

樂曲介紹

D 大調迴旋曲，K. 485

莫扎特（1756-1791）

《媽媽請聽我說》十二段變奏曲，K. 265

鋼琴在莫扎特的職業生涯中扮演了重要的角色，尤其是他英年早逝前那十年——即 1781 至 1791 年，他以自由身在維也納活動期間。他在鍵盤上表現的即興才華，充滿想像力，且手揮目送，因此聲名鵲起。他又透過舉辦音樂會，以獨奏家身份介紹自己最新的協奏曲，因此捧場者日多。就這樣，他身兼作曲和演奏，在維也納透過公開演出和私人教學來謀生。在當時，演奏家和作曲家的身份並沒有像現今古典音樂界那樣明確地劃分。其後貝多芬來到維也納，也用了這種模式，以鋼琴演奏家的身份打響了名堂，同時寫曲創作。

莫扎特除了創作鋼琴協奏曲和較長篇的鋼琴奏鳴曲外，還喜歡寫一些盡顯心思的鋼琴獨奏小品。《D 大調迴旋曲，K. 485》是他在維也納時期的作品，創作於 1786 年 1 月，距他完成兩部鋼琴協奏曲傑作——《A 大調協奏曲，K. 488》和《C 小調協奏曲，K. 491》僅僅幾個月。與此同時，他還忙於創作《費加羅的婚禮》，這是他與才華洋溢的劇作家洛倫佐·達·龐特的首次合作。《費加羅的婚禮》在 1786 年 5 月的首演，標誌著他在歌劇作曲方面的重大突破。實際上，莫扎特的鋼琴協奏曲可以視為他一心要創作的歌劇的器樂替代品，因其中包含了許多類似意大利歌劇中充滿柔情的詠歎調或歡樂洋溢的劇終場景。

《D 大調迴旋曲，K. 485》的整體風格，令人聯想到莫扎特在《費加羅的婚禮》中怎樣把喜歌劇提升至盡善盡美，展現這樂種生動活潑的特色。他稱這首作品為「迴旋曲」，指的是一種圍繞主題展開的古典曲式，在主題重複出現之間，會穿插各種對比的片段。重現的主題，就像舞蹈中不斷重複的排列組合一樣。

但是，莫扎特稱這首為「迴旋曲」，卻顯得有點刻意誤導，他是在狡黠地擺弄樂迷一下。樂曲確實聽起來像迴旋曲，但實際上遵循的是古典風格的奏鳴曲式，即是分「呈示部」（主題材料，並重複一遍）、「開展部」（樂思），及帶有微妙變化的「再現部」。主題本身輕鬆愉快，以一種蘇格蘭風「逆置附點」的節奏突進，即一個附點音符前是一個時值較短、兼負重音的音符。莫扎特玩這手法玩得不亦樂乎，因太容易認出來了，他只想表示他仍能活用其中的變化元素，進入意想不到的調性，並以優雅的

技巧裝飾音樂的流動來給我們帶來驚訝趣味。莫扎特甚至狡猾地引用了自己的作品（來自他於 1785 年寫的《G 小調鋼琴四重奏》的終曲，作品編號 K. 478）。

莫扎特在 1781 年或 1782 年之前創作了《媽媽請聽我說》十二段變奏曲，K. 265，且又一次搗亂聽眾的期望。這組變奏曲以「初學者」的 C 大調為基調，作曲者刻意令彈奏方式多樣化，可見得寫這些變奏曲，他旨在幫助學生提高技巧。

此外，這個主題本身非常簡單，似是給小孩聽的。最為人所熟知的是哄嬰孩入睡的搖籃曲，在英語國家是《一閃一閃小星星》，也有唱字母的版本。這些歌詞要到旋律出現後差不多半個世紀才寫成。這旋律最早於 1761 年出版，配以一首在法國很受歡迎的兒歌歌詞：「呀！媽媽，請聽我說」。很多作曲家借用這旋律寫了各種不同作品，莫扎特只是其中之一，他的朋友海頓是另一位，可見於他的《第九十四交響曲「驚愕」》的〈行板〉。

然而……這裡展現出一種似簡單而實不是的底蘊：莫扎特正為自己能夠把最基本的旋律化作神奇，並以八小節的組合呈現出整齊有序甚感洋洋自得。曲中內容變了又變，甚至在某一時刻達到了歌劇的悲哀感。然儘管有閃亮的裝飾音和飛躍的指尖舞蹈，這支曲子的純真依然在縈繞。

《鏡》選曲三首：

拉威爾（1875-1937）

《海上孤舟》、《悲鳥》、《丑角的晨歌》

拉威爾在 1928 年一篇自傳式文章裡回憶道：「《鏡》這一系列供鋼琴演出的作品集，標誌著我在和聲發展方向的明顯變化，這變化大得足以讓先前絕不用花氣力去欣賞我風格的一眾音樂家感到困擾」。事實上，自從他成為新進的作曲家以來，他就一直讓思想保守的同行感到不悅。儘管他早期的鋼琴和室樂作品已經證明了他的能力，「羅馬大獎」的評審委員會卻五次拒絕授予他這個備受推崇、有助於事業發展的獎項，導致評委會不公正之說甚囂塵上，引起了一場醜聞，巴黎音樂學院院長辭職，由思想比較開明的佛瑞接任。

《鏡》是拉威爾這段創作時期將完結時的作品，寫於 1904-05 年間，是一組包含五個樂章的鋼琴獨奏組曲。從某程度上來說，這組作品是拉威爾向他藝術圈中的夥伴致敬。這個圈子包括音樂家、詩人、畫家，他們自稱為「Les Apaches」，這個詞在當時的巴黎意指「街頭幫派」。其中一位成員——西班牙鋼琴家里卡多·維涅斯以幽默反諷的態度接受了原本帶有侮辱意味的詞語，並將之視為他與一眾藝術家朋友的象徵。《鏡》中的每個樂章都是拉威爾對不同「Apaches」朋友的致敬，正如標題所顯示的，呈現了他們的個性特徵。然而，這些作品並不僅僅是「立像」而已，更是拉威爾對自己和朋友的感知融合在一起，展現了他們之間的情感和共鳴。

《海上孤舟》原本是組曲中的第三首曲目，也是最長的一首；它經常被人拿來與德布西的偉大「交響畫」系列之一《大海》作比較。閃爍的織體、微妙的節奏變化，塑造出一艘船在不斷變化的洋流中航行的景象。拉威爾的鋼琴曲寫作過程中，即使是一個簡單的動作也能蘊含著高潮的力量，同時帶有浪花消散的感覺。

《悲鳥》是組曲中最早創作並獻給維涅斯的一首。樂曲以一隻鳥的悲鳴開始，引起其他鳥兒加入。拉威爾形容這首曲子是「描繪夏日炎炎，迷失在一片非常陰暗的森林中的鳥兒。」佛瑞觀察到拉威爾將曲子分為「兩層，上層是較高亢的鳥鳴聲，以稍微刺耳的快速阿拉貝斯克花飾音呈現；下層是令人窒息、陰暗的森林氛圍，相對沉重，以近乎不動的踏板控音籠罩」。

《丑角的晨歌》，原題「gracioso」是指西班牙文藝復興時期的一個常見的滑稽角色；在此曲的故事中，他在黎明時分打斷了一對年輕戀人依依不捨的時刻。拉威爾對西班牙文化的熱愛在這組曲中明顯可見。他運用了帶有爵士樂風格的切分音，以工程師般的精確和嚴謹構建節奏，並用鋼琴來模仿小丑彈奏結他的聲音，最後以舞蹈的形式注入活力和能量，使場景充滿明亮的氛圍。

降 A 大調第四船歌，作品四十四

佛瑞（1845-1924）

升 F 小調第五船歌，作品六十六

在競爭激烈的巴黎音樂學院中，佛瑞是年輕的拉威爾的導師，在其他同事對這位作曲家發起攻擊時，佛瑞給予了他精神支持。佛瑞於 1845 年出生於法國南部，後獲獎學金前往巴黎的尼德梅爾音樂學校專攻教堂音樂，而比他年長十歲的聖桑成為了他的重要導師，對他的影響尤其深遠。隨後，佛瑞幫助初露頭角的拉威爾進入巴黎最尊貴的沙龍，兩人共同參與了創立促進法國最新音樂的組織「國家音樂協會」。

1882 年，聖桑在國家音樂協會舉辦的音樂會上首演了佛瑞的《第一船歌》。佛瑞總共創作了 13 首船歌，涵蓋了他音樂語言的演變，從年輕時期到二十世紀初，一直到他在 1921 年去世前三年。他晚期音樂的變化充滿戲劇性，部分反映了作曲家對日益嚴重的耳聾的反應。原標題中的「Barcarolle」一詞，源於意大利，代表船夫，尤其令人想起威尼斯的船夫和他們特有的悠揚歌聲。奧芬巴赫的遺作《霍夫曼的故事》中包含了文學上最著名的小夜曲之一——〈美麗的夜晚，啊，愛的夜晚〉，也是世界上最受喜愛的旋律之一。水的意象也預告了拉威爾的《海上孤舟》。然而，佛瑞對「船歌」這個樂種名稱持有保留態度，聲明他只是因為出版商要求才同意使用，以提高銷售。

麗莎·德勒沙爾在佛瑞 13 首船歌中挑選了兩首，第一首是特別著名的《降 A 大調第四船歌》，創作於 1886 年，當時佛瑞仍然明顯受蕭邦的影響，曲中有蕭邦精緻而細膩的織體在迴響。《升 F 小調第五船歌》則不像第四首那樣一目了然，創作於 1894 年，當時作曲家暫停了長時間的鋼琴創作，正在度假。曲子寫得無縫流暢，和先前四首船歌所採用的傳統三段式設計加尾聲不同。

殿堂級的鋼琴家瑪格麗特·朗是佛瑞特別珍愛的音樂演繹者之一，她形容這首「輝煌」的船歌為「充滿生氣和力量……散發著鹽味、海風的氣息，充滿強烈而健康的喜悅。人們可以聽到水手群聲呼喊，旋律如同漁船乘風破浪，歸來後又出海，帆滿飄飄」。她將這首音樂所喚起的感覺與詩人波德萊爾的一句詩相比：「音樂常像大海一樣震撼著我」。

G 小調第一敘事曲，作品二十三

蕭邦 (1810-1849)

F 小調第四敘事曲，作品五十二

蕭邦有一首非常出色的《升 F 大調船歌，作品六十》，能將他對意大利美聲歌劇的熱愛與非凡的技巧融合在一起，可說是船歌的典範。他的四首敘事曲也展現了他能在旋律方面的天賦和樂器的創新運用，取得平衡；他要求的精湛技巧，也是基於音樂內容和想像而不是炫技。

「敘事曲」這個沒有歌詞，僅由純音樂構成的樂種，一般認為是蕭邦所創造的。英文中的「ballade」一詞已存在數個世紀，但多用於文學作品（稱為「敘事詩」）或文藝復興之後的「歌謠」。然而，蕭邦在這個曲式中展現的激情，有時確實讓人聯想到沒有歌詞的歌劇。對許多崇拜蕭邦、視他為「鋼琴詩人」的樂迷來說，這四首敘事曲代表了蕭邦音樂才華的巔峰。四首樂曲創作時間約為十年，從 1830 年代初開始，直到 1840 年代，其中第四首於 1843 年出版。

蕭邦逃離祖國波蘭流亡到西歐時，舒曼成了他的伯樂，並鼎力支持。舒曼對標題音樂抱持開放態度，並運用影響力，引導人們嘗試解讀蕭邦每首敘事曲中具體的文學聯想。他強調這些作品的一個重要靈感來源，是波蘭詩人亞當·米茲凡奇的詩，米茲凡奇是蕭邦的同胞和朋友，也是一位激進的詩人、作家和活動家，同樣成為流亡到巴黎的異鄉人。

以《G 小調第一敘事曲，作品二十三》為例（舒曼曾公開表示截至 1836 年計，蕭邦的作品中他最喜歡的是這一首），據說是以音樂回應米茲凡奇寫的一首敘事詩；背景是想像中的中世紀，內容講述一位虛構的立陶宛英雄的事蹟。另一方面，《F 小調第四敘事曲，作品五十二》則與米茲凡奇另一首詩有關，講述三兄弟出去冒險，最後帶著三位波蘭新娘回國。

但是，對於這些說法，並沒有確鑿的證據。即使米茲凡奇的詩激發了蕭邦的想像力，他所創作的音樂也是獨立存在的，與外在事物完全無關。換句話說，除了蕭邦通過音符講述的故事，我們並不需要了解其他故事。根據音樂作家維克多·萊德勒的觀

點，「蕭邦以卓越的創造力，捨棄了特定的故事情節，保持了敘事的形式，使自己和聽眾的想像力都能夠自由發揮」。

第一敘事曲將耀目的技巧與複雜的詮釋要求相融合。在戲劇性的序曲預示了一部史詩般的故事即將展開後，蕭邦以頗長篇幅呈現了兩個主題（分別為 G 小調和降 E 大調），並逐層展開其詮釋。接著是充滿新激情的迅猛結尾，在幾次似是而非的尾聲後，最終以激動人心的手勢落下了帷幕。

雖然《第一敘事曲》廣受歡迎，但《第四敘事曲》作為四首中最長的一首，卻用了更長的時間才贏得「蕭邦最完美作品之一」的口碑。兩個主題的變奏是這首樂曲獨特結構的一個重要特點。樂曲以神秘地重複的 G 音開始，為這引人入勝的戲劇預設了舞台。蕭邦將看似簡單的段落與世界末日般的強烈程度相結合，最後以一場展現鋼琴才華的絕妙演奏結束，正如蕭邦專家詹·薩姆森所說：「（這演奏）彷彿以一輪熾熱的高超技巧驅散先前的衝突和緊張」。

Programme Notes

Rondo in D, K. 485

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Twelve variations on *Ah vous dirai-je, maman*, K. 265

The piano played a major role in Mozart's career as a freelance artist in Vienna during the final decade of his all-too-short life (from 1781 to 1791). He became a celebrity at the keyboard thanks to his imaginative improvisations as a virtuoso performer. Mozart expanded his fan base by organising concerts in which he would introduce his latest concertos as the soloist. He was thus a composer-performer who depended on a combination of these public events and private teaching to make a living in Vienna. Performers and composers during this time were not divided into different identities as they are today in the classical music world. Beethoven would also follow this pattern when he came to Vienna, making his name as a piano star while composing in parallel.

Mozart also enjoyed writing ingenious miniature pieces for solo piano along with his piano concertos and longer-form solo piano sonatas. The *Rondo in D, K. 485*, is a product of the Vienna years and dates from January 1786 – just a few months before Mozart completed two of his piano concerto masterpieces (the Concertos in A major, K. 488, and in C minor, K. 491). At the same time, Mozart was busy with the composition of *The Marriage of Figaro*, his first collaboration with the brilliant librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. *Figaro's* premiere in May 1786 marked a major breakthrough for his career as an opera composer. In fact, the piano concertos can often seem like instrumental substitutes for the operas Mozart wanted to compose: they contain many moments that resemble the tender arias or bustling comic finales associated with Italian opera.

The overall character of the *Rondo in D* recalls the lively, animated sensibility of the comic opera genre that Mozart raised to perfection in *Figaro*. The name he chose for this piece, “rondo”, refers to a well-known classical form revolving around a main theme. Various “episodes” of contrasting material are presented between repetitions of the theme, which nevertheless keeps returning, or coming “around”, like the repeated patterns of a dance.

Mozart, however, plays a clever game here in that calling his piece a “rondo” is a bit of a misdirection. It can certainly sound like a rondo but actually follows the sonata form which was a signature of the classical style: that is, an exposition of thematic material (which is repeated), a development of the ideas, and a reprise with subtle changes. The theme itself is delightfully cheerful, skipping forward with a rhythmic accent known as a “Scottish snap” – a kind of syncopated rhythm of short-long notes that places the accent on the first

note. Mozart has fun with the fact that it's so easy to recognise by showing that he can still surprise us with its potential for change. He does this by venturing into unexpected keys and decorating the musical flow with gestures of elegant virtuosity. Mozart even slyly adds a self-quotation (from the finale of his *Piano Quartet in G minor*, K. 478, from 1785).

Mozart composed "Twelve variations on *Ah vous dirai-je, maman*, K. 265", several years before, in 1781 or 1782. Once again, he plays games with the listener's expectations. This set of variations is in the "beginner's" key of C major, and the variety of types of playing which Mozart calls for suggests that the Variations are intended to help a student improve technique.

In addition, the theme itself is "baby simple" and is actually best known as a sweetly calming lullaby for babies and small children. In the English-speaking world, this tune is known as the nursery rhyme "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" (also sung to the letters of the alphabet). Those words were written almost half a century after the melody to which they were adapted. The melody was first published in 1761 to the words of a children's song popular in France: "*Ah! vous dirai-je, maman*" ("Oh! Shall I tell you, Mama"). Mozart was one of many composers who borrowed this tune for a wide variety of pieces (his friend Haydn was another: you can hear a version in the *Andante* of his *Symphony No. 94, Surprise*).

And yet...a deceptive simplicity is at work here, for Mozart revels in the magical transformations to which he can subject this basic melody, which is neatly divided into groups of eight bars. A variety of changing contexts is presented, even touching at one point on operatic lament. Yet for all the sparkling ornamentation and deft ballet of fingers, the innocence of the tune continues to resound.

Three pieces from *Miroirs*:

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

"Une barque sur l'océan", "Oiseaux tristes" and "Alborada del gracioso"

"The *Miroirs* form a collection of pieces for piano which mark a change in my harmonic development pronounced enough to have upset those musicians who till then had had the least trouble in appreciating my style", Ravel recalled in an autobiographical sketch in 1928. Indeed, he had been upsetting conservative-minded colleagues since his days as an emerging composer. The jury for the Prix de Rome denied him the prestigious, career-building prize five times, even though he had proved his credentials with his early piano and chamber music. The sense that an injustice was being committed caused a scandal that led to the director of the Conservatoire's resignation and his replacement by the more-open-minded Gabriel Fauré.

Miroirs comes from near the end of this period and was composed in 1904 and 1905 as a five-movement suite for solo piano. On one level, it comprises an act of collective homage to fellow members of Ravel's artistic circle. This group of musicians, poets, and painters liked to call themselves "Les Apaches", a which implied "street gangs" at that time in Paris. One of them, the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, appropriated what was intended as an insult and claimed it for his fellow artists with ironic bemusement. Each of the five *Miroirs* is dedicated to one of Ravel's fellow "Apaches" and, as the title implies, reflects their personalities. But these are not mere "portraits" of different characters. The *Miroirs* blend Ravel's perceptions of himself with those of his friends.

Une barque sur l'océan (A Boat on the Ocean) comes third in the original placement of the suite's five pieces and is the longest; it has often been compared with Debussy's use of sea imagery in *La mer* ("The Sea"), his great set of "symphonic sketches" composed at the same time. Shimmering textures and subtle changes in rhythmic impulses evoke a boat sailing on water animated by constantly shifting, slippery currents. In Ravel's piano writing, even a single gesture can encompass climactic force and at the same time a sense of waves dissipating.

Oiseaux tristes (Sad Birds) was the first piece of the suite to be composed and dedicated to Viñes. The melancholy whistling of a single bird at the start is an invitation for other avians to join in. According to Ravel, the piece "evokes birds lost in the oppressiveness of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer". Fauré observed that Ravel differentiates "two levels: the birdcalls with their rapid arabesques on a higher, slightly strident level and

the suffocating, sombre atmosphere of the forest on a lower level, which is rather heavy and veiled in pedal without much movement”.

Alborada del gracioso might be translated “The Jester’s Morning Song”, since a gracioso refers to a stock clownish character from the Spanish Renaissance; in this scenario, he interrupts a pair of young lovers as they part at daybreak. Ravel’s love affair with Spanish culture emerges in this most obviously narrative piece in the suite. His syncopated, jazzy rhythms are constructed with the extreme precision of an engineer, and the piano is used to imitate the sound of the jester strumming his guitar. At the end, dance gestures light up the scene with brilliant energy.

Barcarolle No. 4 in A-flat, Op. 44

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Barcarolle No. 5 in F-sharp minor, Op. 66

Fauré was a mentor to young Ravel at the highly competitive Paris Conservatoire and offered him moral support while his colleagues were attacking the composer. Born in the south of France in 1845, Fauré himself found an important mentor in Camille Saint-Saëns (only ten years older) when he received a scholarship to study at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, which specialised in training church musicians: Saint-Saëns left an especially lasting mark as one of his teachers. Later, he helped the budding Fauré gain entrée to the most exclusive Parisian salons. They were both involved in founding the Société nationale de musique, an association that promoted the latest in French music.

It was Saint-Saëns who played the first performance of the *Barcarolle No. 1* in 1882, at one of the concerts presented by the Société. Fauré eventually wrote a total of 13 barcarolles that span the evolution of his musical language from his younger period through the turn of the century and up to 1921 – three years before his death. The change in his later music is dramatic, in part reflecting the composer's reactions to his increasing deafness. The term "barcarolle" literally comes from the Italian word for a boatman and evokes the gondoliers of Venice and their characteristically lilting song. Jacques Offenbach's opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which was premiered posthumously in 1881, includes one of the most famous barcarolles in the literature and indeed one of the world's most beloved melodies ("Beautiful night, o night of love"). The water imagery also looks ahead to Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan*. Fauré, however, reluctantly used the genre term "barcarolle", declaring that he only agreed to do so because his publishers required it to enhance sales.

Lise de la Salle has chosen two of the 13 barcarolles, beginning with the especially well-known *Barcarolle No. 4 in A-flat, Op. 44* from 1886. At this point in his career, Fauré was still showing a clear influence from Chopin, whose exquisitely traced textures are echoed in this charming piece. Not as transparent as No. 4 is the *Barcarolle No. 5 in F-sharp minor, Op. 66*. It dates from the following decade, in 1894, after the composer had taken a lengthy hiatus from writing for the piano, and was written while he was on holiday. The writing here is seamless, turning away from the easy-to-follow traditional three-part design with coda that Fauré had used in his previous four barcarolles.

The legendary pianist Marguerite Long, whose interpretations of his music Fauré especially treasured, described this "glorious" barcarolle as "alive and powerful...smelling of salt, of sea-

wind and breathing a vigorous and wholesome joy. One can hear the cries of sailors, and its melody has the pace of a fishing-boat riding on the waves which comes back to square and dashes off, its sails billowing". She compared the feelings evoked by this music with a line from the poet Baudelaire: "Music often takes hold of me like the sea".

Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52

Chopin wrote an outstanding example of a barcarolle (Op. 60, in F-sharp), which synthesises his great love for Italian bel canto opera with extraordinary technical refinement. His four ballades are also examples of Chopin's genius in balancing his gift for melody with innovative writing for the instrument: the virtuosity he demands is always in service of musical substance and imagination.

Chopin is credited with inventing the genre of the ballade as a purely musical composition with no text. The term had existed for centuries but was associated with literature or with sung ballads from the Renaissance. Yet through their elaboration of passions, Chopin's works in this format do at times suggest a kind of opera without words. For many admirers of this poet of the piano, the four ballades represent the peak of Chopin's musical thinking. They span about a decade, from the early 1830s to 1840s, the *Ballade No. 4* having been published in 1843.

Robert Schumann, an important champion of Chopin when he arrived on the scene in Western Europe as an exile from his native Poland, was much more receptive to programme music and influenced the tendency to try to read specific literary inspirations associated with each of the four ballades. He asserted that an important impetus for these works was the poetry of Chopin's fellow Pole and friend Adam Mickiewicz, a firebrand poet, writer, and activist who also became an émigré in Paris.

Ballade No. 1 in G minor, for example – Schumann professed it to be his favourite of Chopin's works (as of 1836, that is) – is often described as a musical response to a narrative poem Mickiewicz had set in an imaginary Middle Ages about a fictional Lithuanian hero. *Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52*, on the other hand, has been linked to a Mickiewicz poem about three adventuring brothers who return with three Polish brides.

Yet there is no specific evidence for these particular correspondences. Even if Mickiewicz's poems provided a spur to Chopin's imagination, the music is totally independent and refers only to itself. In other words: there is no need to know any other story besides the one Chopin tells with notes alone. According to the music writer Victor Lederer, "Chopin's brilliant innovation was to break away from a specific story while retaining the narrative posture, thereby allowing his own imagination – as well as those of his listeners – free rein".

Ballade No. 1 combines dazzling virtuosity with complex interpretive demands. Following a dramatic introduction that suggests a vast epic about to unfold, Chopin presents two themes at length (in G minor and E-flat major, respectively), which undergo manifold elaborations. A presto coda, ablaze with new passions, leads to several “false” endings before the final thrilling gestures that close the curtain.

While *Ballade No. 1* achieved great popularity, *Ballade No. 4*, the longest of the four, took longer to earn its reputation as one of the most perfect of Chopin’s compositions. Variations on the two main themes are an essential feature of the piece’s enigmatic formal design, which opens with mysteriously repeated G’s that set the stage for this fascinating drama. Chopin combines passages of beguiling simplicity with fiercely apocalyptic intensity, ending with a display of pianist brilliance that, in the words of the Chopin expert Jim Samson, “seems to exorcise earlier conflicts and tensions in a white heat of virtuosity.”