



*Piano music by*

Frédéric Chopin

Gabriel Fauré

# Joseph Fennimore

IN CONCERT III

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Orlando Gibbons

Franz Joseph Haydn

Franz Liszt

Franz Schubert

“ ... court an  
amorous  
looking glass.”

From their beginnings about a hundred years ago, sound recordings documented performances by illustrious pianists of the repertory's chestnuts. With editing all but impossible, playing a note-perfect performance in one complete take was a notorious strain making music wilt. The medium was so primitive that most artists held it in quiet contempt thinking it a novelty that couldn't, wouldn't and shouldn't last.

Despite the crudity of the sound reproduction, imagine the shock those playbacks were to those first recording

artists. Any honest pianist today will admit that the initial playback of a newly-studied work inspires the same horror that most feel upon first hearing their recorded speaking voices. Struggling to forge from within an interpretation they believed in, these early recording artists were suddenly confronted with irrefutable evidence of how very far they were from what they thought they had been doing. And not just about a specific work but about their entire artistic identity.

In playback, the considerable energy spent in actually playing was freed to

performance. An all-pervasive recorded norm of the note-perfect inoculated live performances against spontaneity that risked wrong notes. From being one of many goals in live performance, accuracy came to top the list at the same time that pianism shifted from the athleticism of the dancer to that wanted in a gymnast.

While most pianists play better on records than they show live, recordings by the finest artists remain a pale shadow of their live performances. A mike neither responds nor inspires. Performers worthy of the name need a live audience if only to scare forth that adrenalin high that heightens their powers. Even when the concert itself is recorded, the magic of the moment cannot be canned no matter how the sound is goosed by dials. Ambiance is a vital burnish and immediacy the very spice of life. Performance before listeners will continue because musicians need it to continue in some form or other as they have from the beginning of time. However, recordings as we have known them, may be seriously endangered.

The keyboard music of Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) is notated in tablature obsolete by 1625, the rendering of which musicians of the period disagreed. Written for any keyboard — the organ had as yet no pedals — initially published by a gent who added a full chord at the end of every work because he thought it looked nice, Gibbons' slow movements move like lute music, but the quick ones prompted one musicologist to call him "the Liszt of English Virginalists."

I have forgotten enough of who I was and everything I thought about when writing my Fantasy (1963) to be able to treat it as the work of someone else. Do composers who can play, play their music better than others? No, but simpler, and more straightforward, for sure.

Fifty years ago, Schubert's masterpieces were admired but his overall reputation, like Haydn's, remained below that of Beethoven and Mozart. Now, Schubert's every note is enshrouded and all his repetitions faithfully observed. Pouring

of ivory worked with the finest brush. Faure's picture of the Almighty in his Requiem is of a deity kindly sympathetic to requests. Elsewhere, as in the 6th Nocturne, while restlessly searching for ecstasy, spiritual or corporeal, the music somehow always remains supremely Apollonian.

The twelve Transcendental Etudes, not so named by Liszt, exist in three versions, the third being a compromise between the puerilities of the first, written when he was fourteen, and

the ultra-complexities of the second. Rachmaninoff opined that Feux Follet (Will o' the Wisp or delusion) is the most difficult etude in the piano repertory. The notes are troublesome enough but to imbue them with light humor proves the real difficulty. Paysage rises to such a passionate climax that the focus has obviously moved from the landscape to something quite else. The f minor Etude is one of two of the twelve without a title.

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