

# THOROUGHLY POLISH *CHOPIN'S MAZURKAS*

With the Mazurka Op 68 No 3 appearing inside this issue's Scores, there's no better time to explore Chopin's 58 masterpieces – and **Marjan Kiepora** is the perfect guide



**F**rédéric Chopin recreated many existing musical forms for the piano such as the nocturne, polonaise and mazurka. While Chopin has traditionally been a core staple of piano pedagogy and student curriculum, it will be his mazurkas that will be explored here. Whether the mystical Mazurka Op 17 No 4 or the vibrant Op 68 No 3, the mazurkas have been performed by the world's greatest pianists and audiences love them. It is especially in his mazurkas where Chopin created the 'Polishness' that we hear in his music. With dedication and focus, mazurkas can become yours to enjoy and perform.

### The Mazurkas

A dance form in 3/4 time with special rhythms and accents, the mazurkas held a special place in Chopin's mind and soul. If you consider some 200 solo piano works which Chopin composed, there are 58 mazurkas. He composed mazurkas from the beginning to the end of his life. Whereas Chopin's mazurkas are demanding musically, many are accessible technically to pianists across different levels. However, they

require special attention to their style and spirit. Chopin did not compose *easy* pieces; he composed masterpieces. And each one of these is a gem.

As a youngster growing up in Poland, Chopin spent time in the countryside and observed music and folkloric dancing including mazurka forms, along with the beauty of the Polish

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landscape. With these images leaving an indelible mark, Chopin would raise mazurkas to a level of sophistication and élan in the crucible of his inventiveness.

Chopin left Poland in 1830 at the age of 20, in pursuit of artistic growth in the cultural capitals of Europe. After

a short stint in Vienna, he settled in Paris in 1831, which became his new home, and where he would return from sojourns including England and Scotland. All the while Poland's troubling political situation being between powerful nations, territorial divisions and Czarist incursions caused him distress. As a man who spoke through his music, it created fertile ground for the flame that burned within and indeed it was the mazurkas that would represent Chopin's most personal side. His own frail health from a tubercular condition would deny him any hope of seeing his homeland again.

### Types of mazurkas

There are three types of mazurkas: *kujawiak*, slower in tempo such as the Op 68 No 2; the *mazur*, as in the lively Op 68 No 3 and the faster *oberek*, such as the Op 7 No 5. A mazurka will often combine more than one style in the same piece such as slower mazurkas having livelier middle sections.

### Dotted rhythms

Characteristic to the mazurka form is the commonly referred to 'dotted rhythm', where a dotted quaver is followed by a semiquaver then typically a crotchet, minim or semiquaver. Or, a quaver may be separated by a semiquaver rest before the semiquaver, creating the same effect albeit with a brief lift. Frequently these dotted rhythms appear at the beginning of mazurkas. Good examples of both types of dotted rhythms are found at the start of the main theme in bars 9 and 10 of Op 6 No 2, or in bars 37 and 38 of Op 24 No 1. Dotted rhythms should be given space and time to breathe.

### Accents

Accents can appear on any beat in a measure, on none of them, or all three beats. In bars 5 and 6 of Op 6 No 2, there is an accent mark on all three beats. In other mazurkas, accents may be infrequent or implied, like choosing to dwell on a note. The splendid Op 68 No 3 is an early mazurka composed in 1830 when Chopin was still in Poland. It is a brilliant example of the mazurka rhythm. Yet accents are rare in the main theme. It is in the middle *poco piu vivo* section (bars 33 to 44) that accent marks appear more frequently. One can also occasionally delay a third beat, by a mere breath, which provides a lilt to the dance-like character.



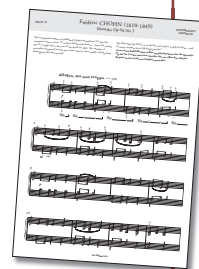
## PIANIST AND THE MAZURKAS

### Mazurka Op 68 No 3 appears inside this issue

#### Mazurkas inside recent past issues:

- Op 7 No 2 (issue 65)
- Op 17 No 1 (issue 73)
- Op 17 No 2 (issue 97)
- Op 68 No 2 (issue 82)

If there's a particular mazurka you'd like us to feature, write to the editor at [editor@pianistmagazine.com](mailto:editor@pianistmagazine.com)



### Rubato

The concept of rubato, as in lengthening a note or phrase, is a powerful component in the interpretation of any Chopin work. It is highly subjective with no one way being definitive. At times *rubato* is noted in the score, as in the first bar of Op 24 No 1 and bar 17 of Op 7 No 3. Chopin gives us a framework for the mazurka as a unique musical form. Yet highly stylized in his own performances, Chopin gives us lots of room for interpretation and ideas. I recommend recording yourself and to make pencil notes in the music or in a note book. Over time your work-in-progress will take shape.

### Repeats

The main themes in mazurkas can repeat several times. The Op 24 No 1 in G minor is an example of a slower *kujawiak*. All of the initial motifs are repeated. It then moves to a whirling *mazur* in E flat marked *con anima* before returning yet again to the original theme. There is room to consider different interpretations and dynamic contrasts, here as in other instances. Chopin admired operas and opera singing. So be mindful of the right- and left-hand balances and give particular attention that the singing lines remain prominent.

### The Dudy effect

Chopin took gestures from Polish folkloric dances by hearing frequent use of the 'Dudy', or sometimes referred to as 'Duda', a bagpipe type instrument common in Poland which created a drone base accompaniment. Also, string ▶



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instruments accomplished this ‘drone’ effect. These ‘drones’ are usually played as a fifth in the left hand as in the opening bars 1-8 of Op 6 No 2, in bars 45-51 of the famous Op 7 No 1, and the middle section (the *poco piu vivo*) of Op 68 No 3. There are numerous other examples.

## Suggested choices

I certainly recommend the youthful and vivacious Op 68 No 3 *mazur* and the slower *kujawiak* styled mazurka Op 68 No 2. Both were composed while Chopin was still in Poland and published posthumously. The renowned Op 7 No 1 is a favourite among the mazurkas. Another choice is the lovely Op 24 No 1 from 1833 when Chopin was in Paris with his homeland in mind. All of these are fun to learn and perform, and have different styles that you will enjoy for a lifetime.

The elegant Op 17 No 4 is a prime example of Chopin being ahead of his time. The chromaticism and dissonance anticipated modern modes of composition that would come generations later. I had the opportunity to ask Vladimir Horowitz, well known for this mazurka, his opinion about it. He said it was a ‘wonderful’ piece – then he added two words: ‘Colour, Colour!’ Be sure to survey *all* the mazurkas as there are wonderments throughout the genre albeit varying technical demands present themselves.

## Technical challenges

Every mazurka has its tricky spots. There are trills, skips, octaves, arpeggios, stretched chords and faster passages which must be worked out as with any piece. Repetition is a part of the process especially before a concert. However, I strongly advise against any kind of rote practising. Perhaps imagine playing for friends or an audience, guiding them along with contrasts and colour! Clear and even trills as in the Op 68 No 2 might depend on the piano. If a piano has a heavy action, then play trills slower for clarity and do not try and overplay them. Pedalling should be shallow, keeping the feet resting gently on the pedals rather than bouncing the feet around.

## Editions

Worthy editions include the Paderewski and Henle, albeit the Paderewski has more fingering options to consider.

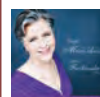
## A Word about Lento

Reports of letters which survived from his students show that Chopin intended *Lento* to be ‘slower’ but not necessarily ‘slow’. I played the Op 68 No 2, which is marked *Lento*, for the venerable Menahem Pressler many years ago. Afterwards he snapped his fingers and moved his arm in a circular rhythmic motion as if to indicate putting some step or pace into the tempo. Metronome markings appear primarily in the earlier mazurkas. They should serve as a reference only. You need to find your own level of comfort allowing for flexibility and mood. Although Chopin did not intend these for dancing, they are still mazurkas and should have movement and cohesiveness. In some of the slower mazurkas the mood may appear wistful. For Chopin, the mazurkas were about remembrance and nostalgia, not sorrow or melancholy. That said, you can personalise your own thoughts.

## MAZURKAS ON RECORD Editor's top choices



**Arthur Rubinstein** – for his unique style  
*Warner Classics 7302502*



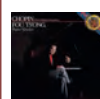
**Janina Fialkowska** – because that's how Rubinstein would have played if he had the fingers! *Atma ACD22682*



**Joanna MacGregor** – for her liveliness  
*Sound Circus SCCD21705*



**Adam Harasiewicz** – for his Polish roots and dancing style  
*Frederick Chopin Institute NIFCCD208-209*



**Fou Ts'ong** – creative, imaginative and utterly convincing  
*Sony/CBS Masterworks 10004626975*



**Vladimir Ashkenazy** – for the more ‘down-to-earth’ approach  
*Decca 4480862*



**Garrick Ohlsson** – for a big, grand and larger-than-life interpretation  
*Helios CDH55392*



**Ignaz Friedman** – because nobody played the mazurkas like Friedman!  
*MVE SCDL15734*

## Chopin's last composition

Chopin's last composition was a mazurka, but not the one we have come to believe over time – the Op 68 No 4 in F minor. That mazurka had been restored from sketches in 1846 three years before Chopin's death, according to Chopin scholar Alan Walker. His authoritative book *Fryderyk Chopin, A Life and Times* now confirms Chopin's very last composition was in fact the Mazurka Op 67 No 2 in G minor. Already seriously ill, Chopin managed to pen this last composition in the summer of 1849, and died that October.

Mazurkas should not be thought of as smaller works – but rather as the compelling concert pieces which they are. They deserve the full dynamic range and contrasts as we would approach to playing *any* Chopin composition. You can make mazurkas your own and something audiences will remember you by. **n**

*Since the launch of his Chopin album entitled Images of a Homeland, the American pianist Marjan Kiepura has gained a significant YouTube following. His development as an artist, and his own Polish ancestry, has led him to focus on Chopin's music. Kiepura has performed works by Chopin in the US, UK and Europe, focusing on the mazurkas which he has extensively researched. His recent podcast series, entitled, Marjan's Musical Soirees, is available at [patriamusic.com/Chopin-podcasts.php](http://patriamusic.com/Chopin-podcasts.php).*