



FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
The Four Ballades
Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35
Fantaisie, Op. 49



Angela Brownridge



SUPER AUDIO CD

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FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810 - 1849)

Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35

[1] Grave. Doppio movimento	4:55
[2] Scherzo	6:36
[3] Marche funèbre: Lento	8:49
[4] Finale. Presto. Sotto voce e legato	1:45
[5] Ballade No. 1, Op. 23	8:28
[6] Ballade No. 2, Op. 38	6:41
[7] Ballade No. 3, Op. 47	7:25
[8] Ballade No. 4, Op. 52	10:03
[9] Fantaisie, Op. 49	12:19

total time 67:07

Today it is difficult to appreciate the impact Chopin's music had on his first listeners. His mix of Slavonic passion and Gallic precision (his father was of French ancestry) created a world of such imaginative daring that it left his audiences bewitched, bothered and bewildered. How to respond to Chopin's brilliant fury in the coda of his Ballade No. 4, to his directions, 'appassionata il piu forte possibile and presto con fuoco' that ends Ballade No. 1. Most of all, what to make of the macabre finale of Piano Sonata No. 2. Even Schumann, most perceptive of critics, felt that Chopin had gone too far, asking 'when is a Sonata a Sonata' as Chopin 'bound four of his maddest children together.' Even more negatively, conservative Mendelssohn was deeply offended, saying, 'as music I abhor it.'

Enigmatic to the last Chopin held aloof from such comments and left the more fancifully inclined to draw their own subjective conclusions. For him, the Second Sonata's finale was merely 'two voices chattering in unison after my Funeral March' while for others it was like 'winds whistling over graveyards' or 'a network of rooks in the twilight.' Again, Chopin would have dismissed as over-heated nonsense a description of the Fantaisie, Op. 49's opening as his own stern and obdurate statement followed by his mistress George Sand's beseeching reply.

Like Fauré after him, Chopin disdained his published tempting tell-tale additions. A 'raindrop' Prelude, 'tristesse,' 'butterfly,' and 'winter wind' Etudes were not for him and his most potent sarcasm would surely have been provoked by James Huneker's discovery in the Ballade No. 1 of a 'tender lily dripping in cadenced monotone' followed by a 'slender-hipped girl with midnight blue eyes'

before adding, 'my readers may well be aghast at what I see in this ballade.' For Chopin, as for Mendelssohn, music was too precise rather than too vague for language.

More pragmatically, *Piano Sonata No. 2* is Chopin's darkest, large-scale masterpiece, ranking with *Piano Sonata No. 3*, *Ballade No. 4*, *Barcarolle* and *Polonaise-fantaisie* among the composer's supreme creations. The third movement *Marche funèbre* was composed first, its tragic tread and rolling ceremonial timpani strokes the seeds out of which two out of the other three movements grew. Schumann, himself the writer of two out of his three exceptionally free and romantic Sonatas, may well have been blinded by such unusual procedure and construction. The first movement's opening octave plunge permeates the entire work including the following *Scherzo* (a Mephisto *Scherzo* if you like). Despite a central relative oasis of calm and a foretaste of the Elysium at the heart of the *Marche funèbre*, this is more grimly defiant than the three minor key *Scherzos* from Chopin's set of four. Remarkably you are left with a work of an astonishing, if wholly novel coherence.

The shock of the new continues with the *Four Ballades*. The opening grandly imposing gesture in the first leads within a few bars to bitter-sweet despondency and one of Chopin's most melancholy, inward-looking melodies. Both first and second subjects are transformed into impassioned declamation, a rapidly dipping and gyrating variation and a coda of fist-shaking force and defiance.

Ballade No. 2 contrasts the active and contemplative ever more sharply. The opening's outwardly serene andantino flow is not without a hint of the rhetorical presto storms to come and both are united in a coda which looks ahead to Prokofiev's percussive and anti-lyrical stance ('I will show that it is possible to give a piano recital without Chopin,' his brazen assertion) before a twist from F major to A minor and a disconsolate close.

In contrast, *Ballade No. 3* is in Chopin's sunniest key of A flat (B minor is his most violent, as in the First *Scherzo* and the 'octave' etude). First played by the composer before a Paris audience 'full of golden ribbons, blue gauzes and strings of pearls' - Chopin's sarcasm once more - there must have been a sigh of relief by an audience not accustomed to surprises, even when radiance is clouded by a central twist into C sharp minor turbulence.

The introduction of the Fourth and glorious *Ballade* was once described by my late colleague, Joan Chissell, as 'like a blind man suddenly acquiring sight.' The principal and very Slavonic theme returns twice varied and bejewelled, its complex evolution interrupted by an aerial cadenza, five mysterious pianissimo chords and an unleashing of a coda as intricate and defiant as anything in Chopin. Claudio Arrau, among the greatest of twentieth century pianists once claimed that his greatest challenge came in the codas of the Chopin *Ballades*; an unsurprising conclusion.

Finally, the F minor *Fantaisie*, where the opening sombre and march-like subject and pleading reply are reconciled in a lyrical extension before ominous swirls of triplets announce an impassioned, red-blooded development. This leads to a surprisingly hymnal and tranquil B major episode before a return to the music's most charged and ardent pages, a brief recitative, and an affirmative coda.

I should add that Chopin's stature is sometimes questioned by those who claim he composed no operas, symphonies or oratorios. But the answer by this 'dreamer in strange places' is that he wrote all of these, but for the piano. As he himself put it, 'the piano is my solid ground, on that I stand the strongest.'

Bryce Morrison, 2016



Angela Brownridge piano

"one of the world's finest pianists..." - New York Times

Hailed as a major star in classical music Angela Brownridge has been compared with such pianists as the legendary Solomon, Rachmaninov, Cherkassky, and Bolet. She began her life in an atmosphere of freedom and individualism virtually impossible to find today. Under the guidance of Maria Curcio, who had been a pupil of Schnabel for many years, she absorbed the ability to produce every nuance of the piano, and to present music flexibly and persuasively instead of concentrating on a single method of technique or continual displays of brilliance, learning to deal with the differing requirements of a varied range of composers which recalls Cortot in his prime. Indeed, by realising that many pianists of a bygone age played with far more individuality, magic, and inspiration than has become the fashion, she was able to develop her own unique personality. In an age which has become over-fascinated with mere technique, and which seeks the degree of 'perfection' offered by over-edited CDs, Angela's playing restores spontaneity, character, and beauty of sound to the platform.

A child prodigy, equally talented in composition, extemporisation, and technically brilliant, Angela first performed in public at the age of seven, and a year later had several pieces published. By the age of ten she had given her first concerto performance, and in her early teens was appearing regularly as a recitalist and concerto performer throughout Great Britain and abroad. She later won a piano scholarship to Edinburgh University, and after graduating B. Mus. was awarded

a further scholarship for a two-year period of study in Rome with Guido Agosti. As the winner of several competitions she was able to continue her studies with Maria Curcio in London, where she now lives.

Since then Angela has appeared in all the major London concert halls, and has visited Eastern and Western Europe, the USA, Canada, the Far East and Australia, as well as performing extensively in the UK. She has been a soloist with many leading orchestras and conductors, and Festival engagements include Bath, Edinburgh, Warwick, Newport Rhode Island, Bratislava, Brno, Hong Kong, and Maastricht.

Her recorded repertoire is very varied, including some first ever collections of the complete piano music of Barber, Gershwin, Kenneth Leighton and the complete piano concertos of Saint-Saëns.

Her recordings have received worldwide critical acclaim, several being voted "Critics' Choice" by Hi-Fi News and Record of the Year by the Absolute Sound magazine of America. She has also appeared on BBC TV in programmes which have involved her in discussion about the music she has performed. She often gives lecture recitals and master classes, and maintains her love of improvisation which has led her on occasions into the world of jazz.



Concert Reviews

...velvety keyboard touch, stunningly beautiful tone and extraordinary command of nuance. She gave one of the finest and most riveting performances I have ever heard. Her supple fingers had barely traversed the first few notes before it became clear that we were in for a rare treat.

Croydon Advertiser

...Vital rhythms and an extraordinary range of colour were the outstanding features of her recital. She has the capacity to turn into a veritable tigress of the keyboard; but what it most striking about her is the delicate balance between heart and head, which resulted in thoughtful, magical, sensuous performances.

Nottingham Post

She has amazing technique and tonal splendour, not only in the massive sections of the music, but in quieter, expressive passages, allied to her ability to hold the audience by the intensity of her interpretations. She brought the music alive with wonderful clarity and dramatic force. The authority with which she presented an adventurous programme was electrifying, of which passion and total dedication were the keynotes. She is an artist of the highest calibre and this was playing of the highest order.

Daily Telegraph

*She gave a performance that was as rich in imagination as it was in bravura.
It combined all the necessary weight with kaleidoscopic colours.*

*Her extraordinary range of colour varied from a velvet-soft sound that
was little more than a murmur, to a full-bodied, monumental fortissimo
that never produced a harsh sound. It was some of the most remarkable
and moving playing that will remain in this critic's memory.*

The Guardian

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