



# Celebrity Series of Boston

Sunday, April 8, 2018 at 3pm  
Symphony Hall

Maurizio Pollini piano

## Notes on the program

**Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849)

*Prélude in C-sharp minor, Opus 45* (1841)

After leaving his native Poland with the hopes of establishing a career as a touring virtuoso, Frédéric Chopin found his niche in Paris, where he made a name for himself performing at exclusive salons (though rarely in public concerts), teaching private students, and publishing a steady stream of solo piano music. He worked most often in compact and intimate genres, especially those based on dances, including Mazurkas and Polonaises with roots in Poland.

Chopin spent the winter of 1838-39 on the Spanish island of Majorca with his new love interest, the novelist George Sand, and her children. Taking inspiration from Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, with its preludes and fugues in every major and minor key, Chopin used the time to assemble a comprehensive set of 24 Preludes, published as his Opus 28. He penned one additional Prelude in 1841, which he published separately as Opus 45.

As the name implies, the usual function of a musical prelude is to introduce some other related piece of music. In the world of church organists (where Bach had his roots), such preludes were typically improvised; it was a natural outgrowth then for composers to notate preludes for keyboard instruments, with the written music sometimes retaining quasi-improvisatory features. Chopin's Preludes are distinctive in that they stand alone, without any accompanying movements in the same key. Compared to the very short and dense Prelude in the same key from Opus 28, the later Prelude in C-sharp minor is extraordinarily patient and spacious, as if its tender melody is being discovered in a real-time process of extemporization.

**Frédéric Chopin**

*Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, Opus 60* (1845-46)

The distinctive character of the Barcarolle, a style derived from the work songs of Venetian gondoliers, comes from its swaying triplet meter, mimicking the rocking of a gondola. After a few introductory measures, Chopin's Barcarolle from 1845-46 establishes this cadence with a docile accompaniment pattern in the left hand. The right-hand melody, harmonized mostly with consonant thirds and sixths, glides effortlessly over the surface, splashed with occasional grace notes and trills. A single-line interlude threatens to linger in a somber minor key, but instead the course shifts to an impassioned contrasting section in A major. The initial swaying accompaniment returns, bolstered by the addition of a lower octave, and the melody surges to a thick climax before retreating for a sparkling conclusion.

Compared to the shorter vignettes that make up much of Chopin's earlier music, this Barcarolle is superbly nuanced and developed. It was, unsurprisingly, a favorite of Debussy's.

**Frédéric Chopin**

*Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Opus 35* (1839)

Chopin wrote only three piano sonatas, one in each decade of his career, including his Second Sonata from 1839, in the brooding key of B-flat minor. This work is most famous for its third movement, a Funeral March, composed two years earlier than the rest of the sonata. The opening movement hints at the heaviness to come with a brief introduction at a *Grave* tempo, until a more restless theme takes over. The *Scherzo* maintains the sonata's turbulent energy, although a contrasting trio section offers respite in the form of a lyrical waltz, made all the more comforting when it returns unexpectedly to close the movement.

The *Marche funèbre* (Funeral March) forms the emotional core of the work, and its familiarity from state funerals and other public outpourings makes it no less affecting in concert. After this wrenching statement, the Second Sonata abandons harmony and melody altogether to close with one last unbroken flurry of rapid-fire phrases cast in stark octaves, only reaching a stable chord in the final seconds.

**Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)

***Préludes, Book II*** (1913)

The gold standard for preludes in the keyboard literature are the two books of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* by J. S. Bach, with each book containing 24 preludes and fugues, representing every major and minor key. The Austrian composer Johann Hummel might have been the first to treat preludes independently when he composed a set of 24 Preludes in 1815, but it was Chopin who revolutionized the form with his own collection of 24 Preludes for piano, published in 1839.

Debussy's two books of Preludes, published in 1910 and 1913, extended the Chopin tradition. The twelve works in each book are short musical poems, most lasting two to four minutes each, and labeled with descriptive titles. It was quite rare for preludes to have titles—most others were identified just with the number and key—and Debussy softened the impact of his headings by printing them in small typeface at the end of each movement. It is fitting that Debussy gave his preludes labels that are poetic and visual, for his musical style was deeply indebted to the writers and artists he circulated with. Debussy also abandoned the formal structure of cycling through the keys in his preludes. By this point in his career, his approach to tonality was increasingly diffuse, with key centers obscured by non-traditional scales and unstable chord structures.

The second book of Preludes opens with an evocation of *Mists*, its hazy sound achieved by using white notes in the left hand and black notes in the right. After a slow and melancholic image of *Dead Leaves*, the third Prelude uses the steady oscillations of the Spanish *habanera* rhythm to match the atmosphere of the *Puerta del Vino* (*Wine Gate*), a feature within the Alhambra, the historic Moorish palace in Granada.

The fourth Prelude takes its enchanted tone and heading—“*Fairies are exquisite dancers*”—from one of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* books. *Bruyères*, signifying the French name for the heather plant and also the name of an ancient castle town in northeastern France, is dreamy and pastoral. In a marked change of tone, *General Lavine – eccentric* plays up physical comedy like that of its namesake, an American performer who had brought his Vaudeville act to Paris.

*The Terrace of Moonlit Audiences* is a reference to a coronation in India, which Debussy read about in a newspaper; the music points eastward (or at least away from the European mainstream) with whole-tone sequences and other “exotic” modes. *Ondine* celebrates a mythical water nymph with slippery, fantastical harmonies.

The brash quotation of “God Save the Queen” is a nod to the Charles Dickens character named in the ninth Prelude, the *Homage to S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.* In *Canope*, the type of jar used for the mummification of vital organs in Egypt inspires a haunting meditation. The eleventh Prelude departs from the poetic pattern and instead goes by a heading that describes its intervallic construction in *Alternating Thirds*. The cycle concludes with a brilliant display of *Fireworks*, its bright gestures darting skyward into the piano's treble range.

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