

Fryderyk Chopin

by W.J. Wagner

On October 17, 1849, the heart of one of the most ardent patriots and the most famous geniuses ceased to beat. Descending from a modest family, son of a member of the Kosciuszko Insurrection and Justyna Krzyzanowska, Frederic Chopin was born in Zelazowa Wola, not far from Warsaw, and with all the strength of his warm feelings fell in love with his Fatherland. Unusually sensitive on the beauty, both of the nature and the achievements of the national culture, from his very childhood Chopin knew how to transform the subtleties of the Polish spirit into enchanting sounds of music - the ideas and sufferings of the nation, its endeavors, aspirations and hopes.

Physically weak, Chopin was a giant by his spirit. He grew on the foundation of Polish sentimentalism and romanticism, but he did not limit his nativity to a mere incarnation of these features into the wonderful world of tones. He was a creator who felt and experienced pain and sorrow for millions. Purely Sarmatian motives - popular in the mazurkas and aristocratic in the polonaises - were elevated by him to the heights of harmony and artistic expression in the way nobody could do it previously. While they did not lose anything from their Polish character, they worked in the direction of purification of the human soul everywhere. There is no human being having at least a touch of sensitivity and ability to appreciate the beauty who would not be deeply impressed and moved by the music of Chopin. It is so unique and different from the masterpieces of all other masters of music, that in spite of the fact that it influenced many composers and that a great number of them tried to imitate it, it remains something quite exceptional and unparalleled in the history of the world culture. Every passage in the compositions of Chopin is Chopinian - it cannot be falsified or replaced.



A copy of the portrait by Charles-Henri Lehmann dating from 1847



Nicholas
Chopin,
Fryderyk's
father



Justyna
Krzyzanowska,
Fryderyk's
mother



Ludwika, the
composer's
eldest sister



Izabela, the
composer's
younger sister



Emilia, the
composer's
youngest sister

Not only the mazurkas and polonaises of Chopin were an expression of Polish spirit. He was an incarnation of the national genius, and, with a few exceptions, he could not - and did not want to - forsake the Polish motives in other of his masterpieces, be it the Revolutionary Etude, composed when the news about the beginning of the "November Uprising" against the Russians reached Chopin, or the nocturnes, expressing his deep nostalgia caused by the necessary exile from his oppressed land which he had to leave, escaping from Russian persecution. And in spite of the fact that connoisseurs of music early recognized his unusual talent and originality, the great master went through difficult times abroad. Some concerts in Paris did not live up to expectations and he had to earn his living by giving piano lessons. A person whose soul was the reflection of the soul of a tortured and suffering nation could not be happy. Thus, most of his compositions are sad, similarly to the fate of his country. However, from time to time some more cheerful tones may be heard, tones of the Polish eagerness to live which may be driven under the surface by harsh realities, but not obliterated; tones of protest and rebellion; tones of hope, and certainty that a better future is forthcoming.

Therefore, a full understanding of Chopin may be experienced only by a few individuals besides the Poles - Poles who, to use the expression of Dmowski, live by the life of their nation "by all the broad side of their soul", who know its history, traditions and endeavors, who in every passage of Chopin's music discover a connection with the feelings and experiences of the Polish nation. Therefore a great composer Schumann, who understood Chopin's music, said: "This is a cannon hidden under flowers; if the Northern autocrat (the Russian tsar) knew what an enemy threatens him even in most simple melodies of the mazurkas - he would damn this music." For this reason, soon after the invasion of Poland in 1939 by the Teutonic hordes, the German occupants prohibited to play Chopin... Again for this reason, when Chopin himself created compositions independent from his Polish character, for instance in the Italian "Tarantella", the result was pleasant but not reaching the pinnacle of the artistic achievement.

However, the melodies of Chopin, grown on the background of the Polish spirit, conquered the whole world, found their way under the roofs of all music lovers, and became favorite selections of concert programs. The disarmed Polish nation fought with them, used them to promote the interest and sympathy for its country and to gain the hearts for the Polish cause. And Chopin's music continues to be - and will be forever - the most outstanding creation of human genius and a bloodless but potent weapon of Polishness, requesting justice for its own nation and the others. To quote Norwid: it contains "all Poland to the top - in the perfection of its fate - taken in the rainbow of enchantment."



The Church of the Holy Cross where Fryderyk Chopin's heart is kept