Recital Programme Notes
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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
Fantasia in C minor, K.475
(1756-1791)

FRANZ SCHUBERT
Impromptu no.2 in E flat, op.90, D.899
Impromptu no.3 in B flat, op.142, D.935
(1797-1828)

FRANZ LISZT
Rémisícences de Norma (Bellini), S.394
(1811-1886)

~ Interval ~

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
Ballade no.1 in G minor, op.23
(1810-1849)

FRANZ LISZT
Ave Maria, S.545
Romance, S.169

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
Variation from Hexaméron
Nocturne in E minor, op.72 no.1

FRANZ LISZT
Ballade no.2 in B minor, S.171

Notes on the programme—

It is perhaps the piano’s construction as a percussive instrument that has made the art of piano playing one that has so idealised what is mechanically impossible—the ability to make the piano ‘sing.’ While a struck note cannot possibly be sustained, pianists have historically been preoccupied with ways to create the illusion that it can. A comment by Mozart reveals this priority when he criticised another pianist by stating that: “she plays wonderfully; only in the cantabile [singing style of playing] she lacks the real feeling of singing.” Chopin, who adored Italian opera and the bel canto singing style, declared: “you must sing if you wish to play.”

For all their inability to ‘sing’, keyboard instruments are uniquely capable of imitating the entire forces of an orchestra, and so the emulation of the human voice in piano technique can have ramifications beyond the merely melodic. Song, through its marriage of music with words, can inspire a sense of drama, implicit or explicit, in music. In trying to recreate various scena, especially extreme emotional states, the pianist-composers experimented with structure, musical genres and inventive pianistic sonorities in their compositions.

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This recital begins with Mozart’s Fantasia in C minor, published as an extended prelude to the Sonata in C minor, K.457. Although there is a firm underlying structure to the piece, the improvisatory element to this Fantasy [Mozart was a keyboard virtuoso who also improvised] is immediately apparent due to the sense of harmonic unrest, and the changing, highly defined sections—from the dramatic to the singing—that seem to draw on opera. Opera was, after all, of key importance to the composer of Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni, Così fan tutte and Die Zauberflöte; Mozart once wrote that “I am beside myself as soon as I hear anybody talk about an opera, sit in a theatre or hear singing.”

Schubert composed eight Impromptus for piano, and while the choice of title was a pragmatic decision by Schubert’s publisher, there is an impromptu-like nature to these pieces in their typically Schubertian wandering structures. The Impromptu in E flat from the first set sharply juxtaposes two contrasting characters that are, however, unified by the same dance rhythm. The second Impromptu in this programme, the Impromptu in B flat from the second set, consists of five variations on a theme that
Schubert also used in the incidental music to Rosamunde. Schubert was a prolific composer of lieder, and the musical material of this Impromptu is strikingly reminiscent of that of his songs.

One of the greatest virtuoso pianists was Liszt, who renounced the concert stage at the age of thirty-six to dedicate himself to serious composition. He wrote a huge array of pieces, and the Réminiscences de Norma was composed in 1844 at the height of his touring career. Vincenzo Bellini’s opera, Norma, is set in Roman-occupied Gaul. The plot, briefly, is as follows: Norma, a priestess, is secretly involved with a Roman consul, Pollione, who has tired of Norma and transferred his affections to another. Norma discovers this and, enraged, incites the Gauls into war with the Romans. A sacrifice is demanded, but when the captured Pollione is offered, Norma selflessly sacrifices herself, thus rekindling Pollione’s love as they both die. In writing operatic fantasies like the Réminiscences de Norma, Liszt received an education of sorts in the Italianate bel canto melodic style, and also found ways to inventively bring dramatic operatic scenes to life on the piano. He even manages to respond critically to the narrative of Bellini’s original in his ’re-writing’, notably altering the tragic conclusion to the opera to suggest triumph, what Liszt saw as the triumph of self-sacrificing love.

~ Interval ~

In titling the Ballade op.23, Chopin seems to deliberately evoke both song and drama in a solo piano work. Prior to Chopin, a ballade was a title for songs, which were often strophic settings of dramas. Schubert was one composer who wrote several vocal ballades. Chopin did not attach any programme to his Ballade (although many have drawn links with the epic poetry of his compatriot, Adam Mickiewicz), but the title itself raises narrative connotations in this strikingly dramatic piece. The bel canto style infiltrates the melodic and virtuosic writing, but the themes are ingeniously structured and developed so that sense of story-telling seems to have been accomplished. This use of musical structure to suggest a narrative hearkens back to Mozart’s Fantasy (Chopin venerated Mozart, “the ideal type, the poet par excellence.”)

The next two items in the programme return to Liszt, piano versions of pieces that also exist in vocal forms. These pieces reveal a private and introspective side to Liszt, a contrast to the Norma fantasy heard earlier, which exemplified the sort of music Liszt played in public earlier in life. The first is a piano setting of the Ave Maria. Liszt was deeply Catholic throughout his life, and wrote several settings of the Ave Maria (the earliest dates from the 1840’s). This setting, also for voice and piano or harmonium, is one of his latest; it is a brief prayer from 1881, and strikingly simple in its gentle exploration of pianistic sonority.

Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.
Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Unlike the Ave Maria, the Romance is a relatively early piece that Liszt set in 1843 and arranged for piano in 1848. The text is by Caroline von Pavloff (‘Let not earthly laughter deride the heavenly tears shed by loving women’), and the setting is very simple (‘Malincolico espressivo’), with an operatically inflected melodic line.

Oh pourquoi donc, lorsqu’à leurs routes
Les doux bonheurs ne manquent pas,
Pourquoi donc pleurent-elles toutes,
Les pauvres femmes d’ici-bas?
Ne jetez pas sur ce mystère
Votre dédain froid et cruel,
Et par le rire de la terre
N’insultez pas les pleurs du ciel.
Ce qui soudain déborde en elles
Nul de vous ne l’éprouverait;
Mais vous laissez ces esprits frères
Se bercer de leur deuil secret.

Oh why then, when on their way
Abounding with sweet happiness,
Why then are they all crying,
The poor women of this world?
Do not pounce upon this mystery
With disdain cold and cruel,
And with earthly laughter
Insult not their heavenly tears.
This unsuppressed outpour in women,
None of you can experience;
But you leave these fragile minds
To delude themselves of their secret grief.
Liszt and Chopin were friends for a period when both were in Paris, and in 1837, Princess Belgiojoso invited six composers, including Liszt and Chopin to write variations on a theme from Bellini’s *I puritani*, a march tune very similar to that from another Bellini opera, *Norma*. The words to the march translate as “Sound the trumpet for liberty!” Liszt organised the effort, which became known as the **Hexaméron Variations**, and composed the introduction, interludes and finale, but the most notable contribution, which is played in this recital, came from Chopin, who ironically transforms the rousing martial sung chorus into a beautifully *cantabile* larghetto for solo piano.

The early **Nocturne in E minor** that follows was composed by Chopin around 1829, but published posthumously. The Nocturne is another new pianistic genre, like the Ballade, that is also associated with Chopin, although this, he did not invent. Chopin was still very young at the time, but the Nocturne shows that he had already settled into his characteristic melodic writing style—the melody line is full of vocally inspired ornamentation that sings over an undulating, expressive bass accompaniment.

Liszt was always an admirer of Chopin’s music, even after their friendship had cooled, and following Chopin’s death in 1849, Liszt authored a book on Chopin, and composed several pieces in genres pioneered by Chopin. The **Ballade in B minor**, composed in 1853, is one such piece, and the narrative connotations of the genre perhaps made it one that Liszt adapted to more easily than others. Liszt had already combined music and other art forms, causing some controversy in his championing of programme music where he drew heavily from his cultural context. His operatic fantasies for piano, like the *Réminiscences de Norma*, worked with music that already used words to describe dramatic scenes, and he correspondingly wrote original works that openly acknowledged their sources of inspiration. This Ballade, unusually, has no explicit programme attached (although it has been frequently associated with the romantic story of Hero and Leander, and the waves Leander has to swim through to get to Hero), but the sense of narrative is again clear. In the Ballade’s *cantabile* melodies, fantasia-influenced structure, and dramatic effects, one can clearly hear traces of Liszt’s earlier virtuoso compositional efforts in this piece.

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