

Program Notes

Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 23

Frederic Chopin
(1810–1849)

Opus 23 was the first of four ballades Chopin composed between 1835 and 1842, after leaving Poland. The term “ballade” had originally denoted a form of poetic narrative in medieval and Renaissance French poetry. Chopin was the first to apply the term to a single-movement instrumental work. While the four ballades are said to have been inspired by the writings of Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, Chopin was not fond of programmatic music, and did not conceive them to correspond to specific narratives. He believed the music should tell its own story.

The form of this piece is a variation of sonata form, in which the two main themes appear in reverse order in the recapitulation. The Largo introduction wanders around the Neapolitan chord, before introducing the lyrical waltz that is the first theme. This theme serves as an anchor throughout the piece, because it is presented in the same way each of the three times it appears. The second theme is also presented three times, but Chopin gives each iteration a different character. It is presented first in the exposition as a beautifully expressive melody. The development section is hugely exciting, and focuses on the manipulation of the second theme in different contexts, including a full statement in a grand, thick chordal texture. The recapitulation presents the themes in reverse order, before a thunderous *appassionato* passage of parallel sixths launches into the turbulent coda marked *Presto con fuoco*. Robert Schumann commented upon examination of the ballade: “I received a new Ballade from Chopin. It seems to be a work closest to his genius...”

Italian Concerto, BWV 971

J.S. Bach
(1685–1750)

In 1735, J.S. Bach published part II of his four-volume collection *Clavier-Übung (Keyboard Practice)*. This publication contained the Italian Concerto and the Partita in B minor (French Overture). The Italian Concerto, along with the famous Brandenburg Concertos, were modeled after the exuberant concerti by Antonio Vivaldi. This style was characterized by a Ritornello form, in which the orchestra (*tutti*) had a recurring main theme, called the Ritornello, interspersed with a soloist or group of soloists (*soli*) playing solo lines between the recurrences of the Ritornello. Bach was able to imitate this form, which required soloists and an orchestra, using only a two-manual harpsichord. The louder manual allowed him to imitate the role of the tutti sections, while the softer manual represented the soloists.

The first movement, marked *Allegro*, features a triumphant Ritornello. The slow movement, in the relative minor, features a gorgeous, quintessentially Baroque melodic line in the right hand over a repetitious foundational bass line, which varies freely throughout the movement. The final movement, also in Ritornello form, is a sprightly expression of pure joy and Italian gusto.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873–1943)

Apart from the famous Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, which brought him international fame, Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto was perhaps the greatest turning point in his career. He was scheduled to appear with the London Philharmonic Society in the spring of 1899, and for this event, he planned to write a piano concerto. However, in the aftermath of the disastrous premier of his first Symphony in 1897, which composer and critic Cesar Cui wrote, would have “...given acute delight to the inhabitants of Hell,” he fell into a deep depression and could not compose. In January of 1900, Rachmaninoff finally sought the help of Russian psychiatrist and hypnotist Nikolai Dahl, himself an

excellent amateur musician, to bring him out of his depression and help him to compose again. By discussing music and reinforcing a positive outlook, Dahl helped cure Rachmaninoff, and by the summer of 1900, he stated: "...new musical ideas began to stir within me – more than enough for my concerto."

Rachmaninoff and conductor Alexander Siloti premiered the work in December of 1901. That performance featured only its second and third movements (as does this program), and the full concerto was premiered about one year later by the same duo, dedicated to the composer's psychiatrist, N. Dahl. The second movement, in E Major, is hauntingly beautiful, featuring a main theme first played by solo flute and clarinet over a wandering piano arpeggiation, followed by a switching of these roles, in which the piano plays the main theme in only one voice. The relationship between melody and accompaniment gives the piece a dreamlike, almost otherworldly feeling. Eric Carmen borrowed this enchanting tune for his 1975 song "All By Myself." The third movement sneaks in playfully with the orchestra, picking up in E major, where the previous movement left off, before modulating to C Minor. The rhythmically-agitated first theme emphasizes the Scherzo-like nature of the movement, while the second theme displays the melodic genius of Rachmaninoff, and is one of the composer's most beloved tunes. In fact, Frank Sinatra later popularized it in his hit song "Full Moon and Empty Arms." After a tension-building middle section that features a fugue-like passage between orchestra and soloist the second theme returns for a final time in a dramatic expression of pure romanticism, played *fortissimo* by the full orchestra. The piece closes with an extremely exciting and resolute coda.

L'isle Joyeuse

Claude Debussy
(1862–1918)

"L'isle Joyeuse" ("Island of Joy") is a programmatic, single-movement work composed by Claude Debussy in 1904, and premiered by Spanish virtuoso Ricardo Viñes in 1905. The piece is based on an eighteenth-century painting by the French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau called "L'Embarquement pour Cytherè" ("The Embarkation for Cythera"). Cythera, according to Greek mythology, was the birthplace of Venus, the goddess of love. The painting depicts a party, or celebration of love, enjoyed by the French aristocrats during a time of peace and leisure following the reign of Louis XIV. In the painting, love-struck couples, surrounded by cupids, are enjoying their celebration in Cythera near a statue of Venus, with their ship awaiting them in the background. The painting was in the style of the "fête galante" ("courtship party"), an idea that was characteristic of a movement in European art that moved away from the extravagance of royal courts, and focused on intimacy, simpler pleasures, and harmony with nature.

The piece is in a variant of sonata form, and explores a wide range of harmonic language, including the whole-tone scale, Lydian mode, and diatonic harmonies. It begins with a cadenza-like introduction, which leads into the playful and animated first theme based on the Lydian mode. The rhythmic vitality of the first theme portrays the gaiety of the lovers on the island, while the lyrical, soaring second theme in A Major expresses tenderness and beauty. In the development, Debussy plays with fragments of both themes in a variety of textures, styles, and tonal centers, building to the recapitulation, which brings back the first theme "plus animé" ("more lively"). After some delay, a fanfare passage finally interjects, as if to announce the climax of the piece: the grand final rendition of the second theme in thick chordal texture. The coda is a brilliant alteration of the introductory cadenza, thus unifying the piece as it tumbles to its close on the lowest note of the keyboard. To quote Debussy himself, regarding this piece in a letter to his publisher in 1904: "But God! How difficult it is to perform...that piece seems to assemble all the ways to attack a piano since it unites force and grace...if I dare to speak thus!"