

F. Chopin (1810-1849)

Three Mazurkas op. 50 – no. 1 in G major, no. 2 in Ab major, no. 3 in C# minor

Three Mazurkas op. 63 – no. 1 in B major, no. 2 in F minor, no. 3 in C# minor

Chopin popularised the mazurka, a Polish dance in triple time with an accent on the second or third beat. He wrote almost sixty for piano over the course of his life, and they were published in groups of three to five. These two sets of mazurkas represent some of Chopin's finest and most refined miniatures. Each mazurka depicts a vivid and distinctive mood, embodying the spirit of the Romantic piano character piece.

Chopin's mazurkas are some of his most innovative compositions; he was generally more experimental with harmony and melody in his mazurkas than in his larger scale works. This can be seen particularly in the persistent dominant seventh chords of op. 50 no. 1, extreme chromaticism in the coda of op. 50 no. 3, the modulation to the leading note key in op. 63 no. 1, and a melodic canon at a distance of one beat in op. 63 no. 3.

R. Schumann (1810-1856)

Piano Sonata no. 3 in F minor op. 14

I – Allegro

II – Scherzo: Molto comodo

III – Quasi Variazioni: Andantino de Clara Wieck

IV – Prestissimo possibile

This is the last and the least frequently performed of Schumann's three piano sonatas. Composed in 1836, at a time when Schumann was away from his beloved Clara Wieck, this sonata is overall stormy and passionate in mood. Clara's influence on this work is explicit. The slow movement is a set of four variations on an Andantino theme composed by her, and the first few notes of this theme are transformed and heard at key points in other movements of the sonata.

This sonata originally had two scherzos which framed the variation movement. However, it was initially published without the scherzos and was given the nickname 'Concerto without Orchestra' by Schumann's publisher Tobias Haslinger. This designation drew criticism from musicians of the era, including the virtuoso pianist, Ignaz Moscheles, to whom the sonata is dedicated. Apart from its grand scale, there is nothing musically in this work to suggest a concerto. Schumann revised this sonata in 1853, restored one of the scherzos and retitled the work 'Grande Sonate'.

The sonata opens with a dramatic octave rendition of Clara's theme. With the first movement, Schumann takes an innovative approach to sonata form, blending the development section into the recapitulation. This movement is full of typical Schumannesque ideas, such as extensive syncopation which distorts the audience's perception of the beat, expressive melodies which overlap and appear never to cadence, and capricious dotted march rhythms.

In the second movement, Schumann continues to play on audience expectations, with irregular off beat accents and frequent modulations, such that the listener only becomes truly sure of the key at the final cadence of the scherzo section. Schumann again subverts convention by placing the lyrical and melodious trio section in the remote key of D major, one semitone higher than the scherzo. Fragments of Clara's theme continue to interject as the music gradually meanders back to the home key of Db major for the return of the scherzo.

The third movement is designated 'Quasi Variazioni' (like variations), hinting at Schumann's loose interpretation of variation technique. Because the opening theme does not return to the tonic chord, the first two variations seem to develop organically as they grow in textural complexity. The third variation employs syncopation and contrast of articulation between the legato melody and staccato accompaniment, while the last variation builds up tension with dramatic canonic entries.

The finale also employs a similar unconventional approach to sonata form as the first movement. There is little respite from the perpetual motion semiquavers that dominate this movement. The movement culminates in a cadenza-like passage where dissonant tremolos leave the music hanging. In the final bars of this dark and desperate work, Schumann makes a sudden shift to F major, ending the sonata triumphantly.

F. Chopin

Two Polonaises op. 26 – no. 1 in C# minor, no. 2 in Eb minor

Polonaise Fantasy op. 61

Polonaise in Ab major op. 53

The polonaise is a Polish dance in triple time with a distinctive quaver-and-two-semiquaver rhythm on the first beat of each bar. While polonaises are sometimes found in compositions of the Baroque and Classical periods, these were often of a gentle, lilting nature. However, Chopin transformed the polonaise into a swaggering vehicle for instrumental virtuosity.

The op. 26 polonaises are passionate and dramatic works, contrasting tense silences and outbursts of energy with lyrical and reticent melodies. In the Polonaise-Fantasy, a far more introspective work, Chopin blends the rhythms of the polonaise with the improvisational nature of a fantasy. One of Chopin's last compositions, it was not immediately loved by the general public, but has gradually gained popularity over the last fifty years. The op. 53 polonaise is one of Chopin's most beloved compositions, full of attractive melodies and a range of virtuoso piano techniques. Sometimes nicknamed the 'Heroic', it featured heavily in the 1945 film 'A Song to Remember' as a symbol of Chopin's nationalistic pride.