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Presents

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J.S. Bach published the *Partita No. 1 in B-flat Major, BWV 825* in 1726 as the first installment in a collection of six partitas released over the following five years. By this time, Bach had crafted an expansive body of keyboard music, including the *French Suites*, *English Suites*, and *Well-Tempered Clavier Book I*. Yet despite his already two-decade career, the composer humbly referred to the partitas as his “Opus 1”, gifting them “to music lovers in order to refresh their spirits”. According to Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, the partitas “made in its time a great noise in the musical world. Such excellent compositions for the clavier had never been seen and heard before... they are so brilliant, well-sounding, expressive, and always new”.

By the high Baroque, the partita became synonymous with the instrumental dance suite. These collections of dances generally include an allemande, courante, and sarabande, followed by several galanteries (such as minuets, bourées, and gavottes), and a vivacious gigue. The B-flat Major Partita, however, incorporates an additional “preludium” movement – traditionally an opportunity for the keyboardist to improvise and become acquainted with the instrument. Far from the rhapsodic musings and vigorous passagework that one might expect, this prelude is docile and pastoral. Through its gentle flowing nature, it functions as a graceful preamble to the electrically charged allemande. An invigorating lightness pervades the cascading allemande and the levitating, smiling pirouettes of the courante. In the sarabande, ornate melodic arabesques swirl above punctuating chords, providing an ephemeral moment of introspection. The two subsequent minuets are remarkable for their child-like simplicity and concision. The dances exude a pure and idyllic, perhaps even folksy, ambience. Concluding the partita is an acrobatic gigue that features a spritely, leaping melody atop a perpetually bubbling undercurrent. A joyful optimism radiates from the dance’s rhythmic verve and frequent crisscrossing of hands.



Of the innumerable composers that have vehemently revered J.S. Bach, few have possessed an obsessive devotion to his music quite like Frédéric Chopin. By his twenties, Chopin had learned and memorized the forty-eight preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Even in his own music, one can hear a Bachian control of polyphony, a commensurate sensitivity to contrapuntal dialogue, and a pervasive inclination to dance. Therefore, it is fitting that tonight’s program pairs music by these two composers.

Within the nocturnes, Chopin offers an intimate glimpse into his inner world. As the name suggests, the nocturnes are all evocative of the evening, although no two are alike. Some call to mind the vivid hues of a radiant sunset or the mystery and menace of a black, stormy night. Chopin's nocturnes conjure nightmares, dreams, dusk and twilight tableau, and everything in between – perhaps even a steamy Texas evening?

Written when Chopin was just twenty-two years old, the *Nocturne in B major, Op. 9 No. 3* comes from the composer's first published set in the genre. The piece features a wistful, rocking melody, reminiscent of the gentle swaying of a boat (as heard in the *Barcarolle, Op. 60*). As in many of Chopin's nocturnes, a churning middle section abruptly interrupts this dreamscape before melting back into the delicate fantasies of the opening. Starry-eyed nostalgia seeps from the liquid melodies of the *Nocturne in F-sharp major, Op. 15 No. 2*, although more lavishly infused with the sensuous lyricism of Chopin's favorite *bel canto* operas. The melodic phrases seem to levitate, until eventually taking flight in an impassioned middle section. The *Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1* elicits a very different type of evening. In the words of the Polish philologist and philosopher, Tadeusz Zieliński, the nocturne "sounds like a lofty, inspired song, filled with the gravity of its message, genuine pathos and a tragic majesty". Dense chords and a weighty bass line burden what sounds like the fragmented skeleton of an aching melody. A stately chorale soon provides a momentary glimmer of hope, only to be interrupted by a series of strained octaves. These octaves drive the music to a heroic climax – or so we think. Upon reaching this apex, we are immediately thrust back into the anguished music of the opening. As the melody becomes increasingly thorny and chromatic, it becomes clear that the struggle will only end in heartbreak. After one final ascending gesture, perhaps a desperate attempt to find peace, the nocturne closes with three tragic chords.

We return now to dance miniatures. The mazurka originated in Chopin's native country of Poland during the seventeenth century. In early nineteenth-century parlance, the mazurka was a dance in three, often integrating melodies constructed from folk scales and quirky off-beat accents or rhythmic syncopations. The Polish dancer, Ada Dziewanowska, reveals that "the mazurka is full of contrasts...it combines the fiery spirit with pride and elegance, vivacity with lyricism, dignity with joy, boldness with gallantry". Chopin composed the *Three Mazurkas, Op. 59* in 1845, at the height of his compositional powers and already quite experienced in the genre. The first mazurka displays a robust harmonic language. The music seems to wander aimlessly between harmonic regions, never truly finding a comfortable resting place. In the middle section of the mazurka, one can hear an undoubtedly Bach-influenced passage of complex counterpoint in what sounds like a melodically meandering duet between two singers. The second mazurka overflows with amorous and optimistic lyricism. Despite several triumphant and joyous surges, the mazurka eventually vaporizes into thin air. The third mazurka, although stern in its demeanor, undulates with burning abandon. A more docile middle section again features a luscious duet between two singers. After an intensified reprise of the opening theme, the mazurka ends in a manner that belies the tempestuous journey it undertook.



The ballade first emerged as a genre of lyric poetry in Medieval France and was later revived by nineteenth-century Romantic poets such as Goethe and Heine. Of the acclaimed balladists in Chopin's time, it was Adam Mickiewicz who had the most profound impact on the composer's understanding of the genre. Mickiewicz described the ballade as "a tale spun from the incidents of everyday (that is, real) life or from chivalrous stories, animated by the strangeness of the Romantic world, sung in a melancholy tone, in a serious style, simple and natural in its expressions". It was likely these qualities that profoundly resonated with Chopin's conceptualization of a new form of instrumental storytelling. While the composer never assigned programmatic narratives to his four ballades, the music unfolds in a theatrical and oratorical manner. Recited in a "strange", "serious", and "melancholy tone", each ballade seems to recount a story of bygone times. Each of the four ballades possesses its own unique narrative; however, when heard together, one cannot help but hear the collection of tales as an expansive epic.

A heroic and majestic rising gesture sets this vast odyssey into motion. Within the first moments of the *Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23*, this proud and courageous theme becomes subtly contorted through a single souring pitch – a premonition of the tragedy to come. After this foreboding “once upon a time” prologue, the story proper commences in the form of a forlorn waltz. The waltz becomes increasingly exasperated, even momentarily violent. As the smoke clears, a dreamy, fairy-tale second theme emerges. It is this tender love song that Chopin later transforms into an extroverted outburst of passion and ardent lyricism. Over the subsequent episodes of the narrative, a Romeo and Juliet like conflict transpires whereby love becomes imperiled by war, ultimately proves unattainable, and culminates in tragedy as heard in the devastating coda.

In 1838, Schumann published *Kreisleriana, Op. 16*, dedicating the work to Chopin. The following year, Chopin returned the gesture of friendship by dedicating his *Ballade No. 2 in F major, Op. 38* to Schumann. Coincidentally, one can hear in the work a rather Schumanesque fascination with the juxtaposition of music with wildly contrasting temperaments. While the opening bars of the first ballade quickly become poisoned by the tones of imminent heartbreak, the beginning of the second ballade leaves the listener entirely unsuspecting of its disastrous conclusion. The first moments of the ballade feature an innocent, swaying melody. Without warning, a fiery and ferocious torrent of sound shatters the placid atmosphere. It is these two themes – the childlike and idyllic versus the destructive and evil – that clash throughout the remainder of the narrative. Ultimately, the ballade closes in resignation, as the innocent song of the opening returns, now marred by the preceding turmoil.

The *Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major, Op. 47* stands alone as the only ballade predominantly imbued with a warm and luminous disposition. Within the first moments of the ballade, an amiable melody unravels like the opening of a flower. Shortly after, Chopin introduces a lilting, flirtatious second theme. These two themes intertwine and intermingle, creating passages of conflict and moments of euphoria. According to the Polish composer, Zygmunt Noskowski, “those close and contemporary to Chopin maintained that the Ballade in A-flat major was supposed to represent Heine’s tale of the Lorelei – a supposition that may well be credited when one listens attentively to that wonderful rolling melody, full of charm, alluring and coquettish. Such was surely the song of the enchantress on the banks of the River Rhine lying in wait for an unwary sailor”.

Among the four ballades, the *Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52* represents Chopin’s most dynamic and intricate approach to storytelling. Mieczysław Tomaszewski, of the Chopin Institute, asserts that the ballade’s “narrative does not lead us down a straight path. Its plot grows entangled, turns back and stops. As in the tale of Odysseus, mysterious, weird and fascinating episodes appear”. In the ballade’s first moments, we are immersed in a melody already in motion – as if we are tuning in mid-phrase. With just two notes, the once sentimental melody turns bitter. A new haunting and ghostly melody materializes, acting as the primary theme of the work. Over the next several minutes, Chopin guides the listener through a myriad of twists, turns, and episodic metamorphoses. One moment, the music simmers with anger, then suddenly bursts into a jovial and frolicking dance. In mere seconds, the music transforms from a hypnotic dream-state to macabre, spine-chilling murmurs. Eventually the primary theme resurfaces once more, reinforced and with intensified passion. After an oceanic surge of arpeggios, the music suddenly comes to a breathless halt. Time seems suspended as a series of fragile chords ring from the piano – one final reminiscence of a precious memory. Like the detonation of a bomb, the memory is brutally shattered and we are hurled into an agonizing coda that inevitably culminates in catastrophe.