

**GOING BEHIND THE NOTES: EXPLORING THE GREAT PIANO COMPOSERS  
AN 8-PART LECTURE CONCERT SERIES**

**CHOPIN: POET OF THE PIANO**

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## CHOPIN: POET OF THE PIANO

PERFORM: Nocturne in E Minor, Op.72, No.1 (Op. Posth.)

### Introduction

Chopin composed this piece when he was 17. He never deemed it worthy of being published, and wished it to be destroyed after his death, along with many other completed but unpublished compositions.

Music can be great without consciously grappling with philosophical or life-and-death issues. We need music which goes straight to the human heart and no composer's music has done that more than Chopin's. Everyone responds to Chopin's music. His music and his playing moved people in ways that they had never been moved before, and his music has never lost its ability to do this. I do not believe it ever will.

Because it is the human heart which lies behind the notes of Chopin's music, today we will be spared explorations into the philosophical and metaphysical areas which I believe are essential in most of my other presentations.

Because the essence of Chopin's music is so human, we will spend much of today exploring the personality of Chopin, and the Polish and French people he interacted with in Polish and French society. To me the key to understanding and interpreting Chopin's music lies in his personality and in the society in which he functioned.

Most people believe Chopin to be a "romantic." However, what you will perceive today is that Chopin as a person, and in his music, was in so many respects a classicist and that the ideal interpretation of his music benefits from the constant awareness of this very important fact.

### Early Life

Chopin's father, Nicholas, of French peasant ancestry, left Lorraine in northeastern France in 1788 at the age of 17. He emigrated to Poland with his violin, his flute, and his beloved volume of Voltaire. He embodied many qualities which his son would inherit, and these qualities are very relevant to understanding the composer Chopin and interpreting his music. Nicholas always demonstrated a great love of order and precision. Even his handwriting was a model of precision. He was cautious, prudent, and practical. He was never religious, and instead espoused the rationalism and skepticism of Voltaire. He was a sensitive man and an extremely devoted husband and father.

Nicholas met a gentle, pious, blonde, blue-eyed Polish girl named Justyna, who was a housekeeper. They married in 1806, when he was 35 and she was in her mid-20s. They had four children – three girls and a boy. Their second child was the son – Fryderyk Franciszek – born in 1810 in a little village where Nicholas was a teacher, 40 miles outside Warsaw. Shortly after the birth of Frédéric, as I shall refer to him, the family moved to Warsaw where Nicholas could teach French and French literature

at a newly opened school. Before long, he opened his own boarding school for children of the wealthy, and it became the most prestigious institution of its kind in Warsaw.

The Chopin children grew up in this orderly, cultured, middle-class home, where they felt very secure and very loved by both parents. Although the mother was the more outwardly warm, all the children felt close to both parents. Frédéric enjoyed his childhood. He had oodles of friends and his outgoing, gregarious personality made him immensely popular. People said it was impossible to not like him and that everyone was in love with him. He seemed always full of jokes and puns and was always laughing and full of mischief. His mimicry and impersonations left everyone in stitches. Word of these, as well as his irreverent wit, spread widely. He also amused and entertained people by using his outstanding artistic talents to draw caricatures and cartoons. When he was 14, he created his own satirical newspaper, which he sent out to friends. He displayed so much skill as an actor that theater professionals encouraged him to consider going into acting as a career, rather than music.

Frédéric's mother enjoyed playing the piano and singing. Five-year-old Frédéric was drawn to the piano after his mother began teaching his older sister. With exceptional talent having been noted, at age 6 he was enrolled with a 60-year-old eccentric, colorful, jovial local music teacher. The problem was that the teacher was a violinist who really didn't know anything about the piano. Therefore, Frédéric ended up teaching himself how to play the piano. But Frédéric adored the teacher for his enthusiasm, and the teacher did something which would play a role in changing the course of music history. The teacher adored Bach and Mozart and immediately introduced their music to Frederic, who would make these composers his two lifelong musical models. This influence of Bach and Mozart's music on Chopin as a composer cannot be over emphasized.

The teacher also encouraged Frédéric to improvise and to compose. In a moment we will hear the first composition which we have of Chopin's--a Polonaise in G minor. He composed it at age 7, and his teacher helped him to write it down. The only other compositions of Chopin's in existence from age 7 to 17, when he wrote the E minor Nocturne which we heard earlier, are several other short Polonaises. The teacher arranged for this G minor Polonaise to be published in a Warsaw magazine shortly after it was composed. It then vanished until it was rediscovered in 1926. It did not become available to the public until 1959, and only became widely accessible in 1990.

Polonaises were originally not intended for dancing, but rather for processions such as at a reception or at a court. Since people would process at a stately pace, the music was measured, dignified and aristocratic. Later the Polonaise became a court dance, which contained characteristic rhythmic figures such as (sing yum pum pum pum) and they also featured phrases which end on the second or third beats, instead of the inherently strong downbeats. Chopin, when he was young, saw old Polish men sitting around in their traditional costumes which included red and white sashes (Poland's national colors) and with their sabers hanging at their sides, talking of their exploits in days past.

PERFORM: Polonaise in G Minor

From the age of eight onwards- in fact till the end of his life -Chopin's world would be that of the aristocracy. Being a part of the aristocracy was a crucial part of his personality and his music. From his

earliest youth he was brought up with exquisite, perfect manners, in order to ingratiate himself to the aristocrats who were the parents of the children in his father's boarding school. He had ample opportunities to put those manners to use from the age of eight to the age of 19 since he performed for the Polish nobility and wealthy in their private homes in Warsaw and even on occasion for the archduke who ruled Poland.

Poor Poland had been dominated for centuries by other countries. It had been partitioned three times in the decades before Chopin's birth, and his father had fought in the failed 1794 rebellion, at which time 20,000 Polish people were massacred by the Russians. In 1810 Poland became a province of Russia, and it would not have its own sovereignty until 1919.

Warsaw, in Chopin's youth a city of 100,000, was neither a small-town nor a metropolis. Although there was much poverty, the city had many palaces. It was not a Paris, which was 10 times bigger than Warsaw, or a London which was significantly larger even than Paris. However, important musicians performed in Warsaw en route between Vienna and St. Petersburg. Therefore, Chopin in his teenage years was able to hear famous instrumental soloists as well as attend many operas.

From the age of 12 through 15, Chopin studied with Joseph Elsner, a Silesian German in his 50's, who was the head of the Warsaw Conservatory, and whose wife was a star of the Warsaw Opera. Elsner taught Chopin counterpoint and composition and devoted a huge amount of extra time to him. He was kind and inspirational, and he and Chopin maintained a very close bond for the rest of their lives. The only problem was, Elsner knew virtually nothing about teaching and playing the piano. Therefore, Chopin ended up never having received any real instruction in the playing of the piano. However, this situation had a silver lining-- he evolved, on his own, an unprecedented, unique method of playing the piano.

By age 19 it was clear that Chopin was meant for a bigger musical capital than Warsaw. He made two long visits to Vienna. However, he was miserable and failed to gain traction there, partly because the Austrians tended to look down on Poles. Therefore, he resolved to try Paris and if that didn't work out his plan was to attempt to establish himself in London. As a final option, he'd heard that many Poles were moving to New York City.

#### Paris and the Polish Community in Paris

Chopin arrived in Paris in a stagecoach with 14 other passengers from Stuttgart. He was 21 years old. The Paris city limits, today at 41 square miles, are not large for an important city, and in his day, they were very much smaller. Paris in 1831 was not laid out as it is today. The extensive wide boulevards were not constructed until 40 years later and in 1831, Paris still contained 1,200 narrow medieval streets which lay at irregular angles. There were no sidewalks, and the streets were unpaved, muddy, and filled with sewage. Most of the population of 1 million was in poverty, and thousands of impoverished refugees from all parts of Europe were continually pouring in. It was dangerous to go out at night.

However, Paris was starting to modernize. The first gas lights had been installed just three years before Chopin arrived. Sidewalks were being built and new bridges were being constructed across the Seine. The Arc de Triomphe was nearly completed. However, the Place de la Concorde still consisted only of unpaved mud and the Champs-d'Élysées was still undeveloped rural land. None the less, Paris had an exceptional beauty with its buildings, gardens, and fountains, and even then, every street corner already had a history. Then, as now, the spell which Paris casts upon ones first arrival cannot be described. One cannot help but become filled with excitement and awe.

Chopin immediately set out walking to explore the extraordinary city where he would spend the rest of his life. He wrote home: "You simply cannot imagine the shouting, the commotion, the bustle and the dirt." He was fascinated by everything, including the extreme contrasts. "You find here the greatest splendors, the greatest filth, the greatest virtue and the greatest vice. . . .Paris is whatever you care to make it." His first step was to become a part of the Polish community.

There was already a large Polish community in Paris. After all, Paris was the capital of civilization, and its language and culture were the model for all of Europe. The Polish population in Paris had greatly swelled after Poland's 1830 revolution had failed. The aristocracy arrived first and later the masses. The Poles and the French were a natural fit. For one thing they shared a Roman Catholic religious bond. The Poles also remembered that Napoleon's rule been much less repressive than that of the Russians, and Napoleon had even taken a Pole as his mistress – a woman who actually had been a student of Chopin's father. The French felt an affinity with, and sympathy for, the repressed Poles and were also attracted to them since they perceived them to be somewhat exotic.

When Chopin arrived in Paris, he found many of the exact same Polish aristocrats whom he had performed for in Warsaw, as well as many of his childhood friends. Paris was even sometimes referred to as the "new capital of Poland," and Paris had a virtual Polish government- in -exile. Many referred to the most prominent Pole in Paris and Chopin's friend, Adam Czartorysky (char tour EES key), as the "uncrowned king of Poland."

There was a political split in the Polish community, which I suppose is not unlike what occurred among the Cuban émigrés in Florida. In Chopin's Paris there were the confrontational, activist, militant Poles who wanted the French government and other governments to assist in another revolution in Poland. On the other side there were the more conservative Poles, who accepted that it was inevitable that Polish freedom would take time and that diplomatic negotiations were the avenue to be pursued. They favored evolution rather than revolution, and they focused primarily on preserving Polish culture.

Chopin had no interest in anything political, even in an age and place where most everyone else did. However, Chopin was innately conservative in everything in life, except for his radical musical harmonies. He was opposed to anything which interfered with tranquility, and he had an absolute horror of any extremism from the left. Perhaps he was influenced by his father, who had opposed the French Revolution, and preached that the primary role of government was to maintain order. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chopin most related to the conservative Poles and not to the Polish activists. But

since he was so gracious to everyone, and everyone knew he was apolitical, he had good friends from the entire Polish political spectrum in Paris.

To Chopin, being Polish was a matter of his identity, his heritage, and his nostalgia for his homeland. He felt most at home and relaxed when in the Polish community, able to speak his native language and eat his native food. He played benefit concerts for, and generously donated funds to charities who helped poverty-stricken Poles in Paris.

It is not known why Chopin never returned to visit Poland after leaving at age 20. There was no political or legal reason why he could not have gone back, and he certainly could easily have afforded to travel there. He adored his family and did travel as far as Dresden to meet them a few years after his move to Paris. But he never returned to Poland.

Despite his being on good terms with the Polish activists in Paris, Chopin was frequently faulted by them for not doing enough to help the cause of Polish freedom. They wanted him to write blatantly nationalistic music – for example, operas that would speak to the masses. They accused him of “caressing the nerves of the French aristocracy” and being “up to his ears in the aristocratic swamp and preferring exalted salons to lofty mountaintops.”

Chopin’s vehicle for supporting the cause of Poland was his piano music. By far the most important Polish quality which permeates much of Chopin’s music is that which is described by an untranslatable Polish word, *Zal*. This is usually translated as sadness, longing, nostalgia, regret, and resignation. But Polish writers stress that *Zal* is more than sadness or nostalgia. They emphasize that it also symbolizes resentment, anger, bitterness, and remorse which can even lead to vengeance. The Poles maintain that there is no equivalent word in any other language. *Zal* is a distinguishing trait in Chopin’s music, and it clearly separates his music from other music of his time or any previous time. If we can believe Liszt’s partner, Princess Carolyne, Chopin said he “never could be free of *Zal*.” Those who perform Chopin’s pieces, especially the Mazurkas and Polonaises, without *Zal* have missed a significant amount of the flavor, character and essence of Chopin and his music.

Beyond the quality of *Zal*, it is controversial how much of Chopin’s music actually shows obvious Polish influences. About 1/3 of Chopin’s 230 pieces are mazurkas and polonaises, which are indisputably Polish-inspired and influenced, with their modal scales, weak beat phrase endings, triplets, and distinctive rhythmic patterns. Also, subtle influences from mazurkas and polonaises do appear occasionally in Chopin’s other works. But most scholars do not perceive blatantly Polish musical elements in the majority of Chopin’s compositions. Although Chopin was enthralled by Polish folk music as a child, he only very rarely actually quoted an authentic Polish folk tune in his works.

We will now hear two Mazurkas. Chopin’s 60 or so mazurkas in many ways are his most characteristic works, and it was he who gave the mazurka a soul. It was the genre closest to his heart, and the genre which most stimulated the full range of his talents. Some of Chopin’s earliest works were mazurkas, and his last two compositions were mazurkas, one of which we will hear later this afternoon.

The Mazurka was originally sung as well as danced. Four, eight, or more couples would dance it and they would stamp their feet or click their heels on unexpected beats. It has been said that “The Mazurka is a waltz with attitude. The minuet walks, the Waltz glides, and the Mazurka thumps. ”Mazurka was actually a family name for several types of dances which were performed at differing speeds – from slow to quite fast. The mazurkas I am now going to play are both somewhat slow. Chopin never intended his mazurkas to be danced to, but rather saw them as poems of longing for Poland. You can imagine how deeply moved those Polish émigrés were to hear Chopin play his Mazurkas in their homes and gathering places in Paris.

A guide to Polish dances has stated that “The mazurka combines fiery spirit with pride and elegance, vivacity with lyricism, dignity with joy, and boldness with gallantry.” You can also hear the *Zal* in them which caused the ever-astute Robert Schumann to write: “If the Czar of Russia knew what a dangerous enemy threatens him in the works of Chopin, in the simple melodies of those Mazurkas, he would ban the music.” I will show some features of Mazurkas before playing them.

I will follow the two Mazurkas with Chopin’s Scherzo in C- sharp minor. This work illustrates Schumann’s observation that “the works of Chopin are like cannons beneath flowers.” The word scherzo derives from Beethoven’s sonata, chamber music, and symphony movements where the Scherzo had a contrasting trio. Chopin adopted the idea of an energetic primary section with a contrasting lyrical section and created four works which he titled scherzo. In this Scherzo, a tempestuous section alternates with a chorale-like section. In the chorale section you can hear novel impressionistic filigree which Chopin would employ in many of his works.

I will show some features of Mazurkas before playing them.

GO TO PIANO: show aspects of Mazurkas (Robust energy, *Zal*, and lyricism; unexpected, irregular accents; second beats often stressed and often performed early; third beats often delayed; common rhythmic patterns; drone accompaniments)

PERFORM: Mazurkas, Op. 33, No. 1 in G-sharp Minor and Op. 33, No. 4 in B Minor

and Scherzo in C-sharp Minor, Op. 39

### The Man Chopin

Chopin was physically small-like Mozart-about 5’4”. He never in his life weighed more than 100 pounds and was always thin and frail. He was perpetually pale. He had tiny feet and needed specially made shoes. He walked with tiny steps. The only thing large about him was his nose. This was also true of Mozart and both were very self-conscious about this feature. Chopin had a high forehead, light brown hair and brown eyes. His voice was soft and subdued. He always found it an effort to speak or write French, despite his having been taught it by his father when growing up. He especially had trouble with spelling and constructing sentences in French. He never lost his extremely strong Polish accent.

Chopin radiated elegance in his bearing, and all his movements were extraordinarily graceful. It was said of him that “there was something perfect, something classical in his most casual gesture.” His



look was thought to exude poetry, and an ephemeral quality. Throughout his life, his unexcelled manners and politeness were noted by everyone. Franz Liszt remarked that “one naturally treated him as a prince.”

Chopin was an incredibly private person, and his fundamental trait was reserve. He hid much of what he really felt or thought and confessed that he “would not admit anyone to (his) sphere of feelings.” Liszt said that Chopin “was prepared to give anything, but he never gave himself.”

The person who knew Chopin best referred to “his delicacy” and his being “gentle, witty, and fascinating in company” but also said that “no one was more prone to irritation. He could be in misery for days over tiny annoyances.... and could be terrifying when angry. He was a creature of habit, and the slightest change was a terrible thing in his life.” Chopin undoubtedly had an obsessive/compulsive disorder. For example, his slippers had to be precisely positioned underneath his bed every night.

Chopin’s hypersensitivity and irritation exhibited itself in a quick temper, tenseness, nervousness, and, at times withdrawals for long periods. He was very thin-skinned in not accepting criticism well, and not liking to be contradicted. Throughout his life he made frequent sardonic, sarcastic, caustic, biting remarks. One biographer has written: “There was something feline about Chopin: witty, suspicious, ill tempered, and charming.”

Chopin’s health played a major role in his life and behavior. His physical issues were primarily respiratory, having a continual shortness of breath. He also suffered severe headaches, gastric problems, and frequent toothaches from his rotting teeth.

Tuberculosis was rampant in Poland in Chopin’s lifetime. He watched his younger sister die from a respiratory illness when she was age 14, and his father also died of a respiratory illness which was likely tuberculosis. Tuberculosis was not only widespread in Poland. It has been estimated that 1/5 of the entire population of central Europe during Chopin’s lifetime died from TB.

From childhood, Chopin had a poor constitution, tiring easily and being stressed by any exertion. He suffered many colds, and bronchitis was diagnosed innumerable times in his young adulthood. In fact, at age 25 it was even reported that he had died from pneumonia. He was constantly coughing all through his life. He first coughed up blood when he was 24, and that continued to happen frequently during the last ten years of his life.

It is not known exactly when his respiratory issues evolved into TB. There was much controversy in those times as to what constituted a diagnosis of TB, as well as whether TB was contagious or not. He may have had TB even as a teenager. It certainly was present by the time he was 29. His health clearly took a turn for the worse at the age of 33, and from age 36 until his death at 39, things were extremely bleak.

However, one should not have the image that Chopin was in seriously ill health continuously every day throughout his entire life. It was only his last 2-3 years which were totally debilitating. Before that time, he did have some moderately long periods of somewhat acceptable health.

Through his entire life the weather greatly impacted Chopin's physical well-being and mental outlook, with winter and rainy days giving him the greatest challenges. The poor air quality in Paris also adversely affected him. As a friend of his wrote, "Who can define the distinction between physical illness and mental depression?" It is clear that Chopin suffered from both. TB was once believed to cause psychological issues and there certainly could be a relationship between the two in Chopin's case. Some of the mental symptoms that were then attributed to TB were indecisiveness, distractibility, melancholy, over-orderliness, hallucinations, and thoughts of death. It is well documented that Chopin exhibited all of these.

Chopin frequently brooded about death. Death was close to everyone in those times with so much infant mortality and short life expectancies. In addition to losing his sister when he was 17, his best friend from boyhood, exactly his age, died of TB when age 32. The friend literally died in Chopin's arms, as Chopin had taken him into his own home to nurse him.

Chopin suffered from a perpetual lack of confidence. When Chopin was a teenager his teacher lamented, "He is a good fellow but lacks confidence. He lets himself be dominated." Why do so many of us lack confidence? In the case of Chopin, was it from his perfectionistic, though always loving, and supportive father? Was it growing up in a place which was not a major music center and perhaps feeling inferior? Who knows? Chopin scholars have never figured it out.

In some ways Chopin's modesty worked to his advantage, since performers with large egos can be quite off-putting. But Chopin clearly suffered all his life from lack of confidence and the perpetual fear that he might not be able to sufficiently please people. One symptom of this was that throughout his life he had enormous difficulty making a decision. Every decision brought about procrastination and hesitation. He once wrote: "You know that I am the most undecided person in the world."

#### Parisian Society and Chopin as Teacher

Not only did Chopin's life revolve around Polish high society in Paris. He was also in the thick of French high society as well. A quick review of French history is useful. After Napoleon was defeated, the question became how France should be governed. While the conservative aristocrats wished to return to the prerevolutionary days, and the liberals desired that enormous power be granted to the common people, a compromise constitutional monarchy was set up in 1815. However, Charles X ruled France in such a reactionary, hardline manner that he was deposed in the 1830 "July Revolution" just 14 months before Chopin arrived in Paris. Again, uncertainty arose. The aristocrats again desired to return to the pre-revolution days, and the liberals split into the moderate and the radical camps.

What evolved was a compromise between democracy and monarchy, partly engineered by the Marquis de Lafayette, of American Revolution fame. Louis-Philippe was made King, but he was never crowned. He called himself the "King of the French" rather than the more officious term, "King of France." He was designated as the "Citizen-King" and walked the streets with an umbrella rather than a scepter. Louis-Philippe's reign almost exactly overlapped Chopin's life in Paris, commencing a year before Chopin arrived, and ending 18 years later, one year before Chopin died. It was a precarious

monarchy. Louis-Philippe had no gravitas whatsoever and basically was a dolt. Chopin referred to him as “that fool whose reign just hangs in there by a mere thread.”

The liberals and leftists hated Louis-Philippe, and he was the target of many assassination attempts. The right-wing conservative royalists hated the fact that they had not regained the power they had sought. Embittered, they retreated into their palaces on the Left Bank as if they were in fortresses. They were very devout Catholics, dressed in the formal attire worn decades previously, and socialized mainly amongst themselves in a very stiff and dour manner.

The people who really were now the power in Paris were a new and younger class – the nouveau-riche, the bourgeoisie, the bankers, the industrialists, and the merchants. They supported Louis-Philippe because he gave them whatever they wanted. They lived on the Right Bank and when they socialized, they enjoyed themselves in a celebratory manner.

Both groups of Parisian high society supported the arts – the aristocrats because they always had, and the nouveau-riche because they believed it to be fashionable and politically correct. The salons were the venue where society people mingled. The original intent of the salons was to trade ideas and practice the art of conversation. People didn’t pay so much attention “to what was said, as to how one said it.”

About the time Chopin arrived on the Parisian scene, the salon conversation was switching to mainly practical matters. However, what is significant is that piano music was increasingly desired at these affairs. The salons were usually hosted by aristocratic women. Many were foreign, with some being ambassador’s and banker’s wives. There was a pool of about 2,000 affluent people who knew each other socially, and there was always a salon one could attend. There were so many hostesses holding weekly salons that one had the choice of attending in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening of almost every day.

These salons were the places where Chopin would frequently perform and where he obtained his students. He most preferred performing at and being a part of the extremely formal salons of the right-wing aristocrats. But they tended to be old people. He got most of his students from the salons of the nouveau-riche, where the wives and adult daughters heard him play and got to know and like him.

It is significant that Chopin was not merely the entertainment that was paraded in at a certain moment, performed, given a tip, and then escorted out like Mozart and Beethoven had been in Vienna. Chopin actually became a center of attention at these gatherings and was perceived as an equal to the wealthy aristocrats because of his musical genius as well as his experienced, smooth politeness.

Among the most prominent hostesses was Betty Rothschild, wife of James Rothschild, who was the son of the banker, Meyer Rothschild, of Frankfurt. The five Rothschild sons, each owning the main bank in the five principal European cities, accumulated what was until recently, the largest family wealth in modern history. James was the richest man in France. Many of you will be familiar with the phrase: “Buy stocks when there is blood in the streets.” It was James who gave that advice. He also founded

one of the great wineries ever to exist. Betty became one of Chopin's first students, and later her daughter-in-law would become one of Chopin's favorite students as well as a devoted friend.

At first it was hard for Chopin to get students since there was such an abundance of piano teachers in Paris. The possibility of moving to London or New York crossed his mind. But once he had gained admission into the high society crowd, his teaching was in very high demand. No one wanted to study with anyone else, not even with Liszt.

Fourteen months after arriving in Paris, Chopin could write: "I have entered into the very best society; I sit between ambassadors, princes, ministers – I don't know by what miracle it is come about, for I am not a climber. But today all that sort of thing is indispensable to me."

Although Chopin knew this was a superficial and affected environment in many ways, he reveled in it. As Mozart had decided in Vienna, Chopin believed he had to appear as if he was one of the wealthy in order to attract wealthy students. He felt he needed to express "bon ton" which means "good form, good style."

As also happened with Mozart, attention to dress became a lifelong obsession. Chopin was famous for his immaculate white gloves. He went to the best tailors seeking the latest styles of blue or gray velvet waistcoats, the silkiest shirts, the finest cufflinks, and the best patent leather boots. But it must be pointed out this was all to be created with dignity and simplicity, and in moderation. Chopin was definitely not a "dandy." The dandies were eccentrics seeking attention with outlandish clothing and behavior. Chopin was never one of them. As with his music, everything was to be done with good taste.

Chopin spent lavishly to furnish his home so that his wealthy students would feel at home. He required fresh flowers every day, with violets being his lifelong favorite. He bought expensive furniture and expensive curtains. He engaged a servant, usually a Pole, which provided him someone with whom to speak Polish. He always lived in the newly built, fashionable area in Paris near the three opera houses, the theater district, the stock exchange, and where the bankers and businessmen were residing. He started in fifth floor drafty rooms. Then he upgraded to first floor quarters so that the students and he would not have to climb stairs. He hired his own two-wheeled carriage, horse, and driver, even though the cost of using a taxi would have been annually more than ten times less.

Chopin taught five or more lessons a day until his health prohibited him doing so in his last years. For his hour lessons he charged about what 160 dollars would purchase today. The student would bring the tuition in a sealed envelope and leave it on the mantel. If he had taught the entire year, he could have made almost the equivalent of what 200,000 dollars would buy today. But as we will discuss later, after his first few years in Paris, he was gone almost every summer, therefore lessening his potential income.

The problem was that Chopin never saved any money. He lived well and was known to be extremely generous. He gave expensive presents to people, frequently paid for his friends' dinners, tipped lavishly for all services, gave to charities, and often loaned money to people. But in his last years

his health was so poor that he could rarely teach. Therefore, he had no income, and having spent all that he had, he was forced to rely on gifts of money from the Rothschilds and other people. Through his life he received very little income from his compositions, which is why he often vitriolically complained about his publishers. He did occasionally pick up a stock tip from the Rothschild wife or daughter-in-law.

In his early years in Paris, after the teaching day, Chopin would don his black cape and gather up his walking stick, and be off to dinner at fine restaurants, off to salons or receptions, or to the opera which he passionately adored. He was transported to all of these in his small carriage.

Chopin found it impossible to pass up a social invitation. He loved to entertain and spent much time planning menus and selecting wines. He himself ate sparingly and did not drink alcohol. But he loved serving the finest Bordeaux to his friends. By the way, he absolutely loved ice cream. This could partly have been because of its soothing effect on his aching throat from his continuous coughing. He also loved milk and every morning he savored his hot chocolate. We must remember that this routine describes Chopin's life only in his earliest years in Paris. As his life went on, he went out less and less. In the final several years of his life he went out only rarely. In his last two years, virtually never.

Chopin did not teach beginning piano students and only taught two children in his entire life. These two were both highly talented, although the truly extraordinarily talented one died at age 15. International people comprised most of Chopin's students. He wrote his parents: "I now will give a lesson to the Rothschild daughter and after that a girl from Marseille. Then I have an English lady, later a Swedish one. To finish the day, I audition someone from New Orleans." Polish females were his preference to teach. He never accepted anyone who dressed sloppily, and he himself always dressed impeccably to teach. He demanded punctuality from all his students.

When teaching he would stand by the grand piano, but frequently demonstrate on his vertical piano. He would very often have to cough during the lessons which made everyone feel sorry for him. If violent coughing occurred, he would take himself to the other side of the room. With only one exception, all his students seem to have praised his "admirable patience, perseverance, and conscientiousness." He was known to be incredibly detailed. Lessons usually lasted 60 minutes, although if the student warranted, he would often give loads of extra time. Those aristocratic women adored him, and he, them. They so appreciated his gentleness, politeness, and encouragement.

#### Chopin's Performing and More on His Personality

Paris was the artistic and intellectual center of the world and it was called "the brain of the world." Music was the center of the cultural life, and the number one attraction of the musical life was opera. There were three opera houses, each specializing in a different type of opera--French opera, Italian bel canto opera, and a genre that was rather like today's musicals. During the season one could go to at least one opera house virtually every night of the week and in Chopin's first two years in Paris he did attend almost nightly. He personally knew the opera composers and singers and socialized with them. The prominent musicians in Paris were a tight knit group.

Next to opera, piano was king in Paris. Everyone was obsessed with the piano, and every home that could afford a piano had one. There were 180 different piano manufacturers in Paris. Heine referred to a “veritable plague of piano playing.” This obsession spawned the existence of professional piano performers. It was the first time ever that performing pianists were not primarily composers, but rather executors of others’ works. (Perhaps some believed them to be more often executioners of others’ works ) Heine considered them to be like “swarming locusts.”

The way piano music was presented was very different from how it is performed today. There were no large concert halls. The only venues for public piano performances were small halls which seated only a few hundred people and were located in the headquarters of the leading piano manufacturers. There were no solo piano recitals since pianists never played alone for an entire concert. If pianists were planning to play a concert, they contacted other musicians – singers and chamber musicians – to share the program with them. There were no impresarios, and it was very burdensome for a pianist to find venues, to sell tickets, and to have to promote the concerts themselves. Pianists only would undertake such a venture for publicity or income or both.

In the 17 years after Chopin had arrived in Paris, he would only ever perform in about two dozen public concerts, and nearly 1/3 of these took place in the British Isles the year before his death. Nearly all his Paris concerts occurred during the first four years of living in Paris and were for the purpose of establishing his reputation. He did earn considerable money each time he put on a public concert, sometimes grossing today’s buying power of 45,000 dollars per concert out of which, of course, expenses would have to be taken out.

Chopin hated the process of putting on a concert and found it very stressful to perform at such events. “I am not fit for giving concerts. The crowd intimidates me, its breath suffocates me. I feel paralyzed by its curious look and the unknown faces make me dumb.” (It may come as a surprise to some of you that many successful pianists and great artists today actually feel this same way before and during every concert. One cannot know what it is like to be up on the musical stage unless one has been there. I remember one of my students who had done a significant amount of acting, told me that it was far easier to go onstage as an actor in front of a couple thousand people than to play the piano for only a few people. The difference was that one could be someone else when acting a role onstage, whereas one feels very vulnerable and exposed when playing the piano for others.) It is noteworthy that after nearly every public concert Chopin’s health relapsed due to the great stress.

Liszt was the first pianist to have the audacity to perform an entire program by himself. His first such event in Paris occurred 10 years after Chopin had arrived in Paris. Chopin would only ever play one recital entirely by himself. The goal of a public concert was to woo the bourgeoisie. For Chopin, that was even more successfully accomplished, and occurred far more frequently, in the salons of high society.

We have previously discussed the formal salons of the old guard aristocracy and the nouveau-riche, where Chopin shone and made his name. There was a third kind of salon which was far less formal. These were the small salons which were usually held at the homes of intellectuals. As we mentioned previously, Chopin was, in his personality and outlook, essentially a conservative classicist. He was in so many ways an 18th century gentleman, a disciple of formality, refinement, precision, and elegance. He was an admirer of rationalism and was a religious skeptic. His mother had dragged him to

Mass. But he adopted his father's skepticism and lack of interest in the church. He never joined a church in Paris, was never known to attend Mass, and apparently did not own a Bible. He showed little interest in the pantheistic beliefs of many of his fellow artists, and he seems to have shown little interest in the transcendental qualities of music.

The attitude of some of Chopin's colleagues was epitomized by how Liszt once actually signed the guest book when arriving at a hotel: "Coming from: Doubt. Going to: Truth. Place of birth: Parnassus. Occupation: Musician – Philosopher." Chopin was not present at that occasion. But if he had been, I am sure he would have rolled his eyes and walked away since he did not relate to any of those answers.

I believe it is extremely significant that Chopin's favorite art was painted by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, born in 1780. Ingres was the artist the Romantics vehemently disliked and opposed. Ingres' art was calm, balanced, neat, and precise. He was a neo-classicist and was perceived as an academic. Chopin was an extremely close friend of the painter, Eugène Delacroix, whose art was filled with vivid colors, daring, tumult, motion, exuberance, and intense passion. Yet, Chopin preferred the art of Ingres to that of his dear friend, Delacroix. (The ironic thing was that Delacroix as a person was as conservative and classical as Chopin, and the two of them were "two peas in a pod" when it came to their views on society and life. They loved to hang out and talk together, each reinforcing the extremely conservative views of the other.)

Chopin did not relate to anything sensational or overly sentimental. He believed in rules, conventions, and propriety. He had a horror of a classless society, believing that such a society would lead to an end of cultural values and standards.

Chopin was opposed to a bohemian approach to life and anything counterculture. He was angry for the rest of his life that Liszt once borrowed the key to Chopin's residence and used it for a rendezvous with Marie Pleyel, Paris's well-known nymphomaniac, who at that time was still the wife of Chopin's favorite piano manufacturer and good friend.

Attitudes like the inscription written by Liszt cited above, are what made Chopin not usually very comfortable at the intellectual, literary salons. These people did not call themselves "Romantics" but they certainly espoused views and outlooks which we have come to call Romanticism. Though there were important beginnings in England and Germany, it was here, in Paris, in the literary salons, that the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic movement enormously blossomed. Emotion and individualism were now the themes to be portrayed and were to become the approach to life. Victor Hugo's home was the center of the literary circle which included Balzac, Dumas père, Heine and Mickiewicz.

Chopin, while extremely self-centered, was among the least egotistical composers and most modest people to ever write music. He was annoyed by egotistical people. We might think it wonderful to have been in a room with Hugo, Balzac, Heine, Liszt, Berlioz, Mickiewicz etc. But many of these were outspoken, egotistical people, pretentiously and bombastically pontificating about saving society with visionary, utopian schemes, and bragging about their own books. Chopin said of Victor Hugo, "He pretends to be very high-minded but carries on as if he were superior to the rest of humanity." The atmosphere had to have been heavy at these literary salons. One friend of Dumas wrote of Dumas: "He

was the most egotistical creature on the face of the earth. His tongue was like a windmill-once set in motion, you never knew when he would stop, especially if the theme was himself.” As Berlioz said, “none of us listened, we all just talked.”

Chopin was not comfortable discussing literature, and apparently read little other than the newspapers. He didn't look for any particular message – social, political, or spiritual – to be expressed in music, including his own. Whether Chopin was rather illiterate in nonmusical areas has been an area of much controversy in Chopin scholarship. We do know he apparently read poetry in Polish and French, and even wrote some poetry himself. He responded to visual art from his teenage years onwards and always displayed paintings in his home. He sketched throughout his life – usually pen portraits. Michelangelo sculptures frightened him, and Rubens paintings perplexed him. But that did not mean he did not appreciate art. When he could no longer himself read in his last months, he asked people to read to him from Voltaire's Dictionary. He especially liked Voltaire's article and views on taste, and the clear, concise language of Voltaire very much appealed to him.

One key aspect of Chopin's personality did fit into the romantic movement and places Chopin's personality in his time and not in the 18th century. This was his frequent depiction of melancholy. Romanticism gloried in the "self" and nearly deified suffering. In this way Chopin was very much in sync with the movement.

Let us have some more music. I will now play one of Chopin's Waltzes which I am sure he would have played at many of the aristocratic or nouveau-riche salons. Chopin was not familiar with waltzes until he went to Vienna where they were immensely popular, partially because one could dance much physically closer to one's partner. Chopin wrote: "I don't even know how to dance a waltz properly. My piano has only heard Mazurkas." The Waltz spread from Vienna through all of Europe. It was Chopin's contribution to increase the refinement and elegance of this genre.

After the 10-minute break we will explore more of Chopin's life and music, and hear two of his most famous pieces, as well as two of his great Mazurkas.

PERFORM: Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 42

10 MINUTE BREAK

Chopin's Playing

Late in the evening at the literary salons, the talking would subside, and Chopin would go to the piano and improvise by candlelight into the wee hours. Everyone would be touched and moved beyond belief. People said his improvisations were even more extraordinary than his playing of his own pieces. Salons were where Chopin felt comfortable playing. The concert halls of even just 300 people were too big for his style of playing. His style was based on making the piano sing in imitation of the human voice. It was a private, personal expression not intended for the public, and certainly not for the masses. Even when he was 20 years old a critic wrote: "The desire to make music predominates noticeably in his case over the desire to please." Another critic wrote: "It was as though his playing was saying 'it is not me, it



is the music.' ” Robert Schumann described Chopin’s playing as “complete perfection,”(and ) mastery which does not seem to be aware of its own worth.”

Even his virtuosity seemed effortlessly graceful. A listener wrote: “Wonderful is the ease with which his velvet fingers glide over the keys.” While having extraordinary, superhuman technical aptitude, virtuosity as an end in itself meant nothing to Chopin. He wrote: ”I really don’t know whether any place contains more pianists than Paris, or whether you can find anywhere more asses and virtuosos. Is there a difference?”

Chopin never aimed to be declamatory or make the piano into an orchestra as was Liszt’s goal. Instead, he exploited infinite gradations of softness and gentleness. The poet Théophile Gautier said that when Chopin’s fingers touched the keys “they seemed brushed by angels’ wings.” Yet Chopin was still able to achieve crescendos within this narrow range of sound. Like Debussy would advocate later, Chopin clearly wanted the piano to seem to be without hammers. This is not because Chopin had little strength as some people have insinuated. It was always by his choice.

The only criticism of Chopin’s playing ever leveled in his whole life was that it was too delicate, too precious, too microscopic, and too understated. This was even when playing in halls which usually did not exceed 300 people. If he were playing in today’s halls with potentially 3,000 people, his sound would be much more lost. This criticism was not infrequent, and it upset Chopin, who was always very keen to know what people thought of his playing. But he never changed his style, saying “I’d prefer it to be that rather than the opposite. “

The effect of Chopin’s playing was so ethereal that some called him the “Sylph of the piano.” People had never heard the piano played with such refinement, elegance, polish, and control. To many, Chopin’s playing was beyond compare to anyone in the world, or even as one writer wrote, “to anything else on earth.” Wow, what a statement - “beyond compare to anything else on earth.”

Chopin and Liszt were universally regarded as being far superior to all the other pianists, and the two of them were frequently compared. There were some people, like the Polish poet Mickiewicz, who preferred the orchestral approach of Liszt. But most knowledgeable people preferred Chopin’s approach- with Balzac even describing Chopin as an angel. Heine called him the “Raphael of the piano,” and others referred to him as the Ariel of the piano.

Let us now hear Chopin’s D-flat Nocturne, Op. 27, No.2. Nocturnes, night pieces, were the perfect vehicles for Chopin ‘s style of playing. It was Chopin who transformed the already existing genre of the Nocturne into something significant. To me the D -flat Nocturne is the quintessential Chopin Nocturne, with its elegant, operatic melodic lines which are sometimes supplemented to create a seeming vocal duet. I am sure that Chopin would have played this work frequently when playing in intimate surroundings.

PERFORM: Nocturne in D-flat Major Op. 27, No. 2

## Chopin's Music

We have talked of Chopin's playing but only a little of his music. Chopin is unique in having written basically only for the piano. Chopin was also the first composer of piano music to write in a style which was specifically oriented to the piano. Previous composers utilized the piano to express musical ideas which could have been played almost equally well by other instruments. They heard musical ideas in their head and happened to write them out for the piano. It was an innovative idea to have the piano itself be the inspiration for the music, and it was the sound of the piano which inspired and aided Chopin in creating his music. As the great scholar and pianist Charles Rosen has written: "Chopin invented pure piano sound."

Chopin's music is derived not only from the piano but from how Chopin himself played the piano. He always composed at the piano, and, unlike most composers, did not feel able to compose without being at a piano. The way he touched the piano formed the basis of many of his compositions.

Chopin was an improviser, tirelessly and daringly experimenting with new harmonies at the piano, just as Debussy would ingeniously do half a century later. Chopin's key changes and progressions were unique and original. He was perhaps most prophetic with his use of unresolved dissonances.

Chopin's music is so unique that Robert Schumann once wrote: "Chopin could publish everything anonymously (and) everyone would recognize him anyway."

The process of composition was a nightmare for Chopin. He found it frustrating and anguishing to have to write down what would have to be a final product. That indecisiveness of his continuously reared its ugly head. He could improvise for hours. But settling on what to write down for posterity was torture. Those overhearing him composing described the process: "It was the most exhausting struggle I have ever witnessed. It was a special kind of effort, of uncertainty and impatience. That which he had conceived as a whole he now analyzed all too minutely. His grief at not finding the total perfection which he sought threw him into desperation. He would lock himself in his room for days on end, weeping, walking up and down, breaking pens, repeating or changing one measure 100 times, writing and crossing out over and over again, the next day commencing anew with a perseverance at once meticulous and frantic. He would spend six weeks on one page, only to end by writing it in the form in which he had sketched it the very first time." This observer believed the piano was "more often Chopin's torment than his joy."

Composing became increasingly difficult the older Chopin became. This was due to his declining health and lessened concentration, as well as the increasing sophistication for which he was striving. Therefore, there is a smaller quantity of works from his later years since he worked longer on each piece. It is sad that many of his later works, though being of greater significance and innovative value, as well as filled with more subtleties than the earlier works, have frequently proven to be less popular with general audiences.

Even if he thought a work was finished, Chopin would take forever to allow himself to have the work published. The G minor Ballade represented four years of work before he permitted it to be

published, and it is only a 9-minute piece. This hesitation explains why the publication dates of his compositions are often later than the dates of completion.

On his deathbed Chopin begged his friends to destroy every manuscript or completed composition which he had not already had published, saying, "Whatever I have published is as perfect as I could make it." However, 6 years later his friends published all the many pieces which he had wished to have destroyed and provided them with opus numbers 66 through 74. Therefore, when one plays works that have these later opus numbers one is frequently playing a much earlier piece than the opus number would indicate. Interestingly, one of the works he had wished to be destroyed was the extremely popular Fantasy-Impromptu.

Chopin's extraordinarily high standards are part of the reason why a higher percentage of his total output are in the standard repertoire today than perhaps that of any other composer.

Chopin did not like most of the music of his time and he gradually attended fewer and fewer concerts- not just for health reasons but because of his dissatisfaction with the music being performed. He did not care for Beethoven's music at all, other than the Opus 26 piano sonata which I performed at our Beethoven lecture concert. Chopin said of Beethoven: "His passion too often approaches cataclysm."

Chopin did not comprehend Berlioz's music at all and did not approve of Liszt's music. He said that Schumann's piano music was "not even music." There were only two composers whose music he truly liked and respected. Those were his life-long models—J.S. Bach and Mozart, although Haydn's oratorio, "The Creation", drew his praise.

Despite the improvisatory origin and basis of his music, Chopin was a master of structure. His music does not meander. It has been said even of his longer works: "Every event is inevitable – but not predictable." The viewpoint expressed by some that Chopin was only successful in his smaller works is nonsensical. He knew very well how to create a tight structure in bigger and longer works.

There is extensive counterpoint in Chopin's music, and this greatly increased in frequency and complexity the older he got. Chopin called fugues "the ultimate in musical logic," and studied Bach's fugues consistently and intensely throughout his life. Charles Rosen has called Chopin "the greatest master of counterpoint after Mozart." (Counterpoint is when multiple melodic lines occur at one time, rather than a texture of a melody and accompaniment. )

Chopin's pedal usage was revolutionary, and his music is inconceivable without extensive, almost continuous use of the pedal. This clearly cannot be said of any composer's music before him.

It is easy to forget that when Chopin wrote the Nocturne that began our day, Beethoven was still alive or had just died a few months before. Realizing that helps one appreciate how original and unprecedented Chopin's music is.

Chopin originated many new technical advances in playing the piano. But his music is so much more than virtuosity. His music combines poetry and virtuosity, and his virtuosity always contains musical meaning.

Chopin's music can be considered the most perfect of 19<sup>th</sup> century piano music, and with Mozart as his model it is certainly the most pure. Unlike much 19<sup>th</sup> century music, his pieces are not based on a person, a place, an event, or indeed anything outside of the music. They don't usually relate to his life and are not usually meant to specifically relate to life in general. He never provided them imaginative or poetic titles. By contrast, Liszt and Schumann did all the above.

Chopin's music is extremely sensuous. This is in keeping with his French heritage and environment. The world has dwelt much on Chopin's Polish heritage, as it should. But too many people do not attribute enough importance to the French qualities in Chopin's music. Half of his blood was French, and one can find many parallels in personality with his French father. It was the German philosophy to perceive music as a vehicle of moral uplift and to desire powerful feelings to be expressed. It has been common for French musicians over the centuries to wish music to appeal to the intelligence and to the senses, and to embody perfect proportion, clarity, logic, and balance. They have desired the sensuous qualities to be expressed with grace and restraint.

One can relate this to a French dinner. All the senses are meant to be appealed to – not only the taste, but also the aroma and the presentation. Nothing is haphazard, nothing is left to chance. Everything is meant to be exquisite and nothing is to be overdone. Chopin's music was intended to be performed in exactly the same manner. As Tolstoy wrote: "When Chopin is simple there is no trace of vulgarity, and when he is complicated, he is still intelligible."

It is hard to find a keyboard composer whom Chopin did not influence. Due to his harmonic innovations, his influence even extended far beyond keyboard composers.

Liszt acknowledged his debt to Chopin as a composer and as a player. Though they were within 20 months in age, Liszt's compositional style evolved chronologically later than Chopin's, and Chopin's influences are obvious in many of Liszt's pieces. Chopin's delicate, elegant and highly expressive playing was something which Liszt had never heard from anyone before, and after hearing Chopin he adapted those aspects into his own playing. Wagner was highly influenced by Chopin's harmonies. The Russian composers showed extensive influences of Chopin – most obviously Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, and Tchaikovsky.

French composers were the most obvious in their emulation of Chopin's refinement and elegance, as well as his experimental harmonies. This is very evident in the works of Franck, Fauré, and Saint-Saëns. Ravel acknowledged the roots of his harmonies in Chopin. However, the truest heir of all is Claude Debussy. We will discuss in the Debussy presentation how Chopin was Debussy's conscious model in composition, as well as the numerous parallels in their personalities and piano playing. I have come to believe that, with Chopin being so far ahead of his time in the 1830's and 1840's, if he could have doubled his life span, which would still be less than the expected life expectancy of a male today,

he would have been composing as Debussy did. Chopin was a true forerunner of 20<sup>th</sup> century music and altered the future of music in a way that few other composers ever had or would.

We pianists adore Chopin's music. He exploited and explored the soul of our instrument. Without him none of us would play the piano with as much sensitivity, and he gave us so much sensitive music in which to express ourselves. I believe a pianist should always be studying Chopin's music. His music teaches us more about the instrument than perhaps any other composer's music. I am not implying that his music is greater than Mozart, Beethoven, or Schubert's. However, when we play their music we constantly grow as musicians. But when we play Chopin's we constantly grow as a pianist, as well as a musician. It is my view that one can be a great musician and not necessarily play Chopin especially well. However, one cannot be a beautiful pianist without having learned to play Chopin's music well.

Let us hear some more of Chopin's music. I have selected a work from Chopin's later years. In the great C-sharp Minor Mazurka of Op. 50 one can hear much more use of counterpoint compared to the earlier two Mazurkas we heard earlier. I will show some features of this Mazurka before performing it.

GO TO PIANO and show aspects of this Mazurka (counterpoint, plus aspects shown previously in the B Minor Mazurka)

PERFORM: C- sharp Minor Mazurka, Op. 50, No.3

Chopin's Teaching and Playing Chopin Today

To those of you who do not play the piano, I wish to emphasize the crucial role of tone production in playing the piano. The piano is a percussion instrument, and our challenge is to make the instrument sing. No two pianists have the same sound, any more than two singers have the same voice.

Chopin's teaching stressed sound above all. Touch came first. He advocated a non-percussive touch where the pianist feels the key, caresses the key, and melts into the key rather than striking the key. A piano hammer responds in the same way in which the key is approached. Pianists know, or should know, that the speed of the key descent is where all the subtleties lie in performance. To develop tonal sensitivity, Chopin asked his students to practice playing the same note 20 different times in a row with a different speed of key descent each and every time, gradually getting louder to the middle of the sequence and then progressively softer.

"You must sing with your fingers" was his constant admonition. Singers were his model, and he advised all his students to listen to singers. He even required some students to take voice lessons in order to better understand how to sing and breathe when playing the piano. By the way, I urge all of you to be attending the Metropolitan Opera in HD at the movie theaters. There are 10 live operas per season broadcast in over 2,000 theaters world-wide on Saturday afternoons, You can go to [www.metopera.org](http://www.metopera.org) for more details, including the theater showing them located closest to you. I believe it is essential for all musicians to know opera well, and for those of you who are not musicians,

opera can be a life-changing experience. Much of the greatest music ever composed consists of the operas of Handel, Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini, among many others.

For Chopin, the essential prerequisites for a beautiful tone were ease and suppleness. There was to be no stiffness, especially in the wrist. Students with poor tone were sometimes told that they sounded like a barking dog.

We have already discussed Chopin's love of propriety and proportion, and his horror of excess, exaggeration, and self-indulgence in anything. This clearly also applies to the interpretation of his works. Chopin told his students "My music is not declamatory."

However, if a pianist is too inhibited, or tries to emulate Chopin's small-scale sound in the bold and more dramatic Chopin works, the performances can fail to reach listeners.

We play on a very different piano than did Chopin. I have played on an 1848 Pleyel piano, Chopin's favorite piano, and I can assure you that it is a very different animal than pianos made in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. We not only have vastly different instruments today. We play in different venues, and with different expectations from our listeners.

Though Chopin as a person expressed much volatility and agitation, nothing excuses playing Chopin's music as if it were written by Liszt, Brahms, or Rachmaninoff, and this happens far too often. I have spent much time today discussing the man Chopin, and his world, to illustrate that what is "behind the notes" in Chopin's music is a classicism, and a purity, tinged with a unique expression of melancholy.

To me, the answer is a middle course where tone is never sacrificed, but neither is the drama in the music. It is seeking and finding that elusive balance between extremes which is the challenge in Chopin playing -and perhaps also in life.

One should play Chopin's pieces slightly differently on each occasion. Chopin was an improviser and was famous for never playing any work the same way twice.

Care should be taken that tempo relationships in a Chopin piece preserve the unity of the piece and not allow it to break apart into clearly separate units.

Slow pieces or sections of pieces should not be played too slowly or fast pieces too fast. The former is especially important, and it can be easy to forget this, or to have it accidentally occur.

A player always needs to be aware of all the contrapuntal lines which occur so often in Chopin's works. A prerequisite for the playing of Chopin's music is understanding how to play the contrapuntal music of J.S. Bach.

I highly recommend the extraordinary book by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Chopin: Pianist and Teacher, listed in today's handout. This volume has compiled every preserved comment by Chopin on playing the piano and interpreting his works.

Some years ago, I presented a detailed lecture/demonstration for pianists on playing Chopin's music. This addresses many aspects too specific for our gathering today. However, an audio recording, and a handout from that occasion, can be accessed on my website, [www.dersnah-fee.com](http://www.dersnah-fee.com) .

### Chopin's Relationship with Aurore Dupin (George Sand)

Though he was never lacking for male friends throughout his life, Chopin always loved the company of women. He was close to his 3 sisters, as well as to his mother. He preferred to teach women and his relationships with some women, including the prominent singer and composer, Pauline Viardot, were extremely meaningful to him. However, these were absolutely purely platonic relationships. If any of you come across mention of erotic letters supposedly from Chopin to Delphina Potocka, you can know that those letters are definitely fraudulent 20<sup>th</sup> century forgeries.

Before the long-term relationship with Aurore Dupin, there were only two women of any romantic significance in his life. The first was a young singer with whom he was infatuated for two years as a teenager. However, he never even told her. The second was an ordinary young Polish girl, who was a friend from his childhood. But nothing of consequence came of that.

I, and Chopin scholars, believe it is important to dwell at some length on the fascinating Aurore Dupin, as well as her long relationship with Chopin. She was the crucial person in Chopin's life from when he was 26 until 3 years before his death. For nine years she created the environment where the easily upset Chopin could work constructively. She gave his life stability – in central France in the summers and in Paris the rest of the year. Without this relationship, some of Chopin's greatest music is likely to never have been written.

Aurore Dupin was possibly the most famous woman in France. She was an assertive, independent woman who saw part of her role in life to be that of helping to emancipate women. A proponent of universal suffrage, she also was a crusader for social justice and utopian idealism. One of the most important authors in France, she wrote 60 novels and 104 other published works. She also wrote over 20,000 letters. Most of her readers were women and her novels primarily dealt with women. Her life experiences and lovers, including Chopin, usually found their way into her books. Her pen name, George Sand, which she took at age 27, was adopted in order to facilitate her publication success. (Though French, she pronounced it as the English pronounce "George.")

Sand's habit of occasionally dressing in men's clothes was partially because she was a divorced single mom with two children and little income at that time, and men's clothes were cheaper than women's. It was also because the streets of Paris were so dangerous that she was less likely to be robbed if she dressed as a male. It was only at one point in her life that she did this and even then, not on a regular basis. She was not the only woman to smoke cigars in France at that time.

As a free spirit, Sand was a polar opposite of the controlled and always proper Chopin. Six years older than Chopin when they met, she was 32 and he 26. She was intrigued by Chopin and what she saw in Chopin was extraordinary sensitivity and modesty. She viewed him as "an angel of gentleness, goodness and tenderness. . . . So noble, so indefinably aristocratic." She was an amateur pianist herself

and responded very deeply to his extraordinarily sensitive playing. This occurred the first time she heard him play, as she stared pensively into the fire while the smoke wafted up from her cigar in the wee hours of the morning.

Sand was a nurturer and had a great need to mother. "I need to look after Chopin as much as he needs my care." Nearly all her previous affairs had also been with younger men who were in poor health, and she was always devoted to causes which involved the protection of the weaker in society. Her relationship with Chopin helped to calm and stabilize her. "I am amazed at the effect the little creature brought to me."

What Chopin saw in Sand was a certain mystical quality. While Sand was not conventionally beautiful, everyone who saw her talked of her unique eyes. You can see her portrait on the program. She was perceived as being enigmatic but with a big heart. Chopin deeply admired her in large part for being the creative artist which she was (although it is unlikely that he ever read any of her books).

The relationship was rather slow to develop initially, and Chopin was reluctant to become too physically involved. This proved a frustration to her. For some reason that is not known, their physical relationship, once begun, only lasted for one, or at most, two years. Yet they remained companions, with Sand having no other romantic relationships for six or seven more years, and Chopin never. Sand regarded Chopin almost as a son. In fact, she wrote "I regard him as my son" and she would write to him as "dear boy." In person, she called him "Chip," "Chip-Chip" or "my little Chopin".

Sand had inherited from her grandmother an estate 180 miles south of Paris. It was an 18<sup>th</sup> century manor on the edge of the village of Nohant. She had spent part of every year there since she was 16, and except for one year, she and Chopin would spend every summer there from when he was 29 until he was 36. The country air improved Chopin's health after the sooty air of Paris. He could feel peace there. It gave him a sabbatical to be away from teaching, and it provided him unlimited time to devote to composition. His large bedroom on the second floor, with a piano having been moved into it, had a beautiful view. He would arise early and either compose or study J.S. Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" most of the day. In fact, in the last several years of his life most of his composing was done there since there were many distractions in Paris. Nearly half of all his published works were composed primarily at Nohant.

Chopin and Sand would take walks in the sunny afternoons. Chopin, too frail to walk, rode a donkey with a velvet saddle and Sand walked beside the donkey. If there were no visiting guests, they would have dinner at 6 o'clock. Chopin would then go to bed at eight and Sand would retire to her bedroom to commence her daily writing. Her habit was to write by candlelight from 8 PM until 5 AM and then sleep until noon. Since her books were a raging success, there was always demand for a new book. If there were guests, Chopin's bedtime was later, and after-dinner puppet shows took place in the marionette theater in the home. Chopin improvised music for the puppet shows, and he also put on shows as a mimic. Billiards were popular with the guests, although Chopin always seemed to be dropping his cue stick.



Chopin was usually thrilled when there were guests--providing they were his friends, for example, the painter Delacroix. But he was bored if the guests were writers, philosophers, or Sand's perpetually drunk half-brother whom he found to be repulsive. He could also become bored if no guests had visited for a while. Chopin absolutely hated boredom throughout his life – more than anything else, as many people testified.

Delacroix noted, "One can fossilize quickly here" and Chopin was frequently restless at Nohant, longing for his friends and the salons in Paris. At times during these summers he suffered much melancholy. As Sand said, "Chopin always wanted to go to Nohant, but he never could bear Nohant." However, if things were going well there, it could be a peaceful, idyllic atmosphere. Delacroix described how Chopin's music would "flow in through the window and mingle with the songs of nightingales and the scent of roses."

In Paris Sand and Chopin had separate apartments in the same square where many other artists also resided. The square was nicknamed "Little Athens." They held their own soirees, with Delacroix frequently in attendance along with other artistic people such as Balzac, and Dumas. Chopin was thrilled that Liszt for a number of years had been gone on his trans-European concert tours and, therefore, they did not need to invite him. (Liszt had always made Chopin feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable in his presence, despite Liszt's sincere fondness for Chopin.) It is interesting that Chopin would invite his aristocrat friends and the bankers whose wives he taught. Sand would invite her socialist and leftist friends. What is noteworthy is that apparently everyone got along and listened to differing viewpoints. I suppose this would be like putting together a dinner party and inviting Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders as well as Wall Street bankers. It is proof how the arts are capable of bringing seeming adversaries together.

If Sand had not had children, she and Chopin would likely have stayed together for the rest of his life. Her son, Maurice, was a surly, spoiled jerk who was 13 when his mother began her relationship with Chopin. By the time Maurice was 22 he wanted to be the man of the house. He had never liked Chopin and did all he could to turn Sand against him. Sand's daughter, Solange, was eight when Sand and Chopin began their relationship. Sand was very close to her son but showed no love for her daughter. The sensitive Chopin felt very sorry for the daughter and was always very supportive of her. Many stressful incidents involving the behavior of each of the two children occurred, and Chopin and Sand's relationship began to fray. Sand for many years had been nursing Chopin and building her life around him. On top of the chaotic behavior of her two children (Solange was now 17), everything just became too much for her to deal with, and she ended the relationship with Chopin.

Sand would eventually live until the age of 72, dying in 1878, 29 years after Chopin. The violence of the 1848 revolution resulted in her abandoning her political activism saying: "My age rebels against the tolerance of my youth." (This statement is not dissimilar to the famous somewhat humorous quotation attributed to a variety of different people from around the world : "If a person is not a liberal when young, he has no heart. If he is not a conservative when he is older, it is because he has no mind.")

Sand is famous for several quotations. One is: "There is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved." Another is: "Know how to give without hesitation, how to lose without regret."

Music lovers owe a debt of gratitude to Sand for all that she selflessly gave Chopin for nearly a decade. She truly did nurture him

### Final Years

After the relationship with George Sand ended, Chopin was a broken man emotionally and physically. 1847 was the worst year of his life and he composed virtually nothing. His health greatly deteriorated, and he was now too ill to compose or even play the piano. He could only rarely teach, and he almost never left his home. His friends had to come to him.

Chopin found it hard to concentrate. "I do everything I can in order to work but it is no good." "I am like an old cobweb and the walls are beginning to fall away." "The world seems to be leaving me behind." Indeed, his world was ending as well as his life. His beloved Paris was falling apart. A cholera epidemic was raging just as one had been when Chopin had arrived in Paris. There were food shortages, massive unemployment, and soaring inflation. Workers rioted, and mobs were screaming outside Chopin's living quarters. Already physically ill, he was further sickened by the rioters. The aristocracy fled Paris or were afraid to go out amongst the continual demonstrations. Desperate for income, Chopin gave his first public recital in many years. Eight days after this recital Louis Philippe abdicated.

Another maternal woman emerged to rescue Chopin. This was Jane Sterling, a wealthy Scotswoman and former student of Chopin. She assured him how much income he could derive from playing and teaching in England. She was the same age as Chopin and was undoubtedly in love with him. Unfortunately for her, he was not in love with her at all. However, he benefited very much by having her as a protectress and nurse, and he would spend seven months in the British Isles in 1848.

Chopin was required to lead an active social life in London in addition to playing at salons and doing a bit of teaching. He met many celebrities including Dickens and Emerson and was able to hear musicians such as Jenny Lind. But he was miserable. He never was fascinated by English things as many French people were, and he did not understand a word of English. The damp climate and foul London air made him still sicker. He knew he was dying and complained that he had to go out every day and never get home until late at night. A servant would have to carry him up the stairs and put him into bed. But he was too polite to ever complain to Jane Sterling herself. "They will suffocate me out of politeness, and out of politeness I will let them." She took him to Scotland and life there was similar to what it had been in England. He was desperately homesick for his beloved Paris.

Once back in Paris, Chopin would have 11 miserable months still to live. He was not well enough to teach, and Jane Sterling anonymously paid his rent and sent him cash. In 1849 he was only able to create two compositions- two Mazurkas, one of which we will hear in a moment. Friends came to see him in his last days and he sent for his sister in Poland whom he had always dearly loved. Much has been written about his last day when several close friends were at his bedside and one of them sang for him.

The recently completed edifice in Paris known as the Madeleine was draped in black for Chopin's funeral. According to his wishes, Mozart's Requiem was performed. 3000 people were inside but many thousands more stood outside. So many people comprised the funeral procession walking the three miles to Père -Lachaise cemetery that no traffic could move in downtown Paris. Chopin had asked that his heart be removed from his body and taken to Poland by his sister. It will always rest in an urn, sealed in a pillar, at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw.

We have heard Chopin's first work. Now we will hear what has always been thought to be his last work, the Mazurka in F Minor, although recent scholarship has revealed that it may be his penultimate work. He was so ill when working on it only a few months before he died, that the manuscript was almost illegible. One of his closest musician friends had to decipher it, and it was one of those pieces published against his wishes six years after his death.

Its mood is mostly heartbreakingly desolate. The quality of *Zal* is now transformed into an elegy, a tragic resignation. The music looks far into the future with its chromatic yearning. If one listens closely one can even hear the famous Tristan chord which Wagner would employ a decade later. This work shows some of the musical directions where Chopin would likely have gone had he lived longer.

We have earlier discussed the Polonaise and its origins as a stately court dance. Chopin wrote 16 of them, although only seven of them after the age of 17. They are all vehicles of nationalism. The A-flat Polonaise you will hear is especially majestic and exultant. It is one of four of his Polonaises which he specifically marked *Maestoso*, which means majestic, stately, and dignified. When Chopin initially played it to a gathering of fellow Poles, they immediately rose to their feet and broke into the patriotic song "Poland is not vanished yet because her sons are living."

This Polonaise is a noble piece. Chopin was very unhappy when players played it too fast, believing that doing so destroyed the grandeur and majesty of the work. Liszt was also distressed when he heard it played too quickly saying "I don't want to listen to how fast you can play octaves. What I wish to hear is the canter of the horses of the Polish cavalry before they gather force and destroy the enemy."

I play this in honor of the great pianist Arthur Rubinstein who was my inspiration when young- and still is to this day, over 50 years after having last heard him. I was fortunate enough to hear him many, many times in live concert in Washington D.C. His playing moved me more than anyone else's. His recordings made in a recording studio do not at all do him justice. It is ironic that many music critics and writers have noted that he could never have had a major career in today's musical world where missed notes are not tolerated, and instead predictable perfection is expected and demanded. Those who heard Rubinstein live can testify to the tremendous emotional uplift one experienced from his performances. If one was in the concert hall, something deep and memorable took place, and I am in music partially because of Arthur Rubinstein's concerts. It has been my hope that I can bring to others even a little of what he brought to me.

PERFORM: Mazurka in F Minor, Op. 68, No.4 and Polonaise in A-flat Major, Op. 53

