

# The Ballade

Brendan Jacklin, piano

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Frédéric Chopin's **Ballade No. 2 in F Major, Op. 38** was composed between the years of 1836–39, his second foray into this narrative form of his own creation. Dedicated to his contemporary and fellow composer Robert Schumann, the inspiration of the work is unknown. There are some claims that it was inspired by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's *Świtezianka* (The Lake of Willis), a ballad that depicts the relationship between reality and the supernatural in Polish folklore. Chopin's work alternates between two main themes: the peaceful, rolling opening theme and the thunderous *Presto*. The piece explores the relationship between these ideas, with each theme transforming the other throughout the work.

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Originally published as *Ballade Slave* (Slavic Ballade) in 1890, the French composer Claude Debussy dropped the Slavic title when the work was revised in 1903. This early work of Debussy was conceived during a trip to Russia, and its harmonies are especially indebted to the Russian composer Mily Balakirev. **Ballade** foreshadows many of the compositional devices Debussy would later be known for, including planing, extended harmonies, and the use of modal scales.

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“I have a quasi-religious relationship to Chopin's Ballades. If I stumble on one of them unexpectedly—on the radio, in a hotel lobby, or walking past a pianist's practice room—I have to stop and sit down. Years ago, I communed with the Ballades to such a degree that now I almost fear them. Of all the Ballades, I was most affected by the Fourth. I'd read that Chopin wanted this piece to have a “sickly, creepy” feeling, which reminded me of an interview I'd read with Thom Yorke in which he'd said the goal of Radiohead's “OK Computer” was to make the listener feel “emotionally nauseated.” In both cases these characterizations struck me as poignantly apt; there is a point at which introspection can feel vertiginous. I'm not sure I shared this artistic objective for this piece, but I kept thinking about it as I was writing it. Because of this, and in homage to the many technical and structural features of Chopin's Ballades that inspired the writing of this piece, I decided to call it **Ballade**.”

Ballade is dedicated to the wonderful pianist and composer Laurie Altman, my piano teacher in high school.” — program notes by Sarah Kirkland Snider

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**Ballade in D Minor Op. 10 No. 1** is one of the few programmatic pieces written by Johannes Brahms. This short work is based on the murder ballad “Edward,” a ballad that dates back at least to the mid-18thC. It tells the tale of a mother questioning her son about blood on his sword. The son avoids a direct answer, claiming that the blood belongs to an animal before finally admitting that it is the blood of his brother (or father, depending on the version). The son then vows to leave and never return, cursing his mother and implicating her in the murder.

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From Frederic Rzewski’s *Four North American Ballads*, **Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues** borrows from both Chopin and a blues tune of the same name to depict an uprising at a textile plant in Winnsboro, South Carolina during the 1930s. The piece alternates between a relentless depiction of the industrial machinery and the more lyrical blues-influenced theme of the workers, pitting them against the chaos of industrialization.

Ol' man sergeant sittin' at the desk  
The damn ol' fool won't give us no rest  
He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes  
To buy a Coca-Cola an' a eskimo pie

When I die don't you bury me at all  
Hang me up on the schoolroom wall  
Place a bobbin in my hand  
So I can keep on a-workin' in the Promised Land

I got the blues, I got the blues  
I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues  
Oh Lordy Lordy spoolin's hard  
You know and I know, we don't have to tell  
You work for Tom Watson gotta work like hell  
I got the blues, I got the blues  
I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues

— Lyrics by Edward Laska

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The Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho writes that “In this short piece I wanted to write music with a melody that grows out of the texture before descending into it again; a work that constantly shifts from a complex, multi-layered texture to concentrated single lines and back

again. Why **Ballade**? Manny [the pianist Emanuel Ax] asked specifically for a piece bearing this title, and I wrote it for him in July 2005.

Much of the musical material comes from her earlier work for soprano and piano *Quatre Instants*, especially from the first movement. The text of the song comes from “Attente,” a poem by the Lebanese-French poet Amin Maalouf.

*Attente* (Longing)

I am the boat adrift  
My lover is beyond the rift  
And the sea is so vast

I am the boat adrift  
My lover is beyond the rift  
And the wind has died down

I have spread all my sails  
For the wind to drive me

I have spread all my sails  
For my lover to see me

— Poem and Translation by Amin Maalouf

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“Hypoballad explores narrative musical elements from the lives of Icelandic twin sisters Herdis and Olina Andrésdóttir, both poets in the ballade and rímur tradition whose work centered on nature and the experiences of peasant women. It draws musical inspiration from Frédéric Chopin, Icelandic folk traditions, and Björk Guðmundsdóttir. This music features “twin themes”, one representing each sister, which weave together to portray their childhood, unravel after their father’s tragic death at sea, are explored independently during their lives of separation, and are once more entwined upon their reunion in Reykjavik after 50 years apart. Together, at the age of 66, they published their first written work *Ljóðmæli* (Poems) to much acclaim.” — program notes by Theresa Thordarson

Are you rising from your twilight slumber,  
O goddess of rhymes?  
Hover over your friends,

awaken them with your bright voice,  
let poetry's light and warmth  
stream throughout the world

- Ólína Andrésdóttir  
translated M.J. Driscoll

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The music of Mexican composer Manuel Ponce was one of the earliest fusions of traditional Mexican folk songs and European Classical music. This nationalistic piece borrows from two Mexican songs: the folk song “El durazno” and his own piece “Acuérdate de mí.” The two songs work together. In “El durazno,” a man is trying to gain the love of a woman, while “Acuérdate de mí” depicts the same man, heartbroken after losing his love.

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