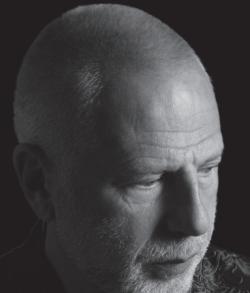


NI 6128

VLADIMIR **FELTSMAN**



Chopin
4 Ballades
Fantasie in F minor
Polonaise-Fantasie

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"...QUITE SIMPLY AN AMAZING PLANIST!" The New York Times



VLADIMIR FELTSMAN

4 Ballades, Fantasie in F minor and Polonaise-Fantasie in A-flat Major

1.	Ballade No.1 in G minor Op.23	9.52
2.	Ballade No.2 in F Major Op.38	7.37
3.	Ballade No.3 in A-flat Major Op.47	8.03
4.	Ballade No.4 in F minor Op.52	11.36
5.	Fantasie in F minor Op.49	13.02
6.	Polonaise-Fantasie in A-flat Major Op.61	14.01

Total playing time 64

This CD was recorded with microphones, tube preamplifier, and A/D converter, designed and built by Mark Fouxman. **Producer**: Vladimir Feltsman **Recording engineer**, **editing**, **and mastering**: Mark Fouxman Recording was made on June 8-9 2008, at Fisher Performing Arts Center at Bard College, NY. **Design**: Doubletake Design Ltd. Coda gently pushes forward and upward and disappears in a shimmering glow. Two chords fortissimo close this haunting work. The Fantasie ends in A flat major; in this case the major key does not signify a happy ending, but a tragic one.

The Polonaise-Fantasie was published in 1846 and dedicated to Madame A. Vevret. It is one of Chopin's finest, most innovative and sophisticated works, along with the Barcarolle and the Fourth Ballade. The very beginning is revelatory; Chopin brings us to a place we (and western music up to this point) have never been. The short, assertive opening gesture stops suddenly and then gradually expands into a long arpeggiated passage that goes all the way up and dissolves into itself. In the very first bar we have a polonaise (the opening gesture) and a fantasie (improvisatory passage). After wandering through different keys in a harmonic limbo, the polonaise proper is announced with fanfare. The rhythmic formula of the polonaise is sustained throughout the exposition of the main episode (a miniature sonata-allegro form), but not reprised. The dreamy and nostalgic middle episode (poco piu lento) is in B major, like the slow section of the Fantasie in F minor. Two new themes are introduced that somehow do not seem "new", but as if already heard; in the Polonaise-Fantasie all the themes are related. There is a magical cadenza on the dominant, with vocalized trills, which resolves into B major and after a few bars brings back the opening gesture, this time pianissimo. The transition to the climax is meticulously calculated. The second theme from the slow episode appears briefly and is dropped. We are back to tempo primo and the rhythmic formula of the polonaise returns. The main theme reappears in triumph, in full armor and heavily dressed in chords. The first theme of the slow episode returns fortissimo. There is a sense of urgency and passion that simply must be expressed. The perpetual motion of triplets exhausts itself and stops. After six bars all the remaining energy is expended and the Polonaise-Fantasie ends with one shining chord.

Vladimir Feltsman

pause (a really long pause it should be indeed), five chords pp (pianissimo) follow. The Coda erupts suddenly with astonishing intensity and power; it is the main dramatic event of the Fourth Ballade. Any lingering doubt about the tragic outcome is banished and despite the resistance of the very thick, polyphonically and chromatically charged texture, the Code rushes on to an unavoidable end.

The Fantasie in F minor was written in 1841 and dedicated to Madame la Princesse C. de Suozzo. It could be considered his 5th Ballade. A somber introduction in tempo di marcia incorporates a funeral march rhythm. This musical material never returns, but the descending sequence of the introduction becomes an important element of the Fantasie. The quasi improvisatory section follows and delivers us to the main episode via a scale bridge over the entire keyboard. The action starts here and new themes are introduced with urgent intensity. A soaring melody written in double notes just takes off, almost levitating. The main episode is emotionally (and chromatically) charged, texturally dense, and pianistically demanding. Events unfold rapidly and passionately. Yet another theme appears in chords (following the descending pattern of the introduction) but is interrupted by transformed material from the improvisatory section: the main episode returns briefly in a different key. This relentless push forward exhausts itself and a slow episode (from the middle of the main episode -- lento sostenuto) begins in B major - a key very far removed from the original F minor. This slow episode is masterfully written – although very short, it creates an unmistakably personal and intimate atmosphere in the midst of turbulence and passion. Everything stops and one of the most magical moments in all of Chopin's music unfolds. The whole slow episode lasts only 23 bars, but these bars are very telling and precious -- sometimes, less is more. There is a chord sequence after the theme that wanders in suspense, as if trying to find a way home (and it does). The action resumes without warning -- there is a recapitulation of the main episode (a reprise, in sonata-allegro terms). Before the end (coda) the theme from the slow episode comes back ff (fortissimo) in the low register and stops after two bars; three short phrases follow pp (pianissimo) like a reminiscence, like an echo of things past. The

Chopin Ballades

Chopin is rightly credited with the invention of the ballade as a musical form, and his Ballades inspired Liszt and Brahms among others to explore this form and compose ballades of their own. The ballade was one of the favorite idioms of nineteenth-century Romantic poetry, and an ideal medium for story-telling. Chopin's Ballades can be seen as stories inspired by other stories. There is no such thing as a "new" story. Every story deals with the past, with something that has already happened: an event, a feeling, a situation, a moment which is no more. Art can recreate these lost moments, recapture the things of the past and make them last forever. Chopin was one of the great masters of this art. His Ballades are among the finest, most original, and enduring works that capture the essence of the Romantic aesthetic.

Each of the Ballades has its own unique form and tells its own story, independent of the well known poetic sources that may have inspired Chopin. Chopin detested programmatic music and titles (unlike his great admirer and champion Schumann). He thought that the music itself should tell the story, and he was perhaps the greatest master of musical narration. Ultimately, what inspires the artist to create his works does not matter, only the quality of the work itself.

The four Ballades belong to Chopin's mature period – 1835-42 (when he was between twenty-five and thirty-two years old!). They were composed in various parts of France and Spain. All four are written in varieties of triple meter. The only exceptions are the improvisatory opening and coda of the Ballade No. 1 in G minor. This ballade was written in Paris during 1835-6 and dedicated to Monsieur le Baron de Stockhausen. The introduction (largo) is written in parallel octaves and contains an ascending sequence that transforms itself into the theme of the first episode, a nostalgic waltz that keeps returning, as if mesmerized by itself. It is difficult to pinpoint the precise form of this ballade; it has its own ingenious form, with two themes that are brought back three times, keeping the first intact while transforming

6

the second from an intimate to a triumphant melody. The turbulent and furious coda (which is quite challenging technically and has caused lots of trouble for many pianists) introduces new material, and spins with an enormous, untamable energy. The benign waltzing figure of the first theme is transformed into a gesture of desperation and this amazing ballade collapses in a catastrophic, crashing conclusion.

The Ballade No. 2 in F major was written in Nohant and Majorca and completed in 1839. It opens very simply with a repeated note in unison octave that magically delivers us into the main theme – a theme that actually begins with the very first note. Chopin, like Beethoven. was a master of deception and ambiguity, of subtle transitions and hidden connections. What we hear is often not what is really there. The main theme unfolds and rocks gently, following its rhythmic pattern, free of worry. A contrasting and highly charged middle episode introduces a brief dramatic motif in the bass. Right and left hands are moving in opposite directions like overlapping waves. The rhythmic formula of the main theme reappears in a very different shape, becoming a heroic gesture. The turbulence of the middle episode gradually subsides and the main theme returns. This time it is developed skillfully - there are hidden strettos and inventive harmonic sequences with two passionate outbursts that bring us back to the middle episode. A long, sustained dominant to A minor (the key of the Coda) builds tremendous tension; the rhythmic formula of the main theme is repeated three times like a call to arms (or call of destiny?) that cannot be denied. There are desperate attempts to resist and escape, but the accumulated energy and tension inescapably resolve into the Coda through four descending trills. The Coda is charged with agitation and passion, enhanced by the rhythm of the waltz. This macabre waltz spins around and around, making your head spin, Transformed and condensed, the material of the middle episode comes back for several bars and abruptly stops at the highest point of tension. The main theme reappears in a minor mode and stops after one phrase – there is nothing more to be done and nothing more to say. After a pause - a long breath -- comes the simple and unpretentious ending. After the music stops, the rhythm is still pulsating within us. The Second Ballade was considered by many (including Schumann, to whom it was dedicated in return for Schumann's dedication of his "Kreisleriana" to Chopin) the weakest of the set. Most certainly, it is not. There are no inferior Ballades; each is a masterpiece.

The Ballade No. 3 in A flat major was composed in 1840-1 and dedicated to Mademoiselle Pauline de Noailles. It is the sunniest of the set and the only one that ends in a major key. There are some hidden polyphonic intricacies in this ballade - more than in the First and Second, but less than in the Fourth, which is the most polyphonically charged and dense. The Third Ballade begins with a charming theme on top that is continued in the bass. The order is immediately reversed: the theme starts again in the bass and is continued on top. From the very beginning Chopin skillfully manipulates our perspective. This theme is not developed in any way and returns only once at the end as a triumphant climax presented flamboyantly in rich chords. The middle episode is not contrasting: it starts very softly with repeated notes spaced an octave apart that descend gently in the rhythmical pattern of the main theme of the Second Ballade. This pattern is maintained all the way through the middle section. A charming waltz appears and disappears without warning. The climax is carefully prepared and calculated – after three chromatically ascending sequences the first theme reappears in shining armor. The waltz returns bursting with joyful energy, climbing up and up. The Third Ballade ends with a brilliant run from the top down. Four chords follow and seal the happy ending. The Fourth Ballade also ends with four chords, but there they seal a tragic, fatal ending.

Ballade No. 4 in F minor was composed in 1842 in Paris and Nohant (revised in 1843) and dedicated to Madame la Baronne C. de Rothschild. It is the longest and most challenging of the set musically and technically. This ballade is a real human drama that unfolds and is completed in about 12 minutes. The texture becomes increasingly rich and polyphonically intricate as it progresses. There are incredible harmonic modulations and effects, like a foretaste of Wagner and Debussy. The structure and its thematic developments are complex and fascinating. Several connected themes are developed simultaneously. A passionate surge before the Coda ends abruptly with three chords played fff (triple forte). After a long

4

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Liner notes by Vladimir Feltsman











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