Chopin

Four Ballades and Four Scherzos

Ballade No. 1 in G minor op. 23
Scherzo No. 1 in B minor op. 20
Ballade No. 2 in A minor op. 38
Scherzo No. 2 in B♭ minor op. 31
Ballade No. 3 in A♭ major op. 47
Scherzo No. 3 in C♯ minor op. 39
Ballade No. 4 in F minor op. 52
Scherzo No. 4 in E major op. 54

Stephen Hough *pf*

Hyperion CDA67456 (72 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

This recording of Chopin's Ballades and Scherzos is born with the purpose of presenting how the works evolved in parallel. Thus, in a sort of single 'unfolding musical biography' (as mentioned in the liner notes on page 5), they are recorded in a pattern where each Ballade is followed by a Scherzo. This, according to Stephen Hough, aspired to undermine the perception of the Ballades and Scherzos as 'suites', restoring their individual identity, as 'eight startlingly original and unique works'. To be honest I am unsure that nowadays the four Ballades and Scherzos are generally accepted as integral suites, which somewhat undermines the notion or sense of a single musical biography, engendered by the alternating pattern of Ballade and Scherzo, that is claimed here. There are, of course, many recordings that reinforce the image of the pieces as 'suites', but there are also plenty of recordings in which individual Ballades or Scherzos are played alongside other pieces by Chopin; Martha Argerich, for instance, plays the Scherzo No. 3 together with Chopin's Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3 (DG 419 055-2), whereas Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli plays the Ballade No. 1 and the Scherzo No. 2 together with the Prelude op. 45 and a selection of ten Mazurkas (DG 2530 236). Furthermore, in modern concert practice both the Ballades and Scherzos are very often performed as free-standing works; certainly they are not perceived as a 'suite' to the same extent that the Preludes op. 28 are considered a single entity, even though there is evidence that Chopin never played the whole series of Preludes in a single concert.

This considered, I think that Hough's plan to present 'each piece afresh – as eight startlingly original and unique works' is still slightly misleading; indeed, the idea of playing the piece in an alternating pattern – which, however, follows neither the publication nor the composition dates – presents them as part of a larger, vaguely chronologically understood and in a sense more teleological suite. I do not have anything against this assumption; I am simply not sure how this is necessarily related to a better understanding of the pieces as original and unique works.

The whole project, moreover, proceeds with alternate phases, high and low. I think, from this standpoint, it would be sufficient to consider Hough's

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performance of the Ballade No. 1 and of the Scherzo No. 1 alone. The Ballade No. 1 is perhaps the least successful performance. Presenting the Ballades in general in the liner notes to the CD, Bryce Morrison writes that

> The cadences which conclude each phrase of the first subject are left unresolved and it takes a lengthy and agitated elaboration to resolve such unease in the assuaging second subject in E flat major. However, the music remains pensive and wistful, and only a further and triumphant shift into A major fully erases all doubts and questions.

This might assist us in evaluating Hough's performance. Already at the beginning, with the first and second subjects, Hough makes use of such rubato – continuous shift of accelerando and rallentando – that, in my opinion, he inhibits the sense of musical flow. Indeed, the rubato might underline the pensive and wistful qualities of the music, but then the same rubato – with a little accelerando in the first half and a little rallentando in the second half of each bar – takes place in the A major episode, which could well be a *locus* of a free cantabile right hand over an inflexible left hand (one of the most recurrent descriptions of Chopin's rubato by many of his pupils). The episode in A major, thus, does not erase all doubts and questions; on the contrary, it continues to support them. In the waltz section, then, with its sense of neatness, Hough downplays its swirling nature; thus the entire section seems to represent a sort of step back. All this would be fine if it were matched by a final agitato which, dismissing all the previous restrains, would answer all the doubts and questions with its resoluteness. The intention is certainly there – with a clear sense of the final driving and lesser use of rubato – but it is still a step back from the energy which, by downplaying the various climaxes, had been accumulating through the Ballade. Perhaps the combination of an overall slower tempo (9'09") – Murray Perahia (Sony SK 64399) 8'49", Maurizio Pollini (DG, 459 683–2) 8'35" – might undermine the sense of directionality and the answer given to the initial questions by the final agitato. As a comparison, it would be interesting to listen to the Michelangeli recording, which lasts 9'11"; a more balanced use of rubato combined with a slower tempo in this case does not undermine the various climaxes in the piece, particularly in the final agitato.

The Scherzo No. 1, on the contrary, offers the most successful attempt at presenting the piece in a refreshing way, and it is worth buying the CD just to listen to this performance. The main problem of this Scherzo is the level of repetition of the same segments. If in the Ballade the subjects are repeated in different keys, thus contributing to create new emotional contexts for the same thematic ideas, in the Scherzo the various patterns are basically the same until the end, when the coda interrupts a circularity which could go on indefinitely. In this piece Hough is able to change the emotional context of every single repetition with very simple devices: the emergence of different inner voices, a sudden shift of tempo or of dynamics, everything helping to surprise the listener. The best example is probably offered by the middle section in B major – the reworking of the Polish carol 'Sleep, little Jesus' – and the return to the opening section. The B major section is made of two phrases repeated twice, then the first is repeated once more, leading into the opening section. The main melodic voice is the inner one of the right hand; around it the other voices fade into a single colour, and only the lowest voice seems to emerge naturally out of it. This is how Hough plays the beginning of the middle section for the first time,

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but one can already discern with some clarity the inner voice played by the left hand. With the repetition that inner voice becomes almost dominant and the little lullaby changes the colour completely. With the last repetition the balance between the two voices (right hand and left hand) is restated but, perhaps because we are now more aware of the presence of the left hand's inner voice, we cannot miss them both played together. The return to the opening section is not an immediate return to the opening molto con fuoco. In fact a slight suppression of the volume – actually the very opening of the piece, after two *ff* chords, is marked *fz* and *p* – allows for a great building-up of the coda, which, unlike the coda in the Ballade No. 1, matches exactly what happened before and erases any questions which the piece might have asked.

The other pieces proceed along the lines demonstrated in the performance of the first Ballade and Scherzo, with Hough at his best in the Scherzos, whereas in the Ballades he often over indulges in the details of single narrative episodes, making it difficult to follow the general thread. In the front cover of the CD there is a reproduction of *Cupid and Psyche* by Annie Loisa Swynnerton. As the myth goes, from the marriage, accepted by Venus after a series of tests that Psyche had to undergo, and after Zeus's intervention, voluptuousness was born. Defined as the intense enjoyment of a material or spiritual desire, voluptuousness is sometimes what is lacking in the performances of the Ballades. The beauty of the works is certainly captured there in the smallest detail – phrase articulation, accents, a great understanding of the polyphonic interlacing of the voices, some of which really emerge as a surprise, as if they have never been heard in any other performance. However, that beauty lacks the overall sense of artistic satisfaction – individual moments of emotions remain only as individual moments, which, though deeply enchanting, rarely portray that feeling of striving momentum towards a sense of final voluptuousness, which is so strong an element of Chopin's music. By contrast, given the different sense of narrative, the Scherzos require a definite presence of an underlying thread, which, if absent, cast doubt on the numerous and potentially platitudinous repetitions of thematic material. Here Hough has an impressive control of the overall direction, and his attention to the smallest details presents every repetition in a different light and adds to the building of climaxes which now, if I can use the metaphor, present themselves with a voluptuousness akin to the children of Cupid and Psyche.

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