

Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760-1812)
Piano Sonatas, Op.35 Nos.1, 2 & 3

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-49)
Nocturne, Op.15 No.2 & Ballade, Op.23

Michael Dussek *piano*

DUSSEK: Piano Sonata Op.35 No.1 in B-flat major (No.11)		[19:05]
1	I Allegro moderato e maestoso	10:03
2	II Finale – Allegro non troppo ma con spirito	9:01
DUSSEK: Piano Sonata Op.35 No.3 in G major (No.12)		[14:54]
3	I Allegro	8:06
4	II Rondo – Molto allegro, con espressione	6:48
DUSSEK: Piano Sonata Op.35 No.3 in C minor (No.13)		[17:42]
5	I Allegro agitato assai	6:45
6	II Adagio patetico et espressivo	6:15
7	III Intermezzo (Presto) – Finale (Allegro molto)	4:41
8	CHOPIN: Nocturne in F-sharp major, Op.15 No.2	3:21
9	CHOPIN: Ballade No.1 in G minor, Op.23	9:08
Total duration:		64:12

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ROMANTIC
REVOLUTION

Jan Ladislav
Dussek

Piano Sonatas
Op.35 Nos.1-3

Fryderyk
Chopin

Nocturne, Op.15 No. 2
Ballade, No.1 in G minor

Michael Dussek *piano*

Jan Ladislav Dussek

a personal view by Michael Dussek

“It was Chopin who properly set romantic pianism on its rails and gave it the impetus that still shows no sign of deceleration. He did this all by himself, evolving from nowhere the most beautiful and original piano style... the basic elements of his playing, his innovations in fingering and pedalling, were not to be altered until Debussy and Prokofieff appeared.”

So wrote Harold C. Schonberg in his definitive 1969 book *The Great Pianists*. And so it always appeared to me when I first encountered Chopin’s earliest works, dating from 1827 when Beethoven and Schubert, both of whom Chopin rejected, were still alive. Where, I wondered, did this completely new style of piano writing come from, with its free, long, singing lines over chordal or arpeggiated left-hand accompaniment?

Bach and Mozart were the two great composers that Chopin revered and both certainly offer clues to his genius: from Mozart, the clarity and ease of the passagework and his vocal, operatic approach to melody; and from Bach the counterpoint and polyphony which are still under-appreciated elements of Chopin’s music. The other composers who are credited are the Irish pianist John Field, well regarded for his unquestionably influential

Nocturnes, and Chopin’s friend Vincenzo Bellini, whose operatic *bel canto* influence is heard in the long *cantabile* melodies.

But there is another figure, revolutionary in his approach to both composition and pianism, who should be acknowledged: the Bohemian Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760-1812). Indeed, the word revolutionary recurs frequently in accounts of his life and career, and is appropriate for someone who, as “Dussek le beau”, escaped from Paris in 1789 where he had been the teacher of Marie-Antoinette.

Coming to London, Dussek joined an extraordinary community of distinguished musicians, collaborating with the likes of Clementi and Hummel, teaching Field and meeting Haydn who perhaps over-generously informed Jan Ladislav’s father in a letter that he considered himself “fortunate in being able to assure you that you have one of the most upright, moral, and in music most eminent of men for a son”. But it was Dussek’s career as the first international, touring piano virtuoso which made the biggest historical impact; in particular his innovation as the first pianist to sit side-on to the audience, in order to show off his impressive profile. It was with him that the modern piano recital truly originated.

So what are the qualities, both in his compositions and in his playing, which were so revolutionary? As far as playing is concerned, this was an

era of significant and rapid development of the piano's design and Dussek was among those involved in Broadwood's extension of the keyboard from five to six octaves between 1791 and 1794. At this time there were two distinct schools of instrument, and consequently of playing.

The pianist Friedrich Kalkbrenner wrote: "The Viennese pianos are particularly noted for their precision, the clarity and rapidity of their execution... the use of the pedals in Germany is almost unknown. English pianos have a fuller sound and a heavier keyboard action. The players of that country have adopted a larger style and that beautiful way of singing that distinguishes them; and it is indispensable to use the large pedal in order to conceal the inherent dryness of the piano. Dussek, Field and J.B. Cramer, the chiefs of that school which was founded by Clementi, use the pedal when the harmonies do not change. Dussek was above all responsible for that, for he used the pedal almost constantly when he played in public". Indeed, he was the first composer to mark specific pedal instructions in his music. This contrasts with the approach of Hummel, who regarded the pedal as "a cloak to an impure and indistinct method of playing."

Added to this was Dussek's advocacy of *legato*. To quote Schonberg again: "Dussek's fingerings, too, were far in advance of his day, and he anticipated Chopin in his ideas about shifting fingers on the same key without actually

striking it, so as to get a pure *legato* – or, as Dussek explained it, 'to hold the vibration and to tie or bind one passage to another'".

Critics invariably commented on the beautiful singing tone of his playing. Fellow Bohemian, Johann Tomaschek, reviewing a recital in Prague in 1804 wrote: "There was, in fact, something magical about the way in which Dussek, with all his charming grace of manner, through his wonderful touch, extracted from the instrument delicious and at the same time emphatic tones. His fingers were like a company of ten singers endowed with equal executive powers and able to produce with the utmost perfection whatever their director would require".

Likening Dussek's playing to a choir contrasts with Beethoven's use of the piano as a substitute for an orchestra. As Schonberg drily observes, "Nobody ever referred to Beethoven's singing style". Finally, the German critic Ludwig Rellstab, immortalised as the poet of the first seven songs of Schubert's *Schwanengesang*, wrote in 1850 (the year after Chopin's death and nearly four decades after Dussek's) that Dussek "having accomplished a vast deal more for the elevation of the piano than most of his contemporaries, occupied a place in the musical life of Berlin which is felt even now".

As a composer, Dussek's qualities must be re-evaluated since the recent discovery, by Richard Egarr, of his *Messe Solennelle*. Assumed to have been

written in 1811, the last full year of Dussek's life, when he was grossly obese and seriously ill, this astonishing work received its first modern performance (possibly its first performance of any kind) at London's Barbican Hall in 2019 and seems to be the culmination of everything his previous work was leading towards. Illustrating the references to Dussek's playing resembling a choir, it displays a mastery of counterpoint and fugue (he had studied with C.P.E. Bach in the early 1780s) which is only hinted at in his piano sonatas.

As a boy Jan Ladislav had been a chorister. Perhaps from his youth he regarded the piano simply as a substitute for the choirs he had grown up singing in. Intriguingly, Chopin's piano teacher, Wojciech Żywny, was also born in Bohemia, in 1756 – the same year as Mozart and four years earlier than Dussek. The possibility exists that it is not only a question of Dussek influencing Chopin, but also, to some extent, of the two composers sharing the same root of choral music in Bohemia.

Dussek's music can be divided roughly into three periods: the first is pre-1789, when some of his piano writing, with big chords and fast left-hand octaves, is completely unlike anything else written while Mozart was still alive. Harmonically, as well, it seems to be liberated from the rules of the Classical era. The final period dates from his return to Paris in 1805, having enjoyed life excessively, as "Dussek le gros", and it is here that we

find music that at times sounds almost exactly like Chopin, notably in the E major slow movement of the Sonata in A flat, Op.64 (*Le retour à Paris*); this work also contains, in the words of the pianist Dr Andrew Brownell, "a tonally unstable Scherzo that would (or may) have made Beethoven green with envy". However, it is from his middle period, when he was living in London in the 1790s, that I have selected the three Sonatas, Op.35, for this recording.

Composed in 1797 and approximately contemporaneous with Beethoven's Op.10 Sonatas, we must be careful not to make exaggerated claims for Dussek. The only *Adagio* movement (Op.35 No.3) clearly cannot be compared to Beethoven's great Op.10 No.3. But what is remarkable in Dussek's writing is the way in which, while remaining within Classical structures, it is possibly even more ground-breaking than Beethoven at this time, in terms of rich pianistic sonority, virtuosic figuration and harmonic daring. Grove's dictionary writes: "Much of Dussek's music resembles that of other composers. Most often, however, these composers are later than Dussek, and such resemblances show him to have been very much ahead of his time in the development of a Romantic piano style".

The first movement of the **Sonata in B flat major** (No.11, Op.35 No.1) is rooted firmly in its tonic and dominant (F major) for much of the time. However, it also finds its way to D flat major, G flat major and, through a

modulatory trick which, more than 30 years later, will become definitively Chopinesque, flicking from flats to sharps and hence B major.

Structurally he favours lengthy expositions and development sections, and abbreviated recapitulations. The second movement shows his love of native folk idioms and dance rhythm. Dussek, like his fellow Bohemians Dvořák and Smetana many decades later, often favours rustic lyricism over the Germanic formal rigour of Beethoven and Brahms. But the development section shows glimpses of the contrapuntal techniques which would achieve full fruition in the *Messe Solennelle*. In 1799 Dussek wrote that a pause (fermata) “gives the principal performer only an opportunity of dwelling upon that note over which it is marked, or to introduce voluntary graces, evolutions, agreeable to his taste and fancy”. I have taken the opportunity to pay homage to his harpist wife, Sophia, with a brief cadenza comprising broken chords.

The **Sonata in G major** (No.12, Op.35 No.2) is unquestionably my favourite of the three. Here there is a truly expressive melodic lyricism, alternating with bravura passagework in both hands. A stately, graceful motif which appears for the first time in bar 80 (2'51") and is then developed subsequently, achieves that beautiful simplicity which is the hallmark of the greatest composers. Harmonically, it combines daring with absolute conviction, for instance at the start of the development

section, going directly from the exposition-ending D major to a B major chord; and at the recapitulation jumping from G major directly to E flat major. And this in the birth-year of Schubert, who, 20 years later, would raise this technique to sublime levels.

The second movement Rondo is, for me, a movement of genius, with the opening melody varied in harmony or phrase length on subsequent repetition. I am not aware of any music written before 1797 which is remotely like this – Haydn's late trios arguably coming the closest. Influence is, of course, impossible to measure, but what a fertile ground of mutual inspiration and challenge London in the 1790s must have been.

The **Sonata in C minor** (No.13, Op.35 No.3) is Beethovenian (anticipating both Op.10 No.1 and the *Pathétique*) and again replete with harmonic creativity. The slow movement is most notable for the Chopinesque right-hand flourishes and another magical modulation, from E flat minor to B major. After a brief *Presto Intermezzo* we are back in the world of the village dance for the last movement, though with hints of complex and brilliant counterpoint. A triumphant C major concludes this gloriously innovative triptych of sonatas.

The unquestioned influence of John Field (1782-1837) on Chopin has already been mentioned. During his residence in London in the 1790s he is

known to have performed some of Dussek's concerti. Describing Field's first piano sonatas, from 1801, Grove writes "any trace at this date of the dreamy sentiment of the nocturnes is to be found, not in these sonatas, but in such pieces as Dussek's Sonata in C minor, Op.35 No.3". Field's Nocturnes date from the 1820s and the link to Chopin's first work of this title, in E minor, published posthumously as Op.72 No.1 but composed in 1827, is clear. However, by 1830-31, when he composed the famous F sharp major Nocturne, Op.15 No.2, Chopin was taking the form into something far more elaborate. The fluid, complex writing in the central section anticipates later works such as the G minor Ballade, Op.23, started in 1831 but not completed until 1835; a pianistic and musical style that did not fundamentally change until 1845-46 with the Polonaise-Fantasie and the Cello Sonata.

Like Field, Chopin was known to have played and taught Dussek's works and the aesthetic connections, some of which I have already referred to, are substantial: an emphasis on *cantabile*, achieved through *legato* fingering and generous use of the pedal; tonal beauty and finesse of touch (accounts of Chopin's surprisingly rare public performances tend to emphasise the softness of his playing, but this may have been due to physical weakness more than intent – the markings in his music, frequently *ff* and reinforced by *sf*, clearly demand the widest possible expressive range). To these can be added rhythmically free, lyrical right-hand flourishes over left-hand broken chords; a mastery of polyphony, under-recognised in both

composers; and unexpected modulations, particularly those achieved by pivoting on one note – e.g. A flat becoming G sharp.

There is something in the pianistic ease and naturalness of both composers which is similar. Both write the most virtuosic music of their eras, but without ever placing undue strain on the hand, even on modern pianos, which are so much heavier than those for which the music was written. Attempting to observe the plethora of instructions – pedal markings, on which the harmony and polyphony depend; phrase markings and articulations, which, as Claudio Arrau observed "are more integral to the music than dynamics", quickly leads one to the realisation that the music truly is greater than any performance of it.

"Are you related to the composer?" is a question most members of my family have been asked at some point. My honest answer has always been "We don't know", though others have often made the claim on my behalf. We know for certain that in 1792 Jan Ladislav had married Sophia Corri, 15 years his junior, in St Anne's Church, Westminster, and embarked on a music publishing business with his father-in-law Domenico Corri. When this failed, Dussek fled the country in 1799, leaving his father-in-law to be jailed for bankruptcy, also implicating Mozart's librettist Lorenzo da Ponte as a debtor. There is no evidence that Dussek saw his wife or daughter, Olivia, again.

The website Ancestry.co.uk links us to Jan Ladislav through John Louis Dussek, 1807-46, but his provenance remains unknown. Presumably there may be numerous unacknowledged Dussek descendants resulting from his rumoured liaisons with many of the European aristocracy in the 1780s. Joking references to our “French royal blood” have been a part of our family folklore since before I understood them. Music has been in our family for at least two generations before mine, so some link to the Bohemian family of musicians seems likely.

This recording is above all a labour of love, and, I hope, an insight into the very specific connections between one of the most innovative and accomplished musicians of his day, Jan Ladislav Dussek, and the greatest of all piano composers, Fryderyk Chopin.

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To all members of my family;
and in memoriam, my parents,
John (J.L.) Dussek, (1922-83)
and **Molly Dussek**, (1930-2020).

Michael Dussek

Michael Dussek made his Wigmore Hall debut in 1980, since when he has performed in the world’s major concert venues as chamber musician, song accompanist and soloist.

From 1979-99 he performed internationally with cellist Ofra Harnoy and since 2002 has collaborated with violinist Ryu Goto, including five major tours of Japan and three recitals in New York’s Carnegie (Zankel) Hall. Other soloists with whom he has collaborated include violinists Levon Chilingirian, Leoš Čepický, Cho-Liang Lin, Lorraine McAslan, Anne Akiko Meyers, Kurt Nikkanen, Antje Weithaas and Xue Wei; cellists Alexander Baillie, Gemma Rosefield and Markus Stocker; oboists Douglas Boyd and Sarah Francis; and singers Charles Daniels, Bernarda Fink, Stephan Loges, Christopher Maltman, Ian Partridge, Jean Rigby, Joan Rodgers, Vassily Savenko, Roman Trekel and Roderick Williams. He has performed with the Bridge, Castalian, Chilingirian, Coull, Dante and Wihan String Quartets, and as a member of the Primavera and Zoffany chamber ensembles.

In 1988, with his wife, cellist Margaret Powell, and violinist Peter Tanfield (succeeded in 1997 by Gonzalo Acosta) he formed the Dussek Piano Trio, which broadcast for BBC Radio 3 from major concert venues and recorded works by Arensky, Brahms, Bridge, Haydn and Hurlstone. As a member of

Endymion since 1981, Michael has collaborated with leading composers at the BBC Proms and Southbank concerts and has performed in the Wigmore Hall's Chamber Music series and at the opening concerts of Kings Place in 2008.

Michael's discography is extensive: with Ryu Goto, sonatas by Beethoven, Franck, Prokofiev, Ravel and Saint-Saëns and a recital from Tokyo's Suntory Hall (Strauss, Brahms and Ravel) recorded live on CD and DVD (Deutsche Grammophon). In addition, more than 20 CDs in Dutton Epoch's highly praised survey of neglected British composers. His recording of Rubbra's Violin Sonatas with Krysia Osostowicz was nominated for a *Gramophone* Award.

Solo recordings include works by Britten, Nielsen, Rubbra and Clifford Benson. His performances of York Bowen's first three piano concertos with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Vernon Handley are included in the *Penguin Guide to Compact Discs 1,000 Finest Classical Recordings*. The First Concerto was selected for *Fanfare's* Hall of Fame.

Michael's teachers have included Hugo Langrish, Alexander Kelly, Geoffrey Parsons and Greville Rother. He is Head of Piano Accompaniment at the Royal Academy of Music and was appointed a Professor of the University of London in 2019.

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