

FREDERIC CHOPIN, A POET OF SOUND

by Prof. Irena Poniatowska

In the nineteenth century; in Paris, at the time when the art of piano playing was in full bloom, the virtuoso pianists of the period were referred to in the following terms: Thalberg was a 'king'; Liszt, a 'prophet'; Herz, a 'solicitor'; Kalkbrenner, a 'minstrel'; Madame Pleyel, a 'Sybil'; Tausig, a 'Mephisto', the last of the virtuosos; Doehler - simply a 'pianist',¹ whereas Chopin was most frequently nicknamed a 'poet', or even 'Ariel' or 'Raphael' of the piano².

In 1838, Ernest Legouvé, the Paris critic, when asked to name the world's number one pianist: Liszt or Thalberg, perversely concluded that "Chopin is..."³

The Polish artist was then distinct amongst all the great masters of the keyboard with his artistry being indeterminable in its beauty, one, which could not be described otherwise than the poetry of sound. This truly poetic aura of Chopin's art of piano playing was depicted through, among others, the reviews by Léon Escudier from 1841 and 1842, respectively: 'Hark, how Chopin day-dreams, how he cries, how sweetly, tenderly, how melancholically does he sing (...) [He] is a pianist of feelings, *par excellence*'; or: 'Chopin is a Poet first and foremost, and a sensitive one indeed, who attempts at rendering the poetic quality predominant in his music',⁴ Whereas Théophile Gautier wrote: "Chopin stands for a melancholic elegance, a dreamy charm, a female sensitivity, anything which upon a soul might be delicate, tender, ethereal (...) Touched with his fingers, the keys seem to be brushed by an angel's wing."⁵ The "angel" pattern reappeared not infrequently whilst it came to describing the Chopin's playing manner, as well as his personality as a whole. Liszt would compare the subtlety of the Chopin *toucher* to 'an odour of verbena' or "the action of a glass harmonica."⁶

However, his art of playing was unique not only because of sophisticated sound nuances, particularly as far as the *piano* dynamic register was concerned, but also in regard to the juxtaposition of these against the more expressive colorist effects, or even "explosions" in terms of intensity. Chopin, himself, once stated that, urged by his own emotions, he "fulminated on the piano."⁷ His magical sound imagination enraptured the listeners.

It is thus worthwhile to determine more precisely *how* Chopin actually played. For today's scholars, the source for learning about the Polish musical genius' art of piano playing, is to be found in the testimonies of his contemporaries: reviews, recollections of his students, letters, utterances by famous people from the period, and the *Sketches Toward a Method of the Piano Playing*, edited, commented, and published by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger a hundred-and-fifty years later.⁸ We do not have, however, any sound material dating back to the time of Chopin, though the period *pianoforte* specimens (very much like the instrument used for the purpose of this recording), with their technical possibilities (as to repetition action and the dynamic or timbre

¹ Danièle Pistone, *Le piano dans la littérature Française. Des origines jusqu'en 1900*, Lille-Paris 1975, pp. 151-152; Karl Fr. Weitzmann wrote on Tausig: "Last virtuoso", "Mephisto among virtuosos" (*Der Letzte der Virtuosen*, Leipzig 1868, p. 16);

² H. Heine, *Lettres Confidentielles*, in: *Revue et Gazette Musicale*, Feb. 4, 1838.

³ Ernest Legouvé, *La Revue et Gazette Musicale*, 25 March 1838 in a review of Chopin's concert

⁴ Léon Escudier, concert review in *La France Musicale*, May 2, 1841 and Feb. 27, 1842

⁵ *La Presse*, Jan. 31, 1848. See M.H. Girard, "Note sur Gautier et Chopin 'Le dernier concert'", in: *La Fortune de Frédéric Chopin*, Dijon 1991, Paris 1994, pp. 56-57

⁶ Franz Liszt, *Chopin*, new edition Paris 1990, pp. 79 and 88

⁷ letter to Jan Matuszynski from Vienna, Dec. 25, 1830; *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina*, ed. B. Sydow, Warsaw 1955, v. 1, p. 161

⁸ J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Frédéric Chopin Esquisses sur la Methode de piano*, Paris 1993, Polish ed. translated by Z. Skowron, *Szkice do Metody gry fortepinowej*, Kraków 1995

capacities) cast some light on the sound aspect of the performing art of that time. There nonetheless remains a certain sphere of mystery, reticence, which does not hurt the way we can figure out the art of Chopin's piano playing, but even adds splendor to it.

In his article *Jak grał Chopin? [How Did Chopin Play?]* (<<Rocznik Chopinowski» [«The Chopin Yearbook»], XX/1992), Professor Jan Ekier notes that on the basis of the surviving descriptions of the artist's playing, particularly, those repeating ones, one can discern certain characteristic pianist tricks as far as articulation, tempi, rhythm, or the use of pedals are concerned. This requires, however, further analysis. In general, the interpretation ideal was for Chopin a combination of a melodious declamation with dramatic expression. For Chopin, singing was decisive with regard to several elements of music. It was the purest expression of feelings, a cantilena of heart as expressed in a *legato cantabile*, ornamented with irregular groups of fioriture, and grounded in chromatically developing harmonies.

Therefore, Chopin would place emphasis - in his own playing, in what he said on different occasions, in what he remarked to his pupils - on the melodiousness of tone. He would say: 'sing whilst you play', or, 'you must sing with your fingers', and recommend taking as the leading performance rules those of singing, listening to the magnificent Italian masters of the *bel canto*, as well as trying to imitate their breath caesuras in the building-up of a phrase. The action of the hand's wrist was approached by Chopin as breathing in singing.

The requirement that the piano should sing was not a novelty whatsoever. Ever since the latter half of the eighteenth century, in any treatise dealing with a keyboard instrument art of playing that got published, the authors would insist on the fact that the instrument was supposed to *sing*. This might sound somewhat paradoxical as regards a plucked instrument such as the harpsichord, or the piano itself, whose action, based on hammers beating the strings, can be considered as a kind of percussion. However, the improvements made to the grand piano in the nineteenth century led to a strict binding of sounds becoming feasible, thanks to a fuller dynamic range, modernized action (also in relation to the pedals) and reinforcement of the instrument as a whole. This could induce the appearance of 'schools of melodious piano playing' - e.g. *L'art du Chant Appliqué au Piano* by Sigismund Thalberg⁹, whereas Kalkbrenner in his *Méthode Pour Apprendre le Pianoforte*¹⁰ recommended certain singers whose art was, to his mind, to serve as a model to follow.

The *bel canto* which fascinated Chopin was not restricted, as translated into the piano language, to series of sounds played in a "tied" manner to realize the cantilena. It was a grand vocal technique that reached its apogee in the last century. But how, in relation to his instrument, did Chopin-the-pianist and Chopin-the-teacher build up the technical grounds? In his *Sketches*, the artist revealed his originality in full, along with a thoroughly Romanticist approach to the problems of sound. The teachers of the time strove to establish a system, whereas relating to the fingering, ornamentation, or reaching the technical basis (at times, even with the use of special appliances), and considered the mastering of one's skills against such a system, achievable by means of arduous exercise, to ensure successful piano playing. Contrary to the period authorities such as Hummel or Kalkbrenner, Chopin's assumption was that the technique is all about the manner of key touching, both as a starting point and the conclusion, thus being the true *art de toucher le piano*. Accordingly, Chopin instructed to play *legato* and slowly. He could not stand a persistent *fortissimo*, naming too-intense sounds 'dog barking', and using the aptly witty phrase 'shooting the doves' about the *staccato*, though he did not eliminate the latter manner from the playing all the same. How he could possibly achieve the unequalled mastery of technically even performance of scales and passages will remain the mystery of his brilliant feeling of sound. We do not know how much time he himself devoted to exercise; we do know; however, that he

⁹ Sigismund Thalberg, *L'art du Chant Appliqué au Piano*, Paris (no date)

¹⁰ Friedrich W.M. Kalkbrenner, *Méthode pour apprendre le pianoforte à l'aide du guide-mains*, Paris [1830], p. 9.

recommended to his pupils not to practice the instrument more than three hours a day, and then, instead of a longer and automatic drilling of the exercises, to contemplate masterworks of music, or even, to go out for a walk. It seems that he composed at the piano, most of all, extemporaneously; only to chisel the musical texts afterwards. In any case, his extraordinary *toucher* was connected with a feeling for elasticity of the entire playing apparatus – “down to the toes,” flexibility unknown, in such a comprehensive form, to the pre-Chopin didactics and keyboard performance practice.¹¹

If anything was insightful or modern in Chopin's approach to the sound, it was certainly making indistinguishable the physical aspect of playing from a thought concentration and hearing control. Chopin referred music on three levels: intellectual, sentimental, and emotional. In his approach to music, he came close to the aesthetic views of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman and George Sand, who stated that the language of music is the most indeterminable one against all the languages of the arts; that music is a truly poetic language, independent of words and written verse in its entirety. It is, thus, poetry in its own right and for its own sake.

What was, then, the poetry of Chopin's piano playing?

- ▶ It was the singing on the piano, which stood for *portamento* and the binding of sounds as well as fioritures, ethereal or distinct figurations, and, the nuanced art of *toucher* as a whole.
- ▶ It was a 'moving of the dynamic's scale', as Professor Mieczyslaw Tomaszewski wrote in his latest monograph on the composer, 'towards the *piano* nuance', which does not mean that Chopin avoided the use of big contrasts; he did not like playing a noisy *fortissimo*. His performing art was marked by strength as well as richness of color shades. His playing was extremely colorful, yet he did avoid exaggerating or being insincerely condescending.
- ▶ One should also speak of a unique *rubato* tempo, a rhythmic-agogic accent wavering between the sounds' projection in the left hand versus the right hand, being subject to analyses until this day. Liszt commented, upon having heard Chopin “a sort of rolling of melody, decanting it like a smooth little skiff above a tempestuous flood,” adding that it was impossible to grasp this “rocking mode” without frequently listening to the Master.
- ▶ Finally, the simplicity should be mentioned, along with the naturalness and a taste for proportion - despite the magnificent gift for improvised playing and introducing performing variants into the same pieces - despite the *rubato* and an expression, the only one of this sort, as Chopin conveyed to his audiences. The Romantic manner of feeling and the approach to the technique of piano *toucher* was coupled by Chopin with classic aesthetic norms. And this was the decisive factor in the establishment of the unattainable dimension of the ideal.

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About the author

Irena Poniatowska, professor of musicology, was a faculty member of the Warsaw University from 1965 to 1993, and currently serves as Visiting Professor in Warsaw and at University of Poznan, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, the Warsaw Academy of Music, and others. Prof. Poniatowska is an author of many articles and a number of books, such as *Beethoven's Treatment of Piano Texture (Faktura fortepianowa Beethowena)*, *Piano Music and Pianism of the 19th century (Muzyka fortepianowa i pianistyka w XIX wieku)*. She has also edited

¹¹ J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher, As Seen By His Pupils*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

a 2-volume material from the 1999 Chopin Conference (*Chopin in the Context of Culture*, published in 2003), as well as Facsimiles of Chopin's Preludes Op. 28 (with commentaries in Polish, English and French, 1999). As a coauthor of the source commentary to the volumes containing Sonata op. 58 and six etudes op. 10 of the *Works by Chopin. Facsimile Edition*. Recently was published her book *In the circle of reception and resonance of music. Chopin sketches* (2008).

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