

# FEATURES

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A sketch of Polish composer Frederick Chopin (1810-1849) bears his handwritten note dedicated to his teacher Jozef Elsner. PHOTO: AFP

*Kochanowski Janina Elzowinski  
propozycyja ucznia Chopina  
luty 1839.*

## Chopin: lion of the keyboard, or effete sentimentalist?

Two hundred years after his birth, the mystery at the heart of the composer's miniature masterpieces is undiminished

BY TOM SERVICE  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Anyone who has made it to the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music grade four or five on the piano will, almost certainly, have encountered a piece by Chopin. Certainly, no compilation of "classics for beginners" is complete without his Prelude No 4. It's got everything the fledgling pianist needs to feel good about their technique: it's short, it's in a gratifyingly slow speed and it has a superficially straightforward left-hand part, with a sad, singing melody line in the right.

Yet this tiny prelude is also a musical masterpiece — of poetic expression, melodic descent and emotional intensification. The thing is, though, once you've mastered its technical aspects, it's all too easy to play it with a

gloopy, Liberace-like sentimentality. If this was the only Chopin piece you had played, you might imagine the composer to be a consumptive sentimentalist, the embodiment of the sickly side of musical romanticism.

This is exactly how one side of music history sees Chopin's work. In the last known photograph of the composer, a melancholy image taken shortly before his death in Paris in 1849, world-weariness oozes from his sunken eyes. His expression is one of gloomy introspection. Some accounts of his life make the image of a self-pitying composer, ill at ease with the world, easy to believe. Born 200 years ago on March 1 (although some reports say it was Feb. 22), Frederic Chopin left his native Poland in 1830, at the age of 20, and was never able to return. After the failure of the November Uprising that year, and as a committed Polish nationalist, Chopin could have been arrested had he gone back to Warsaw. He settled in Paris, but never had the success of the flashy virtuoso, as enjoyed by his near contemporary, Franz Liszt. Reports of Chopin's playing, even the rave reviews he received for his debut recital in a tiny Parisian concert hall in 1832, agreed on his "small sound," his delicate, improvisatory imagination — but they criticized his lack of sheer pianistic power.

It's an idea that maps on to perceptions of Chopin's music as miniature and dream-like, qualities associated with femininity, instead of the heroic, large-scale virtuosity and ambition of, say, Liszt's brand of musical romanticism. Again, the facts of Chopin's life seem to confirm the antiheroic view of his music: instead of giving lucrative public concerts, Chopin earned his living through teaching a variety of wealthy patrons and princesses, restricting his Parisian concert-giving to a mere handful of appearances in the final two decades of his life. He pined for Poland and embarked on a complex, tortuous relationship with the writer George Sand, and spent the last few years of his short life in a near-constant state of ill health. Sojourns in Majorca and concert trips to Britain did nothing to ease his condition, and he died from tuberculosis at the age of 39.

This idea of Chopin as an effete performer and composer is still pervasive in some ways of thinking about Chopin — and in some ways of playing him, too. He composed only a handful of pieces in the showy forms of sonata or concerto; the vast majority of his music is for solo piano and cast in the miniature forms he made his own — etudes, nocturnes, mazurkas.

But there is another side to Chopin. In Poland, he is regarded as a national hero. His heart is even interred in one of the pillars of the Holy Cross church in Warsaw: as stipulated by his will, his sister took the organ home, pickled in cognac. The Chopin that Poland celebrates is the opposite of this listless Paris consumptive: he's a lion of the keyboard, a compositional

revolutionary, the symbol of a national identity that resounds through pieces such as the barnstorming *Revolutionary Etude*, or the two piano concertos Chopin composed and played in Warsaw just before he left the country for ever.

There's also the country's Warsaw International Chopin Competition, a prestigious event held every five years that has launched the careers of Vladimir Ashkenazy, Martha Argerich, Maurizio Pollini, Krystian Zimerman, and scores of other pianists. This extrovert Polish Chopin is more like the young composer and pianist who so impressed Robert Schumann. When Schumann reviewed Chopin's Op 2, *Variations on La Ci Darem la Mano* in 1831, a set of variations on an aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, he exclaimed: "Hats off, gentlemen: a genius!" Later, Schumann heard "cannon concealed amid blossoms" in the textures of Chopin's Piano Sonata No 2 in B-flat Minor (a piece you know, even if you don't think you do — its slow movement is the famous *Funeral March*).

So who is the real Chopin? Salon-bound miniaturist or national icon? And how does his music speak to us today? It's not just individual nations — France or Poland — that have claimed Chopin as theirs: in the 161 years since his death, every generation of pianists and audiences has imprinted itself upon his music. And the reason the work can be subjected to so many different interpretations is due to the essential enigma at its heart. Chopin's music is a tapestry of poetic paradoxes. He never wrote a work of "program music" in his life, a piece that sets out to tell a story or invoke an image. Yet his music, more than anybody else's, has been heard to embody everything from revolution to raindrops, from a funeral march to wind whistling through a graveyard.

Chopin, who revered Bach above

everyone else, was among the most abstract and classical of the early 19th-century composers, yet he opened up worlds of pianistic color and texture without which a whole tradition of Romantic virtuosity could never have started. And yes, he's a miniaturist, but Chopin also created forms and structures — the ballade, the scherzo, the hybrid fantasia — that are models of innovative musical architecture.

John Rink, a leading Chopin scholar, has spoken of the "quality of 'present absence' and 'absent presence' that defines so much of Chopin's music." That's a good epithet for the staying power of this music; it's a quality that's difficult to describe, but easy to feel. The piece I'm currently transfixed by is Mazurka No 4 in A Minor, Op 17. It's music that looks simple on the page, but which is miraculously profound when played. Chopin's harmonies, in the tolling crotchets of the left hand, are so magical because they suggest almost infinite ways of feeling; the change of a single note from one chord to the next is enough to completely alter the emotional atmosphere of the music. They might only last five minutes, but those 132 bars are a complete world when you're playing it. Berlioz, writing about Chopin's power to encompass so much experience in a musical grain of sand, said: "Chopin has written two wonderful mazurkas that are more than 40 novels, and are more eloquent than the entire century's literature."

But, in the composer's bicentenary year, the best thing about Chopin's music is that it doesn't just belong to all those Pollinis, Zimermans and Uchidas out there — if you can play the piano at all, Chopin is yours, too. And if you can't, he's the best possible reason to start.

Flowers adorn Frederic Chopin's tomb at the Pere-Lachaise cemetery in Paris. PHOTO: AFP

### Famous pianists on playing Chopin

BY GUY DAMMANN  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

ANGELA HEWITT

To play Chopin, you have to try to be a poet like him. You can be as clever or passionate as you like, but if you don't make the piano sing, you're not playing Chopin. That doesn't mean being sentimental. There's no image less helpful than that of the Romantic consumptive, eating himself up at the piano with the rain hammering against the windows. You only need to hear his music to be in touch with his immense inner strength and sense of discipline and craftsmanship.

PETER DONOHUE

I learned to play Chopin early, but avoided performing his music until about 20 years ago. I was wary of the Romantics as a young pianist, but listening to older recordings taught me how classical Chopin is in his clarity of form. The key to playing his work is a restraint that only comes after years of playing it. I'd held back performing the Piano Concerto No 1 in E minor until the other day, when I did it for the first time. I suddenly felt young and vulnerable again. After all, his music is partly why we become pianists.

EMANUEL AX

I'm from a Polish family, so playing Chopin was unavoidable. Although he's a national hero, his real value is universal. His connection with the piano is so complete, it feels almost as if the instrument was created to allow his music to come into the world. I have to work hard to get it right, but the notes fall under the hands so beautifully that playing him is overwhelmingly pleasurable.



PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

