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KATYA APEKISHEVA IMPROMPTUS



SCRIABIN | FAURÉ | CHOPIN

FOREWORD

In the last few years I have been drawn to Fauré's music with its rich textures and sensuous, dark, hypnotic harmonies. I discovered his Impromptus which are rarely performed, perhaps partly because of their very virtuosic writing. That led me to an exploration of the genre of impromptus more generally: I was excited by the improvisational quality and variety of mood – from playful miniatures to dark, melancholic, profound pieces of music.

I have put the Fauré together with Scriabin Impromptus which are also not often enough heard. They share the darkness of Fauré's pieces but are more intimate in character. The Chopin Impromptus will be more familiar for listeners: they are little jewels in the piano repertoire. These very different composers' styles complement each other yet there is a common romantic thread running through; and I thought that, together, they would make a very beautiful programme centred around the Impromptu form.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arief', written in a cursive style.

TRACK LISTING

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN (1871–1915)

2 IMPROMPTUS, Op.14

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------|
| 1 | No.1 in B major | 03'11 |
| 2 | No.2 in F-sharp minor | 05'02 |

GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845–1924)

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 3 | Impromptu No.1 in E-flat major, Op.25 | 04'03 |
| 4 | Impromptu No.2 in F minor, Op.31 | 03'45 |
| 5 | Impromptu No.3 in A-flat major, Op.34 | 05'04 |
| 6 | Impromptu No.4 in D-flat major, Op.91 | 04'47 |
| 7 | Impromptu No.5 in F-sharp minor, Op.102 | 02'23 |
| 8 | Impromptu No.6 in D-flat major, Op.86 | 08'51 |

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN

2 IMPROMPTUS, Op.12

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|-------|
| 9 | No.1 in F-sharp major | 05'10 |
| 10 | No.2 in B-flat minor | 04'46 |

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810–1849)

- | | | |
|----|--|-------|
| 11 | Impromptu No.1 in A-flat major, Op.29 | 04'33 |
| 12 | Impromptu No.2 in F-sharp major, Op.36 | 06'05 |
| 13 | Impromptu No.3 in G-flat major, Op.51 | 05'24 |
| 14 | Fantasia Impromptu in C-sharp minor, Op.66 | 05'27 |

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN

2 IMPROMPTUS, Op.10

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 15 | No.1 in F-sharp minor | 05'12 |
| 16 | No.2 in A major | 03'37 |
| 17 | Impromptu a la Mazur in C major, No.3 from Trois Morceaux, Op.2 | 02'02 |

Total playing time: 79'27

Produced & engineered by Alexander Van Ingen
Post production by Claire Hay and Dave Rowell
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“Impromptu – something composed or uttered without preparation or premeditation; a musical composition having the character of an improvisation.” That is the dictionary definition of the word, and while it’s a helpful starting point for considering the music for solo piano played in this recital, it has its limitations.

How, for instance, does a composer retain the freshness of a melody invented “impromptu”, on the spur of the moment, when it’s time to write it down in definitive form on paper? How do you keep the sense of spontaneity involved in an initial moment of one-off improvisation, when you try to capture it in perpetuity, for others to play and study?

Some of the answers to these questions can be found in Frédéric Chopin’s Impromptu Op.66 (or “Fantasie-Impromptu”) of 1834, the last of his four impromptus in terms of opus number, but the first in order of composition. The discrepancy arises because the piece was not actually published in Chopin’s lifetime; it was presented in manuscript form to the Baroness Frances Sarah d’Este, an aristocratic admirer of Chopin, and remained for over a century in her personal collection.

Did the Baroness hear Chopin improvising in one of the numerous performances he gave in the private “salons” of the well-to-do and socially connected? Did she then ask him to write down something similar to put in her own piano album? It’s possible, although we do not know for certain. It’s undoubtedly a short step, however, from the type of dazzling extemporisations Chopin is known to have excelled at in his piano performances, to the rippling cascade of right-hand semiquavers in the Op.66 Impromptu, which one can easily imagine originating in a “warm-up” exercise.

The “Fantasie-Impromptu” is, though, far from being a shallow piece of audience-pleasing. Against the swirling right-hand triplets Chopin sets a left-hand accompaniment in duple time, creating a polyrhythmic interaction which is tricky for the player. And in the contrasting middle section (all four of Chopin’s impromptus have a tripartite A-B-A structure) the composer gifts one of his beguilingly long-spun lyric melodies (a tune that later became the popular American vaudeville song “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows”).

There is, undoubtedly, an “improvisatory” feeling as the melody unravels - but there is artfulness and sophistication too, as the tune is pruned and set proportionately in the context of a broader, overarching structure. The structural outline is trimmed further in the Impromptu Op.29, composed by Chopin three years later in 1837. In many ways the keyboard writing is technically similar to Op.66, although the agitated polyrhythms have disappeared and the mood is brighter.

The Impromptu Op.36 is more tentatively shaped, and more inclined to micro-shifts in mood, as the pianist mulls the path the relatively benign opening material might follow. The train of thought appears suspended in a string of chorale-like chords, before a change of key heralds the more assertive, tolling rhythms of the central section. The music of the opening section returns, significantly embellished by brilliant, aspirational roulades. These are eventually supplanted by a second appearance of the chorale, which is in turn truncated by a stinging double-forte chord, imposing a blunt full stop on a musical paragraph one feels has not quite reached its final destination.

The particular challenge of the impromptu – to embed a sense of free-flowing invention in a structural format which the listener will find satisfying to follow – is most fully met in Chopin’s final essay in the genre, the Impromptu Op.51. The

tempo marking here, “Tempo giusto”, is instructive: there should be no sense of undue haste or tarrying in a performance of this music, no undue manipulation of the illusion it creates of inspiration freely expressing itself with “the fluid appearance of a stream”, as the writer André Gide put it, “the imperceptible gliding from one melodic proposition to another”.

Chopin’s fingerprint is still clearly evident four decades later in the Impromptu Op.25 of the French composer Gabriel Fauré, most obviously in the fluttering melody of its outer sections. The central interlude and the coda are, though, more distinctive, with a whiff of the Wagnerian harmonies Fauré had been keenly inhaling on trips to hear the German master’s operas.

The Wagner influence, never particularly potent in Fauré’s piano music, was evaporating by the time he wrote the Impromptu Op.31 two years later, replaced by an alacrity and elegance which still owe something to Chopin – though more the Chopin of the virtuosically focused Études, perhaps, than of the freer-wheeling Impromptus. The Impromptu Op.34 dates from the same year (1883), and is quintessential Fauré, the graceful finger-filigree of the opening paragraph yielding to a palpably more ruminative central section, and a coda which twice calls into question the need to end the piece with a traditional flourish.

It was two decades before Fauré wrote another impromptu, around the time of his sixtieth birthday. Is it the gathering uncertainties and insecurities of advancing age we hear in this Op.91 piece? The jittery rhythms and unsettled harmonies of the work’s outer segments suggest so, an impression hardly mitigated by the sombre mindset of the middle section.

Outright agitation characterises the relentlessly racing, spinning figurations of Impromptu Op.102, with more than a passing nod to the famous “wind howling around the gravestones” finale of Chopin’s Second Piano Sonata. Impromptu Op.86 is relaxed and airy by comparison. Originally written in 1904 for a harp competition at the Paris Conservatoire, it was later adapted for piano by the French pianist Alfred Cortot. The sweeping, glissando-style gestures typical of the harp occur at several junctures in the piece, and test a pianist’s dexterity at least as much as they do a harpist’s.

If Chopin was an enduring though flickering presence in Fauré’s piano music, he totally dominates the *Impromptu a la Mazur*, Op.2, No.3 by the young Alexander Scriabin. Scriabin was just 15 when he wrote it, at a period of his life when he was attending a military school in Moscow, and slept with copies of Chopin’s music under his pillow.

The Two Impromptus, Op.10, date from seven years later, and show Scriabin beginning to pull clear of his boyhood hero’s influence. The jaggy contours of Op.10, No.1, in F-sharp minor, bespeak a partial fracturing of the elegant, untroubled posture struck in Scriabin’s early Chopin imitation. Op.10, No.2, while superficially blithe in demeanour, has a rhythmic skittishness hinting at a keenly individual, nervy temperament below the surface.

The Two Impromptus, Op.12, date from a year later. Op.12, No.1, for all its determination to achieve a smooth, lyrical fluidity in the right hand melody, has nagging uncertainties in its harmonic patterns, and clouds darkening the horizon further in the central section. The summoning of dark forces intensifies in the

chordal rumblings, rising to a triple-forte dynamic marking, of Op.12, No.2, where the intense, visionary quality of Scriabin's later style is clearly adumbrated.

The Two Impromptus, Op.14, from later the same year (1895) marked the 23-year-old Scriabin's farewell to the genre. Did he know it? There is certainly an element of wistfulness, and possibly leave-taking, in the gently Schumannesque musings of the opening melody of Op.14, No.1, which is strangely halting in nature, as though an intimately stored confidence cannot be fully articulated. The chordal central section is also swiftly truncated, the A-B-A structural outlines of the traditional impromptu blurring over, as deeper emotions swirl around beneath the surface.

There is more confidence and clarity of purpose in the central episode of Op.14, No.2, where slivers of Chopin's salon style are scattered on the music. The work's mistily introverted opening section, by contrast, points unmistakably forward to Scriabin's later music, where he dreamed mystical dreams, and summoned up exotically poetic visions.

When the opening material returns at the piece's conclusion, however, it is dropped almost instantly, in a *coda* spanning just eight bars of music. Here, finally, the modest impromptu form is abandoned by Scriabin. For all its adaptability, it could never hope to encompass the heady, flamboyant expansion of the composer's expressive ambitions – a “really new body of feeling”, Aaron Copland called it – the seeds of which are fascinatingly evident in the second of the Op.14 pieces.

© Terry Blain

Katya Apekiševa is one of Europe's most renowned pianists, in demand internationally as both a soloist and as a chamber musician. Since becoming a prize-winner in the Leeds International and Scottish Piano competitions and collating awards such as the London Philharmonic 'Soloist of the Year' and the Terence Judd Award she has been marked out as a pianist of exceptional gifts, performing with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the London Philharmonic, The Philharmonia, the Hallé Orchestra, the Moscow Philharmonic, the Jerusalem Symphony, the English Chamber Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, working with conductors such as Sir Simon Rattle, David Shallon, Jan Latham-Koenig and Alexander Lazarev.

As a recording artist, Katya has received widespread critical acclaim for her interpretations. Her recording of Grieg solo piano works in 2008 (Quartz) was chosen by *Classic FM* as CD of the week and selected by *Gramophone* magazine as Editor's Choice, further receiving a 'Rising Star Award' in *International Piano Magazine* and becoming Critics' choice 2008 in *Gramophone* magazine. In 2012 Katya released a CD of works by Mussorgsky and Shostakovich (*Onyx*) and has also collaborated on several recordings with violinist Jack Liebeck including a Classical Brit winning CD of works by Dvořák and more recently a disc of Kreisler arrangements for Hyperion.

Her intense artistry and delicacy makes Katya a most sought after collaborative pianist, working with artists such as Janine Jansen, Natalie Clein, Guy Johnston, Maxim Rysanov, Jack Liebeck, Boris Brovtsyn, Alexei Ogrinchouk, the Belcea Quartet, Aviv Quartet and Nicholas Daniel, among others. In this capacity she is a regular guest at major chamber music festivals around the world. Katya also has a highly successful and personally rewarding piano duo partnership with Charles

A woman with curly hair is seated at a piano, looking down at the keys. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top. The background features large, arched windows with a view of a cityscape at night. The lighting is warm and focused on the pianist.

Owen, performing regularly at festivals worldwide. Their CD of Stravinsky Piano Ballets was released in 2016 to a high critical acclaim.

Born into a family of musicians in Moscow, Katya studied at the world-renowned Gnessin Music School for exceptionally gifted children under Ada Traub and Anna Kantor (the teacher of Evgeny Kissin) and at the age of twelve, Katya performed Mozart's Concerto No.17 with the Gnessin School Orchestra which was recorded for Moscow Classical Radio. Katya continued her studies at the Rubin Music Academy in Jerusalem with Irina Berkovich, where she won an America-Israel Foundation scholarship and was awarded second prize at the Young Talents Competition in Jerusalem. Katya then moved to London to study with Irina Zaritskaya at the Royal College of Music, where she was the recipient of the President's Rose Bowl, presented to her by HRH the Prince of Wales, to whom she has been asked to perform on a number of subsequent occasions.

Katya has performed at the Utrecht (Netherlands), Ancona (Italy), Leicester, Oxford, Lincoln, City of London, and Elverum (Norway) festivals, and in the Berlin Spectrum Concert Series. She gave an acclaimed Bach Solo recital at Kings Place, London, and made her Tokyo recital debut in 2014. In addition she made a concerto tour of South Africa, performing with all the major orchestras there, and performed with the Santiago Philharmonic, Wiesbaden Orchestra, English Chamber Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and OFUNAM Orchestra (Mexico) collaborating with conductors Jan Latham-Koenig, Paul Watkins, Emmanuel Siffert and Jason Lai.

Recent seasons' highlights have included concerto debuts in Poland with Jerzy Maksymiuk (Bialystok and Szczecin Philharmonic Orchestras), solo and chamber music concerts at major venues and festivals. Katya is Co-Artistic Director of the London Piano Festival, which returned for its second season in October 2017.

Katya is a Professor of Piano at The Guildhall School of Music and Drama.