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FRYDERYK CHOPIN

THE MAN AND THE INNOVATOR

A lot has been written about Chopin and throughout the ages the strong emotional drive incidental to his pieces contributed to create in the collective imaginary an often distorted image about this composer, making of him at times a wisplike and bashful dandy, with a too delicate sensitivity to be actively involved in worldly matters, unable to face the «real» world and therefore constantly «self-secluded» between the walls of a high society's comfortable salon or, metaphorically, between the more suggestive walls of his own musical world. If it's true that these grotesque deformations rest in some measure upon actual traits of the artist's personality and biographical sketch, one has to admit, on the other hand, that such a description doesn't do justice to Chopin's real features as a man and as a composer, a person whose biographical and artistic vicissitudes show far more forceful and daring traits.

This short essay, on the occasion of the second centenary of the birth of the composer, intends to select and propose some ideas which may contribute to a more realistic representation of one of the most incisive characters of musical history. It is therefore not our intention to provide an exhaustive outline about the vicissitudes of the artist but rather to dwell mainly on what – to use a synesthetic expression – gives more *color* to his life and, above all, to his music.

Passion and fragility

Born in February-March of 1810 (date uncertain) and second of four children, since his early childhood he made occasional public appearances, including a performance of a Gyrowetz concerto at the Radziwill Palace in February 1818. Already by then he was a published composer. Two *polonaises* from 1817 have survived, and one of them (in G minor) received the praise of the Warsaw press which responded in this way: «The composer of this Polish dance, a young lad barely eight years old, is… a true musical genius»[1]. Neither Żywny nor Elsner, his private piano teachers, had much to offer on keyboard technique, and it's plausible that Chopin's highly individual approach to teaching and playing in later life resulted in part from this unorthodox background. His High School years, on the other hand, gave him a rigorous training in composition, though there is some suggestion that in the later stages of the course Elsner may

[1] All the biographical and technical excerpts present in this article are taken from OXFORD/GROVE MUSIC ONLINE, «*http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.dl380.lib.unimi.it/subscriber/article/grove/music/51099?q=chopin&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#firsthit*»

have allowed him more freedom to follow his own inclinations than was usual for High School students. In any event, his final report, written in July 1829, left no doubt about Chopin's acumen: «Chopin F., third year student, exceptional talent, musical genius.»[2] Around 1830 Chopin ended a series of concerts in Warsaw, one of which before an audience of about 900 people. The publicity surrounding these concerts was distasteful to Chopin, and may well have strengthened his growing conviction that the conventional path of the public pianist-composer was not for him. On the other hand, alternative career paths were by no means obvious.

This uncertainty about his future was no doubt a principal factor in the depression Chopin suffered during his final year in Warsaw. But he was also troubled by emotional insecurities of a kind that are by no means unusual among 19-year-olds. He decided that he was in love with the young singer Konstancja Gładkowska, but apparently did little to make her aware of his feelings. Indeed he found it much easier to communicate emotionally with men than with women in these days, and perhaps in later years too.

In comparison with Europe's cultural capitals, Warsaw had a provincial feel. That was brought home to Chopin when he paid a short visit to Vienna immediately after his graduation from the High School, especially as he managed – more by luck than planning – to secure two well-received public concerts in the Austrian capital. After the first concert, at which he played the Variations op. 2, he wrote home that «everyone clapped so loudly after each variation that I had difficulty hearing the orchestral tutti.»[3] His intention, at that point, was to embark on a European tour, with Vienna as first stop: in the end Chopin stayed for eight months in the Habsburg capital. One week after his arrival, the young Fryderyk had news of the Warsaw uprising, which had been sparked off by an ill-judged attempt to assassinate the Grand Duke Constantin. His nostalgia for Poland is evident in some letters: «I curse the moment of my departure.» Several of Chopin's friends (including his teacher Elsner) were hopeful that he would one day create a great Polish opera, which might do justice to the national plight. He himself was aware that his talents lay elsewhere, but it does seem that following the uprising his attitude to 'Polishness' in music changed in significant ways. It was in Vienna that he wrote the first nine mazurkas that he himself released for publication, as opp.6 and 7, and it was through these that the genre was comprehensively defined. Perhaps more significantly, it was in Vienna that he stopped composing the salon polonaises of his early years, pieces barely distinguishable in style from the polonaises of Hummel, Weber and other non-Polish virtuosos. When he returned to the polonaise several years later he was able to redefine it as a genre, allowing it to take on a quite new, explicitly nationalist, significance. It goes without saying that Chopin's music cannot be

[2] Cfr. *ivi.*
[3] Cfr. *ivi.*

confined by a nationalist aesthetic, but that it played a part in the development of cultural nationalism, and not only in Poland, is beyond question.[4]

After leaving Vienna, and before reaching Paris, he spent two weeks in Stuttgart, among the darkest of Chopin's life, as his diary entries reveal. Even by Chopin's standards, it was a period of agonizing indecision. He was far from friends and family, and he was painfully conscious that he was dependent still on funds from his father. As yet he had shown little evidence that he could establish a reputation beyond Warsaw, though at the same time he was all too well aware of the limitations of musical life in Poland. It was while in Stuttgart that he learnt of the failure of the uprising, and he gave vent to his feelings in an extraordinary, barely coherent outpouring of grief in his album. «O God! You are there! You are there and yet you do not take vengeance! […] Oh father, so this is how you are rewarded in old age! Mother, sweet suffering mother, you saw your daughter [the youngest child Emilia] die, and now you watch the Russian marching in over her grave to oppress you!» To return to Poland was now out of the question, and a few days after the «Stuttgart diary» he was in Paris.[5]

Two months later he was writing home in a very different frame of mind. From the start he felt at home in Paris, not least because sympathy for the Polish cause was distinctly fashionable there, and Polish émigrés were everywhere to be seen. By the end of 1832 he was in constant demand socially, and it was partly due to this that an alternative career began to open up for him. His sources of income in the early days in Paris had come partly from his father, partly from private performances and partly from modest sales of his published music. From the winter season of 1832 onwards they came predominantly from teaching, and he was soon in such demand that he could charge exorbitant fees.

For the next two years his reputation as a teacher of exceptional quality, if somewhat unconventional method, grew steadily. So too did his fame as a performer. He largely avoided public concerts, but continued to grace the salons, with their air of intimacy and exclusivity, and to these occasions his technique as a performer seemed perfectly suited. Descriptions are colourful: «The marvelous charm, the poetry and originality, the perfect freedom and absolute lucidity of Chopin's playing cannot be described. It is perfection in every sense.» «When he embellished – which he rarely did – it was a positive miracle of refinement.» Schumann famously described Chopin, playing the Étude op.25 no.1, «bringing out» the inner voices from the accompaniment figuration.[6]

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[4] Cfr. *ivi.*
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Increasingly he saw himself as a composer rather than a pianist-composer, and by the summer of 1835 he had consolidated the considerable achievements of his shorter genre pieces within the context of more large-scale compositions, including the two Polonaises op. 26, the first Scherzo op. 20 and the first Ballade op. 23. The more enlightened critics were beginning to see in these works the mark of a composer of real stature – one of the most radical and penetrating musical minds of the post-Beethoven era.

Chopin's relationship with George Sand is well-known, and plenty of interesting anecdotes might be reported about that. Suffices it to say that when he met her, at the Liszt salon and at a soirée in his own apartment, he was decidedly unimpressed: «What an unattractive person La Sand is. Is she really a woman?» But when Chopin met her again, this time their love was kindled almost instantly, despite the obvious contrast in their backgrounds and personalities. It was an attraction of opposites perhaps, and Sand was probably right when she later remarked that it had been above all a strong maternal instinct which had drawn her to Chopin. Whatever may be said of Chopin's relationship with Sand, it did provide him with a stable home life – the first since his Warsaw days – and consequently with the ideal material and emotional conditions for sustained composition.[7]

In 1842 Chopin's health started to give cause for real concern, and the relationship with Sand gradually deteriorated, partly due to growing tensions within the family. Then, on 17 October 1849, after having partaken of the last sacrament persuaded by Alexander Jelowicki, an acquaintance from Warsaw days who had since taken orders, Chopin died.

A musical innovator

It is worth noting that Chopin had already reached full maturity as a composer before he arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1831. Four of the familiar Chopin genres – the mazurka, nocturne, étude and waltz – were already in place, and in something like their mature formulation, before he left Warsaw. They were consolidated in Vienna and in the early Paris years by the earliest pieces in these genres released for publication by Chopin himself. These included the Mazurkas opp. 6 and 7, composed in Vienna, the Nocturnes opp. 9 and 15, the remainder of the op. 10 Études, which were completed in Paris in 1832, and the E major Waltz op. 18, composed two years later, somewhat on Weber's formal model. By presenting his Viennese mazurkas to the publisher in conventional sets of four and five compatible pieces (opp. 6 and 7), Chopin

[7] Cfr. *ivi.*

crystallized the genre and in a sense defined it, investing the salon dance piece with a complexity and sophistication which immediately transcended habitual meanings. Here, and in the early Paris sets (opp. 17 and 24), he established a new model for the stylization of folk idioms, marrying elements of peasant music with the most «advanced» techniques of contemporary art music in a cross-fertilization which would set the tone for Slavonic nationalists generally in the later nineteenth century. From this point onwards he carved out for the mazurka a special niche in his output, with a singular repertory of technical and expressive devices. It is fitting that his nationalism should have been expressed thus, through the renovation of a simple dance piece rather than through the more usual channels of opera and programmatic reference.[8]

In a similar way, Chopin's engagement with an expressive aesthetic was filtered into the piano nocturne rather than made specific in the art song. When John Field published his first three nocturnes in 1812, neither the title «nocturne» nor the «nocturne style» were in any sense novelties, but they had not yet been drawn together to form a genre. In reality, however, no two of the Chopin nocturnes are alike, and already in the op. 15 set it became clear that the title «nocturne», once its connotative values had been established, could attach itself to music of highly varied formal and generic schemes, and even – as in op. 15 no. 3, which effectively confronts a «mazurka» and a «chorale» – to pieces which seem blatantly to defy the expectations of the genre.[9]

By the 1830s it had already emerged as the principal channel for artistic virtuosity, joining forces with emergent «lyric» and «character» pieces to challenge the sonata as the archetypal keyboard genre. Unlike the virtuoso études of Liszt and Thalberg, Chopin's op. 10 retains a link with the «school étude», addressing one principal technical problem in each piece and crystallizing that problem in a single shape or figure. But it goes without saying that he achieved a balance between technical and artistic aims which was unprecedented in the earlier history of the genre. As Schumann remarked, «imagination and technique share dominion side by side».[10]

The études are a workshop in Chopin's piano technique, which was by common consent strikingly individual, predicated on a «natural» hand shape (with B major as the paradigmatic scale), and on an acceptance, controversial at the time, of the imbalance and functional independence of the fingers. The third of the op. 10 Études, a study in the control of legato melody and in its appropriate phrasing, perfectly exemplifies this, and an adequate performance of it would heed Chopin's caution that «the goal is not to play everything with an equal sound, [but rather] it seems to me, a well-formed technique that can control and vary a beautiful sound

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[8] Cfr. *ivi.*
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quality.» He believed in a flexible wrist and supple hand, so that the wrist and not the arm is in movement. The first of the études, with its massive, striding arpeggios, would have been performed by him in just this way, and of course it further cultivates a capacity to use the pedal to best effect (as does the third étude in a rather different way). «The correct employment [of the pedals] remains a study for life.» Moreover, in the interests of fluidity of movement and evenness of tone he was prepared to sanction unorthodox fingerings, as in the detailed autograph fingerings in the second étude. He was happy, for instance, to use the thumb on the black keys not only in the fifth («black key») étude, where we would of course expect it, but also in the sixth, where it helps the performer maintain the legato of the countermelody alongside the sustained bass notes.[11]

Chopin's mature piano style was defined above all in these works; it remains essentially distinct from that of other bravura pianist-composers of the early nineteenth century, as it does from the lyrical character pieces of a Prague–Vienna axis (Tomášek, Voříšek, Schubert) and the «symphonic» piano style of Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms. Drawing together aspects of Viennese bravura writing (Mozart, Hummel) and a lyrical manner derived from French and English schools (Adam, Clementi, Field), it achieved a unique synthesis which in turn laid the foundations for later piano styles, notably in French and Russian music of the late nineteenth century. More directly than any of his predecessors, Chopin derived his piano writing from the instrument itself (its uniformity of sound, its diminuendo on every note, its capacity for dynamic shading and its sustaining pedal), and from the physical properties of the two hands (the limitations of compass within each of them, and the absence of any such limitation between them). Hence the idiomatic counterpoint which characterizes his textures, and their separation into two layers, collaborating in many different ways, but above all functioning as «sonoristic counterweights».[12]

It was through these mazurkas, nocturnes and études that Chopin's piano music acquired its unmistakable sound. While that sound may be explained on one level as a transformation of early nineteenth-century models, it can also be viewed as a recreation, in terms entirely idiomatic for piano, of Bach's ornamental melody, figuration and counterpoint. All three textural types had receded somewhat in the era of the Classical sonata, and they were in a sense reinvented by Chopin during his early maturity.[13]

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After this rapid overview of Chopin's biographical highlights and artistic orientation, it is now easier, perhaps, to emphasize his desires to *explore* and express his compositive boldness, as well as his profound capacities for empathy and patriotism. And, of course, as a result of the combination of these features, we find ourselves presented with a frail life, both affectively and physically. However Chopin is not to be perceived as a person isolated and timorous of contact with the outside world, but rather should be viewed in the light of the fortitude and energy with which this artist was able to cope with his own fragilities and limits. A man thus able to live out every dimension of his own existence, leaving a profound mark in the relationships he lived, in the music he created, and more generally in the history of a humanity that, through art, tries to explore its own relation with the Absolute.

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