

XXIV International  
Chopin & Friends Festival

Polish and Slavic Center  
in New York

November 5th, 2022

7:00 p.m.



## Carter Johnson

### piano recital

#### Program:

**Maria Szymanowska** – Selected pieces from *Vingt Exercices et Préludes*

Prelude No. 4 in G minor: *Agitato*

Prelude No. 19 in A flat major: *Con spirito*

Prelude No. 18 in E major: *Presto*

**Wojciech Kilar** – Three Preludes

**Fryderyk Chopin** – Mazurka in A flat major Op. 59 No. 2

**Miłosz Magin** – *Triptyque polonais*: I. Mazur, II. Kujawiak, III. Oberek

**Fryderyk Chopin** – Scherzo in E major, Op. 54 No. 4

**Józef Krogulski** – Mazurka in E minor (*à la Chopin*)

**Grażyna Bacewicz** – Sonata No. 2

*Maestoso*

*Agitato*

*Largo Vivo*

#### Program Notes

**Wojciech Kilar** once said that *the keyboard of the piano is like a drug, it is as attractive as a beautiful woman*. For some reasons, though, his piano works were few and far between. Does it mean, then, that he thought the attraction might be fatal (or perhaps too obvious, too simple)? Most composers, however, have succumbed to the allure of the piano, and for centuries keyboard instruments have enjoyed unwavering popularity: from the French harpsichord school of the second half of the seventeenth century through Domenico Scarlatti, Johann Sebastian Bach's works *für Klavier*, his son Carl Philipp Emanuel's developments in the keyboard instruments' texture, the milestones of the Viennese Classicists (Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven) and the nineteenth-century Romantic virtuosity up to the multi-stylistic and eclectic twentieth century music and that of our present times. Despite the stylistic revolutions and advancements aimed at toppling the *ancien régime* aesthetics of tonality and sound conventions, the "king of the instruments" survived the "militant" avant garde of the 1960s and 1970s, which also attracted, albeit briefly, Wojciech Kilar, represented in this program, however, by his early, and rather conservative, *Preludes*.

Whatever the vantage point, **Fryderyk Chopin** (1810–1849) will always be the "epicenter" of the Polish universe. This "Chopin-centric" aspect of Polish music grew out of the historic apex of the hegemony of the piano as the leading medium of the nineteenth-century Romantic expressiveness. On the other hand, however, the revelation of Chopin's music cemented the privileged position of this instrument, not only for his successors but, most of all, as part of the consciousness and sensitivity of the recipients: the music lovers and the concert audiences. There is no doubt that the piano as an instrument and the music composed for it have held sway in Polish music and culture ever since Chopin's era. The fact that Fryderyk Chopin influenced, so undeniably and exceptionally, all his successors is primarily due to his genius, in fact quite exceptional on the European scale. Everything that happened in Polish music after, but also before him and during his lifetime, is relentlessly and unavoidably compared with Chopin. It was a huge challenge for the nineteenth-century composers, both the ones who consciously referred to his output and competed to become his legitimate successors, as well as those few who, like Zygmunt Noskowski, were in direct opposition to him. We think of Chopin when we listen to Maria Szymanowska, who had composed before him, just as we think of him when we listen to Ignacy Feliks Dobrzyński, who, like Chopin, was a pupil of Józef Elsner. Whoever, after Chopin, drew on the folk idiom, whoever tried his or her hand at folk stylizations, had to remember Chopin's mazurkas. Spanning about a dozen genres and musical forms, in which he frequently either charted new territories or enriched the familiar paths with new layers of refinement, imagination and extremely rich invention, Chopin's music finds its concise yet exhausting quintessence in his mazurkas. Usually collected into opuses consisting of three to five miniatures, Chopin's mazurkas are, on the one hand, an unbelievable, in its refinement, ennoblement of the folk idiom and, on the other hand, the composer's passport, which however hard you tried, you could never falsify. Although he bore his father's French name and spent half of his life in Paris, Chopin used his mazurkas to dispel any doubts as to what his nationality was. It was Polish.

Written in 1845, the three *Mazurkas* Op. 59 are Chopin's late works. Although in his letter dated 1848, the composer painfully complained that "I barely remember how they sing in the homeland", he was still living in Poland in his memory, spirit and all his nature. Created with a noble economy of means, *Mazurka No. 2 in A flat major* is, primarily, a rhythmic reminiscence of the *mazur*, although it seems to be pervaded by restrained elegance, with only flashes of reined-in passion. Chopin gave the autograph of this composition to the wife of his near contemporary Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, who, in a letter, wrote the following characteristic words: "My dear Chopin, can I ask you a favor? Would you be as kind as to write a few measures of music for my wife Cécile? When we last met, in Frankfurt, I was engaged; and ever since that time whenever I have wanted to give my wife a special pleasure, I had to play some of your music for her..."

Fryderyk Chopin was well acquainted with the European high society of the first half of the nineteenth century, but the biographers of both composers are silent when it comes to his possible acquaintance with **Maria Szymanowska** (1789–1831). In terms of musical aesthetics and biological age, they were a generation apart, which meant that when he was enchanting the Warsaw audiences in his childhood and teenage years, she – as an unmarried woman – was boldly paving the ways, across the European continent, for women virtuoso concert pianists. Because Chopin was eager to keep abreast of any artistic phenomena around him, he must have been familiar with Szymanowska's compositions. He would hardly have been unwilling to attend her concert if the opportunity had presented itself. Szymanowska was, after all, an exceptional figure in the world of music in those times. Her personal and artistic emancipation must be seen as an act of exceptional courage, while her compositions, written in the fashionable "brilliant" style (inspirational for young Chopin, too), drew on the music of the biggest names associated with that aesthetics, such as Hummel or Dusík. She was also acquainted with the intellectual and musical elites of contemporary Europe, and commanded genuine respect in the artistic circles. Even though Szymanowska never received formal music education, she managed to compose more than a hundred works for piano (in addition to several dozen chamber works), including a collection of twenty *Etudes and Preludes* (1836). These highly original works were praised and appreciated by Robert Schumann, who was known for his critical opinions about other composers' accomplishments. Szymanowska's music seems to her only reflect the real lack of her talent but also the characteristic features of her piano technique: scale of superficial virtuosity, tuneful and delicate tone, as well as technical versatility.

Maria Szymanowska also wrote a number of mazurkas for piano, whose idea (rather than character or the extent of refining their folk essence) could have served as a starting point for Chopin's stylizations. However, you can hear the echoes of his inimitable mazurkas in the works written by **Józef Krogulski** (1815–1842) and **Miłosz Magin** (1929–1999).

The path of Józef Krogulski's music education was similar to that of Chopin's – they both studied with Józef Elsner at the Principal School of Music (Szkoła Główna Muzyki) in Warsaw. After his first public performances when he was only ten, Krogulski was dubbed the "Polish Mozart". His *Mazurka in E minor "à la Chopin"* has the formal construction of a song. Whereas its *kujawiak*-like outer sections are lyrical, perhaps even sentimental, the character of its middle movement is brighter, sunnier and more sanguine. The miniature's subtitle leaves no doubt as to the composer's source of inspiration.

A pianist and composer born in the city of Łódź, Miłosz Magin came of age during the German occupation of Poland during the Second World War, and immediately had to face the aesthetical and ideological oppression of the communist regime in the wake of the wartime agonies. As a pianist, Magin made a name for himself at the International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1955, where he won an honorable mention. Two years later, he made a decision to leave Poland and, as a consequence, he spent most of the rest of his life in France. He played and recorded the complete works by Chopin, and the deep and practical expertise that he had in that music inspired his own compositional technique, which can be described as idiomatically pianistic. Miłosz Magin composed his *Tryptyk polski (Polish Triptych)* in 1967 as a set of concert pieces to be performed by himself. The three parts of the triptych are directly dedicated to the most important Polish folk dances (except the *krakowiak*), and point out the exact same rhythmic affiliations that can be found in Chopin's mazurkas. The truculent Mazur, the tuneful and nostalgic *Kujawiak* and the rakish and restless *Oberek* create an internally contrasted and impressive cycle of works.

Both **Wojciech Kilar** (1932–2013) and **Grażyna Bacewicz** (1909–1969) remained in Poland after the Second World War. They were divided, however, by a generational gap resulting in their differing sets of experiences or perspectives of steering their artistic paths.

Kilar's *Three Preludes* belongs to the composer's slender production of music for piano. His most famous, and relatively frequently performed, piece of this type is his *Piano Concerto No. 1*. In this regard, Kilar's seems to be the very antithesis of Fryderyk Chopin's works, even though his very early and twenty-four *Preludes* Op. 28 creates an undeniable context for the twelve *Preludes* that Kilar wrote when he was only nineteen. Out of the dozen, only three works have survived, all of them having a folk taste and forming an unpretentiously charming and simple mini-triptych, internally contrasted. The bristling galloping outer movements of *Prelude No. 1* frame a brief, vocal-like intermezzo. *Prelude No. 2* is a meditative plainsong progressing with an even rhythm of measured chords, whereas *Prelude No. 3* is a miniature toccata, pleasantly unsettling in its irregular beats, which unrelentingly lead to a succinct conclusion.

Composed in 1953, two years after Kilar's *Preludes*, Grażyna Bacewicz's *Piano Sonata No. 2* is a work of a mature composer fully aware of her creative artistic identity. The three-movement *Sonata* draws on the Romantic form, though not directly, and definitely not specifically, on the mature *Sonatas* written by Chopin. The first movement has a two-theme structure, the second is a tuneful plainsong with a hugely emotional climax and the third is a galloping and unstoppably *perpetuum mobile* of a toccata having a character of the oberek. Stylistically, Bacewicz's *Sonata* is close to the aesthetics and harmonic language found in the works written by Béla Bartók. The work is exceptional in the very juxtaposition of its "conservatively" constructed form with its stylistic roughness. But it is the composer's technical mastery, her unusual awareness of resources and phenomenal feel for the drama throughout the work's three movements that make this *Sonata* one of the masterpieces of the genre. In the context of the whole oeuvre of a composer who was, primarily, a violinist and wrote mostly for the violin, *Sonata No. 2* is a potent and undeniable testimony to her exceptional and versatile talent. First and foremost, though, the work is brilliantly and outstandingly spectacular.

Andrzej Sułek

Translated by

Adam Zbyszewski

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