Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade no. 1 in G minor, op. 23

By Professor of Humanities John Edwards

Chopin’s four Ballades for solo piano occupy a central position in his output. The Ballade no. 1 in G minor, op. 23, was written in Vienna in 1831 but not published until 1836, by which time Chopin had established himself in Paris and become a French citizen. Three further Ballades would follow between 1836 and 1842. Chopin was the first composer to apply the title “Ballade” to instrumental compositions. It is generally assumed that he had in mind an association with the poetic ballad, though Chopin scholars disagree as to whether the composer had specific literary prototypes in mind for each ballade.

European Romantic culture was fascinated by the possibilities of interplay between different artistic media. For example, Romantic composers often sought to communicate literary associations through music (the proliferation of programmatic works like Berlioz’s *Fantastic Symphony* and Liszt’s tone poems being an example). A ballad is a type of rhymed, metrical poetry set to music. So by entitling these works “Ballades,” Chopin was in part reflecting this Romantic tendency toward amalgamation of forms of expression. As Charles Rosen puts it, Chopin in the Ballades is “imitating with an instrument not a particular narrative but the technique of ballad narration: the formal periods and the refrain and the *sense of story*” (emphasis added).

As Rosen suggests, the text of a ballad is typically narrative; moreover, its narrative is often of a heroic character. Romantic culture was preoccupied with the idea of the hero, so much so that the “Romantic Hero” became one of the major archetypes in the literature of the period. In his study of the Chopin Ballades, James Parakilas argues that these pieces attempt to emulate a balladesque narrative structure beginning with an act of defiance and ending in some kind of retribution, a pattern very familiar to readers of Romantic texts like *Faust*, *Frankenstein*, and *Moby-Dick*. The Ballades of Chopin, then, might well have prompted contemporary listeners to think of Romantic-Heroic parallels.

In addition, the poetic ballad has strong popular and folk associations. When William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published a collaborative collection of poems dealing with, in Wordsworth’s language, “incidents and situations from common life,” which they tried to relate “as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men,” they chose to call this publication *Lyrical Ballads*. Romanticism in general tended toward a preference for the raw, the natural, and the spontaneous over the concerns with decorum, good taste, and classical discipline emphasized by the culture of the Enlightenment. By calling these works Ballades, Chopin might also have been in part aligning them with a Romanticized, idealized conception of the “rustic” life of “natural” men and women.

Musically speaking, the Ballade no. 1 begins with a brief introduction in common time. The bulk of the work is in 6/4 time, giving it a waltz- or dance-like rhythm. The Ballade has two main themes, one in G minor and one in E-flat major, which alternate and interact with each other until the movement returns to duple meter in its furious *Presto con fuoco* ending