

Prof. Piotr GLIŃSKI: Polish to the core. On Frédéric Chopin

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“Chopin encapsulates everything we were denied: colourful noblemen’s robes, gilded sashes, sombre *czamarka* coats, four-cornered caps, the rattling of noble’s sabres, the glint of peasant’s scythes, the moaning coming from a wounded chest, the rebellion of a shackled spirit, cemetery crosses, roadside village churches, the prayers of worried hearts, the pain of enslavement, the cursing of tyrants and the happy song of victory,” said Ignacy Jan Paderewski in 1910 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Frédéric Chopin’s birth, giving a pithy description of the meaning Chopin’s music had for the enslaved and partitioned Polish nation as well as its extraordinary immersion in Polish culture.

The strong national component in Chopin’s works was obvious to his contemporaries from the very beginning. As early as 1837, as he was commenting on the rich gamut of European traditions from which Chopin’s compositions stemmed (he recognised in them the elegance and charm of French culture as well as the “romantic depth” derived from German culture), Heinrich Heine underlined: “Poland gave him a knight’s temperament and the pain of history.” “Chopin contains two figures,” wrote the Paris reviewer Ernest Legouvé after one of the composer’s concerts, “a patriot and an artist. The soul of the former enlivens the genius of the latter.” Wilhelm von Lenz, who studied under Chopin for a time, said: “He gave Poland; in the music he wrote there was Poland.”

Our attitude to Chopin’s Polishness is often based on a stereotype: we have got used to associate it only with the traces of folk stylisations present in his music, citing the example of mazurkas. However, it was already the author of Chopin’s first biography, the composer and virtuoso pianist Ferenc Liszt, who observed that Chopin had become the “embodiment of the poetic spirit of the entire nation,” not because “he set his pieces to the rhythm of polonaises, mazurkas and cracoviennes and named many of them after folk dances”, far from it. “He used the [folk] form only to express a certain way of feeling that was more common in his country than elsewhere [...]. His preludes, etudes, and especially nocturnes, his scherzos and concertos – the shortest compositions as well as the most prominent works – are imbued with the same, unchanging type of gentle sensitivity even if it is expressed with varying levels of intensity and in a thousand varieties.”

Yes, the national qualities of Chopin’s music run much deeper than folklore inspirations. “Why, being so very Polish and rooted in Polish culture,” wondered the Polish music critic Bohdan Pociąg, “is Chopin’s <language of sounds> so universal and understandable in all the countries and continents of the modern world? What is the (substantial) essence of the music’s Polishness?”

Over the years, the impression of the essentially Polish nature of Chopin’s music would only grow stronger. It was beautifully summed up in 1865 by Cyprian Kamil Norwid in his poem “Chopin’s Grand Piano”: “And therein was Poland, captured/ At history’s all-perfect zenith/ Like an arc of rapture.” In the following century there was no shortage of voices recognising the national tones ringing in Chopin’s works – one strong opinion on the subject was expressed by the German philosopher, sociologist, music theoretician and composer Theodor W. Adorno: “You have to stop your ears not to hear Chopin’s *Fantasy in F minor* as a kind of tragically decorative song of triumph saying that Poland was not yet lost and that [...] some day she would rise again.”

Polish yet European, homely yet universal, emotional yet artistically perfect – Chopin’s music may be understood in many ways. Performed by the world’s best pianists, it is now listened to by tens of millions of people from Japan to North Canada who are not necessarily music enthusiasts. Having lost nothing of its relevance, Polishness and universality, it remains the best showcase of our Polish culture.

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