

Chopin



Chopin  
by J. Cuthbert Hadden

With an Introductory Note by Jacques Leroie



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## Introductory Note

James Cuthbert Hadden (1861-1914) is author of a number of important books, most notably (for the musicologists or music enthusiast) his biographies of Handel, Mendelssohn, Haydn and Chopin. The present book is perhaps his least flamboyant (although no less rewarding to read than the others), a fact which may have been shaped by a conscious effort to distance himself from the many works which Hadden describes as overflowing with a 'sentimental gush.' Hadden has therefore 'endeavoured to tell the story of Chopin's life simply and directly, to give a clear picture of the man, and to discuss the composer without trenching on the ground of the formalist.'

Whether he has succeeded to do so is another question, one which is perhaps as important as that concerning Hadden's tendency to swing to the other extreme by ignoring too much as 'rubbish,' 'sentimental,' or simply 'stupid.' Although one can see where he is coming from, and although there was certainly a good deal of room for a work of this kind at the time in which it appeared, the reader of today should take into account that his positivism cannot be taken out of its context. This Chopin biography is a very important work, and more capable of giving an objective picture than much of the literature that would have been available to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century reader. But its value will be missed, if one does not remember that its spirit is one that was born amid the sentimentalism that is, if not contained, the enemy of much good scholarship.



## CHAPTER I

### Birth—Ancestry—Early Years

ONE of Shelley's biographers mourns the fate of "mighty poets whose dawning gave the promise of a glorious day, but who passed from earth while yet the light in them was crescent." Shelley, Keats, Byron—these were all extinguished when their powers were still in the ascendant—when their "swift and fair creations" were issuing like worlds from an archangel's hand. The cant against which Carlyle fulminated so fiercely would fain have us believe that a "wise purpose" lies behind this untimely slaying of genius. But what if Sophocles had been cut off before the composition of *Oedipus*? Supposing Handel had died before he had begun to think of writing oratorios—before in his fifty-sixth year he conceived the oratorio of *The Messiah*? What if Milton had been known only by the poems of his youth, with no *Paradise Lost* to serve as a treasure for countless poetical descendants? If Burns had lived as long as Goethe or Wordsworth; if Mozart had seen Bach's sixty-five summers; if Schubert, born with Mercadante in 1797, had died with Mercadante in 1870; if Marlowe had attained the age of Shakespeare; if Raphael had all but touched the nineties like Michael Angelo—if all this had been the order of a "wise purpose," what splendid achievements the world might now be rejoicing in! No doubt there are cases in which an earlier death would have prevented disastrous mistakes; but I am not with those who regard a man's life as necessarily complete at whatever age he dies. It is an insanity of optimism to delude ourselves with the notion that we possess the best possible works of genius con-signed to the grave before its time. When genius is shown by fate for one brief moment and withdrawn before its spring has merged into the fruitful fullness of summer, we must simply, as the biog-

rapher of Shelley says, bow in silence to the law of waste that rules inscrutably in nature.

These reflections have a special application in the case of at least four of the great composers. Schubert died when he was thirty-one, Mozart died when he was thirty-five, Mendelssohn died when he was thirty-eight, and Chopin died when he was thirty-nine. Probably Mendelssohn and Mozart, alone of the quartet, with longer lives, would have equalled without surpassing the works which we possess from their pens. On the other hand, Schubert's achievement can hardly be regarded as complete; while in the case of Chopin it is at least reasonable to assume that length of years, extending, let us say, to the Davidic limit of threescore and ten, would have strengthened and expanded his genius and resulted in a series of works which would have secured him a place among the composers whose names we are accustomed to distinguish by the epithet "great." But these are vain speculations. As has been well observed, life, in all true reckoning, is counted, not by years but by actions. Chopin's life was brief, but it failed not of its purpose. That he did not die with all his music in him must be our lasting consolation.

The exact date of Frederic François Chopin's birth, like many incidents of his career, has occasioned some controversy. "All the foreign biographers of Chopin," says Karasowski, "have mistaken the date of his birth. Even on his monument at Père la Chaise, in Paris, 1810 is engraven instead of 1809, an error which ought to have been rectified long ago." If Chopin had indeed been born in 1809 the event would have added one more notable name to the birthday list of that *annus mirabilis* which witnessed the advent of Mendelssohn, Tennyson, Gladstone, Darwin, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Abraham Lincoln, and Edgar Allan Poe.

But there is more than a doubt about Chopin having been born in 1809. That year was given by his sister to Karasowski, and it is adopted by Professor Niecks, who in 1878 was assured by Liszt of its correctness. It is, too, the year which appears on the memorial in the Church of the Holy Cross at Warsaw, where Chopin's

heart is preserved. There is, however, no documentary evidence in favour of 1809. The short and simple way of settling the point would have been for the biographers to procure a copy of the baptismal certificate; but no one seems to have thought of doing this until the search was undertaken some eight years ago by Mlle. Natalie Janotha, the well-known Polish pianist.

According to Mlle. Janotha's evidence, the composer was born on 22nd February 1810, and baptised on the 23rd of April following. The baptismal certificate found in the records of Brochow Church, Zelazowa Wola, runs, in an English translation: "I, the above, have performed the ceremony of baptising in water a boy with the double name Frederic François, on the 22nd day of February, son of the musicians Nicolai Choppen, a Frenchman, and Justina de Krzyzanowska, his loyal spouse. God-parents: the musicians Franciscus Grembeki and Donna Anna Szarbekowa, Countess of Zelazowa Wola."

It is not easy to see how this evidence can be ignored. Mr. Huneker hints at the suspicious inaccuracy which describes the parents of the composer as musicians, and suggests that Chopin himself may have been to blame for the confusion of dates, inasmuch as "artists, male as well as female, have been known to make themselves younger in years by conveniently forgetting their birth-date or by attributing the error to carelessness in the registry of dates." People are certainly not to be implicitly trusted in the matter of their birthdays. Brahms always said that he had been born on the 3rd of March, whereas the date was the 3rd of May. But there is nothing to show that Chopin himself favoured the later date; while, as regards the term "musician" of the baptismal register, it is curious that it should have been applied to the god-parents as well, one of them a countess.<sup>1</sup> It is a point worth noting that Fétis' year is 1810, for Fétis was personally acquainted with Chopin, and would in all probability get the date from the composer himself. Mlle. Janotha assures us that the date of the Brochow certificate has been placed upon several Chopin monuments in Poland; and, taking the whole circumstances into account, we shall probably be safe in accepting her testimony that

Chopin was born, not in 1809, but in 1810—on the 22nd of February.

His father, Nicolas Chopin, appears to have been rather an interesting personality. He was born in 1770, the same year as Beethoven, at Nancy, in Lorraine, and was, if we may credit the statement of M. A. Szulc, the author of a Polish book on Chopin, the natural son of a Polish nobleman who, having accompanied King Stanislas to Lorraine, adopted there the name of Chopin. There are variants of this story, about which nothing can be said in the absence of authentic confirmation. Whatever may have been his descent, Nicolas Chopin was a man of education and refinement. He went to Warsaw during the political agitation of 1787, and after, as it would appear, doing some book-keeping in a tobacco manufactory, became tutor to the two children of the Staroskin Laczynska. He was still in the capital when the revolution of which Kosciusko was the hero broke out in 1794, and shortly after this, having begun to look upon Poland as his second home, he joined the National Guard, and bore an active share in the defence of the country. Some years afterwards he resolved to return to France, but illness having twice prevented him from carrying out his resolution, he saw in this the guiding hand of Providence, and remained in Warsaw, giving lessons in French.

Drifting to Zelazowa Wola, a village not far from Warsaw, he found there a congenial occupation as tutor to the Countess Skarbek's son Frédéric, after whom the future composer was named. It was here that he met and fell in love with Justina Krzyzanowska, whom he married in 1806. Justina is said to have been born of "poor but noble parents." George Sand declared that she was Chopin's "only love." In one of his own letters Chopin calls her the "best of mothers." She seems to have been an ideal mother—a woman of strong common-sense, of a gentle disposition, and, in her days of widowhood, given to piety and prayer. One describes her as "bright, active, and tender-hearted, full of folk-lore and household recipes, sincere in religion, charitable in conduct, gentle and courteous in speech." A Scots lady who had seen her in her old age spoke of her to Niecks as "a neat, quiet, intelligent old lady, whose alertness contrasted strongly with the

languor of her son, who had not a shadow of energy in him." Of course, this was said of Chopin in his later years. In earlier life he was perhaps, as we shall see, even feverishly energetic.

Justina bore her husband four children—three girls and a boy, the subject of the present memoir. Louisa, the eldest child, who developed a literary talent, married Professor Jedrzejewicz in 1832, and died in 1855 at the age of forty-eight. Isabella, the second daughter, married a school inspector named Barcinski; while Emilia, the youngest daughter (Chopin's favourite), who gave evidence of premature intellectual development, was cut off in 1827 when she was only fourteen.

The contemporary Brontë sisters and their brother Branwell occur to one in contemplating this Chopin family of three girls and a boy—only, however, as regards the comparatively early deaths, and the fact that chest trouble was at work in both households. The Chopin girls were certainly not Brontës, for though they seem to have had the temperament of genius they had none of its accomplishments; and Chopin himself was as far as possible from resembling the *habitué* of Haworth's "Black Bull," who wanted to die, as Hadrian said a Roman emperor should do, standing. Whence the divine fire that came into these families was derived by way of heredity is a question beyond conjecture, for the mental faculties of the parents were in neither case unusual. We can only say of Chopin and Charlotte Brontë what Walton says of the poet and the angler—they were "born to be so." They illustrate no modern theory of the origin of genius.

Nicolas Chopin's career subsequent to the birth of his son may be briefly outlined. In 1810 he returned to Warsaw, and was appointed Professor of French at the newly-founded Lyceum. This post he retained for twenty-one years, having meanwhile added to his duties by undertaking the French Professorship at the School of Artillery and Engineering and at the Military Elementary School. For a number of years, too, he kept a boarding-school, which was patronised by some of the best families in the country. His last appointment was at the Academy for Roman Catholic Clergy. Karasowski says that the failure of his physical powers was much hastened by the strenuous exertions which he had un-

dertaken on behalf of his adopted country, and adds that his declining years, which he spent in retirement and in the enjoyment of a pension, were beclouded by anxiety about his son. His death took place in 1844 at the age of seventy-four. Madame Chopin survived him by fifteen years, having seen all her family but one consigned to the grave.

Chopin, it will thus be gathered, was peculiarly fortunate in his parents and early associates. With a scholarly French father, a Polish mother rich in all true womanly virtues, and a trio of clever sisters always ready to pet him, the boy grew up, like Mendelssohn, in an atmosphere of charming simplicity, love, and refinement. He seems to have been from the first something of a weakling. Mr. Hadow calls him "a little frail, delicate elf of a boy," which is a fair description. Liszt says that he was "fragile and sickly," and that "the attention of his family was concentrated upon his health." He took no interest in outdoor sports and exercises, and had none of the usual boyish adventurousness. One can hardly imagine him scaling scaffoldings like Haydn, or tearing his clothes, or getting his feet wet. But he was assuredly not the "moonstruck, pale, sentimental calf of many biographers." Karasowski has several tales of his vivacity and love of practical joking: some evidently authentic, others as evidently apocryphal. He played innumerable tricks on his sisters and his school-fellows, and even on persons of riper years. We are told that one afternoon, when the pupils had become unusually boisterous, he restored them to order by improvising romances. That story may be accepted with a very slight hesitation; but the other, which represents him as sending the same unruly youngsters to sleep by representations of night on the pianoforte, must be politely discredited.

It is clear at any rate that his spirits were sufficiently high, perhaps too high for that slender frame, that delicate constitution, in which the seeds of disease were already sown.

The birthdays of his parents and friends were frequently celebrated by theatrical representations, and in these he usually took a prominent part. One dramatic artist said that on account of his presence of mind, his excellent declamation, and his capacity for rapid facial changes, Chopin was born to be a great actor. Balzac

and George Sand shared this view, which receives some further support from the fact of his having collaborated with his sister Emilia in the writing of a comedy. The comedy was, we may be sure, as little noteworthy as Master Samuel Johnson's reputed verses to his duck, but Chopin's share in it may at least be taken as an evidence of his juvenile interests and activities.

It is, of course, not uncommon to find high spirits and love of fun coexisting with a delicate and refined sensibility. The case of Charles Lamb instantly occurs to one—the prince of practical jokers, and yet sensitive in the highest degree. I have heard of a boy of six, cheerful, healthy, high-spirited, rushing out of the room in which Mr. Somervell's music to "The Forsaken Mermaid" was being played. He was found sobbing in another apartment. "I will not listen to it!" was all he could say. So it was with Chopin. We read that when quite a child he "wept whenever he heard music, and was with difficulty restrained." One unsympathetic biographer compares this with the "responsive howls" of a dog when an instrument is played. It is rather an indication of susceptibility, partly physical, partly mental, and prepares us for the early interest in music which Chopin showed. He was no baby composer, writing scores and extemporising sonatas and concertos before he had cut his first tooth. But he took to the piano almost as soon as he could walk—as if, in short, it were by natural destiny. His parents, being sensible people, resolved to do all that was possible to foster his evident talent. A master was engaged for him in the person of Adalbert Zywny, a Bohemian, who played the violin and taught the piano. Mr. Hadow, arguing from the fact that in after life Chopin's system of fingering was entirely original and unorthodox, conjectures that Zywny never really showed him how to play a scale. The inference loses some of its point from the fact that Chopin devised a system of fingering for himself, a system arising out of the peculiar demands of his own music. There is a tradition that Zywny allowed the boy to spend most of his time in improvisation. However that may be, he gave his young pupil a thorough grounding in the rudiments of his art, encouraged and guided his talent for extemporising, and so advanced his progress

at the keyboard that before long he became the wonder of all the drawing-rooms of Warsaw.

Frederic Chopin, in fact, was in some danger of developing into that unnatural product of modern exploitation known as the “infant prodigy.” A Polish lady who heard him play when he was not quite nine wrote, of him as a child who, “in the opinion of connoisseurs of the art, promises to replace Mozart.” Precocious he undoubtedly was, even in an age of such precocity as that of Mendelssohn and Liszt. But he could never have been the *wunderkind* that Mozart was. For one thing, he had no burning desire to shine in public. Even when during his ninth year he played a Gyrowetz concerto at a charity concert, it was not his own achievement that interested him most: it was his personal appearance. He had been dressed in a new jacket with a handsome collar for the occasion; and when the anxious mother, who had stayed at home, asked him what the audience liked best, he naively replied: “Oh, mamma, everybody was looking at my lace collar.” Here was the dandy in embryo. Chopin, as Byron said of Campbell the poet, was always “dressed to sprucery.” This was not from vanity or conceit, as it often is with wearers of long hair and fur-trimmed coats, but merely because it gave him pleasure to have fine, neat clothes, just as it gave him pleasure to have flowers about his room. With all his little affectations, there was not a particle of conceit about Chopin. That is perfectly apparent from his letters. Even now, when Madame Catalani, impressed with his talent—“she, too, foretold the perfect rose”—gave him a watch with a flattering inscription, he appreciated the compliment less than the idea of possessing a new toy.

The influence of this early contact with the *bon ton* of Warsaw on Chopin’s tastes and temperament is worth remarking. He always had, as Karasowski puts it, “an aversion to coarse people, and avoided anyone who lacked good manners.” The feeling was probably inborn, and it had certainly been fostered at home, where all sorts of interesting personages were constantly calling, and where, besides, was always coming in contact with his father’s pupils. But with the flower of the Polish aristocracy vying with each other in their patronage of the young musician, it was only

natural that elegant surroundings should become to him a sort of second nature, and give him that impress of an aristocrat which, in the days of his fame, no one who came near him failed to note. The Polish biographer's pages devoted to this part of his career are peppered with the names of society *grandees* in whose salons he was eagerly welcomed—Czartoryskis, Radziwills, Lubeckis, Skarbeks, Pruszaks, Hussarzewskis, and the rest. He was introduced to the Princess Lowicka, the unhappy wife of that typical Russian bear the Grand Duke Constantine, and frequently improvised in her drawing-room. He had fallen into the habit of casting his eyes towards the ceiling when engaged in these visionary exercises, and one day the duke remarked to him: "Why do you always look upwards, boy? Do you see notes up there?" What did Chopin not see "up there"?

Liszt, in his rhapsodical, not to say hysterical book on the composer, has some characteristic gush about these adulatory gatherings. "Chopin," he writes, "could easily read the hearts which were attracted to him by friendship and the grace of his youth, and thus was enabled easily to learn of what a strange mixture of leaven and cream of roses, of gunpowder and tears of angels, the poetic ideal of his nation is formed. When his wandering fingers ran over the keys, suddenly touching some moving chords, he could see how the furtive tears coursed down the cheeks of the loving girl or the young neglected wife; how they moistened the eyes of the young men, enamoured of and eager for glory. Can we not fancy some young beauty asking him to play a simple prelude, then, softened by the tones, leaning her rounded arms upon the instrument, to support her dreaming head, while she suffered the young artist to divine in the dewy glitter of her lustrous eyes the song sung by her youthful heart?" Liszt's experiences with women were peculiar. There was nothing to match them in the career of Chopin. The most that can be said about these aristocratic ladies and gentlemen who buzzed about him is that they made life pleasant for the dreamy young genius, and enabled him to lay up a treasure of happy memories against a time when happy memories could be almost his only solace.

For that he was happy now is absolutely certain. Some sentimental writers, representing him as a plaintive pessimist, hooting, as Dumas says, at the great drama of existence, have pictured his early life as a mixture of poverty and misery. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Poverty, of course, is comparative term. But while in his son's babyhood Nicolas Chopin, thanks mainly to Napoleon's rampant militarism, must have experienced something of the worries of straitened resources, things improved greatly after 1815, when the Congress of Vienna established a Kingdom of Poland; and enlargement of means came to the French Professor with the gradual restoration of the great families. Chopin's life was singularly free from all the grosser conditions of anxiety; and if health had only been granted him it might have been "roses, roses all the way." He never had to pawn his possessions, like Mozart, or sell his manuscripts, like Schubert, before he could order a meal. But this, as Aristotle observes, is matter for another disquisition.

The boy having begun to compose in earnest his father wisely determined to provide him with a master for theory. Here again he made an excellent choice. Joseph Elsner had gone to Poland from his native Silesia in 1792. In 1816, when Chopin was six years old, Elsner established a school for organists in Warsaw, where he was subsequently (1821) entrusted with the direction of the Conservatoire. Several of his pupils attained distinction, and the esteem in which he was held by the general public is attested by the handsome monument, raised by subscription, which adorns his tomb in Warsaw.

From what has been recorded of Elsner, it is evident that he was just the man to direct the theoretical studies of an original genius like Chopin. He was assuredly no pedant, quoting his chilling formulas to check the tendency of his pupil for "splendid experiments." When people complained to him of Chopin's airy evasion of certain rules of harmony and counterpoint, he would reply: "Leave him alone; he does not follow the common way because his talents are uncommon. He does not adhere to the old method because he has one of his own, and his works will reveal an originality hitherto unknown." When one remembers how some

instructors of the great masters hindered and repressed their pupils' efforts to strike out a new path, it is impossible not to feel a measure of sincere regard for Joseph Elsner. Chopin himself entertained for him a lasting love and reverence. When he went to Paris he wrote asking his advice about studying under Kalkbrenner, and the name of the old master continually crops up in his letters. "From Zywny and Elsner," he said, "even the greatest ass must learn something."

No details have come down to us of Chopin's course of study under Elsner. In a letter of 1834, addressed to Chopin, Elsner refers to himself as "your teacher of harmony and counterpoint, of little merit, but fortunate." Karasowski speaks of Chopin's "profound knowledge of counterpoint," but Chopin's works nowhere exhibit a profound knowledge of counterpoint in the strict sense. It is doubtful if Elsner himself possessed such a knowledge: those of his compositions which have been examined do not indicate anything of the kind. Some contend that he was too easy-going with Chopin. But he taught him to love Bach; and if he allowed him, for the most part, to take his own course, what then? As one has said, with a conscientious pupil the method of encouragement is the easiest possible way to inculcate a feeling of responsibility, and the most successful teacher is he who knows how to train mediocrity and to leave genius a free hand.

Concurrently, of course, with his theoretical studies Chopin was labouring hard in the improvement of his pianoforte technique. He had an instrument in his bedroom, and would often get up during the night to do a spell of practice or to try the effect of some particular combination which had been engaging his thoughts. "The poor young gentleman's mind is affected," was the compassionate comment of the servants. But Chopin knew very well what he was about. As Mr. Willeby remarks, the pianoforte "school" of that time was totally insufficient for his requirements, and necessity, the mother of invention, led him gradually on to those experiments in tone and technique which so revolutionised the practice of the keyboard and resulted in the development of a new style. Karasowski says that Chopin showed a preference for the organ as offering the widest scope for his

improvisations. The assertion seems doubtful in view of the fact that Chopin's genius was so essentially a genius of the piano. Yet one is not so sure. The middle part of a well-known Nocturne in G Minor, for example, looks very "organic." And, at any rate, Chopin clearly did play the organ. George Sand tells how, on the way home from Majorca in 1839, he took the instrument at the funeral of Adolphe Nourrit, the opera tenor, who, in a fit of despondency, threw himself from a window in Naples. It was at the Church of Notre-Dame-du-Mont, in Marseilles. "What an organ!" writes the novelist. "A false, screaming instrument which had no wind except for the purpose of being out of tune . . . He, however, made the most of it, taking the least shrill stops, and playing *Les Astres* [a melody of Schubert's], not in the enthusiastic manner that Nourrit used to sing it, but plaintively and softly, like the far-off echo from another world." This is authentic. The only other reference I have found to Chopin's organ-playing is in connection with a dubious anecdote told by Sikorski and Karasowski. According to this anecdote, Chopin sometimes sat in the choir and played the organ at the Wizytek Church, which was attended by the students of the Warsaw University. One day, when the celebrant had sung the "Oremus," Chopin extemporised in an ingenious manner on a motive from the mass just performed. The choristers and band left their places and gathered round the player spell-bound. The priest at the altar complacently awaited the pleasure of the musician, but the sacristan rushed angrily into the choir, exclaiming: "What the devil are you doing? The priest has twice intoned *Per omnia saecula saeculorum*, the ministrant has rung repeatedly, and still you keep on playing. The superior who sent me is out of all patience." The poetic imagination has almost certainly been at work on this anecdote, if indeed the whole thing is not an invention.

So far Chopin had been receiving his general education at home among his father's pupils. In 1824 he was sent to the Warsaw Lyceum, where he "worked hard, rose rapidly, won two or three prizes, and gained the esteem and respect of his school-fellows by developing a remarkable talent for caricature." There is a story of his having made an unflattering portrait of the Lyceum direc-

tor, who, becoming possessed of the sketch, returned it with the sardonic comment that it was excellent! This tendency to caricature the peculiarities of others became, as Mr. Huneker observes, a distinct, ironic note in his character, though in later life the trait was much clarified and spiritualised. Possibly it attracted Heine, though Heine's irony was on a more intellectual plane.

While at the Lyceum his holidays were generally spent in the country, most frequently at the village of Szafarnia. There, as Karasowski informs us, he conceived the idea of bringing out a manuscript newspaper after the pattern of the *Warsaw Courier*. He called it the *Szafarnia Courier*, and its contents were made to serve in place of the ordinary home letters. Here is one paragraph, showing that even while on holiday he was not wholly divorced from his beloved music. It must be premised that "M. Pichon" was a name he had assumed. "On July 15th," runs the note in the journal, "M. Pichon appeared at the musical assembly at Szafarnia, at which were present several persons big and little. He played Kalkbrenner's Concerto, but this did not produce such a *furor*, especially among the youthful hearers, as did the song which he rendered." This, so far as I am aware, was the only occasion on which Chopin sang, either in public or in private. But perhaps he was indulging in a joke, and did not sing at all! Compare Charles Lamb again: this was just the sort of mystification *he* enjoyed.

The influences of these Szafarnia holidays—the open-air life, the songs of the reapers returning from their labours, the dancing at the harvest homes, and so on—must have made themselves felt, if insensibly, later on when he began to compose in earnest. In a letter to one of his school-fellows he says: "I spend my time in a manner highly agreeable. Don't fancy you are the only one who can ride. I too can sit a horse . . . I ride, that is, I go wherever my steed pleases to take me; clutching at its mane I feel just as comfortable as a monkey would feel on a bear's back. I've had no fall to lament so far, because my steed hasn't yet been inclined to throw me, but I shall fall the first time it takes its fancy. I don't want to fill your head with my affairs. The flies often select for domicile the bridge of my nose, but who cares? It's a custom of these plaguy insects. The midges honour me with their bites. But

who cares for this either, as they do at any rate spare my nose? “This is an essentially boyish letter, on which account alone it is interesting. Chopin wrote few such letters.

Of the next few years of his life the details are rather meagre. In 1825 he made two public appearances in Warsaw, the first in May the second in June, playing Moscheles’ concerto in G minor and improvising as usual. At the earlier concert he had to “show off” an instrument bearing the portentous name of the Aeolo-pantalon, a sort of combined pianoforte and harmonium, which had just been invented by Dlugosz of Warsaw. Later on he played before the Emperor Alexander, who had come to Warsaw to open the Parliamentary session, and went from the royal presence with many compliments and the more substantial reward of a diamond ring. Next year—that is to say, in 1826—his parents began to detect signs of over-study, and he was accordingly packed off, with his sister Emilia—who was in the last stages of consumption—to Reinerz, a watering-place in Silesia, to try the effect of the whey cure. We hear little about the whey, but the rest did him a world of good, and he is soon found writing in the liveliest spirits to his school-fellow Wilhelm Kolberg. His musical enterprises seem to have been limited to a charity concert which he got up on behalf of two orphans whose mother had just died, leaving them totally destitute. Chopin had always the kindly, sympathetic heart.

From Reinerz he went on to Strzyzewo, where he spent the rest of the summer with his godmother, Madame von Wiesiolowska, a sister of Count Skarbek. While there he made a short stay with Prince Anton Radziwill at Antonin, where the distinguished musical amateur had his country residence. The prince does not figure prominently in the musical dictionaries; but he was so good a composer that his setting of the first part of Goethe’s *Faust* was performed for several years at the Berlin Singakademie. He had an agreeable tenor voice, was a capable ’cellist, and altogether was exactly the kind of man in whose company Chopin was likely to find pleasure. Liszt makes the extraordinary statement that he “bestowed on Chopin the inestimable gift of a good and complete education.” Another report credits him with defraying the cost of Chopin’s tour in Italy. As Chopin never made an

Italian tour, that report is easily disposed of: the other is likely to have as much foundation. Fontana, one of Chopin's most intimate friends, denied its truth; Karasowski indignantly repudiates the idea. On the face of it the thing is improbable. Chopin's education cannot have been very costly; and it would certainly have been surprising if his father, a professor at three large academies and the proprietor of a flourishing *pension*, had found it necessary to accept the charity of an outsider, however distinguished. Chopin, of course, could not go travelling for nothing, and he had expensive tastes. Substantial presents may have been made to him by Prince Radziwill. Such things were frequently done, and no one's dignity was hurt. But the gift of "a good and complete education" is an entirely different matter; and I do not think we shall greatly err if we regard it as another of the many fictions of the Chopin biographers.

Back in Warsaw, the young musician passed his final examination at the Lyceum in 1827. At this examination he did not make any great mark, and for a very good reason. He was now devoting himself more and more to music, less and less to general study. The bent of his mind had been anxiously watched by his father for years, and the time appeared to have arrived for a decision in regard to his future. There does not seem to have been much hesitation about it. A practical, matter-of-fact parent would have made a fuss over his son risking the uncertainties of a musical career. But Nicolas Chopin had himself a good deal of the artistic temperament. He recognised that it would be foolish to thwart the evident direction of Frederic's genius; and so it was finally resolved that Frederic should be allowed to devote himself to the art of which he was soon to become so remarkable an exponent.



## CHAPTER II

### Berlin and Vienna

HAVING thus decided about his son's future Nicolas Chopin began to realise that some acquaintance with the outer world would be advisable as a preliminary to settling down to the practice of his profession. Warsaw was a small place after all—isolated, moreover, from the great centres of artistic and intellectual life—and could hardly be expected to satisfy the longings of a young genius to hear the masterpieces of the classic composers performed by the best artists. The question was whether it should be Vienna or Berlin.

Chance led to a decision in favour of Berlin. Dr. Jarocki, the zoology professor at the University, an intimate friend of Nicolas Chopin, had been invited to attend a scientific congress, presided over by Alexander von Humboldt, at Berlin, and, calling one day, he offered to take the young musician with him. Chopin was delighted. The Scientific Congress was nothing to him: indeed he refused a ticket of admission to the meetings. What should he do among those bald heads? he asked. But the prospect of enlarging his musical experience in one of the leading European centres of his adopted art was too tempting to be lost. "It will give me," he wrote, "an opportunity of at any rate hearing a good opera once, and so having an idea of a perfect performance, which is worth a great deal of trouble." He would meet all the best musicians, too—Mendelssohn, Zelter, Spontini, and others. The mere anticipation made him almost crazy, until on the day for starting he was "writing like a lunatic, for I really do not know what I am about."

The two travellers left Warsaw on the 9th of September 1828. It was the period of lumbering diligences and bottomless roads, and the journey to Berlin took five days. Rossini, like Ruskin, decried against railways, which he described as a means of loco-

motion so little suggestive of art and so entirely at variance with nature. Chopin by all accounts would have been glad to dispense with the Rossini sentiment in favour of a tolerable measure of comfort. But he got to Berlin, and that was the main thing. By the middle of the month he was writing to his parents from the Hotel Kronprinz, where he had established himself. Karasowski has preserved three of his letters of this date, which give us a very vivid and often amusing account of how the young artist, plunged for the first time into the great world, occupied himself. As literary productions Chopin's letters disappoint even moderate expectations; but when they deal with his travels they at least serve to show that he was an intelligent and keen observer. The first letter from Berlin may be quoted in full. It is dated September 16, and runs as follows:

MY DEARLY BELOVED PARENTS AND SISTERS,

We arrived safely in this big, big city about 3 o'clock on Sunday afternoon, and went direct from the post to the hotel "Zum Kronprinz," where we are now. It is a good and comfortable house. The very day we arrived Professor Jarocki took me to Herr Lichtenstein's, where I met Humboldt. He is not above the middle height, and his features cannot be called handsome, but the prominent, broad brow, and the deep penetrating glance reveal the searching intellect of the scholar, who is as great a philanthropist as he is a traveller. He speaks French like his mother tongue; even you would have said so, dear father.

Herr Lichtenstein promised to introduce me to the first musicians here; and regretted that we had not arrived a few days sooner to have heard his daughter perform at a *matinée*, last Sunday, with orchestral accompaniments.

I, for my part, felt but little disappointment, but, whether rightly or wrongly, I know not, for I have neither seen nor heard the young lady. The day we arrived there was a performance of "The Interrupted Sacrifice,"<sup>2</sup> but our visit to Herr Lichtenstein prevented me from being present.

Yesterday the savants had a grand dinner; Herr von Humboldt did not occupy the chair, but a very different looking person, whose

name I cannot at this moment recall. However, as he is, no doubt, some celebrity, I have written his name under my portrait of him. (I could not refrain from making some caricatures, which I have already classified.) The dinner lasted so long that there was not time for me to hear Birnbach, the much-praised violinist of nine years. To-day I shall dine alone, having made my excuses to Professor Jarocki, who readily perceived that, to a musician, the performance of such a work as Spontini's "Ferdinand Cortez," must be more interesting than an interminable dinner among philosophers. Now I am quite alone, and enjoying a chat with you, my dear ones.

There is a rumour that the great Paganini is coming here. I only hope it is true. Prince Radziwill is expected on the 20th of this month. It will be a great pleasure to me if he comes. I have, as yet, seen nothing but the Zoological Cabinet, but I know the city pretty well, for I wandered among the beautiful streets and bridges for two whole days. You shall have a verbal description of these, as, also, of the large and decidedly beautiful castle. The chief impression Berlin makes upon me is that of a straggling city which could, I think, contain double its present large population. We wanted to have stayed in the French street, but I am very glad we did not, for it is as broad as our Lezno,<sup>3</sup> and needs ten times as many people as are in it to take off its desolate appearance.

To-day will be my first experience of the music of Berlin. Do not think me one-sided, dearest Papa, for saying that I would much rather have spent the morning at Schlesinger's than in labouring through the thirteen rooms of the Zoological Museum, but I came here for the sake of my musical education, and Schlesinger's library, containing, as it does, the most important musical works of every age and country, is, of course, of more interest to me than any other collection. I console myself with the thought that I shall not miss Schlesinger's, and that a young man ought to see all he can, as there is something to be learnt everywhere. This morning I went to Kisting's pianoforte manufactory, at the end of the long Frederic Street, but as there was not a single instrument completed, I had my long walk in vain. Fortunately for me there is a

good grand piano in our hotel, which I play on every day, both to my own and the landlord's gratification.

The Prussian diligences are most uncomfortable, so the journey was less agreeable than I had anticipated; however, I reached the capital of the Hohenzollerns in good health and spirits. Our travelling companions were a German lawyer, living at Posen, who tried to distinguish himself by making coarse jokes; and a very fat farmer, with a smattering of politeness acquired by travelling.

At the last stage before Frankfort-on-the-Oder, a German Sappho entered the diligence and poured forth a torrent of ridiculous, egotistical complaints. Quite unwittingly, the good lady amused me immensely, for it was as good as a comedy when she began to argue with the lawyer, who, instead of laughing at her, seriously controverted everything she said.

The suburbs of Berlin, on the side by which we approached, are not pretty, but the scrupulous cleanliness and order which everywhere prevail are very pleasing to the eye. To-morrow I shall visit the suburbs on the other side.

The Congress will commence its sittings the day after to-morrow, and Herr Lichtenstein has promised me a ticket. In the evening Alex von Humboldt will receive the members at his house: Professor Jarocki offered to procure me an invitation, but I thanked him and said I should gain little, if any, intellectual advantage from such a gathering, for which I was not learned enough; besides the professional gentlemen might cast questioning glances at a layman like me, and ask, "Is Saul then among the prophets?" I fancied, even at the dinner, that my neighbour, Professor Lehmann, a celebrated botanist from Hamburg, looked at me rather curiously. I was astonished at the strength of his small fist; he broke with ease the large piece of white bread, to divide which I was fain to use both hands and a knife. He leaned over the table to talk to Professor Jarocki, and in the excitement of the conversation mistook his own plate and began to drum upon mine. A real *savant*, was he not? with the great ungainly nose, too. All this time I was on thorns, and as soon as he had finished with my

plate, I wiped off the marks of his fingers with my serviette as fast as possible.

Marylski cannot have an atom of taste if he thinks the Berlin ladies dress well; their clothes are handsome, no doubt, but alas for the beautiful stuffs cut up for such puppets!

Your ever fondly loving,

FREDERIC.

The second letter, dated 20th September, is less interesting. It tells how, at the opera, he had heard Spontini's *Ferdinand Cortez*, Cimarosa's *Il Matrimonio segreto*, and George Onslow's *Der Hausirer*. These performances, he says, he greatly enjoyed; but he was "quite carried away" by Handel's *Ode on St Cecilia's Day* at the Singakademie. "This," he wrote, "most nearly approaches my ideal of sublime music." He had been to one of the Congress meetings, and sat quite close to the Crown Prince. Spontini, Zelter, and Mendelssohn were there, too, "but I did not speak to any of them, as I did not think it proper to introduce myself." Chopin's modesty again! He goes on to describe a visit to the Royal Library, "which is very large, but does not contain many musical works." He saw, however, an autograph letter of Kosciusko's, and was "much interested."

One awkward incident he recounts with a comically feigned distress. At the Singakademie, observing a lady talking to "a man in a kind of livery," he asked his neighbour if that were a royal *valet de chambre*. "That," replied his neighbour, "is His Excellency Baron von Humboldt." "You may imagine," says Chopin, "how very thankful I was that I had only uttered my question in a whisper; but I assure you that the Chamberlain's uniform changes even the countenance, or I could not have failed to recognise the great traveller who has ascended the mighty Chimborazo." The physiognomies of the German savants struck the young Pole as rather odd, and he could not refrain from caricaturing "these worthy but somewhat strange-looking gentlemen," carefully adding the names, "in case they should prove to be celebrities." The letter closes with an expression of eager relish at the prospect of hearing Weber's *Der Freischütz*, which had been staged at War-

saw in 1826, but unfortunately the subsequent communication printed by Karasowski has nothing to say of the opera. Chopin was never really intensely interested in opera. It was not in his "line." The third letter, dated 27th September, deals chiefly with a "grand dinner" given by the Naturalists the day before the close of the Congress. Functions of the kind are apt to prove a bore to most people, but Chopin found the dinner "really very lively and entertaining." The following extract is interesting and amusing:

Several very fair convivial songs were sung, in which all the company joined more or less heartily. Zelter conducted, and a large golden cup, standing on a red pedestal in front of him as a sign of his exalted musical merits, appeared to give him much satisfaction. The dishes were better that day than usual, they say, "because the naturalists have been principally occupied during their sittings with the improvement of meats, sauces, soups, etc." They make fun of these learned gentlemen in like manner at the Königstadt Theatre. In a play in which some beer is drunk, one asks: "Why is beer so good now in Berlin?" "Why, because the naturalists are holding their conference," is the answer.

After a stay of some fourteen days in Berlin the professor and the young musician set off and talk about politics was as little agreeable to Chopin as it was to Shelley. Moreover, the two gentlemen smoked incessantly. Chopin disliked smoking. One of the travellers announced that he was going to smoke until he went to sleep, and would rather die than give up his pipe. This was too much for the musician, who, determined to have fresh air at any risk, went outside. In passing, one cannot help remarking on Chopin's objection to the weed, and the fact that his "friend" George Sand, as Carlyle said of Tennyson, smoked "infinite tobacco." Mr. Huneker, commenting on the point, reminds us that one of the anecdotes related by De Lenz accuses George Sand of calling for a match to light her cigar. "Frédéric, un fidibus," she commanded, and Frederic obeyed. But there is a letter from Balzac to the Countess Hauska, dated 15<sup>th</sup> March 1841, which concludes: "George Sand did not leave Paris last year. She lives at Rue Pigalle,