

CHOPIN IN MAJORCA

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JOSÉ CARLOS LLOP CARRATALÀ AUTHOR



We are in Palma, amongst palms, cedars, aloes, oranges, lemons, figs and pomegranates, trees which the *Jardin des Plantes* only possesses thanks to its heating", wrote Chopin to his friend Fontana on 15th November 1838. "The sun shines all day", he went on, "and the people dress as in summer, because it is hot. At night, for hours on end, one hears singing and the sound of guitars. The houses have enormous balconies from which vine-leaves hang, and

their walls date back to the time of the Arabs... The city, like everything here, reminds one of Africa... In a word, a delicious life!... We are close to that which is most beautiful in this world, I am a better man."

Frederic Chopin had arrived in Majorca a week before, on board the *El Mallorca*, a steamboat used to transport pigs, with his lover George Sand and her children, Maurice and Solange. Maurice's health forced the writer to travel to

warmer climates. Chopin left Paris behind and followed his companion in the hope of improving his health, which was also delicate. This departure from the Paris *salons* should have provided them with the ideal setting for their romance; in fact, they were to live the sunset of their passion: he, sunk in his own anguish; she, overwhelmed by the obsessions of her "patient". During the following weeks, Chopin's letters to Fontana were to adopt a gloomy tone, as a

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system consists of a treble clef staff with a melodic line featuring a triplet of eighth notes and a bass clef staff with a simple accompaniment. The second system continues the piece with similar notation. Both systems include dynamic markings like 'Ped.' and '*' below the bass staff.

result of his departure from the island and the changes that were to take place in his relationship with Sand, already a thing of the past, or worse, "a very maternal adoration" on her part. Years later, in *L'Histoire de ma vie*, George Sand wrote, "Our stay in the Carthusian Monastery of Valldemosa was torture for him and a torment for me. Friendly, jolly, charming in society, the sick Chopin was unbearable in strict privacy".

On their arrival in Majorca, a state of war had been declared on the island. Carlists and Liberals were fighting each other in the north of Spain. At that time, there were almost twenty thousand refugees from the civil war in Palma. In his correspondence, Chopin passed over these details, so far from his own worries. Still enjoying a period of sentimental splendour in the company of Sand, there were only two questions that really bothered him: his own health and the difficulty involved in getting hold of a piano that Pleyel had sent him from Paris and whose delivery had been held up. "I dream of music", he wrote to him, "but I cannot play, because there are no pianos here. This is a very savage country in this respect." At the end of November, he had another attack of tuberculosis and was racked by fever. In spite of everything, once over the crisis, he wrote to Fontana in an ironic vein: "For the last three weeks I have

been as sick as a cur, in spite of a temperature of eighteen degrees, in spite of the roses, the orange-trees, the palms and the fig-trees in blossom. I have been very cold. The three best doctors on the island got together to treat me. One sniffed my expectorations, the other percussed the place from which the expectoration had emerged; the third listened to my chest while I expectorated. The first told me I was going to die, the second that I was dying and the third that I was already dead."

At the end of December, they left the city and moved into a cell in the Carthusian Monastery of Valldemosa, expropriated under the Mendizábal Law and the property of various private individuals. There he got hold of a Majorcan upright piano and some days later the much longed-for Pleyel arrived. He composed the *Prelude* no. 6 in B minor, the *Ballad* in F major op. 38, the *Scherzo* in C sharp minor op. 39, the two *Polonaises* in A major and C minor op. 39, the *Mazurka* in E minor op. 41 no. 2 and the first draughts for the *Sonata* in B flat op. 35 and the two *Nocturnes* op. 37. To Fontana he was to write: "Imagine me without white gloves, with my hair uncurled, as pale as ever. My cell is shaped like a coffin... The work of Bach, my manuscripts, my notes and a few other scraps of paper —this is all I own. Tranquility

reigns; one can shout very loud without anyone hearing. In a word, I am writing from a very strange place."

In this "very strange place", Chopin lived his nostalgia for the worldly pleasures of Paris, suffered the frustration of his love and experienced fear. An intense fear, like the mist that falls on Valldemosa after nightfall, which was to inspire him to write some of his greatest work. Between his gloomy melancholy and his continual attacks of coughing, there were moments when he recognized neither Sand nor her children. On one occasion, he imagined them all killed by a storm, the same as him. On other days, he barely left the cell, believing that the ghosts of the dead monks were waiting for him in the passages. Nevertheless, between fits of delirium, Chopin found time to organize the sale of his originals from the monastery, thus showing himself to be an implacable businessman—one of those paradoxes of Romanticism. George Sand, torn between revenge and sorrow, kept a minute record of the Polish musician's horror and despair. On 12th February 1839 they left Valldemosa, and took a ship from Palma to Barcelona the next day. From Barcelona they set sail for Marseilles. The fatigue of their reclusion had not allowed them to see the winter out on the island but it was to leave an indelible mark on the lives of the two artists. ■