



Chopin's Ballade in F minor

There have been over 280 recordings of Chopin's Ballade in F minor. In the first of a two-part collector's guide, Dmitry Rachmanov traces performances of the work from 1929 to the 1960s

Three brothers go to distant lands, sent by their father to fetch sables, black tails and silvery veils. Summer is gone, so is the autumn and winter. The father assumes the worst: his sons have fallen on the battlefield. When all hopes are dashed they suddenly return from the barren land with one shared trophy: a bride. So goes the story of Adam Mickiewicz's ballad *Trzech Budrysow* ('Three Brothers') which purportedly provided the inspiration for Chopin's F minor Ballade. Despite the spiritual affinity between composer and poet, the programme for Op.52 is hard to substantiate. Chopin drew little inspiration from literary sources, unlike Schumann, Liszt and Berlioz. Eschewing extra-musical programmes for subject matter, Chopin was the absolute musician. He felt compelled, however, to borrow a literary term when creating the new genre of the instrumental ballade, even though the weighty narrative of his compositions are of a musical rather than illustrative nature.

Chopin was searching for a deeper mode of expression when working on the piece in the autumn of 1842. The end result is a masterpiece of rare originality, enhanced complexity and integrity of content and design, of seeming spontaneity of discourse, yet possessing a strong inner order, an economy of means and structural cohesiveness. Its free-flowing, polyphonic textures and tremendous concentration of emotion marked a plateau in Chopin's style. Contemporary critics misunderstood the work's genius and originality. 'Icarus has flown too near the sun, and the borrowed wings have no longer the strength to support him' (Hadow). They were befuddled by the composer's evolving style, complaining of 'ear-splitting discords, torturous transitions, harsh modulations, ugly distortions of melody and rhythm, the strangest tonalities, the most unnatural chord positions.' (Rellstab). Tellingly, the F minor is the only one of the four ballades that Chopin never performed publicly.

above **Frédéric Chopin**
opposite (l-r) **Monique de
la Bruchollerie; Alfred
Cortot; Sviatoslav Richter**
Photos Tully Potter Collection

1920s and 30s – early recordings

For pianists like Cortot, Hofmann, Paderewski and their generation, a free attitude towards the text with breaking or filling chords, splitting hands and altered notes (adding bass octaves, etc) was part of their style. It is in the early recordings that we find the broadest gamut of creativity, bold artistic choice and distinct individuality of approach. Following on from Ignaz Friedman's 1922 Duo-Art piano roll, Alfred Cortot made the first electric recording of the F minor Ballade in 1929, returning to the studio in 1933 to make a second. The overwhelming power, boundless freedom and poetry of his personal statement are spellbinding. There is a palpable sense of urgency, high drama with tragic undertones, and deep affinity for the music. His sound and *rubatos* go beyond mere piano playing: the tone speaks as an eloquent human voice. The almost wild freedom of Cortot's first version becomes more tempered in the second.

Hardly a year after Cortot's groundbreaking first account, Robert Casadesus, his younger countryman, followed suit with the first of four recordings. Where Cortot's statements are subjective, Casadesus's are Apollonian and aristocratically restrained, with a velvety tone and high sense of proportion. This is Casadesus's most satisfying version, the performances of 1950 and 1955 generally having leaner tone and less exuberance than in 1930. The live 1960 recording, its excitement notwithstanding, has some pitfalls. The third recorded version of the Ballade, by the now-forgotten Frenchman Jacques Dupont on the Pathe label, has never been reissued following its original multi-sided 78 rpm format. Only two sides (one record) containing the first 120 bars of the work were found at the International Piano Archives at Maryland (IPAM) It is a pity: like many

other older pianists, Dupont has a distinctive voice. His playing reveals a relaxed and endearing monologue etched in pastel colours.

Josef Hofmann is captured in the work's first live recording from his 1938 recital at the Curtis Institute. One is immediately smitten by his bold spontaneity, colouristic imagery, sweeping dramatic gestures and boundless power. Raoul von Koczalski was Chopin's musical grandson, having studied with the master's pupil, Carl Mikuli. His interpretation is unique: he breezes through the piece with the wilful charm of an impatient child. Sections barely come to a close when new ones interrupt (bar 99); *rubatos* are breathless and everything is held in a constant state of flux. Ignacy Jan Paderewski was the earliest-born pianist to record the Ballade. At 78 he was sadly past his prime when he gave a live radio broadcast in 1938. Paderewski labours through the piece like a giant walking on wooden legs, with only rare glimpses of his former prowess.

1940s – free license

The 1940s perpetuated the pianistic tradition of free artistic license. Benno Moiseiwitsch, for example, added double thirds to the passage in bars 159-160. What one accepts as the idiosyncrasy of a great artist can hardly be forgiven in lesser hands. In 1980 Canadian pianist Arthur Ozolins offered a poor version of the same passage in double thirds, completely obliterating the melodic turn of the last triplet in bar 159. Moiseiwitsch displays breathtaking pianism in his 1947 recording: explosive temperament and effortless freedom of expression, fluidity of phrasing, elegance and arresting spontaneity of colours. His later recordings bear the same traits even if they feel more relaxed. Monique de la Bruchollerie's 78 rpm recording was never



reissued and comes as a revelation of French pianism's best-kept secret. She delivers an irresistible and intoxicatingly passionate reading that crushes all barriers and engulfs the music in holy flames, fully extracting the score's mellow sensuousness. Her compatriot Jean Doyen's refined touch and the ease with which he allows the music to unfold adds to the understated eloquence of his performance.

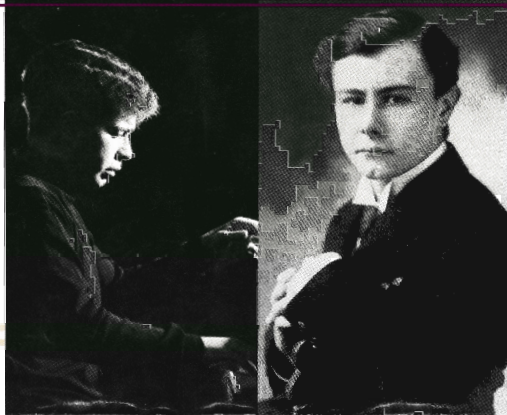
Solomon's patrician 1946 recording displays a dichotomy of characters: in the introduction, G flat episode and the second subject, the mood is restrained, delicate, tender; in the main theme and its later transformations, there is a heightened sense of inner melancholic yearning. His milk-and-honey tone flows graciously and a feeling of generosity and wisdom holds it all together. Simon Barere's treatment of the introduction may forever remain an unsolved mystery, as the first fourteen bars are missing from his live Carnegie Hall recording. The first theme appears in mid-sentence with a gentle lilt and slightly stretched downbeats. The evocative atmosphere is enhanced by delicate filigree, a halting and nostalgic second subject, and the sensation of a

Where the former displays inner warmth, subtle shadings, and continuous momentum with explosive flashes, the latter has a slightly reserved feeling, steady of pulse with quiet dynamics carefully observed. The use of rubato is subtle, the dramatic surges never overblown. His 1969 live performance is brisk and impatient, yet the slow sections flow like water. Horowitz's live 1981 performance, the most successful of all, casts magic spells with dramatic twists of unpredictable explosions of sound.

1950s – the LP arrives

With the invention of the LP, the 1950s witnessed over 30 new recordings of the Ballade. The subjectivists, such as Sirota, Karolyi, Feinberg and François, are contrasted with an increasingly more objective esthetic as espoused by Oborin, Graffman and Skavronsky, while the likes of Arrau, Rubinstein and Tiegerman occupy a stylistic middle ground.

The biggest surprise is the discovery of Ignace Tiegerman ('The lost legend of Cairo', *IPQ* Spring 1999) Despite the pitiful sound quality of this



fragile and improvisatory discourse. Grigory Ginzburg, the first Russian from behind the Iron Curtain to record the work, gives a mesmerising performance of hushed lyricism and gentle intimacy, transmitting a feeling of the music's timelessness where every note lives and each phrase breathes. Wladislaw Szpilman, the protagonist of the film *The Pianist*, offers a personal account, steeped in the old tradition of piano playing. The music flows in an uninhibited and peaceful daze, as if whispered by an enchanted fairytale character, while the climaxes sound muted. Lingered-upon contemplations are followed by hurried interjections, tossed off with characteristic ease.

Vladimir Horowitz's 1949 HMV 78 rpm recording was issued and quickly withdrawn from the market. Its inspired spontaneity compares favourably with the well-known 1952 RCA version.

long-forgotten private recording, one cannot help but feel the presence of a great poet delivering his message like a Shakespearian actor reciting with passionate fire. Long arching lines, a powerful yet delicate touch and concentrated emotion all contribute to this memorable performance. Another surprise is Alexei Skavronsky, a student of Ginzburg, who exudes modesty and reverence for the music. His impressive playing is dignified and warm, coupled with a well-developed sense of continuity, proportion and balance. Of the other Russian recordings of the decade, Samuel Feinberg infuses the music with a Scriabinesque neurotic monologue of impulsively fluctuating rhythmic strokes. Dmitry Paperno, a prizewinner at the 1955 Chopin Competition, possesses a soaring, youthful energy, warm singing tone and continuous organic flow. His live broadcast from 30 years on is not as

above (l-r) **Nelson Freire**

Photo © Klaus Hennch

Josef Hofmann;

Benno Moiseiwitsch

Photos Tully Potter Collection

Yvonne Lefébure

Photo courtesy of

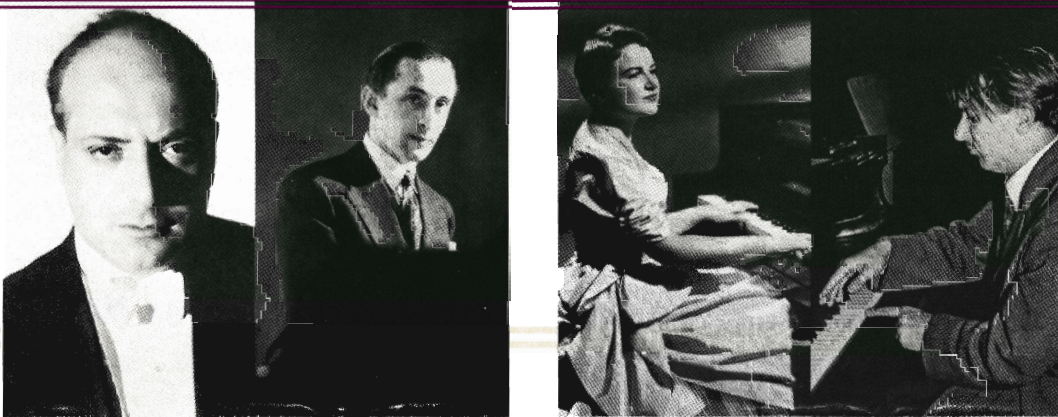
Solstice Music

effortless. Xenia Prochorowa infuses the main subject with a barcarolle lilt, elsewhere emphasising inner voices and delineating the music with a deliberate, subdivided pulse.

Of Arrau's three recordings, his 1953 performance exudes the pianist's deep passion and reverence for the music, most strikingly his integrity and liquidity of tone – temporally spacious and full of meaning. His later recordings sound less at ease, revealing a greater sense of struggle. Artur Schnabel's 1959 studio account is not as profound: it emphasises moderation, simplicity and clarity, the various themes sounding noble and reserved. His later live account is freer and more spontaneous, speaking from the heart. The playing is both weighty and fluid, gradually unleashing its power. Samson François's four recordings show the unmistakable influence of Cortot. The playing is personal and spontaneous, with volatile dynamic shifts, sudden inner voices and a liquid *rubato*. Of the four, 1954 is most immediately passionate. The 1952 and 1960 versions are calmer, while 1967 shows a pianistic

melodramatic, but 20 years later her tone sounds brittle and dry, the expression over-accentuated and mannered. Nelson Freire sounds like different pianists in his two recordings. He was only fourteen at the time of his first in 1958. The expression is haltingly understated with ruggedly dry, sparsely pedalled and accented textures. 1964 possesses a smooth, natural elegance, fluidity of rhythm and rhetorical eloquence.

Jan Ekier's reading is spacious and warm-hearted, while Agi Jambor's is earth-bound and metrically stiff. Ginette Doyen is delicate, mild and even-tempered. Orazio Frugoni's carefree flow has a tipsy tinge while Cor De Groot has an easy, warm, conversational flow. Josef Raieff's genial, unassuming elegance underscores a sense of continuity and clarity and fluidity of tone. Julian von Karolyi's restless and quirky sense of timing is peculiarly combined with a delicacy of touch and a metronomic pulse, creating a highly individual performance. Leo Sirota's intensely lingering, capricious reading is replete with heightened mood swings, yet it has a certain freshness. Friedrich



decline and is more mannered in style. A sense of nostalgia and fatigue reign over Jörg Demus's 1950 performance: feelings are muted, dynamics hushed and phrases expanded. His 1986 recording on an 1880 Erard-Freres piano is marginally more flowing, with an affecting lightness of touch and gentle sense of reserve.

Earl Wild brings a singing, relaxed tone to all three of his readings. The earliest is the most expansive, with a velvety touch and exquisite tenderness. There is more dramatic contrast in 1981 but some of the enchantment is lost. A 1990 recording lies somewhere in between: mellower than the second but not as mesmerising as the first. Gary Graffman's cultured and measured performance underscores the equality of each note, navigating the music's course into secure havens with a slightly pedantic touch. Magda Tagliaferro's 1957 performance is stormy and

Gulda maintains an urgent, feverish pitch from the first note to last, yet is paradoxically emotionally well balanced.

Despite its historical interest, a recently released private recording of Józef Turczynsky, a student of Leshetizky, sounds as though it was recorded on an out-of-tune upright. It finds the elderly pianist in frail shape, with unwieldy, heavy-handed rhythms and an unsteady touch.

Eric Silver – the pianist that never was: between 1951 and 1957 the Record Corporation of America, a New Jersey-based company, used different label titles and fictitious artists' names to re-release copyrighted recordings. One of them was Gramophone 2041 featuring Chopin's Ballades Nos.1-4 with 'Eric Silver at the piano'. 'Eric Silver' was as real as Lieutenant Kijé: it was actually a pseudonymous 1953 reissue of Leonid Hambro's

above (l-r) **Simon Barere;**
Vladimir Horowitz;
Ruth Slenczynska;
Samson François

Photos Tully Potter Collection

1951 account. He sounds business-like and dry at a brisk pace, with shallow tone and not a single moment for repose.

1960s – international variety

The 1960s ushered in the modern era of pianism with more focus on composer than performer, resulting in a more deferential treatment of the text. Artists like Fiorentino still add notes here and there, but the general stylistic trend led to the balancing of the emotional and subjective with the rational and objective. Artists like Richter, Moravec, Ashkenazy, Bishop and also Grinberg in Russia, made significant additions to the discography of the Ballade.

Sviatoslav Richter influenced generations of Russian pianists with his hypnotic artistry and unique interpretations. The finest of three live recordings is from his 1962 tour of Italy. An air of timelessness and suspenseful contemplation of ethereal spoken lines juxtaposes with flurries of wild, sweeping torrents, creating a powerful performance full of elemental drive. Vladimir Ashkenazy's one live and three studio recordings span three decades. In his live Moscow performance, which must have been one of his last before leaving for the West, the slow sections are spaciously laid out and introspective, yet the faster episodes sound aggressive and brash with untamed bravura. His studio recording made a year later is less dramatic: there is smoothness, poise and a

lightness of touch, while his characteristic technical ease sounds more tempered in the faster passages. Ashkenazy reaches his peak in 1985 with malleably expressive lyrical lines, while 1999 is dryer and stiffer by comparison. Maria Grinberg was the first woman to record the Beethoven sonata cycle. Her playing gets right to the core of the music with her warm honesty, strong intellect and underlying economy of expression. Valentina Kamenikova's playing is convincingly fresh, permeated with a strong sense of *rubato*. The music flows naturally, the rising and falling lines imbued with expressiveness. Of the older Russian émigrés, Joseph Fidelman's recording caught him in artistic decline: the playing is bumpy and plain. Nikita Magaloff's 1965 recording is a decidedly sober affair. It rises to a dramatic conclusion in an otherwise emotionally tepid account. On his 1974 recording, tempos are milder, more sustained and the expression warmer. There is a sense of dignity, seriousness of purpose and unity of tempo.

Among Eastern European interpreters of the work, Ivan Moravec's two recordings have a feeling of introspective drama. His 1963 account is an expansive, dark soliloquy, with suppressed sighs and pained exclamations, in telling contrast with 2002's intensity – the various lines trace sinuous contours, but overall this is less striking than the earlier version. Witold Maluczynski's playing is gentle with a simplicity of feeling and sense of graceful communicativeness, yet the tone and technique

below **Gary Graffman**

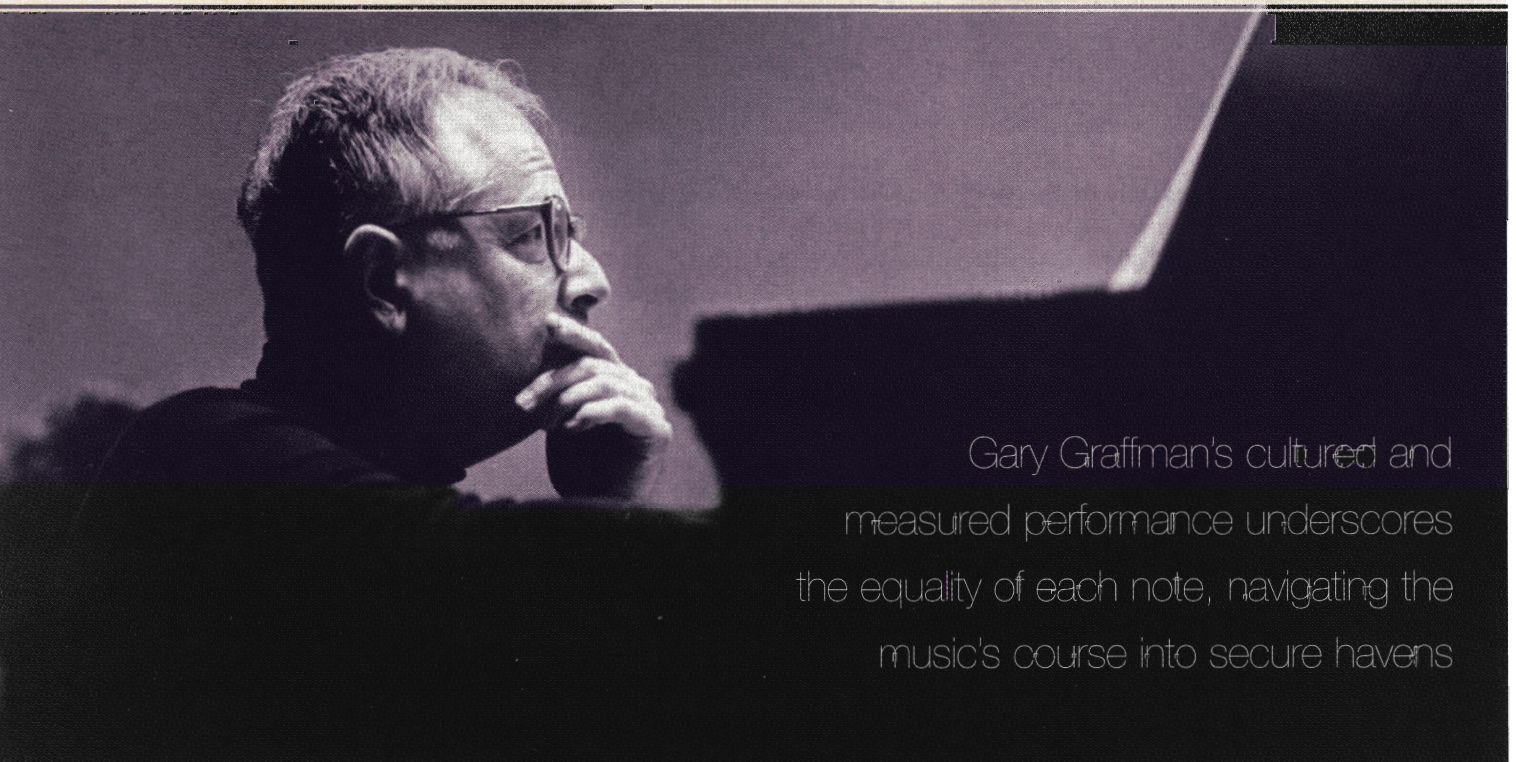
Photo David Swanson

opposite (l) **Charles Rosen**

Photo courtesy of Shuman Associates

(r) **Ivan Moravec**

Photo Anost Nosek



Gary Graffman's cultured and measured performance underscores the equality of each note, navigating the music's course into secure havens

sound fragile. Georges Cziffra has natural grace, spontaneity and a disarming pianistic ease with silkily embroidered passagework. His 1969 and 1970 concert performances are individual in their improvisational quality and personal rhetoric, the soaring emotional drive combining with boundless technical freedom and elemental bravura. Of the two live recordings, 1970 has the greater freedom; the studio version of that same year is drier by comparison, yet one can still identify the same pianist at work by his telltale idiosyncrasies: the bass in bar 56 arrives way ahead of time and there is a sudden *fermata* on the top note of bar 105. Peter Frankl exhibits delicacy of tone, graceful phrasing, inner continuity and excitement. By contrast there are some hurried semiquavers in Tamás Vásáry's recording. The agogic contours sound impulsive, the tone forced during *crescendos*, the expression perturbed.

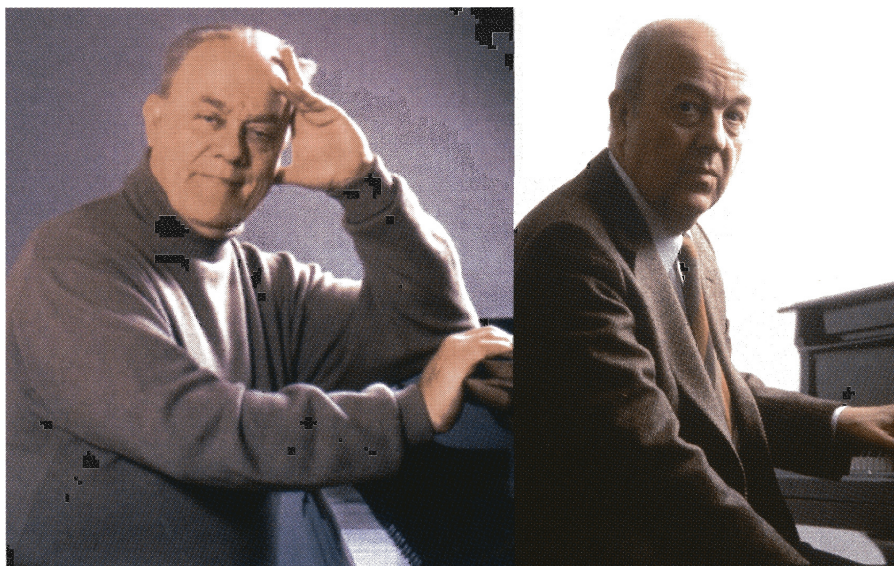
French recordings from this era include Cortot's student, Yvonne Lefébure, who offers one of the most fervent readings, imbued with a sense of passionate urgency. Its poetic outpouring flows in an uninhibited way and is ignited by great immediacy of feeling. Philippe Entremont's interpretative choices are bold in 1960, the playing highly personal, the expression raw with moods ranging from brooding contemplation to anger. In 1970 his phrases sound drawn out, with lingering cadences and little flow, the tone becoming hard, the expression overblown. Claude Kahn's warm-hearted playing possesses a natural cohesiveness, spontaneity and a total lack of pretence.

Recordings of players from other nationalities are led by Sergio Fiorentino. His playing is one of a kind, its delicate aristocratic reserve, immediately establishing an emotional rapport with the listener. Its hushed mellowness and seductive lilt is captivating. There are only a few moments when Fiorentino loosens his reins: in the torrent of downward cascades in bars 117-125 and in the coda, which tumbles down in a breathless sweep, yet with underlying ease and control. Guiomar Novaes's performance has the character of a *ballata domestica*, with integrity of feeling, ease and continuity, a sense of intimacy, all conveyed in an unaffected manner. Paul Baumgartner's technically fragile playing is openly emotional and dramatic, yet its capricious phrasing borders on the self-indulgent.

Stephen Kovacevich (Bishop at the time of his recording) offers a performance of genuine integrity, quiet lyricism and dignified reserve. There is a feeling of humility in his playing which highlights the score in all its purity while diverting attention from himself. One distinctive feature of Louis Kentner's performance is its agogic freedom: no two quavers in the melody sound the same. His playing

has a tipsy feeling, a sense of immediacy in its excited personal discourse. In Fou Ts'ong's 1960 recording the internal drama and speaking tone contends with vertical, accented phrases and hardened expression. His 1983 recording displays extremes from hushed *pianos* to overblown *fortissimos* in a single phrase, and wide fluctuations of tempo.

Unostentatious simplicity, austere expression, unforced tone and structural continuity are the benchmarks of Charles Rosen's interpretation. On her 1960 recording, Ruth Slenczynska's playing seems weightless, swimming with ease in thicker textures and moving forward in continuous motion. Her live 1988 recording is more down-to-earth, the piercing tone of the instrument adding poignancy to



the melodic lines. One readily senses the performer's personality behind the urgency and spontaneity of expression. Stanley Hummel's light-hearted playing flows with mellow tone, sweet airiness of phrasing and expressive *rubato* and flair. Alexander Uninsky's delicate touch, flexibility and inner passion juxtaposes with a fragility of tone and texture that become brittle at high dynamic levels. Eileen Flissler's playing features a graceful, swinging *rubato* with the occasional *stretto* effect (bar 38 and coda) and a spacious eloquence. Despite certain distracting *ritardandos* and *rubatos* along the way, there is an overriding unity and steady pulse in Noël Lee's playing that make a compelling case for one unifying tempo. Here the development section sounds unusually broad, while the main theme flows by almost innocently. ©

The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Cullan Bryant, Farhan Malik, Donald Manildi, Joseph Patrych, Roman Markowicz, Yuan Sheng, Ernst Lumpe and Vladimir Leyetchkiss for their generous help in providing recording material for this article.

Chopin's F minor Ballade, part 1 - a discography compiled by Cullan Bryant

Artist	Record co. & number	Date	Artist	Record co. & number	Date
A			J		
Arrau	Arlecchino 100	1953	Jambor	Capitol P 8403 (LP)	1957
Arrau	Ermitage 182	1971*	K		
Arrau	Philips 468 391	1977	Kahn	Club National du Disque CND 1006 (LP)	c. 1960s
Ashkenazy	Russian Disc CD 11 208	1963*	Kameníková	EMI CFP 150	1968
Ashkenazy	Decca 466 499	1964	Karolyi	DG POCG 90412	1951
Ashkenazy	Decca 452 579	1985	Kentner	Saga 5233 (LP)	1964
Ashkenazy	Decca 466 708	1999	Koczalski	Selene 9807 43	1938
B			Krecmarova	Chant du Monde 5015 (78)	1947
Barere	APR 5621	1946*	L		
Baumgartner	Ermitage 200	1964*	Lee	Valois MB 837 (LP)	1969
Bishop	EMI CSP 1501 (LP)	1963	Lefébure	Solstice 133/5	1966-70
Bruchollierie	HMV DB 6731 (78)	1949	M		
C			Magaloff	Adès 203112	1965
Casadesus. R	Pearl 0068	1930	Magaloff	Philips 426 816	1974
Casadesus. R	Columbia ML 4798 (LP)	1950	Malczuzynski	Disky Classics 706782	1963
Casadesus. R	Movimento Musica 01 061 (LP)	1955	Martin	Educo Master Class (LP)	1960s
Casadesus. R	Sony 5033922	1960*	Morseiwitsch	APR 5575	1947
Cortot	Biddulph LHW 1	1929	Morseiwitsch	Philips 456 907	1956
Cortot	EMI TOCE 8891	1933	Morseiwitsch	Dante HPC 58	1958
Cziffra	Philips 434 547	1963	Moravec	Supraphon 11 0630	c. 1963
Cziffra	Ermitage 103	1969*	Moravec	Vox VXP 7908	2002
Cziffra	EMI 6525 1	1970	N		
Cziffra	Recital Company RCP-9902	1970*	Novaes	Vanguard 8071	1969
D			P		
de Brunhoff	EMI 85249	1963	Paderewski	Pearl 9397	1938
DeGroot	Philips 462 527	1951	Paperno	Melodiya D2645/6 (LP)	1955
Demus	Remington RLP 14921 (LP) c	1950	Paperno	Cedille 90000 026	1989
Demus	FSM 123017/8	1986	Pariente	Golden Crest RE 7014 (LP)	1963
Doyen. J	HMV DB 5148/9 (78)	c. 1943	Prochorowa	Haydn Society HS-9047 (LP)	c. 1956
Doyen. G	Westminster WL5169 (LP)	1952	R		
Dupont	Pathé X 98015-6 (78)	1931	Raieff	SR 14307B (LP)	1950s?
E			Richter	Praga 254 060	1960*
Ekier	Muza SX 0061 (LP)	1959	Richter	TNC 1463/4	1960*
Entremont	Columbia MS 6118 (LP)	1960	Richter	DG 457 667	1962*
Entremont	Sony 62415	1970	Ringeissen	Polskie Nagrania L 21 (10" LP)	1955*
Estrella	Chant du Monde 5014 (78)	1949	Rosen	Epic BC 1090 (LP)	1960
F			Rubinstein	BMG 63045	1959
Feinberg	Moscow Conservatoire SMC 26	1952	Rubinstein	Arkadia 918	1970*
Fidelman	Urania 5149	1961-2	S		
Fiorentino	Delta TQD 3014 (LP)	1962	Sirota	Arbiter 137	1952
Flissler	RCA MARH 2370 (10" LP)	c. 1960	Skavronsky	Melodiya 4380/1 (LP)	c. 1958
François	EMI 68710	1952	Slenczynska	Decca DL 10029 (LP)	1960
François	EMI 68708	1954	Slenczynska	ACA 20010	1988*
François	EMI 68713	1960	Solomon	Testament 1030	1946
François	EMI TOCE 55413	1967	Szpilman	ZNAK	c. 1946-63
Frankl	Allegretto ACD 8151	1965	T		
Freire	Fonografica Brasileira GC 15 002 (LP)	1958	Tagliaferro	Echo 197A	1957*
Freire	Riosom RSCL 4 002 (LP)	c. 1964	Tagliaterro	CopacabanaCOLP 12463(LP)	1979*
Frugoni	Vox PL 10 490 (LP)	1957	Tiegerman	Arbiter 116	1950s
G			Ts'ong	Westminster WST-14137 (LP)	1960
Ginzburg	Arlecchino A56/7	1949	Ts'ong	JVC VDC-1024	1983
Graffman	RCA VICS 1077 (LP)	1958	Turczynski	Selene 0008 68	1950
Grinberg	Denon COCQ 83497	1960	U		
Gulda	Philips 456 820	1954	Uninsky	Fontana special 700 173 WGY (LP)	c. 1960
H			V		
Hambro	Allegro AL 115 (LP)	1951	Vásáry	DG 469 350	1965
Harasiewicz	Philips 464 025	1962	W		
Hofmann	Marston 52014	1938*	Wild	Concert Hall 1401 (LP)	c. 1952
Horowitz	HMV DB-21503 (78)	1949	Wild	Baldwin BDW 802 (LP)	1981
Horowitz	RCA 60987	1952	Wild	Chesky 44	1990
Horowitz	Living Stage LS 4035177	1969*	*indicates 'live' performance		
Horowitz	RCA 7752	1981*			
Hummel	Ersta 1040 (LP)	1961			