



 CHAMPS HILL
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ALEXANDRA piano
DARIESCU

Schumann

Liszt

Chopin





I FOREWORD

I am thrilled to be releasing my debut CD on Champs Hill Records. Looking back it has not only been a tremendously enjoyable experience but a hugely stimulating process that helped me to mature as an artist. When discussing the choice of repertoire, I felt it would be appropriate to rely on my strength, which is performing. Performing is what I truly enjoy and love doing most; the thrill of communicating with the audience through the many stories that lie within the music. As a result, I chose one of my recital programmes that proved enormously popular with audiences, a programme that will now attempt to enthrall the listener wherever they are, whether they choose to listen to the complete disc or join in a moment of one or two select pieces. Most debut CDs, I am told, should be one-composer discs in order to find their place on the shelf. Well, I am hoping my choice of Schumann, Liszt and Chopin will bring as much joy in the listeners' hearts as it brought me when I recorded it.

I would like to thank Mary and David Bowerman for their incredible support and kindness in helping to bring this disc to life. They have generously allowed me to form a new collaboration with TallWall Media in their beautiful Champs Hill Music Room – which in itself has inspired much of the playing that can be heard. The films are already up and running on You Tube and are very much part of the programming idea for this CD. Many thanks also to our producer Alexander Van Ingen, whose commitment, drive and passion was a continuous source of encouragement and inspiration.

Alexandra Danese

1	VARIATIONS ON THE NAME 'ABEGG' OP.1 IN F MAJOR SCHUMANN	7'51
2	BALLADE NO.2 S.171 IN B MINOR LISZT	13'52
3	ISOLDE'S LIEBESTOD S.447 FROM WAGNER'S TRISTAN UND ISOLDE LISZT	7'04
	GRANDE POLONAISE BRILLANTE précédée d'un ANDANTE SPIANATO , OP.22 CHOPIN	
4	ANDANTE SPIANATO	3'48
5	GRANDE POLONAISE BRILLANTE	9'50
6	BALLADE NO.4 OP.52 IN F MINOR CHOPIN	11'01

Total playing time: 53'26

Produced and Engineered by Alexander Van Ingen
 Edited by Dave Rowell
 Mastered by Alexander Van Ingen
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 Photographs of Alexandra Dariescu: TallWall Media

Executive Producer for Champs Hill Records: Alexander Van Ingen

PROGRAMME NOTES

The foundations of Romantic piano composition, to which all three composers on this album richly contributed, were effectively laid by Beethoven. Whether explicitly in his blending of fantasy with the rigours of sonata form (in such works as the two Op.27 sonatas 'quasi una fantasia', including the so-called *Moonlight* Sonata), or implicitly in his 'heroic' *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas, Beethoven's innovative piano music mapped the qualities of fantasy and Romantic expression to be used by Robert Schumann, Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt. Both Schumann and Liszt worshipped Beethoven as a great forebear of their art, and while Chopin always felt closer to the limpid musicality and expression of Mozart, his discoveries at the piano of new degrees of harmonic expressiveness and sustained, song-like lyricism, which in turn profoundly influenced both Schumann and Liszt, themselves owed something to Beethoven's example (consider the *Andante cantabile* of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata).

Of the three, Liszt became the most idolized pianist-composer (or composer-pianist, some of his admirers would insist) of the nineteenth century. Yet it was even before his fame as a performer was on the ascendant that the 20-year-old Schumann published his Opus 1, *Variations on the name 'Abegg'*, in 1830 with the intention of establishing himself as a virtuoso pianist-composer. Although Beethoven and Mozart were arguably the two greatest pianist-composers from the previous fifty years, even more celebrated than either at the time Schumann published his first opus were Friedrich Kalkbrenner, whose exceptionally even technique Chopin greatly admired and under whom he considered studying, and Ignaz Moscheles, a champion of Beethoven's music and himself widely admired both as pianist and composer in the early nineteenth century.

Schumann's admiration for Moscheles's music lasted even after he himself had achieved fame, and almost inevitably his own first set of variations was indebted to the older composer: just months before he completed the *Abegg Variations*, Schumann wowed an audience in Heidelberg by performing Moscheles's then-renowned *Variations on La Marche d'Alexandre*. The influence of that showpiece

can be heard in the ostentatious three-part textures (creating the illusion of an extra 'third' hand) of the first variation, and the frequent use of showy filigree work in the right-hand treble part.

What is remarkable, though, is how Schumann found his distinctive voice even in this first published work: certainly one may also hear the influence of the warmly expressive harmonies of Beethoven's late piano sonatas (perhaps most distinctly Op.109 with its variations-form finale). Yet Schumann expresses his own sensibility in its chromatic harmonies and in rhythms more supple than in the Moscheles variations he used as his 'blueprint'. Most striking is the fourth 'Cantabile' variation, where Schumann breaks away from the predominant F major tonality not to the conventional F minor, but to the more remote key of A flat (F minor's related major key), soon wandering into various other keys as if teasing his listeners by avoiding the expected F minor, creating a curious sense of expectancy before rounding the variations off with a 'Finale alla fantasia'. There is a similar playfulness in Schumann's choice of title: the impressively titled 'Mademoiselle Pauline Comtesse d'Abegg' to whom his work was ostensibly dedicated was a mere whimsy, having no existence beyond an imaginary excuse to have the last name 'translated' into musical pitches – A-B flat-E-G-G – from which his theme embarks.

Just a year later, Schumann embarked on his second career, almost as celebrated as his first as a composer, as a music critic. His maiden review, published on 7 December 1831 in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, was a landmark essay on Chopin's Op.2, the Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. This included Schumann's famous acclamation – "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius" – which he put in the mouth of the fictional Eusebius (the contemplative half of the imaginary duo who featured in several of Schumann's writings, the other being Florestan, the hot-headed Romantic). Schumann was not in fact alone in his recognition of Chopin's genius; his teacher, Friedrich Wieck, also published a

laudatory notice, whose scarcely less fanciful language the Polish pianist thought hilarious.

More sober and acerbic in character than Schumann, Chopin was nonetheless one of the greatest poets of the piano. Witness the unhurried, limpid grace of the *Andante spianato*, whose charming central interlude-like episode surely inspired Elgar's *Dream Children* some 70 years later. Chopin composed the *Andante* in 1834 as a preface to his very different *Grande Polonoise Brillante* which he had started years earlier before leaving Warsaw; extrovert, apparently carefree and increasingly ferocious in its virtuosic demands, this was one of his last essays in that dance form which he completed in 1831 in Vienna (just months before Schumann's laudatory review was published). Originally written for piano and orchestra, the *Grande Polonoise* was premiered coupled with the opening *Andante spianato*, with Chopin playing the solo part, at a Conservatoire concert in Paris, 26 April 1835. However it was widely agreed that the orchestral part was crudely written and largely redundant, and though the two pieces remain coupled, nowadays the *Grande Polonoise* is heard in a version for piano solo Chopin arranged two years after that premiere.

One of the forms Chopin pioneered for piano literature was the Ballade, appropriating the name from the world of poetry. His Ballade No.4, Op.52, is one of his most profound compositions not only in that form but also in all of his piano works. This was composed in 1842 when Chopin – by then in precarious health (recent scholars suggest he suffered from cystic fibrosis, rather than tuberculosis) – was living with the cross-dressing woman novelist George Sand. They spent summers at her country house in Nohant, central France, and it was partly there that he composed this gently melancholic masterpiece. Rich in its variety of textures, and at times approaching the contrapuntal intricacy of Brahms's late piano works (and for one startling moment seeming to look forward to the German composer's Intermezzo in A major, Op.118 with five soft, organ-

like chords), it is a work which seems to reveal yet more avenues of feeling with each hearing.

Liszt greatly admired Chopin, and championed his music throughout his career. Sadly it seems that Chopin was rather less enthusiastic about Liszt, a feistier character some two years younger than himself whom he found too much a brash showman to be sympathetic. As Liszt himself recalled, their relations ultimately soured due to the falling out of their respective mistresses, George Sand and Liszt's Countess Marie d'Agoult. Despite the rift, Liszt composed a biography of Chopin shortly after the Polish composer's death in 1849 (though much of its actual writing was by his then lover, the Polish princess Caroline von Sayn-Wittgenstein). By then Liszt had retired from the concert platform and had taken the post of Kapellmeister Extraordinaire at Weimar, where he composed several of his most important works. Amongst these was his dramatic single-movement Sonata in B minor, recognized as one of his greatest masterpieces. Having completed this in 1853, he almost promptly wrote a pendant in the same key, his Ballade No.2 (the very form being further evidence of his indebtedness to his late colleague). In a manner that recalls a Chopin scherzo, this initially contrasts a stormy opening theme with a more gentle and reflective idea. Another influence, that of Schubert, is evident in the inquisitive cadence which opens that second subject, recalling as it does the first harmonized cadence of Schubert's song "Ihr bild" (in which the poet looks upon a portrait of a lost beloved, whose face seems fleetingly to come to life). Whether this suggests a private significance for Liszt (perhaps mourning a past relationship), both the subsequent wistful theme and the stormy opening theme play extensive roles in the drama that follows this introduction. Liszt originally ended this work in an extrovertly virtuosic manner, but decided that a more restrained coda was more in keeping with the essentially intimate emotions of his B minor Ballade.

Though Liszt and Marie d'Agoult's relationship did not last they had several children, including Cosima who herself became Richard Wagner's beloved second

wife. Wagner's landmark opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, was considered by Liszt the greatest music drama of his lifetime – indeed it was the last dramatic work he heard before his own death. It was Liszt who first labelled Isolde's great final aria in that opera her 'Liebestod' (love-death), so naming it in his transcription for solo piano. Liszt's many works included hundreds of piano transcriptions of operatic excerpts, symphonies and other orchestral works by the various composers he admired, most particularly Schubert, Beethoven, Berlioz and Wagner: these, of course, served a noble purpose of propagating those masterpieces he admired in an age before radio and gramophone could introduce those works around the world by the mere flick of a switch. But Liszt was rarely content to simply place the notes at the pianist's fingertips, perhaps least of all his own, without embellishing, rearranging or even in effect recomposing several of these works so they could work all the more effectively on his instrument.

Though relatively short (certainly in relation to the four-hour opera!), Liszt's transcription from *Tristan und Isolde*, which he titled *Isoldens Liebestod*, is a masterfully handled transfiguration: note how the Liebestod starts from the baritone end of the keyboard (starting with a short phrase taken from the lovers' great duet in Act 2) and gradually infuses with light with first the occasional glimmer, Liszt's tremolandos not merely sustaining the volume of Wagner's music but in themselves becoming a major part of the music's texture; then reaching full brilliance in the treble range of the keyboard before subsiding to tranquil fulfilment.

Daniel Jaffé

Featured as *BBC Music Magazine's* Rising Star in June 2011, Alexandra Dariescu is an outstanding communicator, hugely popular with audiences.



In 2012 Alexandra made her début at the Carnegie Hall in New York where she was invited by András Schiff during his 'Perspectives' residency. She has given recitals at major venues and festivals throughout Europe and further afield including Wigmore Hall, Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, Bridgewater Hall, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, Mozarteum Buenos Aires, the Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik, Phillips Collection in Washington D.C., the City of London, Cheltenham, Bath and Ravel festivals among many others.

As a concerto soloist, Alexandra performs with such orchestras as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Mecklenburgische Staatskapelle Schwerin, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sinfonia ViVA, Northern Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra of St Paul's and European Union Chamber Orchestra at venues including the Barbican, Royal Albert Hall, South Bank Centre and LSO St Lukes. In 2011 she gave the world premiere of a piano concerto by Emily Howard with the Liverpool Mozart Orchestra to celebrate the orchestra's 60th anniversary season. Alexandra also gave the UK premiere of Dinu Lipatti's Concertino in Classical Style in 2012 with the Orchestra of St Paul's at LSO St Lukes.

A laureate of the Verbier Festival Academy, Alexandra won the prestigious CUBS Bank Verbier Festival & Academy Prize. She returns to the Geneva International

Summer Festival and Academy for masterclasses and concerts. In 2010 she won the Guildhall Wigmore Hall Prize and in 2008 received the prestigious Prix Maurice Ravel at the Academie Internationale de Musique Ravel in France, returning to give a recital at the Ravel Festival in 2009. Alexandra is the first pianist to be mentored by Imogen Cooper in the RPS/YCAT Philip Langridge Mentoring Scheme and an alumna of the English-Speaking Union.

Committed to chamber music, Alexandra has collaborated with the Belcea, Elias, Idomeneo and Sacconi quartets as well as violinist Alina Ibragimova at venues including the Wigmore Hall and City of London Festival. Alexandra is regularly featured on international media and appeared performing for BBC Radio 3 and BBC Radio 4, Classic FM, radio and television stations across Romania, Manx Radio, Isle of Man and Nevada Radio in California.

Born in Romania in 1985 Alexandra Dariescu studied in Iasi, Romania, Pocklington School in York and at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) where her teachers included Nelson Goerner, Mark Ray, Alexander Melnikov and Dina Parakhina. During her studies at the RNCM, Alexandra was supported in full by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music and won all major prizes and awards including the Gold Medal, Chopin Prize and Peter Donohoe Prize. She graduated in 2008 with distinction. Alexandra was selected by the Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in 2008 and completed her Masters at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama with Ronan O'Hora, receiving a Piano Fellowship for 2010/2011.

Alexandra is an affiliated artist with the Romanian Cultural Institute in London and she is extremely grateful for their continued support.