

**Notes commissioned for a recital by William Howard at Lakeside Arts Centre,
Nottingham (May 2014)**

Lieder ohne Worte:

Andante espressivo, Op. 30 no. 1

Un poco agitato, ma andante, Op. 102 no. 4

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(1809-1847)

'Who has not sometimes sat alone at twilight before his pianoforte, and unconsciously, while improvising, has not softly sung a quiet melody to himself? Provided one is, above all, a Mendelssohn, and that one occasionally unites the melody to the accompaniment with the hands alone, the finest of "songs without words" will be the result.' So wrote Robert Schumann in his review of Mendelssohn's second volume of *Lieder ohne Worte*, op. 30. Mendelssohn's first foray into writing songs for the piano seems to date from around 1828, when he was still a teenager. The lyrical intimacy of a piano-only form evidently appealed to him; and although his first published *Lieder ohne Worte* op.19b (1833) had only modest success, he was to complete a further five volumes by 1845.

The six pieces of op. 30 were published in 1835, and the first of its set, in E flat major, was probably composed the previous winter. One can easily see how the gentle lyricism of this piece inspired Schumann's vision of solitary improvisation at twilight; and the intimacy of the form was to make it particularly popular with female musicians – indeed, a number of *Lieder ohne Worte* were written with specific women in mind. Op. 30 was dedicated to Elise von Woringen, the daughter of one of Mendelssohn's principal supporters in Düsseldorf; other pieces were composed for Clara Schumann, Mendelssohn's sister Fanny, and other female amateur pianists of his acquaintance.

At the time of Mendelssohn's death, in 1847, a number of further *Lieder ohne Worte* were already in circulation amongst his friends. His German publisher, Simrock, subsequently arranged the remaining pieces from the composer's estate into two further books, published as op. 85 and op.102. The fourth item of op. 102, in G minor, was written in May 1845; and whilst it retains a strong sense of melodic shape, the writing seems more overtly pianistic – almost reminiscent of Chopin in its idiomaticism.

Rondo Capriccioso in E major, Op. 14

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(1809-1847)

In 1825, whilst visiting Paris, the young Mendelssohn encountered a twelve-year-old piano prodigy by the name of Delphine von Schauroth. Impressed by her outstanding playing, he was delighted to meet her again in Munich, in 1830, and the two became close friends. (Indeed, at one time Mendelssohn's sisters even considered her to be a potential sister-in-law.) The two evidently played to each other often, and it seems that Mendelssohn showed her a number of his earlier

compositions, including an *Étude* in E minor that he had written in 1828. He wrote to his sister Fanny, in June 1830, that Delphine ‘has commanded me, under pain of one disgrace or another, to edit the great 6/8 Rondo Capriccioso in E minor. So, I have tastily cooked it up with a stirring introductory Adagio, some new melodies and passages, and I have been successful. Now I just have to write it out and present it to her...’

The result of Mendelssohn’s efforts is a fleet-footed rondo (bearing hints of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, still over a decade in the future), requiring of some considerable skill to keep the music as light and effortless as the score seems to demand. This is prefaced by his ‘stirring’ introduction, a grandly rhetorical Andante (evidently he changed the tempo marking after his letter to Fanny). But above all, there is a sense of great energy and humour in this music, particularly in Mendelssohn’s setting up of each reappearance of the rondo.

Two days after his letter to his sister, the piece was completed and presented to Delphine, who offered her thanks in the form of a *Lied ohne Worte* of her own composition, in the same key as the Rondo Capriccioso. Although the romance came to nothing, the two remained friends, and Mendelssohn dedicated his First Piano Concerto to her in 1832.

Fantasy in C major, ‘Wandererfantasie’ D760

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797-1828)

Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo — Adagio — Presto — Allegro

This evening’s programme is infused with song in a multitude of guises – but it is in this, arguably Schubert’s most ambitious composition for solo piano, that we hear a little of a song which was originally composed *with* words, rather than without. The so-called ‘Wandererfantasie’, composed in November 1822, was dedicated to a rich and talented pianist, Emanuel Karl Liebenberg de Zsittin (who had been a pupil of Hummel’s). At its centre is a quotation from Schubert’s setting of Georg Phillip Schmidt’s poem *Der Wanderer* D489, which had appeared in print the year before, in May 1821, and was rivalled only by *Erkönig* as his most popular song during his lifetime. It is the second verse of the song which appears in the Fantasie’s Adagio: ‘Here the sun seems so cold, / The blossom faded, life old, / And men’s words mere hollow noise; / I am a stranger everywhere.’

This minor-key Adagio theme is not directly quoted in the surrounding sections of the Fantasie; instead, it is the dactylic rhythm of the song’s accompaniment (long, short-short) that permeates the piece. This is first presented as the energetic theme of the opening Allegro, and it is *this* theme (rather than the song quotation) that is then transformed into the repeated refrain of the 3/4 Presto and the final Allegro fugue. Although each section dissolves into the next in a flurry of virtuosic chords and arpeggios – as one would expect with a ‘Fantasie’ – the overall construction of this innovative work has strong links to sonata form. It is compact and cyclic, with each section serving as a part of a single, larger structure: one commentator describes the faster sections as ‘a sort of sonata-form sandwich’ around the ‘filling’ of the *Wanderer* Adagio.

Quite aside from such structural ingenuity is Schubert's extraordinarily vivid use of a multitude of keys: the piece's home key is C major, yet the Adagio is cast in C sharp minor and major. And a whole range of tonalities provide both dramatic contrasts between themes, and provide flashes of colour as the pianist races through them in the fantasie passages between sections. In the space of twenty minutes, we are led, pushed and thrown through a tremendous range of dances, counterpoint, lyrical melodies, ominous tremolos and thundering chords – with the song providing the one still point in the drama.

Liebenberg de Zsittin must have been a prodigiously talented pianist to warrant the dedication of such a piece; it is notable that the first public performance was given by the virtuoso Karl Maria von Bocklet, in 1832. Schubert's close friend, the painter Leopold Kupelwieser, recalled that when Schubert played the 'Wandererfantasie' to his friends, he 'broke down in the last movement... he sprang up from his seat with the words: "Let the devil play the stuff!"'.

Barcarolle in F sharp major, Op. 60

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
(1810-1849)

Taken as a group, the three piano works of Chopin that close tonight's programme reveal three rather different attitudes, on the part of the composer, towards musical genres for his instrument. The most straightforward of these is the Barcarolle, composed between 1845 and 1846 – which is Chopin's only such essay in the medium. The Barcarolle was already a popular form in the eighteenth century, conjuring the songs of the Venetian gondoliers; and it was subsequently taken up by Schubert in several of his *Lieder*, and in three of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*. Chopin's work stretches the traditional 6/8 time signature of the genre to 12/8, but the swaying 'Venetian' thirds and sixths of the melody, the transparency of texture, and the gently static left hand are all characteristic of the genre as it had been established by his predecessors. The work was dedicated to the Baroness von Stockhausen, wife of the German ambassador in Paris, whose daughter, Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, was to become a ferociously talented pianist and a close friend of Johannes Brahms. By a similar token, the first Ballade Op. 23, was dedicated to Elizabeth's father.

Nocturne in A flat major, Op. 32 no. 2

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
(1810-1849)

The Nocturne was also a pre-existing musical form, famously popularised by John Field (1782-1837). The elegant vocal-style melodies and sustained arpeggiated bass figurations of the early nineteenth-century nocturne were first adopted, and then transformed, by Chopin as he began to explore the possibilities of the genre. Between c.1829 and 1846 Chopin composed nineteen nocturnes, developing the medium into a far subtler and more complex form than the simple, harmonically predictable work of his predecessors.

The two Nocturnes Op. 32 fall roughly in the middle of this period, and were published in 1837. In the second of the pair, in A flat major, Chopin provides both a pair of 'bookends' in the form of

two bars of Lento chords, and the familiar ABA structure within this. The effect is striking – whilst there is no marked tempo change for the contrasting middle section, its increasingly agitated nature allows us to hear the A section, when it returns, in a completely different light. And the two Lento bars with which we began, a kind of rhetorical opening gesture, become the means of quietly resolving the music at its conclusion.

Ballade no. 1 in G minor, Op. 23

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
(1810-1849)

Finally, we come to a musical genre which Chopin himself invented: the solo piano Ballade. At the time of the work's creation, between 1831 and 1835, the term 'ballade' was exclusively applied to vocal compositions (particularly by Schubert and Loewe, and in certain kinds of French operatic composition); and Chopin's adoption of the term hints at his interest in the literary preoccupations of contemporaries such as Schumann and Liszt. However, no programme was ever presented for these compositions – and in the first advertisements for the G minor Ballade Op. 23, the phrase 'ohne Worte' was appended to the title.

Whilst the narrative of the first Ballade refers to no specific extra-musical source, there is a strong sense of drama in the variation and playing out of two contrasting themes over the course of the piece. Following a brief Largo introduction, we are presented with the first of these, a moderato G minor melody in 6/4, which is subsequently set in contrast with a second, rather more lyrical theme in E flat major. These two themes alternate in increasingly intense, impassioned and virtuosic presentations, until the first theme makes a final reappearance over a long dominant pedal and bursts into a Presto finale in G minor, the home key is resoundingly restated over several pages.

In September 1836, Robert Schumann wrote to a friend, 'Just as I received your letter two days ago and was on the point of answering it, who do you think walked in? Chopin! That was a splendid treat. We spent a wonderful day together... He gave me a new Ballade in G minor. It seems to me his most inspired work (if not the one most filled with genius), and I told him I liked it best of all his works. After a long pause for reflection he said with great emphasis, "I'm glad you think so; it is my favourite too."'