

A man with dark hair and a light beard stands with his arms crossed against a wall of horizontal wooden planks. He is wearing a dark, heavy coat over a light blue shirt and a dark scarf with thin gold stripes. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures of his clothing and the wall.

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EMMANUEL
DESPAX

FRÉDÉRIC
CHOPIN

PRELUDES
BERCEUSE
BARCAROLLE

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

24 PRELUDES | BERCEUSE | BARCAROLLE

24 Preludes, Op. 28

1	No. 1 in C Major	[0.40]	15	No. 15 in D-Flat Major 'Raindrop'	[5.41]
2	No. 2 in A Minor	[1.58]	16	No. 16 in B-Flat Minor	[1.15]
3	No. 3 in G Major	[1.02]	17	No. 17 in A-Flat Major	[3.22]
4	No. 4 in E Minor	[1.54]	18	No. 18 in F Minor	[1.05]
5	No. 5 in D Major	[0.37]	19	No. 19 in E-Flat Major	[1.36]
6	No. 6 in B Minor	[2.00]	20	No. 20 in C Minor	[1.49]
7	No. 7 in A Major	[0.46]	21	No. 21 in B-Flat Major	[2.15]
8	No. 8 in F-Sharp Minor	[2.08]	22	No. 22 in G Minor	[0.49]
9	No. 9 in E Major	[1.11]	23	No. 23 in F Major	[1.10]
10	No. 10 in C-Sharp Minor	[0.36]	24	No. 24 in D Minor	[2.46]
11	No. 11 in B Major	[0.50]	25	Berceuse in D-Flat Major, Op. 57	[5.01]
12	No. 12 in G-Sharp Minor	[1.29]	26	Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60	[9.19]
13	No. 13 in F-Sharp Major	[3.18]		Total timings:	[55.09]
14	No. 14 in E-Flat Minor	[0.32]			

EMMANUEL DESPAX

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PROGRAMME NOTE

We are rather too apt to think of Chopin exclusively as a Polish composer, whereas in fact – like most great composers who came before and after him – his greatness derived precisely from his ability to absorb the most inventive and expressive innovations from his peers, regardless of national origin. Consider how he adapted the Nocturne from the Irish composer John Field, or the bel canto aria from the Italians Bellini and Donizetti.

Chopin's musical education was quite orthodox, even reactionary. His principal teacher, Adalbert Zywny, was a native Bohemian who had settled in Poland; though Zywny loved his adopted country, his musical gods remained Bach, Haydn and Mozart. Bach and Mozart were particularly formative influences on the young Chopin, Bach's being perhaps the most enduring. Even when the mature Chopin was holed up some dozen years later in the fifteenth-century Carthusian monastery in Majorca, working on his Preludes, he had Bach's music lying on his desk as inspiration. Yet, as good a student though he was, Chopin also had an enterprising and rebellious streak; while his teacher could not tolerate the Italianate school of Spontini

and Rossini, Chopin embraced the bel canto melodic style exemplified by Bellini, who became a personal friend when the two composers were introduced in Paris in the autumn of 1833. Indeed, Chopin encouraged all his students to listen to Italian opera singers, to learn how to breathe and shape his musical phrases.

Both Bach and Bellini may be heard as primary influences in Chopin's cycle of **24 Preludes**. To an extent Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier* was a model for Chopin's own collection, albeit each of Bach's preludes, unlike Chopin's self-standing essays, is paired with a fugue. Perhaps an even more pertinent model for Chopin was an earlier form of the prelude as practised in the 17th century. At that time the prelude was not simply a prefatory statement before a more substantial piece, but also served as an improvisatory "warm up" in the relevant key: for instance, a lutenist might play such an improvisation to check his tuning and to warm up his fingers before launching into the main piece. Hence the aphoristic character of several of Chopin's preludes, such as the C sharp minor which appears very much in the style of such a "warm up".

The prelude as an independent form was already well-established by the time Chopin came to compose his cycle; composers such as Hummel, Clementi, Kalkbrenner and Moscheles had published cycles of 24 Preludes in all the keys, albeit for pedagogical use rather than as works of aesthetic value. Chopin's elevation of the prelude to a new aesthetic form was well recognised by his peers, Liszt observing after the composer's performance at a Paris recital in 1841:

Chopin's preludes are compositions of an order entirely apart. They are not only, as the title might make one think, pieces destined to be played in the guise of introductions to other pieces; they are poetic preludes, analogous to those of a great contemporary poet, who cradles the soul in golden dreams, and elevates it to the regions of the ideal... Everything seems fresh, elastic, created at the impulse of the moment, abounding with that freedom of expression which is characteristic of works of genius.

Chopin composed most of his set of 24 preludes prior to the winter of 1838-39, when he joined his lover, George Sand, on the island of Majorca. Sand had gone there with her

two children for the sake of the health of her 15-year-old son, Maurice; Chopin had only reluctantly followed Sand there, yet was too much in love with her to let her leave him alone in Paris. To finance his journey, he pre-sold to the publisher and piano manufacturer, Pleyel, his nearly completed set of Preludes – twenty out of the 24 had been more or less fully sketched – and arranged for the firm to ship a piano to Majorca before embarking from Paris to join Sand there.

Despite the civil war raging in Spain, and the antagonism the couple soon encountered from conservative locals – George Sand especially exciting disapproval and lewd attention with her mannish clothes and habit of smoking cigars – they soon found a charming villa to rent two miles outside Palma, moving in on 15 November. Chopin wrote to his close friend, Julian Fontana, that he was “surrounded by palms, cedars, cactuses, olives, oranges, lemons, aloes, figs, pomegranates, etc... The sky is like turquoise, the sea like lapis lazuli, the hills like emeralds, the air like in heaven...”

Only days later, the weather suddenly changed. In the face of now torrential and incessant rain, and a sudden plunge in temperature,

Chopin became seriously ill. Sand's attentive nursing and regular preparation of nourishing food helped stabilise his condition, and his morale was improved when, as the delivery of the Pleyel instrument was seriously delayed, they managed to find a piano to hire so he could continue work on his preludes. In mid-December, however, they were forced to leave the villa when local doctors diagnosed Chopin as having tuberculosis: the landlord, alarmed by the news, gave them notice to leave, and furthermore billed them to replace all the furniture which, according to Spanish law, had to be all burned since it was assumed to have been contaminated by Chopin's infection.

Chopin and George Sand now moved into a fifteenth-century Carthusian monastery. Despite the rain and damp, Chopin relished the monastery's mountainside views. Yet the weather worsened, as did his health. Sadly, too, the monastery's regular inhabitants, having discovered that George Sand was not married to Chopin and that they never attended church, regarded their visitors with increasing mistrust. Chopin began to suffer hallucinations and nightmares.

The Pleyel piano finally arrived in mid-January, and with somewhat improved weather Chopin was able to polish the four preludes he had managed to compose on the hired piano (Nos 2, 4, 10 and 21) as well as the remaining twenty he had sketched before his journey to Majorca. Alas, when they finally left the island he had to abandon the Pleyel, due to the exorbitant export fee that would be imposed should they have it shipped back to Paris; once on board ship, Chopin and the Sand family had to endure an appalling voyage, being restricted to their cabin as the ship was carrying live pigs which had to be chased about the deck to prevent their becoming sea sick. Coping with the noise and smell of the cargo, coupled with Chopin's desperate state of health – by the time they were finally rescued by a French brig onto which Chopin was carried he was haemorrhaging and coughing up “bowfuls of blood” – evidently overshadowed any of the bright moments they had enjoyed at Majorca. Certainly three of the four preludes Chopin composed there are unquestionably among his darkest conceptions, most strikingly the second Prelude in A minor. But one should still hesitate to assign too strong a programmatic association with these fragments, however vivid some of them are.

The famous “raindrop” Prelude in D flat major, for instance, was conceived and largely composed well before that unhappy sojourn in Majorca.

Chopin biographer Adam Zamoyski suggests that the **Berceuse** (Lullaby) may have been composed sometime after May 1843 when Chopin was with George Sand in Norhant, and spent much of his time – rather than composing – playing with the infant daughter of Pauline Viardot left in Sand’s care. Certainly the way the harmonies of that piece become a touch wayward or at least not well within its home tonality readily suggest the blurring effect a child may experience while falling asleep. Yet Chopin originally titled the new work Variations, only giving it the title Berceuse on preparing it for publication the following year. Clearly the piece haunted the imagination of Tchaikovsky when he came to compose the second movement of his First Piano Concerto.

Even bolder in its harmonic adventurousness is the **Barcarolle**, composed between the autumn of 1845 and the following summer. Chopin was by then doubtful about either his health or his ability to create – certainly he found it harder

to compose – yet he was now writing some of his finest music. The Barcarolle’s opening major ninth chord anticipates late Liszt, before resolving into the song’s characteristic rhythm, Chopin’s love of Italianate melody helping him to imagine a Venetian gondolier’s song he would never hear first hand for himself. So smooth is the part writing, so natural does the music’s improvisatory character sound that it is easy to overlook many of the harmonic audacities mid-way through the piece. Here, surely, is where Chopin’s thorough grounding in the German tradition most fruitfully combined with his love for the Italian school to create music which looks forward to Liszt and even Wagner.

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A NOTE FROM THE PERFORMER

Chopin the composer has always fascinated me – multifaceted, complex, a man of paradoxes. His music has huge scope yet at the same time is incredibly intimate and poetic. He sometimes has a reputation for being merely a writer of sentimental salon music; I wanted to correct this through this recording, and demonstrate how timeless and relevant, indeed

modern, his message is, and that behind these beautiful operatic melodies and what seems at times like spontaneous improvisation lies an absolute master craftsman, poet, and composer of pure genius. I would put him up there amongst the greatest – Bach, Mozart and Beethoven.

What has been important for me in making this recording is to keep as close as possible to Chopin's score, using the latest editions. For the Preludes in particular, I have used the latest Peters urtext edition by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (the Chopin specialist and author of that remarkable book, *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher: As Seen By His Pupils*). Mistakes have been rectified and any markings not by Chopin have been removed.

I also worked straight from the facsimile of the autograph, which was a revelation. The amount of detail in Chopin's score is amazing, especially when it comes to pedalling. Sometimes he crossed out a release pedal sign on the manuscript to shift it a couple millimetres to the left or right – this level of dedication is humbling. He unquestionably saw the sustaining pedal as an integral part of his composition, nearly as important as the actual notes. He was a master

at pedalling, with a unique style of “breathing” with the pedal – that is to say, at times releasing the sustaining pedal a fraction early before the next harmony, often in order to have the melody resonate by itself for a split second. When one tries it, it's like seeing the same image in 3D for the first time. He also often indicates where he doesn't want any pedal used, or, on the contrary, in other passages marks daringly long pedals, mixing clashing harmonies together and creating a sort of dream-like sound world (a similar effect used in late Beethoven at times). Though of course this can't be followed religiously due to differences between a 19th century and modern instrument, I nevertheless took a lot of care to try always to understand what he was after with pedalling, trying to find the best solution and adapt it to a modern instrument of course.

We also took a lot of time during the recording to get the sound right and to capture a perfect balance of scope and intimacy. I didn't want the recorded sound to be too dry and studio like, so as to convey the poetic aspect of this music, but I also wanted it to be an extremely intimate, exposed and honest recording, as if one was reading someone's diary.

Emmanuel Despax

EMMANUEL DESPAX

"Poetry fused with breathtaking technical perfection" (Concertclassic) and *"A master colourist with genius-like ability"* (Classical Source) is how the brilliant French pianist Emmanuel Despax was described after his acclaimed recitals at the Louvre auditorium in Paris and Wigmore Hall in London.

Despax is establishing himself as an artist whose interpretations bring a rare sincerity and imagination to the music. He performs internationally and is regularly broadcast on many radio stations including France Musique, BBC Radio 3 and Medici TV. Recent highlights include recitals in Paris, Amsterdam and a performance of three piano concertos at Cadogan Hall. This concert was recorded live and released on the Signum Classics label. *"Emmanuel Despax is a formidable talent, fleet of finger, elegant of phrase and a true keyboard colourist."* (Gramophone). Despax is also a regular performer at London's Wigmore Hall.

In his native France he has appeared in prestigious venues such as Paris' Salle Gaveau, the Louvre auditorium and the Festival International des Nuits Pianistiques in Aix-en-

Provence. Elsewhere in Europe he has given recitals at the Fazioli Auditorium in Italy, the Gasteig Blackbox in Munich and the Palais des Beaux Arts in Belgium.

Having studied in the UK at the Yehudi Menuhin School and Royal College of Music with Ruth Nye, one of Claudio Arrau's finest students, Despax draws inspiration from a long tradition of pure artistry and uncompromising commitment to the score. His passion lies in retaining and regaining the true role of a performer, as a faithful vessel for the composer's message.

Now based in London, Despax has performed with many UK orchestras including the City of Birmingham Symphony, the London Festival Orchestra in their Virtuoso Pianists Series at Cadogan Hall and Arion Orchestra at St James's Piccadilly. In addition to his recitals at the Wigmore and Cadogan Halls, he has also performed at the National Portrait Gallery, the Drapers' Hall, the Royal Concert Hall in Nottingham, and the Chipping Campden and Petworth Festivals.



To Miho, with whom everyday is a new Chopin prelude.

Special thanks to Andrew Keener, Terry Lewis, Dominique Merlet, Stuart Mitchell, Ruth Nye and Dasha Shenkman for their continuing support and friendship – none of this would be possible without you and I am forever grateful.

Recorded from 11-13 September 2013 in Wyastone Concert Hall, Monmouthshire, UK.

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Performed on a Fazioli model 278, kindly provided by

 *Jacqueline Samuel* 
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Cover Image – Luca Sage

Design and Artwork – Woven Design www.wovendesign.co.uk

This recording was sponsored by:

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