

EMIL GRYESTEN

CHOPIN: 24 Préludes & Sonata No.2

CON FUOCO RECORDS is releasing the new album by concert pianist **EMIL GRYESTEN**, featuring **Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28**, and the **Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35**, performed on a beautiful **Érard piano** from 1837.

The recording was captured using twelve high-quality omnidirectional microphones arranged in a cubic array, offering a highly immersive and natural representation of the Concert Hall of **The Royal Danish Academy of Music**.

The album will be available on all major digital streaming platforms in **stereophonic sound**, and in **Dolby Atmos** immersive sound on selected ones.

In the following essay, pianist Emil Gryesten offers deeper insight into the concept behind the recording project.

A CONVERGENCE OF INSPIRATIONS

By Emil Gryesten

This album is dedicated to the memory of Fou Ts'ong (1934–2020).

This recording is born of a convergence: a remarkable historical instrument, inspiration from an exceptional mentor, and a long, evolving relationship with these two works by Chopin.

The piano is an Érard grand, built in Paris in 1837—the very year Chopin was composing the Préludes and the Sonata. I encountered it when I began teaching at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, Copenhagen, in 2017, and I fell in love with it immediately. I dreamt of moving it into the concert hall of the old Radio House—now home to the Academy—where its voice could bloom in full. The inspiration for this recording begins there.

The tone of the Érard is extraordinarily beautiful—tender, fragile, and finely shaped. Its sustaining power is far from that of a modern grand: the sounds flash into existence and vanish. Each tone is a unique pearl—self-contained and distinct in character. The sensuality of the touch is not just tactile, but imaginative: it opens a space between the fingers and the sound, and between the present and the past.

My fascination with the instrument's material presence is also bound to its origins. The ivory from which the white keys are made would have been taken from an elephant that likely lived in the early 19th century on the African savannah. European traders would have travelled south to hunt the animal, then brought its tusks up the Nile and across the Mediterranean to Paris, where they were crafted into the surface I now touch. That awareness—that I am literally placing my fingers on the tooth of a long-dead elephant, transported across continents to serve the making of music—is a small part of what makes the tactile experience so rich. The beauty of the woodwork and decorative inlays of the piano case is beyond words. This piano is not merely an artifact of 1837 Paris; it is a node in a far

longer and more complex material history.

This also resonates with an idea in the philosophy of Graham Harman, whose *object-oriented ontology* (a popular set of ideas within the realm of artistic research today) describes the “charm” of certain objects—their capacity to radiate meaning across time and space, to act as portals not only to the past, but to imaginary worlds. Playing this instrument, I feel I’m in dialogue with something that is both material and metaphysical.

I first learned the *Préludes* and the *Sonata* as a teenager, and while my interpretations have since evolved, some early impressions have remained. When I was studying the opening movement of the *Sonata*, I imagined the principal theme as evoking the *Nazgûl* from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*—faceless, ghostlike riders moving swiftly through the dark. The association was youthful and naive, but it captured something of the music’s atmosphere—driven, spectral, and unrelenting. In the *Funeral March*, I sensed a stark ceremonial presence, while the middle section opened into something wholly other: a vision of the silence of the afterlife, or perhaps a stillness beyond grief—pointing toward a kind of nirvana beyond our world. These early images still live beneath the surface of my interpretation. They marked the beginning of a decade-long evolution of my engagement with these compositions.

Years later, while studying at the International Piano Academy Lake Como, I played the *Préludes* for Fou Ts’ong. When I told him I would be performing them in his masterclass, he said, “Ah, well then we need at least three hours.” The lesson in fact lasted five—interrupted only once by a brief toilet break. In a later lesson on the *Fourth Ballade*, I asked him about the use of rubato when interpreting Chopin. I had heard conflicting advice—some urging restraint, others endorsing freedom—and I wanted his view. He replied, with a slight smile: “There is the way of Toscanini, and there is the way of Furtwängler... often, I do find the way of Furtwängler more interesting!”

The remark was characteristic. Fou Ts’ong had a way of speaking in paradoxes—setting up oppositions not to resolve them, but to let them resonate. He often thought in terms of contrast and tension. His musical thinking, shaped by Chinese philosophical traditions, resisted fixed categories. His Toscanini–Furtwängler distinction was not about choosing one or the other, but about understanding the expressive stakes in each approach.

In the current album, I’ve adopted this polarity as a guiding strategy in my approach to the two works. The *Sonata*, with its large-scale architecture, demands a certain structural discipline. I’ve aimed to maintain continuity of tempo, proportion in dynamics, and a sense of long-range coherence—what Fou Ts’ong might have called “the way of Toscanini.” The *Préludes*, by contrast, require something else. Each prelude, however short, must emerge as a self-contained musical universe. Here, I’ve allowed myself far greater rhythmic flexibility, color, and expressive range—searching for something like “the way of Furtwängler.” In this sense, the two works call for different modes of imaginative attention, and I’ve tried to let those modes remain distinct.

The *Sonata* in B-flat minor, composed between 1837 and 1839, resists easy integration. Robert Schumann (1810–1856) described it as “four of Chopin’s wildest children” placed side by side, and famously likened the last movement to “a wind passing over the graves.” The finale, consisting throughout of rapid, soft unison octaves with no clear destination, offers little in the way of conclusion, remaining one of the most mysterious riddles of the Romantic repertoire. The work as a whole moves between cohesion and rupture, gesture and disappearance. I have tried not to smooth over its discontinuities, allowing this album to hold the paradox of two opposing interpretative strategies.





EMIL GRYESTEN

Classical pianist Emil Gryesten, a native of Aarhus, Denmark, has performed across Europe, Asia, and the United States, and has received numerous accolades, including first prizes at the Steinway Competition in Hamburg and the Nordic Piano Competition in Malmö. His discography includes eight CD recordings, and he has produced a number of recordings for the Danish National Broadcasting Corporation (DR). In 2018, he gave his debut recital at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Emil holds degrees from the Royal Danish Academy of Music and the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, and pursued advanced studies at the International Piano Academy in Como, Italy.

Since 2017, he has taught piano and chamber music at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, where he currently serves as Assistant Professor. Alongside his teaching, Emil is also a PhD researcher at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, Belgium, in collaboration with the Royal Danish Academy of Music and the University of Antwerp.

RECORDING TECHNIQUE

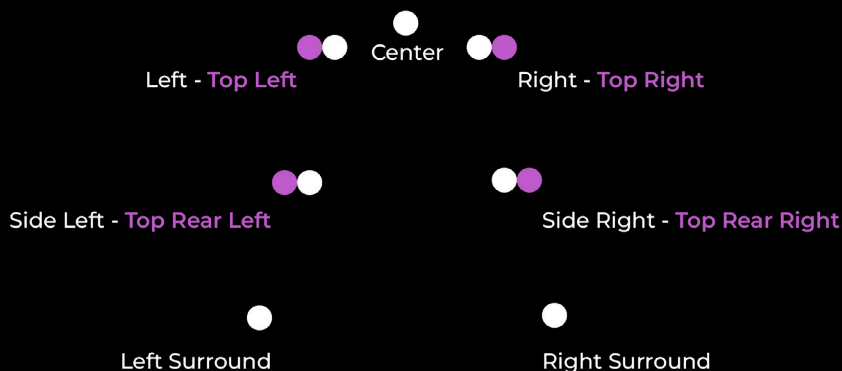
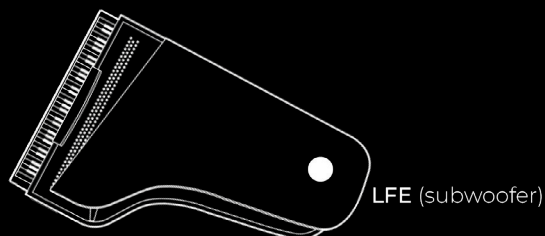
The album has been mastered in both **stereophonic** and **7.1.4 multichannel sound** (in *Dolby Atmos* format), the latter available on supported digital streaming services. A **cubic array** of twelve omnidirectional microphones was placed approximately 2.5 meters from the piano—eight forming the **lower layer** and four the **height layer**. The piano used for the recording, being a historic instrument, has significantly less volume and brightness compared to a modern grand piano. These characteristics, together with the warm acoustics of the concert hall at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, create an intimate and immersive listening experience.

To me, the 24 Préludes, composed around the same time, form the darkest work in all of Chopin's output. The major-key pieces often pass like breath or shadow—barely stable enough to catch, painfully short moments of relief. The minor-key ones carry more weight and ultimately dominate the fragile glimpses of light. For me, the emotional axis of the cycle lies in the middle section of the fifteenth prelude—the so-called "Raindrop." (I find that the repeated notes signify something more like tolling bells than raindrops.) At the very end, in the final prelude in D minor, the bells return with the last three notes, confirming the arrival in a very dark place.

This recording brings together a remarkable historical instrument, the influence of an extraordinary teacher, and two works I have lived with for many years. These elements do not merge into a single interpretative direction. Rather, they remain distinct, at times even contradictory—but in that friction, something opens. I've tried not to resolve these tensions, but to let them resonate, and to listen through them.

● TOP LAYER

● LOWER LAYER



TRACKLIST

Frédéric Chopin

24 Préludes, Op. 28 (1837-1838)

1	Prélude No. 1 in C Major	00:42	14	Prélude No. 14 in E-Flat Minor	00:30
2	Prélude No. 2 in A Minor	02:07	15	Prélude No. 15 in D-Flat Major	05:13
3	Prélude No. 3 in G Major	00:59	16	Prélude No. 16 in B-Flat Minor	01:11
4	Prélude No. 4 in E Minor	01:55	17	Prélude No. 17 in A-Flat Major	03:30
5	Prélude No. 5 in D Major	00:36	18	Prélude No. 18 in F Minor	00:56
6	Prélude No. 6 in B Minor	01:52	19	Prélude No. 19 in E-Flat Major	01:28
7	Prélude No. 7 in A Major	00:49	20	Prélude No. 20 in C Minor	02:00
8	Prélude No. 8 in F-Sharp Minor	01:56	21	Prélude No. 21 in B-Flat Major	02:02
9	Prélude No. 9 in E Major	01:11	22	Prélude No. 22 in G Minor	00:42
10	Prélude No. 10 in C-Sharp Minor	00:37	23	Prélude No. 23 in F Major	01:02
11	Prélude No. 11 in B Major	00:36	24	Prélude No. 24 in D Minor	02:20
12	Prélude No. 12 in G-Sharp Minor	01:14			
13	Prélude No. 13 in F-Sharp Major	03:01			

Frédéric Chopin

Sonata No. 2, Op. 35 in B-Flat Minor (1837-1839)

25	Grave - Doppio movimento	07:32
26	Scherzo	06:08
27	Marche funèbre. Lento	08:51
28	Finale. Presto	01:39

Recorded at the Concert Hall of The Royal Danish Academy of Music, July 8–12, 2024.

Piano: Érard piano, year 1837

