



Deux-Elles

# NOCTURNE

The Romantic Life of Frédéric Chopin

Lucy Parham piano

Harriet Walter  
Samuel West narrators

# Nocturne The Story

Scripted by Lucy Parham

Although Chopin's piano works are among the most distinctive and instantly recognisable music ever composed, Chopin the man remains something of an enigma. Many of his letters have been destroyed and very few of those that remain give any real insight into his character and beliefs. It is maybe through the music, with its melodic genius and inimitable lyricism, that we can best come to know the man.

Fryderyk Chopin was born in Poland in 1810 to a middle-class intellectual family; his father was French and his mother Polish. His birth date is controversial: the town registration of his birth specifies February 22nd, but Chopin always gave the date as March 1st. A child prodigy, he studied at the Warsaw Conservatory and by the age of 19 had written his F minor piano concerto and many other works. As a pianist, Chopin was largely left to develop on his own, as Warsaw had few piano teachers of importance.

In 1831 Chopin travelled via Vienna to Paris, where he was to remain until his death in 1849. At that time, the French capital was the centre of European culture and Chopin found himself surrounded by a group of writers, artists and

musicians including the author Balzac, the painter Delacroix and the composers Berlioz and Liszt. "Chopin is all sadness," wrote Liszt in a letter of 1834, "Furniture is a little more expensive than he had thought, so now we're in for a whole month of worry and nerves."

Those nerves, coupled with a dislike of showmanship, caused Chopin's record of performances to be very meagre – just thirty concerts in thirty years. However, through his aristocratic Polish friends, Chopin befriended the influential Rothschilds who enabled him to set up the lucrative teaching practice which became his main source of financial support and his entrée with the Parisian elite.

Until the age of 26, Chopin enjoyed a discreet and quiet social life. He had been engaged to a childhood friend, Maria Wodzińska, but her father had broken off their union, citing Chopin's ill-health as the reason. Despite his somewhat effete and fastidious demeanour, with his perfect dress sense and long white gloves, Chopin had a healthy interest in the opposite sex. His life was turned upside down when Liszt's mistress, Marie d' Agoult introduced him to the renowned female writer and feminist George Sand. Sand was famous not only for her writing, but also for wearing men's clothes, for smoking, and for her numerous affairs and generally unconventional behaviour. In fact, she was probably the most famous woman in France. Although Chopin

was initially shocked by Sand's values, the unlikely pair eventually began a romance and by 1837 they were living together. Chopin became inspired by his new partner and she sacrificed a great deal to be with him. Six years older than Chopin, Sand remained a mother figure during their relationship and often used to refer to him as "my child" or "my chip chip".

In 1838 Sand persuaded Chopin to travel with her and her two children to Majorca, in search of a warmer climate. In spite of an unwelcoming reception from the islanders and the composer's continued ill health, it was here that he wrote some of his finest works, including the 24 Preludes. But it was also here that his consumption worsened, his weak lungs responding badly to the constant rain. The stay in Majorca remains the most documented period of his relationship with Sand. When they returned to Paris they lived in adjoining houses and spent their summers at Sand's country home in Nohant, where she continued to nurse the increasingly frail composer. Chopin was particularly happy at Nohant, and some of his greatest works, such as the *Polonaise Fantasy*, 3rd and 4th *Ballades* and *cello sonata* were all composed there. But the happiness was not to last. Complex misunderstandings connected to Sand's children precipitated their eventual break-up in 1847 and there were constant recriminations from both sides. After returning from a tour to England and Scotland, Chopin was so weak he could neither teach nor

compose. His sister came from Warsaw to nurse him alongside his treasured stepdaughter, Sand's child Solange. During his final days, Chopin ignored George Sand's requests to see him. He died on October 17th, 1849, aged just 39.

Chopin lived in constant fear of being buried alive and so, at his request, his heart was removed before the burial. Once again at his request, Mozart's Requiem was played at his funeral.

I have compiled *Nocturne* with the help of letters, diaries and correspondence written by Chopin, George Sand and their contemporaries. The featured music is not in chronological order. It was chosen more to reflect the mood of the story and to enhance the words.

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Inspired by the Irish composer, John Field, Chopin's 21 *Nocturnes* have a unique and significant place in the history of solo piano music. Influenced by Bellini's *bel canto* operas, the *Nocturne* evokes the mood of a dreamy and sometimes starless night by spinning a long melodic line over a flowing bass line. *Op.27 No.2 in D flat* is one of the most popular and its dreamy mood depicts the summer evenings at Nohant that Chopin so loved. The *Nocturne in C minor Op.48 No.1* is possibly his finest work in this genre. Dark and foreboding, its opening bars predict a gloom and desperation from which this haunting work never escapes more than momentarily.

Composed between 1832 and 1836, the Op.25 Études remain some of the most technically demanding works in the repertoire. Chopin dedicated this set to Liszt's mistress, Marie d'Agoult, through whom he met George Sand. *No.1 in A flat* is often known as "Aeolian Harp" because of its long melodic line surrounded by an arpeggiated accompaniment.

Whilst Chopin spent the majority of his adult life in Paris, his musical soul always remained in Poland. And it is in Poland that the two dance forms of Mazurka and Polonaise originated. The Mazurka is a country dance and it was Chopin that introduced it into concert music. Like many Mazurkas, the Polonaises are also in ¾ time but were known as a more of an upper-class dance – processional and courtly in stature. The *A major Polonaise Op.40* (the "Military") is a patriotic "call to arms" and Chopin's most well-known. The *D major Mazurka Op.33 No.2* depicts its folk origins

with a spirit of dance and contrasts vividly with the much more haunting and poignant *A minor, Op.67 No.4*. In total, Chopin wrote 57 mazurkas and they remain some of most elusive and musically challenging works for the pianist.

Chopin was said to have been captivated by a dog chasing its tail when he wrote the *Waltz in D flat Op.67 No.1*. Known in France as the "Petit Chien", its whirling and dexterous right-hand figuration have made it a popular encore piece and, despite its other nickname, it was never intended to be played in one minute! The second waltz of the pair, the *Waltz in C sharp minor*, is a far more reflective and wistful piece. Although the Waltz was a popular dance in the nineteenth century, Chopin's Waltzes were never written to be danced to.

Chopin completed his set of 24 *Préludes Op.28* during his time with George Sand in Majorca in 1838. Whilst on the island Sand wrote of them, "many of them are melancholy and suave and others are of gentle sadness which, while charming your ear, break your heart." The "*Raindrop*" is said to depict the raindrops beating on the rooftiles of the monastery that they were living in and Sand says "in his mind and in his music they had become tears from heaven beating on his heart".

The Four Ballades remain at the heart of most pianists' repertoire. All four are bound only by their title and present enormous challenges to the performer. The *Ballade No.3 in A flat* represents Chopin at his most optimistic, whilst the *Ballade No.4 in F minor* is one of his deepest, most profound and finest works in extended form.

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**Dame Harriet Walter** is an award-winning theatre actress, and an associate artist with the RSC. She has played most of Shakespeare's leading ladies and lately turned her hand to a male role, playing Brutus in the Donmar Theatre's all-female *Julius Caesar*. In a varied career she has happily moved between Radio, Television (*Lord Peter Wimsey, Law and Order:UK, Downton Abbey and Midsomer Murders*) and Film (*Sense and Sensibility, Atonement, the Young Victoria, The Wedding Video*).

She is also the author of three books; *Other People's Shoes, Macbeth* (for Faber's Actors on Shakespeare) and a photographic book *Facing It*.

As a great music lover, Dame Harriet Walter feels privileged to have collaborated with pianist Lucy Parham on several concert programmes including *Nocturne, Odyssey of Love* and *Beloved Clara*.



As a reciter, **Samuel West** has appeared with all the major British orchestras, with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Dallas Symphony Orchestras and the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington DC. Last year he performed Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, Strauss's *Enoch Arden*, Walton's *Façade* and Henry V, the Britten and Auden film scores *Night Mail, The Way to the Sea, Coal Face, The King's Stamp* and *God's Chillun*, Graham Fitkin's *Track to Track*, the UK premiere of Jonathan Harvey's *Weltethos* and the world premiere of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Simon Bainbridge. He has performed at the Proms five times and was soloist in *Henry V* at the 2002 Last Night. He also makes regular appearances at Wigmore Hall.

Work as an actor includes the title roles in *Hamlet* and *Richard II* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, *Enron* in the West End, the television series *Eternal Law* and the films *Howards End, Van Helsing* and three for director Roger Michell: *Notting Hill, Persuasion* and *Hyde Park on Hudson*. At the Vaudeville Theatre he played *Astrov* in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and is appearing in the second series of *Mr Selfridge* for ITV.



Acknowledged as one of Britain's finest pianists, **Lucy Parham** applies her sensitivity and imagination not only to concertos and recitals, but also to portraits in words and music of such composers as Schumann, Chopin, Liszt and Debussy.

Her life-long passion for the music of Schumann inspired the original concept of the words and music evening, *Beloved Clara*. The CD of *Beloved Clara* (ASV) was released to critical acclaim. Two further evenings, *Liszt - An Odyssey of Love* and *Nocturne - The Romantic Life of Frédéric Chopin* also premiered in the London Piano Series at the Wigmore Hall. These musical portraits have toured the UK and abroad, also making their US debuts in Los Angeles and subsequently broadcast on NPR across the USA. Her most recent programme, *Rêverie* – the life and loves of Claude Debussy was performed at the Wigmore Hall London Piano Series in December 2012 to critical acclaim.

Celebrated actors who appear in these programmes include Dame Harriet Walter, Samuel West, Martin Jarvis, Dominic West, Joanna David, Brendan Coyle, Edward Fox, Henry Goodman, Timothy West, Juliet Stevenson, Alex Jennings, Rosamund Pike and Charles Dance.

Lucy Parham has made numerous recordings including Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (RPO/EMI Gold), concertos by Ravel, Fauré and Franck (RPO records) and a solo Schumann CD

(ASV). Her CD of Clara and Robert Schumann Concertos (BBC CO/Sanctuary) won the BBC Music Magazine "Critics' Choice of the Year"

She came to public attention as the Piano Winner of the 1984 BBC Young Musician of the Year. Since her Royal Festival Hall concerto debut at age 16, she has played throughout the UK as concerto soloist with most of the major British orchestras and is a frequent recitalist at the Wigmore Hall. She also toured the USA with the BBC Concert Orchestra on their 50th anniversary, as well as Mexico and Turkey with Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Abroad, she has toured with the Russian State Symphony, Sofia Philharmonic, Bergen Philharmonic, Polish National Radio SO and L'Orchestre National de Lille.

Lucy Parham is a regular contributor to BBC Music Magazine, Pianist Magazine and the Guardian. She also appears frequently as a broadcast presenter and guest on BBC Radio 3 and 4 on CD Review, Proms Plus, The Essay, Music Matters, Composer of the Week, Young Musician of the Year, Sunday Salon and In Tune. She has broadcast on BBC TV as the commentator on the Leeds International Piano Competition in 2006 and 2009 and as a jury member in both 2008 and 2010 for the final of Young Musician of the Year. She was invited to be the Director of the 2006 Schumann Anniversary Festival at Cadogan Hall and the Director of Schumann 200 Festival at King's Place in 2010.





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The Romantic Life of Frédéric Chopin

**Lucy Parham**

piano

Harriet Walter and Samuel West

narrators

## CD 1

- 1** Nocturne in C minor Op.48 No.1 6:09
- 2** *"In the winter of 1831 ..."*  
Polonaise in A Op.40 No.1 4:48
- 3** *"We were in his audience ..."*  
Waltz in C sharp minor Op.64 No.2 4:34
- 4** *"Chopin's sensitivity ..."*  
Etude in A flat Op.25 No.1 8:10
- 5** *"Dear Chopin ..."*  
Mazurka in D Op.33 No.2 5:39
- 6** *"After some considerable effort ..."*  
Ballade No.3 in A flat Op.47 12:40

## CD 2

- 1** *"In the winter of 1838 ..."*  
Mazurka in A minor Op.67 No.4 5:30
- 2** *"My Chopin has been rather unwell ..."*  
Prelude in D flat Op.28 (raindrop) 8:22
- 3** *"My dear sister ..."*  
Prelude in G minor Op.28 5:13
- 4** *"October 1839 ..."*  
Waltz in D flat Op.64 No.1 (petit chien) 3:08
- 5** *"We often shared the anguish ..."*  
Nocturne in D flat Op.27 No.2 6:37
- 6** *"Our life in Nohant was simple yet divine ..."*  
Ballade No.4 in F minor Op.52 20:57

Recording engineer - Peter Newble

Booklet Notes - Lucy Parham

Photos - Sven Arnstein

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