

PROGRAM NOTES FOR TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES

Natasha Paremski, piano
15 February 2022 in Old Cabell Hall

Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op.60 Frédéric-François Chopin (1810-1849)

The music of Frédéric Chopin falls into a category all its own. Few composers have established so broad and lasting a berth in music history within such a relatively narrow medium. Yet the capabilities of the piano, which was Chopin's domain, expanded significantly in his hands. His instrument was larger than Haydn's and Mozart's *fortepiano*, but it had not yet grown to the full 88-key instrument on which his music is played today. As both a performer and a composer, he had an uncanny communion with his piano. The potential of that instrument, a keyboard in transition, was territory begging for exploration. Chopin ventured to previously unimagined musical continents at the piano, speaking a language unmistakably identifiable as his own.

Among Chopin's 74 published opus numbers (about a dozen of which appeared posthumously), there is only one *Barcarolle*. Whereas he composed dozens of mazurkas, waltzes, and nocturnes, 24 preludes and 24 *études*, four ballades and four scherzi, and some 16 polonaises, the *Barcarolle* stands alone. Unlike the other Polish dances he favored, the barcarolle has Venetian origins: its gentle rocking meter (Chopin uses 12/8) is associated with gondoliers' songs.

Chopin's is a late work: begun in 1845 and published the following year. He spins a spellbinding tale in the deliciously rich key of F-sharp major. Following an understated introductory flourish, a lilting left-hand accompaniment establishes the groundwork. Above it, he builds an intricate and lovely melodic edifice. Often the right hand is responsible for two melodies -- even double trills -- at once, a compositional ploy that requires immense technical and musical control from the performer. Despite the inherent delicacy of the *Barcarolle*, Chopin brings this work to a convincing climax that never compromises the subtlety and refinement of the whole. The coda is sublime, spinning magic with a succession of new ideas that enchant the ear. His *Barcarolle* is as much of a pleasure to play as it is to hear in performance.

Chopin, Mazurka in B major, Opus 63 No.1

Thomas Adès (b.1971), Mazurka Opus 27 No.1, *Moderato, molto rubato*

Chopin, Mazurka in F minor, Opus 63 No.2

Adès, Mazurka Opus 27 No.3, *Grave, maestoso*

Chopin, Mazurka in C-sharp minor, Opus 63 No.3

Mazurkas, a genre associated closely with Chopin, typify the defining sources of his music: song and dance. Most of his mazurkas share a more introspective character than the other, more 'public' genres – waltz, etude, polonaise. Chopin's genius allowed him to expand his harmonic and expressive vocabulary regardless of the vessel enclosing his ideas.

The mazurka is a Polish folk dance in triple meter, often with the principal emphasis on the second or third beat, rather than the first. Several types exist. The *mazur* or *mazurek*, from the province of Mazovia, is spirited and aggressive, with a second beat accent. *Obertas* or *oberek* are also from Mazovia. They are even faster, usually buoyant, and accent the first beats, but not necessarily in every bar. A third type is *Kujawiak* from the Kujawy region, which is a slower, languorous cousin to the mazurka, generally displacing the accent to the second beat. Chopin adapted all three types, sometimes within an individual mazurka.

His mazurkas are both an expression of Polish nationalism and a laboratory for harmonic experimentation. He published eleven sets of Mazurkas in the 1830s and 1840s. Nearly sixty examples survive: more than any other genre. Chopin was probably encouraged by the dance's popularity in aristocratic Parisian circles. His imagination and formal variety were limitless. Some draw their inspiration from rustic energy, while others pursue an elegiac path. Nearly all of them employ modal scales, which relates them to Polish folk music and lends a wistful, exotic character.

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Ms. Paremski has chosen to intersperse three late Mazurkas by Chopin with two by Britain's Thomas Adès. Adès rocketed to fame in the early 1990s with a series of remarkable chamber works, simultaneously cultivating his reputation as a brilliant pianist. A London native, Adès studied at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and at Kings College Cambridge, where his composition teachers included Alexander Goehr and Robin Holloway. He was only 24 when his first opera, *Powder Her Face*, was commissioned and premiered by the Almeida Opera Festival. Before the millennium turned, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra commissioned his *Asyla*, which won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition – then the largest purse in classical music – in 2000. He remains the youngest composer to have received that award.

Adès has fulfilled his early promise as a composer and pianist, and has expanded his activities to include conducting. He served as Artistic Director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 1999 to 2008, and remains active on both sides of the Atlantic. He became the Boston Symphony's first ever Artistic Partner in 2016.

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Chopin composed the three Mazurkas of Opus 63 in 1846; they were published the following year. They were his last Mazurkas; those bearing higher opus numbers are early works that were published posthumously. The Polish scholar Elzbieta Witkowska-Zaremba has called the mazurkas “a musical collection where seemingly contradictory elements coexist in perfect harmony.” Her description is spot on for the Opus 63 set.

The first, in B major, is both bold and whimsical. Sudden changes of key and off-balance accents add to its vitality. No.2, in F minor, is a *kujawiak*, whose plaintive, sighing melody that cannot decide between major and minor. It opens with a jarring dissonance – a minor ninth – that seems to communicate a poet's unsettled frame of mind. A central section in A-flat major offers only momentary respite from the melancholy mood.

Opus 63, No. 3 is the best known of the set. It is the most waltz-like of these three

mazurkas, and its minor mode sections are strikingly similar in spirit to the well-known C-sharp minor Waltz, Op.64 No.2. The Mazurka's brief D-flat major interlude is more exploratory harmonically, migrating seamlessly back to the more sorrowful B minor. Chopin introduces a canonic countermelody in his coda that, combined with the rhythmic displacement of a hemiola, allows for a dramatic close.

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Thomas Adès composed his Mazurkas in 2009 at the behest of the pianist Emanuel Ax. Would he write something to observe the Chopin bicentennial in 2010? The result, jointly commissioned by Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, London's Barbican Centre, and the Concertgebouw, was Three Mazurkas. Adès opted for the same Polish dance that Chopin favored above all others, filtering his mazurkas through the lens of a 21st-century aesthetic.

In the First Mazurka, persistent dotted rhythms reinforce the dance's personality, but the musical language is highly chromatic. We have little sense of any tonal center until the very end. Adès plays with meter and *rubato*, allowing for the insertion of occasional bars that are in duple or an irregular meter, rather than the consistent triple meter of a traditional mazurka.

Adès's Third Mazurka, by contrast, feels like controlled pointillist melancholy. The texture is spare, emphasizing the distance separating three registers of the piano: uppermost, lowermost, and the center of the keyboard. Rather than focusing on the triple meter, Adès here dwells in spatial uncertainty. We feel unmoored, flung to these far reaches. This Mazurka asks more questions than it answers.

***Polonaise-Fantaisie* in A-flat Major, Op.61 Frédéric-François Chopin**

The late *Polonaise-Fantaisie* is an exploratory work that may well have heralded a new phase in Chopin's evolution as a composer. Alas, that phase was never to flower. Chopin's health was declining in 1845 and 1846 when he composed his Opus 61. The consumption that would claim his life in 1849 compromised his productivity during his final years.

This work's ambiguous title is the key to its structure. Chopin refused to cubbyhole himself. The distinctive polonaise rhythm is sometimes present, elsewhere conspicuous by its absence, almost as if we focus in and out of an awareness of the dance. The concept is quite original, with an extended introduction that traverses a remarkable span of harmony. Cadenzas and improvisatory passages give vent to Chopin's lyric impulses, supporting the idea of a fantasy. The triumphant conclusion bursts through the earlier moodiness and melancholy.

The *Polonaise-Fantaisie* was misunderstood by Chopin's contemporaries. One reviewer observed that its "pathological contents" caused it to "stand outside the realm of art." Even Liszt felt that it was "overshadowed by a feverish apprehension." He wrote: "An elegiac sadness reigns here, broken by startled movements, melancholy smiles, and sudden gasps." The piece was slow to achieve popularity and acceptance. Yet it has a peculiar unity and persuasiveness

that has won over connoisseurs. Today the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* is regarded as one of Chopin's late masterpieces.

Pictures at an Exhibition **Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)**

Pictures at an Exhibition is one of the most recognizable works in all classical music, but not so much because of Musorgsky. Rather it is Maurice Ravel's superlative 1922 orchestration that has given the work its celebrity. That orchestral version is performed far more frequently than the solo piano original. There are several reasons, but the most significant is the enormous difficulty of Musorgsky's keyboard writing. Nevertheless, *Pictures* is a cornerstone of the virtuoso keyboard repertoire.

Essentially *Pictures* is a suite consisting of ten movements whose 'connective tissue' is the recurring music of the *Promenade*. That opening theme is a self-portrait of the Russian composer, who casts himself in the principal role of the visitor wandering through the exhibition of the title. The other principal character, who appears vicariously through his paintings and drawings, is Victor Hartmann, a prominent Russian artist and close friend of the composer's. When Hartmann died in 1873 at the age of 39, Musorgsky was shattered, for the two young men had shared artistic ideals and ambitions as part of their friendship.

The following year, an exhibition of Hartmann's paintings, watercolors, and architectural drawings was organized in St. Petersburg by Vladimir Stassov, then Director of Fine Arts at the Imperial Library. In an attempt to illustrate some of the paintings in music and pay tribute to his friend, Musorgsky commenced work on a set of piano pieces. The resulting composition pleased the composer, but went unremarked by his contemporaries. The cycle was not even published until 1887, six years after the composer died.

Musorgsky's musical precedent for this suite was the large programmatic piano works of Robert Schumann, particularly *Papillons*, *Carnaval*, and *Kreisleriana*. Other striking parallels between Musorgsky and Schumann come to mind in a consideration of *Pictures*. Like his German predecessor, Musorgsky composed best in the first flush of inspiration, and the refinement of those ideas often presented problems. Writing to Vladimir Stassov (the eventual dedicatee of the piano pieces) in June 1874, Musorgsky exclaimed:

Hartmann is bubbling over, just as [the opera] *Boris Godunov* did. Ideas, melodies come to me of their own accord, like the roast pigeons in the story -- I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to put it all down on paper fast enough.

The immediacy of Musorgsky's impressions keeps them as fresh and vivid as the colors of Hartmann's paintings. His incisive portraits of human nature are some of the finest in all music: women haggling over market prices at Limoges in search of a daily bargain; children squabbling at play in the gardens of the Tuileries; and perhaps the most trenchant of all, the caricature of ponderous Samuel Goldenberg, the wealthy Jew, conversing with the poor obsequious chatterer Schmuyle.

Recently the Belgian music historian Francis Maes has pointed out that the movement's title, *'Samuel' Goldenberg and 'Schmuyle'*, suggests that the two characters are one and the same, since Hartmann never drew or painted two Jews in the same picture. Maes has written:

The first name is European, the second is Yiddish. If that interpretation is correct, then the underlying anti-Semitic meaning is shocking, to say the least, the piece reflecting, on the one hand, the respectable outward behavior of the character and, on the other, his contemptible inner nature. . . . Unfortunately, the many manifestations of anti-Semitism in Musorgsky's correspondence support this interpretation.

While such a theory is distasteful and shocking by today's standards, it is hardly the only example of crude anti-Semitism in Western art. This is a case in which the calibre of the artistic product may warrant dissociation from any underlying subtext.

Musorgsky himself was especially fond of the several Promenades. They remain the closest we have to a musical self-portrait of this elusive and controversial Russian composer, reflecting his shifting emotions as he moves through the exhibition. Apart from *Pictures at an Exhibition*, his only piano works consist of salon pieces. This one masterpiece has earned him an important niche in the repertoire.

By Laurie Shulman 2020
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