Tuesday 12 June 2007, 7.30pm

# **Maurizio Pollini** *piano*

**Chopin**

Prelude in C sharp minor Op.45 5′

Ballade No.2 in F major Op.38 8′

Two Nocturnes Op.27:
No.1 in C sharp minor • No.2 in D flat major 12′

Scherzo No.3 in C sharp minor Op.39 8′

Polonaise in A flat major Op.53 7′

*interval* 20′

**Liszt**

Nuages gris 4′

Unstern 5′

La lugubre gondola No.1 5′

R.W. – Venezia 2′

Sonata in B minor 30′

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# **Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849)

## Prelude in C sharp minor Op.45

Chopin

The solitary and uniquely inspired Prelude in C sharp minor Op.45 that Chopin was persuaded to write for the 1841 volume of *Keepsake des Pianistes* has little in common with the celebrated set of 24 Preludes Op.28 he had completed in Majorca two years earlier. If there is any other aspect of his work it can be aligned with, it is the Nocturnes. Certainly, it is a nocturnal kind of improvisation modulating so freely and so spontaneously on every poetic impulse that it floats out of reach of the home key almost as soon as it is established. Basically ternary in form, it restores the C sharp minor harmonies at the appropriate point only to slip away again, drifting this time into a strange little cadenza of parallel fourths and fifths and then, as if by chance, back into C sharp minor.

## Ballade No.2 in F major Op.38

The one form which Chopin can be said to have invented is the ballade. It was 'inspired', he told Robert Schumann when he played an early version of the Ballade in F major to him in Leipzig in 1836, 'by the poems of Mickiewicz'. Chopin presumably did not intend to suggest that his Ballades were based directly on the stories in the Polish poet's *Ballady i romanse,* although that is not impossible. He surely meant no more than to indicate that he found in them a usefully liberal title and the general idea of a poetic narrative shaped by epic events and heroic personalities rather than by any conventional formal pattern

If any one of Chopin's four Ballades does have a programme behind it, however, it must be this Op.38 in F major, which is frequently associated with Mickiewicz's *Switez*: a mysterious woman rises slowly from the lake to tell the story of the struggle of the Lithuanians against the tsars and to describe how the inhabitants of Switez were engulfed by the waters and transformed into aquatic flowers. There is also a theory, which is less understandable in story-line terms, that it is based on Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable*, an opera which Chopin greatly admired in his youth.

Whatever the source of inspiration, the most compelling evidence that there is some kind of story behind it is in the music itself. A work beginning in one key and ending in quite another was not only a defiance of convention but also a radical departure from Chopin's own established practice. While it might be an early experiment in progressive tonality, the extinction of a placid F major by a highly aggressive A minor is far more likely to represent some dramatic and irreconcilable change in poetic fortune. Apart from that, the contrast between the simple siciliano material introduced in the opening *Andantino* and the torrent of *Presto con fuoco* bravura figuration that suddenly engulfs it in minor harmonies is so extreme that it can only have some descriptive purpose. The siciliano reappears in F major, if in rather less innocently pastoral colouring this time, but only to be even more comprehensively engulfed. The last distant echo of the siciliano melody is in a sad A minor.

# Two Nocturnes Op.27: No.1 in C sharp minor • No.2 in D flat major

Of the two Nocturnes written in 1835 for the Countess d'Apponyi, the second in D flat major is the more commonly performed. The first in C sharp minor is particularly interesting, however, for the peculiarly personal use Chopin makes of a common harmonic device – left-hand C sharp arpeggios omitting the third and a right-hand melody equivocating poignantly between the minor and major implications of E and E sharp respectively. Any of Chopin's contemporaries might have had the idea but only he could have made anything as beautiful of it. In the end, incidentally, the decision is made in favour of C sharp major, but only after a long and agitated middle section.

The attraction of the D flat major Nocturne is, above all, its highly decorative passages of purely pianistic figuration. It is a masterful example of continuous melodic development effortlessly sustained by the right hand over a regular arpeggio in the left. The same thematic material is presented three times over, each time with altered harmonies and in different, spontaneously proliferating melodic decorations. The inspiration is in the detail.

# Scherzo No.3 in C sharp minor Op.39

Chopin's work in scherzo form was complementary and parallel to his work in ballade form. The first Ballade and the first Scherzo were both written in about 1835 and – after what seems like far more than seven years of development in style and temperament – the fourth and last of each set was completed in 1842. It is true that, whereas the ballade was something he more or less invented, the scherzo (the Italian word for joke) had a long history and had already developed something of the macabre element which is such a prominent feature of Chopin's treatment of the form. Even so, the demonic character of his First Scherzo in B minor was still so unconventional that Schumann was moved by it to make his classic remark that if this is a joke he would like to know what serious music sounds like. When it first came onto the market in this country Chopin's London publisher thought it expedient to ignore the composer's title and call it 'The Infernal Banquet'.

The Scherzos became gradually less infernal, however. Although, to begin with, the Third Scherzo in C sharp minor is recognisably related in temperament to the First in B minor, it later achieves a radiance not so very far from the happy mood of the Fourth in E major, which he was to write three years later. After the passionate first section in C sharp minor, in anticipation of the conventional ternary form the ear easily accepts the D flat chorale (with its quiet cascades of quavers at the end of each line) as the contrasting major-key middle section. In fact, the opening section is only briefly recalled and the chorale makes a long and mostly radiant reappearance in E major before the final acceleration into the coda and the not obviously predictable C sharp minor ending.

# Polonaise in A flat major Op.53

Chopin

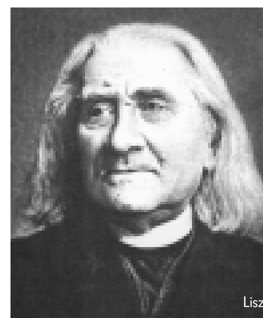
Written in 1842, the Polonaise in A flat major is the last in the series before Chopin finally transcended the form in the Polonaise-Fantaisie four years later. It is no mere polonaise, however: it is more a tone poem, drawing on the heroic associations of the dance as Chopin had developed it during the last seven years but also including other kinds of material strongly suggestive of some kind of poetic programme.

There is nothing specifically of the polonaise in the dramatically articulated introduction and, although its generic character is unmistakable, the splendid main theme is accompanied not by the usual rhythmic figures but by pairs of quavers phrased across the bar lines. A new, less muscular theme marked *sostenuto* is awarded the authentic polonaise accompaniment but it doesn't last long before it provokes a *fortissimo* return of the main theme. The passage which invites programmatic commentary is the one beginning with seven emphatic chords of E major and continuing with a galloping ostinato in the left hand while a proud new melodic personality rises above it in the right. So, after a brief reminder of polonaise rhythm, does the apparently anomalous passage of decorative semiquavers in the right hand running over syncopated figuration in the left. Anyway, the main theme returns in all its splendour and the coda briefly recalls the galloping ostinato, which is now won over to A flat major.

*interval*

# **Franz Liszt** (1811-1886)

## Nuages gris
## Unstern
## La lugubre gondola No.1
## R.W. – Venezia


Liszt

In November 1882, when Liszt was staying with the Wagners in the Palazzo Vendramin in Venice, Richard Wagner confessed to Cosima that he was worried by the way her father's latest music was going. He didn't like its dissonant harmonies and what he called its 'budding insanity'. Liszt did in fact suffer from depression in his last years and, as he said, his mental state was bound to affect his music: 'I carry a deep sadness of the heart which must now and then break out in sound.' But this was not the only explanation for the often short, spare, even austere, harmonically liberated piano pieces Wagner must have heard his father-in-law playing in his apartment in the Palazzo Vendramin. Just as in his prime Liszt had anticipated some of Wagner's more radical

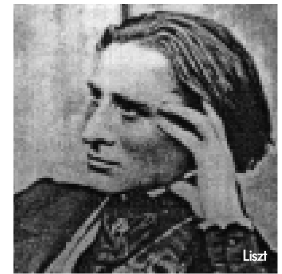
developments, in his visionary old age he was still looking ahead, further than even Wagner could see. He was 'throwing a lance into the boundless realm of the future', as he put it, and not infrequently hitting the mark.

One piece Wagner might have heard in Venice was the recently completed *Nuages gris* (Grey clouds). Though sparsely scored, it is prophetic of impressionism not only in its title but also in its sound – not so much in the opening melody with the tritonal kink in its line as in the rumbling pedal-sustained textures that follow and, towards the end, the right-hand octaves floating upwards through 12 semitones over whole-tone harmonies in the left. The incomprehension with which his contemporaries met such music did not deter Liszt from writing it. 'I calmly persist in staying stubbornly in my corner,' he said, 'and just work at becoming more and more misunderstood.' *Unstern* (Evil Star) is difficult to understand even now. It seems to be a confession of darkest depression illuminated only, just after a violently dissonant climax of despair, by a glimmer of religious faith in the form of a chorale (marked *quasi organo*) which, howerver, carries little conviction and achieves no harmonic or emotional resolution.

Wagner would have been even more alarmed by the music Liszt was writing in Venice if he had known that one piece, *La lugubre gondola*, was inspired not only by the funeral processions by gondola Liszt had seen passing on the Grand Canal below the Palazzo Vendramin but also by a premonition that Wagner himself would soon be carried away in a similar water-borne procession – which did in fact happen only a few weeks after Liszt left Venice for Budapest. Of the two versions of *La lugubre gondola,* the first is shorter and less dramatic but no less desolate in its harmonies and, in its 6/8 barcarolle metre, closer to its Venetian origin. If Liszt's immediate reaction to the news of Wagner's death seemed minimal – he is said to have muttered only 'He today, I tomorrow' without looking up from his work – he gave true expression to his feelings in *R.W. –Venezia,* in the profoundly gloomy colouring of its opening bars, the painfully persistent augmented fifths of its inconsolable harmonies, its pointless fanfares and nothing-left-to-say ending.

# Sonata in B minor

*Lento assai – Allegro energico – Andante sostenuto – Allegro energico – Lento assai*


Liszt

One of the masterpieces of Liszt's middle years, the Sonata in B minor represents the most radical development of what he called the 'angular, unyielding squareness' of sonata form since Beethoven had completed the last of his piano sonatas 30 years before. He succeeded in constructing a sonata movement – with exposition, development and recapitulation – and incorporating within it elements of the conventionally separate slow movement, scherzo and finale. It was an immense effort of will-power on his part, but there was at least as much inspiration in it, if only because he had the imagination to adopt as his models three works not readily recognisable as sonatas.

The most important of the three was Schubert's 'Wanderer' Fantasy, where there is no break between the four movements and where each is linked to the others by the theme they have in common. Another was Schumann's Fantasy in C major, which is such a brilliant example (dedicated to Franz Liszt) of the art of transforming themes. The third was his own *Grosses Konzertsolo* where, almost by accident, he had discovered how he could include an *Andante* within an integrated sonata-form construction. That work was

written in 1849; Liszt's notorious arrangement of the 'Wanderer' Fantasy for piano and orchestra was completed in 1853 (and dedicated to Robert Schumann) at much the same time as the Sonata in B minor (also dedicated to Robert Schumann).

It is arguable that all four main themes of the B minor Sonata are derived from the scalic descending motif introduced quietly but with all due significance at the beginning of the work. This motif does not appear as subject material itself: it is used almost exclusively as a signpost at the major structural interchanges (a procedure which Schoenberg was to follow in his single-movement First String Quartet). The first subject of what one might call the 'first movement' – the *Allegro energico* section – is introduced *forte* in double octaves and has a percussive tail attached to it low in the bass register. After an impassioned development, and at the urgent request of the scalic motif from the beginning, it gives way to the two second-subject melodies – one unmistakably *grandioso* over repeated D major triads in both hands, the other a lyrical variant of it, both of them derived from the unlikely source of the percussive tail to the first subject.

This material is developed with great intensity until, again at the request of the scalic motif, the tempo is reduced to *Andante sostenuto* – marking the start of a ternary-form 'slow movement' with a new main theme in F sharp major derived from the first subject and with the two earlier second-subject melodies reshaped as the melodic material of the middle section.

The transition to the next section shows how at least two of the main themes are related to the scalic motif, which reappears to introduce a scherzo-like fugato on the first subject. As well as being a combined fugue and scherzo, this is also the beginning of the recapitulation, for when the scalic motif returns it is to prepare the way for a climactic recall of the second subject in the tonic major, the first subject evidently having been disposed of by means of its transformation to the fugue subject. Which leaves, for a finale, a *prestissimo* coda, a quiet review of the four main themes, and a discreet ending in B major.

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Programme notes by Gerald Larner © 2007

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**Maurizio Pollini** piano

Maurizio Pollini was born in 1942 and studied with Carlo Lonati and Carlo Vidusso.

After winning the first prize in the 1960 Warsaw Chopin Competition, he went on to establish an international career of the greatest importance, performing in the world's major concert halls and working with the most distinguished orchestras and conductors including Karl Böhm, Sergiu Celibidache, Herbert von Karajan, Claudio Abbado, Pierre Boulez, Riccardo Chailly, Zubin Mehta, Wolfgang Sawallisch and Riccardo Muti.

He was awarded the Vienna Philharmonic's 'Ehrenring' in 1987 after performing the Beethoven Piano Concertos in New York; the Ernst-von-Siemens Music Prize in Munich in 1996; the prize 'A life for music – Artur Rubinstein' in Venice in 1999; and the Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli Prize in Milan in 2000.

Known for his imaginative programming, he has devised and performed in his own concert series at the Salzburg Festival (1995 and 1999), in Carnegie Hall, New York (1999/2000 and 2000/2001), in La Cité de la musique, Paris, in Tokyo (both in 2002), and in the Parco della musica, Rome (2003). These series have featured chamber and orchestral works mirroring his wide musical tastes, from Gesualdo and Monteverdi to the present. He is currently involved in a project centred on the works of Luigi Nono which comes to the Southbank Centre in late October this year.

Maurizio Pollini's repertoire ranges from Bach to contemporary composers (including first performances of Nono, Manzoni and Sciarrino) and includes the complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas, which he has performed in Berlin, Munich, Milan, New York, London, Vienna and Paris.

He has recorded works from the Classical, Romantic and contemporary repertoire to worldwide critical acclaim. His recordings of the complete works for piano by Schoenberg, and of works by Berg, Webern, Nono, Manzoni, Boulez and Stockhausen, are a testament to his great passion for music of the 20th century.

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