

Fall 1972

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Terry Miller
Ouachita Baptist University

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FREDERIC CHOPIN

HONORS SPECIAL STUDY

Terry Miller
Fall 1972

Frederic Chopin was born in Zelazowa Wola, Warsaw on February 22, 1810. He was brought up in a private school among sons of Polish nobility. His musical education was entrusted to the Bohemian pianist Albert Zwyny and the Director of the Warsaw School of Music, Joseph Elsner. At the age of seven he played a piano concerto by Gyrowetz, and improvisations in public. His first attempts in composition were dances (Polonaises, Mazurkas and Waltzes), but he published as Opus 1 a Rondo, and as Opus 2 variations on "La ci darem la mano", with orchestra.

While a youth, Chopin travelled in Europe visiting Danzig, Dresden, Leipzig, and Prague. In 1829, already a composer of eminent individuality and a finished performer, he set out for Vienna, Munich, and Paris. His concert in Vienna, on September 11, 1829, elicited high praise. His first concert in Paris was given at Pleyel's house, before an invited audience of musicians, in 1831. His reception was so cordial that he made Paris his home for life. He was destined never to revisit Poland.

Chopin made a deep and lasting impression not merely on gay Parisian society, of which he soon became the declared favorite, but on men like Liszt, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Bellini, Adolphe Nourrit, Balzac, and Heine, to whose intimacy he was admitted as a cherished and equal companion.

From the beginning he taught the piano; his instruction was eagerly sought, chiefly by members of the French and Polish aristocracy. The most remarkable of his students, and the only one to give promise of a spectacular career, was Charles Filscht, who died at the age of fifteen. Liszt heard this young boy, and remarked to

de Lenz, who tells the story, "When that child starts touring I shall shut up shop."

Apart from Filscht, Chopin's pupils were mediocrities - - - mostly aristocratic young ladies, none of whom made their mark or were able to pass on a positive tradition embodying anything that mattered: tempo, phrasing, pedalling, general dynamics - in a word: style. These students were remembered for being conscientious teachers rather than performers with outstanding ability.

The factual details of the background of Chopin's career are not to be disputed. His legendary reputation as a pianist was, for his whole life, based on a mere thirty or so genuinely public appearances. The greater number of these were given without any sort of monetary reward and in no way enhanced his reputation as an artist. His largest single audience was one of twelve hundred at a concert in Manchester, and not more than about six hundred persons, mostly aristocratic music-lovers, heard him during the last ten years of his life in France.

Seeing that the number of concerts Chopin gave was surprisingly few, and taking into account the fact that his reputation was rivaled only by the spectacular fame of Liszt and Thalberg, one wonders what the secret of Chopin's success was.

Chopin's brilliant reputation and widespread fame are probably due to the limitation of his audience to a small aristocratic circle of friends. Without the aid of high pressure publicity, an understanding was gradually established - a kind of "confidential" fame which circulated among the chosen few. "One does not merely love him; one loves oneself in him," remarked one of the regular visitors

to the happy musical gatherings that resulted from this mutual understanding.

Chopin's uncompromising attitude was all that was needed to excite the curiosity of that larger circle, which is always interested in the current opinions of the aristocracy.

There are two available reasons why Chopin might have reserved his art for the select few. First, he had an unconquerable aversion to miscellaneous concert-giving. Chopin once admitted that he felt apprehension at the mere idea of appearing on a platform. Second, his special qualities were not appreciated by the general public at the time. His approach and manner of playing were altogether different than what the public was accustomed to hearing. In writing of his concerts, Chopin gave a completely honest account of his playing: "Too feeble, or rather too delicate for those who are accustomed not only to hear, but also to see the artists who play here, almost bang their pianos to bits."

Chopin's playing was the counterpart of his personality. Every characteristic which may be distinguished in the man came out in the pianist - the same precision; the horror of excess and all that is "sloppy" and uncontrolled; the same good manners and high tone of breeding, combined with poetic warmth and a romantic fervor of expression. No one had heard such polished playing, although others could make a more overwhelming impression by their rush and violence.

Chopin's compositions took precedence over all else in the pianistic world. In 1839, Schumann wrote, reviewing some of Chopin's preludes, mazurkas, and waltzes: "He is the boldest and proudest poetic spirit of the time".

His position, both in society and the world of art, was 4
assured; the devotion of his pupils and admirers bordered
on fanaticism. The Paris critics found a Shakespearean
epithet for him: "the Ariel of the piano".

In 1837 Liszt introduced Chopin to George Sand
(Mme. Dudevant). Their mutual attachment formed an episode
eventually most painful for the refined and sensitive artist,
who was dominated by this coarse-fibred woman of the world.
A severe attack of bronchitis in the autumn of 1838 overturned
his usually normal health, and led Chopin to spend the ensuing
winter in Majorca with Mme. Dudevant. She appeared to have
nursed him quite tenderly, but after Chopin's malady had
developed into consumption, they parted (1847). Disregarding
his failing health, Chopin visited Great Britain in 1848 and
remained there seven months, giving concerts and accepting
invitations which exhausted his remaining energies. He
finally returned to Paris, and after his death on October
17, 1849, was buried at Pere Lachaise.

Chopin's music testifies to three historical
"Backgrounds". The first background is not national but
international - that of public concert rooms from Vienna to
Edinburgh. In these, the composer-pianist proved his calibre
by performing and directing piano concertos. From this
background Chopin recoiled very early, as we have seen.
When he played in salons and to an elite, his style was
utterly unlike that of the popular concert-hall virtuoso.
His concertos were not rivals to other concertos.

The second background is that of Poland, more
specifically the educated and national-conscious society of
Warsaw. To it belong the polonaises, mazurkas, and the rarely
heard songs.

The third background is Paris and her salons, Chopin's own elegant rooms and those of his friends. To it belong the waltzes and nocturnes. To this background also belong the studies, scherzos, and preludes. They are produce of an age and society associated chiefly with Paris.

The Polonaise was a form into which Chopin could most easily pour his musical personality and instrumental virtuosity. A polonaise is a Polish national dance of a stately and festive character. The music is always in moderate triple meter. The polonaise is not a folk dance, but was developed from courtly ceremonies and processions. The Polonaises enshrine the memories of past splendours and heroism. In them Chopin achieves a combination of noble energy and expressive pathos fitting his lofty theme. Chopin wrote 15 polonaises.

The mazurka was also a Polish national dance, in triple meter and moderate speed, frequently with strong accents on the second or third beat. Chopin was the first to introduce the mazurka into the realm of art music. Most of Chopin's mazurkas cannot be traced to a single, definite folk-model, but arise from a composite recollection of certain types of melodies and rhythms. Chopin's mazurkas reflect with infinite variety the less strenuous, homely aspects of the Polish scene. Chopin published 41 mazurkas during his lifetime.

Chopin's four ballades occupy a unique position in his output, and in music. They do not all belong to the same period of his life, the first appearing in 1836 and the last in 1843. Chopin used the term ballade for piano pieces written in the ternary form ABA of the 19th century

character piece. Here the highly dramatic character of A and the lyrical character of B seem to portray heroic deeds and knightly love, thus justifying the title Ballade.

Chopin has employed the term Scherzo for independent pieces in which sections of a highly dramatic and somewhat gloomy character (scherzo) alternate with others of a more lyrical expression (trio). The trio is a second minuet introduced by way of contrast before the first is repeated. The more expanded the piece becomes, and the weightier the material it sets forth, the greater, usually, is the contrast which seems to be demanded. With his scherzos Chopin presented us a family group of four.

Perhaps the scherzos do not display the richness of Chopin's genius quite as fully as do the ballades, but they are magnificent compositions, and bear a wonderful testimony to the uniqueness of his creative art.

The Fantasy is one of Chopin's very finest compositions, in the richness of its ideas and the breadth with which it is set forth.

Beyond the fact that it comes from Venice, little seems to be known about the barcarolle in its original form. The word means "Boat-song", but there is no evidence that it derives from any form of folk-music: it is more likely that it was simply a type of popular song with which the gondoliers of former times regaled their customers. Chopin wrote only one Barcarolle, but it has long been a favorite, and remains one of his most popular and effective works.

The ballades, scherzos, the "Fantasie" in F minor and the "Barcarolle", Chopin's most extended works in forms wholly elaborated by himself, show his unique qualities at

their best. They reveal his perfect understanding of the nature of the piano, his gift for conceiving melodies which are inseparable from the instrument and for weaving a rich and many-voiced texture of sound, and his capacity for creating on his own lines musical structures which make their mark first by their absolute musical qualities, secondly by their emotional impact, and least of all by any "title" or romantic programme that can be attached to them. It is here that Chopin is original and masterly.

The name nocturne is employed for Romantic character pieces, written in a somewhat melancholy or languid style, with an expressive melody over a broken-chord accompaniment. The first nocturnes were written by the Irishman John Field from whom Chopin adopted the idea and the name.

Though the nocturnes cannot be said to occupy as important a place among Chopin's works as do the preludes and the studies, they are in no sense minor compositions. As with the mazurkas, one feels that in them he was less concerned with pianistic considerations, and more with his most intimate thoughts and feelings. It is clear that they derive in great measure from his very personal style of playing. Though by all accounts he was capable of astonishing virtuosity, it was always the poetic quality of his playing that made the deepest impression. It was thought too intimate for large concert halls, and better suited to a more restricted audience. The nocturnes therefore correspond to a very individual feeling for the piano.

In many ways Chopin's studies and preludes are the most permanently significant of all his works. From the

point of view of sheer harmonic and melodic originality, the large-scale works like the ballades, the two great sonatas, the Fantasy, the Polonaise-Fantasia, and the Barcarolle may in their best moments move and astonish us to a greater degree. There is hardly any section of his work that does not contain passages of piano-writing that still dazzle us today by their ingenuity and by the profound understanding shown of the possibilities of the instrument. Yet, what can be said is that in the studies and preludes, there is a consistently high degree of integration and fusion of musical content, form, style, and technical exploitation of the instrument.

The essential character of a study (and in many ways a prelude is much the same thing) is that it is short, embodying one principal technical problem and homogeneous in texture and musical character. The studies and preludes, with the exception of the Prelude in C sharp minor, were all written between 1829 and 1839. Chopin lived for another ten years, but he wrote no further works designed to illustrate particular aspects of piano technique. Chopin wrote twelve studies. — *in two separate opuses (24) plus three others.*

Chopin used the word prelude merely as one of the numerous noncommittal titles of Romantic piano pieces. The "disconnected" prelude is represented by the preludes of Chopin and those of his numerous imitators. These are pianistic character pieces, usually based on a short figure or motive which is exploited by means of harmonic modulations.

The preludes present no obvious technical problems, except in the sense that real legato playing is always in itself a problem. These pieces are pure lyrics; it is really these balanced contrasts between the lyrical and dramatic

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elements and the imaginative exploitation of the technique of the instrument that give the preludes their special character as a summing-up of nearly every aspect of Chopin's many sided genius. Chopin wrote 24 Preludes.

In his waltzes Chopin's models were the more civilized ballroom and court dances of his age. A waltz is a dance in moderate triple time which originated around 1800. Of the Chopin Waltzes it has been said that they are "dances of the soul and not of the body."

Chopin's studies, nocturnes, preludes and waltzes are distinguished by a happy concord between their dimension, form and musical content. They are full of careful workmanship, even where (as in some of the nocturnes and waltzes) the actual musical material is of slight ~~slight~~ significance.

The Impromptus, of which there are four, are not among Chopin's most important works. With all the freedom of an improvisation, the Chopin impromptu has a well defined form. There is structural impulse, although the patterns are free and original. The mood isn't varied in the first, third and fourth impromptus, but in the second there is a ballade-like quality that hints of the tragic.

There are definite thematic links between them. It would be interesting to know how far Chopin was aware of these resemblances, which have often been pointed out. All four impromptus are basically in ternary form. (ABA)

That Chopin wrote songs, though an unfamiliar fact, is not a surprising one. The song was a natural field for a composer whose gifts were suited to small, essentially poetic compositions.

The special genius of Chopin's piano music is the way it seems to grow out of the very nature of the instrument.

The same cannot be claimed for his vocal music; but the songs, though not fully exploiting the technical resources of a first-class singer, are all written for the voice.

Chopin's "Miscellaneous" works fall into three categories: works for piano and orchestra, chamber music works and works for piano solo. Most of them are early works, written before Chopin decided to confine himself almost entirely to writing for piano alone, but some were written late in his life, and even the early works include many of great interest. Chopin matured very early as a composer. He was composing from the age of seven onwards, and many of the works written in his teens already show surprising accomplishment.

In the small forms he chose, there lies a world of originality in constructive ingenuity, in melody and melodic ornament, in harmonic progressions and arpeggiated figuration; a world of national melancholy or voluptuous sentiment and poetic reverie.

His playing was notable for flawless accuracy and remarkable brilliancy of technique, sensuous charm in touch and tone, and a peculiar flexibility in the tempo (rubato) which was at times almost exaggerated. It has been said that Chopin was not only the most music-minded of pianists, he was also the most exceptionally keyboard-minded of all composers.

Chopin represents the full liberation of the pianoforte from traditional orchestral and choral influences. The piano now assumes a place as a solo instrument. Chopin's music, as none before, breathes the piano-spirit, incarnates the piano-soul, revels in the pure piano-tone, and illustrates the intrinsic piano-style, without seeking orchestral effect, tonal or technical.

His works mark a boundary in piano effect which has never been surpassed.

The imperious craving for perfection dominated and tormented Chopin's whole life. He could be satisfied with nothing less, whether in composition or playing, love or friendship, clothes, manners, taste . . . everything. And when, in love and friendship, his exacting demands could not be met, in an imperfect world among imperfect people, Chopin would retreat, disillusioned, into himself, and let his music receive what he had failed to give away. All in all, Chopin was a remarkably self-centered "composer-pianist".

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