

# CHOPIN: POET AND MISUNDERSTOOD INNOVATOR

*by Peter Feuchtwanger*

*"Unfortunately, virtually no one except Chopin himself can play his music. He alone holds the secret."* Hector Berlioz's remark highlights a major difficulty in our understanding of this composer: that his very individual style of playing accompanied him to the grave.

Does the playing on disc of Raoul Koczalski (1884-1948), who studied with Chopin's pupil Mikuli, bear witness to the way Chopin played his own works? Or do the wonderful performances of the mazurkas recorded between 1923 and 1930 by Ignaz Friedman (1882-1948), himself a Pole trained in Vienna by Leschetizky (1830-1915), provide any indication? According to accounts by Chopin's contemporaries, Friedman's interpretations would appear much closer to the master's style than the sterile, straight-laced performances generally heard today. As we live in an age which claims to be able to deliver historical performances characterised by "authenticity" and "*Werktreue*", should we not ask ourselves whether we have moved closer or further away from Chopin's style? It goes without saying that music cannot be experienced in the same way as it was almost two centuries ago: we listen to Chopin's music through twentieth-century ears. Sadly the last forty years or so have seen a tendency towards a loss of refinement and elegance, both qualities synonymous with the composer. Our difficulty in comprehending his elusive style is compounded by the demise of *bel canto*, that notable and much admired school of vocal art which Chopin strove to emulate in his own playing throughout his life. Perhaps some of today's pianists might come closer to the Chopin style if they listened to a 1906 recording of Verdi's preferred singer, the soprano Adelina Patti (1843-1919), singing an aria from Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, "Ah non credea mirarti" (apparently Chopin's favourite melody: he is said to have asked it to be sung at his death bed).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnEhCwO9ii4>

In this celebrated recording, Patti, though well past her prime, still deploys to miraculous effect the embellishments used by the famed

singer Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865).

In his teaching Chopin often referred to Pasta as the supreme exponent of *bel canto*, and his own playing was modelled on her style. It is surprising, then, that so few pianists nowadays permit themselves to profit from this long-dead singer whose incomparable vocal example may suggest much of Chopin's own use of rubato, agogic inflection and ornamentation.

We can gain further insights into Chopin's style from several contemporary accounts by his friends and pupils, published in a collection by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger and available from Cambridge University Press in a translation from the French by Naomi Shohet. However, since none of Chopin's pupils were outstanding enough to pass on their teacher's tradition, the style was lost, to be replaced by an entirely different way of playing greatly influenced by Liszt, whose school produced a number of remarkable pianists. Though an ardent admirer of Chopin, Liszt possessed a temperament altogether different from that of the Pole: he was drawn towards pathos and the grandiose, whereas Chopin tended to be quiet and introspective. Chopin disliked exaggerations such as extremes of dynamics, likening loud playing to a dog barking (partly due to the sound of the Instruments of his day).

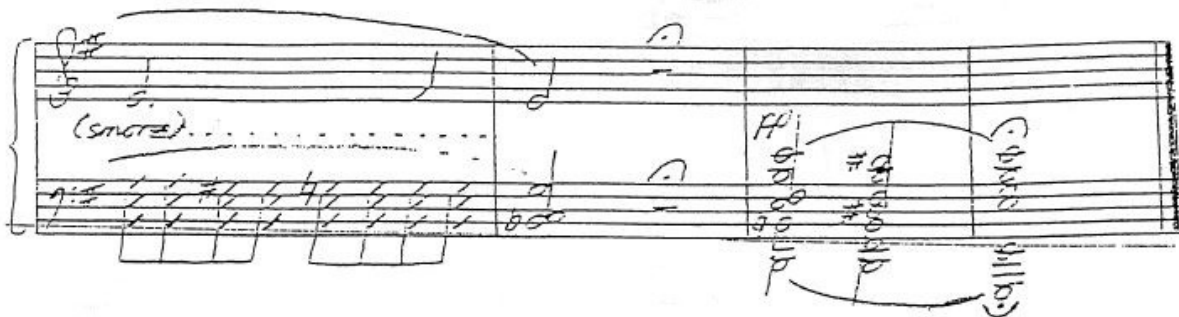
Pianists should learn from this biting comment to play fewer over-wrought *fortissimos*. It is hard to understand why most pianists thunder their way through the C major study op. 10 no.1 when Chopin did not write a single *fortissimo* in the whole piece. Contrary to the usual practice of ending the study *fff* Chopin writes *diminuendo* to end with a quiet low octave C, thereby making the piece into a preamble to the remaining eleven studies.

When Artur Schnabel (1882-1951), born the same year as Friedman and likewise a pupil of Leschetizky, referred to Chopin as a right-handed genius, he expressed a mere fragment of the truth, ignoring Chopin's exceptional mastery of form and counterpoint. Examination of some of the late mazurkas, such as op. 50 no. 3 in C sharp minor, op. 56 no. 3 in C minor, and op. 63 no. 3 in C sharp minor, should suffice to prove the point.

Similarly, one can illustrate Chopin's remarkable harmonic innovations by

looking at the development section of the first movement of the B minor Sonata op. 58. If one plays without interruption through all the semiquaver figures in bars 106-114, omitting the other voices, the result will sound almost atonal. Ask a listener, preferably a pianist, to guess the composer's identity and the replies will invariably range from Prokofiev to Schoenberg! When put to the test, even pianists who claim to have made a thorough study of the work flounder and are unable to recognise the passage as Chopin.

Once we understand that the written notes serve only as an approximation and that their meaning will differ in the hands of every performer (Chopin himself never played his compositions twice the same way), we soon realise that "authenticity" in performance cannot exist; one can only develop a certain informed attitude of mind which admits of many possibilities. All the more reason why a text free from the intrusive editing which over the years has played such havoc with Chopin's music would assist the pianist in the quest to form his own ideas and arrive at his own conclusions. It is nothing short of absurd to suggest that, as some editors would have pianists believe, Chopin knew little or nothing of harmony and that his grammar sorely needed correction! Take as an example the Prelude in E minor op. 28 no. 4 in a publication by the F. Chopin Institute in Warsaw (see music example), where the editors see fit to change the B flat in the bass at bar 23 into an A sharp, explaining that this note is the altered root of the subdominant, thus reducing Chopin's sublime



inspiration to mere school harmony. As the last notes of the Prelude fade away and we arrive at journey's end, the B flat signifies utter despair,

leaving the listener all too aware that there is no escape from man's 'inevitable' destiny. In technical terms the B flat can lead only to the Neapolitan chord of F minor, but in this instance Chopin chooses to suppress the expected progression.

The following minim rest with pause leaves the unresolved sonority hanging in the listener's consciousness, delaying almost forever the solemn E minor cadence. Since an A sharp, on the other hand, drives towards the bass octave B, changing the crucial B flat into an A sharp encourages the pianist to truncate the all-important silence.

Psychologically this results in a complete misunderstanding of Chopin's true intentions.

In the Prelude no. 13 in F sharp major Chopin erased what had presumably been a 6/4 time signature and felicitously replaced it with 3/2.

This change enhances the 'meaning' of the piece, and the *Piú lento* section gains considerably in eloquence. The second chord in each bar, with its underlying deep bass note, will no longer coincide with a strong beat, creating a floating quality and inducing the pianist to play the piece in a more flowing tempo. And yet all editions give the time signature as 6/4.

We turn finally to Chopin the metrical innovator. Aged just sixteen, he took the evolutionary step of writing the *Larghetto* of his First Piano Sonata op. 4 in 5/4. The first autograph of the Nocturne in C sharp minor op. posth. of 1830 (marked *Lento con gran espressione*) sees Chopin experimenting rather startlingly with polymetrics: the middle section is in 3/4 in the right hand but in 4/4 in the left (the melody is a quotation from the F minor Piano Concerto). Possibly foreseeing the lack of comprehension, Chopin suppressed his device in his second autograph. Wisely, the Henle edition includes the far superior first version, unlike both the Polish edition and the Wiener Urtext (edited by Ekier, who does at least mention the first version in his critical notes). Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's forthcoming edition for **Peters** is eagerly awaited. An unblemished text may help to clarify what is currently a very complex picture, and thereby bring us closer to a real understanding of Chopin's revolutionary genius.

### About the Author:

Born in Munich he now lives and teaches in London. He gives master classes worldwide including the Summer Academy at the *Mozarteum*, Salzburg.

His greatest musical influence came through his encounter with the Romanian pianist Clara Haskil. Peter Feuchtwanger adjudicates at many international piano competitions and is vice president of EPTA UK.