

## Chopin Today

by Harold C. Schonberg



CHOPIN TODAY? As far as his music goes, there is not much difference from Chopin in the 1840s. Franz Liszt, the greatest pianist of all, the idol of audiences everywhere, was successful in everything except promoting his own music. He watched Chopin's career when the 21-year-old Pole came to Paris in 1831, and they became friends. Liszt played Chopin in public, he studied Chopin's music as it came from the presses, and he learned a great deal from the harmonic and pianistic ideas of the young genius. In the middle of 1840s, he wrote an article in which he said that Chopin already was a classic.

True. Chopin died in 1849, and even then all of his music was firmly in the repertory. It has remained so. Virtually everything that Chopin ever wrote—a few examples of juvenilia do not really count—is still

played. Of how many composers can that be said? Certainly not of Bach. For instance, how many of Bach's 200-plus cantatas get performed today? Certainly not of Mozart. How many of his divertimentos, cassations, and pre-K. 271 concertos do you know? Beethoven comes closer, but even in that great body of music can be found dozens of large-scale works that lie neglected (the Mass in C, for example). So Chopin has come down to us whole, thanks to his amazing genius. He is an example of a composer who knew exactly what he could do and was not to be diverted from his goal. He was a pianist who wrote music, and that music was for the piano. There are no operas, chamber music (a single trio excepted, and a lovely trio it is), symphonies. Only once in his life did he turn to the human voice, with a collection of Polish songs. Only once in his life did he write a cello sonata. Because he composed largely in small forms, there once was a tendency to underestimate him. That day has long gone. It is now realized that he was one of the supreme musical innovators. His harmonic ideas were far in advance of his time. He was flirting even with atonality in such works as the A-minor Prelude. He was using major and minor seconds and ninths. Even so fine a musician as the pianist-composer Ignaz Moscheles could not understand what Chopin was doing. No wonder the conservatives of his day shuddered at his appalling dissonances. But the big men of the period adopted much of his harmonic vocabulary. Chopin influenced the entire last half of the nineteenth century. Liszt took from him. Wagner took from him. Chopin spawned a century of epigones—Heller, Henselt, Moszkowski, the young Scriabin. Very few could escape the mighty hand of the tiny Pole. No composer springs from nowhere. Around the turn of this century, the great conductor Karl Muck was once asked to program a work by a new composer whose ideas were completely new (so he was told). This compser (again he was told) came from nowhere, and his ideas had no precedent. "Strange," said Muck, "where I come from, everybody had a father and a mother." Well, Chopin's antecedents were composers no longer in today's repertory. He heard the then-famous Johann Nepomuk Hummel in Warsaw around 1829, and inbided some of Hummel's approach to keyboard writing. Chopin must have been familiar with some of the prophetic works of Jan Ladislav Dussek. He must have been acquainted with the music of the Moschels.

The last of Fryderyk Chopin's pianos, made by the firm of I. Pleyel, on which he played and composed his works in the years 1848-49

But it was Frederick Chopin, a genius from a European musical outpost named Warsaw, who took the nascent winds of Romanticism from the music of his minor forebears and blew them into a gale that still swirls today. The amazing thing about this young man from Warsaw is that his style seems to have been fully formed before he was 20-not necessarily his music. Creation is, after all, a process of growth, and Chopin's music deepened through the years. A young man of 20 is not going to write an F-minor Ballade, Barcarolle, or Polonaise-Fantaisie.



Yet, before going to Paris, Chopin had in his portfolio a good number of his Etudes, and he never was to write anything better at any time. No composer before Chopin had come near him in sheer originality. It was Chopin more than anybody else-more than Berlioz, more than Liszt (who did not come into flower as a composer until around 1850), more than Mendelssohn, more even than Robert Schumann-who launched Romanticism.

Curiously, Romanticism was a term Chopin did not like. He was a strange, reserved man who shunned the spotlight. He did not care for most of the music he heard in his own time, and his only real musical loves were Bach and Mozart. That could well account for the classic quality ever-present in his ultra-Romantic music. There was a classic strain in Chopin. Is not his first Prelude, in C major, an implied obeisance to the C-major Prelude that opens Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier? If you play the Chopin slowly, you will find a marked resemblance. And there is a kind of counterpoint in Chopin's music-voice against voice-that is curiously Bachian. Unfortunately, most pianists do not know how to bring this out.

Styles change. Every age makes music its own way, in firm conviction that is the only true way. But Chopin remains a constant. Reputations come and go. Certain composers are rediscovered (Mahler is today's prime example). Others lose their impact (Hindemith, Milhaud). But from the beginning, from 1830 until today, Chopin has always been with us, always a part of the active repertory, always one of the supreme challenges to pianists, always beloved by the public. There is no evidence that Chopin ever actively sought fame. But it came to him willy-nilly. The quiet, elegant, snobbish, frail, tubercular genius from Poland turned out to be one of the giants.

**Harold C. Schonberg**, Pulitzer Prize Winner for Criticism, and author of twelve books. Since 1950 a music critic and cultural correspondent for the New York Times.