PRELUDES TO CHOPIN
SONATAS, BARCAROLLE, POLONAISE

KENNETH HAMILTON
(PIANO)
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Frédéric Chopin:
1  Prelude in C# minor, op.45 (3'50")
2-5  Sonata no.2 in Bb minor, op.35:
   Grave—Doppio Movimento (7'50")
   Scherzo (5'23")
   Funeral March (6'02)
   Finale—Presto (1'27")
6  Prelude in F# major, op.28 no.13 (2'45")
7-10  Sonata no.3 in B minor, op.58:
   Allegro maestoso (8'34")
   Scherzo (2'21")
   Largo (7'56")
   Finale—Presto non tanto (5'01")
11  Prelude in A-major, op.28 no.7 (6'46")
12  Barcarolle, op.60 (8'13")
13  Prelude in Eb minor, op.28 no.14 (6'24")
14  Chopin-Busoni: Polonaise in Ab Major, op.53 (6'25")
15  Prelude in Ab major, op.28 no. 17 (2'40")
16  Chopin-Liszt: Mes Joies (My Joys) (according to Bernhard Stavenhagen’s
   “Personal Memories of Liszt”) (4'08")

Also available on Prima Facie

Kenneth Hamilton plays
Ronald Stevenson Vol. 1
(PFCD050)

Producer: Steve Plews
Editor: Phillip Hardman
Piano Technician: Kait Farbon
Piano by Steinway & Sons, Hamburg
Recorded 26-27/8/17 at Cardiff University School Music, Wales
Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840): Mondaufgang am Meer (Moonrise by the Sea)
Photo of Kenneth Hamilton by Gerald Lim

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From one point of view, a new recording of Chopin needs no excuse—the music is so self-evidently stupendous that it can hardly be heard too much. And I, like many other pianists, can’t resist preserving on disc my passion for pieces that I’ve played with boundless enthusiasm from adolescence onwards. But from another point of view, a new CD does need some justification. After all, most of the works on this disc have been recorded dozens, if not hundreds of times—sometimes routinely, sometimes wonderfully. So, what’s different here?

The inspiration for this recording is similar to that which prompted me to write my book *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (Oxford University Press). In other words, a fascination with the performance styles of the so-called “golden age” of pianism from Chopin and Liszt to Paderewski—from around 1830 to 1945—and an abiding interest in how Romantic and late-Romantic approaches might be adopted, adapted or modified in a modern context to enrich our own playing. I argued that our aim should not be a direct imitation of a few essentially incomparable earlier players, or the quasi-recreation of historical recordings with modern technology, but to open ourselves to, and with practice internalise, a range of interpretative possibilities (from Chopin’s own day and the generations thereafter) that challenge some current conventions. The end result will inescapably still be modern—performance, perhaps fortunately, cannot avoid retaining indelible characteristics of its own time and of its performer—but hopefully might also be thought-provokingly varied, communicative and convincing.

In relation to the repertoire recorded here, this means that the entire production team—pianist, piano technician, producer and editor—have worked hard to ensure that the Steinway used, although a modern rather than a historical instrument, could generate the silken “singing tone” so prized by Chopin and his immediate successors, rather than the more cuttingly metallic sound of some contemporary pianos. I have also freely, although far from continuously, applied (or “indulged in”, for those who don’t like the effect…) various types of chordal arpeggiation and dislocation between the hands for expressive intensification. Markings such as *sostenuto* (sustained), *espressivo* (with expression), and *leggiero* (lightly) have been treated as potentially referring to tempo as well as character, the first two implying a slightly slower, the third a slightly quicker tempo. The same goes for hairpins—now often regarded merely as signs for *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, but in Chopin’s day, and for nearly a century afterwards, also indicative of small-scale tempo fluctuations. The end effect of all this will, I hope, be spontaneous rather than studied.
In repeated sections, I have tried to achieve interpretative variety rather than the “structural” uniformity regularly advocated in the late 20th century. (There is something to be said for both approaches, but they are, for the most part, mutually exclusive.) For example, the repeat of the Second Sonata’s first movement is done slightly differently—more urgently in places, more placidly in others—but still, I hope, coherently. The treatment of the recapitulation of the Funeral March in the Second Sonata is influenced by that of Ignacy Paderewski, who placed the bass an octave lower, filled out with tightly rolled chords, to produce an effect eerily like distant thunder. I was captivated by this when I first heard Paderewski’s only recording of the March, and since then have alternated between “faithful” and somewhat Paderewskified renditions in my live performances. The version recorded here represents a modest tampering with Chopin’s score, but one that retains the composer’s general dynamic sequence, unlike the once extremely popular “processional” approach devised by Anton Rubinstein, and heard on recordings by Rachmaninov and Raoul Pugno, in which the repeat of the march begins fortissimo rather than pianissimo, and then fades slowly into the distance. I am not, however, defending my interpretation on grounds of “less than full-blown infidelity”. That argument is as unpersuasive aesthetically as it is on the Jerry Springer Show. Ultimately, the listener is either convinced by the effect or not.

I am also not arguing that any of the specific aesthetic approaches mentioned above are unique in modern performance, but I do hope, taken together, that they represent an intriguing divergence from currently common practice. As far as I’m aware, two of the tracks are also first recordings in acoustic/digital format, although the respective pieces appeared on piano rolls around a century ago. Chopin’s Polonaise in Ab is played in a version by the endlessly inventive composer-pianist Ferruccio Busoni. The most prominent variant is the extended octaves that represent a modest tampering with Chopin’s score, but one that retains the composer’s general dynamic sequence, unlike the once extremely popular “processional” approach devised by Anton Rubinstein, and heard on recordings by Rachmaninov and Raoul Pugno, in which the repeat of the march begins fortissimo rather than pianissimo, and then fades slowly into the distance. I am not, however, defending my interpretation on grounds of “less than full-blown infidelity”. That argument is as unpersuasive aesthetically as it is on the Jerry Springer Show. Ultimately, the listener is either convinced by the effect or not.

The other acoustic/digital premiere is Liszt’s movingly nostalgic arrangement of Chopin’s song My Joys, in an extensive revision dating from Liszt’s last years. It is known in this form partly from a score published long after Liszt’s death, edited by Isidor Philipp, and partly from a fascinating piano roll of 1905 by his pupil Bernhard Stavenhagen, which carries the subscript “according to personal memories of Liszt”. There can be little doubt that this version derives directly from Liszt himself, and moreover, that Stavenhagen’s roll gives a good idea of Liszt’s unconstrained approach to playing it, which I have tried to reflect in my own performance. I have written a chapter on My Joys and other related pieces in the book Liszt’s Legacies (Pendragon Press), for those who are interested in finding out more detail about all the variant versions of pieces passed down by Liszt’s students. It makes, in my opinion, an amusing musical detective story.

Kenneth Hamilton

Described after a concerto performance with the St Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra as “an outstanding virtuoso- one of the finest players of his generation” (Moscow Kommersant), by the Singapore Straits Times as ‘a formidable virtuoso’; by Tom Service in The Guardian as “pianist, author, lecturer and all-round virtuoso”, Scottish pianist Kenneth Hamilton performs worldwide as a recitalist, concerto soloist and broadcaster. He has appeared frequently on radio and television in Britain, the US, Germany, France, Singapore, Canada, Australia, Turkey, China and Russia, including a performance of Chopin’s first piano concerto with the Istanbul Chamber Orchestra on Turkish Television, and a dual role as pianist and presenter for the television programme Mendelssohn in Scotland, broadcast in Europe and the US by Deutsche Welle Channel. He is a familiar presence on BBC Radio 3, and has numerous international festival engagements to his credit.

His recent recordings for the Prima Facie label: Volume 1 of Kenneth Hamilton Plays Ronald Stevenson and Back to Bach: Tributes and Transcriptions by Liszt, Rachmaninov and Busoni have been greeted with widespread critical acclaim: “played with understanding and brilliance” (Andrew McGregor, BBC Radio 3 Record Review); “an unmissable disk…fascinating music presented with power, passion and precision” (Colin Clarke, Fanfare); “precise control and brillance” (Andrew Clements, The Guardian); “thrilling” (Jeremy Nicholas, Gramophone); “a gorgeous recording and excellent performance” (Jack Sullivan, American Record Guide); “provides the ultimate in energetic impact, taut tempi and gripping creative command” (Stefan Pieper, Klavik Heute).

Kenneth Hamilton is Head of the School of Music at Cardiff University in Wales, and was a student of Anne McLean, Alexa Maxwell, Lawrence Glover and Ronald Stevenson, the last of whom inspired his interest in the history of piano performance. Hamilton is especially fascinated by the varied performance styles of the pianistic “Golden Age” from Liszt to Paderewski, which constitute for him a source of stimulating artistic ideas, rather than models for exact imitation, a position argued in his last book, After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance (Oxford University Press). This was a classical music best-seller, welcomed as “full of wit and interest, and written with passion” by Charles Rosen (Times Literary Supplement), and as a “deft and sympathetic account of the old school virtuosos” by Alex Ross (The New Yorker). It was a Daily Telegraph Book of the Year in the UK, a recipient of an ARSC award, and a CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title in the US.

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We do not have to look far to find the origin of Chopin’s seemingly spontaneous idea to compose a Barcarolle—a Venetian Gondola song—in late 1845. That year saw a winter festival in Paris, during which Parisians could admire the river Seine illuminated by night and bedecked with gondolas—turning the French capital temporarily into the Venice of the North. Chopin’s Barcarolle was finished the following year. It advertises the attractions of Italy both by its casually swaying melodies, and by their operatic doubling in thirds. The gently undulating main tune, first presented with a relaxed reticence, returns in an unexpectedly extrovert manner towards the end of the piece. But a valedictory coda imparts a warmer, more introspective glow over the final pages. In performance, the energetic apotheosis demanded too much of the terminally ill Chopin. He premiered the Barcarolle at what was to be his last Paris concert, but did not have the strength to produce a fortissimo. Instead, the audience heard the climax played as a delicate whisper—a prelude of death from consumption the following year.

The “Heroic” Polonaise in Ab major is a swaggeringly majestic assertion of national pride written during Chopin’s long, voluntary Parisian exile. Like many expatriates, Chopin found it easier to be patriotic from afar, but his sincerity cannot be doubted. The Polonaise was as much an aristocratic procession as a dance, customarily led by the head of the household through the various interconnected rooms of a grand palace. The procession would bow in respect to various elements of local interest as it passed, whether sculptures, portraits, or paintings of historical scenes. And this seems to be what we hear in the central episode of the polonaise—a battle scene in which, according to Liszt, the famous octaves should conjure up “the Polish cavalry thundering across the plain, charging down upon its enemies”. In Busoni’s version, the octaves thunder even more. Just as clearly illustrated is the lamentations of the wounded after the battle (an element familiar from illustrative pieces such as Kotzwara’s Battle of Prague) before the victors celebrate in joyful triumph, recalling their glorious charge in left-hand octaves just before the end.

The sunset glow of Liszt’s Chopin song transcription offers a quasi-encore at the close of the CD. My Joys, the title used by Liszt, is somewhat misleading. The original, from a charmingly naïve Polish love-lyric by Adam Mickiewicz, is more accurately translated as My Darling. The song is undeniably a modest piece, expanded by Liszt to over twice its length by the addition of a plethora of imaginative passagework, a reworked climax, and a new, quite irresistibly beautiful coda. The latter was an afterthought on Liszt’s part, composed sometime in the mid-1880s, decades after the initial publication of his arrangement. As mentioned above, the version recorded here is derived from one of Bernhard Stavenhagen’s piano rolls, played “according to personal recollections of Liszt”. I am very grateful to Rex Lawson and Denis Hall of the Pianola Institute for introducing me to this piano roll, and to Olivia Sham and Gerald Lim for assistance in creating a score from it.

Notes by Kenneth Hamilton

And finally, there is the title of the CD itself, Preludes to Chopin, which refers to the inclusion here of a handful of Chopin’s Preludes not as independent pieces, but as what they were mostly intended to be—preludes to longer works. It was the custom in Chopin’s own day, and up until the Second World War, for pianists to perform a (sometimes improvised) prelude before each concert item. Chopin’s intricately jewelled set of 24 Preludes, op.28, gives an example in every key for exactly that purpose. The preludes were designed to attract the audience’s attention (concert audiences could be a chatty and distracted bunch in the 19th century), to prepare the key and complement the mood of the piece to come, and (not least, in an age of unreliable instruments) to test out the piano. I’ve adapted this approach a little—by, for example, placing the Prelude in A major before the Barcarolle in F#-major (technically speaking a mediately key relationship with the succeeding piece, rather than the usual tonic or dominant of Chopin’s day). And any testing out of the piano was, I promise, thoroughly undertaken before the recording light went on. But I have adhered to the “mood-setting” spirit of the earlier practice.

The very first piece on the disc, the exquisite Prelude in C# minor is, however, in a class of its own. It was published as an isolated work, not as part of the op.28 set, and is largely in the style of a modulating prelude or transition between pieces, with a profusion of ingenious harmonic side-slips, sinuously chromatic twists and turns: an anticipation in miniature of the style of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. It is a perfect preface to the equally enharmonic opening of Chopin’s Second Sonata.

There is also a story behind the op.45 Prelude, uncovered by the Chopin scholar Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. The piece was prompted by a nocturnal discussion between Chopin, his partner Aurore Dupin (better known as the novelist George Sand) and the artist Eugène Delacroix on the similarities between the mixing of colours in painting and the mixing of harmonies in music. Subsequently, Chopin sat down at the piano and improvised, initially tentatively, but soon with more confidence, in a chromatic style intended to express what George Sand called the “blue note” of moonlight. The improvisation was eventually written down, no doubt with revisions, as the C# minor Prelude. This narrative explains the choice of key—the same as Beethoven’s already famous Moonlight Sonata—and the presence of an impressionistic passage of boldly mixed colours towards the end of the piece, which I’ve shaded by an extended use of the sustaining pedal (Track 1, 3’00”–14”). It also explains the gently veiled sonority of the piece as a whole, and why I have chosen Caspar David Friedrich’s painting Moonrise by the Sea for the cover of this CD.

Notes by Kenneth Hamilton
And so, on to the concisely powerful Second Sonata, which itself opens with a stately preludial introduction, modulating swiftly from an implied C# minor to a fast agitato exposition in Bb minor. This modulation also slickly serves to link the end of the exposition with its repeat—as assuming, of course, that the score used by the pianist correctly shows that the repeat begins with the slow introduction. Unfortunately, most editions have mistakenly indicated that it begins instead with the agitato, replacing Chopin’s stroke of genius with a clunky transition worthy of a music student set to fail Harmony 101. But even aside from this, the Sonata raised eyebrows on its first appearance, largely owing to the bizarre finale, which even today seems bafflingly macabre to those expecting a more conventional close.

The wellspring of the Sonata is the famous Funeral March, which Chopin originally composed as an independent piece. He probably got the idea of building a larger work around the march from Beethoven’s Sonata in Ab major, op.26—of the few pieces by anyone other than himself that he ever played in public—for there the third movement is a “funeral march on the death of a hero”. Nevertheless, apart from the dotted rhythms, Chopin’s graveyard music is very different from Beethoven’s, with an angelically soulful cantilena at its heart, instead of Beethoven’s militaristic imitation of trumpets and drums. (I have played the March at a walking pace, rather than the more dragging tempo sometimes adopted.) The vertiginously dynamic Scherzo of the second movement anticipates the Funeral March’s cantilena in its own central section—a caressing melody that seems like a cross between a slow waltz and a cradle song.

It is, however, the finale that creates the greatest surprise of all. Both hands chatter swiftly together in complex unison figuration, without any tune or topographical assistance, before crashing against the wall of a despairing Bb minor chord. The details of the musical line are inevitably difficult for the listener to follow (although I have slightly emphasised the sighing figure formed by the main beats when the opening material returns at 0’43”-47”) but the emotional impact is utterly direct, and even now seems uncompromisingly avant-garde. For Robert Schumann, it represented “the wind blowing over the graves after the funeral”. Anton Rubinstein had a curious approach to playing this movement: before the start, he would permanently depress Chopin’s stroke of genius with a clunky transition worthy of a music student set to fail Harmony 101. But even aside from this, the Sonata raised eyebrows on its first appearance, largely owing to the bizarre finale, which even today seems bafflingly macabre to those expecting a more conventional close.

The third Sonata was written in 1844, nearly five years after the second. The much greater expansiveness and more open integration of the later piece may constitute Chopin’s response to those who had criticized the Funeral Sonata for disunity and excessive structural concision (in Schumann’s excruciatingly affected language, Chopin had “yoked together four of his wildest children”). While the model for the op.35 Sonata had been Beethoven’s op.26, the plan of its successor in B minor was equally obviously Johann Nepomuk Hummel’s once well-known Sonata in F sharp minor, a work that left a clear mark on Liszt’s Sonata in B minor as well as Chopin’s.

The first movement, a grand and luxuriously extended Allegro maestoso, follows a very similar structure to the Hummel. But Chopin has by far the better tunes, which partly explains the popularity of his music and the neglect of Hummel’s. Indeed, Chopin’s second subject is one of the great melodies of the piano repertoire. It is probably only its vocally challenging melismas that have prevented it from being turned into an easy-listening song, like “So deep is the night” from the Etude op.10 no.3. The Allegro is followed by a quicksilver Scherzo in Eb major, its fleet figuration contrasting vividly with the central trio. Here, a comforting lullaby gradually emerges from the held notes of interlocking chords. It personally reminds me of one of the forest scenes from Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream, but that is merely imaginative speculation. Chopin, unlike Liszt and Berlioz, was always hesitant to mention any specific images in connection with his music.

A stern preludial introduction ushers in the slow movement. The noble melody of dignified beauty that follows could easily be from an opera by Bellini, a reminder of the mutual admiration of the Italian and the Polish composer, who met often in the Paris of the 1830s. The dreamily undulating central section of the movement has been considered too lengthy by some pianists, who make a discreet cut in performance. I suspect that they are simply playing the section too slowly, and that Chopin expected the player to count two beats in a bar, rather than four, although he did not directly indicate this. One of his students claimed that there was a similar oversight in the central section of the Nocturne op.37 no.1: Chopin had intended to change the time signature, but forgot to do so.

The sonata’s finale begins with yet another short prelude, this time setting the stage for a vigorously memorable theme in riding rhythm. The music replicates the key and the harmonic structure (rising by thirds) of the opening of Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture, which Wagner also remembered very well when he was writing his Ride of the Valkyries. There could certainly be a chain of influences here, but it is also possible that all three composers associated this harmonic sequence with the “primitive” folk music of Europe, whether illustrative of Scots, Poles or Nordic deities. Chopin juxtaposes this bracingly elemental inspiration with brisk figuration as the music hurtles towards a thrillingly jubilant close.