until a sweeping chromatic scale leads directly into the reprise of the main theme. The music's dizzying course is

continued in the coda, with a series of jagged arpeggios descending from the very top of the keyboard to the bottom, before three full-blooded A minor chords bring the piece to a full-stop.

The slow movement seems at first bent on offering a serene antidote to the violence that has preceded it. However, at its mid-point the music turns to the minor, and revisits the unrest of the sonata's beginning in no uncertain manner. The rapid repeated notes in the right hand, with their dissonances only gradually resolved, seem to evoke dramatic string tremolos, while beneath them the rumbling of trills serves to increase the music's tension. The turbulence eventually subsides, but a sense of unease lingers on through the first stage of the reprise.

The finale is a piece whose subdued, breathless agitation seems to have left a mark on the concluding rondo of Schubert's great A minor Sonata D.845, of 1825. Both composers include a central episode in the major (Mozart's begins almost in the nature of a musette, with an unchanging bass note running through its first twelve bars), but while Schubert allows his piece to spiral away into the distance before its peremptory concluding cadence, Mozart's final bars gather strength for an ending of overwhelming force.

Among the genres Chopin transformed into something wholly original and individual, the mazurka, the polonaise and the nocturne stand out. Certainly, all three are more immediately associated with his name than with that of any other composer. Chopin composed more than fifty mazurkas (the name arises from the Mazurs who populated the plains around Warsaw), though only a handful of them were written while he was still in Poland. In the remainder we seem to hear a nostalgic recollection of Polish folk culture, filtered through some of the composer's most visionary harmonic experiments. Not for nothing did he observe of the first set of mazurkas he himself offered for publication (it appeared in Vienna as his Op.6) that the pieces were "not for dancing".

The three Mazurkas Op.63, composed in 1846, were the last to be published during Chopin's lifetime. The second and third of the group are characteristically melancholy pieces in minor keys; and while the Mazurka in C sharp minor Op.63 No.3 has a more consolatory middle section in the major, it is short-lived before the initial minor-mode theme makes a return. The four Mazurkas Op.17 were written in Paris, probably in 1833. The first of them is a straightforward affair, with a trio section in folk style followed by a literal reprise of the first half.

Like the mazurka, the waltz was a genre Chopin had begun to cultivate even before he left Poland towards the end of 1830. His first waltz to appear in print was a 'Valse brillante' Op.18. The inspiration behind it is likely to have been Weber's 'Invitation to the Dance' – another continuous chain of waltzes with a recurring refrain. Chopin did not see fit to have any of his earlier efforts issued in print, nor did he prepare the later examples for publication when they were essentially *pièces d'occasion* written for friends. In the years following the composer's death, his friend Theodor Fontana edited many of the unpublished pieces, grouping them together arbitrarily, and assigning opus numbers to them.

The Waltz in A flat Op.42 was composed in Paris, in 1840. It is a genuine 'valse brillante', and one of the best known among Chopin's pieces of the kind. It plays on the metrical conflict between a theme which gives the impression of unfolding in duple time, and a genuine waltz-like accompaniment. The music seldom strays far from the confines of its home key of A flat, but towards the end Chopin ramps up the excitement with brief forays into 'sharper' territory. An *accelerando* in the closing bars brings the piece to a whirlwind conclusion.

As a vehicle for intimate piano music the nocturne had been established in the early years of the 19th century by John Field. Chopin was acquainted with Field's pieces, and he took it as a compliment when the

famous French pianist and composer Frédéric Kalkbrenner once likened his playing to that of the Irishman. Field's cantabile melodies unfolding over a smoothly rocking accompaniment anticipate the type of piano texture favoured by Chopin; but as he did with so many other musical forms, Chopin transformed the nocturne into something much more ambitious and multifaceted, allowing it at times to assume a surprisingly dramatic character.

The two Nocturnes Op.27, composed in the autumn of 1835, are very different in mood: the brooding C sharp minor first in the pair, with its theme having major-mode inflections as though in preparation for the D flat major key of its companion-piece, has an impassioned and agitated middle section that rises to a forceful climax – far removed, we may feel, from the typical world of Chopin's nocturnes. But there is a further blurring of genres to come, in the shape of a new idea which has all the hallmarks of a mazurka, before calm is restored with the return of the initial nocturne melody, this time with a new inner voice, before the music sinks to a calm close in the major.

The two Nocturnes Op.62 were Chopin's last pieces of the kind, and they provide wonderful examples of his mastery of endless melody, and of melodic variation. The long-spun opening theme of the E major second nocturne is followed by an agitated episode in the minor. When the initial theme returns, it does so in an abbreviated and harmonically unstable form, until the home key is at last re-established with the murmuring bass line of the opening section's latter half.

Chopin's four Ballades for piano are very much *sui generis*. As its name would suggest, the ballad was essentially a vocal form, and as such it achieved popularity in the early 19th century, not least in the songs of Schubert and Carl Loewe. (The latter's many ballades include a setting of Goethe's 'Der Erlkönig' to rival Schubert's more famous version.) Chopin appears to have been the first to apply the title of 'ballade' to a purely instrumental composition, and his example was followed by Brahms, Liszt and César Franck, among others. It

has been suggested that Chopin's pieces were inspired by the ballad poetry of his compatriot Adam Mickiewicz, but they contain precious few traces of the actual narrative content of Mickiewicz's poems, and are best regarded as purely 'abstract' music.

Chopin's great achievement in his Ballades was to create a synthesis of narrative style and lyrical expression. All four pieces begin in an atmosphere of timelessness and profound calm; and in all of them that beginning meets its obverse side in a climax which heralds, or coincides with, the return of the opening material. The A flat major Ballade No.3 contains three distinct themes, of which the second, with its 'rocking' rhythm, assumes by far the greatest significance during the course of the piece. This second theme is presented in F major and minor; and following the entrance of the third theme, in flowing semiquaver motion (its appearance is marked by a luminous change in key), it returns in the home key to provide a bridge to a central development in which the simple drooping octaves of its original right-hand accompaniment are decorated and expanded. It is this enlarged sonority, covering a far wider keyboard compass, that allows the music to reach its first resplendent climax. Only once this has passed does the opening theme of the piece make itself felt as part of the music's continuing developmental flow. The return to the home key comes very late in the day, with a passionate restatement of the main subject, but the reprise is of such overwhelming grandeur that the proportions of the piece as a whole remain deeply satisfying.

The Polonaise-Fantasy Op.61, completed three years before Chopin's death, was not only the last of his polonaises, but also his final large-scale work for solo piano. His sketches reveal that he originally planned it purely as a fantasy, and that the polonaise rhythm of the main theme's accompaniment was something of an afterthought. Even then, the initial appearance of this theme, and the agitated passage leading to its return much later in the work,

are the only portions of the work in which the polonaise rhythm makes itself felt at all. The design of the piece as a whole, too, was initially to have been far more straightforward: Chopin's first continuity-draft shows a modestly-conceived work whose principal elements were the opening theme, the slower middle section in the key of B major, and the reprise. It was only as he worked on it that he decided to render the music's underlying ternary form less immediately evident through the interpolation of new thematic ideas and developmental interludes.

Chopin was a composer who always delighted in creating ambiguous or hybrid forms. Some five years before the Polonaise-Fantasy, the trio section of his F sharp minor Polonaise Op.44 had been written in the style of a mazurka; and the middle section of the Polonaise-Fantasy itself finds Chopin invoking the atmosphere of a nocturne. The opening of the piece is one of Chopin's great inspirations: an improvisatory passage which sets the entire keyboard vibrating with the aid of the sustaining pedal. At the same time this beginning leaves the question of the music's tonality open: not until the onset of the polonaise theme itself is the home key of A flat major established with any degree of firmness. This opening passage returns in a much abbreviated form later in the piece, as a distant echo of its former self, after which the music gradually gathers momentum again, in preparation for the climactic reprise of the main theme which brings it to a close.

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