



RAFAL BLECHACZ

Rafał Blechacz emerged as unquestionable winner of the 15th Frédéric Chopin International Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland in October 2005, and to underscore his distinguished performance among the remaining Competition participants, the international jury decided not to award anyone the 2nd prize. All the special prizes of the Competition also went to him: Polish Radio Prize for the best performance of the mazurkas, Frédéric Chopin Society Prize for the best performance of the polonaise, National Philharmonic of Poland Prize for the best performance of the concerto, and the Krystian Zimerman Prize for the best performance of the sonata. He also won the Audience Award.

Born in 1985 in Nakło nad Notecią, Bydgoszcz province, Poland, he began his piano lessons at the age of five. He continued his piano education at the Artur Rubinstein State School of Music in Bydgoszcz. Next, he progressed to the Feliks Nowowiejski Academy of Music in Bydgoszcz, where he graduated in May 2007 from Katarzyna Popowa-Zydroń's piano class.

At the early stages of his career, he was awarded prestigious prizes in many music festivals and competitions, including the 1st Prize and Grand Prix at the 13th All-Poland Johann Sebastian Bach Competition in Gorzów Wielokpolski in 1996, and the 2nd Prize at the 5th International Young Pianists Competition "Artur Rubinstein in memoriam" in Bydgoszcz in 2002. His progress continued the following year when he was named co-winner of the 5th Hamamatsu International Piano Competition in Japan.

His 2005 victory in Warsaw opened the doors of the world's most renowned concert halls, such as the Royal Festival Hall and Wigmore Hall in London, Berliner Philharmonie, Herkulesaal in Munich, Alte Oper in Frankfurt/Main, Liederhalle in Stuttgart, Konzerthaus in Vienna, Tonhalle in Zurich, Victoria Hall in Geneva, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Salle Pleyel in Paris, Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, Avery Fisher Hall in New York, La Scala in Milan, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, just to name a few. The most acclaimed music festivals, such as Salzburg in Austria, Verbier in Switzerland, La Roque-d'Anthéron in France, Klavier Festival Ruhr in Germany and Gilmore Festival in the United States keep inviting Rafał Blechacz to perform time and time again. His appearances generate admiration and enthusiasm from music critics and concertgoers around the world. He performed with the best symphonic orchestras under the direction of such conductors as Valery Gergiev, Mikhail Pletnev, Paavo Järvi, Charles Dutoit, David Zinman, Marek Janowski, Krzysztof Urbanski, Jerzy Maksymiuk, Fabio Luisi, Antoni Wit,

Jerzy Semkow, Trevor Pinnock, John Storgårds and Daniel Harding. In July 2010 he received the prestigious Premio Internazionale Accademia Musicale Chigiana (Siena, Italy), awarded annually by the international jury of music critics to young musicians for their superb artistic achievements. In recent seasons, Blechacz's concerto appearances include Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 4 with the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and Milan's Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala, Beethoven's Concerto no. 3 with the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie and Concerto no. 2 with the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra and the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich, Schumann's Piano Concerto with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Chopin's Concerto no. 2 with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

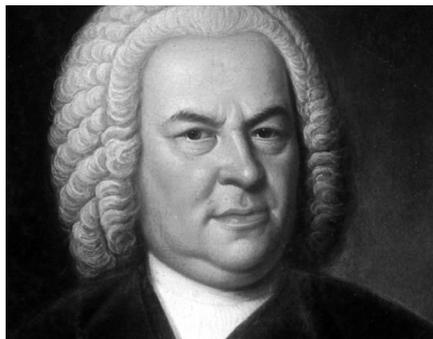
In May 2006, he was invited to sign an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon, becoming the second Polish artist, after Krystian Zimerman, to enlist with this prestigious classical music label. His first Deutsche Grammophon CD with all of Frédéric Chopin's preludes was released in Europe in October 2007 and attained Platinum Record status in Poland in the second week of sale. This CD also won additional awards, such as the German Echo Klassik and French Diapason d'Or. His second Deutsche Grammophon CD in October 2008, featuring sonatas by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, received great praise from music critics and the listening public. Upon the success of these two CDs, he honored the Chopin Year 2010 by recording Chopin's Concertos for DG with the acclaimed Concertgebouw Orchestra under the baton of Jerzy

Semkow. Soon after, the Concertos CD was awarded the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik, a prestigious prize of the German music critics. After its release in Poland, it quickly reached the double Platinum Record status. His fourth Deutsche Grammophon CD, entitled "Debussy/Szymanowski," was released on February 1, 2012. It received a great international acclaim and amassed excellent reviews as well as a title of the Recording of the Month from the British "Gramophone" for May 2012. In July 2012, Deutsche Phono-Akademie awarded the Debussy/Szymanowski CD with its distinguished annual prize ECHO-Klassik in the category of Piano-Solo recording of the year (20th/21st century). On April 25, 2013, for the same album again, Fryderyk, the most prestigious prize in the field of music in Poland, was awarded to him in the category of the classical music best recording of the year. He returns to Chopin for his latest Deutsche Grammophon album, a recording of the composer's Polonaises nos. 1–7, released on September 6, 2013.

In January 2014 Blechacz was announced as the 2014 winner of the highly-esteemed Gilmore Artist Award.

This is Rafal Blechacz's Chicago debut.

PROGRAM NOTES



Partita No. 3 in A minor BWV 827

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

b. March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany

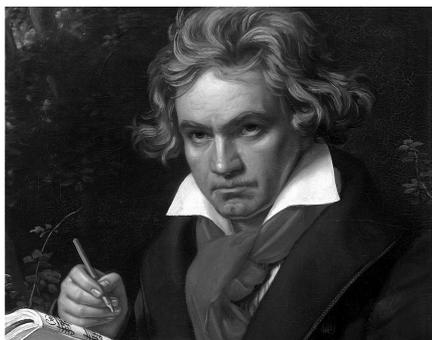
d. July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany

When Bach moved to Leipzig in 1723, his musical duties changed. For his music-loving prince in Cöthen, Bach had written the great part of his secular instrumental music, but now — as Cantor of the Thomaskirche — he was charged with producing music for religious functions, and the music flowed out of him at a pace that would have exhausted even a Mozart: from the late 1720s came several hundred church cantatas and the *St. Matthew Passion*. But Bach did not altogether lose interest in instrumental music — he had written the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in Cöthen, and now in Leipzig he continued to compose for keyboard.

Bach's set of six partitas, originally written for harpsichord, was composed between 1726 and 1731 and published in the latter year as the first volume of his *Clavier-Übung* ("Keyboard Practice"). In a wonderful introductory note in the score, the composer described these works as having been "Composed for

Music Lovers, to Refresh their Spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach." Bach understood the partita to be a suite of dance movements — its name implies a set of "parts" — based on the traditional sequence of allemande-courante-sarabande-gigue. He adopted this tradition but made it his own by supplementing it with three of what he called "galanteries": extra movements, somewhat lighter in character and intended to make the work more attractive to listeners. These consisted of an introductory movement (in a different form in each of the six partitas) and two extra dance movements.

The *Partita No. 3 in A Minor* opens with a *Fantasia* that dances gracefully along its 3/8 meter as the melodic line flows easily between the two hands. The ornate *Allemande* is enlivened by turns, mordants, and sharp interjections, while the energetic *Courante* contrasts a steady flow of sixteenth-notes in one hand with sharply-dotted rhythms in the other. The *Sarabande* is solemn and dignified — some scholars have noted that there is nothing distinctly sarabande-like about this music. Two interpolated movements follow. The *Burlesca* is sturdy and propulsive (though not self-consciously "funny"), while the Scherzo is distinctive if for no other reason than the fact that this is the only time Bach used that title. The partita concludes with an unusually powerful Gigue, full of contrapuntal complexity, that rushes relentlessly along its 12/8 meter.



Piano Sonata in C minor, Opus 13 “Pathétique”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

b. December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany

d. March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

It was — quite unusually — Beethoven himself who contributed the famous nickname of this sonata: when it was published in Vienna on December 18, 1799 (two days after his 29th birthday) he called it *Grande sonate pathétique*. Beethoven understood *Pathétique* to mean *intense* or *emotional*, and those qualities saturate this powerful music, sometimes in quite different ways. Beethoven’s choice of key for this music is crucial: C minor was the key he turned to for his darkest and most dramatic music, and it would later be the key of the *Fifth Symphony*, *Coriolan Overture*, and the *Funeral March* of the *Eroica*. By 1799, Beethoven had already composed a piano trio, piano sonata, string trio, and string quartet in C minor, and while those are all firm-ribbed works, none of them approaches the stark power of *Pathétique Sonata*, the earliest great manifestation of Beethoven’s “C-minor mood.”

Beyond its emotional power, this music is remarkable for the young composer’s experiments with form. The *Pathétique*

opens with a slow introduction (his first in a piano sonata) marked *Grave*, an indication of solemn import as well as slow speed. The powerful chordal writing leads to a sudden plummet down a run of 128th -notes into the main body of the movement, marked *Molto allegro e con brio*. The materials here are simple — the opening theme is essentially a run up the C-minor scale and Beethoven sets the music at a quiet dynamic — but into these simple elements Beethoven fuses vast power, and soon this music is rushing forward with a furious energy. The second subject, fleet and singing, is decorated with mordants, and all might seem set for what would be simply an unusually powerful opening movement, but Beethoven continues to spring surprises. At just the point the development should begin, the music comes to a stop, and back — in all their dark strength — come the imposing chords of the *Grave* introduction. Only then does Beethoven allow the development to proceed; this is climaxed by some remarkable harmonic progressions, and Beethoven brings back a reminiscence of the *Grave* introduction before the twelve-measure coda hurls the movement to its close.

The *Adagio cantabile* is built on a gorgeous melody — it has become almost too popular — and Beethoven sets this movement in rondo form: this opening melody is twice interrupted by brief episodes, and at the end Beethoven combines the triplet accompaniment of the second of these with his main theme in a graceful fusion of material. The key of this movement — A-flat major — sounds particularly warm and comforting after the C-minor furies of the

opening movement, and it is to C minor that Beethoven returns for his rondo-finale, marked simply *Allegro*. That key, however, does not sound nearly so dark or violent in this finale. There is almost a delicacy to this rondo theme, which may be explained by the fact that Beethoven had originally intended to use it in a violin sonata. One of the unusual features of this finale is its brevity. In fact, the movements grow steadily shorter as this sonata proceeds: the *Pathétique* moves from a powerful nine-minute opening movement to a six-minute slow movement and concludes with a final rondo lasting barely four minutes. As a result, it feels heavily balanced to the front, and Beethoven was aware of this: when he wrote the *Moonlight Sonata* two years later, he set out to move the dramatic weight from the first movement to the finale.

The *Pathétique* is one of Beethoven's most popular works, and this was true even in his own time. The pianist Ignaz Moscheles has left a wonderful account of the sonata's effect on young musicians of the era (Moscheles was 10 when the incident he describes here took place): "It was about this time that I learnt from some school-fellows that a young composer had appeared at Vienna, who wrote the oddest stuff possible – such as no one could either play or understand; crazy music, in opposition to all rule; and that this composer's name was *Beethoven*. On repairing to the library to satisfy my curiosity as to this so-called genius, I found there Beethoven's Sonata *pathétique*. This was in the year 1804. My pocket-money would not suffice for the purchase of it, so I secretly copied it. The novelty of its style was so attractive

to me, and I became so enthusiastic in my admiration of it, that I forgot myself so far as to mention my new acquisition to my master, who reminded me of his injunction, and warned me not to play or study any eccentric production until I had based my style upon more solid models. Without, however, minding his injunctions, I seized upon the pianoforte works of Beethoven as they successively appeared, and in them found a solace and a delight such as no other composer afforded me."



Nocturne in A-flat Major, Opus 32, No. 2

FREDERIC CHOPIN

b. February 22, 1810, Zelazowska Wola, Poland

d. October 17, 1849, Paris, France

Chopin composed the two nocturnes of his Opus 32 in Paris during the years 1836-7. Listeners may find the *Nocturne in A-flat Major* familiar because it was later orchestrated and used as one of the movements of the ballet *Les Sylphides*. This nocturne takes the expected ABA form, but Chopin offers a few surprises along the way. He begins with a *Lento* introduction only two measures long and then eases directly into the main theme, which is decorated with those

utterly free “rhythmic sprays” so typical of Chopin. This slow and genial opening section gives way to the much more vigorous central episode, set in 12/8 and full of staccato writing and decorative mordants. Chopin makes the expected return to his opening material, but now it is energized in a way the opening was not (the marking here is *appassionato*). The music trails off at the end, and Chopin concludes with the same two-measure *Lento* that had served as the nocturne’s introduction.

Two Polonaises, Opus 40

The *polonaise* — as its name implies — is of Polish origin, but that title does not begin to suggest how deeply this form is embedded in the national character. In triple time, it was originally intended as ceremonial music and could be sung or danced as part of festive processions. By the eighteenth century, it had become a dance form, but Chopin took it a step further in his fifteen polonaises for solo piano. He had left Poland at age 20, never to return, and as an anguished exile he watched the suffering of his homeland under Russian subjugation. While his polonaises do not have explicit programs, it is clear that this form had unusual meaning for him and that he invested it with an emotional intensity rare in his music. Was Chopin pouring out his feelings about his native country in this music? He insisted that all his music was abstract and should be understood only for itself, but his audiences — particularly his audiences in Poland — believed his polonaises to be expressions of nationalistic sentiment.

Chopin composed the two polonaises of his Opus 40 during the years 1838–9, and he performed them in Paris at one of his rare public concerts, on April 26, 1841. The dramatic *Polonaise in A Major* is one of his most famous works, and it is easy to see why this heroic music has attracted a number of interpretations: some have felt that it depicts the victory of the Hussars of Subieski, and a generation ago this music acquired the nickname “*Military*.” Given its powerful character, that does not seem an inaccurate nickname, though it certainly did not come from the composer. The pounding opening section, with both parts repeated, gives way to a center section in D major, where a wide-spanned melody sings above characteristic polonaise rhythms. There are some dramatic trills in the latter stages of this section, and they help power the music back to the opening section, which is recapitulated literally, this time without repeats.

Though he completed the first of these two polonaises in Paris, Chopin did not finish the *Polonaise in C Minor* until January 1839, when he and George Sand had gone to Majorca. Despite the storms that would pass through, Chopin loved it there. To a friend he wrote: “I am at Palma among palms, cedars, cactuses, olive-trees, oranges, lemons, aloes, figs, pomegranates . . . The sky is like turquoise, the sea like emerald, the air as in heaven . . . In a word, a superb life!” The polonaise he completed in Majorca is less extroverted than its predecessor. In the opening section, the melodic interest is entirely in the left hand, which plays in octaves throughout, and the dynamic remains fairly quiet

through this opening, though there are moments of agitation here as well. The middle episode, in A-flat major, is marked *espressivo*, but this too grows more dramatic as it proceeds. The ending brings a surprise: rather than offering the expected repeat of the opening section, Chopin merely invokes a memory of it, and suddenly this polonaise is over.

Three Mazurkas, Opus 63

A *mazurka* is a Polish country dance that originated in the village of Mazovia, near Warsaw (the residents were referred to as Mazurs). The dance was in triple time, with the accent often on the second (or third) beat rather than the first. In its original form the *mazurka* was danced by groups of couples who would separate and return, and it was sometimes accompanied by the bagpipe. Chopin loved this dance, and he wrote about sixty *mazurkas* across the span of his life — the first when he was 14, the last in the year of his death. A devout Polish nationalist, Chopin lived his adult life in exile in Paris, and no doubt his use of the form brought an important feeling of contact with his homeland, then under Russian subjugation. Yet Chopin's *mazurkas* are not a matter of self-consciously assuming the trappings of Polish folk-music. Instead, he took the general form of the *mazurka* — sometimes raw and wild in its original form — and used it to write his own music, often quite original in matters of rhythm and harmony.

Chopin composed his set of *Three Mazurkas, Opus 63* in 1846, and they were published the following year. All

three are quite brief. The opening section of the *Mazurka in B Major* moves quickly along dotted rhythms (the marking is *Vivace*). Chopin modulates to the unexpected key of A major (down only one step) for the middle section, and a whiff of this reappears in the coda. The *Mazurka in F Minor* lasts barely a minute. Marked *Lento*, it passes by so quickly that it seems to have no true central episode, only a continuation of the opening.

The concluding *Mazurka in C-sharp Minor* has been much admired. This particular *mazurka* has some of the manner of a waltz: the opening, with its subtle harmonic shifts, gives way to a march-like central episode, and Chopin marks the return of the opening *con forza*. The coda is magical: beginning quietly, the opening tune evolves through a series of canonic imitations to the emphatic close.

Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Opus 39

Though the term had been used earlier, it was Haydn who conceived of the scherzo in its modern sense. In 1781, he called the third movement of some of his string quartets “scherzos”: what had been the old minuet-and-trio movement now became a scherzo (and trio), and Haydn's choice of the name indicated that he wanted more speed and liveliness. Beethoven took this evolution one step further: his scherzos, usually built on very short metric units, explode with violent energy and with enough comic touches to remind us that scherzo is the Italian word for joke.

In his four scherzos, Chopin does not copy the forms of Haydn or Beethoven exactly, but adapts the general shape of the classical-period scherzo for his own purposes. He keeps the quick tempo, the 3/4 meter, and (usually) the ABA form of the earlier scherzo, but makes no attempt at humor — the emphasis in this music is on brilliant, exciting music for the piano. The general form of the Chopin scherzo is an opening section based on contrasted themes, followed by a middle section (Chopin does not call this a trio) in a different key and character; the scherzo concludes with the return of the opening material, now slightly abridged.

The third scherzo, composed in 1839, has the most unusual structure; it lacks the clearly-defined ABA form of the others and in some ways approaches traditional sonata-form structure. The beginning, again marked *Presto con fuoco*, presents tentative bits of sound, and out of these the true first theme bursts to life. Marked *Risolto*, this theme is in powerful, plunging octaves, and in fact much of the writing throughout this scherzo is in octaves. The second theme is a quiet chorale tune, but what makes it unusual is Chopin's elaboration of the end of each phrase: he decorates the end of each line of the chorale with a falling arpeggio, almost silvery in its quietly sparkling color — the combination of the sober chorale tune and its sensual decoration is striking. These themes alternate until the close, where powerful octave chords drive the scherzo to its cadence.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger © 2014