

# The Pianist

*He killed all of the pianists here to death, the whole of Paris has lost its mind.*

Antoni Orłowski to family, 9 March 1832

*No one ever touched the keys so.*

Ferdinand Hiller in memoirs, 1868

Chopin did not leave any recordings, as he could not. We cannot hear how he played. But the reports of those who did hear him play – so many we could fill an entire anthology with them – can carry us back to those times and those places. They can give us a point of entry to imagine and try to reconstruct that which is forever lost.

Maurycy Mochnacki, a listener and competent critic, was the first to try and capture that playing in words, three times. First and foremost, he stated concisely: “Chopin does not play like others.”<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm von Lenz, in his later recollection, expressed a similar thought: “As a pianist, he was a phenomenon of unparalleled originality.”<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand Hiller – despite the passing of years – was continually seized by his first impressions. “His miraculous playing,” he wrote many years after his first experience and hearing, “I will never forget to the last sigh. No one ever touched the keys so.”<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, a closer description of his playing was attempted. In the opinion of Ignacy Moscheles, with whom Chopin played four hands, “He proceeded like a singer, occupied with expressing feelings.”<sup>4</sup> Anton Schindler had no doubt that “his playing is not calculated for applause...It does not impress with strength of sound or trinketry.”<sup>5</sup> As Hiller remembered, “one felt the charm of his sound without the presence of the weight imposed by Liszt, Thalberg and others.”<sup>6</sup> Comparisons were unavoidable; quite simply they were on everyone’s lips in Paris.

Among Chopin’s very first impressions, after his arrival on the Seine, were such comments as, “So, I don’t know if there is someplace with more pianists than Paris, I don’t know where there are more donkeys and virtuosos than here.”<sup>7</sup> He only had to wait a short time before his own playing started to be compared to the greatest, and then constantly so, like a refrain. Heine was brave enough to put forth a view which could have been amazing, given the endless fame of Liszt: “The brilliant pianist [Liszt] is here again and is giving concerts [...] Next to him, all pianists disappear with the exception of one: Chopin, the Rafael of the piano.”<sup>8</sup> Balzac concisely expressed his experience in a black and white *bon mot*: “Do not judge Liszt till you have heard Chopin. The Hungarian is a devil; the Pole an angel.”<sup>9</sup>

In one review after a concert it is possible to read the opinion of a dry critic, Michael Bourges, trying to define more closely the differences between the most famous: “Liszt and Thalberg, as we know, call forth a great expression, yet Chopin does the same, but not in a noisy (*tumultueux*) manner, and this is because he pulls strings in the heart more intimate and delicate.”<sup>10</sup> Ernst Legouvé’s comment (of which he was reminded and which did him no good), given in a mercilessly witty way, went straight to the point: “To the question, who is the top pianist, Liszt or Thalberg, there is only one answer: Chopin.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, it should be remembered that Chopin learned piano with Żywny, a violinist, and Kapellmeister. When he appeared in Paris, it was believed that he was at least a pupil of John Field. He was happy when people discovered in him “Cramer’s playing and Field’s touch,” despite the fact that he had never heard either of these masters. If he had someone after whom to model his playing, it was rather, and only, Maria Szymanowska and Johann Nepomuk Hummel. He himself was thrilled by Kalkbrenner’s playing: “He is one person for whom I shall not lace his shoes, I am not worthy.”<sup>12</sup> It is astonishing how far he allowed himself to be fascinated: “You would not believe,” he confessed to Woyciechowski, “how much I was interested in Herz, Liszt, Hiller, etc. They are all zero compared to Kalkbrenner. I promise you, I played liked Herz, but I would like to play like Kalkbrenner. If Paganini is perfection, then Kalkbrenner is his parallel, but in a completely different style. It is difficult to describe

his *kalm*, his charming touch – wonderfully even – and his mastery of painting in every note; he is a giant trampling over Herz, Czerny, etc., and at the same time, me.”<sup>13</sup>

What was amazing about Chopin was that he was able to shake himself out of this asphyxiation. He took from the Parisian master that which complemented his own “pianism,” allowing both to remain themselves. Soon Kalkbrenner would be sending him his own pupils to be refined.

There could be one more surprise for him. His presentation concert, in February 1832, conquered Paris. Immediately he existed as a pianist of the first rank. And in the moment, when it seemed that he was at his peak, in 1835 – after one concert, about which the reviews did not please him – he withdrew from playing. In this one grand and celebratory good-will concert, given in the hall of the Théâtre des Italiens, he played a little too quietly to make an impression on the somewhat accidental audience.

His decision to withdraw from the grand stage was *not* accidental. From then on, the “composing pianist” became a “composer whom it was possible to hear from time to time as a pianist, but not as a pianist of the stage, a chamber musician.” From that time he only gave three public concerts in Paris: 1841, 1842 and 1848. These were recitals given in the Salle Pleyel, which seated more or less 300 people. “It will be like I am at home, and nearly only familiar faces will meet my eye.”<sup>14</sup> He did not like crowds; he was unable to cope with them as did Liszt. When he played – as was noticed – he played as if directly for each of the listeners. “The listener is alone with you Sir, even amongst a crowd,” as the Marquis de Custine gave his impressions.<sup>15</sup>

He did not allow himself to be easily persuaded to give a recital. George Sand had cause to joke – not without malice – about Chopin’s fears and inhibitions: “He doesn’t want posters, he doesn’t want programmes, he doesn’t want crowds of public, he doesn’t want it spoken about,” she said to Pauline Viardot, a mutual friend. “So many things make him afraid that I would propose him to play without candles and without an auditorium, just a dumb piano.”<sup>16</sup>

At a memorable concert, on 26 April 1841, gathered, as Franz Liszt put it in his brilliant, apparently superlative review, “aristocracy of all types: blood, money, talent and beauty.” In addition to the *Ballade in F Major*, Chopin played a series of preludes and etudes, mazurkas and nocturnes. He had to encores the *Ballade* and two *Etudes*. “Feeling better in private circles than among the adventurous public,” wrote Liszt, “he could show himself as he is, that is, like an elegiac poet, deep, pure and a dreamer. He had no need to beat anyone down or to amaze anyone; it was more important to him to rather arouse delicate sympathy than noisy flights and – let’s state this immediately – he achieved that completely.”<sup>17</sup>

A little unbelievable, but George Sand saw the success of her friend from a particular perspective. She reported on him in a manner that gives cause to think: “In two hours by hammering with his two hands he drew to his pockets six thousand and a few hundred francs, amongst the bravos and encores and stamping of feet of the most beautiful women of Paris,” adding, “He assured himself a quiet summer.”<sup>18</sup>

A year later he was requested again and in very early spring gave another concert for a group of not-accidental listeners in Salle Pleyel. This time he played his new *Ballade (A-flat Major)* and as before, the new series of etudes, mazurkas and nocturnes. Two people close to Chopin agreed also to take part: Pauline Viardot and August Franchomme. And again it was a huge success. A report by Louis Escoudier in “La France Musicale” gives us an impression of the scale of this success: “Chopin’s inspiration is a poetic nature, sensitive and naïve, without breakneck throwing of his hands and diabolical variations; he wants to speak to the heart, not to the eyes, he wants to love, not amaze. Look: the public collapses in ecstasy and delight; Chopin has reached his peak.”<sup>19</sup> George Sand again saw this event in her own particular way. The concert was not only “beautiful and dazzling,” but also “lucrative, like last year.” It generated 5000 francs of income, “something quite unique in Paris.”<sup>20</sup>

Outside of Paris, Chopin performed publicly and semi-publicly very rarely. In fact, both times were in friendly situations. He performed in 1833, with success, in Tours in a benefit concert for cellist August Franchomme, and in 1838 in Rouen to huge success for the benefit of Conductor Antoni Orłowski. In the penultimate year of his life he would perform in England and Scotland for purely economic reasons. This was playing to earn a living.

Chopin's pianistic activities followed two separate paths from the moment that he gave up his career as a concert pianist, as a virtuoso like Liszt, Moscheles or Thalberg, travelling the length and breadth of Europe. One strand was his supremely rare concerts in Salle Pleyel, recitals for "not accidental," as Liszt defined them, public. Chopin only played his own pieces at these. The second strand is his performing at private salons of a different social level. Here he played not only his own music, though this is what everyone wanted to hear above all else; he allowed himself to be heard playing pieces by people close to him from the whole grand repertoire, ranging from Bach, Mozart and Beethoven to Weber, Hummel and Schubert. In less formal situations he liked to play pieces for four hands, particularly duets with his female pupils.

He had a legion of them. Attempts have been made to count his pupils, among whom young ladies – titled and beautiful – dominated. Up to 150 have been counted. "Chopin's pupils felt more than adoration for him," commented one of the last of them after many years, A. F. Marmontel, "rather it was a real cult."<sup>21</sup> Although sometimes he lost his temper teaching, these lessons had their own name: "leçons orageuses."

According to Marcelina Czartoryska, "Chopin's whole theory of style could be condensed to showing pupils the analogy between music and language."<sup>22</sup> Music for him was speech, of course – sung speech. He advised his pupils to take lessons from singers, masters of *bel canto*, and also to study theory and analyses of pieces which they were putting into their pianistic workshop. It was important to not only understand their form, but also "the type of feelings and psychological processes which made up the expression."<sup>23</sup> He discouraged his pupils from exaggerating the number of hours they would practice. "He was afraid of them becoming stupid."<sup>24</sup>

Several of Chopin's students marked their presence in the history of the piano, each in their own different way. A few – such as Georges Mathias, Adolf Gutmann, Thomas Tellefsen or Carl Filtsch (who died young) – became virtuosi. Others – among whom in particular were Friederike Müller-Streicher, Camille O'Méara-Dubois and Karol Mikuli – became consummate and experienced teachers. And still others – such as Marcelina Czartoryska, Jane Stirling or Maria Kalergis – cultivated the art of the piano, as high-born and highly educated amateurs. Almost everyone thought it their duty, at least in a few words, to capture and pass on the image of Chopin and his playing to their descendents, just as they remembered him. And then their pupils, and pupils of their pupils, added to that image their own – no longer direct, though derived from tradition, inherited but also enriched by their own subjective interpretations – vision of Chopin.

It is paradoxical that all of these different visions may be, at the same time, true. "One may say," said Paul Dukas, "that Chopin's music appeared like as a resonance of the soul of the piano."<sup>25</sup> Artur Rubinstei n put his understanding of Chopin in the sentence, "Above all, he made the piano sing."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Maurycy Mochnacki, "Kurier Polski," Warsaw 22 Mar. 1830.

<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm von Lenz, *Die grossen Pianoforte-Virtuoson unserer Zeit aus persönlicher Bekanntschaft*, Berlin 1872.

<sup>3</sup>Ferdinand Hiller, *Briefe an eine Ungenannte*, Cologne 1877, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup>Charlotte Moscheles, *Aus Moscheles' Leben*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1873, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>See: Ferdynand Hoesick, *Chopin. Życie i twórczość*, vol. 2, Kraków 1965, p. 418.

<sup>6</sup>F. Hiller, *Briefe an eine Ungenannte*, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Chopin to Tytus Woyciechowski, Paris 12 Dec. 1831.

<sup>8</sup>Heinrich Heine, *Musikalische Saison im Paris 1841*, "Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung" from 20 Apr. 1841.

<sup>9</sup>Honoré Balzac, letter to Ewelina Hańska, Paris 28 May 1843.

- <sup>10</sup> Michael Bourges, "Revue et Gazette Musicale," Paris 27 Feb. 1842.
- <sup>11</sup> Ernst Legouvé, in the review of the concert in Rouen, "Revue et Gazette Musicale," Paris 25 Mar. 1838.
- <sup>12</sup> Chopin to Norbert Kumelski, Paris 18 Nov. 1831.
- <sup>13</sup> Chopin to Tytus Woyciechowski, Paris 12 Dec. 1831.
- <sup>14</sup> Chopin to family, Paris 11 Feb. 1848.
- <sup>15</sup> Astolphe de Custine to Chopin, Paris 18 Mar. 1837.
- <sup>16</sup> George Sand to Pauline Viardot, Paris 18 Apr. 1841.
- <sup>17</sup> Franz Liszt, "Revue et Gazette Musicale," Paris 2 May 1841.
- <sup>18</sup> George Sand to Hyppolite Chatiron, Paris 26 Apr. 1841.
- <sup>19</sup> Louis Escoudier, "La France Musicale," Paris 27 Feb. 1842.
- <sup>20</sup> George Sand to Hyppolite Chatiron, Paris 4 Mar. 1842.
- <sup>21</sup> Antoine François Marmontel, *Les pianistes célèbres*, Paris 1878.
- <sup>22</sup> Marcelina Czartoryska according to Cecylia Działyńska, *Jak grać Chopina?* "Kurier Poznański" 24 Nov. 1892.
- <sup>23</sup> Karol Mikuli, written by Raul Koczalski, in *F. Chopin. Betrachtungen, Skizzen, Analysen*, Cologne 1936.
- <sup>24</sup> Camille O'Méara-Dubois, *Ze wspomnień o Chopinie*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany," 1896, No. 48.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul Dukas, *Les écrits sur la musique*, Paris 1948.
- <sup>26</sup> Artur Rubinstein, introduction to: Kazimierz Wierzyński, *Życie Chopina*, New York 1953.

>>>>>>

This is an excerpt from the book "Chopin" by Prof. Mieczysław Tomaszewski, BOSZ Publishing House, Warsaw, 2009, [www.bosz.com.pl](http://www.bosz.com.pl). Exclusive US distributor: Theodore Presser Company, [www.presser.com](http://www.presser.com)

#### About the Author

**Prof. Mieczysław Tomaszewski** is one of the most distinguished Polish scholars specializing in Chopin, musicologist and music theoretician, Head of the Department of Musical Work Theory and Interpretation at the Academy of Music in Kraków. His numerous publication on Frederic Chopin has been translated into seven languages. Mieczysław Tomaszewski has lectured on Chopin and Polish music in Paris, Dijon, La Châtre (Nohant), Valldemosa, Mariánské Lázně, Vienna, Graz, Garming, Dresden, Leipzig, Hamburg, Essen, Düsseldorf, Chemnitz, Aarhus, Vilnius, Bratislava, London and New York.