



[Mazurka - Remaking Chopin](#)

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If the presence of a Gypsy band on this CD leads you to expect to hear Chopin's tunes interpreted in a traditional Gypsy manner, you will be sorely disappointed. What we have here is Chopin meets the young Penderecki. It's a case of what Chopin would have written had he heard the Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima. A useful comparison might be with Hans Zender's reworking of Schubert's Winterreise for tenor and orchestra. There Zender uses avant-garde techniques to render the work as shocking for modern listeners as Schubert's original was in 1828. However, I do not find Remaking Chopin shocking. In fact it contains playing of great warmth. A more useful comparison might be with a klezmer ensemble playing modern jazz. That Chopin's mazurkas are based on folk dances makes it appropriate to reinterpret them using a folk ensemble. It's a means for analyzing the roots of the music. As this particular Gypsy orchestra is influenced by the 1960s European avant-garde, Chopin becomes the conduit of something that transcends his time and place.

Of all Chopin's works, the mazurkas are the ones least bound by the formalities of the time at which they were composed. Their rhythms and the shapes of their melodies are as much ethnomusicology as the style galant. They are a precursor of Bartók's research into folk music, which left such an imprint on his works. The musicians on Remaking Chopin at times deconstruct the mazurkas to create something quite different and intriguing. Sometimes they play just snatches of a mazurka, or beat out its rhythm with their feet. Occasionally a chord of Chopin is enveloped in an acoustic haze reminiscent of Ligeti's Atmospheres. Every so often Chopin's melodies are played straightforwardly by the piano or the gritty Stroh violin, although in the context of what's going on elsewhere, Chopin's tunes now sound daring and alcohol-soaked. Nils Henrik Asheim plays a restored Collard & Collard piano from around 1820, which sounds more like a folk instrument than the modern Steinway does. When the last of these mazurkas is performed as a duet for piano and cimbalom, it is like a synthesis of all that has gone before—an object lesson in the duality of the mazurkas as salon pieces and authentic folk culture. In a similar vein, Wanda Landowska recorded a mazurka on the harpsichord, emphasizing the antiquity of these dances.

The sound engineering on the CD is clear and full. I would have loved to hear an analog mix of this music on LP. Remaking Chopin is very much what it says it is. It belongs to a tradition that includes Jacques Loussier's Play Bach jazz albums, although Remaking Chopin is considerably more daring. In a sense it is music about music, giving us insight into the universality of what Chopin tapped into. I can't recommend it to the casual Chopin lover, who might find it bewildering or upsetting. But if you are unafraid of the European avant-garde, Remaking Chopin will bring you nearer to the truth of what Chopin accomplished. The mazurkas are truly not just of an age, but belong to every age. Dave Saemann

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