Although it was Irish pianist-composer John Field, who created the form “nocturne,” it was Chopin who realized its fullest possibilities as a medium of expressing some of his most sensitive and poetic thoughts. “They have,” wrote James Huneker of the Chopin nocturnes, “the exotic savor of the heated conservatory, not the fresh scent of the flowers grown in the open by the less poetic John Field... Chopin loved the night and its starry mysteries; his nocturnes are truly night pieces, some wearing an agitated, remorseful countenance; others seen in profile only; while many are like whisperings at dusk — Verlaine moods.”

In this complete recording of the twenty-one nocturnes, Earl Wild has created a recital of these beautiful pieces rather than playing them in the usual chronological order. In this recording the nocturnes are organized according to mood, key and effect. The liner notes will follow Earl Wild’s recital order.

Disc 1

1. **Nocturne No.13 in C minor, Opus 48, No.1**
   is one of two nocturnes composed in 1841. They were published in January, 1842 and dedicated to Mlle. L. Duperré. This nocturne must be one of Chopin’s grandest works. Huneker calls it “the noblest Nocturne of them all. Biggest in conception, it seems a miniature music drama.” In his lectures on Chopin’s greatest works, Jean Kleczynski devotes several pages on how this Nocturne should be played. He writes: “This dignified and expressive work is very often played coldly and phrased colorlessly or falsely. Yet every note in this composition is full of meaning. I do not know if the legend be true that this Nocturne represents the contrition of a sinner. The reproaches of conscience are, according to this idea, followed in the middle part by heavenly harps and angelic choirs, and later on by a growing disquietude ending with death and a yearning flight to heaven.”

2. **Nocturne No.20 in C sharp minor, Opus Posthumous**
   was dedicated to his sister, Louise — it was said to be a study for his Piano Concerto No.2 in F minor and the song Zyczenie (Desire). It was composed in 1830 and published posthumously in Poznan in 1875. Musicologists claim that there is a high probability that Chopin never intended to publish it. We hear in this youthful and graceful nocturne, quotes of material he used in the 2nd concerto and in the song. A miniature mazurka can be heard suddenly sprouting forth in this work.
Nocturne No.5 in F sharp minor, Opus 15, No.2
was composed between 1830 and 1833, and published as part of a set of three nocturnes with a dedication to composer and friend, Ferdinand Hiller. Theodor Kullak remarks about the heavenly beauty of the melody which “touches one like a benediction.” Frederick Niecks in his book on Chopin writes, “The brightness and warmth of the world without have penetrated into the world within. The *fiorituri* flit about us lightly as gossamer threads. The sweetly-sad longing of the first section becomes more disquieting in the *doppio movimento*, but the beneficial influence of the sun never loses its power, and after a little there is a relapse into the calmer mood, with a close like the hazy distance on a summer day.”

Nocturne No.9 in B Major, Opus 32, No.1
was the first of two Opus 32 nocturnes composed between 1836 and 1837 and is marked *Andante sostenuto*. Jean Kleczynski believes it should be played as simply as an air by Mozart. Theodor Kullak remarks: “The Nocturne expresses feelings, such as awaken in quiet hours of solitude far from the noisy world, when one is absorbed in thought and reverie and dear familiar images arise in memory. The tender lyric mood continues to the *coda*. The latter is strangely and overpoweringly dramatic in effect. It is as if something coming from without (perhaps repeated strokes of the clock, or a rapping at the door) suddenly made an end of all reveries.” Huneker believes it to be the most important part of the piece: “It is in the minor, and is like the drum-beat of a tragedy. The entire ending, a stormy recitative, is in stern contrast to the dreamy beginning.”

Nocturne No.19 in E minor, Opus 72, No.1 (Posthumous)
is, despite the late Opus number, Chopin’s first nocturne. He composed it in 1827 while completing his studies at the Warsaw Lyceum. It was published posthumously in 1855 in Berlin. Although most musicologists dismiss this work as “youthful,” Niecks draws attention “to the wide-meshed chords and the light-winged flights of notes and the foreshadowing of the *coda* of Opus 9, No.1.” Although it is simple and melodious throughout, English musicologist, G. C. Ashton Jonson “would not willingly exchange it for the whole of Field’s works bound in full morocco!” Whatever its merits, Theodor Kullak writes that “a comparison of the first and last Nocturnes (Opus 62, No.2) will be interesting to the admirers of the great composer. *Ex ungue leonem!*”

Nocturne No.18 in E Major, Opus 62, No.2
was composed and published in 1846, and is Chopin’s last composition to be so titled. Many Chopin-lovers believe it to be one of his most personal. It is full of unexpected, and unprepared, modulations with a lingering pathos about the *coda*, as if Chopin was loth to end what he perhaps felt would be his last inspiration in this form.

Nocturne No.3 in B minor, Opus 9, No.3
is the least known of the three earliest published nocturnes. Dedicated to Mme. Camille Pleyel, it was composed between 1830 and 1831, and published in 1832. Both sinuous and suggestive, with a stormy middle
section, it has been described by Frederick Niecks as “impregnated with musk and other perfumes.” James Huneker agrees that the work is gracious and even coquettish, then adds the comment “it is a passionate intermezzo that has the true dramatic Chopin ring.”

8 Nocturne No.12 in G Major, Opus 37, No.2
is a lovely piece composed in 1839. Niecks finds in this work “a beautiful sensuousness, it is luscious, soft, rounded, and not without a certain degree of languor. But let us not tarry too long in the treacherous atmosphere of this Capua — it bewitches and unmans.” According to Eleonor d’Esterre-Keeling, the work was written in Majorca and Georges Sand’s diary describes the voyage there that might serve as a programme to the content. Sand writes: “The night was warm and dark, illumined only by an extraordinary phosphorescence in the wake of the ship; everybody was asleep on board except the steersman, who, in order to keep himself awake, sang all night, but in a voice so soft and so subdued that one might have thought that he feared to awake the men of the watch, or that he himself was half asleep. We did not weary of listening to him, for his singing was of the strangest kind. He observed a rhythm and modulation totally different from those we are accustomed to, and seemed to allow his voice to go at random, like the smoke of the vessel carried away and swayed by the breeze. It was a reverie rather than a song, a kind of careless floating of the voice, with which the mind had little to do, but which kept time with the swaying of the ship, the faint sound of the dark water, and resembled a vague improvisation, restrained nevertheless by sweet and monotonous forms.”

Eleonor d’Esterre-Keeling goes on to say: “Any one who plays the G major Nocturne after reading this passage will be struck by the singular likeness that the music bears to the written description of the scene. The swaying of the double notes over the undulating bass accompaniment, suggests the gliding motion of the vessel, while the richness of the harmonies carry out the idea of the brilliancy of the water scintillating with phosphorescent lights. Then comes the vague song of the steersman, rather a reverie than a song. The mind has indeed little to do here, but the pulse of the poet throbs through every note. The song dies away and the boat floats over the sea once more, then we hear the steersman again; this time he starts on a lower tone, and the melody is worked up chromatically to a truly Chopinesque climax; that done, to quote old Herrick, it sinks down again into a silvery strain, and makes us smooth as balm and oil again; then more repetition of the swaying motive, and as the vessel passes out of sight we hear in the dim distance the murmuring song of the steersman across the dark waters.” Huneker agrees: “In his Nocturne Chopin painted with a most ethereal brush. It is a true barcarolle...”

9 Nocturne No.10 in A flat Major, Opus 32, No.2
is dedicated to his pupil Madame la Baronesse de Billing and is very well-known to ballet-goers as the opening section of Les Sylphides, Fokine’s great ballet blanc. Completed and published in 1837, it’s a real night piece, quiet and flowing, mysterious and magical.
Nocturne No.8 in D flat Major, Opus 27, No.2,
composed in 1835, “exhibits,” according to Ashton Jonson, “all the sweetness, the refinement, the exquisite
ornamentation and the luscious melody of which Chopin was capable.” Huneker describes it as “a song of the
sweet summer of two souls, for there is obvious meaning in the duality of voices.” The exquisite duet is sung
throughout the work. The concluding bars have been described as sighs “with the truth stamped upon them
which rise in the air and lose themselves at the very gates of heaven.”

Nocturne No.1 in B flat minor, Opus 9, No.1
has a very dreamy nature. It’s full of long-phrased melodies, a rocking, arpeggiated bass with wide figurations,
and a contrasting middle section. It’s an astonishing and indicative composition. It was composed in 1831 and
published two years later. The mood of nocturnal calm is occasionally disturbed by sudden appasionato and con
forza segments, yet the spirit of coloratura chromatics reminiscent of arias by Rossini and Donizetti are
omnipresent. Chopin biographer, Herbert Weinstock, calls this Nocturne, “the music of a pale, amorous young
man, of puissant and unfulfilled sexuality, certainly of half-seen creatures moving by night!”

Nocturne No.6 in G minor, Opus 15, No.3
is a rather strange piece written in 1833. On the manuscript he wrote originally “After a performance of
Hamlet,” but on consideration he struck it out, saying: “No! let them guess for themselves.” The Nocturne is
one of the simplest of all nocturnes, with the barest of basses and long-held melody notes. The last section is
chorale-like, marked religioso. Niecks considers it the finest of the three Nocturnes forming Opus 15. “The
words languido e rubato describe well the wavering pensiveness of the first portion of the Nocturne, which find
its expression in the indecision of the melodic progressions, harmonies, and modulations. The second section
is marked religioso, and may be characterized as a trustful prayer, conducive to calm and comfort.” Ashton
Jonson, on the other hand, finds the allusion to Hamlet irresistible: “The first subject might be a reflection of
the mood in which Hamlet says:

“O God, O God,
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.”

The Nocturne halts and wavers; in it there are sighs, sobs, and protests, but after a feverish climax the music
dies down; and then three soft, bell-like notes usher in a beautiful enharmonic change, and there supervenes
with the second theme a mood of consolation and hope, of philosophy and resignation:

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will.”

There is no return to the first subject, there could not be, so true and deeply felt is the poetical emotion, that it
would not be musically possible.”
Chopin’s birthplace in Zelazowa Wola
“Nocturne is like a beautiful lyric poem created in a consecrated hour free from trouble.”

— Theodor Kullak (1818-1882) —

Disc 2

1 Nocturne No.14 in F sharp minor, Opus 48, No.2
is a soft elegiac piece composed in Paris in 1841. Frederick Niecks speaks of its tear-laden sweetness, while Charles Stanley calls it “salon-like, with its yearning melodic line broken by a declamatory middle section.” When Adolph Gutmann studied this work with Chopin, the master told him the middle section should be played as a recitative, “a tyrant commands” (the first two chords), he said, “and the other asks for mercy.”

2 Nocturne No.17 in B Major, Opus 62, No.1
was written in 1846, three years before his death, this Nocturne was called by Huneker the “Tuberose Nocturne.” “It is faint with a sick rich odor. The climbing trellis of notes, that so unexpectedly leads to the tonic, is charming, and the chief tune has charm, a fruity charm. It is highly ornate, its harmonies dense, the entire surface overrun with wild ornamentation, and a profusion of trills... Irregular as its outline is, its troubled lyricism is appealing, is melting, and the A flat portion with its hesitating, timid accents, has great power of attraction.”

3 Nocturne No.2 in E flat Major, Opus 9, No.2
is the most celebrated of all Chopin’s Nocturnes and, with the possible exception of the “Funeral March,” the best known of all his works. It is often referred to as “Chopin’s Nocturne” by those who are unaware that it is one of twenty-one compositions by him bearing this title. It is one of the shortest of the Nocturnes, written in a simple two-part song form, with a fascinating coda. One critic was reminded of Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” while another critic claimed that it is a poem of tender and devoted love, reminding him of one of the lines from Tennyson’s “Gardener’s Daughter,” when:

“All is heard, and Love’s white star
    Beamed through the thicken’d cedar in the dusk.
    • • •

Love at first sight, first born, and heir to all
Made the night thus.”

4 Nocturne No.15 in F minor, Opus 55, No.1
was written in 1843 and published the following year. It was dedicated to his Scotch student, Jane Wilhelmina Stirling. This is one of Chopin’s most popular Nocturnes. Fairly simple in structure, it is by nature almost an improvisation, as if the composer sat idly at the piano following the impulse of the moment, playing deliciously,
one exquisite harmony following another, paying no heed to the strict laws of musical form in their articulation or arrangement. The work is full of exquisite harmonic details, and in many respects is as beautiful and original as anything that Chopin had written. To Eduard Hanslick this Nocturne represented “a sadness which rises by different degrees to a cry of despair, and is then tranquilized by a feeling of hope.” Kullak, acting on this theory states: “We may be permitted to imagine a wanderer, who goes his way solitary and sad, after taking leave of his beloved home and all his dear ones.”

5 **Nocturne No.16 in E flat Major, Opus 55, No.2**
is rarely heard in concerts today. Written in 1843 and published in the next year, it’s one of the more unusual nocturnes in that it has no contrasting second section. Instead the melody flows onward from beginning to end in a uniform manner. Niecks points out that “One is seized by an ever-increasing longing to get out of this oppressive atmosphere, to feel the fresh breezes and warm sunshine, to see smiling faces, and the many-colored dress of Nature, to hear the rustling of leaves, the murmuring of streams and voices which have not yet lost the clear, sonorous ring that joy in the present and hope in the future impart.” The highly spiced chromatic harmonies and inner-voice writing perhaps compelled H. Barbedette in his treatise on Chopin of 1861 to call this Nocturne “un peu tourmenté.”

6 **Nocturne No.7 in C sharp minor, Opus 27, No.1**
is dedicated to Mme. la Comtesse d'Appony and was published in May of 1836. Huneker calls this Nocturne “the gloomiest and grandest of Chopin’s moody canvasses. Its middle section is Beethovenian in breadth.” Kullak speaks of it as ecclesiastic in coloring, and beneficent and conciliatory in effect. He finds in it a psychological resemblance to Meyerbeer's song “The Monk.” “The chief subject is gloomy in coloring; it is like the melancholy lament of one who is done with life.” Kleczynski is somewhat more melodramatic: “The Nocturne appears to be a description of a calm night in Venice, when, after a scene of murder, the sea closes over a corpse and continues to serve as a mirror to the moonlight!” The music is dramatic and moving, and Henry Finck, in writing of the work, says, “It embodies a greater variety of emotion and more genuine dramatic spirit in four pages than many operas in four hundred.”

7 **Nocturne No.4 in F Major, Opus 15, No.1**
was completed in 1831. A serene and tender *Andante* is followed by a stormy theme marked *con fuoco*, which, after waves of emotion, dies down into the opening theme, closing with two tender arpeggioed chords. Barbedette sees in it a calm and beautiful lake, ruffled by a sudden storm and becoming calm again. Kullak quotes from the poetry of Ossian, and says it is “like the dream of the hunter on the hill of heath; he sleeps in the mild beams of the sun; he awakes amidst a storm; the red lightning flies around; trees shake their heads to the wind! He looks back with joy on the day of the sun, and the pleasant dreams of his rest.”
Nocturne No.11 in G minor, Opus 37, No.1
was composed in the summer of 1838. Kleczynski suggests for it the title of “Heimweh” (or “Longing for Home”) and provides us a programme: “The poet weeps at the remembrance of his native soil, a remembrance which we perceive in the middle part of the piece in the form of a prayer played upon the organ of a country church. This prayer soothes the mind of the artist.” Moritz Karasowski, in his treatise on Chopin published in 1879, speaks of this Nocturne as “keeping up a ceaseless moan, as of harping on some sad thought, until interrupted by a church-like movement in chords, whose sadly comforting strains resemble the peacefulness of the grave.” According to another annotator, “Is it Chopin who yearns for his native land, who grieves for her distressful condition and who prays for her deliverance from the oppressor? There is consolation, a serene calm, in the beautiful chorale in the middle portion of the work but it cannot wholly obliterate the heart-ache, for the sadness and yearning of the earlier portions of the Nocturne soon return, and its longing and sweet melancholy continue to the end.”

Nocturne No.21 in C minor, Opus Posthumous
was written in 1837 and first published by the Society for the Publication of Polish Music in 1938. The manuscript is at the library of the Paris Conservatoire. Only forty-five measures long, it may have been intended as part of Opus 32. However, stylistically the work seems to be of an earlier period in Chopin’s creative life and some musicologists give the date of 1827. If this is the case, this Nocturne could have been written at about the same time as Opus 72, No.1, making it his earliest effort in the genre. It is simple and melodious, not as deep and penetrating as his other efforts, but unquestionably characteristically Chopin from first note to last.

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Thoughts on the Chopin Nocturnes by Earl Wild

Over the past 82 years, I’ve heard many of the world’s greatest pianists perform various Chopin Nocturnes in concert. A few of those great artists that come to mind are Rachmaninov, Hofmann, Paderewski, Petri and Lhevinne. The beauty of their playing proved to me the necessity of acquiring an abundance of technique and hopefully, an unfettered imagination.

It’s my wish that the listener will find in the interpretations I offer of these beautiful miniatures, a link to the romantic spirit and tradition of the past.

As we enter the 21st century, with its mobilized information technology, Chopin’s Nocturnes should offer great solace and inspiration to all.

Chopin in 1849 at age 39
Earl Wild Biography

Earl Wild is considered throughout the world as one of the last in a long line of great virtuoso pianist/composers. Born on November 26, 1915, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Wild began piano studies at the age of three. Before his twelfth birthday, he was accepted as a pupil of Selmar Janson, whose teachers were Xaver Scharwenka and Eugen d’Albert (who was a student of Franz Liszt). Mr. Wild went on to study with the great Dutch pianist, Egon Petri. While still in his teens, Wild played piano and celeste in the Pittsburgh Symphony under the baton of Otto Klemperer and Fritz Reiner. With his immense hands, absolute pitch, graceful stage presence, and an uncanny facility as a sight-reader and improviser, Earl Wild was well equipped for his lifelong career in music.

In 1937, he joined the NBC network as staff pianist and performed in the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. Two years later, when NBC began to transmit telecasts, Wild was the first artist to perform a piano recital on U.S. television. In 1942, Toscanini made Earl Wild a household name when he invited him to be the soloist in Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue. While serving in the Navy during World War II, Wild performed at the White House and frequently played the National Anthem as a prelude to the speeches by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Wild has had the unequaled honor of having performed for six consecutive Presidents of the United States, beginning with Herbert Hoover.

In addition to his distinguished concert career, which encompasses performances with conductors such as Stokowski, Reiner, Maazel, Solti and Mitropoulos, and artists like Callas, Tourel, Pons, Melchior, Peerce and Bumbry, Wild successfully shines as both a conductor and composer. His Easter oratorio, Revelations, was broadcast by the ABC network in 1962 and again in 1964, with Mr. Wild as conductor. Wild’s most recent composition, Variations on a Theme of Stephen Foster for piano and orchestra (“Doo-Dah” Variations), premiered with Wild as soloist with the Des Moines Symphony Orchestra in 1992. His recording, Earl Wild — The Romantic Master — 13 Virtuoso Piano Transcriptions (released on the SONY Classical label), received the 1996 Grammy® Award as “Best Instrumental Performance (without Orchestra).”

Credits

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The drawing room of Chopin's apartment in Square D’Orléans, where he moved in 1842.

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