

Frédéric-François Chopin (February 22 or March 1, 1810 – October 17, 1849)

The late Romanticism in Chopin's style was revealed around 1835 by new freedom of expression in dynamic infuriating force of deep drama, heart-wrenching lyricism, and negation of virtuosity for virtuosity's sake. Chopin broke the boundaries of established musical forms.

Considered to be one of the greatest masterpieces of the nineteenth century and an embodiment of the Romantic idiom, **Piano Sonata no. 2 in B-flat minor, op. 35**, was written by Chopin in 1839 at Nohant and was published in Paris and Leipzig in the spring of the following year. Profound dramatic expression, innovative harmonies and impressive virtuosity characterize this *Sonata*. Interestingly, Chopin's contemporary critics found it lacking cohesion. This second theme in relative key of D-flat major emits beauty and affection, rising to rapturous expression in its octaves and chords. The balladic middle section is saturated with mysterious questions and replies – starting with whisper and growing into violent drama. In the recapitulation, the first theme is absent, but it is returning in the bass octaves of the coda, ending in B-flat major.

II. *Scherzo* is written in E-flat minor and in a ternary form with virtuoso outer sections and melodic middle section in G-flat major. The main theme of the *Scherzo* strikes with demonic power, continuing the drama of the first movement. The trio is in a slower tempo and contains a touching and simple melody, a reminiscence of a lullaby, an echo of which ends the *Scherzo*.

III. *Marche funèbre: Lento* was written two years before the rest of the *Sonata*. The date on Chopin's manuscript of this *Marche* is November 28, 1837 – the eve of the anniversary of the November Rising in Poland. (In Paris, the Polish immigrants had commemorated national and religious anniversaries the day before the actual date.) This movement is in ternary form. It starts and ends with the famous funeral march in B-flat minor with the middle section trio in D-flat major. The somber and simple principal theme has a range of emotions – from denunciation to mourning. In the second theme, one can hear crying and anger at the unwavering fate. In contrast, the trio is beautifully peaceful and nostalgic. Afterwards, the march comes back with even greater intensity, ranging from a whispering poignancy of a lament to a scream of revolt. This funeral march is a climax of the *Sonata*, to which the first two movements lead, with the Finale as an epilogue.

IV. *Finale: Presto* is close in its conception to an etude and *moto perpetuo*, exploiting the full chromatic universe of the piano. It was described by musicologists as 'ghostly,' with a 'catastrophic' eloquence, comparable to a wind blowing through the graveyard.

Robert Schumann wrote, "The Sonata ends as it began, with a riddle, like a Sphinx – with a mocking smile on its lips."

In his four *Scherzos* Chopin was inspired by Beethoven and was influenced by both of the Romantic scherzo tendencies: the fairytale and the demonic. Although "scherzo" in Italian literally means "joke," Chopin's *Scherzos* are very rarely humorous or light-hearted but are filled with intense drama, emotional profundity, tragedy, haunting mystery, captivating beauty and lyricism, extreme volatility and romantic passion. Schumann had compared Chopin's *Scherzos* to the poetry of Byron. They transport listeners to a realm of dreams. The inner world brings angst and peril – the outer world, a refuge. The structure of those *Scherzos* is mostly tripartite

reprise form, with elements of sonata form or the rondo. There is a deep contrast between outer sections and the interior trio.

"How will gravity array itself, if wit is already cloaked so darkly?" asked Schumann in his review of the **Scherzo in B minor, Op. 20**. This wild and demonic *Scherzo* was published in 1835, and the date of composition is difficult to establish precisely. The *Scherzo* begins with tension-filled chords at the top and bottom of the keyboard, akin to screams of anguish, followed by sweeping tempestuous virtuosic passages, marked by unexpected accents, like sparks of a flame. The middle section trio in B major, in a total contrast, is a peaceful, nostalgic and simple theme quoted by Chopin from the Polish carol-lullaby "Lulajże Jezuniu," to which he added his own charming melodic episode, like memories from another world. Suddenly, the opening chords interrupt this dream, jolting back to the explosive and passionate reprise followed by a fiery coda, ending with opening chords in reverse harmonic order.

Scherzo in B-flat minor, Op. 31 was completed 1837 and published the same year. Almost immediately, it became tremendously popular. Musicologists and critics hailed it for demonic power and passionate lyricism. "It should be a house of the dead," Chopin had supposedly said of the opening theme, which brings restlessness until the last measures of the finale, finding repose only in the trio.

The opening motif is followed by a contrasting episode in D-flat Major, and afterwards melody is wandering through different tonalities gaining intensity and power. Similar to the *Scherzo* No.1, the trio elevates to a world of yearning and marveling. An idyllic pastoral melody leads to a melancholy waltz, becoming more and more passionate and restless in *fortissimo* and *con fuoco*. A reprise follows, climaxing in the powerful and brilliant coda.

Scherzo in C-sharp minor, Op. 39 was composed 1839 and published the following year. It was the last work by Chopin inspired by Majorca and was dedicated to Adolf Gutmann, one of his favorite pupils.

The introduction of this *Scherzo* is veiled in the ambiguous chromatic harmony and demonic-like rhythm, in the expression of empirical questions. The bold double octaves of the principal theme suddenly take over, *fortissimo* and *risoluto*. Agitated melody emits suspense and tension. Then enter austere, powerful chords of a chorale trio in D-flat major, interlaced with delicate cascading arpeggios. The reprise with original theme returns and is followed again by chorale, now in E major, changing to gentle and mysterious E minor in *sotto voce*, which suspends in a pause as if in a question. Chorale transforms into a beautiful, uplifting, long-phrased melody, enhanced by chords, leading to a tumultuous, wild coda, ending this *Scherzo* in victorious C-sharp major.

Scherzo in E major, Op. 54 was composed in 1842-1843 and published in 1843. In Chopin's first three *Scherzos* there are extreme and surprising contrasts with the expression often close to the demonic. The *Scherzo* No. 4 is sunny, exuberant, and has a fairytale flavor in its

beautiful shimmering sounds in the highest registers of the piano. Sparkling with joy, the colorful and playful opening section is followed by a trio, singing of passionate and pure love in a beautiful, broad, operatic *cantilena* melody which transforms into an intimate duet, infused with ardent emotion. The first section repeats with more contrasts and added harmonies. Virtuoso coda concludes the *Scherzo* in bright-colored jubilation.

The **Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53, 'Héroïque'** was composed by Chopin at Nohant in 1842 and dedicated to his friend, a banker, Auguste Léo. It became a favorite piece of listeners and musicians alike for its noble powerful expression, romantic tenderness and virtuosic display. It has a character of a ballade and a dance poem with a majesty and rhythm of a polonaise. Its form can be viewed as ternary (A-B-A) or rondo (A-B-A-C-A). Music scholars have associated the spirit and architecture of this *Polonaise* with name "Heroic." The opening bars project boldness and dignity, continued in the main theme with added strength, striving upward to a full sonority, spanning from bass to upper registers. With the surprising E major *fortissimo* chords, the balladic trio begins. One can hear fanfares against the octaves in the bass. The lyrical section then takes over, followed by the return of the main theme, and the *Polonaise* finishes with a triumphant coda. Musicologist and composer Hugo Leichtentritt wrote: "Everything that the polonaise contains in terms of sparkle, distinction, strength and enthusiasm was expressed in this masterpiece in the most exhilarating way possible."

~Sophia Agranovich