



Naum Grubert *piano*

CHOPIN RELIANCE





NAUM GRUBERT

Born in Riga in 1951, Naum Grubert's principal studies were with the famous professor Gutman in Moscow. He was a prize-winner in the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978, after having won the 2nd prize at the International Piano Competition in Montreal the year before. He toured extensively throughout the Soviet Union and other European countries before emigrating from Russia and becoming a resident of the Netherlands. His many impressive recitals have earned him a reputation of superb musicianship, as well as concerts with among many others the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Köln Philharmonic, the Tonkünstler Orchestra Vienna, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Helsinki Philharmonic, the Kirov Orchestra St. Petersburg, the Dutch Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rotterdam Orchestra, the Residentie Orchestra. He has participated in the Lichfield Festival (Great Britain), the Cadaqués Festival (Spain) the Lockenhaus Festival (Austria) and the Gergiev Festival (Holland), among others. Naum Grubert has performed with conductors such as Paavo Berglund, Sergiu Commissiona, Jean Fournet, Horst Stein, Christopher Seaman, Vernon Handly, Matthias Bamert, Ernest Bour, Ed Spanjaard, Vassili Sinaiski, Thomas Sanderling, Valery Gergiev, Claus Peter Flor, Aldo Ceccato, Evgeny Svetlanov, Stanislav Skrovachevsky. Naum Grubert holds professorships in piano at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and The Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Naum Grubert's discography includes Schubert sonatas D960 and D784, Rachmaninoff Études Tableaux, Liszt Sonata in B minor, Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition, Schumann Études Symphoniques and Fantasia Op. 17 and on Navis Classics Beethoven sonatas No. 32, No. 10 and No. 17.



Naum Grubert piano

CHOPIN



CHOPIN: WALKING THE INTERPRETATIVE TIGHTROPE?

Both as a player and composer, Chopin continues to maintain a central position in both piano technique and tradition as securely as he did during his lifetime. Every pianist will have encountered his legacy and been challenged by it. They will also have been asked the lapidary, if slightly clichéd question: what does Chopin mean to you?

For me the music of Chopin opens up a whole world of pure poetry and beauty. I remember Chopin for almost as long as I remember myself: one of my earliest memories is staying in bed with the flu listening, score in hand, to a recording of Chopin's 2nd Piano Concerto (my father was a passionate LP collector).

A time is difficult to imagine when his music didn't exist: it slots into the history of culture so organically that it seems not to be man-made. Chopin's music always feels natural to the point of being miraculous. Even now, when I'm able to analyse it more rationally, this sensation of a miracle never quite abandons me.

Somehow nothing about his music is commonplace, from its tender lyricism to its apparent fragility combined with uncanny inner power and drama, from its piercing yet always refined emotional intensity to a nobility of spirit that is all his own. Also miraculous is Chopin's musical provenance. Which musical planet did he come from? Though the appearance of every genius in the history of music is enigmatic, one can nonetheless discern a kind of divine logic in its 'family tree.' But where is Chopin's place in this continuum?

Musicologists usually point out that Chopin's roots lie in Mozart and later Italian opera, but somehow I've never found these links wholly convincing. As if out of nowhere, Chopin brought to the world all those Ballades, Mazurkas, Nocturnes, Polonaises, Waltzes, Etudes – musical forms that were either unknown altogether, or acquired a whole new dimension through him. After Chopin the very sound of the piano entered a new aesthetic category. He brought to music his unique sense of timing that in many ways affected the music of his period and beyond. His influence on the development of later music is huge. This is especially noticeable in Debussy, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff; composers who, like Chopin, expressed much of their inspiration through the piano.

*There are plenty of anecdotal accounts of Chopin's own ways of playing, and indeed a considerable amount of documentary evidence as well, including his own *Projet de méthode*. However, there seems to be a potential risk of walking an interpretational tightrope – in, for example, balancing the rubato between a more classical style informed by Mozart and Beethoven and that apparently required by the greater extremes of the more poetic Romantic idiom – bearing in mind throughout that Chopin is said to have hated exaggerated *ritenuti*. Such questions arise with any music, but Chopin's case is special. Where do you stand in terms of attempting, or conversely abandoning all attempts to emulate the way Chopin himself might have played these works? At what point can the performer's individuality rise above the limitations imposed by Chopin's own markings?*

This interesting question sets in train a rather long chain of thought. There are indeed many written accounts of Chopin's playing, all describing it as ineffably beautiful. No doubt my musical world would be enriched immensely if, hypothetically, I could eavesdrop on his performance at one of those musical soirées he so much preferred to concerts. And of course this would in many ways influence my own playing, but I cannot imagine it changing my perception of his music in principle.

Here the parallel with Rachmaninoff's recordings is inevitable. We're blessed with being able to hear Rachmaninoff's playing. As a pianist, he is unsurpassed. It's impossible even to approach his musical vision, his soaring mastery. Nevertheless, would I play his music in a dramatically

different way if I didn't know his recordings? Possibly to some extent, but not fundamentally.

Though the score remains the most reliable source of a composer's intent, this is conveyed symbolically, leaving room for every performer to interpret it differently – such is the reality and beauty of any performing art. Interestingly, though always demanding and detailed in his teaching, Chopin once said to his most talented young student Filch: 'We each understand this differently, but go your own way, do as you feel, it can also be played like that'

Artur Schnabel expressed this with his customary verve: 'A musical composition is greater than any interpretation of it.' (I quote from memory.) Even greater than the composer's own interpretation, I would add. There's plenty of evidence that great composers (perhaps apart from Stravinsky, but that's a special case) have acknowledged this fact. In addition to the inevitable individuality of interpretation, we cannot ignore the almost 200 years that separate us from the time when Chopin created his works. Any attempt to ignore our subsequent historical (and musical) experience would render our performance lifeless. After all, metaphysical memory can never capture any past event, especially a work of art, exactly as the contemporaries or even the creator of this art saw it. That's why I'm so sceptical of so-called historically informed performance. You can't enter the same river twice, as Heraclitus said.

Any new epoch adumbrates a new perspective, which remains perfectly valid for as long as it's spiritually linked with the time when the music was written. Alas, so much of today's playing becomes increasingly problematic and artificial specifically because, while taking advantage of the interpretative freedom inherent in the music, performers operate within a Zeitgeist no longer linked to the great culture of the past.

You have chosen to open your programme with one of the more introspective and lyrical of the Opus 25 Etudes published in 1837. Chopin dedicated this set to Liszt's mistress Countess Marie d'Agoult, and the passionate outbursts at the heart of the piece can only really be heard as heart-felt romantic gestures of some kind. How do you approach such elements in this music – as a love letter from the past, or by applying to them the raw honesty of personal experience?

This question touches upon the very core of my attitude to music in general. For me, the music I play is never a letter from the past. I perceive it as if it were written today. Neither a temporal nor geographical distance exists. Those 180-odd years that have passed since Chopin wrote this study flash by in a moment. In spite of the enormous humility with which one approaches these ultimate achievements of human genius, to play the music and not sense it as one's own experience is in my opinion a flagrant falsehood, a sin. Such is the greatness of art, where the existential experience of the creator (composer) becomes a personal experience to anyone capable of perceiving it and even more so to the one performing it. And that is why the confessional lament of this study, where two voices interweave in their seemingly endless dialogue, moves us so deeply.

Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 opens with a reference to Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 32, Op. 111, which you recorded on Navis Classics NC14002. Beethoven is also known for funeral marches in his Third and Seventh symphonies, as well as the Piano Sonata No. 12 in A-flat major on which Chopin's sonata might even have been modelled, certainly in its sequence of movements. This seems to be another contradiction, adapting a clear antecedent to a work of which Robert Schumann pointedly remarked that Chopin had in this sonata "simply bound together four of his most unruly children." What are your thoughts on this sonata? Are there problems in interpreting a work one of whose movements has become one of the best-known pieces of all time, and whose finale seems to place a foot firmly in our century, even anticipating Ligeti?

Chopin's B-flat minor Sonata is one of the most significant and enigmatic works written in sonata form. The sonata – the piano equivalent of a symphony – is the most important, largest and all-encompassing form of piano literature in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The sonata and symphony (along with the string quartet) play the same role in music as the novel does in literature. One could say that, starting from Beethoven, the sonata becomes a composer's concept of the universe, of the human drama.

The concept of the B-flat minor Sonata was so original that even Chopin's great contemporaries Schumann and Liszt were perplexed. In his wonderful book 'Life of Chopin', where he writes about his deceased friend with warmth and endless admiration, Liszt writes that "his [...] sonatas are beautiful indeed, but we may discern in them more effort than inspiration." And Schumann, who in general adored Chopin, wrote that replacing the funeral march in the 2nd Sonata with some Adagio in D-flat major would make it incomparably better.

Beethoven was the first to introduce the funeral march in a sonata/symphony cycle. But Beethoven uses different, even contrasting music to offset the tragic gloom of the funeral march in Op. 26, which is psychologically linked with the other three movements but otherwise relatively isolated from them.

Conversely, what makes the concept of the B-flat minor Sonata unique is that the dark rays from the funeral march are cast in all directions: on the sinister epigraph of the short two-bar introduction; on the 1st movement's frenetic main subject, dominating the whole movement with its almost un-Chopinesque black-white clash and a development section of matchless drama; on the demonic scherzo of the 2nd movement; and on the schizophrenic finale – 'the wind blowing through the cemetery' (in Anton Rubinstein's phrase) – with its morbid unison and bewildering harmonies. It was with good reason that Cortot called the B-flat minor Sonata a poem of death: everything in it rotates with maddening speed around the funeral march, not giving a moment's respite. We perceive even the few lyrical moments (the second theme in the first movement, the middle sections of the scherzo and the funeral march) not so much as a contrast to the rest of the sonata but as a dream gone forever, one we see through the prism of death. This is a work of unparalleled intensity, density and formal unity.

The four Ballades are said to have been inspired by verses written by Adam Mickiewicz, another Polish exile in Paris and Chopin's friend. The Ballade No. 3, published in November 1841, was dedicated to one of the composer's pupils, Princess Pauline de Noailles. It's reputed to have been inspired by Mickiewicz's poem Undine, the water-nymph who fell in love with a mortal unable to survive with her under water. Do such literary allusions help at all in a work already full of amorous lyricism and with a clear dramatic form?

I can't believe that, had he not known Mickiewicz's Undine, Chopin would not have written his Ballade No. 3 in any case. Nor can I imagine a pianist substantially altering his perception of the Ballade after reading Undine, although the second theme of the Ballade does reflect that image beautifully. I think Chopin would have found any programme music to be alien. Performing even the Liszt sonata (Liszt strongly favoured programme music), while it doesn't hurt to get acquainted with Dante's and Goethe's texts, it isn't strictly necessary: the musical language is perfectly self-sufficient. Debussy wisely wrote the titles of his Preludes after the last note, so as not to impose his own associations on the performer.

Escaping the typical textures of its genre, the Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 48, No. 1, is regarded by some as one of Chopin's greatest emotional statements. Though this raises the loaded question of emotion in music, one can hardly deny the expressive power of this piece. What do you seek to communicate here?

This exceptional Nocturne indeed breaks away from its genre. In both imagery and instrumental expression it's close to the adjacent opus, the Fantaisie Op. 49, one of Chopin's largest and most dramatic works. In both pieces the opening resembles a funeral march, and Chopin places an irenic chorale in the middle of both of them. And in both pieces the development of the musical material culminates in extreme tension. The sense of tragedy and desperation at the end of the Nocturne is among the most overt in Chopin's entire oeuvre.

Chopin's two Opus 27 Nocturnes have that air of poetic mystery that shows how much he had moved beyond the genre's inventor, John Field. Chopin's melodies owe much to a vocal, sometimes even operatic lyrical style, and it's down to the pianist's great alchemy to extract a sense of line from what is basically a percussion instrument – another tightrope between technique and psychological illusion about which I'm sure we would all love to know more.

The paradox is that all attempts to transcribe this divine music for other, seemingly more singing, instruments have failed drastically. There are for example arrangements of some Nocturnes for violin and piano, along with Glazunov's Suite for Orchestra, Chopiniana, which also includes a Nocturne. But in spite of Heifetz's or Elman's prodigious violin skills or of Glazunov's masterly orchestration, I find those pieces impossible to listen to. The sensual quality of that most singing of instruments, the violin, contradicts the elevated mood of Chopin's poetry as much as does the realism of orchestral sonority.

It's precisely the somewhat abstract quality of piano sound that is an ideal means of expression for Chopin's music. This holds true in particular for his Nocturnes, where Chopin lavishes on one instrument his inimitable melodic gift combined with an ingenious accompaniment, where the pedal precludes any impression of dryness, and where the melody doesn't rely on any vibrato to produce a sensation of celestial harmony and elevated spirituality.

In the first of these two Nocturnes brought together in one Opus, the endless melancholy of its outer sections is broken up by an explosive middle section culminating in a jubilant mazurka. This contrasts with the D-flat major Nocturne where a most magic and seemingly endless melodic line is enveloped in heavenly harmony.

Adapted from their origins as country dances from the plains of Mazovia near Warsaw, Chopin's Mazurkas can be regarded as indigenously Polish works, if ones rather far removed from their folk antecedents. Chopin wrote at least 59 Mazurkas, so what was your thinking behind the selection played here?

Chopin wrote Mazurkas throughout his short life, and they're his most intimate autobiographical works. In this sense one can compare them with one of his main masterpieces, the cycle of 24 Preludes. The last piece which Chopin wrote and actually left unfinished was Mazurka Op. 68 no. 4, which is included in this release.

Both Op. 67 and 68 were published after his death. Chopin spent most of his life in emigration, never saw Poland again (the Russian occupation doubtless being the main reason), and his whole life in Paris was tainted by acute nostalgia for his lost motherland. But as Nabokov, who a hundred years later shared Chopin's fate of spending most of his life in exile, once remarked that nostalgia reflects the category of time more than space. Almost all the Mazurkas are permeated with this excruciating longing for his youth, for an ideal love Chopin never found in Paris, and for something transcendent for which every true artist yearns.

The Ballade No. 4 has that feel of poignant melancholy combined with triumph over adversity which is the essence of Chopin's most deeply felt works. With its emphasis on counterpoint, intricate structure and virtuoso demands, this is indeed a tour de force that at the most basic level tells us much about Chopin's strength of will and body in the face of poor health. Commentators refer to the universe of musical expression to be found within its relatively short length, but what are your thoughts on this, arguably the summit of Chopin's achievements as a composer for the piano?

It's difficult to identify the exact summit of Chopin's achievements: the works of a genius defy comparison. Next to his second Sonata, this is undoubtedly the most tragic of his large works, sophisticated in its musical language (in its chromatic density and Chopin's own polyphony to which he turned late in life). Equally intricate is its form, organically blending as it does elements of sonata, variations and fantasy. The road to the apocalyptic coda from the short 'dawn' introduction and the first theme, one of the most poignant and despondent themes in the entire Chopin oeuvre, is travelled with extraordinary veracity, where complexity and artlessness are inseparable.

Chopin's waltzes were written for concert performance rather than adhering to the Viennese dance tradition and, as with the Mazurkas, Chopin's creative alchemy turns this fashionable and physical genre into something instantly and uniquely personal. Where do you see his place in a continuum that reaches back to the 18th century and still has a hold on composers today?

Schubert was probably the first of the great composers to write memorable waltzes. Liszt, Brahms, Berlioz, Ravel and Richard Strauss also spring to mind, not to mention the Russians: Tchaikovsky, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Shostakovich. But I think it was Chopin who found in the Waltz some new, particular quality, so much so that many subsequent composers were spellbound by this magical dance, where perpetual whirling in triple tempo evokes the movement of time snatched out of eternity. Chopin wrote some fast, brilliantly virtuosic waltzes and also some slow, lingering ones. Yet most of them possess an ineffably poetic, wistful character, and their mesmerising motion links us with the known past and something even beyond. Such is the waltz in this recording.



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Special thanks to Daniëlle Grubert-Nefkens

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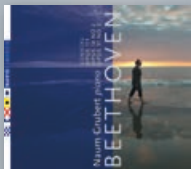
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NC14002



NAUM GRUBERT CHOPIN RECITAL

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

PART 1

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|------|
| 1 | ÉTUDE OP. 25 NO. 7 IN C-SHARP MINOR | 5.20 |
| SONATE OP. 35 IN B-FLAT MINOR | | |
| 2 | GRAVE – DOPPIO MOVIMENTO | 8.16 |
| 3 | SCHERZO | 7.24 |
| 4 | MARCHE FUNÈBRE | 8.37 |
| 5 | FINALE, PRESTO | 1.47 |
| 6 BALLADE NO. 3 OP. 47 IN A-FLAT MAJOR 7.51 | | |
| 7 | NOCTURNE OP. 48 NO. 1 IN C MINOR | 6.13 |

Total time 45.31

INTERVAL

PART 2

TWO NOCTURNES OP. 27

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|---|---------------|------|
| 1 | C-SHARP MINOR | 5.30 |
| 2 | D-FLAT MAJOR | 6.19 |

FIVE MAZURKAS

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|------|
| 3 | OP. 63 NO. 3 IN C-SHARP MINOR | 2.09 |
| 4 | OP. 63 NO. 2 IN F MINOR | 1.39 |
| 5 | OP. 68 NO. 4 IN F MINOR | 1.50 |
| 6 | OP. 41 NO. 2 IN E MINOR | 2.18 |
| 7 | OP. 67 NO. 4 IN A MINOR | 2.52 |

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|---|---------------------------------|-------|
| 8 | BALLADE NO. 4 OP. 52 IN F MINOR | 11.42 |
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ENCORE

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|------|
| 9 | WALTZ OP. 69 NO. 2 IN B MINOR | 3.01 |
|---|-------------------------------|------|

Total time 37.23

