

Chopin: Apotheosis of the Piano

(excerpts from 'The Lives of the Great Composers', by Harold C. Schonberg)

Most of the romantic composers had a *parti pris* about romanticism. They were propagandists; they played or conducted one another's music; they wrote reviews and articles about the new styles and theories; they helped one another as best they could; and as teachers, some of them passed their aspirations to the oncoming generation. Not Frédéric Chopin. He would have none of it. Indeed, he disliked romanticism. He thought Liszt's music vulgar, did not like Schumann's music at all, and had nothing to say about the works of Berlioz or Mendelssohn, though he was the friend of all of those great men. He approached Beethoven with a mixture of admiration and dislike; the 'thunderer' was too big and uncouth, and Chopin felt uncomfortable in his presence. If he heard any music by Schubert, he did not mention it. The only two masters who meant anything to him were Bach and Mozart. For them he had nothing but praise.

He was not widely read, nor did he respond to romantic art. His teaching – which was how he supported himself in grand style – was private and largely confined to society. Elegant pupils would enter Chopin's studio and put their twenty or thirty francs on the mantelpiece while he looked out of the window. He was a gentleman, and gentlemen did not soil their hands with anything as vulgar as business transactions. He liked to move in aristocratic circles, and was greatly concerned with style, taste, clothes, and *bon ton*.

One of the greatest pianists in history, he gave very few concerts during his life and was primarily a salon pianist. He was physically frail and his playing at best never had much sonority. Toward the end it was a whisper. His last public appearance in Paris took place in 1835, when he was just twenty-six. For the rest of his life – he was born in 1810 and died in 1849 – he gave only three more recitals, and those were semi-private, before a carefully selected audience. He did a great deal of playing at musical parties. Chopin and Liszt would play four-hand music, perhaps with Mendelssohn turning pages, while awaiting his turn at the keyboard. Around the piano might be Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Delacroix, Heine, and George Sand.

Chopin fit beautifully into the mad, bad, sad, glad Paris of the 1830s and 40's. Although he did not have many close friends, he knew everybody and everybody liked and respected him. They knew he was a genius. He was not only a genius as a pianist; he was creatively a genius, one of the most startlingly original ones of the century. And Paris those days was highly experienced in judging genius. It was the intellectual and artistic capital of the world. Chopin arrived in Paris in 1831 and spent the rest of his life there.

Chopin's thinking and composition was revolutionary; he developed an altogether new kind of piano playing; his daring, yet refined harmonic sense; his experimentation with a kind of piano sonority that once and for all released the instrument from the past. In the young Chopin a musical fermentation went on, and he found that he had to change the rules. "You know", his father wrote, "that the mechanics of piano playing occupied little of your time, and that your mind was busier than your fingers.

If others have spent whole days working at the keyboard, you rarely spent an hour playing other men's music." Thus as a musician Chopin was one of the lucky ones: a natural technician with an easy style, a composer who decided early on to write only for the instrument that he loved. And when he improvised on some Polish tunes while living in Vienna, Chopin himself said, "people were dancing up and down in their seats." How, they kept asking, could Chopin have learned so much in *Warsaw*?

Pre-romantic pianists of the day would run well-drilled notes up and down the keyboard, with little or no pedal. Using high finger strokes, playing from hand and wrist, rather than elbow and arm, they had little idea of the coloristic resources of the piano, an instrument that by 1830 was very close in action and sonority to the concert grand of today. Chopin made his Paris debut early in 1832. Liszt and Mendelssohn were present, and the recital was the talk of Paris. After that, there was no more nonsense talk about who among the dozen or so pretenders was the greatest of the composer-pianists.

Chopin's life changed when he was introduced to George Sand by Liszt. He was twenty-six and she was thirty-two years old, already a famous novelist, equally notorious for her independence and her disdain for the proprieties. Of sharp intelligence, for a time she wore men's clothes, smoked cigars, and had a succession of lovers.

Chopin had no false modesty about himself and his work. As early as 1831 he was writing about his "perhaps too audacious but noble wish and intention to create for myself a new world." He did precisely that. As a pianist he created a style that dominated the entire second half of the nineteenth century and was not substantially changed until Debussy and Prokofiev came along. It was a style that broke sharply from everything that went before it. For the first time the piano became a total instrument: a singing instrument, an instrument of infinite color, poetry, and nuance, a heroic instrument, an intimate instrument. Schumann's piano music, wonderful as it is, original as it is, sounds thick by comparison. Chopin's music flowed naturally out of his own way of playing the piano, and as a pianist he was light-years ahead of Schumann, exploiting the instrument in an idiomatic and completely modern manner. In any case, the new ideas about pedaling, fingering, rhythm, and coloristic resource that Chopin invented were immediately taken up by every one of the younger pianists.

Many professionals of the day could not follow him. But Mendelssohn ultimately surrendered, followed by everybody else. "There is", Mendelssohn wrote, "something entirely original in his piano playing and it is at the same time so masterly that he may be called a perfect virtuoso... He produces new effects, like Paganini on the violin, and accomplished things nobody could formerly have thought practicable."

Even the great Liszt was not too proud to learn from Chopin. Between the two was an uneasy friendship. They saw a great deal of each other, but there may have been an unconscious hostility. Chopin envied Liszt his strength, his extroversion, his virility, his power to hypnotize large audiences. "Liszt is playing my etudes," he wrote to Stephen Heller, "and transporting me outside of my respectable thoughts. I should like to steal from him the way to play my own etudes." But there was an element of vulgarity and fakery to Liszt that repelled Chopin. Occasionally, Chopin burst into spitefulness as in a letter to Jules Fontana: "One of these days he'll be a member of parliament or perhaps even the King of Abyssinia or the Congo – but as regards the themes from his composition, well, they will be buried in the

newspapers.” Liszt, on the other hand, sincerely admired Chopin’s pianism and adopted many of his ideas. Chopin showed that the piano could be much more than a virtuoso instrument even in virtuoso music; and, more importantly, Chopin’s music showed that even the wildest flights of virtuosity could have a musical meaning. Chopin’s filigree and bravura, in his mature works, never is mere show-off. He introduced the concept of functional ornamentation.

Two things about Chopin’s piano style – and by extension, as always, his music – are of extreme importance: his ideas about rubato, and his classic bent. Rubato, which had been the subject of much discussion by performers as far back as Mozart and C.P.E. Bach, is a kind of displacement in which the rhythm is delicately altered but never the idea of the basic meter. It gives variety and added interest to a phrase. Every sensitive musician uses it; the device is equivalent to variation of line in a drawing by a master. Chopin, with his Polish dance heritage, used such a pronounced rubato that listeners unaccustomed to it were taken aback. One fine pianist of the day noted that a remarkable feature of Chopin’s playing “was the entire freedom with which he treated the rhythm, but which appears so natural that for years it had never struck me.” Yet despite his romantic rubato and his extremely romantic music, Chopin had a strong classic streak in him. He always had a metronome on his piano, insisted that his pupils play in strict time, gave them plenty of Bach and Mozart, and went into a tantrum when rhythmic liberties were taken. “Yesterday, we heard Henri Herz perform,” wrote Joseph Filtsch to his parents. “His execution is elegant, agreeable and coquettish, but without subtlety. What a difference between him and Chopin, whose fingers sing and bring tears to your eyes, making anybody who is sensitive tremble with emotion. ... Thanks to this flexibility that he can play black notes with his thumb or a whole series of notes with two fingers only, passing the longer finger over the shorter and sliding from one note to another.” These were practices condemned by the classic teachers. Black notes were not to be played with the thumb. Filtsch goes on to describe Chopin’s rubato. “To his pupils he says: ‘Let your left hand be your conductor and keep strict time.’ And so the right hand, now hesitant, now impatient, is nevertheless constrained to follow this great rule and never weaken the rhythm, of the left hand.” (Mozart had expressed almost the exact same thought over a half-century previously. Joseph Filtsch, incidentally, was a pianist who had come from Hungary with his younger brother Karl to study with Chopin. Karl was enormously gifted and was by far the best pupil Chopin ever had. Liszt heard him and said that when the youngster started playing public, then he, Liszt himself, would shut up shop. Poor Karl died at the age of fifteen.

As a composer, Chopin has survived all changes of fashion and is as popular today as he ever was. Almost everything he composed in the active repertoire. Can this be said of many other composers? He found his style very early, and after the Etudes of Op. 10 – many of which were composed before his arrival in Paris – there was no substantial change, except perhaps a greater depth to his music, but very little in the way of technique, harmonic ideas, or melody. He also had worked out the basic style of his mazurkas and nocturnes in Poland. If there was one thing Chopin loved, it was beautiful singing, and many of his melodic ideas came from the great vocal stylists of the day.

Another aspect of his musical style was Polish nationalism, as represented by the mazurkas and polonaises. To Europe, these were strange and exotic. Chopin was the first of the great nationalists. The great nationalists do not copy folk melodies. They do not have to. The folk tradition is part of their

background, their racial subconscious. It emerges as an evocation of homeland, even if no actual folk-tune quotations are used. In his mazurkas and polonaises, Chopin echoed the melodies with which he had grown up. In his other music he was much more a cosmopolitan, though here and there a folk tune can make its appearance.

Chopin never gave anything but abstract titles to his music, and in this he was different from the other romantics. The well-known titles of certain of Chopin's etudes, preludes, polonaises and mazurkas are all romantic inventions, generally supplied by publishers. In none of Chopin's music are there any programmatic implications, though it is claimed that the four ballades were inspired by poems by Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish patriot. If this is true, Chopin was remarkably quiet about it. The only names Chopin gave to the overwhelming majority of his music (the Polish songs excepted) were generic: etude, prelude, polonaise, ballade, scherzo, sonata, fantasy, nocturne, mazurka, impromptu, waltz, variations, concerto.

In his youth his music was graceful, exuberant, inventive, and full of brilliance, marked by a decided predilection for virtuosity, and was composed as vehicles for public performance. It is often breathtaking, sparkling and coruscating, taking complicated figurations and breaking them up or spreading them over the keyboard so that the notes scatter like pinpoints of flame. Few composers have had Chopin's gift for modulation, his taste in combining pure virtuosity with an aristocratic and poetic kind of melody. That could be heard from the beginning, and he never changed his approach. As he grew older his forms became tighter, and every note had a point. The music could be difficult, but it also was condensed and under perfect control. It had dissonances, including harsh seconds and ninths, which sounded intolerable as the classic pianists played them, and the new generation of pianists had to learn how to handle them, how to make them glint and resolve through a skillful use of the pedal. Those chromatic and daring harmonies were a seminal influence on nineteenth-century music thinking. Chopin influenced Wagner and later composers, and he anticipated Debussy (who in turn, with his own set of Etudes – would pay tribute to Chopin's masterpiece set) with free-floating pedal effects and near-impressionist harmonies in some of his works. The delicate, sickly, Polish composer put a mighty hand on the future of music.

Delicate and sickly; but that does not mean his music lacks power. Most of Chopin's major works – especially the etudes, preludes, polonaises, ballades, scherzos and sonatas, in addition to his fantasy and barcarolle – contain majestic utterances. Lyric and spontaneous as his music often sounds, it was the product of much work and thought. He did not rush his ideas to paper, as Mozart and Schubert so often did. Chopin was a slow worker who would not let a piece of music be published until he was satisfied that it was as jeweled, as flawless, as logical as he could make it. Initial ideas came fast, but working them into the appropriate form could be excruciating. Many of his compositions resulted from improvisations, as Filtsch has described the way Chopin worked: "The other day (in March 1842) I heard Chopin improvise at George Sand's house. It is marvelous to hear Chopin compose in this way. His inspiration is so immediate and complete that he plays without hesitation as if [the music] had to be thus. But when it comes to writing it down and recapturing the original thought in all its details, he spends days of nervous strain and almost frightening desperation. He alters and retouches the same phrases incessantly, and walks up and down like a madman." Even when a work was published, Chopin

was not satisfied. He would make changes whenever he could, and in many of his works there are differences between the French and German editions, some of them significant.

His music is all of a piece. Whether tiny, as in the prelude in A major, which lasts no more than twenty seconds, or extended, as in the B minor sonata, it is for the most part a highly precise, condensed form of music in which a single idea is exploited. The single-idea aspect of Chopin comes in the etudes, preludes, mazurkas and nocturnes, although in the longer etudes, mazurkas and nocturnes subsidiary ideas make their appearance. The works in larger form – the ballades, scherzos and F minor fantasy – are Chopin's own solution to the problem of sonata form. Classic sonata form did not interest him very much, and his own sonatas achieve a copybook form that just passes; what both saves and elevates them is the wealth of ideas and the extraordinary freedom with which he moves within the confines of the form.

Several elements of his music suggest classicism and, in particular, his beloved Bach. The twenty-four Preludes (Op. 28) follow the idea of the Well-Tempered Clavier, going through all the major and minor keys in the circle of fifths. And the Etudes begin on a similar suggestion, but quickly part ways. Could the very first Prelude and Etude – both in C major, and both based on arpeggiated chords – be implied compliments to the C major Prelude that opens Bach's great [Well-Tempered Clavier] series? If Chopin's are played at very slow tempo, there are startling relationships among these works.

Once Chopin had established himself, there was remarkably little criticism of his music. It was accepted as the work of a master. As Liszt wrote in 1841, "This exquisite, lofty and eminently aristocratic celebrity remains unattacked. A complete silence of criticism already reigns about him, as if posterity already had come." Liszt was only stating fact. Certainly the informed composers of the day – Liszt, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Berlioz – knew that Chopin was an immortal; that within his self-imposed limitations he was perfection itself. Other composers have had their ups and downs. Chopin goes steadily along, and the piano literature would be inconceivable without him.

From 'The Life of Chopin', by Franz Liszt

"As the manifold forms of art are but different incantations, charged with electricity from the soul of the artist, and destined to evoke the latent emotions and passions in order to render them sensible, intelligible, and, in some degree, tangible; so genius may be manifested in the invention of new forms, adapted, it may be, to the expression of feelings which have not yet surged within the limits of common experience, and are indeed first evoked within the magic circle by the creative power of artistic intuition."

"In making an analysis of the works of Chopin, we meet with beauties of a high order, expressions entirely new, and a harmonic tissue as original as erudite. In his compositions, boldness is always justified; richness, even exuberance, never interferes with clearness; singularity never degenerates into uncouth fantasticalness; the sculpturing is never disorderly; the luxury of ornament never overloads the chaste eloquence of the principal lines. His best works abound in combinations which may be said to form an epoch in the handling of musical style. Daring, brilliant and attractive, they disguise their profundity under so much grace, their science under so many charms, that it is with difficulty we free ourselves sufficiently from their magical enthrallment, to judge coldly of their theoretical value. Their worth has, however, already been felt; but it will be more highly estimated when the time arrives for a critical examination of the services rendered by them to art during that period of its course traversed by Chopin."

"The frail and sickly organization of Chopin, not permitting him the energetic expression of his passions, he gave to his friends only the gentle and affectionate phase of his nature. In the busy, eager life of large cities, where no one has time to study the destiny of another, where everyone is judged by his external activity, very few think it worthwhile to attempt to penetrate the enigma of individual character. Those who enjoyed familiar intercourse with Chopin, could not be blind to the impatience and ennui he experienced in being, upon the calm character of his manners, so promptly believed. And may not the artist revenge the man? As his health was too frail to permit him to give vent to his impatience through the vehemence of his execution, he sought to compensate himself by pouring this bitterness over those pages which he loved to hear performed with a vigor [Footnote: It was his delight to hear them executed by the great Liszt himself.—Translator.] which he could not himself always command: pages which are indeed full of the impassioned feelings of a man suffering deeply from wounds which he does not choose to avow. Thus around a gaily flagged, yet sinking ship, float the fallen spars and scattered fragments, torn by warring winds and surging waves from its shattered sides."