

LIR CLASSICS

LIR013 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Summer in Nohant

It is a perversion of composer biographies that the trickiest thing to discuss in biographical terms is the composing itself, in all its experiential complexity. Chopin spent many hours of his life - and for him they were doubtless among the richest and most satisfying - just sitting at a desk struggling with recalcitrant musical materials, rejecting, refining, elaborating. 'I write a little and cross out a lot', he once wrote to his sister. 'Sometimes I am pleased with it, sometimes not. I throw it into a corner and then pick it up again.' Yet sitting at a desk hardly makes for exciting copy, especially when compared with elopements to Mallorca. So although Chopin undoubtedly composed his greatest music during the summers he spent at George Sand's country estate Nohant, biographers have said relatively little about his life in this fairly remote corner of rural France (it is situated near Le Châtre in the province of Berry). The months spent at Nohant may have been among the fullest and most eventful of all in the mysterious interior landscape of the composer's creative imagination, but they were uneventful in conventional biographical terms. So it is perhaps no surprise that only in fiction does Nohant receive anything like its due, notably through the intriguing blend of myth and reality we encounter in the play *Lato w Nohant* [Summer in Nohant] by the eminent Polish poet and distant cousin of Karol Szymanowski, Jaroslaw Iwaskiewicz.

For all its idealisation of those summers, Iwaskiewicz's play does convey something of the blend of 'splendid isolation' and artistic vitality that accompanied Chopin and Sand right from the first summer in Nohant in 1839. Despite the romantic connotations, the Mallorca episode of the previous winter had been a disaster for both of them, and especially for Chopin's health. It had been followed by a long convalescence in Marseilles, and then by that restorative first summer at the old manor house. There were seven summers in all. They were not quite successive (1840 was spent entirely in Paris), and the last of them (1846) took place in the unhappy circumstances of the composer's disintegrating relationship with George Sand. Sand has been given a bad press by Chopin biographers, so it is salutary to remember what a remarkable woman she was, leaving her mark, sometimes carelessly, on just about all aspects of the political, social and cultural world of her time. More pertinently, it is worth reminding ourselves that it was thanks to her that Chopin was given the financial security and familial stability that enabled him to devote extended periods to composition during these summers. His routine at Nohant was straightforward. He had a large room on the first floor, separated from Sand's by a shared sitting room. He took a late breakfast in his room, spent his day composing, and joined the family and other guests for dinner (always at six), followed by conversation, music and other entertainments.

The down side was his occasional boredom. Chopin had no real feeling for the country, and at times hankered after Paris and 'society'. Yet Sand was alive to this problem, and did her best to alleviate it by arranging visits from artists, friends, and even (towards the end) his sister from Warsaw. It was thanks to Nohant that Chopin had an opportunity to get more closely acquainted with Eugène Delacroix, for instance, and the two artists developed a real, and in some ways a surprising, affinity. Delacroix's diary not only provides us with one of the most poetic evocations of Chopin in Nohant ('From time to time you hear through the window opening out onto the garden strains of Chopin's music, blending with the nightingales and the scent of the roses.');

it also affords us one of the few concrete examples of Chopin's thoughts about creativity in music, referring in particular to the primary significance of counterpoint. In any case, the compensations of Nohant far outweighed any occasional ennui, and we benefit from them to this day. Nohant opened up a space within which some of the most exceptional and sophisticated music of the European tradition, much of it recorded here, could come to fruition.

By the time of the first summer, Chopin was widely recognised as a composer of remarkable originality, albeit addressing a rather narrow circle of initiates (he was never a 'public' composer-pianist of the kind epitomised by Liszt). No small part of that originality lay in his rethinking of some of the established genres of post-classical pianism, such that genre titles took on new and rather specific meanings within his music. We may begin with the mazurka, represented here by the Op. 41 set, of which the first (the so-called 'Palma mazurka') was composed in Mallorca and the others in Nohant, and by the Op. 59 set, written during the penultimate summer in 1845. A plausible case can be made for regarding Chopin's early published mazurkas (Opp. 6 and 7) as the first canonic repertory of European nationalism, predating the relevant works of Glinka by several years, and inaugurating a century of romantic nationalism in art music. In Chopin's hands, this unpretentious dance piece acquired a new-found ambition as a site for sophisticated dialogues between so-called 'folk music' and contemporary art music, and at the same time as a locus for both compositional innovation and subjective expression. More than any other single genre, the mazurka is the thread of continuity running through the composer's entire output. Yet there are perceptible gear changes along the way, and it is hard not to register a significant shift of orientation between the two sets recorded here. They were, after all, separated by some six years.

'They seem pretty to me,' Chopin wrote of the Op. 41 set, 'just as the youngest children appear beautiful to ageing parents.' While 'pretty' no doubt seems an inadequate term for these delicately drafted and immensely subtle pieces, it would be downright unthinkable as a description of the later Op. 59 set, where Chopin's ambition for the genre reached new heights. These later pieces are dance poems on the grandest scale, displaying (or rather concealing) a wealth of harmonic and contrapuntal subtlety, as in the hidden counterpoints of No. 2, which contains one of the most adventurous of Chopin's sliding chains of chromatic harmonies, and in the glorious canonic bridge to the reprise of No. 3, with its eloquent, harmonically so subtle, coda. It is interesting too that Chopin rejected an earlier manuscript of this last mazurka in the interests of cyclic unity, transposing the entire piece from its original G minor to F sharp minor in order to forge tonal links with the other pieces. Compared with Op. 59, the Op. 41 mazurkas - the first fruits of Nohant - are somewhat closer to recognisable folk idioms, with bourdon pedals, modal melodic patterns, and many of those whimsical details that characterise Chopin's earlier mazurkas, from the tonal dislocations of No. 1 (sketched incidentally on the same page as another E minor piece from Mallorca, the fourth of the *Préludes*) to the unexpected 'mid-thought' ending of

No. 3. The last mazurka is the longest and most ambitious of the set, its structural weight confirming that although Chopin was happy to play the mazurkas individually, he also thought of them as cycles.

The two sets of nocturnes recorded here are more proximate in date, Op. 48 composed during the summer of 1841, and Op. 55 begun the following summer but only given a final polish in 1843. The C minor Nocturne Op. 48 No. 1 has been widely regarded by commentators as among the most imposing and dramatic of the series, and it is certainly one of the most expansive. This is partly due to the 'enlargement' of the principal melody in the reprise. It is a gesture characteristic of several large-scale works of Chopin, including the third Ballade and Polonaise-fantaisie, and it marks a crucial change from the practices of so-called 'Viennese' classicism; in a word, the reprise functions in Chopin as an apotheosis rather than a synthesis. The approach to this reprise is also characteristic, not least in its collision of genres, as a delicate bel canto melody gives way to a heroic march in the tonic major. While the first nocturne of Op. 48 dwarfs its companion in just about every way, the reverse might be claimed of the Op. 55 pair. The E flat Nocturne Op. 55 No. 2 is in every way a richer and more adventurous piece than its predecessor, bringing to the service of its lyricism a contrapuntal edge and harmonic asperity which were given only restrained expression in the earlier nocturnes. The opening paragraph here is truly extraordinary for the independence of its part movement, its rhythmic complexity, and the unorthodox level of dissonance justified by its linear textures.

The three extended works recorded here are presented (as is the music generally) in chronological sequence. It is worth noting that all three are in the key of A flat major, a fact which might well have registered more tellingly in Chopin's time than in our own. That said, there is considerable space between the warmth and elegance of the third Ballade's A flat, almost Schubertian in character with a lyrical opening theme and carefully symmetrical periodic phrasing, and the heroic A flat of the Polonaise Op. 53. Composed in the summer of 1841, the third Ballade owes something to each of its predecessors. The parallel with the first Ballade begins with the tonal structure, and extends to the 'quick waltz' central episode and the apotheotic mirror reprise. The second Ballade is evoked rather by the generic character of the themes, with

their barcarolle-like associations. Such 'characteristic themes' function almost as dramatis personae, with their interplay, cathartic dissolution (into the pivotal waltz theme), and fusion into a single entity in the development section creating one important dimension of the work's dramatic effect. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that nineteenth-century critics were inclined to attribute poetic meanings to the piece, and even to link it explicitly with particular ballads by Adam Mickiewicz. However, if this music 'mimes a drama', it is due even more to the unpredictability of its formal design and tonal structure, as the composer skillfully remodels the elements of sonata form by placing them in new contexts and subtly blending their traditionally separate formal functions.

It is of the greatest significance that Chopin turned his back on the polonaise for several years after leaving Warsaw. It is as though he wanted to dissociate himself from an earlier understanding of 'national music', as something linked with the nation but available to all. Prior to 1835 the polonaise was, after all, favoured by W. F. Bach, Telemann, Beethoven, Hummel and Weber, and in their hands it had no more to do with Polish nationalism than had the *écossaise* with a struggle for Scottish independence. It was conceived, in other words, as a cosmopolitan genre, albeit spiced with a lively local colour. When he returned to the polonaise in the mid 1830s - the Op. 26 pieces are the first he himself issued for publication - Chopin redefined the genre

totally, conceiving it in heroic terms (mainly through a kind of essentialising of its gestures) far removed from the virtuosity of post-classical pianism. Op. 53, composed mainly in the summer of 1843, is the culmination of this tendency, with its electric 'announcement', its orchestral sonorities, and its 'trio' reducing the music to ruthlessly repetitive ostinati. The combined resonance of the genre title and the rather explicit referential codes established by the music was unmistakably suggestive to Polish audiences. There is scarcely a nineteenth-century account of this work that eschews the imagery of patriotism, nationalism, and the call to arms.

Unsurprisingly, commentators have been tempted to construct an historical narrative in which Chopin's polonaises grow in length and complexity, culminating in the great Polonaise-fantaisie Op. 61, completed in 1846 and the last extended work he wrote for solo piano (as well as his musical farewell to Nohant). Yet the evidence of the sketches tells a quite different and rather fascinating story. It is clear that Chopin was really intent on writing a 'Fantasy', similar in conception and design to the Op. 49 Fantasy (the same improvisatory introduction, the same 'slow movement' in B major in the context of A flat), and that only after completing the work did he think to turn the opening theme into a 'polonaise' by the simple addition of a semiquaver to the left-hand accompaniment. The work, in short, is more 'fantasy' than 'polonaise', and in fact the polonaise rhythm disappears entirely after the opening section. These same sketches are eloquent testimony to the intensely self-critical approach to composition Chopin adopted in these later years. Through them we can see how a relatively simple ternary design was purposefully extended and rendered complex through strategies of interruption and insertion, teasing our ears and minds and erecting strategic obstacles to any easy assimilation of the form and the flow. Leonard B. Meyer expressed it well when he remarked that great art enables us to feel the 'uncertainty of the improbable while convincing us of its propriety'.

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