

The Nocturnes of Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)

The nocturne was a musical genre to which Chopin kept returning throughout his life. Written between the years 1827-1846 this group of twenty-one pieces forms an important thread in his output of works for the piano.

Although Chopin didn't invent the nocturne - that honour probably goes to the Irish composer, John Field, whose music Chopin admired - he is the composer who consistently developed the genre throughout his short life. In a sense, in the early Romantic era, the nocturne is the new 'kid on the block'. As a musical genre, it didn't exist before Field and Chopin's time, there being no single type of keyboard composition from the preceding classical era that can be said to have developed into the nocturne. Accordingly, there is no single dominating precedent for its invention. Rather, there are a number of concurrent musical styles that might be said to have contributed something to the nocturne's development. One of these - perhaps the most important - is the bel canto operatic style of composers such as Bellini, whose works Chopin admired. Bellini, as well as other Italian bel canto composers, were writing the opera tunes that everyone would have been whistling on the streets. To a considerable extent the piano took on this opera-based vocal style.

Another important influence was the piano itself with composers and performers alike beginning to exploit all of the instrument's resources, including its sustaining pedal, which allowed and encouraged the pianist to create a 'wash' of many harmonious sounds, which, in turn, enhanced the instrument's 'singing' qualities.

The Nocturnes of Chopin are dominated by melody, which is usually projected via the pianist's right hand with an arpeggiated chordal accompaniment in the left hand. Cantabile (meaning: 'in a singing style') projection of melody on top of the musical texture is the order of the day. So, in a sense, in this style the piano imitates the human voice and the song it sings is usually deeply felt, gently expressed, and resonant of strong and important emotions.

The emotional sphere this music inhabits is not delivered rapidly or pointedly, but unfolds gradually, taking us on a journey to places we've certainly been before, and reminding us of things we have experienced in our lives, perhaps long ago. There are no titles to help explain to us what Chopin thought each piece is about. This is quite deliberate on his part; most of Chopin's music is, in fact, 'absolute', that is, his works don't have titles to explain their meaning other than non-emotive titles such as 'sonata', 'etude' or 'ballade', etc., which he uses to describe different styles of pieces. And yet, each Nocturne does tell a story that we can all understand. It's a story we've all experienced before (rather than heard) and is conveyed through the music connecting us with our memories, emotional states, perhaps a recalling of beautiful sights, sounds, perfumes and our own deepest personal experiences. All of this is conveyed through Chopin's incomparable melodic lines as well as his harmonic patterns and textures.

Chopin's Nocturnes are quite complex, both in their harmonic language and in their subtlety of rhythmic flow. And although each is similar – for example, their tempi range from slow to moderate, with nothing much faster than that – they are also quite strikingly different from one another. Taken as a group, these works are all masterfully crafted. There is no discernible difference in quality over the period of their composition (1827-1846); there are no 'mature' or 'less mature' Nocturnes by Chopin. Perhaps this is one of their most remarkable features: having achieved a mature 'nocturne style' from the earliest examples of these works (those composed in the period 1827-1830), Chopin then maintained that quality through the next twenty years as he returned again and again to the genre.

The title 'nocturne' tells us that the music is nocturnal; it is music that is intended for the evening and the earliest performances of these and other similar romantic piano pieces would have taken place in candlelit rooms. In this sense, Piers Lane's presentation of these works in the Serenata Series will be authentic and historically accurate in terms of the way audiences in Chopin's time would have first received this music. This is salon rather than concert hall music and is designed for performance environments that are, like the music itself, intimate.

Robert Constable (April 2018)