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Dear Audience Friends,

Leap-frog!

That’s what we had to say when, for our 2020-21 season, we had to cancel everyone and everything that had been so elegantly curated for it by our second guest artistic curator, Vladimir Feltsman. That is, we promised to invite them back for 2022-23 (2021-22 was already booked), confident that we’d be through the pandemic, somehow, by then.

The good news is that all the original line-up, save one, are, indeed, on their way to Portland this year and they are bringing stellar programs. As always, there is a robust mix of time-honored, treasured pieces and splendid music that will be new to many ears. Vladimir’s programs this weekend will be especially pleasing for audience friends who love the familiar, particularly because he will bring his special magic, through long devotion to these pieces, to the programs.

Thus, welcome back and welcome to the beginning of another terrific season of PPI! We feel confident that you will be thrilled with the artists and programs lined up for this year. If you haven’t yet, please do subscribe for the whole season. It’s way more fun that way!

You may be reading this program book because you have come to Vladimir’s special October 6 recital at the Patricia Reser Center for the Arts in Beaverton. You and all of PPI’s audience friends have two more opportunities to enjoy those special one-hour/no-intermission programs on Thursdays at 6:00 twice more: January 19 and March 23, 2023. You might want to come on Saturday and Sunday at Lincoln Hall, too, after you hear those great programs.

Your generosity and fidelity with PPI buoy our spirits so much. Thank you deeply for making this music possible. We so love being with you for these great moments.

All best wishes,

Bill Crane
Executive Director
THANK YOU!

From the earliest, adventuresome days of what we now call Portland Piano International, 44 years ago, when founder Harold Gray envisioned enriching our city with music from the world’s greatest pianists, countless generous donors have come forward to make that music happen. On your behalf, we say again here how grateful we are for their generosity and for what this all has done for our ears, minds, and hearts!

You are probably listed in the big acknowledgement below. Thank you! You and your fellow piano lovers have created and sustained a distinguished recital series, plus a really admirable suite of related educational programs. Your belief in PPI’s mission means the world to us. Thank you again.

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VLADIMIR FELTSMAN

RUSSIAN-AMERICAN | Guest Artistic Curator

Pianist, conductor, and educator Vladimir Feltsman is one of the most versatile and consistently interesting musicians of our time. Born in Moscow in 1952, Mr. Feltsman debuted with the Moscow Philharmonic at the age of 11. In 1969, he entered the Moscow Conservatory to study piano under the guidance of Professor Jacob Flier. He also studied conducting at both the Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) Conservatories. In 1971, Mr. Feltsman won the Grand Prix at the Marguerite Long International Piano Competition in Paris; extensive tours throughout the former Soviet Union, Europe, and Japan followed. In 1979, because of his growing discontent with the restrictions on artistic freedom under the Soviet regime, Mr. Feltsman signaled his intention to emigrate by applying for an exit visa. In response, he was immediately banned from performing in public and his recordings were suppressed. After eight years of virtual artistic exile, he was finally granted permission to leave the Soviet Union. Upon his arrival in the United States in 1987, Mr. Feltsman was warmly greeted at the White House, where he performed his first recital in North America. That same year, his debut at Carnegie Hall established him as a major pianist on the American and international scene. Since then, Mr. Feltsman has performed with major American and European orchestras and appeared at the most prestigious concert venues and music festivals worldwide. His vast repertoire encompasses music from the Baroque to the twenty-first-century.

Mr. Feltsman expressed his lifelong devotion to the music of J.S. Bach in a cycle of concerts that presented the major clavier works of the composer and spanned four consecutive seasons (1992-1996) at the 92nd Street Y in New York. His project “Masterpieces of the Russian Underground” unfolded a panorama of Russian contemporary music through an unprecedented survey of piano and chamber works by fourteen different composers from Shostakovich to the present day and was presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in January 2003 with great success. Mr. Feltsman served as Artistic Director for this project as well as performing in most of the pieces presented during the three-concert cycle. These programs included a number of world and North American premieres and were also presented in Portland, Oregon and in Tucson, Arizona at the University of Arizona. In the fall of 2006, Mr. Feltsman performed all of Mozart’s piano sonatas in New York at the Mannes School of Music and the New School’s Tishman Auditorium on a specially built replica of an eighteenth-century Walter fortepiano. His most recent project, “Russian Experiment,” included works of lesser-known Russian composers of the first half of the twentieth century and was presented at the Aspen Music Festival in 2017.

A dedicated educator of young musicians, Mr. Feltsman holds the Distinguished Chair of Professor of Piano at the State University of New York, New Paltz, and is a member of the piano faculty at the Mannes College of Music in New York City. He is the founder and Artistic Director of the International Festival-Institute, PianoSummer at New Paltz, a three-week-long intensive training program for advanced piano students that attracts major young talent from all over the world. In 2012 Vladimir and his wife Haewon established the Feltsman Piano Foundation, which helps young musicians to realize their potential and advance their careers. Since 2017 every student accepted to PianoSummer receives free tuition and housing.

Released on the Sony Classical and Nimbus labels, Mr. Feltsman’s extensive discography includes more than 60 CDs and is still growing. He has recorded all of the major clavier works of J.S. Bach, the complete Schubert sonatas, major works of Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms, concertos by Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Prokofiev. He has also recorded six tribute recordings dedicated to Russian composers: Tributes to Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Prokofiev, Silvestrov, and “Forgotten Russians.”

Mr. Feltsman is the author of Piano Lessons, a book published in 2019 that presents insights drawn from a lifetime of devotion to music and addresses such vitally important topics as practicing, performing, learning, and recording. Also included in the book are highly informative and detailed liner notes written to accompany his many recordings, and a study of the Well-Tempered Clavier by Bach.
PORTLAND PIANO INTERNATIONAL PRESENTS

VLADIMIR FELTSMAN

INTERLUDES

AT THE RESER IN BEAVERTON

THURSDAY
OCTOBER 6
6PM

The perfect break after the workday... or in between errands

PROGRAM

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
Seven Bagatelles, Op. 33
   No. 1 in E-flat Major (Andante grazioso quasi allegretto)
   No. 2 in C Major (Scherzo: Allegro)
   No. 3 in F Major (Allegretto)
   No. 4 in A Major (Andante)
   No. 5 in C Major (Allegro ma non troppo)
   No. 6 in D Major (Allegretto quasi andante)
   No. 7 in A-flat Major (Presto)

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)
Nocturne in B-flat minor, Op. 9 No. 1
Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2
Nocturne in B Major, Op. 9, No. 3
Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

THE RESER
12625 SW CRESCENT ST
BEAVERTON, OR
SUNDAY / OCT 9

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)
Partita No. 1 in B-flat Major, BWV. 825
   Prelude
   Allemande
   Courante
   Sarabande
   Minuet I
   Minuet II
   Gigue

INTERMISSION

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)
Nocturne in B-flat minor, Op. 9 No. 1
Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2
Nocturne in B Major, Op. 9, No. 3
Nocturne in F-sharp minor, Op. 48, No. 2
Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

PROGRAM NOTES BEGIN ON PAGE 10
NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

VLADIMIR FELTSMAN
by BILL CRANE

SATURDAY / OCT 8

MOZART
Fantasy in C minor, K. 396

“Mozart’s music is constantly escaping from its frame, because it cannot be contained in it.”
— Leonard Bernstein

“Beethoven I take twice a week, Haydn four times, and Mozart every day!”
— Gioachino Rossini

It is a lovely thing, don’t you think, to begin PPI’s 45th season of recitals with a fantasy of Mozart, just to engage the mind and heart immediately, to remind us anew just why we love the music of the solo piano? This fantasy, with its dramatic adagio introduction and overall feeling of improvisation, is particularly well-suited to engaging us into an attentive listening state of mind, not only for this afternoon, but probably for the whole season to come.

“K. 396” has an especially interesting history. Composed “mostly” in 1782 – for, indeed, Mozart never finished the piece – and first published in 1802, with a dedication to his wife, Costanze, what we will hear this afternoon was actually completed some years after Mozart’s death by a Benedictine priest, the Abbé Maximilian Stadler, who was also a composer and important figure in musical circles in Vienna. It was he, actually, who gave the piece the title fantasy.

Starting from a fragment of only 28 measures, Stadler undertook, at Costanze’s request, to compose a “completion” of the work. Indeed, Costanze, widowed too young, asked friends and pupils of the late composer to help her catalogue and sometimes complete the many drafts and fragments her late husband had left behind. It probably strikes one as wise on her part to seek ways that further publication and sales of his works would provide income for the family after his death.

That dramatic opening arpeggio reveals immediately a certain darkness of mood, but that won’t last throughout the whole piece. Indeed, heightened variation of mood is one of the most important and fun aspects of a fantasy. In the proceedings, we will hear searing dissonances, diminished chords, unresolved harmonies, chromatic bits all over, and surprising harmonic progressions. Some will hear a strong reminiscence of baroque style and that may be because Mozart, arriving in Vienna in 1781, soon became a favorite in various patrons’ salons, several of whose musical evenings favored the music of Bach and Handel, even though some Viennese found such music old-fashioned. Mozart took to the style nonetheless and quickly earned a reputation for his virtuosic keyboard improvisations. Stadler, I think, kept this in mind in his “completion” work.

Scholars differ in their opinion about the stormy development section in the middle, leaving uncertain its authorship, not being able to know whether Stadler had a sketch from Mozart for this section or whether, by contrast, he made it entirely from his own creative impulse. The migration to C Major, the key center of nearly the whole final third of the piece, will strike some ears as happy or fresh, as we were taught about major keys when children, but some may, like me, hear enigma in that contrasting portrait of the thematic material first heard distinctively and dramatically in its related minor.

BEETHOVEN
Seven Bagatelles, Op. 33

“At 80, I have found new joy in Beethoven.”
— Igor Stravinsky

“Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy.”
— Beethoven

Perhaps it is because of our having seen too many portraits of Beethoven scowling and having heard too many tales of his temper and all around grumpiness that we can think of Beethoven as having written only “serious” pieces – all that passion and knitted brows in the sonatas, and so on. So, it is especially
fun in today’s recital to hear a different Beethoven. Here is music in which he is a bit mischievous, in which he seeks only to delight. One can imagine him at the piano after dinner, regaling his friends with charming music.

The Op. 33 set to be heard today was first published in 1803, though he noted that some of the pieces were written as early as 1782. (He would have been 12 then!) He continued to compose Bagatelles, or what he called Kleinigkeiten ("trifles") throughout his life. The other sets, to be heard some other time, are equally beguiling.

Music historians note rightly for us that some of the Op. 33 Bagatelles were composed in the terrible year 1802, when Beethoven wrote his famous Heiligenstadt Testament, detailing to his brothers his hearing loss and the intense struggles he was facing in living with it. In Heiligenstadt, he even wrote of considering ending his life, but that he had found resolve to go on because he had so much music to write. Thank goodness!

Thinking about these tuneful and straightforward pieces, we can recognize that Beethoven must have needed some diversion in his composing. Indeed, we think of him as the builder of imposing monuments for the piano, requiring super-human effort beyond extraordinary inspiration, so his Bagatelles must have let him let off a little steam. Op. 33 came to life in between the composing of the Pathétique and Moonlight sonatas and just after them, he wrote the Eroica Symphony. I have a hard time wrapping my mind around that bit of history.

The distinguished English Beethoven scholar Eric Blom (1888-1959) wrote of the Bagatelles that they “…reveal [Beethoven’s] character more intimately than anything else he ever wrote. They are, if anything in music can be, self-portraits, whereas his larger compositions express not so much personal moods as ideal conceptions requiring sustained thought and an unchanging emotional disposition for many days or weeks – indeed, in Beethoven’s case, sometimes years.

“…in the Bagatelles we have some perfect and almost graphically vivid sketches of Beethoven in his changeable daily moods, tender or gently humorous one morning and full of fury, rude buffoonery or ill-temper the next. Nothing in his letters, in which we may find all these turns of mind too, reveal him more clearly than that.”

SCHUBERT
Four Impromptus, Op. 142, D. 935

“The reason why Schubert is celebrated so much today lies rather in the fact that there has been nobody else like him — not before him, not after him.” — Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

1794
French Revolutionary figure Maximilien Robespierre and 22 other leaders of “the Terror” guillotined to thunderous cheers in Paris

1794
Strasbourg, Alsace-Lorraine, prohibited circumcision and the wearing of beards

1802
Napoleon Bonaparte elected president of Italian (Cisalpine) Republic

“Schubert had arguably the same melodic gift as Mozart, but even less support. He didn’t have the early exposure, never got to travel anywhere, and yet generated and amassed a body of work that grew and developed and is very profound.” — Twyla Tharp

There is a good chance that Schubert may have been doing to some extent with these Impromptus what Beethoven did with his Bagatelles – creating pieces for himself to play at musical gatherings or soirées. Fortunately, both also intended that the compositions be published and, thus, made available to other pianists. Happily, they remain well positioned in the repertory today. It was Schubert’s first publisher, Tobias Haslinger, who initially called these pieces from an earlier set (Op. 90) Impromptus and the name was quickly taken up by Schubert for today’s four wonderful pieces. It is poignant to note that they were not published until 11 years after his death, when Diabelli put them out in 1839.

The designation Impromptu suggests spontaneity and it is easy to imagine there being something improvised or just tossed off. Not here, though. The sophistication of these Impromptus shows that quite considerable thought went into them. In fact, at first there was delay in their being issued because publishers wanted shorter, easier, “more marketable” pieces. These are, indeed, fully-grown, recital-worthy compositions, tightly made, cohesive. The longest one lasts over ten minutes.

The first of the four, with a wide range of moods, contains elements of both a sonata and a rondo. Of its middle section, musicologist John Daverio remarked that it seemed a “Dialogue without Words” because of melodic exchanges between treble and bass. One hears lots of Schubert’s characteristic fluctuations between major and minor tonalities.

A simple minuet and trio forms the second Impromptu. In mood, melodies, and harmonic progressions, it recalls the opening of Beethoven’s Sonata Op. 26 (in the same key, A-flat Major.)

The third is a theme with five variations. Schubert took the splendid theme from his own incidental music to the play Rosamunde, Fürstin von Zypern.

The fourth Impromptu, concluding today’s recital, is a bit ironic, but delights with its playful rhythms, spirit of dance, and brilliant passage work. A great rush to the finish is marked dramatically by its conclusion (an F-minor descending scale hurling itself off a cliff!) on the lowest note on Schubert’s piano.

1959) wrote of the Bagatelles that they “…reveal [Beethoven’s] emotional disposition for many days or weeks – indeed, in his case, sometimes years.

The distinguished English Beethoven scholar Eric Blom (1888-
**BACH**

**Partita No. 1 in B-flat Major**

“If one were asked to name one musician who came closest to composing without human flaw, I suppose general consensus would choose Johann Sebastian Bach....”

— Aaron Copland

“To strip human nature until its divine attributes are made clear, to inform ordinary activities with spiritual fervor, to give wings of eternity to that which is most ephemeral; to make divine things human and human things divine; such is Bach, the greatest and purest moment in music of all time.”

— Pablo Casals

The concluding few measures of the Gigue, the final movement of this Partita, should convince everyone, even the crabby, that Bach was not merely a serious, dramatic, precise, pedantic, blah, blah, blah composer, full of “greatness” and theological insight and architect of towering musical structures, and all that, but that, more important (for me, at least), that he endlessly invited his players, singers, and listeners to dance. There is enough felicity, flirtation, and joy in this boisterous movement that it probably made the clergy with whom he worked at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig a good bit nervous. Yay!

But, I get ahead of myself. Perhaps a few proper musicological remarks about Partita form are in order.

A partita is simply a suite of dance movements, most typically remaining in the same key movement-to-movement, comprised of forms that would have been quite familiar to Bach’s contemporaries, notably the “required” four almost always in such suites: allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue. Bach’s French and English Suites are made up in the same way, but the Partitas are grander and more technically challenging. In all of these, other dance forms join the Big Four, variously minuets, preludes, airs, trios, bourées, loures, etc. Each movement typically has two halves, both repeated (plus ornaments in the repeats, sometimes) and by the end, the listener has been rewarded with an exceptionally satisfying whole.

This is particularly true in the first Partita, with its overall upbeat shininess, going from cheerful and celebratory to ecstatic by the end. The Prelude gets us ready for ensuing fireworks in the friendly key of B-flat and serves as a bit of a warm-up for the player (albeit technically challenging from the get-go.) All manner of carrying-on in subsequent movements helps to build the drama; we hear great romps, leaps, hops, and swagger, but all of it serving refined musical ends. Even the Sarabande, with its slow harmonic movement, does a special little dance with its florid elaborations in the right hand. That Gigue (I’m crazy about it!) is made of real acrobatics, including lightning-speed hand crossings to make a sort of echo effect. If I were ever held at gun-point and told to name the last note that I wanted to hear, it would be the final B-flat with which the Gigue concludes.

This is the composition, along with the other five Partitas, that Bach finally decided to have published, at his own expense, at the age of 41, even though he had already been composing for 20 years. Calling it his “Opus 1,” he marked it as “offered to music lovers in order to refresh their spirits.” Indeed!

In 1802, Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, wrote about the Partitas, “This work made in its time a great noise in the musical world. Such excellent compositions for the clavier had never been seen and heard before. Anyone who had learnt to perform well some pieces out of them could make his fortune in the world thereby; and even in our times, a young artist might gain acknowledgment by doing so, they are so brilliant, well-sounding, expressive, and always new.” Indeed!

**BEETHOVEN**

**Pathétique**

“Don’t only practice your art, but force your way into its secrets.”

— Beethoven

It is a happy circumstance, I would argue, that PPI audiences sometimes get to hear certain “canonic” pieces repeatedly – that has been the case across our more than four decades of recitals – and thereby have a chance to reflect on memories of prior performances compared to today’s. We heard the Pathétique last May and I wrote the notes below for it then. I hope you won’t mind my repeating that essay here. –

Between French and English, there are often les faux amis, false cognates, and thus we must not get snooty with someone who imagines that Beethoven wrote a “pathetic” sonata. In fact, he didn’t even give this piece that nickname; it was a subsequent publisher who appended the title Grande Sonate Pathétique, probably mostly to stimulate sales of the printed score. (It was an immediate huge success.) That fancy title actually just indicates by grande that the work is large and important enough to be published as a separate piece rather than as part of a collection and pathétique in French just means “moving or “affecting.” In fact, the dictionary of the Académie française notes that the word just connotes “qui émeut les passions,” that which excites the emotions. The careful listener will certainly find that to be the case with this sonata.

It comes from a remarkably prolific time in Beethoven’s life; the same year of its composition also saw three string trios, three other piano sonatas, and three violin sonatas. The big thing about the Pathétique is that it is an exceptional example of the
Romantic tendencies in German literature of that time, translated into the medium of music. Its astounding emotional power, via great contrasts of ideas, violent energy, and adventurous harmonies, was recognized early on. In fact, the splendid pianist-composer Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870), when young, was forbidden by his teacher to study or play the “crazy” music of Beethoven. Of course, Moscheles loved the Pathétique and pretty much all the rest of Beethoven’s music. He grew up to be one of the most admired pianists of his time and milieu, oftentimes playing that forbidden stuff!

About that power of expression, one of Beethoven’s biographers, Barry Cooper, wrote that this sonata “surpasses any of his previous compositions in strength of character, depth of emotion, level of originality, range of sonorities, and ingenuity of motive and tonal manipulation.” What the focused listener may gain from hearing the Pathétique is Beethoven’s uncanny knack for articulating difficulty and suffering, but at the same time, through remarkable musical devices, managing to suggest that difficulty can always be overcome. This art, like other great works, conveys a sense of resistance to the inevitability of despair, to the indomitability of the human spirit, even towards joy.

Today’s audience of piano lovers will have heard the Pathétique many times and, thus, musicological explanations of its three movements would probably be superfluous. In the first movement, the intense pathos is evident from the very beginning statement. The second movement contains one of Beethoven’s most beautiful melodies, an especially beautiful contrast to the first movement. The third movement, a rondo, opens with a cheerful melody, perhaps not letting the listener know right at first of the drama that will unfold. Its explosive ending in a minor key can be unsettling.

CHOPIN
Nocturnes

“Nocturnes of Op. 9 were written between 1830 and 1832. The three Nocturnes of Op. 9 are all variously in triple meter. In them at different moments, we hear an utter clouded and heavy. ... The gift of Chopin is [the expression of] the deepest and fullest feelings and emotions that have ever existed. He made a single instrument speak a language of infinity. He could often sum up, in ten lines that a child could play, poems of a boundless exaltation, dramas of unequalled power.”

— George Sand, Story of My Life: The Autobiography of George Sand

“Chopin, in his poetic Nocturnes, sang not only the harmonies which are the source of our most ineffable delights, but likewise the restless, agitating bewilderment to which they often give rise.”

— Franz Liszt

Rather than jumping into musicological ephemera and careful structural analysis of them, it seems most important first to say about the Nocturnes, these “night songs” with their atmosphere of yearning and nostalgia, that in them we encounter some of the most sublime music ever written for the piano. They so reveal Chopin’s persistent inclination toward voluptuous melody, probably inspired by Italian bel canto opera, perhaps even by his friend, fellow composer in that genre, Vincenzo Bellini. Here we are presented with an opportunity for extended revery, for complete and appropriate escape.

Musicologists will note, of course, that the Nocturne form was first developed by the Irish composer John Field and that Chopin built upon his good foundation. Many will say that Chopin’s Nocturnes remain the best realization of the form, even though many composers after him, including Schumann, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Fauré, Scriabin, and Szymanowski, wrote beautifully within the Nocturne’s parameters afterward. (I’ll take them all. Nothing wrong with dreaming of a late evening . . . )

Here are, variously, fun things to note about the Nocturnes:

• All of Chopin’s piano works are pianistic and effectively can never be transcribed successfully for any other instrument. Chopin understood the piano’s possibilities better than just about anybody.

• They share several characteristics – the embellished melody when repeated; contrasts in middle sections; the supremacy of melody and its always being “vocal” while the accompaniment (most often in the left hand) being “instrumental.”

• Chopin was the first composer to take pedal markings seriously as a matter of principle. With them, melody, rather than the bass line, connects the music and, if the markings are inadvertently observed, the music is vibrant and alive, rather than clouded and heavy.

• The three Nocturnes of Op. 9 are all variously in triple meter. In them at different moments, we hear an utter cavatina from the bel canto tradition, Chopin singing in his own free and confident voice, a siciliana, waltz-like and unusual for a nocturne melody, and, always, song, song, song. The profusion of opera in Warsaw when he was a student at school, not to mention all his time spent in Paris, where opera reigned supreme, so clearly had profound influence on his writing.

• The Op. 9 Nocturnes were written between 1830 and 1832 and were dedicated to the French-Belgian pianist Maria Moke-Pleyel, a young virtuoso who first played in public at the age of eight.
About the Op. 48, No. 2, with its special intensity and vivid, agitated middle section, Chopin himself described it as “A tyrant commands, and the other asks for mercy.”

CHOPIN
Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

A ballade in the musical lexicon can be fairly compared to narrative in the literary. A ballade, like a poem, even a novel, that is, means to tell a tale. Or, at least, associated with epic and quite dramatic moments, it is emotional storytelling. Chopin, it seems, proceeded from such verbal roots, albeit without specific characters or plot, but, rather, with intent to reveal a great deal about the human heart. That tone of narration is apparent in all his four Ballades, but in the A-flat, Op. 47, we note especially its brightness and mood of optimism.

Two themes of contrasting character dominate the work – the first, yet another songful melody; the second a change of mood completely with its dancelike, instrumental note. After much development, a third, flamboyant theme gives license to splendid multi-octave arpeggios that make for thrilling passagework all over the keyboard.

Op. 47 was composed during a relatively happy period in Chopin’s life, when, in 1841, he was spending summers at George Sand’s estate. (George Sand, of course, was the nom de plume of the writer Aurore Dupin.) Most scholars agree that this Third Ballade was likely inspired by poetry of his fellow Pole, Adam Mickiewicz, most probably “Undine,” a tale of a water sprite who falls in love with a mortal man. But, Chopin, preferring that his listeners not know a specific tale so that they could, rather, dream their own narratives, never confirmed any literary sources that served as creative impulses for his compositions.

To say more about the proceedings of the Third Ballade, I think it best to quote today’s performer, our guest artistic curator, Vladimir Feltsman:

“The Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major was composed in 1840-41 and dedicated to Mademoiselle Pauline de Noailles. It is the sunniest of the set and the only one that ends in a major key. There are some hidden polyphonic intricacies in this ballade – more than in the First and Second, but less than in the Fourth, which is the most polyphonically charged and dense. The Third Ballade begins with a charming theme on top that is continued in the bass. The order is immediately reversed; the theme starts again in the bass and is continued on top. From the very beginning, Chopin skillfully manipulates our perspective. This theme is not developed in any way and returns only once at the end as a triumphant climax presented flamboyantly in rich chords. The middle episode is not contrasting; it starts very softly with repeated notes space an octave apart that descend gently in the rhythmical pattern of the main theme of the Second Ballade. This pattern is maintained all the way through the middle section. A charming waltz appears and disappears without warning. The climax is carefully prepared and calculated – after three chromatically ascending sequences, the first theme re-appears in shining armor. The waltz returns bursting with joyful energy, climbing up and up. The Third Ballade ends with a brilliant run from the top down. Four chords follow and seal the happy ending.”

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