

PROGRAM

Music of Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Four Ballades

- Op. 23, in G Minor (1831–1835)
- Op. 38, in F Major (1836–1839)
- Op. 47, in A-flat Major (1840–1841)
- Op. 52, in F Minor (1842)

INTERMISSION

Twenty-four Preludes, Op. 28 (1836–1839)

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| No. 1 in C Major | No. 13 in F-sharp Major |
| No. 2 in A Minor | No. 14 in E-flat Minor |
| No. 3 in G Major | No. 15 in D-flat Major |
| No. 4 in E Minor | No. 16 in B-flat Minor |
| No. 5 in D Major | No. 17 in A-flat Major |
| No. 6 in B Minor | No. 18 in F Minor |
| No. 7 in A Major | No. 19 in E-flat Major |
| No. 8 in F-sharp Minor | No. 20 in C Minor |
| No. 9 in E Major | No. 21 in B-flat Major |
| No. 10 in C-sharp Minor | No. 22 in G Minor |
| No. 11 in B Major | No. 23 in F Major |
| No. 12 in G-sharp Minor | No. 24 in D Minor |

Viennese pianist **Stefan Vladar** returns to the National Gallery for his second appearance, having played his Washington debut here in 1998. Among the most active and distinctive Austrian pianists of his generation, he studied at the Vienna Music Academy with Renate Kramer-Praisenhämmer and Hans Petermandl. The youngest contestant in the 1985 International Beethoven Competition of Vienna, Vladar won its top prize. In the years since winning that contest he has enjoyed an international career that includes collaborations with such renowned conductors as Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Chailly, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, and Christoph von Dohnányi. Vladar is a regular guest at many of the world's most prestigious festivals, including the Festival and Mozartwoche in Salzburg, the Schleswig-Holstein and Rheingau Festivals in Germany, and, at the personal invitation of the late Rudolf Serkin, the Marlboro Festival. Since 1988 he has been the artistic director of the *Neuberger Kulturtage* in Styria, where he also established the annual *Neuberger Schumann-Tage*. In 1999 Vladar assumed the artistic directorship of the *Oberösterreichische Stiftskonzerte* and was appointed professor of piano at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. Highlights of Vladar's 2000–2001 concert season included performances with the American Symphony Orchestra in New York and the New World Symphony Orchestra in Miami Beach, Florida. In addition, he toured as guest soloist with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra under Vladimir Fedoseyev and played in Europe and Japan. Stefan Vladar has recorded piano concertos of Mozart with the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields under Sir Neville Marriner, as well as solo and chamber music of Schumann, Beethoven, Brahms, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Richard Strauss on the Sony, Naxos, Camerata, and Koch Classics labels. He appears at the National Gallery by arrangement with Matthew Sprizzo of Staten Island, New York.

Each of the four *Ballades* of Chopin had its inspiration in the poetry of his compatriot Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855). The elocutionary quality of these works earned for Chopin the rightful designation as a creator rather than a mimic or renovator. According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the ballade is “an instrumental (normally piano) piece in a narrative style. It was first used by Chopin,

[who] composed four ballades [having] compound meter (6/4 or 6/8) and a structure...governed not so much by formal procedures as by a programmatic or literary intention.” The great German music scholar and author, Friedrich Niecks (1845–1924), declared: “None of Chopin’s compositions surpasses his *Ballades* in masterliness of form, beauty, or poetry of content.” The English Chopin scholar Arthur Hedley (1905–1969) admonished: “To give a worthy account of these masterpieces is a task not to be undertaken lightly. They represent four summits of pianism.... If there is to be a conquest of any one of them, something more is required than mere nimble fingers and a few facile recipes for expressiveness.”

The *Ballade in G Minor, Op. 23*, is the opening window on four musical storytelling adventures. It begins like a fairy tale: “Once upon a time, long ago....” Marked *largo* and in 4/4 time, this seven-bar introduction gives away to an ongoing narrative at the change of tempo (*moderato*) and meter (6/4). The deep passion expressed in the following measures seems to emanate from great longing (possibly for Chopin’s homeland). A brief reprieve (*meno mosso, sotto voce*), is followed by a short and capricious waltzlike passage, and after a return of the opening statement, a coda of ferocious scales and octaves brilliantly closes the work

Ballade No. 2 in F Major, Op. 38, is dedicated to Robert Schumann and is said to have been the favorite of the great nineteenth-century Russian pianist, Anton Rubinstein. This particular ballade is the only one believed to be linked to a specific Mickiewicz poem. The poem, *Świtezia*, spins a tale of a town and its inhabitants’ relationship with an enchanted lake. The musical realization consists of two contrasting themes: the first (*andantino*) is unpretentious, pleasant, and meditative, while the second (*presto con fuoco*) is impetuous and rapacious almost to the point of being barbaric.

Considerably less aggressive than its neighbors, though not without passion, is the third *Ballade, Op. 47*. It has an outline that can be identified with the sonata-allegro form. There are primary and secondary themes in the opening segment, followed by a development section, the theme of which is extracted from the second subject but is freely devised. The development section concludes with a brief recapitulation

based on the primary theme. *Op. 47*, according to music critic James Huneker (1857–1921), “is the delight [of the schoolgirl], who familiarly toys with its demon, seeing only favor and prettiness in its elegant measures.” In spite of its apparently delicate façade and flowery opening segment, *Ballade No. 3* carries an elegant air of gallantry. In the words of the American writer Herbert Weinstock (1905–1971), this ballade “is one of Chopin’s masterpieces.... Nothing else he composed has [its] special quality of exultance [or the] radiant jubilation that makes this [particular work] seem to glow upon the piano.”

Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52, is the most eloquent and luxurious of the four. It is a daring canvas of passionate lyricism. The opening theme, a masterpiece of simplicity, is richly developed through Chopin’s use of polyphonic techniques. Music critic Jean Roy sees this work as a mingling of the “classical forms of variation and rondo masterly executed by Chopin.” Expanded and embroidered with each return, the theme in its narrative tone becomes more reflective and intense, until five long serene chords introduce a final coda of immense audacity and velocity. Rapid scale passages in double thirds and sixths, coupled with crackling dissonances, bring the work to a brilliant and dramatic close.

Chopin found complete satisfaction in composing works for solo piano, excelling in the shorter musical forms (preludes, etudes, waltzes, scherzos, and ballades). Modeled after the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Johann Sebastian Bach, whom Chopin idolized, the *Préludes, Op. 28*, cover all major and minor keys. They are, as John Gillespie says in *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, “very much like Bach’s preludes, not in technical style but in attitude and basic concept. The *Préludes*...faithfully reflect the soul of the romantic musician: brief portrayals, some, such as *No. 24*, melancholy and even desperate, others, such as *No. 3*, light and gay.” Before displaying his collection, a jeweler will polish his stones to perfection. The musical jeweler Chopin polished his *Préludes* to the highest state of flawlessness that is humanly possible. Again quoting Gillespie: “[when] played as a set, [the *Préludes*] provide a tonal mosaic, a prism of different hues. Heard singly, each emerges as a delectable inspiration born of concentrated emotion.”

Program notes by Elmer Booze