GREAT ANNIVERSARIES

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

1810 — 1849

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UNESCO
CHOPIN in the hundred years that have passed since his death, has been involved in an adventure which is not his own. The most admired, the most unusual, and altogether the most popular among modern composers, — no other's works are so often performed or commented on in such minute detail—he is also the least understood, and in the letter and the spirit of his message is most often betrayed.

His music, too sure and too jealous of its purity ever to need the support of spoken argument or the prestige of symbolic titles, speaks directly to the ear, the heart, and the intelligence of his listeners, yet it is constantly misunderstood by his editors, his critics, performers—to say nothing of audiences. So thoroughly misunderstood indeed that a screen of arbitrary criticism and doubtful anecdotes separates us from him and, excepting we believe ourselves to be incapable of appreciating his music for what it is, might lead us to think that it is insufficient in itself.

Commentators on the Préludes imagine raindrops (without being able to agree on the Prélude in-
ANNIVERSARIES

volved), the hoofs of an impatient horse, meteors of all sorts, processions of phantoms, wild charges of horsemen, to say nothing of the Etudes where the white keyboard is stained crimson with blood spilled in riots. Once Chopin, in a day barren of inspiration, wrote to his friend Franchomme: "If this continues, my work will never be able to suggest the song of the warblers or broken porcelain. I must resign myself..."

But he was not at all resigned when the editor, Wessel, gave whimsical titles to his work: "I shall never again send that hack Wessel anything for his Agréments au salon. Perhaps you do not know that this is the title he gave my second Impromptu" and elsewhere; "Wessel is an imbecile and a swindler. If he loses money on my compositions, it is certainly because of those stupid titles he riggs them out in, contrary to my strict orders".

We have seen things even more surprising in the hundred years since Chopin has been prey to the most sentimental interpretation, elastic rubato, frantic tempi, the crazes of arrangers. But ridiculous excess carries with it its own remedy. An editor, not long ago, put words to the melody of the Etude in E. "Tristesse" was indeed an appropriate title as the idea, lamentable both in itself and in its results, was cause enough for tears.—But the success of this publication led to a new transformation: Tristesse is sold today in a version for piano solo. The cycle has been completed
and the time has come to re-transcribe Chopin for piano solo, to hear what he says and not what he has been made to say, to approach his work, to the best of our ability, as he himself approached music—beginning with the piano: the touch teaching the finger, one note leading to another. We cannot enter Chopin’s universe without humbly participating in that hesitant, timid emotion which hardly dares believe in the good fortune of its discovery.

Any attempt to probe the finished work for what is bound to be highly problematical evidence of the circumstances of its creation is certain to be vain and disappointing. Even should we not go astray, we are always apt thus to neglect the unique and essential in favour of the common and merely fortuitous.

What is common is the sick man suffering from cold and exile, wounded by men’s coarseness and women’s perfidy. What is unique is the purity of the message that Chopin could only deliver to his century by escaping from its clutches.

If we would know what finally matters in a man’s life: what he has done that distinguishes him from others and how he has done it, Chopin’s life is the most surprising and the simplest imaginable—a fully-illumined mystery.

Born near Warsaw—his father, an emigrant from Lorraine, his mother, Justine Krzyzanowska, a Polish woman—Chopin was of the second Romantic generation, younger than Schubert,
Bellini, and Berlioz. The date of his birth, February 22, 1810 makes him an almost exact contemporary of Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Liszt.

His remarkable precocious talent was immediately recognized and encouraged by a group of intelligent teachers; Adalbert Zywny who first taught him to play; Joseph Eslner who introduced him to composition, showed him the beaten path, and encouraged him when he ventured away from it. This spoiled child, disposed to leisure by an attractive tenderness, had no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing his loyalties. His only teachers were those first teachers of his childhood and he was faithful to his first musical loves throughout his life: Johann Sebastian Bach; Mozart, whom he made his God; the Italian Opera which, sung by Cimarosa and Bellini, was for him a constant enchantment; but first and always, the songs of his motherland, the folk-music which he heard in his cradle and remembered in exile.

Childhood, lost and then found again, is the source of his genius. Nostalgia, the Polish zal, fed him and consumed him. Chopin's music is a song of fidelity.

As a young man of twenty he left Warsaw on November 1, 1830, scarcely a month before the Polish insurrection. He was never to see his country again, but he left Poland armed as is the perfect butterfly on leaving the chrysalis. With
him he carried his two concertos, the *Waltz in D flat*, his first *Nocturne*, four *Mazurkas*, and his first *Etudes*, an important part of his work which he completed, but never published.

In Vienna, he was told that Poland had been crushed. He stopped a post chaise, but then decided not to join his friends in a struggle he felt was hopeless. His passport for London was marked “Passing through Paris”, but his stay there lasted the brief eighteen years that remained to him of life: “I have arrived here, carried by the wind. One can breathe freely, perhaps that is why one sighs so often...” He seldom left Paris without regret: love of Dresden—*Moja bieda* (my misery), boredom at Nohant. The mists of Scotland and of London completed what the Majorcan rains had begun: they dealt the final blow to this consumptive who returned to Paris to die on October 17, 1849 among the French whom he loved “as his own people”. It was essentially in Paris that he accomplished his brief, brilliant, discreet career as a pianist and composer. The artistic world whose favours Chopin set out to win (it did not take him long) learned to applaud him in the intimacy of the salon more often than on the concert stage. The ceremonial of aristocratic receptions was also more to his taste than the informality of the artist’s studios, with the exception of Eugène Delacroix’s atelier which was not open to all comers.

The Romantic group, with which we too readily
identify Chopin, made too much noise for his exquisite reserve, and he stood apart from them. Baudelaire’s description of Delacroix applies to Chopin as well: “The same apparent and slightly affected coldness, the same icy cloak covering a chaste sensitivity. Very much the untamed, very much the man of the world—and very much the dandy.”

Chopin’s friend Orlowsky wrote: “He turns all women’s heads. Men are jealous of him. He is in fashion. Undoubtedly we shall soon be wearing gloves like Chopin’s; but he is consumed by homesickness.”

Franz Liszt, generous man and future high priest of the sumptuous and baroque in music, who seems to have liked Chopin a great deal better than he was liked in return, reports his friend’s distaste for the charlatanism of virtuosity: “I am unable to give concerts—the public intimidates me. I feel suffocated by their horrid breath, paralysed by their curious stares, mute before their strange faces; but you are destined for it, because when you do not win your public, you overwhelm it.”

These scruples which led him to earn his living by giving lessons rather than by exhibiting himself in public, this delicacy which made him choose pearl-grey as the colour for his room because it is “neither loud nor vulgar”, this same reserve made him hostile to anything in man or art that betrayed excess or triviality.
This ardent patriot, this daring innovator who was pursued everywhere by the revolutionary storms of 1830 to 1848, had an innate horror of all forms of revolution. He carefully avoided the circles where it was planned and fled the crowds that accomplished it.

The Romantics offered him a sympathy which it would have been ungrateful to refuse, but he never mixed with the clan nor accepted its slogans. Baudelaire speaks of Chopin's "light and passionate music which is like a brilliant bird hovering over the horrors of a gulf." The gulf is Romanticism, but the brilliant bird scarcely touched its edges.

Chopin's theory of art, his rejection of the obscure, his distaste for the morbid, his scorn for the merely literary, his defiance of those feverish powers which govern the artist against his will, are faithfully recorded in the testimony of Eugène Delacroix.

Delacroix recounts in his *Journal* under the date of April 7, 1849, one of his last conversations with Chopin. Questioned on what establishes logic in music, Chopin declared that musical art requires the rigour of a science. "The science of a man like Chopin is art itself. Art is no longer what the masses believe it to be, that is to say a sort of inspiration which comes from no one quite knows where, which progresses by chance and only presents the external appearances of things. It is reason itself adorned by genius but following
ANNIVERSARIES

a necessary course and governed by superior laws. This brings me to the difference between Mozart and Beethoven. When Beethoven is obscure and seems to lack unity, he told me, it is not because of his much vaunted and rather untamed originality, it is because he turns his back on eternal principles. Mozart never does.''

This explains why, after Beethoven, no Romantic composer found favour with Chopin: Meyerbeer horrified him; Mendelssohn seemed facile; Berlioz extravagant. He hardly accepted Schumann. Schubert, the only musician with Mozart and Bellini who clearly influenced Chopin, disappointed him, he said, "by his over-sharp contours where the emotion seems to be stripped bare".

What then does Chopin, the inexorable critic, demand?

Creators of genius are to be recognized in this, they know exactly what they do not want. What they strive to create is inscribed in letters of gold or of fire in their work itself. So it is with the work of Chopin.

What strikes us first in Chopin's works is their extraordinary attachment to the concrete, which explains the fastidiousness of his technique and his determination to impose certain limits on himself in order within those limits to compose more perfectly. "In restricting himself exclusively to the realm of the piano," said Liszt, "Chopin shows that he has one of the qualities most essen-
FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

tial to a writer: a true appreciation of the form in which it is given him to excel”.

Written less for the piano than by the piano, Chopin’s music curiously enough draws its virtues from its necessities. Empiric of practice on the keyboard seems to have supplied him not only with the matter of his compositions, but soon with their form as well. Far from correcting those small defects which derive as much from the inequality of the pianist’s fingers\(^1\) as from the imperfect mechanism of the instrument, his work seems inspired by them.

Chopin’s pianistic colouring contrasts or blends the shades of sound created by the play of the black and white keys. The proportions of their use determines the choice of key, while the pedal liberates the harmonic series in a halo of sound which surrounds the note and prolongs the chord.

It is significant that German critics had great difficulty in situating Chopin’s art and discovering its elective affinities. They recognized, it is true, the insistent use of altered chords and of chromatics, practices of which he must have found the first examples in the familiar works of Bach and Mozart. But what disconcerted Riemann, among others, was that the search for a fluent syntax is with Chopin not always exclusively limited to the

\(^1\) Pianists have struggled against nature trying to make each finger capable of producing an equal sonority. There are several kinds of sonority just as there are several fingers. The problem is to utilize these differences.
framework of traditional harmony, as it is with the Germans.

Chopin, accustomed from childhood to popular and ecclesiastical modality, never ceased to investigate the songs of the Polish earth. The master of the Préludes was thus the first composer who freely applied suspensions, retards, anticipations, evasive or broken cadences, ambiguities and contrasts—all the discoveries of harmony—to the fluctuations of modal melody.

Melody is essential to Chopin’s art. The harmony is there only to restrain its caprice, to prolong its charm, without giving way, as the Germans soon did, to the fatal attractions of endless development.

Nothing demands sharper lucidity than dissimulation: whoever plays the game of suspense and surprise must be constantly watchful. From this point of view, no one has better understood Chopin’s phrases in their secret progress than Marcel Proust: “so free, so flexible, so tactile, they begin by searching and trying their place outside and far away from their original direction, far from the point where we might have hoped they would touch, and they play in this fantastic disgression only to return more deliberately, more precisely, as to a crystal which resounds until it makes you cry out, to touch us to the very heart”.

Chopin’s effort to introduce his national songs into European music never led him to do violence
to the norms of this music, as several musicians did after him.

With Chopin, assimilation is always so perfect that the strongest influences he underwent never appear to be borrowings. The two texts must be studied with the greatest care before anything from J. S. Bach’s *Toccata in D Minor* for organ can be found in the *Fourth Etude*.

And if Chopin’s Waltzes momentarily evoke one of Franz Schubert’s *Ländler*, nothing is as surprising as the quiet ease with which the composer of the *Barcarolle* made the piano the legitimate heir of Italian ornamentation, or recast for the piano vocal line of his beloved Bellini. As Ravel said: “This great Slav, an Italian by education, realized all that his masters, through negligence, expressed only imperfectly. Born of the concrete, rigidly attached to the concrete, Chopin’s music moves from the sound to the note.”

“Each one of his notes is the fruit of a necessity”, said André Gide. And if sentiment pervades this music it is, as Gide said further, because it is at home there. Before expressing the emotion, Chopin organizes the sensation. In this he is close to the French, to Baudelaire, Manet, Debussy. And he is close to the French in his sense of form because he excludes abstract development. He prefers the elementary limitations of the dance forms—polonaises, mazurkas, waltzes—the pace of which imposes and directs the structure, to the amplifications of a musical
rhetoric. Nor do we separate Chopin from his native Poland if we suggest that the "celebrated pianist" who, according to the Petit Larousse of our childhood "came to France to introduce mazurkas", renewed across the Romantic period, the tradition of the French lutists and harpsichordists. He questioned his instrument and obeyed its instructions, as they did, and he was inspired as they were by the rhythm of the formal dances. He cultivated, as they did, the "adorable arabesque", and held its vibration in the chord.

And, finally, like these lutists and harpsichordists, he made his art an intimate confidence which he reserved for a chosen audience. Modern piano literature shows us that without Chopin, neither Claude Debussy nor Maurice Ravel would have been able to rediscover the French tradition.

To establish Chopin's influence on the Wagner of Tristan and Isolde, on the whole French school from Emmanuel Chabrier to Francis Poulenc, on the Spain of Albeniz and de Falla, on the Norway of Grieg; to estimate the exemplary value of an art which authorized and aroused the creation of musical nationalities all over Europe, it is sufficient to say that the man, who for a century has personified Poland in the eyes of the world, is in a way consubstantial with Western culture.

At a time when bad taste applauded brilliant virtuosity or excessive grandiloquence, Chopin
FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN was narrowing the limits of his subtle play of sound and time.

The goal of this reduction to the essential can be summed up in a word: purity. “Pure as a tear”, said the painter Kiatkowski at Chopin’s death bed.

But it is easy to be mistaken here: the purity of art certainly has its echo in simplicity of heart, but candour alone is not sufficient in the strict order of artistic creation.

“Purity”, writes Paul Valéry, “is the result of an infinite number of operations on the language, and a concern for form is nothing other than the conscious reorganization of the means of expression.” And in fact, in music, as in all art, purity is only achieved through purification. Chopin summed up his work in a short note he sent to Franchomme: “I am working a little, erasing a great deal, coughing sufficiently.”

He had the reserve of a nobleman, the simplicity of a child, a virile, lucid healthy mind in a sick body. “He died his life,” said Auber. But he died it with dignity. Like his adored Mozart, like Purcell, Pergolesi, Schubert, and Bellini, those beloved of the gods that heaven loaned to the earth only for an instant, Frédéric Chopin restrained the violence of a heart whose beats were numbered, but he could not keep it from answering the invitation to beauty through the only love which inspired him.
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(This bibliography does not include books which have been published, re-edited, or translated only recently.)