

The Many Shades of Genius

by Tadeusz Andrzej Zielinski

IN THE ART OF SOUND, the beauty of Chopin's music is an exceptional phenomenon—something bordering on the miraculous. This conviction is curiously at odds with long-established schematic notions on the subject of greatness in music. Therefore, a spontaneous delight and admiration for Chopin's genius is often put in check by a harsh reflection, that perhaps he was not so great a genius after all, since he composed (almost) exclusively for the piano, and indeed only miniatures, dances and poetic fantasias, instead of a few dozens of sonatas; a composer who wrote no symphonies, operas, oratorios or masses? Such reservations, which are ultraconservative in nature, have survived even to this day. In a book published after World War II Arthur Hedley wrote, "He does not rank highest in the hierarchy of musicians? nobody would claim that? yet he enjoys what only few have: he is one and high above any level, raised in his own closed domain."



If that is the case (one is tempted to ask), what is the matter with this hierarchy? One should add, that the above-mentioned reluctance is also present in the two-volume *History of Music*, recently published by Joseph and Krystyna Chominski. They did not even think it fit to discuss Chopin in a separate chapter, the way they discussed Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven, not to mention Handel or Bach. Yet, as soon as one becomes free from the outdated schematic way of thinking, which conceives of musical genius in the context of classical models of 18th and early 19th-century German music, one sees Chopin as one of the greatest creators of music that ever lived, someone most certainly deserving that "highest rank." He deserves it not only for the stunning charm of his works, but also for the particular historical role of his art.

It is true that Chopin concentrated on piano music, but he was the first composer ever, who could afford to do so: he developed the piano into an instrument of unfathomable range of possibilities, forcing it to spawn a new dazzling world of sounds, which nobody had dreamt of before, and produced in that world a legion of masterpieces against which pales the magnificence of many a symphony. While he was seemingly restricting the performing apparatus, Chopin emphasized with unheard-of strength the element of music, which became so significant in the future (right into our own century): the sound. Starting with Chopin it is difficult to think of music as an abstract structure merely "conveyed" by instruments. From his time on, music has been much more closely tied with the concrete fabric of sound: its color, register, the sensual nature of sound, and the way it is produced.

Yet, the new unprecedented sound of Chopin's is not only inherent in the specific treatment of the instrument and in the sparkling pianistic technique, but also in the sound language itself: in Chopin's harmony. It is enough to hear the first few bars of *Etude in E major, Op. 10 No. 3* to realize the importance of the change that had come about in the perception of harmony: Chopin's harmony is separated by a deep gulf from the harmonic sound of Beethoven's and Schubert's works. Chopin's chords don't function only as a set of tonal tensions and resolutions, which accompany a tune; they stun listeners with their individual colorful sound. Chopin discovered that dissonance, apart from its traditional tension-creating function, can be beautiful by itself; indeed it can entice listeners with its unique sensual charm. That discovery had far-reaching consequences. It inspired the impressionism of Debussy, who clearly derived his view of harmony intertwined with sound and color from Chopin's

oeuvre. It also caused more radical changes in 20th-century sound language. In Chopin's works we will come across dissonances that are velvety and ear-caressing, or others that are sharp and shrill, to recall but the Prelude in A minor, a number of mazurkas ? starting with the first published Opuses 6 and 7 (the extraordinary middle part of Mazurka in B flat major!), the Etude in E minor, Op. 25, or the chilling climaxes just before the end of the Scherzos Nos. 1 and 2.

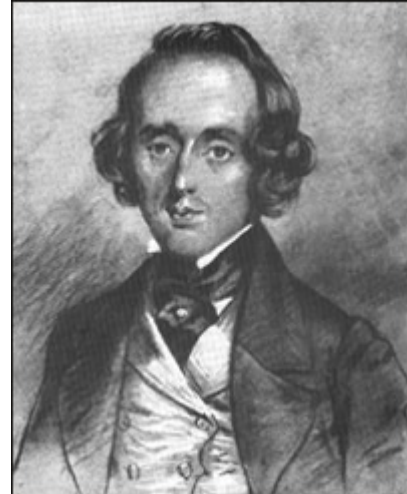


For many reasons Chopin's work is a landmark in the history of music; a milestone on road of its development. His often extremely burgeoning chromaticism gave birth to Wagner's (Tristan and Isolde.) His unusual modulations, and his sudden key changes in the middle of a phrase (recall the opening of the Fantasie in F minor) abolish rules preached in harmony textbooks. The introduction of new scales in the mazurkas (and elsewhere, i.e. in the Etude F minor, Op. 10 or the Nocturnes in G minor Op. 15 and B major Op. 62) brakes down the previously uniform major-minor system and opens the door into other broad worlds of sound. Similarly, expression, the manner of shaping phrases, the method of constructing form ? place Chopin's oeuvre as a dividing point in the music of the previous three

centuries: an abrupt turn initiated by the composer of ballads, scherzos, of the Sonata in B flat minor or the Polonaise-Fantasie will launch the late Romantic art of composition into a new swirling adventure, drilling new depths of unusual expression.

However, this paramount importance of Chopin in the development of music seems a secondary circumstance compared with the contents of his work, the ingenuity of his melodic and harmonic ideas, his own unique, distinct style. The originality of his poetics, which impressed his contemporaries so strongly, was an unprecedented fact from the very beginning: no composer before him had distinguished himself with such individual and personal style. That impression has held on to our times: we recognize Chopin's music and its uniqueness right away after a few bars and chords, unlike any other music. Looking through music history we can try various comparisons, search for analogies or relationships between composers who are centuries apart. Chopin has no analogy. You will neither find a master of a similar personality, nor a composer embracing a related concept of beauty. Considering the exceptional nature of his genius, Chopin certainly belongs among the high priests of European cultural heritage ? Shakespeare, Dante, Michelangelo or Rembrandt. In Chopin's music, individuality ? perhaps the most important sigh of greatness in art ? goes together with mastery of compositional skill. He was a magnificent improviser of great imagination, yet while preparing a piece for publication, he never relied on imagination alone. Instead, he gave much care to the internal logic of the piece, honing each and every detail to perfection. Therefore, the beauty of his themes always goes together with perfect construction, worthy of the greatest masters of musical form. This is best seen in his etudes and preludes, although it applies to his general mode of composing. The listener often gets carried away by the pianistic brilliance of his pieces, but if we take a closer look at them; if we try to play the rich virtuoso figurations slowly, we will apprehend the musical perfection of their structure, the logic of every note, the importance of every successive sound ? just like in the compositions of Bach.

Chopin is as much a master of transforming themes and motifs, as was Beethoven ? who is considered the model of ingenuity in constructing developments for the main movements of sonatas and symphonies. No less ingenious and artful are Chopin's sonatas (including the cello sonata), while the development of the Allegro from the B flat minor Sonata is one of the most magnificent and dramatic developments ever in the history of sonata form. Brilliant developmental sections can also be found in other works, for instance in ballades (especially the third one, in A flat major) or even in smaller pieces like the "polyphonic" Mazurka in C sharp minor, Op. 50). Apart from interesting ways of transforming and developing motifs, Chopin delights in generating numerous variants of entire themes, occasionally producing utterly transformed sounds and expression of the originally presented tune. In the Ballade in G minor, for example, the two main themes keep recurring, each time in a slightly different light and surprisingly different shapes, to the extent of never allowing the original version to reappear.



It was in his ballades that Chopin produced the most striking creation of a new form, that differed from the classical one: the course of the piece, along with theme transformations, creates an emotional plot, much like in a drama or a poem, yet with no words or notions. In that plot there is no going back to the point of departure (unlike in the classical recapitulation), because the dramatic thread keeps unfolding up to its eventual conclusion. This way the classical idea of architectural symmetry (of the A B A type) is juxtaposed with a Romantic idea of a poetic "story," even though in either case we remain within the realm of music. Such a musical story with clearly emotional meaning is unfolded by Chopin not only in his ballades but in many other pieces, such as the Polonaise-Fantasia, the Barcarolle, the Impromptu in F sharp major, the Nocturnes in D flat major, Op. 27 and in C minor, Op. 48, or some mazurkas styled as poems. Stories of emotional substance are also the gist of Chopin's great sonatas.

The extraordinary diversity of emotions, moods and their transformations in the work are yet one more great feature and value of Chopin's music, that distinguishes it from musical styles known to us. Other great composers of Romanticism (and even more so of earlier periods) seem much more homogeneous and restricted in their types of expression. Chopin in his emotional diversity presents a panorama so broad that it is hard to grasp it all. With regard to that, the set of 24 Preludes Op. 28 ? that superb guide to the human soul and its many dark nooks ? is an unheard-of phenomenon. Diversity of moods and emotions is seen even in a genre that, you would think, is typically bound up with just one type of expression, namely in the nocturne. Yet actually, each of his twenty nocturnes presents a different emotional countenance, to say nothing of the transformations and evolutions within each work. Chopin's style, in general, is rife with emotions and their nuances. Still, there is a margin for individual feelings, interpretational freedom, personal choices in selecting and underlining one or another feature of a composition or a phrase. The composer himself permitted various subtle inflections in performances of the same work, and indeed he was delighted with Liszt's interpretation of the Etudes, which was quite different from his own. These liberties have their limits, of course, as there are always the dangers of producing a perfunctory interpretation, obliterating features that define the work's value, or utterly misunderstanding the piece.

The span of ideas and emotional states in Chopin's music seems boundless. His

works owed their earliest and easiest conquest of audiences hearts to their lyrical and melodic merits. The charm of those lyrical tunes is indeed unique and individual, starting with the early Concerto in F minor or the Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 9 to the subtle cantilena of the "late" Chopin in the Sonata in B minor or in the last Waltz in C sharp minor. But Chopin's "soft" lyricism has many different shades. One in particular deserves attention because of its novelty and bravery: it is a kind of music that evokes a peculiar state of mind reminiscent of a dream or perhaps of entranced meditation. This deliberately static and monotonous music contemplates a sound or a chord, and simultaneously carries us into a new dimension and a new emotional state. Chopin introduced this expressive device for a first time at the end of the Introduction to the Variation on a Mozart Theme, Op. 2. Later, it reappeared in the beautiful conclusions of the three Nocturnes: F sharp major Op. 15, D flat major Op. 27, and B major Op. 62, but above all in the Andante Spianato of the Grande Polonaise in E flat major and in the Berceuse.



The other extreme of Chopin's music features savage storms and hurricanes, as in the F major Ballade, the Etude in C minor, Op. 10 (also known as Revolutionary), in the A minor and C minor Prelude. There is also humor, wit, irony, sarcasm, especially in the early rondos, in the Krakowiak, the ecossaises, the finales of the both concertos, the Etudes in G flat major, Op. 10 and in E minor, Op. 25, the G major Prelude and in many mazurkas. At times, Chopin's style involves profound philosophical reflection, if you recall his Prelude in C sharp minor, Op. 45, or the great central episode of the third movement of the B minor Sonata. From some works emanates a tremendous vital energy, power and optimism, as can be seen in the final part of the mentioned Sonata,

Etudes in C major, C sharp minor and F major, Op. 10, or Polonaise in A flat major, Op. 53.

In a discussion of emotions pervading Chopin's music one cannot possibly ignore those émigré reflections, concerning Poland and its fortunes. They are, of course, expressed in the national style of the mazurkas and polonaises, but also have more profound manifestations. Those great patriotic emotions, which were put into words by the composer in his letters and personal notes, deeply impressed his music. Yet, the ability to recognize and feel them depends on the pianist's and the listener's intuition and sensitivity.

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