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Programme Notes By Majella Boland

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Programme:

Frédéric Chopin (1810 - 1849)

Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44

Three Mazurkas, Op. 59

1. Moderato in A minor
2. Allegretto in A-flat major
3. Vivace in F-sharp minor

Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1

Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 55 No. 2

Ballade in G minor, Op. 23 No. 1

INTERVAL

Siobhán Cleary (b. 1970)

An Cailleach

New commission by Music Network

i. Dùbhlacht: “Darkness”
ii. Faoilleach: “Wolf”
iii. Feadag: “Plover”
iv. Scuabag: “Sweeper”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

"The Seasons" Op. 37 bis

1. January: By The Fireside
2. February: Carnaval
3. March: Song Of The Lark
4. April: Snowdrop
5. May: May Nights
6. June: Barcarolle
7. July: Song Of The Reaper
8. August: The Harvest
9. September: The Hunt
10. October: Autumn Song
11. November: Troika
12. December: Christmas

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Frédéric Chopin (1810 - 1849)

Chopin is as much a household name now as he was in the nineteenth century. Beneath this popularity lie elements of conflict however; born in Warsaw to a Polish mother and French émigré father, Chopin's dances are strongly connected to Poland, while his nocturnes tend to be associated with the Parisian salon. Ambiguity surrounding his national identity today is fuelled by the fact that Chopin's body rests in Paris, while his heart resides in Warsaw. As a musician and composer on the other hand, he has been subjected to negative criticism due to his preference for performing in the context of a salon – a platform for music making in the home and therefore dominated by a female audience – and primarily composing small-scale works for the piano. By contrast, he was championed in the influential nineteenth-century Parisian press as a musician who prioritised music before empty virtuosity and showmanship, factors that permeated concerts at this time. Yet, the divide between public and private music-making brought with it ostensible masculine and feminine traits in compositions; a corollary to this being positive and negative categorisation from which Chopin has not escaped. Irrespective of these dualities, that his music is captivating, demanding, and carefully crafted remains undisputed.

Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44

Nicknamed "tragic", Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44, is considered one of Chopin's mature works. By the time it was published (1841), Chopin had worked on this genre for many years – his first published composition in 1817 was a polonaise – and was experimenting with the fantasy genre; he had also been writing mazurkas for about fifteen years. It is hardly surprising then that Op. 44 is often considered a composite work i.e. a work embedded within another work, in this case a mazurka.

Op. 44 also exhibits traces of the fantasy genre, a genre recognised by its improvisatory-type playing, which, in the nineteenth century, was often considered to be penned improvisation. Chopin himself recognised the experimental nature of this work: in 1841, he wrote to his Viennese publisher, Mechetti: 'it is a sort of fantasy in the form of a polonaise, and I will call it a polonaise'. The next day in a letter to his friend and fellow Polish pianist Julian Fontana however, he stated: 'I offered him [Mechetti] a new manuscript (a polonaise of sorts, but more a fantasy)'.

Whether or not this is more a fantasy than a polonaise, the typical rhythm from the Polish stately dance is strongly asserted by the bass after the 8-bar introduction. The mazurka section has a waltz-like character, is less agitated, and flows gently. The interjection of the distinctive polonaise rhythm and hints of the opening section indicate that the mazurka is coming to an end as the polonaise has the final step in the ballroom.

"…it is my dearest work."

Chopin on his Ballade in G minor, Op. 23 No. 1

Three Mazurkas, Op. 59

1. Moderato in A minor
2. Allegretto in A-flat major
3. Vivace in F-sharp minor

In the nineteenth century, publishers recognised that shorter works sold better when grouped together with works of a similar kind; this in part explains Op. 59 comprising three mazurkas. Chopin himself is reported to have performed works individually rather than in sets, but there is evidence that he strove for compatibility within them as his use of tonal recall – an unusual key featured in one work will be brought back in another work – in the first and second mazurka of Op. 59 attests.

Most striking however, and similar to the polonaise, is the rhythm taken from the Polish dance mazurka. In the first mazurka the rhythm is evident from the opening bars. The third mazurka uses rhythm also characteristic of the dance form while the second mazurka tends to use a combination of both.

The mazurka is a folk dance usually at a moderate speed in triple time. All the mazurkas in this set are indeed in triple time but the tempo of the third piece is very fast and reminiscent of another Polish dance, the Oberek; the triplets and quick tempo combined conjure up images of dancers spinning and jumping, moves that you would expect in the Oberek.

Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1

Chopin adopted the nocturne genre and has been credited with bringing it to new heights. The piano nocturne, often considered to have been invented by John Field, more likely emerged as a result of the technological developments to the piano at the end of the eighteenth century i.e. the ability to play dynamics, its extended range, and the presence of a sustaining pedal.

In this nocturne, the importance of the sustaining pedal is demonstrated: the performer continuously leaps from low octave notes in the bass, up to higher chords. This is all the more impressive as the melody soars above the sections that are punctuated with chords and octaves while the intensity builds. Here, Chopin captivates his audience with a slow and somewhat mysterious opening, which grows into an agitated section before releasing its grasp on the listener and dying away.

Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 55 No. 2

Although a definition of the nocturne is difficult to pin down, a melody with a left hand arpeggiated accompaniment tends to be the general consensus; in many ways Op. 55 No. 2 exemplifies this. On the surface, an alluring melody supported by a somewhat aimless accompaniment, on closer inspection, duet-like passages for the right hand, areas of counterpoint, and dialogue between the hands make clear Chopin's skill as a composer. Relatively free in form, the melody meanders in an improvisatory nature, and in this nocturne we are reminded of its vocal

counterpart: songs that were considered serenades, possibly duets, but certainly a piece that was characterised by its charm. Franz Liszt extolled the nocturne as a medium through which the composer could write with expression and freedom, as opposed to being restricted by form.

Ballade in G minor, Op. 23 No. 1

In 1836, Schumann recorded his encounter with Chopin: 'I told him of everything he has created thus far [the Ballade in G minor] appeals to my heart the most', to which Chopin replied, 'I am glad, because I too like it the best, it is my dearest work'. Ballads, which tell a story, have been sung for centuries, finding their way into Polish poetry in the early nineteenth century at the pen of Adam Mickiewicz, later to be taken up by Chopin who developed the genre on the piano.

Even in music, narration is central to the composition: the listener is immersed in a story and experiences many moods and emotions. Chopin's ballades epitomise romanticism, and through them he speaks passionately and distinctively. The opening can be likened to a formidable storyteller who commands attention as he utters the words 'once upon a time', after which he pauses for effect. We await as the story begins to unfold with a lyrical melody, during which plots are introduced, momentum starts to build before developing into an intense and dramatic tale with a powerful ending.

INTERVAL

Siobhán Cleary (b. 1970)

An Cailleach

New commission by Music Network

i. Dùbhlacht: "Darkness"
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iv. Scuabag: "Sweeper"

Born in Dublin, Siobhán Cleary studied music at NUI Maynooth, Queen's University Belfast, and Trinity College Dublin. She has attended composition courses in Italy, France, and Poland where her tutors included Franco Donatoni and Louis Andriessen. She has also studied privately with Tom Johnson and Kevin Volans and studied film scoring with Ennio Morricone and Don Brandon Ray.

In 1995 she was a finalist in the Yorkshire and Humberside Arts Young Composers' Award at the Huddersfield Festival. Other awards include a Pépinières Young European Artists award in 1996 for a three-month residency in

Bologna and first prize in the Arklow Music Festival Composers' Competition in 1997. A concert of her music was performed at Cité International des Arts in Paris in 1997.

Siobhán has written the music several films and documentaries including the score for two Roger Corman films, 'Spacejacked!' and 'Dangerous Curves' and Planet Korda's "The Book Smugglers". She also worked with the Ciniteca di Bologna writing music scores to restored films, most notably the Dali/Buñuel classic 'Un Chien Andalou'.

Her orchestral work, Threads (1992 rev.1994), was selected by Vienna Modern Masters for performance at the Second International Festival of New Music for Orchestra in Olomouc in the Czech Republic, and was later released on CD. Other orchestral works include 'Alchemy' (2001) and 'Cokaygne' (2008) both commissioned by RTÉ and performed by the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra. Other commissions include the Irish Chamber Orchestra, Chamber Choir Ireland and the Vanbrugh Quartet among others.

She is the founder and artistic director of the New Sound Worlds concert series from 2005 and in 2015 she founded the Evlana Sinfonietta. Recent works include her opera Vampirella which was performed at Smock Alley March 2017 by RIAM briefs. Siobhán was elected to Aosdána, Ireland's state-sponsored academy of creative artists in 2008.

Siobhán Cleary has kindly provided the following note on her piece, An Cailleach:

In preliterate times, seasons were observed by the hours of light, weather patterns and lunar cycles, rather than any set calendrical date. Stories were invented and handed down generation by generation, in order to explain the astronomical divisions of the year; the vagaries of the weather and the shortening and lengthening of the days.

In the folklore of Ireland and Scotland, the Cailleach was the embodiment of winter, among many other things. Incarnated as an old hag at the end of Autumn (Samhain) she brings winter's elemental destruction until she is recreated once again at the beginning of Summer (Beltaine) as a young maiden.

These four short piano pieces take their title from a Scottish Gaelic legend which depicts the multitudinous ways the Cailleach casts her hibernal spell from Ben Nevis over her lands, until she is transformed, inevitably (and annually) into Spring.

"These four short piano pieces take their title from a Scottish Gaelic legend which depicts the multitudinous ways the Cailleach casts her hibernal spell…"

Siobhán Cleary on her work *'An Cailleach'*

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Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

"The Seasons" Op. 37 bis

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Tchaikovsky's compositional output is diverse: he wrote operas, symphonies, ballets, concertos, solo music, chamber music, and programme music to name but a few. Proclaimed as one of the best composers in the world at the opening night of Carnegie Hall (1891), at which he was the conductor, and awarded an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University (1893), Tchaikovsky was one of the first Russian composers to assimilate Western European musical traditions into his music, while maintaining an original and national style. His compositional versatility is evident in The Seasons, a piano cycle commissioned by music publisher Nikolai Matveyevich Bernard for his musical periodical Le Nouvelliste.

Like any nineteenth-century composer, Tchaikovsky accepted numerous commissions to support his career, and this particular one paid well; it predates his fourteen-year correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck, an admirer of his music who became his patron (1876–1890) which allowed him to focus on composing and to quit his job at the Moscow Conservatory. The Seasons was a retrospective title that appeared when Bernard published it as a complete cycle; initially the pieces were published monthly, while the subtitles, such as 'January: By the Fireside', were also chosen by Bernard. This programme music demonstrates that Tchaikovsky was true to his word when he wrote to Bernard: 'I will make an effort not to fall on my face in the mud and to carry the thing off to your satisfaction'.

The Seasons opens with a simple expressive and dream-like melody reminiscent of Schumann and moves on to a more energetic February full of character and fun as you would expect at a carnival. In June, the barcarolle – from Italian boatman or gondolier – gives the impression of gently floating along soft waves, although there is a moment of suspense in the middle, which is somewhat Chopinesque. August is a hive of activity with the harvest underway, while the hunt in September opens with the unmistakable sound of the 'trumpet' and its march-like dotted rhythm. December brings the cycle to a close, somewhat carefree, as the waltz entices everyone to join in.