FRIDAY, JUNE 24 :: 7:30 PM

Piers Lane, piano

SONATA NO. 8, IN C MINOR, OP. 13, [PATHÉTIQUE] (1798-9)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Grave – Allegro di molto e con brio
Adagio cantabile
Rondo: Allegro

SONATA NO. 31, IN A-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 110 (1821)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
Allegro molto
Adagio ma non troppo
Arioso dolente
Fuga: Allegro ma non troppo

:: INTERMISSION ::

THE COMPLETE WALZES
Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)
Waltz in E, WN 18 (1829)
Waltz in B minor, WN 19 (1829)
Waltz in D-flat, WN 20 (1829)
Waltz in A-flat, WN 28 (1829-30)
Waltz in E minor, WN 29 (1830?)
Waltz in G-flat, WN 42 (1832)
Waltz in E-flat Valse brillante, Op. 18 (1833)
Waltz in A-flat, WN 47 (1835)
Waltz in A-flat, Op. 34 No. 1 (1835-8)
Waltz in A minor, Op. 34 No. 2 (1831)
Waltz in F, Op. 34 No. 3 (before 1838)
Waltz in A-flat, Op. 42 (1839-40)
Waltz in F minor, WN 55 (1841)
Waltz in D-flat, Op. 64 No. 1 (Minute) (1840-7)
Waltz in D-sharp minor, Op. 64 No. 2 (1840-7)
Waltz in A-flat, Op. 64 No. 3 (1840-7)
Waltz in A minor, WN 63 (1847-9)

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PROGRAM NOTES

BEETHOVEN THE PIANIST

There was something elemental about Beethoven's piano playing. He broke all the rules and followed no school or style. Indeed, Beethoven was largely self-taught as a pianist. Listeners were struck by the power of his playing and its drama. Beethoven was at the heart of Beethoven's skill at the keyboard and in this art, he had no equal. His improvisations would last for up to an hour and were frequently structured into recognizable musical forms.

His 32 piano sonatas chart an unprecedented journey, from early virtuoso to late philosopher. They often act as a blueprint for Beethoven's artistic and spiritual growth. As time went on, he said more with less.

SONATA NO. 8, IN C MINOR, OP. 13, (PATHÉTIQUE)
Ludwig van Beethoven (b. Bonn, Germany, December 15 or 16, 1770; d. Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827)
Composed 1798-9; 18 minutes

As the 18th century turned to the 19th, the idea of grouping sonatas into sets of three or six long-established. Beethoven was to contribute more than anyone to the decline of the practice by developing the sonata from its relatively easy-going origins to a single statement of mighty weight. The Pathétique is the earliest of his sonatas to do so.

The nickname, unusually, has its origins with Beethoven himself, since Viennese publisher Franz Hoffmeister issued the work December 18, 1799, as Grande Sonate pathétique / pour le clavecin ou piano-forte. The young Beethoven’s reputation as a firebrand would surely have warned the unwary clavecin (harpsichord) player that this turbulent score was really designed for the more powerful pianoforte. It is one of the earliest examples of Beethoven’s dramatic C minor mood that, within the decade, would lead to the Fifth Symphony.

The imposing sequence of chords with which the sonata begins herald grand drama and will function as weighty rhetorical building blocks. Before they do, the first theme bursts on the scene with furious energy and a timpani-roll to accompany, as it rockets up the C minor scale. A second theme is denied its customary access to the major key and it too is designed to propel the music forward. The turbulence that these two themes generate is broken only by more dramatic C minor mood that, within the decade, would lead to the Fifth Symphony.

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SONATA NO. 31, IN A-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 110
Ludwig van Beethoven (b. Bonn, Germany, December 15 or 16, 1770; d. Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827)
Composed 1812; 20 minutes

Op. 110, Beethoven’s penultimate piano sonata, was the only work he completed in 1821, finishing it on Christmas Day. His last three piano sonatas, and the five late string quartets to which he would turn after completing the sonatas, share a concern with spiritual and transcendental ideals. In Op. 110, Beethoven’s compositional process is subtle and organic.

Motifs recur and are recalled from one movement to another. The movements are designed to follow one another without break and, although it might appear that there is a descriptive program underlying their considerable mood swings, the music provides its own coherent map.

Beethoven writes on amabilità at the opening of the first movement and the music maintains amability and warmth of feeling throughout. In contrast, rapidly changing moods and rhythms give the second movement the character of one of Beethoven’s gruff bagatelles. Functioning as a scherzo, the music even includes allusions to the themes of two popular songs. The slow movement is linked to and, essentially, a part of the finale, together carrying much of the weight of the sonata. Three bars of introduction and a recitative introduce a vocal song of lamentation, marked Arioso dolente. This contrasts with the serene fugue that follows, itself a variation of the same tender theme with which the sonata began.

The progression from Arioso dolente to the closing fugue has no parallel in Beethoven’s earlier music. Writer William Kinderman has compared the progression with that of the Agnus Dei to the Dona nobis pacem movements in the Missa Solemnis, music that Beethoven was also wrestling with at the time. At both a musical and a spiritual level, he suggests that the sonata mirrors the promise of liberation that emerges from an endless cycle of suffering and injustice reflected in the music of the mass.

CHOPIN THE PIANIST

Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin was a poet at the keyboard, renowned for his singing tone – a musician first and pianist second. Largely self-taught as a pianist, his only piano teacher was Wojciech Zywny, who was primarily a violinist, and the lessons ended when he was 12. Chopin rejected the powerhouse approach to piano technique and, when he arrived in Paris in the fall of 1831, he found himself bored by the flashy, but shallow pianism of the time. Not for Chopin the ‘three-hand’ effect of a Thalberg or the polished pearls of a Kakknerner – just two of a clutch of pianists competing for supremacy in this champion’s league, prizing technique above all. Chopin was a quiet revolutionary, an innovator whose individual piano style and developments in keyboard fingering and pedaling went unchanged until the time of Debussy and the 20th century. As a virtuoso with a wide repertoire, he was welcomed in the leading centers of piano playing and public concert life. Yet Chopin shielded away from the concert platform at a time that public piano recitals were beginning to thrive throughout Europe. He gave around 50 concerts in his entire lifetime, from his earliest childhood in Warsaw to the performances he gave in Britain a year before his death at the age of just 39.

The roots of Chopin’s extraordinarily beautiful melodic writing grow directly from the events of his life. First in Warsaw, then in Vienna, the city in which he stayed after leaving Poland, Chopin heard much Italian opera. Then, in Paris, where he eventually settled, he became friends with Italian singers and composers like Rossini and Bellini. Italian opera gave Chopin a love of the long, sustained, elaborately decorated vocal line, a style of singing known as bel canto. He recreated on the keyboard, using a flat finger to gain a more singing touch, passing the longer fingers directly over the shorter ones if it brought a more legato line, flattering the sustaining pedal to gain a constant, clear richness in the overall tone color. “You have to sing if you wish to play,” he said to his pupils, who provided him with a substantial income. This observation of vocal detail found its way into Chopin’s piano writing to a degree previously unexplored, including in the waltzes.

INVITATION TO THE WALTZ

Chopin saw potential in the waltz beyond its traditional role as a popular dance and consciously moved away from social dance music when it was increasingly becoming all the rage. Before leaving Warsaw at the age of 20, having already publicly performed his two piano concertos, he had also written six early waltzes. At this stage, he likely had an eye on domestic music-making, rather than works he would wish to publish. He also gave copies of his waltzes as gifts or keepsakes to friends, most notably the earliest draft of the Waltz in A-flat major, WN 47 to Maria Wodzińska, to whom he was briefly engaged. (Chopin would continue this practice throughout his life, adding aristocratic acquainances to the recipients, often noting his latest ideas for performance as they evolved on different occasions.)


“I play Chopin’s Waltzes in chronological order, so that one follows the dance of his life from his teens through to his last years. The last waltz of all was first published in 1955. Whether they are of a brief conventional cast or a more complex set of ‘walzais within a waltz’, they never fail to speak with that inimitable poetry and eloquence with which Chopin imbued all his precious creations. They sparkle or sigh by turns, effortlessly finding variety and nuance, all of them rare jewels.” (Piero Lane)
manuscripts – on the three surviving manuscripts of WN 47 for example, or the five surviving manuscripts of the Waltz in F minor, WN 55, published posthumously as Op. 70, No. 2.

So, while Chopin may well have heard socially functional waltzes by Strauss and Lanner while living in Warsaw and certainly heard them while visiting (1829) and then living temporarily (1830–11) in Vienna, he realized, even from the age of 21, that his goal was to refine and enrich the popular waltz by introducing elements from a more developed, polished musical language. That this realization only came gradually could be gauged from the letter he wrote from Vienna back home to his composition teacher, Józef Elsner, in 1831: “Here, waltzes are called works!” he writes, evidently with some surprise . . .: “I don’t pick up anything that is essentially Viennese. I don’t even know how to dance a waltz properly.”

Still, stylistic elements that would soon become hallmarks of the mature, published waltzes (Opp. 18, 34, 42 and 64) are already noticeable in the six he wrote in Warsaw.

Being Chopin, each of these early waltzes contains features that immediately attract, whether the endearingly sentimental Waltz in E major, WN 18, the gentle B minor, WN 19 full of expressive lyricism with a hint of the imaginative chromaticism to come, or even the rapid-fire A-flat major, WN 28. The Waltz in E minor, WN 29 opens with a flourish and closes with a brief dramatic coda. In between, all four themes start ambiguously, on the tonic and away from the home key, inviting our curiosity and avoiding any feeling of the foursquare structure which can be found in other Warsaw waltzes. While the sum of the parts of these Warsaw waltzes may not add up to the sophistication of those Chopin composed in Paris, the E minor comes closest and is the finest of what used to be called the ‘posthumous’ waltzes (those Chopin chose not to publish).

In this part, may have resulted from a landmark publication in the early history of the waltz, Weber’s Aufforderung zum Tanze (Invitation to the Dance) of 1819, by far his most famous composition for piano. In this earliest case of successfully transforming social dance to concert platform, Weber increases the tempo of the waltz (Allegro vivace) and bookends an interconnected sequence of waltzes with a formal introduction and closing developmental coda. Chopin begins to explore Weber’s framework to some degree in his early E minor waltz, though we can’t be sure when he first came across the Invitation. But he would explore and further refine Weber’s intricate interweaving of waltzes, contrasting of moods, and recall of prominent themes in his masterpieces to come.

The E-Flat Waltz, which Chopin published in Paris as his Op. 18, is one of the longest and most spirited of his waltzes. He described it, as was the convention of the time, as a valsa brillante, and the waltz does exude brilliance, elegance and sophistication, with more than a touch of coquettishness. Though structurally not too far removed from what Schubert did with his waltzes, dieter and Deutsche, Robert Schumann praised this waltz as music for the listener’s soul, as much for the body. In it, virtuosity lies at the service of the brilliance of its themes. It has been noted that both the Op. 18 waltz and the three of Chopin’s Op. 34, his next publication, are all dedicated to fashionable women of means. That takes us directly into the salon at whose gatherings Chopin would increasingly become guest of honor. The habitués were traditionally the aristocratic wealthy and those who wished to be seen among society. But, as time went on, the middle-class, too, were drawn to the salons and began to hold soirées of their own, wishing to associate themselves with artists.

The Op. 64 waltzes, which Chopin wrote and polished over several years, but only published two years before his death, are independent creations and a fastidiously refined high point in the collection. The first is the so-called Minute waltz – though ‘90 to 100 seconds’ would be a more accurate nickname for the literally-minded, and even longer with the rubato that Chopin’s graceful music demands. In it, a perpetuum mobile figure in the right hand creates a giddy feeling of forward momentum, which continues through the syncopations of the central trio section. Then, proving that a nickname is not essential to popularity, the Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op. 64 No. 2, one of the gems of Chopin’s output, carefully wraps graceful, bittersweet outer sections around a nocturnal D-flat center. Less familiar and, perhaps, curiously distinctive, the Waltz in A-flat major, Op. 64 No. 3 follows the simple three-part structure of the ‘Minute’ waltz, with unpredictable melodic writing and starting modulations along the way, building to an increasingly animated cascade of eighth-notes as the piece ends. Taken together, the three Op. 64 waltzes reveal Chopin at his most urbane, bringing to a popular dance all the sophistication, creativity and attention to detail that echo the same qualities that Bach brought to his allemandes, courantes, sarabandes and gigue – the popular dances of his day. Chopin admired Bach immensely and recommended daily practice of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier (WTC) to all his pupils. He even annotated and analyzed in minute detail Book One of the WTC in his spidery writing for Pauline Chazaren, one of his pupils. The influence of Bach’s polyphonic writing is present throughout Chopin’s music, including the waltzes.

The late Waltz in A minor, WN 63 has a wistful, haunting quality to its main theme. There’s sunshine in the major moods, and attention to detail that echo the same qualities that Bach brought to his allemandes, courantes, sarabandes and gigue – the popular dances of his day. Chopin admired Bach immensely and recommended daily practice of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier (WTC) to all his pupils. He even annotated and analyzed in minute detail Book One of the WTC in his spidery writing for Pauline Chazaren, one of his pupils. The influence of Bach’s polyphonic writing is present throughout Chopin’s music, including the waltzes.

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PIERS LANE, piano

London-based Australian pianist Piers Lane stands out as an engaging and highly versatile performer, at home equally in solo, chamber and concerto repertoire. He has recently been appointed as the Artistic Director of the Sydney International Piano Competition of Australia. He was the Artistic Director of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music from 2007 until 2017 and also directed the annual Myra Hess Day at the National Gallery in London from its inception in 2006 until 2013, which then inspired his collaboration with actress Patricia Routledge on a theatre piece devised by Nigel Hess which explored Dame Myra’s work throughout the Second World War. In the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Birthday Honours, Lane was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for distinguished services to the arts. In 1994, he was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Music, where he was a professor from 1989 to 2007. Piers holds Honorary Doctorates from two Australian Universities: Griffith and James Cook.