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VLADIMIR FELTSMAN

2 CDs

Chopin

Complete Nocturnes
Barcarolle, Berceuse

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"...QUITE SIMPLY AN AMAZING PIANIST!" *The New York Times*



VLADIMIR FELTSMAN

Chopin Complete Nocturnes

Disc 1

1	B-flat Minor Op.9 No.1	5.35
2	E-flat Major Op.9 No.2	3.52
3	B Major Op.9 No.3	6.52
4	F Major Op.15 No.1	4.20
5	F-sharp Major Op.15 No.2	3.45
6	G Minor Op.15 No.3	4.23
7	C-sharp Minor Op.27 No.1	4.39
8	D-flat Major Op.27 No.2	5.36
9	B Major Op.32 No.1	4.35
10	A-flat Major Op.32 No.2	5.17
11	G Minor Op.37 No.1	5.24
12	G Major Op.37 No.2	5.45

Total playing time **60.03**

Disc 2

1	C Minor Op.48 No.1	5.56
2	F-sharp Minor Op.48 No.2	7.32
3	F Minor Op.55 No.1	4.55
4	E-flat Major Op.55 No.2	4.49
5	B Major Op.62 No.1	7.11
6	E Major Op.62 No.2	5.22
7	E Minor Op.72 No.1	3.35
8	C-sharp Minor	3.52
9	C Minor	3.08
10	Barcarolle Op.60	9.10
11	Berceuse Op.57	5.10

Total playing time **60.41**

Vladimir Feltsman, piano (Steinway & Sons)
Recording was made on February 11-13, 2000, Bolshoi Hall of the Moscow Conservatory Moscow
Design: Doubletake Design Ltd.

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harmonic tension foreshadow Brahms and Mahler. The main theme returns after the middle episode richly ornamented in trills. A magical transition (tempo primo) follows and brings us home to B major that remains until the end for 14 bars. The E major Nocturne has a large, dramatic middle section that returns in abbreviated form at the end.

The three "additional" nocturnes are all in minor keys – E, C sharp, and C minor respectively. They are rarely played nowadays, but there are moments of beauty in each. Chopin seems to have been incapable of writing a bad tune – a good disability to have.

Many composers, including Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Fauré, wrote barcarolles (gondoliers' songs) but Chopin's, written near the end of his life, is the finest. The boat pushes off from the bank and starts moving forward, rocking gently. A hypnotic paddle pattern begins in the left hand. The main theme appears in thirds and sixths: the boat song begins. It is a love song, a duet. The Barcarolle travels through harmonies as if through changing landscapes of intimate feeling, bringing us to very special places that are open only to those invited. Chopin has provided the invitation; it is up to us to pick it up and make the journey. The Barcarolle resembles a nocturne in form; A-B-A, but on a larger scale. The climax (piu mosso) may be the most exalted and moving in all Romantic music. The last two pages (tempo primo) are miraculous – an apotheosis of all western music including that yet to be written.

The Berceuse (lullaby) is a textbook example of improvisation by variation. Chopin considered it one of his best works and played it frequently. The left hand plays one figure, repeated constantly without change, as if hypnotized by its own simplicity and minimalist beauty. The harmony alternates between tonic and dominant in every bar until the last 16 bars. The melody is simple and unpretentious – it is a four bar period that constantly doubles. The theme appears in new guises 14 times; each variation brings new patterns and ornamentations which become increasingly complex. Before the end, the harmonic pattern changes; two of the three last variations are wandering away, as if sleep walking and finally finding a way back home; it is time to rest, time to stop wandering and fall asleep.

Vladimir Feltsman

Op. 37 comprises two nocturnes. The G minor Nocturne, known as “Les Soupirs” (“Sighs”), has a choral middle section and is one of the easiest of the Nocturnes to play. The G major Nocturne, by contrast, is quite challenging; the melody is written in double notes which are difficult to play legato. The middle episode is presented twice and reappears for a third time as a brief coda. It features one of Chopin’s favorite rhythmical formulas: a repeated sequence of quarter and eighteenth notes.

The two nocturnes of Op. 48 are in C minor and F sharp minor. The C minor is perhaps the most dramatic of all Chopin’s nocturnes. It begins with the left hand moving like a pendulum and the melody on top. The melody enters twice on the weak beats, as if breathless--unable to utter more than one word, one sound. It immediately returns in different harmonics and proceeds to wander through highly expressive and elaborate lines. The range of the main theme is two octaves! The middle episode starts very quietly, but develops into one of the most expressive and theatrical passages in all of Chopin, with almost Lisztian bravura. The main theme returns (*doppio movimento*) heavily dressed in highly charged chords in triplets. It now develops into an emotional climax that crashes into G flat in the bass instead of the expected tonic, which returns after three bars. The nocturne ends with a farewell gesture and two simple chords. After a short introduction, the F sharp minor Nocturne introduces a seemingly endless theme that goes on and on as if unable to stop. The middle episode presents two distinct gestures and should be played like a recitative: “A tyrant commands and the other ask for mercy,” in Chopin’s words.

The two nocturnes of Op. 55 are in F minor and E flat major. The most distinctive feature of the F minor Nocturne is its ending; instead of continuing the theme it concludes with a pattern (variants) of triplets that resembles moving laces – a magical moment. The Nocturne in E flat major might be the finest of the set; all of the best qualities of Chopin’s writing are present here – a boundless melodic line enriched by the second (duo) voice, simplicity and harmonic sophistication, incredible fluidity and rhythmic complexity. It is one of the most sensual works of music ever written by anyone. Words cannot do justice to its seductive beauty.

The two nocturnes of Op. 62 were the last to be published during Chopin’s lifetime. The B major Nocturne is yet another masterpiece, filled with sophisticated voicing. Its melodic lines and

Chopin Nocturnes

“Chopin, in his poetic Nocturnes, sang not only the harmonies which are the source of our most ineffable delights, but likewise the restless, agitating bewilderment to which they often give rise.” - **Franz Liszt**

In Chopin’s 21 Nocturnes we encounter some of the most sublimely beautiful music ever written for piano. The Romantic idiom of these “night songs,” with their atmosphere of yearning nostalgia, was perfectly matched with Chopin’s talents and inclinations. The genre of the nocturne was first developed by the Irish composer John Field. Chopin knew Field’s nocturnes well and built upon his foundation. Another source of inspiration was Italian bel canto opera, exemplified by the works of Chopin’s friend Vincenzo Bellini. Whatever his sources of inspiration, however, Chopin’s nocturnes represent the highest realization of the form, despite the fine subsequent efforts of composers including Schumann, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Fauré, Scriabin, and Szymanowski.

18 of the nocturnes were published during Chopin’s lifetime (1810-1849). Three more were published posthumously – one, the Nocturne in C minor, not until 1938! Even in his early 20s Chopin was already in full command of his powers, but his writing continued to become progressively more subtle, sophisticated, harmonically complex, and polyphonically charged. The harmonic revelations in later works such as the Polonaise Fantasie and Barcarolle unquestionably influenced composers like Liszt, Wagner, and Debussy.

Chopin understood the possibilities of the piano better than any other composer. All of his works are pianistic at the core and cannot be transcribed successfully for any other instrument. Amazingly, his reputation as the greatest pianist of his time was based on a very few public appearances, mostly in Paris. Most of his performances were not open to public and took place in the intimate atmosphere of a salon, in private houses with only a handful of guests in attendance. According to reliable accounts, he never played loudly; his dynamics ranged from mezzo forte to an almost inaudible pianissimo. To appreciate Chopin’s playing, the listener had

to be in close physical proximity to the piano. There is very little public orientation in his music or his personality. Nothing is ever loud, bombastic, or exposed in Chopin. Emotions are private, subtle, and understated.

The Nocturnes share several common characteristics – the melody is embellished when repeated and there are usually contrasting episodes in the middle. The melody is always vocal and the accompaniment in the left hand is instrumental. Most of the embellishments, trills, fiorituras, and scales (glissando effects) are vocal as well. Nothing is ever set in stone in Chopin. His music suggests multiple opportunities for interpretation, for different readings of the text. Chopin himself marked different embellishments, fingerings, and dynamics for the same piece in the scores of various students.

Chopin was the first composer to take pedal markings seriously as a matter of principle. The pedal is commonly used to connect the bass line, but in Chopin the pattern is reversed; it is the melody that connects the musical tissue, not the bass. This crucially important fact is very often ignored. When his pedal markings are understood correctly and followed, the music becomes vibrantly alive, and breathes naturally; when they are ignored, it becomes heavy and murky.

All three nocturnes of Op. 9 are written in varieties of triple meter. The Nocturne No. 1 in B flat minor opens unusually, with an unaccompanied melody; it is clearly and unapologetically a bel canto cavatina. The melody is immediately repeated in the fourth bar, embellished lavishly. From the very beginning of this, his first nocturne, Chopin is in full control of the genre; he sings freely and confidently in his own voice. Op. 9, No.2 in E flat major is perhaps the best known and frequently played. Chopin provided additional embellishments to this Nocturne for his students; the present recording features several such embellishments based on Chopin's, though not following them exactly. The third Nocturne of the Op. 9 set is in B major. It contains a waltz like (siciliano) rhythm that is unusual for a nocturne melody. There is a romantically turbulent middle section that seems suspended in mid air and magically brings us back to the main theme. Of all the Nocturnes, this is the only one with a lively tempo indication – Allegretto. The others feature a variety of Largettos, Andantes, and Lentos (but no Adagios!). Despite these indications they

should not be played too slowly. The Nocturnes are vocal in character; a good singer does not take a new breath in the middle of a phrase. If a very slow tempo is taken the singer (the pianist) could die of asphyxiation! Chopin's tempo indications have less to do with speed than with the character of any given work.

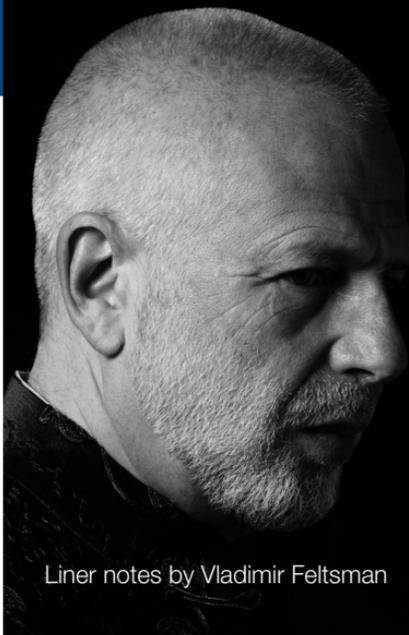
There are three nocturnes in the next set, Op. 15. The F major Nocturne is written in typical A-B-A form with a serene and peaceful theme and a stormy middle episode. The F sharp Nocturne, frequently played and recorded, features lavish embellishments and fiorituras. The G minor Nocturne could easily be mistaken for a mazurka if it were not marked *lento*. The theme and phrasing are irregular and there is a sustained note in the melody that lasts three bars. The middle episode is marked *religioso*. There are some sophisticated harmonies in the transition to the main theme, perhaps Chopin's most innovative up to this point. It is said that Chopin was inspired by a performance of Hamlet to compose this nocturne, and originally intended to call it "On the graveyard."

The two nocturnes of Op. 27. are both masterpieces. The first, in C sharp minor, is dark and intense. The atmosphere of the first episode is one of haunting nostalgia. There are two middle episodes back to back; the first is impassioned, repeating a rhythmical figure like a siciliano, going up and up and ending with the dynamic marking *fff* (triple forte – the maximum in Chopin's dynamic range). The second middle episode is in D flat major (finally a major key!). It has the flavor of a mazurka, but suddenly turns dramatic, ending up *fff* again before coming back to the main theme via a recitative passage in octaves. The Nocturne in D flat is one of Chopin's most sublime works. A ceaselessly repeated sequence in the left hand provides a fluctuating harmonic background, a shimmering landscape of hypnotic beauty over which the melody soars freely. This is simplicity and sophistication of the highest degree.

The two nocturnes of Op. 32 are not among the most popular or frequently played. They are similar in mood. The B major Nocturne has no contrasting middle episode, but a very unusual and dramatic recitative conclusion. The Nocturne in A flat major does have a middle episode, but not a contrasting one – there is no change in tempo and no additional expressive markings.

VLADIMIR **FELTSMAN**Chopin **Complete Nocturnes, Barcarolle, Berceuse**

2 CDs



Liner notes by Vladimir Feltsman

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