

CHOPIN's
Last Waltz

Robert Silverman,
pianist



STEINWAY & SONS



Robert Silverman

BIOGRAPHY:



In a career spanning more than five decades, Robert Silverman has climbed every peak of serious pianism: lauded performances of the complete sonata cycles by Beethoven and Mozart; concerts in prestigious halls across the globe; orchestral appearances with many of the world's greatest conductors; and award-winning recordings distributed internationally.

Widely acknowledged as one of Canada's premiere pianists, Robert Silverman has reached a level of musical and technical authority that can only be accomplished after years of deep commitment to the instrument and its vast literature. Many aspects of Silverman's playing are frequently noted: a polished technique, an extraordinary range of tonal palette, an uncanny ability to sing his way into the heart of a phrase, and probing interpretations of the most complex works in the repertoire.

The distinguished pianist has performed in concert halls throughout North America, Europe, the Far East and Australia. Under the batons of such renowned conductors as Seiji Ozawa, John Eliot Gardiner, Gerard Schwarz, Neeme Järvi, and the late Kiril Kondrashin and Sergiu Comissiona, he has appeared with orchestras on three continents, including the Chicago Symphony, the Sydney Symphony, the BBC (London) Symphony, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestras, and every major orchestra in Canada.

Robert Silverman's discography includes over 30 CDs and a dozen LPs. His recording of Liszt's piano music received a Grand Prix du Disque from the Liszt Society of Budapest, while his widely-acclaimed 10-CD recording of all thirty-two Beethoven sonatas was short-listed for a Juno Award. His 7-CD album of all the Mozart Sonatas was released in 2010 for IsoMike.

In 2013, Silverman was named to the Order of Canada, an honour accorded only about 150 Canadians annually. In 1998 Robert Silverman was named the first winner of a major Career Achievement Award for Keyboard Artistry, administered by the Ontario Arts Council Foundation, in recognition of "his high level of artistry, his moving interpretations of a wide range of music...and his commitment and contribution to music in Canada."

Robert Silverman resides in Vancouver where he was a faculty member at the University of British Columbia for thirty years, served a 5-year term as Director of the School of Music in the 1990s, and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters in 2004. He now devotes himself full-time to concertizing and recording. He is frequently heard on the CBC English and French radio network; a Steinway artist, he has recorded for EMI, Stereophile, IsoMike, Marquis Classics, OrpheumMasters and CBC Records.

Silverman enjoys an enormous following on the internet, where a generous selection of his recordings is accessible on YouTube, Soundcloud and iLike. Most of his recordings are available for sale and download from Amazon, iTunes, and CD Baby.

CHOPIN's Last Waltz

by Robert Silverman

Early in my career, at a social occasion I had been invited to as a guest, I was asked to sit down at the piano and play something. As I had not yet acquired the art of declining such requests graciously (or otherwise when unduly pressed), I acquiesced. At the conclusion of the performance, my host mentioned that although he'd enjoyed my playing, he preferred "semi-classical music," especially by that popular French composer whose name he had forgotten. "Michel Legrand?" I asked helpfully. "No, no, someone more famous." "You don't mean Chopin?" "Yes, that's the one." "I just played something by Chopin," I responded. Since he had a limited knowledge of music, his gaffe could be easily forgiven, even if mine could not. Still, the time has long passed since it apparently was a truth universally acknowledged that aside from his ability to write beautiful melodies, Chopin possessed only elementary skill at composition, and certainly was not remotely in the league of the three Bs or many others.

Nowadays, it is commonly agreed that Chopin was a musical genius of the highest order. Still, old misunderstandings persist: Chopin's music operates on so many visceral levels that even from the onset of his career, audiences who may not have appreciated its inherent skill and finesse, invariably have loved the sound his music makes. Some cognoscenti have never forgiven him this sin. I recall a well-known scholar stating, upon hearing a performance of a late Nocturne, that he thought it was a student's mediocre imitation of Chopin. At least he got the composer right.

The young Chopin was fortunate to have teachers who, recognizing the immensity of his talent, willingly served as mentors rather than strict martinet, thus allowing him the opportunity to develop on his own. As a result,

Chopin was basically self-taught both as a pianist and a composer. He developed quickly, and public recognition in both areas was virtually instantaneous. He was only 17 when he composed the set of variations, Op. 2, about which Robert Schumann famously wrote "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius."

While still in his late teens, he began composing what would become the Op. 10 Études – the first half of an indispensable compendium of piano studies that have since challenged and fascinated students and professionals alike. Several short, familiar waltzes, published posthumously, date from this period as well. In 1830, at the age of twenty, his career began in earnest with the publication of the Op. 6 Mazurkas and the E minor piano concerto. Henceforth, with only a handful of stumbles along the way, a stream of well-received works would flow regularly from his pen. His output seriously slowed down only in 1846 with the onset of the later stage of his illness, and ceased a year later. His final two years were virtually silent.

His works are all generically entitled; he had no use for the fashionable quasi-literary titles that Schumann and Liszt favored. His compositions took the form of either Polish national folk dances, like Mazurkas and Polonaises, or absolute music such as Études, Waltzes, Nocturnes, Préludes in all the keys, and Impromptus. From the start, these masterful, original works easily surpassed similar pieces by his contemporaries and predecessors. As he matured, his music exhibited an unsurpassed understanding of the piano's sonic and technical capabilities, an ever-increasing mastery of counterpoint second only to J. S. Bach, and an avant-garde harmonic language that foreshadowed Wagner. Toward the

end of the decade, following an unsuccessful effort at writing a piano sonata, he produced his masterful Sonata No. 2, Op. 35. Of greater importance were his large single-movement works like the Ballades and Scherzos. He also began to blend genres within individual pieces: Mazurkas, for instance, can be found in his C#-minor Nocturne and his F#-minor Polonaise, a light Valse Brillante appears within the first Ballade, while the middle section of his 4th Scherzo takes on the character of a melancholy Barcarolle.

In the 1840s, his music continued to increase in its complexity, and often was rife with foreboding tragic overtones, causing some of his admirers to fear he was in danger of losing his audience. In addition to working in all the above-mentioned forms, he composed his finest one-off masterpieces: the Barcarolle, Berceuse, and the two Fantasies. It is from this period that the repertoire on this album is drawn.

The 1841 **Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49** is one of the landmarks of the 19th-century piano literature. Although countless composers churned out virtuoso-like, formulaic "Fantasies" based on themes from then-popular operas, this large work follows in a more serious tradition set forth by Mozart, Schubert and Schumann. A sombre march is followed by a lengthy section consisting of several brief episodes of extraordinary passion, sweep, and power, concluding with a quick march that foreshadows Elgar. This being perhaps too much material to absorb in one hearing, Chopin wisely repeats most of it again in a new key, but interrupts the proceedings in midstream with a peaceful Adagio. After a sudden outburst of three fortissimo octaves, we are once again led into the breach. The Fantaisie concludes with an echo of the Adagio and a final pianissimo flourish.

Chopin published Nocturnes throughout his life. However it was only the title and external characteristics — Bellini-like melodies accompanied by broken chords in the left hand — that he borrowed from the sentimental salon pieces by his Irish contemporary John Field. (The closest Chopin came to Field's conception was his syrupy Nocturne No. 2 in E-flat Major.) The others usually begin similarly, but before they conclude, Chopin's dreams often assume the character of nightmares.

The final **Nocturne in E major, Op. 62/2** (1846) begins with a glowing theme, giving way to a more poignant melody. This in turn leads to a restless, thickly textured passage in which one hand imitates the other, while melody and accompaniment are intertwined. Chopin understood that there was no need to repeat the opening section in its entirety. He restates just enough of it to remind us where we are in the piece, and then moves on, returning to the poignant second theme, but now altered so as to convey a sense of peaceful finality.

The brooding **Prelude in C-sharp minor, Op. 45** dates from 1841. It is more of an unanswered question than a statement, featuring one of Chopin's favorite devices: a rolling bass accompaniment sweeping upward until it takes over the next phrase of the melody. The most remarkable passage in this brief work is a chromatic cadenza toward the conclusion. (And yes, there is a striking similarity between one phrase in this piece and the climax of the well-known Irish tune, Danny Boy. It is best not to focus on it.)

It has been said that the Mazurkas are Chopin's most authentically "Polish" works, hearkening back to national folk dances of the medieval era. However, as Bartok would do almost a century later, Chopin managed to infuse his artistic being with the spirit of those idioms to the point that he could create authentic-sounding pieces without having to rely on pre-existing melodies. He wrote fifty-seven Mazurkas, but published only forty-one. As a group, they comprise his most original, inventive compositions, in which unorthodox scales and astonishing voice leading play an important role. This music belongs more in his private domain, the antithesis of, say, the showier, deliberately appealing Waltzes.

At first his Mazurkas were true miniatures, usually in standard tripartite form. As they evolved, though, they often became longer and formally more complex. Their moods, ranged from the ecstatic to deep melancholia. The final one he published, the wistful **Mazurka in C-sharp minor, Op. 63/3**, (1846) additionally exemplifies his mastery of imitative counterpoint in the effective coda.

As for the feverish, unfinished **Mazurka in F minor, Op. 67/4** (1849 - his "deathbed" work), only portions of the autograph are reasonably legible, and those parts were published shortly after his death. Since then, however, several musicians have attempted to decipher the rest of it, and to determine how all its parts might fit together. (I base my efforts on Michelangelo's recording of the piece.) One might be hard pressed to claim this Mazurka to be a forgotten masterpiece but it at least affords us insight into a dying composer's hallucinatory thoughts. Its Wagnerian harmonies also provide a hint of a direction he may have pursued had his health been miraculously restored.

The final piano works published in Chopin's lifetime are the three Waltzes, Op. 64. The first (the "Minute Waltz") and second (the C-sharp minor) need no introduction, but the **Value in A-flat, Op. 64/3** is one of his least-known pieces. It is everything its opus-mates are not: obscure, subtle, and almost uniquely in Chopin's output, humorous. I only learned, after the recording was fully edited, that it may have been composed in 1840, seven years earlier than the other two. Thus ironically, "Chopin's Last Waltz" turns out not to be included in this album at all, yet in its sophistication, it could easily stand as his ultimate effort in this genre. The principal melody slithers about over a traditional "oom-pah-pah" bass, wandering from key to key. As the middle section approaches, Chopin introduces a "drumbeat" motif that is at odds with the 3/4 time signature. That drumbeat becomes the springboard for most phrases in the middle section as it too meanders through several keys. Characteristically, Chopin only quotes enough of it to remind us what a return section is traditionally supposed to do. The ensuing coda accelerates increasingly, finishing suddenly with a brilliant flourish descending down the entire length of the keyboard.

Pianists automatically think only of Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Liszt when discussing composers born in the first decade of the nineteenth century. But there was another equally original genius born six years earlier: Hector Berlioz. His 1830 "Symphonie Fantastique" begins with a series of halting G's. Perhaps Chopin did not knowingly borrow the idea for the opening of his **Fourth Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52**, but it is indeed unusual to find two such singular works in the repertoire that begin so similarly.

Scholars have puzzled over the structure of Chopin's Ballades ever since they appeared, often attempting to shoehorn them into one variant or another of what is commonly termed Sonata Allegro form. However, they miss the point. Indeed, such works exhibit sonata principles, not to mention other traditional forms (what good pieces from 1750-1900 don't?) but fundamentally, the Ballades have no real antecedent either as a genre or a musical form. Chopin well understood the underlying principles of composition, and realized before any of his contemporaries that after a century of tonality's firm hold on European art music, it was no longer necessary to adhere closely to established structures in order to compose a highly cohesive composition lasting more than a few minutes.

It takes no great insight to state that following a brief introduction, the Fourth Ballade features three iterations of a main theme, each succeeded by episodic material, and followed by a coda that is one of the most brilliant passages in all of piano music. This is tantamount to saying that Shakespeare's Othello is a play in five acts, in which everyone dies at the end.

There's a bit more to it than that. Of the countless wonders contained in this masterpiece, allow me to point out how, about two thirds through the piece, Chopin's ingenious development and expansion of the introductory measures unperceivably blend into the final variation of the main theme. This in turn leads, again seamlessly, into a passage that repeats a lilting episode heard earlier (all the Ballades have lilting themes, incidentally), but is now transformed into what might have been one of the great operatic scenes of the 19th century, if only he had chosen to compose an opera...



Side A

Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49 (1841)
Valse in A flat major, Op. 64/3 (1847)
Nocturne in E major, Op. 62/2 (1846)

Side B

Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 45 (1841)
Mazurka in C sharp minor, Op. 63/3 (1846)
Mazurka in F minor, Op. 68/4 (1849)
Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52 (1842)

Producer: Ellen Silverman
Editing: Aaron Hubbard
Mastering: Chad Kassem, Aaron Hubbard
Recording Engineers: Aaron Hubbard, Ray Kimber

isoMike

©2017 Kimber Kable All rights reserved Printed & packaged in the USA. IsoMike is a trademark of Kimber Kable.

