



**Pianist Evren Ozel at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum  
November 29, 2020, 7:30 pm**

## **NOTES ON THE PROGRAM** **By Dr. Jannie Burdeti**

### **Johann Sebastian Bach: Partita No. 5 in G Major, BWV 829**

When Johann Sebastian Bach decided to start publishing his partitas, he had been living in Leipzig for about three years. Much to his frustration, he was little appreciated in his new job as Kantor. His duties included overseeing the music at the four main churches in town, instructing the students at the Thomaskirche, and essentially, taking responsibility for anything that had to do with music in Leipzig. His commitments were now far more extensive and diversified than at his previous posts. Compounding the squabbles he had with colleagues and students was the high cost of living in Leipzig, which made life difficult for his growing family. It was in these circumstances that Bach embarked on a completely new venture: self-publication.

Beginning in 1726, Bach published one partita for keyboard per year until 1731, culminating in what he himself named, his Opus 1: a compilation of the six partitas. The resulting work, carrying the very modest and ambiguous title *Clavier-Übung* (Keyboard Exercise) bore the description, “Composed for music lovers to refresh their spirits.” Paradoxically, his Opus 1 represents the peak of his writing in the genre of the suites.

As has been noted by many musicologists, this set can be seen as an homage to Johann Kuhnau, his predecessor in Leipzig. Kuhnau had been the first composer to assign the German name *Clavier-Übung* to any piece, as opposed to the more common Latin term in use at the time, *exercitium*. Furthermore, he had published two sets, each of them containing seven suites. Another motivating factor, suggested by Christoph Wolff, was George Frideric Handel’s recent publication of his *Eight Great Suites* in 1720. Bach had always maintained an interest in Handel’s activities and would have almost definitely known of these works.

Above all, Bach’s greatest incentive in the publication of his partitas would have been his consistent desire to develop his reputation and prove himself an equal to his published colleagues at the school where he was employed. This first set of partitas would be followed by other volumes of *Clavier-Übung* consisting of some of his most celebrated keyboard works: the *Italian Concerto*, the *French Overture in B Minor*, a collection of works for organ, and the *Goldberg Variations*.

Bach’s *Partita in G Major* is brimming with resplendence and joy, not unlike his other G-major works, such as the *Goldberg Variations* and the first cello suite. Peter Williams notes that every movement in this seven-movement suite is imbued with triple time, be it in the number of beats per measure, the use of compound meter, or on the even smaller scale, the use of triplets (as in the Allemande). The Praeambulum is a brilliant and humorous opening movement consisting of scales and broken chords, punctuated by blocked chords and silences. As musicologist Andrew Talle has noted, hand-crossings were quite in fashion during this time due to their theatrical quality, and this movement certainly makes use of this technique, requiring a wonderful display of keyboard finesse and virtuosity. The Allemande is full of grace in its rolling “sea of triplets,” in the words of harpsichordist Colin Tilney. Bach’s six partitas alternate between the Italian version of the Corrente and French Courant, and this partita utilizes the former, a bubbly and fleeting dance. A tender duet in thirds ensues in the

Sarabande. While the Tempo di Minuetta is technically in 3/4 time, Bach uses an accentuation throughout so that one hears the music in two instead of in three, again lending a humorous quality to this work, as he did in the initial Praeambulum. Bach, on the title page of this collection, had written that included are a number of *galanteries* (lighter dances), such as *capriccio*, *burlesca*, and *scherzo*. The following Passepied would certainly be considered an example of a *galanterie*. Angela Hewitt writes that this movement is reminiscent of the fourth variation from the *Goldberg Variations*, with its rustic 3/8 writing. The Gigue is a double fugue and, according to Hewitt, perhaps the most technically challenging movement in all of the partitas.

## **Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109**

The last years of Ludwig van Beethoven's life were filled with seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes. Here was Beethoven, who was practically stone-deaf, writing some of the most revered works in the history of Western music. It was during this period that he wrote the shortest piece in his entire corpus (Bagatelle Op. 119, No. 10), as well as his most massive works (Symphony No. 9, *Missa solemnis*, and the *Diabelli Variations*). Childlike simplicity is heard alongside the most harrowing complexities. Even in terms of compositional techniques, his late works are practically built upon juxtapositions.

In 1818, Beethoven completed the *Hammerklavier*, his most formidable piano sonata. He wrote that it would keep pianists busy for the next fifty years, and of course, pianists have been busy with this work for much longer than that. Two years after the *Hammerklavier*, Beethoven wrote his Piano Sonata in E Major, Op. 109, where he is at his most compact and unpretentious. This would be the first of his last three sonatas—a true triptych and the completion to his thirty-two piano sonatas, a “New Testament” to Bach’s “Old Testament,” the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, as the pianist Hans von Bülow famously once said.

After writing his longest and most physically demanding sonata, Beethoven demonstrates an extreme economy of material in the first two movements of Op. 109, the first of which originated as a bagatelle. Moreover, in contrast with the previous work's epic emotional struggle, Beethoven now begins with flowing sixteenths, in the key of E major, traditionally known in the Baroque era as the “celestial key.” Its first theme, lasting a mere seven seconds, is set in direct antithesis with the second theme, which is not only in a different meter, but also rhythmically halting and constantly searching. The terse second movement—the shortest ever in a Beethoven sonata—disrupts the E-major peace that was established in the first movement with a wild and headlong tarantella.

E.T.A. Hoffman's description of Beethoven's music was sublimity, and the last movement is certainly an example of that. Richard Taruskin writes that in this last movement, marked *Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung* (songful, with the most inward feeling), Beethoven uses the very word, *Empfindung*, that would later epitomize the Romantic movement. Here, Beethoven explores the inner regions of the soul, and ultimately, in his last variation, reaches towards the Kantian “starry heavens.” The hymnlike theme is transformed into a cosmic dance, pointillistic playfulness, and Bachian counterpoint. In the sixth and last variation (perhaps a nod to Bach's numerology and religious use of the number six), Beethoven's centrifugal rhythmic force (in the words of Leon Fleisher) spins faster and faster until the trills create an ecstatic vibration of pure and intense energy. When it abates, we hear once more the theme. As in a hearing of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the restatement of the theme at the end is the same, yet utterly transformed by our experience of what came before.

## **Frederic Chopin: Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 35**

The Sonata in B-flat Minor, Op. 35, was conceived during the summer of 1839, while Chopin was residing at the estate and country home of his partner, Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin (alias George Sand), in the village of Nohant. The pair had returned there after seven long months of traveling. This period in their lives marked a shift in their relationship, with Sand taking on a maternal role towards Chopin, whose health was quite fragile. Sand took it upon herself to take care of him and would later dub him her “everyday patient.” The two of them had completely different habits and opposite schedules—Sand liked to work at night and sleep during the day, while Chopin went to bed early and would compose during the day. While Sand was busy writing and taking care of her two children, Chopin was left to his own to do what he pleased. Even if the composer would sometimes complain about the rural life at the chateau, he had total freedom and few worries. Fortunately for posterity, Chopin’s stress-free environment had a wonderful effect on his output during this time. As such, a number of his most celebrated works were completed while he was residing at Sand’s mansion. The Sonata in B-flat Minor, the Impromptu in F-sharp Major, and his Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61, all of which are on tonight’s program, are but a few examples of works he composed in full or in part in Nohant.

This sonata was his first serious foray into the German classical form. (He wrote his first sonata for piano as a student, which was published posthumously.) The nickname “Funeral March” (one of the rare cases in which Chopin approved of such a programmatic title) originates from its third movement, composed in 1837, two years before the rest of the work. While Robert Schumann, speaking of the overall form of the sonata, notably remarked that Chopin “simply bound together four of his most unruly children,” the work was a purposeful recontextualization of textures from his preludes and etudes, the *bel canto* (beautiful singing) style from his nocturnes, as well as oft-used structures of his waltzes and polonaises. Moreover, scholars have again and again brought attention to the deep motivic connections that tie the work together.

According to Charles Rosen, the first movement’s opening “is a shock.” It opens with forte octaves outlining the threatening interval of a diminished seventh. Four bars later, the exposition proper begins. The entire movement is extremely orchestral in nature. The first theme emulates breathless string writing, originating from Italian opera. The second theme, in the relative major, is a welcome repose, with Chopin’s characteristic melodic writing. According to Rosen, the development looks ahead to Richard Wagner in terms of harmony, rhythm, and use of motif (predating the leitmotif). The energetic close of the movement leads directly into the next. The second movement is a fiery scherzo, almost demonic in nature. It is unrelenting and virtuosic and is held in check only by the trio. On the manuscript, at the top of the trio of the third movement, Chopin had written, “28 November, 1837.” This was the eve of the anniversary of the November Uprising, also known as the Polish-Russian War of 1830–31 or the Cadet Revolution. One can hear the emotional scope of the funeral march, from which this sonata gets its name—the commemoration of a national tragedy. Alan Walker writes: “There is some irony in the fact that the first occasion it was enlisted in the service of the dead was at Chopin’s own funeral, in the Madeleine Church, on October 30, 1849, in an orchestral arrangement by Henri Reber.” Of the Finale, Arthur Rubinstein wrote that it evokes “wind howling around the gravestones.” Its unison figurations are prefigured in Chopin’s earlier E-flat minor prelude. In a letter from Chopin to his friend Julian Fontana, he wrote that in this movement, “the left and right hands gossip in unison.”

## **Frederic Chopin: Impromptu No. 2 in F-sharp Major, Op. 36**

George Sand described Chopin's compositional process as "spontaneous [and] miraculous. He found ideas without looking for them, without foreseeing them. They came to his piano, sudden, complete, and sublime—[he] sang in his head while he was taking a walk, and he had to hurry and throw himself at the instrument to make himself hear them." This improvisatory spirit permeates the impromptus, of which Chopin wrote a total of four: the Impromptu in A-flat Major, Op. 29, F-sharp Major, Op. 36, and G-flat Major, Op. 51, as well as the posthumously published Fantasy-Impromptu, Op. 66.

The Impromptu, Op. 36, is in many ways a synthesis of different genres, and it cross-references a number of other works by Chopin. Jim Samson writes, "[It] introduce[s] a discreet counterpoint of styles such as must have characterized many improvisations of the day." Chopin's impromptu begins with a pastoral introduction in the left hand, setting the scene in a fashion similar to the Barcarolle (in the same key, F-sharp major) or the Berceuse in D-flat Major. After the opening's nocturne-like melody in the right hand, the music becomes suspended in a luminous chorale before making a surprising harmonic turn to D major. This new section of dotted rhythms is, as Samson calls it, "a march in the deliberately strident manner of contemporary French opera." The return of the opening melody is in the surprising and harmonically distant key of F major (rather than the opening F-sharp major), followed by two variations. Its last transformation consists of colorful arabesques, or *jeu perlé* (pearly playing) according to Samson, in the upper register of the piano. The chorale theme is evoked directly once more before a majestic finish. In a letter to his friend Julian Fontana, Chopin wrote, "It is perhaps a stupid piece. I can't tell yet, as I have only just finished it." While Chopin may have struggled with its organization, upon listening to this piece, one immediately recalls Sand's description of his playing: filled with spontaneity and the miraculous.

## **Frederic Chopin: Polonaise-Fantasia in A-flat Major, Op. 61**

Chopin's Polonaise-Fantasia, Op. 61, written between the summers of 1845 and 1846, belongs to a time in his life when he found it difficult to compose. His recently ended relationship with George Sand and declining health were partly to blame, but Chopin was nonetheless at the height of his compositional powers. The Polonaise-Fantasia was to be his last large-scale composition for the piano. At the time of its writing, Chopin had not yet found a suitable title for the piece and confessed, "I'd like to finish something that I don't yet know what to call."

Its ambiguity and search for meaning can be traced back to his own identity as an expatriate. Chopin creates a synthesis between the Polish national spirit and his most personal thoughts and feelings, blending two forms: the ternary structure, characteristic of polonaises, and elements from sonata form. This complete integration of "polonaise" and "fantasy" brings about a deep web of interconnectedness through this seemingly rhapsodic and improvisatory work. It is a linear narrative, and its singular events, like those in life, are consequential, connected, and seemingly inevitable.

Pianist Jeremy Denk calls the opening an "invocation" and the rising arpeggios an invitation to *listen*. Two chords open the work with polonaise panache, followed by a rising, unmeasured arpeggio, a continuation of the second chord's harmony. As Vladimir Feltsman has pointed out, in the very first measure, both the polonaise and the fantasy are present. The sequence is heard four times, and different polonaise rhythms are slowly born until the lyrical first theme arrives, heralded by repeated forte octaves in the left hand. Like in the Fantasia in F Minor, Op. 49, there is a slow, central section in B major, reminiscent of a dream or a stasis, where the search for answers comes to a momentary halt.