

Chopin: First and Last
Peter Katin



*Early and late works played on a
Collard & Collard square piano of c. 1836*

CHOPIN : FIRST AND LAST

After my experiences of playing on period pianos, I wondered how much of Chopin's music was in fact written for "salon" entertainment, and how much virtuoso writing would fit into a six-octave square piano without taxing its capabilities. But what was uppermost in my mind was the business of finding a period piano which I felt was capable primarily of reproducing (for me, at least) the particular melodic lines which are difficult enough to sustain on a modern grand.

Any Chopin player will know that it is hardly easy to find the ideal solution to this and discover even the finest Steinway concert grand which will do, expressively, exactly what he wants, so when I finally decided to challenge what I thought would be almost unchallengeable, I wandered into a piano showroom and discovered an unrestored Collard & Collard, which even in its rough state showed me that here, with careful restoration, was a period instrument on which I could happily play quite a lot of Chopin.

In time, I found that while I had my sights on some early works which were doubtless played in domestic situations (but which, I have to admit, I had not seriously thought seriously upon as suiting the modern grand), I came across a far greater range of works which fitted this square piano excellently - both early and late music. So I devised a programme which I hope will show that these instruments do not only suit the miniature and early pieces, but can be perfectly at home in Chopin's more acrobatic music, written at a time when his attention was focussed on achieving a reputation as a virtuoso pianist - and also his more inward-looking works, both early and late, in which the virtues of the instrument seem to accentuate the reflectiveness and nostalgia, as in three out of the four Op.24 *Mazurkas*, and the playfulness of the Op.64 *Waltzes*.

In choosing a repertoire in this case, the limitation of six octaves is not difficult to accept. In the first place, Chopin never wrote above the top F (seven notes below the modern piano), nor lower than the bottom C. And yet the only real consideration musically would be in those lower notes, which he used in the bigger-scale and later works such as the Ballades, Scherzos and Sonatas, none of which would stylistically suit the “square” piano with its more obvious intimacy of basic sound. Therefore the bottom F limit was really the only one to be considered, and so much of his music was written within those six octaves that there was a great deal to choose from.

Some of these bigger-scale works were still written within this apparently restricted compass, although the extra bass notes were available on grands while Chopin was still in his teens. He was therefore able to write the two concertos, the first book of *Etudes*, and several other works intended for performance in concert halls, but it is my contention that most other pieces were at least adaptable for smaller venues. The Op.24 *Mazurkas*, for instance, suit the period instrument as well as they suit a modern Steinway (Olympia OCD 193 - see also *Variations Brillantes*, Op.12). I suppose the obvious choices would be, apart from these, the *Souvenir de Paganini* (not published until 1881), written as a series of variations on “The Carnival of Venice” and apparently an expression of his amazement at Paganini’s wizardry: “Ninety-two notes in one stroke of the bow!”, but this delightful and unaccountably neglected piece does not require the equivalent feat of virtuosity from the pianist. In fact, although it was written in 1829, one has to jump to 1843 (a year before the B minor *Sonata*) in order to find, in the *Berceuse*, a similar structure in which the first melodic phrase glides into a sequence of sixteen linked variations.

There is little to say about the three virtuoso works. The *Bolero* was written, as were the Op.12 *Variations* and the *Rondo*, more for the young composer to play at concerts himself. The *Variations* were written on a Rondo (of surprising banality) from Hérold's opera *Ludovic*, but Chopin managed to make a kaleidoscopic display from this very simple tune. The *Bolero* was often named "Bolero à la Polonaise", which would be a title rather out of keeping with a composer who had at least a working knowledge of Spanish colour. The C minor *Rondo* was published as Op.1 and Chopin played it twice in 1825 with great success - as a work it has an impish humour and I am inclined to think of its more dignified themes as having been written with tongue in cheek.

The first known composition was of course the G minor *Polonaise*, written at the age of seven and dedicated to the Skarbeck family. A rather formal piece, it was followed in the same year by another, in B flat, and a third, in A flat, during 1821 and dedicated to his old teacher Zywny. These three were edited by Jachimiec as "Three Polonaises from the Earliest Years".

I have included an additional *Mazurka*, believed to be the last music that Chopin wrote. Even now, I only assume that the manuscript I have here is the one entire version, and I am surprised that the Henle edition, while obviously copying the original notation, did not make an effort to include the middle section. It was available at that time, and Arthur Hedley gave me a copy of it in 1961.

There is now some doubt as to whether his own assumptions were correct, as Chopin gave the manuscript to Auguste Franchomme, who apparently decided to publish it in 1852 but did not trust himself to read Chopin's rather feeble writing of the middle section, although Fontana published it in a reconstruction

during 1855. There have been many contradictory arguments about this work - even concerning the date of its composition - but the manuscript is in the Chopin Society Museum in Warsaw, together with Franchomme's reconstructed copy. After a very close examination of the original manuscript (Chopin's writing was almost illegible by that time) I decided to play it in the form that most other Mazurkas take.

To go back to the early years, I would agree with Chopin that the first *Sonata*, in C minor, should never have seen the light of day - it was a kind of essay, and would contain nothing of originality were it not for the slow movement, the only work he wrote in 5/4 time.

Despite a brief reference to the first movement I am inclined to believe that he had this beautifully meditative piece in mind before he wrote the rest of the *Sonata*.

Whether I am right or not, I decided to include it here, as it contains so much of the haunting quality of his later works. And I could not omit the C sharp minor Nocturne (originally called only "lento con gran espressione"). It is popularly referred to as a reminiscence of his love for Constantia Gladkowska, and the references to his F minor *Concerto* might bear this out, but to me, these references could just as easily been part of a premonition - it was not long before the July Revolution in Paris, and it could be that Chopin knew, in himself, that if he left Poland he was unlikely to return.

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PETER KATIN

Peter Katin's musical interests have always been very wide. Early in his career, after several successes in the chamber music and Lieder fields, he agreed to play Rachmaninov's 3rd concerto at a Promenade Concert in 1953. This established him virtually overnight as a born player of the most taxing of the romantic repertoire, and for several years he was typecast to the extent that he had little chance of keeping a grip on his original repertoire.

In the late 1960s he decided to restrict himself, at least partially, to the areas in which he had achieved his first successes. This is not to say that he shut himself off entirely from the "warhorses" with which he had become associated, but he felt the need to study in greater depth the composers for which he had a special love. Schubert, Debussy and Chopin engrossed him; all three composers figure in his recital programmes, and he has achieved wide recognition as a leading exponent of Chopin. Amongst his many recordings he has included the complete Nocturnes (recorded commercially four times), Waltzes, Polonaises and Impromptus, as well as all the Mozart Sonatas and Grieg's Lyric Pieces.

This apparent change of direction has not ruled out some remarkable performances of the virtuoso works with which he became associated, and big-scale works such as the Liszt Sonata and the Brahms D minor Concerto figured in his concerts for the 1996/7 season. But he has ventured further in the past few years; he developed an interest in period pianos which has led to recordings of works by Clementi and Schubert, and now this present Chopin programme. In the late 1990s he formed a Piano Trio and also took on the task of playing and directing an entire Beethoven cycle, in 1998, which marked the 50th anniversary of his début, so he shows no signs of any diminishing of his artistic awareness.



PETER KATIN

**The above biography dates from
the original release of this disc.**

**Peter Katin died in 2015 after a
tragic accident at his home**

Recorded in August 1996 at Peter Katin's studio.

Square piano by Collard & Collard, c.1836

Restored using authentic materials

by Michael Parfett

PITCH: A=431

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Piano technician: Martin Ness

An Athene recording.

Cover photo: Gardens of the Willonow Palace, Warsaw

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Fryderyk Chopin

1	Variations Brillantes, Op. 12	7:48
2	Mazurka in G minor, Op. 24/1	2:54
3	Mazurka in C major, Op.24/2	2:13
4	Mazurka in A flat, Op.24/3	2:41
5	Mazurka in B flat minor, Op.24/4	4:26
6	Mazurka in F minor, Op.68/4	4:44
7	Rondo in C minor, Op.1	8:50
8	Souvenir de Paganini	4:03
9	Nocturne in C sharp minor, Op.posth	3:37
10	Waltz in D flat, Op.64/1	1:52
11	Waltz in C sharp minor, Op.64/2	3:21
12	Waltz in A flat, Op.64/3	2:57
13	Sonata in C minor, Op.4 (3rd mvt)	3:52
14	Polonaise no.13 in G minor	3:08
15	Polonaise no.14 in B flat	2:25
16	Polonaise no.15 in A flat	3:19
17	Berceuse in D flat, Op.57	5:05
18	Bolero, Op.19	7:43

Peter Katin

**plays his Collard & Collard
square piano (c.1836)**

an athene recording



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