



Putting the Dance Back Into Mazurka

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photograph of Andrzej Wasowski by Edvard Lieber

Should a mazurka be played three beats to the bar: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, as in a waltz? "Of course," many pianists would say; to doubt it would be like doubting that "obvious" should end with an s. Chopin wrote his mazurkas in three, after all, and great Chopin players like Arthur Rubinstein have played them that way.

But Chopin, evidently, did not. Some who heard him play mazurkas report that his rhythm was closer to two or four beats to the bar, although you would notice only if you counted time. Reluctantly, the composer admitted as much, saying that his playing reflected "the national character of the dance."

This might seem a specialized concern, but it points up one of the problems with that credo of 20th-century classical performance, faithfulness to the score. Recapturing Chopin's not-quite-three, not-quite-four rhythm requires something else: you also have to know how to dance mazurkas. Indeed, in these works - the composer's "supreme achievement in small form," according to the pianist and scholar Charles Rosen - Chopin also exploits other aspects of the dance, like heel-clicking leaps, represented by offbeat accents. To complicate matters, there are a number of different types of mazurkas, and Chopin wouldn't hesitate to use several in a single piece.

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How might mazurkas sound when played with a sense of their rustic idioms? An idea can be gained from the reissue of all 51 Chopin mazurkas performed by Andrzej Wasowski (Concord Concerto CCD-42036; two CD's), one of two posthumous Chopin releases featuring the pianist.

Wasowski, who died in 1993, at 74, was one of those artists the broad international public neglects but critics and colleagues rave about. In 1946, *Time* magazine called him "the greatest Chopin interpreter of modern times," and 20 years later, the Polish violinist Henryk Szeryng concurred.

The reception of Wasowski's mazurka performances fits the same pattern. William Zakarisen of *The New York Daily News* called the pianist's 1981 presentation of the mazurkas at Alice Tully Hall "one of the most revelatory Chopin recitals heard in decades," but the recording, made a year earlier, went largely unnoticed. Listening to the reissue makes such neglect seem altogether mysterious. Wasowski had danced mazurkas since his boyhood in Poland, and it shows.

A prime example is Opus 33, Number 3, the piece Giacomo Meyerbeer declared to be in two when he heard it in Chopin's studio. In response, a witness reports, "Chopin almost yelled, 'It's in 3/4!' -- he who never normally raised his voice above a murmur." But neither composer was quite

right, the witness goes on to suggest: Chopin did play it in three, but the third beat lost some of its value. That is exactly how Wasowski plays it.

Another high point of the set is Opus 17, Number 4. The piece's quiet sadness comes across movingly, and again, its rhythm is idiomatic: the middle beat is gently elongated, as other sources indicate it should be. Both of these numbers have occasionally been recorded this way, but here, all 51 mazurkas benefit from the same degree of rhythmic savvy.

Yet there is more to these performances than just getting the rhythms right. The coda of Opus 56, Number 3, includes an arabesque that explores an eerie harmony; Wasowski spins it out with otherworldly tone and feeling. And although he knew more than most pianists about the dance origins of the Chopin pieces, he often seems to hear them "as nostalgic and idealized reflections of a vanished past" (as the English critic James Methuen-Campbell describes them).

Still, Wasowski is never flat-footed. Even in the haunting Opus 68, Number 4, Chopin's last composition, he retains an element of dance. He says in the CD booklet that the piece is a kujawiak, a particular type of mazurka, and that it has a "quasi-improvised mood." In fact, parts of many mazurkas should sound improvised, and in this set they often do. Wasowski can make an embellishment sound as if he had dashed it off, an astonishing modulation sound as if he had just discovered it. Early in Opus 33, Number 4, when the melody suddenly appears in the bass in an unexpected key, he plays it as if on the spur of the moment.

CONCORD HAS ALSO issued a set never before released, Wasowski's 1989 recording of Chopin's 21 nocturnes (CCD-42044; two CD's). Although knowledge of Polish folk idioms plays an infrequent role in the interpretation of these works, Wasowski brings other strengths to bear. He has a legato that Rubinstein called legendary, an unusually wide palette of tone colors and a command of inner voices, which in these performances neither get submerged nor stick out unnaturally.

Other aspects of his playing may prove more controversial, particularly the tempos, which tend to be slow and flexible. Some listeners will object, for example, when Wasowski slows for highly decorated passages. But in some nocturnes, subtle inflections of tempo and dynamics allow the pianist to heighten the mood. In Opus 37, Number 2, a brief slowing at the end of the second bar creates an emotional link to the cascade that follows. Such inflections also help him reveal depths in the "smaller" numbers. Pianists often treat Opus 32, Number 2, as froufrou; Wasowski treats it as a drama.

Like the mazurka rhythms, these touches are, of course, deviations from the printed score. Although Wasowski revered the score and attended to it with great care, he knew Chopin's idioms too well to think that the score could capture everything that mattered.

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