

Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 36

In 1913, Sergei Rachmaninoff took his wife and daughters on holiday to Switzerland and Italy. While in Rome, the family stayed at the same house once used by Tchaikovsky. There Rachmaninoff began writing two works: the massive choral symphony based on Edgar Allen Poe's *The Bells*, and the Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor.

Within its three movements, Op. 36 achieves a particular unity, thanks to Rachmaninoff's use of recurring and related themes. The second movement segues without pause into the third, further coalescing the movements together. Poe's bells ring throughout, as crashing chords evoke the monumental chimes of Russian Orthodox church bells. The second movement has the languid, harmonically rich sound of French piano music, and here Rachmaninoff even ventures briefly into jazz, with a series of jazz-inflected left-hand harmonies.

In 1915, after the unenthusiastic response to his premiere of Op. 36, Rachmaninoff put it aside. 16 years later, Rachmaninoff decided to revise it. "I look at my early works and see how much superfluous material is there," he said in 1931. "Even in this Sonata [the original version of Op. 36], too many voices are moving simultaneously, and it is too long. Chopin's sonata lasts 19 minutes and all is said."

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**Sonata No. 2 in G-sharp minor,
Op. 19, “Sonata-Fantasy”***Andante*
*Presto*Aleksandr Scriabin
(1872-1915)

12 minutes

Three Piano Pieces, D. 946*Allegro assai*
Allegretto
*Allegro*Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)

24 minutes

INTERMISSION

Variations on “Là ci darem la mano”, Op. 2*Introduction. Largo – Poco piu mosso*
Thema. Allegretto
Variation 1. Brillante
Variation 2. Veloce, ma accuratamente
Variation 3. Sempre sostenuto
Variation 4. Con bravura
*Variation 5. Adagio and Alla Polacca*Frédéric Chopin
(1810-1849)

18 minutes

Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 36 (1931)*Allegro agitato*
Non allegro – Lento
*L'istesso tempo – Allegro molto*Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873-1943)

22 minutes

Sonata No. 2 in G-sharp minor, Op. 19 “Sonata-Fantasy”

Aleksandr Scriabin was an iconoclast in more ways than one. According to several contemporary accounts, his egotism was vast; he once jotted, “I am God,” in a notebook. Scriabin’s belief in himself was absolute, but this self-confidence came with a cost: he often spent years on his compositions, tinkering with the smallest details. Op. 19, for example, took Scriabin five years. In the summer of 1896, even after he had given several public performances of his second sonata in Paris, Scriabin was still discouraged. He told his publisher and friend M. P. Belayev, “I have admittedly finished the sonata, yet I am completely dissatisfied with it, even though it has been revised seven times.” Belayev urged him to publish: “Sasha, you’ve had the Second Sonata long enough. Don’t fuss with it any more.”

One hallmark of such painstaking work reveals itself in the music’s seeming effortlessness. Scriabin’s first encounter with the ocean, off the coast of Latvia in 1892, inspired the “narrative” of Op. 19, and Scriabin wrote a brief description of the music: “The first part evokes the calm of a night by the seashore in the South; in the development we hear the sombre agitation of the depths. The section in E major represents the tender moonlight which comes after the first dark of the night. The second movement, presto, shows the stormy agitation of the vast expanse of ocean.”

Drei Klavierstücke, D. 946

Schubert’s six *Moments musicaux* number among the most characteristic and unique of his solo piano pieces. They feature Schubert’s unique approach to harmonic modulation – moving from key to key. Coupled with Schubert’s unmatched melodies, the *Moments musicaux* demonstrate Schubert’s distinctive affinity for the piano and its capabilities.

Schubert may well have intended the three movements of D. 946 as additions to his *Moments musicaux*; since he died before completing them, we will never know. It was Johannes Brahms who edited these works 40 years after Schubert’s death and gave them the generic title “Three Piano Pieces.” Schubert’s unfinished manuscripts consist of two drafts and a third barely sketched out in pencil; thus, Brahms had to act as both composer and editor as he prepared them for publication.

Each of these Klavierstücke, consisting of two contrasting sections, evokes very particular emotions; one can even assign them personalities. The first is tempestuous, juxtaposed with an unexpectedly tender interlude, while the second begins as a gentle rumination and morphs into a march. The third, noticeably shorter than the preceding two, features an exuberant opening, paired with a quasi-static theme featuring a melody of repeated notes over shifting harmonies.

Variations on “Là ci darem la mano,” Op. 2

In 1827, Józef Elsner gave his 17-year-old composition student Frédéric Chopin an assignment: compose a set of piano variations with orchestral accompaniment. Chopin, who adored opera and singers – he maintained a long and close friendship with the famous mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot – naturally turned to an opera by his favorite composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, for a suitable theme. Chopin chose the popular duet between Don Giovanni and Zerlina from the first of act of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, “Là ci darem la mano” (There you will give me your hand).

Chopin begins with a slow introduction; the main theme of “Là ci darem” does not emerge for several minutes. The variations and finale showcase the *style brillante*, a virtuosic Romantic mode of composition at which the young Chopin excelled. Each variation highlights the young Pole’s dazzling technique and speed. When Friedrich Wieck, Clara Schumann’s cantankerous father, reviewed Op. 2, he wrote, “In his Variations, Chopin brought out all the wildness and impertinence of the Don’s life and deeds, filled with danger and amorous adventures. And he did so in the most bold and brilliant way.”