Jan Lisiecki, piano

ÉTUDES & NOCTURNES
Fryderyk Chopin (1810–1849)
Étude in C major, Op. 10, No. 1
Étude in A minor, Op. 10, No. 2
Nocturne in E major Op. 62, No. 2
Étude in E major, Op. 10, No. 3
Étude in C-sharp minor, Op. 10, No. 4
Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 1
Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2
Étude in G-flat major, Op. 10, No. 5
Étude in E-flat minor, Op. 10, No. 6
Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 9, No. 2
Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1

:: INTERMISSION ::
Nocturne in G minor, Op. 15, No. 3
Étude in C major, Op. 10, No. 7
Nocturne in F major, Op. 15, No. 1
Étude in F major, Op. 10, No. 8
Étude in F minor, Op. 10, No. 9
Nocturne in B minor, Op. 9, No. 1
Étude in A-sharp major, Op. 10, No. 10
Nocturne in A-sharp major, Op. 32, No. 2
Étude in E-sharp major, Op. 10, No. 11
Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. post.

GENEROUSLY SPONSORED BY STEPHEN PERRY AND OLIVER RADFORD
FRYDERYK CHOPIN: PIANIST AND COMPOSER
(b. Zelazowa Wola, nr. Warsaw, Poland, March 1, 1810; d. Paris, October 17, 1849)

Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin was a quiet revolutionary, a poet at the keyboard, renowned for his singing tone: a musician first and pianist second. His imagination was ripe to question the very nature of the instrument he played – and, certainly the main, if not quite the only, instrument he composed for. Chopin confronted the problems it posed, converting the technical solutions he devised into poetic flights of imagination.

Largely self-taught as a pianist, Chopin had just one piano teacher, Wojciech Zywny, who was primarily a violinist. The lessons ended when he was 12. The young Chopin’s mind was full of ideas for the development of piano technique.

When he arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1831, he rejected the powerhouse approach to piano technique and found himself bored by the flashy, but shallow pianism of the time. Not for Chopin the ‘three-hand’ effect of a Talberg or the polished pearls of a Kalkbrenner – just two of a cluster of pianists competing for supremacy in this champion’s league, whose prestige was prided above all. Chopin was 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 reputation, he was welcomed in the leading centers of piano playing and public concert life. Yet Chopin shied away from the concert platform at a time that public piano recitals were beginning to thrive throughout Europe. He only 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.

CHOPIN – THE OP. 10 ÉTUDES

Of Chopin’s Études, Robert Schumann wrote admiringly, “imagination and technique share dominion side by side.” Each étude is a work of art in itself, carefully balancing creativity with a didactic purpose. Chopin wrote the earliest of them in Poland, as a teenager, to challenge his own technique. He took a first draft of the Études with him to Paris when, as a 21-year-old musician, he decided to settle in this center of piano virtuosity – in part since his homeland was by now coming under the control of Russia. He published Op. 10 a few years later, in 1833, as Douze Grandes Études, with a dedication to his fellow lion of the keyboard, Franz Liszt. The Op. 25 collection followed four years later, in 1837, dedicated to Liszt’s mistress, Countess Marie d’Agoult.

Several contemporary pianist-composers had already written collections of 12 or 24 Études to help others explore the technical potential of the instrument. Chopin took on the challenge of exploiting the piano itself to draw out its potential for expressive power, texture and shading – what Jan Lisiecki refers to as “the yearning, captivating melody, the framework for flexibility, the endless fresh ideas.” In the Nocturnes, Chopin explores both the textural beauty of an ornamental cantilena enveloping a vocal line simultaneously with its structural potential. He finds color in the dying away of every struck note. And he makes highly expressive use of the sustaining pedal. For Chopin, the weaker fingers are not a hindrance to musicality at the keyboard; instead, they provide color to the overall sonority. “The goal is not to play everything with an equal sound,” he wrote, “[but rather] it seems to me, with a well-developed technique that can control and vary a beautiful sound quality.” The stronger third finger, he would describe to his pupils as a ‘great singer,’ demonstrating entire phrases at the piano, with the third finger playing most of the melody line.

The Nocturnes embrace the whole of Chopin’s creative life. By the later, intensely inward-looking Étude in C minor, Op. 62 No. 2 (1845-6), the music roams restlessly over a complex interweaving of musical lines and sophisticated textural writing. It is one of the most refined yet graceful of Chopin’s Nocturnes and a fitting conclusion to the cycle. To quote Franz Liszt: “Chopin, in his poetic Nocturnes, sang not only the harmonies which are the source of our most ineffable delights, but likewise the restless, agitating bewilderment to which they often give rise.”

— All program notes copyright © 2023 Keith Hörner. Comments welcomed: knotes@ymapto.ca

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Access artist biographies via our digital program book. Scan this QR code with your smart phone and tap the provided link.