FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
Waltz in E-flat major, Op. 18, Grande valse brilliante
Born: Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, March 1, 1810
Died: Paris, October 17, 1849
Work composed: 1831

Chopin’s waltzes compliment his nocturnes in musical character. In general, this dance brought from the composer a more robust and outgoing type of music, with sparkle and rhythmic momentum not so much replacing as augmenting the quiet dreaminess that is the signature trait of the nocturnes. It is worth noting that Chopin regarded his waltzes as concert music rather than ballroom fare. Robert Schumann, an active and astute music critic as well as a composer, concurred. “These are waltzes for the soul, not the body,” Schumann wrote of some of Chopin’s early works of this kind.

Chopin published 14 waltzes during his lifetime. (Several others appeared posthumously.) The first, written in 1831, was issued as his “Opus 18.” Chopin titled this work “Grand valse brilliante.” It is indeed both large and brilliant. Formally, it unfolds in a series of distinct sections, each of which seems to flow organically out of what has preceded it. Chopin begins with a brief fanfare motif built on repetitions of a single pitch, and extensions of this idea, in the form of quick repeated-note figures, run throughout the piece binding together its various episodes. The music sparkles in a manner that requires both agility and lightness of touch. This is not easily achieved, but it produces an almost intoxicating effect in the hands of capable performer.

What to Listen For
In the Grande valse brilliante, notice how repeated-note figures, which grow out of the very first measures, recur in different forms in the several sections of the composition.

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