LIFE AND WORKS

Frédéric
Chopin

Written and Narrated by
Jeremy Siepmann

with **Anton Lesser** as Chopin

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Preface

If music is 'about' anything, it's about life. No other medium can so quickly or more comprehensively lay bare the very soul of those who make or compose it. Biographies confined to the limitations of text are therefore at a serious disadvantage when it comes to the lives of composers. Only by combining verbal language with the music itself can one hope to achieve a fully rounded portrait. In the present series, the words of composers and their contemporaries are brought to life by distinguished actors in a narrative liberally spiced with musical illustrations.

The substantial booklet contains an assessment of the composer in relation to his era, an overview of his major works and their significance, a Graded Listening Plan, a summary of recommended books, a gallery of biographical entries on the most significant figures in his life and times, and a calendar of his life showing parallel developments in the arts, politics, philosophies, sciences and social developments of the day.

Jeremy Siepmann

Recorded at Bucks Audio Recording, Buckinghamshire, UK and Hats Off Studios, Oxfordshire, UK
Engineers: Alan Smyth, Michael Taylor
Sound Editors: Simon Weir, Classical Recording Company; Michael Taylor, Ariel Productions
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Frédéric Chopin

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Cast

Jeremy Siepmann – Narrator
Anton Lesser – Chopin
Other parts read by Neville Jason, Elaine Claxton and Karen Archer.
Recorded at Bucks Audio Recording, Buckinghamshire, UK and Hats Off Studios, Oxfordshire, UK.
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Jeremy Siepmann

Though long resident in England, Jeremy Siepmann was born and formally educated in the United States. Having completed his studies at the Mannes College of Music in New York, he moved to London at the suggestion of Sir Malcolm Sargent in 1964. After several years as a freelance lecturer he was invited to join the staff of London University. For most of the last 20 years he has confined his teaching activity to the piano, his pupils including pianists of worldwide repute.

As a writer he has contributed articles, reviews and interviews to numerous journals and reference works (including *New Statesman*, *The Musical Times*, *Gramophone*, *BBC Music Magazine*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*), some of them being reprinted in book form (Oxford University Press, Robson Books). His books include a widely acclaimed biography of Chopin (*The Reluctant Romantic*, Gollancz/Northeastern University Press, 1995), two volumes on the history and literature of the piano, and a biography of Brahms (Everyman/EMI, 1997). In December 1997 he was appointed editor of *Piano* magazine.

His career as a broadcaster began in New York in 1963 with an East Coast radio series on the life and work of Mozart, described by Alistair Cooke as ‘the best music program on American radio’. On the strength of this, improbably, he was hired by the BBC as a humorist, in which capacity he furnished weekly satirical items on various aspects of American life.

After a long break he returned to broadcasting in 1977, since when he has devised, written and presented more than 1,000 programmes for the BBC, including the international-award-winning series ‘The Elements of Music’. In 1988 he was appointed Head of Music at the BBC World Service, broadcasting to an estimated audience of 135 million. He left the Corporation in Spring 1994 to form his own independent production company.

Anton Lesser

Anton Lesser is one of Britain's leading classical actors. He has played many of the principal Shakespearean roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company and other leading theatres, including Richard III, Hamlet and Romeo. He is also known for contemporary drama on stage in London's West End and on television and film. He has made many recordings for Naxos AudioBooks, including *Paradise Lost* and the novels of Charles Dickens.

Neville Jason

Neville Jason trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, where he was awarded the Diction Prize by Sir John Gielgud. He is a familiar voice on BBC Radio. For Naxos AudioBooks he has abridged and recorded Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in 12 volumes.

Elaine Claxton

Elaine Claxton has worked extensively in UK theatre, including London's Royal National Theatre. She has twice been a member of the BBC Radio Company, during which time she participated in over 200 broadcasts.

Karen Archer

Karen Archer has worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company in *Nicholas Nickleby* and as Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, as well as across the UK in plays such as *Ghosts*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Her television appearances include *The Chief*, *Ruth Rendell Mysteries*, *Casualty* and *Chancer* and she has been seen in the films *The Secret Garden* and *Forever Young*.

Historical Background: 1800–1850 1

Overview

The nineteenth century, especially in Europe and North America, was an era of unprecedented change, peppered, inevitably, with wars and revolutions of almost every kind and at every level of society. The continuing advance of the Industrial Revolution, while far from abolishing poverty, brought new wealth to an ever-expanding middle class; factories proliferated throughout Europe, soon exceeding the supply of indigenous raw materials and thereby intensifying the impulse towards colonisation. The British Empire increased its dominions dramatically, Africa was carved up by Britain and other European colonists, and despite increasing unease, the slave trade continued, though its days were numbered. It was outlawed throughout the British Empire in 1807, but it was not until 1870 that the last slave was shipped to the Americas.

Alarmed by European expansionism, China and Japan attempted to shut out the West altogether. But empire-building went on apace within Europe itself, never more dramatically than during the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), which had the incidental effect of igniting in countries from Italy to Russia a fervent nationalism which became a running feature of the century as a whole. In 1848 revolutions broke out all over Europe, and Marx and Engels published their epoch-making *Communist Manifesto*. In 1837 Queen Victoria began her 63-year reign in Britain, presiding over the most far-flung empire ever known (encompassing more than a quarter of the world's lands and people) while seeing the monarchy itself steadily reduced to a merely symbolic significance as increasing numbers became educated and acquired the right to vote.

Science and Technology

As in the previous century, science and technology had expanded human knowledge to an unprecedented degree. When Joseph Lalande published his catalogue of 47,390 stars in 1801, he heralded a century of astronomical discovery both literal and figurative, not least on the medical front. The single greatest advance in medicine was undoubtedly the discovery by Pasteur and Koch that bacteria and viruses lead to infection, and the consequent mass immunisations against more than 20 diseases, including such rapacious killers as smallpox, tuberculosis and cholera (the last having claimed more than 16,000 people in London alone in 1849). Other landmarks included the discovery of quinine as a cure for malaria and the introduction in 1847 of ether as an anaesthetic, which with increased use of antiseptics resulted in unprecedented advances in surgery.

Arms

As ever, arms played a key part in most economies. By the mid-century, the Krupp works at Essen in Germany had become the world’s leading arms manufacturers, producing the first all-steel gun as early as 1850.

Agriculture

Easily sidelined by the achievements of the Industrial Revolution, agriculture experienced revolutions of its own, with breeding experiments leading to ever bigger crops and fatter animals. Cyrus McCormick invented his reaping machine in America in 1831, heralding a new age of mechanised harvesting. Justus von Liebig’s *Chemistry in its Application to Agriculture* inaugurated the age of scientific farming and the use of artificial fertilisers in 1855.

Trade

In the 1840s, Britain's adoption of a free trade policy (no customs duties) helped to establish London as the centre of world trade, with the pound sterling as the dominant currency. Many other countries later introduced import levies as a means of protecting their own industries from economic imperialism.

Ideas

As might be expected in a time of such ferment, the century was rich in philosophers, though the ideas which had, and continue to have, the most impact came from other quarters.

Philosophically, the high ground was held by the Germans, much as the French had held it in the previous century. The great names are Hegel (1770–1831), Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and Nietzsche (1844–1900), all of whom were much concerned with music in one way or another. Nor should one forget the Danish Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Hegel argued that consciousness and the world of external objects were inseparable aspects of a single whole, and that truth is discoverable only through a dialectic process of contradiction and resolution – a thoroughly rationalist idea with clear parallels in the concept of sonata form [see Glossary]. Schopenhauer took a more pessimistic view (and one more in keeping with the preoccupations of the Romantics), in which the irrational will is seen as the governing principle of our perception, dominated by an endless cycle of desire and frustration from which the only escape is aesthetic contemplation. His thinking had a powerful effect on both Wagner and Nietzsche, who rejected established concepts of Christian morality, Nietzsche proclaiming that 'God is dead' and postulating the ideal of the *Übermensch*, or 'Superman', who would impose his self-created will on the weak and the worthless – a view fully in keeping with the gargantuan nature of the Romantic ego, with its roots in the controlling powers of the Industrial Revolution and the spate of scientific discoveries which granted man an ever greater mastery of his environment.

Kierkegaard, the founder of 'existential' philosophy, was fundamentally out of step with these ideas, taking what was in many ways a specifically Christian stance and arguing that no amount of rational thought could explain the uniqueness of individual experience or account for the existence of God, which could be understood only through a ‘leap of faith’. His suggestion that not only God but exceptional individuals stood outside the laws of morality, however, did not endear him to the established church.

The Arts

In the realm of literature it was the century of the novel, in which such writers as Dickens, Zola, Hugo, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky managed both to absorb and entertain and to lay bare the realities of life for the mass of society, who suffered rather than benefited from the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Others, like Thackeray, Austen, Stendahl, George Eliot and Flaubert, dealt in various ways with the lives, fantasies and pretensions of the upwardly-mobile middle class.

Timeless issues of love, death, disappointment and adventure were memorably explored by Sir Walter Scott, the fantastical E.T.A. Hoffmann and the three Brontë sisters. It was also the century of the great Romantic poets: Goethe, Wordsworth, Heine, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge and Pushkin. Of these, Goethe, Byron, Heine and Pushkin had the greatest impact on composers, prominent amongst them Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, Berlioz and Tchaikovsky.

In the world of painting and sculpture, the greatest figures in the earlier part of the century included Goya, Constable (heralding a new wave of landscape painters), Ingres (as a natural classicist born into a century of Romanticism, he had much in common with Chopin, though not friendship), the arch-Romantics Géricault and Delacroix (whose obsession with the distant past arose from a characteristically Romantic distaste for the present), and the staggeringly original J.M.W. Turner, whose work foreshadowed the development of the French Impressionist school in the latter half of the century.

In the realm of dance, ballet underwent some important transformations, including the introduction of tights, calf-length white dresses and toe-shoes. The technique of female dancers was developed at the expense of the male, who was reduced to a largely supporting role. In the modern repertoire, the most typical examples of Romantic ballet at its best are *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841).

Architecture

Nineteenth-century architecture in Europe and America reflected both the Romantic obsession with the past and the industrialists' concerns with practicality and economy.

Public buildings tended for most of the century toward an ever more massive grandiosity, drawing on a wide variety of styles ranging from the distant to the recent past, often within a single building. A famous example, from 1835, are the neo-Gothic Houses of Parliament in London. Housing for the working class, however, bore many of the hallmarks of present-day factory farming, consisting in the main of terraced brick houses – small, crowded, lacking in facilities which today we take for granted, and of a soul-numbing sameness.

Music

Never has an art known greater changes in so relatively short a time than music in the nineteenth century. When the century began, Beethoven was only 30, Schubert only three. Haydn (68) was still at the height of his powers. When it ended, Debussy's revolutionary *Prélude à l'aprés-midi d'un faune*, often cited, even today, as 'the beginning of modern music', was already seven years old, and Schönberg (26), Ives (also 26), Bartok (19) and Stravinsky (18) were all fully active. In between, the end of the Classical era and the dawning of Romanticism could be seen in the maturest works of Beethoven and Schubert (whose symphonies, sonatas and chamber music reached previously undreamt-of proportions and expanded classical forms to their outermost limits). Harmony underwent unprecedented transformations, including the progressive dissolution of traditional tonality by Liszt, Wagner, Debussy, Mahler and Ives [for more on 'tonality', see Glossary]; the piano attained its full maturity and became the world's most popular and commercially successful instrument; the art of orchestration became a front-line issue, thanks to the pioneering work of Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner; and nationalism became a driving force, especially in Russia, Bohemia, Spain, Scandinavia, Poland, Hungary, Italy and America. There was a major shift from the relative ‘objectivity’ of the Classical era to the intensely emotional and formally self-generating outpourings of the Romantics. Illustrative ‘programme’ music achieved a popularity never approached before or since, and the cult of virtuosity became a dominant feature, thanks largely to Paganini and Liszt. The specialist (i.e. non-composing) performer became the rule rather than the exception (such figures were scarcely to be found in the previous century), and musical schools and conservatories became commonplace. Despite this, the discipline of counterpoint, once amongst the most highly prized of musical attributes, fell into widespread disuse. In the works of Schubert, Lanner, Weber and the Strauss family, the waltz became the most popular form of the century. Forms in general polarised, from the millions of piano ‘miniatures’ and ‘character pieces’ to the most lavish theatrical extravaganzas. It was the century of Grand Opera, whose most prominent exponents included Meyerbeer, Auber, Halévy and Massenet. Their works were long (five acts), spectacularly staged, complete with ballet and special effects.

Chopin in his Time 2

It is strange but true that Chopin, while writing some of the most romantic music ever composed, felt himself out of sympathy with almost every aspect of the Romantic movement (the only two composers he loved unreservedly were Mozart and Bach). His most notable musical contemporaries, on the other hand – Liszt, Schumann, Berlioz, Bellini, Meyerbeer and, to a lesser extent, Mendelssohn – not only subscribed to Romanticism, they virtually invented it (though that honour, if we're to be properly inclusive, would probably have to be shared by Beethoven, Weber and Schubert). They all had in common the time in which they lived (though only Chopin grew up on the periphery of the European heartland) but their responses to it could hardly have been more various.

Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and Mendelssohn were all born at around the same time – Mendelssohn in 1809, Chopin and Schumann in 1810, Liszt in 1811 – and they were all pianists. The piano stood at the heart of the Romantic movement. Its popularity was unparalleled. It came in all shapes and sizes and it was cheap enough, at the lower end of the financial spectrum, for almost every middle-class home to have one. And the Romantic movement was emphatically a middle-class phenomenon. Where classical music, so-called, had once been an adornment of the ruling classes, and a well-manipulated agent of political distraction, it was now taken up by the rising bourgeoisie as a symbol of genteel prosperity and a badge of economic power. To an altogether new extent, music passed out of the palaces and into the marketplace. Composers were decreasingly dependent on aristocratic patronage. They now relied for their livelihood on the sales of their work, or, more commonly, on their income as teachers of the well-to-do.

The Romantic movement, from Beethoven onward, created a cult of self-expression, and no single instrument served that purpose more comprehensively than the piano. Unlike any domestic keyboard instrument before it, it had a voice which could range from the tenderest murmur to the rafter-shaking roar. It could emulate the rising and falling inflections of human speech and the contours of non-verbal expression, from the sigh to the scream. No instrument was better suited to the programmatic, illustrative, imitative use of music which was one of the linchpins of Romantic fashion. No instrument better reflected the social, economic, religious and national turmoil which in the mid-nineteenth century was to shake Europe to its foundations.

This truly tumultuous climate of change, however, was by no means confined to Europe. The United States was rapidly becoming one of the supreme economic and military powers, the British Empire was expanding eastwards, and in every so-called developed country the Industrial Revolution, with its roots in the England of the 1780s, was transforming society at a rate and in ways beyond measure. The birth of the Machine Age ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity and an equally unprecedented increase in the general population. Parallel to the Industrial Revolution was a new, commercial revolution. World trade expanded dramatically. The clear-cut social stratifications of eighteenth-century Europe gave way increasingly to a new and often bewildering fluidity. Where the dominance of an inherited aristocracy had once been taken for granted at almost every level of society, the engines of social and artistic change now fell to the rapidly expanding, commercially-based middle class.

Music in the Classical era (which is to say most of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth) was based on preconceived notions of order, proportion and grace. Beauty and symmetry of form were objects of worship in themselves and combined to create a Utopian image, an idealisation of universal experience. In the Romantic Age, which lasted roughly from the death of Beethoven to the outbreak of the First World War, this was largely replaced by a cult of individual expression, the crystallisation of the experience of the moment, the unfettered confession of powerful emotions and primal urges, the glorification of sensuality, a flirtation with the supernatural, an emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation and the cultivation of extremes – emotional, sensual, spiritual, and structural. Where a near-reverence for symmetry had characterised the Classical era, Romanticism delighted in asymmetry. And if there was a rebellion against the recent past, there was an almost ritualised nostalgia for the distant past, and in many cases an obsession with literature and descriptive imagery. Form was no longer seen as a receptacle but as a by-product of emotion, to be generated from within. While the great Romantic painters covered their canvases with grandiose landscapes, lavish depictions of atmospheric ruins, historical scenes, portraits of legendary heroes and so on, the great Romantic composers, Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner most of all, attempted similar representations in sound – but not by sound alone. Notes, rhythms, tone colours, melodic fragments were consciously related to specific ideas, to characters and their development. Music took on an illustrative function to a degree never previously attempted. In its cultivation and transformations of folk music (or that which was mistakenly perceived as folk music) it became an agent of rampant nationalism.

A further feature of the Romantic imagination was a taste for extravagance. Grand Opera, particularly in Paris, anticipated the biblical spectaculars of Hollywood in its heyday. In the symphonic works of Berlioz and Liszt, as, later, in the works of Wagner, Strauss, Mahler, Bruckner and the pre-revolutionary Schönberg, orchestras frequently assumed gargantuan proportions.

To all or most of this, Chopin felt implacably opposed. Yet his music, in its overall tone, in its ravishing sonorities and its highly emotional expression, is as romantic as music gets. Chopin has won his continuous and undiminishing popularity through his crystallisation of emotions and states of mind which can be recognised and felt by everyone, from whatever background, throughout the westernised, indeed throughout the so-called developed world, whatever its geographical placement. It was a part of his genius to do this, in most cases, without any recourse to exaggeration. In his music, emotions are never caricatured or overblown; the nationalism of his mazurkas, even of the most ‘military’ of his polonaises, is never jingoistic. There’s nothing synthetic about his music. While never without feeling, it is never sentimental. Its sincerity is beyond doubt. His gift for melody was unsurpassed, his gift for harmonic colouration hardly less so. While he was a revolutionary, he never regarded himself as a futurist. He did not strive for originality as such; it was a by-product of his questing, experimental cast of mind. While the work of a man with an altogether exceptional intellect, his music is never self-consciously intellectual, still less academic. Unlike Liszt, he wrote a great deal of very fine music indeed which could be played by ordinary people. But he never condescended. That he also wrote some of the most difficult and virtuosic music ever written is another matter, one closely related to the time in which he lived – a time of expansion, of aspirations to the superhuman and a stretching of boundaries. Again unlike Liszt – indeed unlike most of the reigning virtuosos of the day – he disliked competition. He shrank from the kind of pianistic ‘duels’ indulged in by Liszt and even Beethoven. Nor was his response to Paganini’s achievements competitive. He was not out to excel Paganini. He was seized by the dream of infinite discovery, of expanding the limits of the known – and first, last and always, of expanding the expressive possibilities of the piano.

Chopin was the only piano composer who unwaveringly derived his aural inspiration from the intrinsic character of the instrument itself. All other important piano composers, especially after the example of Beethoven, had envisaged the instrument as a kind of surrogate for other media: orchestral, vocal, or specifically instrumental (Brahms’s piano music is full of ‘horns’, Debussy’s full of ‘flutes’, Liszt’s of shimmering ‘string’ effects). Again and again they treated the piano as a kind of celestial chameleon, forever turning into something else. Beethoven and Liszt repeatedly and deliberately wrote beyond the instrument’s capabilities, thus forcing the course of pianistic evolution. Chopin never did this. He is the only great composer who wrote exclusively for the piano. His music is so perfectly conceived for the instrument that there’s never the faintest hint of frustration. In a century hooked on transcriptions, arrangements and orchestrations, only Chopin’s music resists. All attempts to orchestrate it have succeeded in lessening rather than enhancing its quality.

3 The Major Works and Their Significance

The Ballades

Chopin’s four Ballades are among his most substantial and dramatic works, and though they weren’t designed as a set, they are frequently performed as such, with great success. No two of them conform to a single, basic structure but they all have strong elements of so-called sonata form, though none of them actually adheres to it in any conventional sense. This is combined, particularly in the Fourth Ballade, with a sometimes highly polyphonic variation technique of extraordinary resourcefulness and skill. In the depth of their emotion, their range of feeling and their dramatic character, the Ballades – particularly the first and the last – give us Chopin at his greatest, and make nonsense of the knee-jerk claim that he was essentially a miniaturist who was at sea in larger forms.

Despite their generic title, the Ballades are not programmatic in the sense that so many of Liszt’s pieces are, but the nationalist poetry of Adam Mickiewicz is said to have inspired at least the first of them. The principal source of drama in the Second is the completely unexpected juxtaposition of the serenely lilting, folk-like opening section and the violent explosion of passion which then crashes in on it, strikingly contrasted with the first section in almost every aspect: rhythm, texture, register – and especially key. In fact, the piece is really in two keys (a still greater source of tension), beginning in one and ending in the other, with various intensifying diversions along the way.

If the first two Ballades are essentially tragic in their power, the Third is more lyrical in its general character. Like the Second, it concerns the changing relationships between two main themes, but in this case, the second is more like a complement to the first than a rival. The Fourth Ballade (complete on CD 4) is generally felt to be the greatest, and demonstrates Chopin's mastery of developing variation. And characteristically, its form is true unto itself alone. Appearing at first to be a series of variations on the inward-looking, almost circular theme heard at the outset, it builds to a climax through the pursuit of material which seems on the surface to be completely different. Few works in any medium manage to combine a sense of inevitability with such apparent freshness and unpredictability. And this brings us to a typically Chopinesque paradox. As in the First Ballade, he unfurls some of his most profoundly felt and meticulously thought-out music in the trappings of a style generally identified with sensual frivolity – the waltz, whose stereotyped, oom-pah-pah accompaniment actually plays an important role in his music as a whole. But this was an important part of his secret. The near-universal appeal of his music derives partly from his unique combination of sophistication and a deep-rooted, wholly uncondescending sense of the popular, from peasant to Parisian. Within the framework of the waltz, the polonaise and the mazurka, he used extraordinary craftsmanship to express emotions seldom even hinted at in any of these forms before.

Broadly speaking, the Ballades are more notable for their differences than for their similarities, but in the nature of those similarities lies a clue to their enigmatic title: an almost ritualistic rhythmic scheme which is one of the hallmarks of the folk ballad, where it serves as an aid to the memory. Each of the four Ballades is characterised by a near-hypnotic grouping of beats in units of six. This is particularly clear in the openings of the Second and Fourth.

The Scherzos

Chopin's four Scherzos are among the most strangely named pieces in the repertoire. Only in the last of them could one conceivably guess that ‘scherzo’ is the Italian word for ‘joke’. It wasn’t Chopin, though, who first appropriated the term for musical purposes. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Haydn had used it for a speeded up version of the courtly minuet, but it was Beethoven who really transformed it into a new form in its own right. His symphonic scherzos leave hardly any trace of the minuet, or of the ballroom. In his hands, the tempo was accelerated to the point where the chief unit of measurement was no longer the triple-metre grouping of single beats within a bar, but the bars-of-three themselves. But – and here’s the catch – these bar-long units were grouped in twos. In a sense, that in itself could be seen as a joke: a piece which is in triple and duple metre at the same time – the aural equivalent of an optical illusion.

Chopin’s scherzos, unlike Beethoven’s and Haydn’s, were not conceived as parts of a larger design, such as the symphony, but as self-contained works. They are more notable, on the whole, for their alternating intensity and lyricism than for any sense of fun, and the dance element is almost completely submerged in favour of an epic ‘narrative’ style, drawing loosely and idiosyncratically, as in the Ballades, on the principles of so-called sonata form.

Far from being in any sense joke-like, the First (as can be heard on CD 2) is one of the most anguished, even tragic things Chopin ever wrote – one of the very few of his works which can justifiably be described as violent.

The Second, in B flat minor, was written six years after the First. Here, the general feeling is altogether more buoyant and positive, and the sense of spontaneity is sustained right to the end of the brilliantly integrated coda, which serves as a kind of dramatised curtain-call for the work’s main thematic characters.

The Third Scherzo followed in 1839. Its form is about as near as Chopin ever got to the straight ABABA pattern of Beethoven’s scherzos, and its harmonies are both daring and prophetic. In the effectively keyless introduction, all twelve notes of the chromatic scale appear, thus anticipating the revolutionary procedures of Arnold Schönberg by about three-quarters of a century. The opening rhythm is a perfect example of Chopin’s love of ambiguity: two bars of four beats each, at the outset of a work whose triple metre is proclaimed by its very title.

If the first three Scherzos give us Chopin at his most serious, the Fourth, in E major, finds him at his most carefree and capricious. In keeping with its serene good humour, it lacks the extreme contrasts of the others. In fact there are very few works of this length which have such a restricted dynamic range. Only rarely does Chopin suggest anything stronger than *piano*. And again unlike its companions, most of the work's main themes are quite audibly related.

The Préludes

The *24 Préludes*, Op. 28, one in each key, were loosely based on the model of Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* – a monumental work which Chopin carried in his head and played, generally to himself, throughout his life. As usual with Chopin, the title is more confusing than helpful. A prélude isn't a form, as such, and the range of styles, forms and durations here is enormous. In several cases, the Préludes are generically indistinguishable from the Etudes, many of them clearly dealing with a single musical-cum-technical idea. Examples of this type are No. 3 with its rapid left-hand figuration – a kind of lightweight counterpart of the famous 'Revolutionary' Etude (complete on CD 2), No. 6 in B minor (a study in left-hand *cantabile* ['singingness'] and a miniature cousin of the so-called 'Cello' Etude from Op. 25), the extraordinary F sharp minor which anticipates Wagner (No. 8), No. 12 in G sharp minor, similar in the nature of its difficulties (though not in its mood) to the Second Etude from Op. 10, the dazzling, demoniacally exuberant B flat minor (No. 16, one of the most sheerly exciting exercises in bravura ever penned) and the very taxing and rhapsodic E flat (No. 19).

Ironically, this most neutrally entitled opus by the nineteenth-century's most reluctant Romantic is among the most definitively romantic things he ever wrote. It lacks the sprawling grandiosity and the allusiveness of the operatic and symphonic Romantics still to come, it hasn't anything like the sensation-drenched egotism of a Berlioz, Liszt or Richard Strauss (however magnificent), nor does it descend, as Chopin would have viewed it, to the merely pictorial, but in its startling brevity of utterance (almost half of the Préludes last less than a minute), its subversion of traditional notions of key, its myriad colours and its spell-binding virtuosity, Chopin's Op. 28 could well be enshrined as a keyboard Romantic's manifesto. Those preludes which are not undercover studies in pianism are equally striking studies in emotion: 'Dream Visions', Schumann might have called them (some of them nightmarish). The starkly prophetic A minor (No. 2) is one of the bleakest meditations ever entrusted to the piano; hardly less disturbing is the E flat minor (No. 14). The nocturne-like D flat (No. 15, the so-called 'Raindrop') is one of the most powerfully involving and sensuously beautiful of all Chopin's works, fully justifying its popularity. The unbuttoned E flat Prélude (No. 19, complete on CD 3) gives us Chopin at his most pianistically enchanting and exultant. No. 22 (also on CD 3) is brief, turbulent and terrifying. The penultimate Prélude, in F major, is perhaps the one that most justifies George Sand's reference to 'the scent of Heaven', and the last one (concluding the group on CD 3) plunges straight into one of the most dramatic and doom-laden finales ever penned.

Envisaged as a single, continuous cycle, the Préludes amount to a tragic drama of extraordinary power and conviction, in which Chopin gives of himself with an almost frightening candour and intensity. Equally remarkable is the revolutionary originality of his imagination. Even today, things like the A minor Prélude (No. 2) have an almost disturbing sense of modernity. The importance of these pieces lies both in their intrinsic and unparalleled range and in the consistently soaring quality of the mind behind them. In the Préludes he turns a pitiless and unflinching eye on the human condition and creates a drama whose tragic stature is fully revealed in Idil Biret's uncompromising playing of them. Sceptics need only listen to her sovereign timing of the last three notes.

The Nocturnes

The Nocturne was 'invented' by the Irish composer-pianist John Field, from whom Chopin took the name and the general concept of a dreamy melody over a broad-spanned, lilting harmonic accompaniment, offset by a contrasting middle section before a reprise of the opening section. Like Field's, Chopin's Nocturnes cultivate a lyrical, non-virtuosic style and conform to a taste for moodscapes which we now take for granted but which then enjoyed a fashionable novelty. Comparisons of Chopin's earlier Nocturnes with some of Field's leave no doubt that the influence was both real and conscious, but the difference in quality is enormous. In the subtlety and power of their harmonies, the flexibility of their rhythm and the unprecedented suppleness and significance of their often highly ornamented melody, Chopin's Nocturnes are in a class of their own. That identity of style and substance which blossomed so luxuriantly in his youthful Concertos reaches its peak in the Nocturnes, and their far-reaching effects on composers as diverse as Scriabin, Debussy, Rachmaninov and Ravel are generally acknowledged.

The Nocturnes may not generally give us Chopin at his most adventurous, but they contain some of the most beautiful and resourceful music he ever wrote – and one amazing stroke of originality which places him in the avant-garde of his day. In its original version, the hauntingly beautiful C sharp minor Nocturne of 1830 contains a passage in which the tune is written out in 3/4 time against an accompaniment in 4/4. That Chopin should even have thought of such a notation in 1830 is remarkable in itself. The combining of two or more incompatible metres is normally regarded as a twentieth-century development.

The Nocturnes are as much studies in feeling as they are works of art, and more than any other of his works they helped to establish Chopin's often misguided reputation for soulfulness and manipulative sentimentality. The summit of this particular strain is the D flat of Op. 27 (complete on CD 3), which happens also to be an unsurpassed jewel of craftsmanship in every way.

The Sonatas

Chopin wrote only four sonatas: three for solo piano and one for cello and piano (plus a fifth if we include the Piano Trio in G minor of 1829). Of these, only two hold a secure place in the repertoire today. The C minor Sonata, Op. 4 (composed in 1827–28, and discussed in CD 1) was clearly a student work, and in later life he effectively disowned it. His next sonata was begun in 1837, though Chopin was not aware of this at the time. It was only later that he decided to embed a previously self-contained Funeral March of that year in the midst of a major four-movement work. Conceived and composed two years before the sonata in question, it has an almost hypnotic power which has made it the most famous funeral march in history. Its place, and indeed its placement, at the heart of Chopin's most celebrated Sonata is one of the relatively few instances where his music reveals the direct and openly acknowledged influence of Beethoven. Beethoven's own so-called 'Funeral March' Sonata, the A flat, Op. 26, was Chopin's favourite. He studied, taught and played it many times. Like Beethoven, Chopin puts his scherzo second and the Funeral March third, but the finale which follows is the weirdest and most original movement he ever wrote. The whole thing is over and done with in a mere 90 seconds, and it still retains its power to amaze, to disturb and shock – and to baffle. There's nothing else like it in history.

The second of his two great Sonatas, No. 3 in B minor (written five years later, in 1844), was composed when Chopin's reverence for Bach was at its height. This didn't lead him, as it sometimes led Mendelssohn, to write in a vaguely Bachian idiom (no work is more purely Chopin) but it bore rich fruit in the lavishly polyphonic fabric of the first movement, in particular. The weave of intertwining melodic strands is among its most striking characteristics. Structurally, the work follows the same basic layout as its predecessor. Again the scherzo comes second, and here, as in the first movement, the prevailing texture is polyphonic. The slow movement, which contains some of the most ravishing music ever written, isn't so remarkable for its form as for its relative proportions. It follows a straightforward A-B-A pattern, but the middle section is so expansive that it fairly dwarfs its neighbours by comparison. The finale is about as different from that of the previous sonata as it would be possible to get. It's one of the biggest, boldest and most stirring things he ever wrote. It's hard to believe that anyone could retain an image of Chopin as a miniaturist after hearing this.

Chopin's final sonata gave him endless trouble. Written for his cellist friend Auguste Franchomme, whose musicianship he admired enormously, the Sonata in G minor for Cello and Piano, completed in 1846, has a studious kind of 'objectivity' which has prevented it from ever becoming popular, even amongst cellists. It's the most deliberately un-Romantic, even anti-Romantic work he ever wrote – and the last of any great substance. Its dramatic change of course has fuelled endless speculation as to how his music might have changed if death hadn't claimed him at the age of 39.

The Polonaises

Like the mazurka, the polonaise comes originally from the Polish folk tradition. Like the mazurka, too, it was originally a sung dance. In the seventeenth century it began to be cultivated by the landed gentry, but it was only when it moved into the palaces of the Polish nobility that it became a purely instrumental form. There it lost most of its folk-like character and was eventually transformed into a dance of such splendour that it was taken up throughout Europe, where it also lost much of its Polishness. Its most outstanding feature was its insistent, rather martial rhythmic 'motto'. Many composers took it up, among them Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, none of whom, of course, had the slightest interest in its nationality. It was Chopin who almost single-handedly won it back for Poland and further transformed it into a blazing nationalist tone poem. For that we have the Russian Tsar to thank. Prior to the Russian crushing of Warsaw, Chopin too had taken a fairly light view of the form, and of his seventeen Polonaises, the first eleven can't be regarded in any way as major works.

Only with the two Polonaises of 1835 (Op. 26) did he take hold of the form and lift the whole conception of it onto a higher plane than ever before. From Op. 26 onwards, the Polonaise became for Chopin a fervent patriotic hymn in which the fearsome, the tender and the grandiose combined to reflect the glory of Poland's past, the tragedy of her present and his hopes for her future. For further comment on these, see the Listening Plan (p. 29).

The Waltzes

After the mazurka and the polonaise, the waltz was Chopin's favourite dance, or at least it came to be. When he first visited Vienna, he wrote home scornfully reporting, 'Here they actually call waltzes "works".' But it wasn't long before he did the same. Not that he hadn't already written quite a few waltzes of his own, but they were definitely at the lightest end of his stylistic spectrum. The waltzes of his Polish years are attractive and some are distinctly more than that (the E minor of 1830 being a good example), but it was in Paris that he really elevated the concert waltz (or more often, in his case, the salon waltz) to the realms of highest art.

Taken as a whole, Chopin's 'mature' waltzes are sparkling, often virtuosic pieces, clearly written to please and none the worse for that. Chopin was never more effortlessly elegant than in his Parisian waltzes and his refined charm seldom paid more wide-ranging dividends. The waltzes did more, perhaps, than any of his other works to assure both his social and commercial success, and they remain the most popular branch of his output. What separates his Parisian from his Polish waltzes isn't just their elegance and impeccable craftsmanship, it's their frequent and rather Mozartian suggestion of hidden depths beneath the glistening surface. The ever-popular C sharp minor, for instance, is both fashionably wistful and genuinely profound. In the haunting A minor waltz (his favourite) there is no surface, glistening or otherwise. It confronts us head-on with the first waltz in history which can rightly be described as tragic.

Chopin took unusual trouble over the structure and, in particular, the continuity of his waltzes. Behind almost all of the later ones lies the organic principle of developing variation, one of his subtlest techniques. Unlike many lesser composers he was never content to assemble a sequence of waltz tunes like so many beads on a string: they had to have an inner coherence. One of the truly extraordinary features of Chopin's waltzes is the sheer variety of moods and styles which he discovers within an outwardly rigid framework, dominated by the square, relentless four-bar phrase and its equally relentless oom-pah-pah accompaniment. His waltzes emphatically *were* 'works'. But it was a part of his genius to conceal the fact.

The Etudes

Most of Chopin's 27 Etudes rank with the most difficult piano pieces ever written. But many of their difficulties are often hidden from the non-pianist. Some – many – are clearly virtuoso pieces, which are hard even to play badly. In others, the difficulties may be more subtle. These aren't just studies in speed, endurance, leaps, trills, octaves and so on. Several are studies in rhythm, others in articulation, but the great majority are also studies in sound, in the control, variation and uses of tone colour. Chopin was the first great composer to mix sounds as a painter mixes colours on a palette, revealing in the process a kaleidoscope of aural possibilities. In the realm of technique, his Etudes were the first works since Bach to demonstrate that the technical requirements of a study could be combined with artistic perfection, though the variety of emotions, musical textures and technical challenges which they embrace dwarfs even Bach's achievements in that line. Following Bach's example, each study is predominantly focused on a single technical problem – the rapid expansion and contraction of the hand, quicksilver scales and trills in double thirds, the combination of two or more outwardly conflicting rhythms – and on a single musical idea. Chopin's Etudes are predominantly studies in various forms of legato, the smooth, seamless succession of consecutive notes on the model of the human voice. Where Liszt exploited the essentially percussive nature of the piano (it is, after all, an instrument in which strings are struck, and in which every note begins at its loudest and then rapidly diminishes in strength), Chopin does everything in his power to transcend it. In many ways he seems to anticipate Debussy's ideal of the piano as 'an instrument without hammers'. To this end, he requires the almost continuous use of the sustaining pedal as a primary source of colour, though his legato is to be achieved by the fingers alone, the pedal being more a source of ever shifting-light – sometimes helping to emphasise the harmonic rhythm, sometimes deliberately blurring it. At the time of their composition, the Etudes constituted the most idiomatic music ever conceived for the piano. A century and a half later, they still do.

The Works with Orchestra

Ironically for a composer whose piano works reveal such a ravishing tonal palette, Chopin was never really interested in the orchestra and confined his use of it to six early works, all composed before his twenty-first birthday and all designed at one level or another to provide a showcase for his pianistic talents. Once they had fulfilled that function, in Warsaw and in Vienna, he turned his back on the orchestra for good. Of the six, only two, the fully-fledged Concertos, can be considered major works, though the others are attractive and diverting, and sometimes more.

As with Beethoven a generation earlier, the Concertos were published in reverse order, so that the one we know today as No. 2 was actually the first to be composed. Both have traditionally been criticised for their poor orchestration and Chopin himself often played them as unaccompanied solos. But the orchestra does add something valuable, even if only as a backdrop to the piano, and even the carpers would surely prefer it to be there. In the the slow movement of the E minor Concerto (complete on CD 2), few listeners are likely to see what the fuss is about. Still less would most people complain about the orchestration in the larghetto of the F minor Concerto, where the accompaniment in the operatic middle section (tremolo string chords with ominous pizzicatos in the double basses) is as effective a piece of instrumentation as one could hope to hear. Another beautiful instance is the haunting opening of the Krakowiak, with its spare octaves in the piano melody set against a simple string accompaniment.

What moved Chopin most in music, especially in these early years, was not structure or symphonic synthesis or any of the pillars of Germanic musical traditions, but melodic invention, textural refinement, translucency of colour, a sense of proportion and a profound emotionalism which was a stranger to exaggeration. In these respects, his Concertos are models of their kind.

The One-offs

There are a number of Chopin's works which don't fit into any of the usual categories. Many of these are justifiably neglected, but some are among his greatest works. The *Barcarolle* (CD 4), the *Fantasy in F minor* and the bewitching *Berceuse* are such jewels which will never tarnish.

4

A Graded Listening Plan

Like Liszt's music, but in very different ways, Chopin's music ranges from the instantly seductive to the weird, enigmatic and intellectually demanding (though there are very few works which fall into the latter category). Unlike Liszt's, most of it has remained uninterruptedly in the mainstream repertoire from his time to our own. The following itinerary progresses from the most accessible to the most challenging and is thus neither chronological nor strictly generic (Préludes, Nocturnes, Ballades etc.). The *24 Préludes, Op. 28* contain both extremes, so do the Mazurkas and the B flat minor Sonata, while the Waltzes belong entirely to the first category and the Cello Sonata mostly to the latter.

One-offs

Chopin wrote nothing more innocently ravishing than the D flat *Berceuse*, which can be heard, in part, near the beginning of CD 1 (and complete on Naxos 8.550508, which also includes the beautiful *Trois Nouvelles Etudes* and the four *Ballades*). His raw material is a simple, five-note figure (too short even to be called a tune), heard unadorned at the very opening and then repeated again and again throughout the piece while Chopin spins a succession of ever more elaborate variations above it. Pure magic – and the work of a superior craftsman.

As an example of Chopin's sheer songfulness it would be hard to beat the beautiful *Andante*

Spianato (played complete on CD 2) which serves as an introduction to the unabashedly virtuosic *Grand Polonaise, Op. 22* [Naxos 8.550368].

With its combination of rippling sparkle and long-spun melody, the *Fantasy-Impromptu* in C sharp minor [8.550362] rapidly became one of Chopin's most popular works, though for reasons which remain unclear he suppressed its publication during his lifetime. The melody of its beautiful middle section was pinched by Harry Carroll in 1918 for the popular song *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows.*

Waltzes [8.550365]

Chopin wrote no more consistently winning works than these, though unlike the more wide-ranging *Préludes*, they were composed variously throughout his career. They range from the glittering, exuberant and virtuosic to the wistful and haunting – and even to the melancholy bordering on the tragic, as in the case of the A minor Waltz, once said by Chopin to be his favourite of all his works. The most popular include the so-called 'Minute Waltz' (not so-called by Chopin, and to play it in a minute would be no more than a circus stunt) and No. 7 in C sharp minor.

Early Nocturnes [8.550356]

Nothing forbidding or challenging here, though there's considerable variety of style and mood. The level of melodic inspiration is extraordinarily high, but what sets these apart from the attractive but generally rather insipid nocturnes of John Field, the 'inventor' of the form, is the richness, variety and coloration of the supporting harmonies (not that Field, even at his best, was a melodist in Chopin's class either). From the very opening of the first Nocturne, Chopin's gift for a truly 'singing' melody is at the fore, closely followed by his then uniquely supple and continuous flow of rhythm. The Second Nocturne, Op.9 No.2, is one of his most popular pieces in any genre – simpler than No.1 and very much easier to play (undoubtedly a factor in its popularity). No.3 is stranger, but haunting in its doubtful questioning, and more continuously woven, while No.4, with the simplicity of its ‘floating’ opening melody is one of the most seductive pieces Chopin ever wrote. The unprepared storm that erupts in the middle is a master-stroke of dramatic psychology, almost terrifying at a first hearing.

Barcarolle

The Barcarolle (complete on CD 4) is a one-off in name but not in nature. Essentially it belongs to the family of Nocturnes, and is the greatest of them all.

Works for Piano and Orchestra [8.550368–69]

These are all early works, composed near the end of Chopin’s Polish years. The concertos proper are the meatiest items, and also the most inspired, but the haunting introduction to the *Krakowiak, Op. 14*, is among the most beautiful and hypnotic things he ever wrote. The actual Krakowiak itself is little more than a bravura showpiece, but very attractive nevertheless. The *Variations on ‘La ci darem la mano’* from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (some of them included on CD 1) are highly enjoyable. Written to please, they do the job perfectly.

Ballades [8.550508]

The most popular by a long chalk, if the record catalogues are anything to go by, is the near-tragic but seductive and often exciting No. 1 in G minor. Next comes No. 3 in A flat, altogether gentler and more lilting, closely followed by No. 2, which is actually in two keys (F major and A minor). In its stark opposition of the serene and the turbulently virtuosic, it is a kind of large-scale counterpart to the F major Nocturne described above. No. 4 in F minor is regarded by most musicians as the greatest, but ironically it has always earned less popular favour than the others.

Middle Nocturnes [8.550357]

The greatest of these are the two of Op. 27, the second of which, in D flat (complete on CD 3), is quite simply one of the most beautiful piano pieces ever written. Its sibling, in C sharp minor, is no less remarkable but entirely different in mood – dark, mysterious, impassioned and utterly compelling.

Early Mazurkas

These are less winning than the waltzes, but make for very agreeable listening nevertheless, and it's fascinating to hear how Chopin differentiates the rhythm from that of the waltzes, which share the same triple metre. Clearly reflective of their rustic roots, the early mazurkas, while full of catchy rhythms and intriguing harmonies, give little hint of the complexity and dimensions of some of the later 'symphonic' mazurkas (for instance, that played on CD 3).

Polonaises

No problem of accessibility here. The earlier ones [8.550361] are relatively lightweight, the later ones [8.550360] progressively less so, but there is nothing notably demanding in any of them (except for the player). The most famous is the last, the great A flat Polonaise (often aptly subtitled the 'Heroic') which closes CD 4. Running a close second in popularity is the so-called 'Military' Polonaise in A major, Op. 40 No. 1. Its sibling in C minor, Op. 40 No. 2, is the only downright sombre one, bordering at times on the funereal. The great F sharp minor Polonaise which follows it (Op. 44) is fiercely defiant, almost grim, and not the easiest of access.

Scherzos [8.550362]

Like the Ballades and the Nocturnes, these were never intended to be played as a set. The dashing, soaring No. 2 has always been the most popular, with the other three level-pegging not far below it. No. 4 gives us Chopin at his sunniest and most confidently capricious, No. 1 (part of which can be heard on CD 2) is the most dramatic, even tragic, in its turbulent writhings, and No. 3 is the most darkly heroic. Like No. 1, it gives little hint that the literal meaning of the word 'scherzo' is 'joke'.

Etudes [8.550364]

Far from being academic or evidently tutorial in any way, both books of twelve, Op. 10 and Op. 25 – find Chopin at the top of his form. The fact that most of the first set was completed by the time he was twenty-one is astounding. The most famous of all is the so-called 'Revolutionary' (complete on CD 2), but this is probably due as much to its title (not Chopin's) as to the music itself. No. 3, in E major, perhaps the next most popular, is a study disguised as a deeply lyrical Nocturne, and No. 5 (complete on CD 2) is irresistibly virtuosic and powerfully heroic. No. 1 of the Op. 25 set also has a nickname, the 'Aeolian Harp', and gives us Chopin at his most poetically soaring. But every one of these ground-breaking pieces is a jewel.

Later Nocturnes [8.550357]

These include some of Chopin's greatest music. The best of them leave the seductive dreaminess of the early ones way behind, and have a complexity that renders them less instantly attractive to the musical novice. The C minor, Op. 48, No. 1, is a sombre, dramatic, large-scale canvas of extraordinary intensity and drama. In tone and pianistic technique it brought Chopin as close as he ever got to writing like Liszt. Its sibling, Op. 48, No. 2 in F sharp minor, is predominantly agitated and restless. In the great E flat Nocturne, Op. 55, No. 2, Chopin demonstrates that contrapuntal complexity and broad, sweeping, eloquent melody are in no way incompatible. The B major, Op. 62, No. 1 is one of those works whose harmonic daring and outwardly fragmentary and complicated structure make it less immediately appealing, but it repays repeated hearings with further riches every time.

24 Préludes, Op. 28 [8.550366]

Written at around the same time as Chopin's ill-fated stay with George Sand in Majorca in 1838–39, these astonishing pieces give us the whole Chopin at his greatest and most original. There is scarcely a shade of human emotion that isn't captured here. The longest and most famous is the so-called ‘Raindrop’ Prelude in D flat. The weirdest, most enigmatic and modern is the second, in A minor (but which in reality is almost without key), closely followed by the grim wrestling of No. 14 in E flat minor.

Three Piano Sonatas [8.550363]
The first of these, in C minor (see CD 1), is a student work which, while not worthless, is justly neglected in favour of the other two. The B flat minor Sonata contains (indeed was built around) the famous Funeral March, which is almost certainly Chopin’s best-known work. Its opening phrase is sung by millions who have probably never heard of Chopin. Like its sibling in B minor (No. 3), it’s an imposing, large-scale work (whose last two movements can be heard on CD 3). Its finale remains, even today, one of the weirdest and most puzzling movements ever written. The Third Sonata, while filled with magnificent and extraordinarily beautiful things, is in many ways a tough nut to crack, particularly in the case of its elaborately, almost forbiddingly contrapuntal opening movement. A great work, certainly – and its finale is one of the most thrilling things in the whole of Chopin’s output – but it would make a daunting and in many ways misleading introduction.

Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61 [8.550360]
Music-lovers and musicians alike tend to find this the most elusive and musically demanding of all Chopin’s major works. Few love it at first hearing, though its artistic stature is unmistakable, but most pianists end up regarding it as the greatest polonaise of all, although as its title makes clear, it’s only partly polonaise, and the mixture of dance and fantasy isn’t always a comfortable one. This is one of the very few of Chopin’s works which met with widespread incomprehension in his lifetime. Astonishingly, even Liszt, himself a prophetic modernist and one of Chopin’s most dedicated champions, found the work ‘unfathomable’ and went so far as to proclaim that such works were basically valueless as art.

Later Mazurkas [8.550358–59]

With their sometimes revolutionary and unsettling harmonies, their elusive rhythmic schemes and their lack of obvious lyricism, many of these constitute the least accessible portion of Chopin's output. For many musicians, on the other hand, they contain much of his greatest and most important (though not always beautiful) music. In any even vaguely systematic exploration of Chopin's finest works, it would be wisest to save these for last.

Recommended Reading 5

Chopin, as befits his unwavering popularity, has had many books written about him, but surprisingly few of these remain in print. Of those current at the time of writing, most are studies of the music which can be recommended only to readers who are either sophisticated musicians or exceptionally well-informed amateurs.

As straight biography, bypassing any but the most cursory comment on the music, Adam Zamoyski's *Chopin* (Granada, 1981) is absorbing and highly informative. Painstakingly researched and with a sympathetic feeling for its subject, it tells the story well and is written in good, highly readable prose. Illustrations are confined to a mid-volume ghetto and are indifferently reproduced.

A very much more concise but equally readable biography, this one well and profusely illustrated throughout, is that by Ateş Orga in the Illustrated Lives of the Great Composers series from the Omnibus Press. Written in 1976, and not updated for its paperback reprint (1981), it packs a lot of material, including copious quotations from contemporary correspondence, into its relatively brief span and makes an excellent introduction. As Naxos collectors may know from his excellent programme notes, Orga, unlike Zamoyzki, is a trained and authoritative musician and musicologist. A pity, then, that the requirements of this series don't allow for more musical commentary.

The most recent substantial biography written primarily for the general rather than the musically sophisticated reader is my own *Chopin: The Reluctant Romantic* (Gollancz/Northeastern University Press, 1995), though it does include serious discussion of the music in a series of Interludes, each arising from the material of the preceding biographical chapter. Thus ‘Chopin and the Waltz’ follows the chapter on Chopin’s early life in Paris, ‘Chopin and the Etude’ follows the chapter on Chopin as a teacher, and so on. The idea is to give the reader the chance to read the book as a straight biography, either skipping altogether or later going back to read the musical Interludes. These discuss the music without recourse to jargon and are aimed both at the interested layman and the professional musician. Among the book’s Appendices is a symposium on Chopin in performance, featuring contributions from such notable interpreters as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Emanuel Ax, Alfred Brendel, Mitsuko Uchida and Tamás Vásáry. The Second Edition will include further contributions from (among others) Idil Biret, whose recording for Naxos of the complete works remains unique.

Jim Samson’s *Chopin* volume in the long-running Master Musicians series (Oxford University Press, 1996) is informed by enormous scholarship and much musical insight, although the prose is sometimes a little academic and the musical commentary requires considerable sophistication and musical knowledge if one is to derive lasting sustenance from Samson’s thoroughgoing analytical approach.

Samson’s predecessor in the Master Musicians series was *Chopin* by the late Arthur Hedley. While obviously not so up-to-date, it still has very much to recommend it and for the relative newcomer to Chopin biography it remains an excellent, concise and authoritative introduction.

There are two major collections in English of Chopin’s correspondence, one being *Chopin’s Letters* (Dover reprint, 1988) in now elderly and dated translations by Ethel Voynich (some readers may know her best-selling novel *The Gadfly*), the other – and far superior – being *The Selected Correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin*, collected, edited and translated by Arthur Hedley (Heinemann, 1962).

Highly recommended, though some of it is pretty technical, is Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher – as seen by his pupils* (Cambridge University Press, 1986). This is worth reading not only for its insights into Chopin and his music but as a fascinating and inspiring lesson in the general psychology of teaching. For music teachers in particular it should be required reading.

6 Personalities

Alkan, Charles Henri Valentin (1813–88), reclusive French composer and virtuoso pianist who wrote many études and other works rivalling Liszt's and Chopin's in both originality and difficulty. An astounding prodigy, he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire when he was only six. In adulthood, his temperament proved unsuitable for the life of a performer, and he spent the last 40 years of his life as a virtual hermit. He was among the relatively few contemporary composers whom Chopin genuinely admired.

Baillot, Pierre (1771–1842), distinguished French violinist, much admired by Chopin, and a one-time member of Napoleon's private orchestra. He studied composition with Cherubini and Reicha, and wrote many violin and chamber works, most of them now long-forgotten.

Berlioz, Hector (1803–69), flamboyant French composer. He was an arch-Romantic and the opposite of Chopin in almost every way. Not proficient on any instrument, he became the first of the true orchestral virtuosos, as both composer and conductor. His mastery of instrumental tone-colour was unique in his time and almost all his works were programmatic or tied in some way to literary or historical models. His most famous work, the *Symphonie fantastique*, is flagrantly and fancifully autobiographical, and his autobiography is as entertaining and extravagant as it is unreliable.

Catalani, Angela (1780–1849), famous Italian soprano. Her singing and personality made a great impression on Chopin when she visited Warsaw in 1820 and presented the 10-year-old composer with a gold watch as a token of her artistic esteem.

Cherubini, Maria Luigi (1760–1842), Italian composer, resident in Paris from 1778, and admired by Beethoven. In 1822 he was appointed director of the Paris Conservatoire. His famous *Treatise on Counterpoint and Fugue* was avidly studied by Chopin. Renowned for his gruff conservatism, he was amusingly (and unfairly) pilloried by Berlioz in his highly readable and equally suspect *Memoirs*.

Clementi, Muzio (1752–1832), Italian composer and virtuoso pianist. He pioneered a truly idiomatic piano style when the instrument was only just beginning to oust the harpsichord in public favour. A teacher of both Cramer and Field, he composed a celebrated book of pianistic studies, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, still widely used today. Chopin made extensive use of this and Clementi's *Préludes et exercices* in his own teaching.

Cramer, Johann Baptist (1771–1858), German pianist and composer. A pupil of Clementi, he too produced many studies for the piano, a number of which are still in use today and have considerable artistic merit. These too were used by Chopin in his teaching.

Czerny, Karl (1791–1857), Austrian pianist and composer, a pupil of Hummel, Clementi and Beethoven and the teacher of Liszt. Astoundingly prolific, he had several writing desks in his study, each supporting a different work in progress. While the ink dried on one, he moved on to the next, thus becoming music's first one-man assembly line. His many studies have driven countless piano students to distraction. While declaring Czerny to be his 'close friend', Chopin nevertheless lamented that there was 'more warmth in the man than in his music'.

Delacroix, Eugène (1798–1863), French Romantic painter and perhaps the greatest figure in nineteenth-century French art, whose loose style of drawing and brilliant use of colour shocked the classically-minded establishment of the day even more than the prominence of violence and the macabre among his chosen subjects. Despite this, he and the outwardly conservative Chopin had a very high regard for one another and enjoyed many rich and stimulating conversations.

Elsner, Joseph (1769–1854), noted composer and educator (and Chopin's principal teacher). He was born in Germany and educated there before settling in Warsaw, where he founded the Warsaw Conservatory and became more Polish than the Poles. Of his 32 operas, 30 are in Polish, as are all of his 25 songbooks, and only one of his several published treatises is concerned with a non-Polish subject. As a teacher he was quick to recognise Chopin's individuality and drive, and wisely made no attempt to force his education into a rigid, traditional framework.

Fétis, François Joseph (1784–1871), French composer, musicologist and critic. A professor at the Paris Conservatoire from 1821, he became its librarian in 1827. His *Biographie universelle des musiciens* was an important forerunner of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and his *Histoire générale de la musique* is still a valuable reference book for scholars.

Field, John (1782–1837), Irish-born pianist and composer. A pupil of Clementi, his music and playing were admired by Schumann and Liszt. It was he who first devised the form and name of the Nocturne, which Chopin was to transform, leaving Field at the starting gate. His most notorious pronouncement was his description of Chopin as 'a sickroom talent'.

Filtsch, Karl (1830–45), brilliant Hungarian pianist. He studied with Liszt and Chopin and died of tuberculosis before his fifteenth birthday. Liszt said of him, ‘When that boy starts to travel, I’ll shut up shop.’ That he was spared.

Fontana, Julian (1810–65), Polish composer, pianist and writer. A fellow pupil of Elsner at the Warsaw Conservatory, he followed his friend Chopin to Paris in 1832 and was lavishly exploited by him, becoming in effect a glorified dogsbody. He acted as intermediary between Chopin and his publishers, copied out more than eighty of Chopin’s compositions and published a posthumous edition of Chopin’s works from Op. 66 to 77.

Franchomme, Auguste (1808–84), minor composer and major cellist. He played in the orchestras of the Paris Opéra and Théatre Italien, and was cellist of the Alard Quartet. A close and much admired friend of Chopin.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von (1749–1832), German poet, dramatist, scientist and courtier. The most renowned of all German writers, his works had an incalculable effect on the birth and early development of the Romantic movement.

Gutmann, Adolf (1819–82), German pianist and composer. He was a pupil of Chopin who won the composer’s affection and was present at his death.

Gyrowetz, Adalbert (1763–1850), prolific Bohemian composer in many genres. It was with one of his concertos that Chopin made his public debut at the age of eight. Among the most admired musicians of his time, his name is barely known today.

Heine, Heinrich (1797–1856), German poet, essayist, journalist, politician and lawyer, who chose to live as a self-styled exile in Paris. His poetry has found musical immortality in the songs of Robert Schumann.

Herz, Henri (1806–88), German piano virtuoso and composer of much saloniste confectionery. He was a minor darling of Parisian high society and later made a great reputation for himself in America.

Hiller, Ferdinand (1811–85), German pianist and minor composer. He studied with Hummel, settled in Paris in 1828 and enjoyed the friendship of Mendelssohn, Chopin and Liszt.

Hugo, Victor (1802–85), French poet, dramatist and author, and a leading champion of French Romanticism. He was among the most stellar lights in the Paris of Chopin's time. His greatest work was the novel *Les Misérables*.

Hummel, Johann Nepomuk (1778–1837), German-Hungarian pianist and composer. He studied with Mozart and Clementi, taught Czerny and Thalberg and was ranked in his day only just below Mozart and Beethoven. As a pianist he was considered supreme between the death of Mozart and the emergence of Liszt, Chopin and Thalberg. His music had a pronounced effect on Chopin's own.

Kalkbrenner, Friedrich (1788–1849), immensely accomplished German pianist and very minor composer. He spent much of his life in Paris where he was more admired by the public than by his peers, with the notable exception of Chopin.

Kurpinski, Karol Kasimir (1785–1857), Polish composer, conductor and violinist. He was a prolific and popular opera composer.

Kosciuszko, Tadeusz (1746–1817), Polish soldier and patriot. In 1794, after the Second Partition, he headed the national movement in Krakow, of which he was appointed dictator and commander-in-chief. He died when the horse he was riding fell over a precipice.

Lenz, Wilhelm von (1809–83), Russian writer on music. It was he who first divided Beethoven's work into three chronological periods. In Paris he had piano lessons from both Chopin and Liszt, and his book *The Great Pianists of Our Time* (pub. 1872) is an absorbing and valuable (though not entirely reliable) source of information on the subject.

Lind, Jenny (1820–87), famous soprano, known as the 'Swedish Nightingale'. Her path and Chopin's crossed both in Paris and in London, where she attended his British debut at the home of Mrs Sartoris in 1848.

Malibran, Maria (1808–36), Franco-Spanish soprano. She was perhaps the most famous female singer of her time, and was the sister of **Pauline Viardot**.

Meyerbeer, Giacomo (1791–1864), German-born composer of operas. The most famous of his spectacular blockbusters for the Paris Opéra are *Robert le diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *Le prophéte* and *L'Africaine*. Chopin's enthusiasm for this apostle of French Romanticism is among the great surprises of his early Parisian days.

Mickiewicz, Adam (1798–1855), great Polish poet and patriot. He was banished to Russia between 1824 and 1829. His epic *Pan Tadeusz* was published in 1834 and has been acknowledged ever since as his greatest work.

Moniuszko, Stanislaw (1819–72), Polish composer and conductor. Ranked in Poland second only to Chopin among nineteenth-century musical nationalists.

Moscheles, Ignaz (1794–1870), Bohemian composer and pianist of great distinction. Commonly ranked with Hummel, he was among the first peripatetic concert virtuosos, and settled first in Paris and then London.

Musset, Alfred de (1810–57), French poet and dramatist. Met George Sand in Paris in 1833 and became her lover. Their relationship was tempestuous and left de Musset broken in health and spirit. Their affair coloured most of his later work.

Orlowski, Antoni (1811–61), Polish violinist, pianist, conductor and composer. A fellow pupil of Chopin's at the Warsaw Conservatory, he composed many piano miniatures heavily influenced by the music of his more gifted friend.

Paderewski, Ignacy Jan (1860–1941), great Polish pianist and composer. The most popular pianist of his day, he became a national figure and served as the first Prime Minister of modern Poland. He was most famous as a player of Chopin, and his edition of Chopin's works is still widely used today.

Paer, Ferdinando (1771–1839), Italian composer and Napoleon's musical director. He composed more than 40 operas.

Paganini, Niccolò (1782–1840), the most famous (and very probably the greatest) violinist the world has ever known. So incredible were his feats that he was widely rumoured to have made a bargain with the Devil. Some even suspected him of being the Devil himself. Paganini's influence had a formative effect on such disparate composers as Chopin, Liszt, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. At the time of his death, he was also the richest musical performer in history, though it brought him little solace.

Pashkievitch, Ivan (1782–1856), brilliant Russian soldier. He took part in successful campaigns against the French, the Turks and the Hungarians and was pronounced Prince of Warsaw after his crushing of the Polish revolt in 1831.

Pixis, Johann Peter (1788–1874), German pianist and composer, equally noted for the size of his nose and his libido.

Pleyel, Camille (1788–1855), French piano manufacturer, publisher and pianist. He was a friend and sometime publisher of Chopin, and it was at the Salle Pleyel that Chopin played his first Parisian concert in 1832 and his last in 1848.

Potocka, Countess Delfina, Polish noblewoman and immensely accomplished amateur singer. A close friend of Chopin's, she was widely believed to have had a torrid love affair with him, but the evidence is both slim and suspect. Most of it didn't surface until 1945, when a mentally disturbed Polish scholar, Pauline Czernika, claimed to have unearthed a series of hitherto suppressed letters (or typed copies of them) in which Chopin refers in the most forthright language to their sexual adventures. This 'evidence' has now been authoritatively discredited. Potocka was among the friends who were with Chopin in his final, agonising days and one of his last wishes was that she should sing to him, which she duly did.

Reicha, Antonin (1770–1836), Bohemian composer and teacher. He was among the first to experiment with polytonality.

Rellstab, Heinrich (1799–1860), German music critic. He was among Chopin's fiercest detractors before undergoing a late and fashionable conversion. It was he who saddled Beethoven's C sharp minor Sonata with the nickname 'Moonlight'.

Sand, George (1804–76). Born Amandine Aurore Lucie Dupin, Baronne Dudevant, but known as George Sand. A prominent novelist of the French romantic movement, she was a prolific writer, though she is now best remembered for her affairs with Chopin and the writer Alfred de Musset.

Schlesinger, Maurice (1798–1871), Franco-German music publisher. He published 40 of Chopin's compositions.

Schumann, Clara (née Wieck) (1819–96), one of the foremost pianists of her day and a gifted composer. She married Robert Schumann in 1840 and was the first in Germany to champion the music of Chopin in performance, winning his wholehearted approval: 'She is the only pianist in Germany who knows how to play my music.'

Schumann, Robert (1810–56), German composer and crusading journalist. He was the first man outside Poland to recognise Chopin's true stature, heading a review of the early *Variations on 'La ci darem la mano'* with the famous exhortation 'Hats off, gentlemen! A genius!' Chopin nevertheless felt that Schumann generally misunderstood his music and never sought to make his acquaintance.

Thalberg, Sigismond (1812–71), Swiss-German pianist and composer. A pupil of Hummel, he was one of the most famous virtuosos of the day and specialised in a style of keyboard composition designed to give the illusion of three hands.

Viardot, Pauline (1821–1910), one of the greatest mezzo-sopranos of the nineteenth century. She was also an accomplished pianist and a fluent composer of operettas and songs. She was the sister of the great soprano Maria Malibran and a close friend of both Chopin and George Sand. She did all she could to mediate between them when the break came, but to little avail.

Weber, Carl Maria von (1786–1826), influential German pianist and composer. He was one of the foremost exponents of Romantic opera, foreshadowing Wagner, and his most famous work, *Der Freischütz*, is still in the repertoire today.

7 A Calendar of Chopin's Life

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1810		Robert Schumann and Otto Nicolai born; Beethoven composes *Egmont*; Scott writes *The Lady of the Lake*; Hannamahn founds homeopathy; revolutions in much of Latin America
1811	1	Beethoven composes his 'Emperor Concerto'; Weber's opera *Abu Hassan* produced in Munich; Franz Liszt born in Raiding, Hungary; Rossini composes his opera *Cambiale*; Jane Austen writes *Sense and Sensibility*; English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray born

Historical Events	Chopin’s Life
Napoleon at his zenith; Venezuela wins independence from Spain; Durham miners’ strike in Britain; Krupp founds munitions works in Germany	Chopin born at Zelazowa Wola in Poland; contemporary musicians: Beethoven (age 40); Bellini (9); Berlioz (7); Donizetti (13); Mendelssohn (1); Meyerbeer (19); Paganini (28); Rossini (18); Schubert (13); Weber (24).
Napoleon annexes Oldenburg; Russians capture Belgrade; Paraguay gains independence from Spain; British forces occupy Java; George III of England pronounced insane; Regency begins; Luddites sabotage machinery in North of England	

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1812	2	Beethoven completes Symphonies 7 & 8; Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde founded in Vienna; births of authors Charles Dickens, Zygmunt Krasinski and J.I. Kraszewski; English poet Robert Browning born; Lord Byron writes *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
1813	3	Births of Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi; London Philharmonic Society founded; Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* produced in Venice; waltz craze spreads throughout Europe; J.M.W. Turner paints *Frosty Morning*; birth of the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan
1814	4	Beethoven completes final version of his opera *Fidelio*; Schubert (17) initiates his incomparable series of great Lieder with *Gretchen am Spinnrade*; Irish composer John Field publishes his first Nocturnes; Mälzel invents the metronome; Jane Austen publishes *Mansfield Park*; Byron writes *The Corsair*; birth of Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov
1815	5	Beethoven writes his Op. 102 Cello Sonatas and the cantata *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt*, dedicated to Goethe; Schubert (18) composes two symphonies (2 & 3), four operas, two masses and roughly 150 songs; advent of the 'Biedermeier' era in Vienna
1816	6	Beethoven completes Piano Sonata, Op. 101, and song-cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*; Schubert (19) writes Symphonies 4 & 5, another mass, a string quartet, most of his first opera and over 100 songs; Rossini (24) completes *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*

Historical Events	Chopin’s Life
Napoleon retreats from Moscow and returns to Paris, his troops depleted by 550,000; USA declares war on Britain; Lousiana becomes part of the USA; Madison elected President; J.L. Burckhardt discovers the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.	
Austria and Prussia declare war on France; ‘Battle of Nations’ at Leipzig; Wellington victorious at Vittoria; Simon Bolivar becomes absolute ruler of Venezuela; Mexico declares its independence; Anglo-American war continues in USA and Canada	
Napoleon banished to Elba; Louis XVIII assumes French throne; Congress of Vienna opened; Anglo-American war ends with the Treaty of Ghent; Hanover declared a kingdom; advent of gas lighting in Westminster, London; first practical steam locomotive constructed in England; Pope Pius VII restores the Inquisition	
Louis XVIII flees; Napoleon returns to France, initiating the ‘Hundred Days’, which ends with his banishment to St Helena after losing the Battle of Waterloo to Blücher and Wellington; England suffers post-war economic crisis; first steam warship built in the USA	
First German constitution granted by grand duke of Saxe-Weimar; Argentina declares independence from Spain; Metternich opens Diet of German Federation; Java restored to Dutch Empire; Indiana becomes state of the USA; invention of the stethoscope	Has first piano lessons with his mother

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1817	7	Rossini completes *La Gazza Ladra* and *La Cenerentola*; Clementi publishes his influential book of piano studies *Gradus ad Parnassum*; Schubert (20) writes many important songs, six piano sonatas, one symphony and two 'Italian' overtures; Lord Byron writes *Manfred*; Jane Austen publishes *Emma*
1818	8	Beethoven begins work on 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, Op. 106 and the *Missa Solemnis*; Schubert completes Symphony No. 6; Rossini's *Mosé in Egitto* produced in Naples; Donizetti's *Enrico, Conte di Borgogna* produced in Venice; Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* published; Byron writes *Don Juan*; John Keats writes *Endymion*; Mary Shelley publishes *Frankenstein*; Russian author Ivan Turgenev born
1819	9	Schubert composes his *'Trout' Quintet*; Beethoven begins work on his *Choral Symphony*; births of Offenbach and Clara Schumann (née Wieck) in Germany; Liszt plays his first concert; first Sanskrit–English dictionary published; Byron writes *Mazeppa*, which is later to have a profound influence on Liszt; Keats writes *Hyperion*, Shelley *The Cenci*
1820	10	Beethoven completes his Piano Sonata in E major, Op. 109; Schubert composes his opera *Die Zauberharfe*; his several unfinished works of this year include *Lazarus* and the *Quartettsatz*; Keats writes *Ode to a Nightingale*, Shelley *Prometheus Unbound*; Venus di Milo discovered

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Riots in England against low wages; construction of the Erie Canal begins in USA; Simon Bolivar establishes independent government in Venezuela; Mississippi becomes a state of the USA; Turkish government grants partial autonomy to Serbia; Evangelical Union formed by Lutheran and Evangelical Churches in Prussia	Begins lessons with Zywny and composes his first Polonaise
Chile declares independence; first professional horse-racing in the USA; Karl Marx born; Prussia abolishes internal customs; constitutions proclaimed in Bavaria and Baden; border agreed between the USA and Canada; Illinois becomes state of the USA; first Atlantic crossing by steamship; Bessel's *Fundamenta Astronomiae* catalogues 3,222 stars; Berzelius catalogues molecular weights of 2,000 chemical compounds	Plays at a charity concert in Warsaw and is taken up by the Polish aristocracy; presents Empress with two Polonaises
East India Company establishes British settlement in Singapore; constitutions granted in Württemberg and Hanover; USA purchases Florida from Spain; Alabama becomes state of the USA; 11 killed, 400 injured in 'Peterloo' Massacre in Britain; freedom of the press established in France	
Revolutions in Spain and Portugal; Duc de Berry assassinated in France; in the 'Missouri Compromise', Maine enters USA as a free state, Missouri as a slave state; platinum discovered in Russia's Ural Mountains; Ampère establishes Laws of Electrodynamic Action	The great singer Catalani presents him with gold watch; he plays for the Grand Duke Constantin
	Dedicates Polonaise to Zywny

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1821	11	Weber's *Der Freischütz* staged in Berlin; Beethoven completes Piano Sonata in A flat major, Op. 110; Schubert composes many Goethe settings; Goethe publishes *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*; Keats dies at 26; births of Baudelaire, Dostoevsky and Flaubert
1822	12	Schubert composes 'Unfinished' Symphony and *'Wanderer' Fantasy*; Royal Academy of Music founded in London; deaths of Shelley and E.T.A. Hoffmann; Pushkin writes *Eugene Onegin*
1823	13	Beethoven completes *Missa Solemnis* and Ninth Symphony; Schubert writes incidental music to *Rosamunde*, song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin* and Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 784; Weber's *Euryanthe* staged in Vienna; Erard builds the first 'double-escapement' piano, allowing increased rapidity of repeated notes; Oxford Union founded in England
1824	14	Beethoven completes his String Quartet, Op. 127; Schubert writes *Death and the Maiden*, A minor String Quartets, *Octet in F major* and *Grand Duo*; births of Bruckner, Cornelius and Smetana; National Gallery founded in London; Byron dies in Greco–Turkish war
1825	15	Beethoven composes his A minor quartet, Op. 132; Schubert writes 'Unfinished' Piano Sonata in C; birth of Johann Strauss II and death of Salieri in Vienna; Pushkin writes *Boris Godunov*; death of the highly influential Romantic writer 'Jean-Paul' (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter)

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Napoleon dies; revolution in Piedmont; Victor Emmanuel abdicates Italian throne; Peru, Guatemala, Panama and Santa Domingo declare independence from Spain; first demonstration of sound reproduction; Faraday discovers and experiments with electromagnetic rotation	
War between Greece and Turkey; Brazil gains independence from Portugal; first iron railroad bridge built in England; gas lighting installed in Boston, Masssachusetts; Congress of Verona opened	First composition lessons with Elsner; composes his Polonaise in G sharp minor
Mexico becomes a republic; Switzerland refuses political asylum to refugees; Monroe Doctrine brings curtain down on further colonisation of North America by European powers; death penalty for more than 100 crimes abolished in England; Babbage attempts to build a calculating machine; Mackintosh invents waterproof fabric	
Outbreak of First Burmese War; British capture Rangoon; Egyptian forces conquer Crete; Russia and USA sign frontier treaty; John Quincy Adams becomes President of the USA; Simon Bolivar declared Emperor of Peru; British workers granted the right to form unions	Begins his studies at the Warsaw Lyceum
Crushing of Decembrist revolt in Russia; sacrilege becomes a capital offence in France; first passenger railway inaugurated in England; horse-drawn buses appear in London; Trades Union movement gains strength in England; Chinese tea roses first imported to Europe	Performs for the Czar, who gives him a diamond ring; edits the Szafarnia Courier; his Rondo, Op. 1 is published Composes B flat minor

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1826	16	First performance of Beethoven's String Quartet in B flat, Op. 130, with *Grosse Fuge* as finale; composition of his last quartets, Opp. 131 & 135; Schubert: G major String Quartet and G major Piano Sonata; Mendelssohn (17) writes his *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture
1827	17	Beethoven dies at 56; Schubert writes his two Piano Trios, his two books of *Impromptus* and his greatest song-cycle, *Winterreise*; Bellini's *Il Pirata* staged in Milan; death of William Blake; Nash designs Carlton House Terrace, Westminster, London
1828	18	Schubert composes his last three piano sonatas, C major String Quintet for strings, Mass in E flat and *Schwanengesang*; dies at 31; Auber: *La Muette de Portici*; Marschner: *Der Vampyr*; Rossini: *Le Comte Ory*; Alexandre Dumas (*père*) writes *The Three Musketeers*; death of Francisco Goya; Webster's American Dictionary published
1829	19	Schumann (19) writes his *Papillons*; Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*; Rossini: *William Tell*; Mendelssohn (20) revives Bach's *St Matthew Passion* for the first time in 100 years; concertina patented; Lamartine elected to Académie Française; births of Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Anton Rubinstein

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Russia declares war on Persia; Burmese war ends; Pan-American congress held in Panama; Thomas Jefferson dies; first railway tunnel in England; University College, London, and University of Munich founded; London Zoo established	Polonaise; visits Bad Reinertz; enrols at Warsaw Conservatory; further concerts in Warsaw
Turks enter Athens in Greco–Turkish war; Russia, France and Britain agree in Treaty of London to force truce on the Sultan of Turkey; Sultan rejects Allied moves; sulphur-tipped matches invented; screw-propeller for steamships invented in Austria; Ohm's Law of electrical currents formulated; aluminium first obtained from clay	Death of his sister Emilia at 14; he composes the *Variations on 'La ci darem la mano'*, Op. 2 and the Sonata in C minor, Op. 4
Wellington becomes Prime Minister of England; Russia declares war on Turkey; liberal revolt in Mexico; Andrew Jackson elected President of the USA; Working Men's Party founded in New York; Baltimore and Ohio railway built in USA; Uruguay becomes independent republic	Visits Berlin; composes *Fantasy on Polish Airs*, Op. 13, and Rondo *à la Krakowiak*, Op. 14
Turkish–Russian war ends with the Peace of Adrianople; Turkey recognises independence of Greece; slavery abolished in Mexico; Venezuela secedes from Gran Colombia; Britain bans *suttee* (the traditional immolation of a widow with her dead husband) in India; first typewriter patented in USA; first electromagnetic clock constructed; haemophilia identified; hydrotherapy invented	Paganini visits Warsaw; Chopin graduates from the Conservatory and travels to Vienna where he plays two highly successful concerts; reveals his love for Constancia Gladkowska
	Plays his two Piano Concertos in

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1830	20	Schumann (20) writes Abegg Variations and Toccata in C; Mendelssohn (21) writes *'Reformation' Symphony*, begins work on *Hebrides* Overture; Bellini: *I Capuleti ed I Montecchi*; Donizetti: *Anna Bolena*; Balzac inaugurates his *Comédie humaine*; Hugo: *Hernani*; Lamartine: *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*; Stendahl: *Le Rouge et le Noir*
1831	21	Mendelssohn, in Italy, writes G minor Piano Concerto, begins work on *'Italian'* and *'Scottish' symphonies* and completes *Hebrides* Overture; Bellini's *La Sonnambula* and *Norma* staged at La Scala, Milan; Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* scores huge hit at Paris Opéra; Victor Hugo writes *Notre Dame de Paris*
1832	22	Mendelssohn writes first book of his *Songs Without Words*; Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* staged in Milan; death of Clementi; Japanese artist Andro Hiroshige publishes his series *53 Stages of the Tokaido*; deaths of Goethe and Sir Walter Scott; Part II of Goethe's *Faust* published posthumously; births of French painters Gustave Doré and Edouard Manet
1833	23	Mendelssohn's *'Italian' Symphony* given in London; Brahms born; Heinrich Marschner's Romantic opera *Hans Heiling* staged in Berlin; first Venetian pictures by Turner go on exhibition at the Royal Academy in London; Balzac publishes *Eugénie Grandet*; completion of the great German translation of Shakespeare, begun in 1794

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
French conquer Algeria; July Revolution in Paris; Louis Philippe proclaimed 'Citizen King'; Ecuador secedes from Gran Colombia; military insurrection in Warsaw; Britain adds Mysore to its Indian empire; first sewing machine built in France; steam cars appear in London; Liverpool–Manchester railway opens in England; Joseph Smith founds Mormons in New York; stiff collars for men become widespread	Warsaw; leaves Poland for Austria, France and Italy
Cholera epidemic ravages Europe; Russians crush Polish insurrection; slave revolt in Virginia, USA; James Garfield elected President of the USA; uprising in Lyon, France; Egypt conquers Syria; invention of telegraphy, electromagnetic induction, chloroform and mechanical reaper; exact position of magnetic North Pole established	Depressed in Vienna; in Stuttgart he hears of Warsaw's defeat by Russian forces; proceeds to Paris, where he meets Kalkbrenner and Liszt
Egypt defeats Turks in Syria; Mazzini founds 'Giovine Italia' to support the cause of Italian independence; advent of the Democratic Party in USA; Mass demonstrations in Germany; Britain occupies Falkland Islands off Argentina; first usage of the word 'socialism'; New England Anti-Slavery society established in Boston; opening of first French passenger railway; first widespread use of friction matches	Gives first Paris concert; friendships with Berlioz (29) and Mendelssohn (23); Opp. 6 & 7 published in Paris and London; he begins his lucrative teaching career
William IV grants new liberal constitution to Hannover; slavery abolished throughout the British Empire; Whig party established in USA; General Trades Union formed in New York; growth of charity bazaars in Britain; the term 'scientist' coined in England; first magnetic observatory built in Germany; major meteor showers in America	Plays with Liszt (22) at benefit concert; Opp. 8–12 published; friendship with Bellini; gives several private concerts
	Visits Germany, where he renews

Year	Chopin’s Age	Arts and Culture
1834	24	Schumann becomes editor of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, creates the imaginary League of David to wage war against latterday Philistines, and composes much of *Carnaval* and the *Symphonic Etudes*; Berlioz composes *Harold en Italie*, based on Byron’s *Childe Harold*; Mendelssohn starts work on his oratorio *St Paul*; Balzac publishes *Le Père Goriot*; Victor Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame* scores runaway success; Pushkin writes *The Queen of Spades*; death of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
1835	25	Schumann’s *Carnaval* and Sonata in F sharp minor completed; Mendelssohn appointed conductor of Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts; Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* staged; birth of Saint-Saëns; death of Bellini at 34; Heine’s poetry banned in Germany; first stories of Hans Christian Andersen
1836	26	Mendelssohn completes *St Paul*; Glinka writes trail-blazing nationalist opera *A Life for the Tsar*; Meyerbeer composes *Les Huguenots*; Dickens publishes *Pickwick Papers*; Gogol publishes *The Government Inspector*; Alfred de Musset’s autobiographical novel *Confession d’un enfant du siècles* completed

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Spanish Inquisition officially ended after 500 years; Palmerston effects alliance of Britain with France, Spain and Portugal; Abraham Lincoln enters politics in USA; East India Company's monopoly of Chinese trade abolished; increasing discord between China and Britain; one-horse, two-wheeled hansom cabs appear in London; fire devastates British Houses of Parliament; amalgam of mercury alloy first used as fillings for teeth; Herschel begins first major survey of the southern stars	friendship with Mendelssohn; his music is savaged by critic Ludwig Rellstab; back in Paris, he plays at one of the Conservatory Concerts; Opp. 13–19 published; composes the *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, which he then suppresses
Sam Colt takes out patent for his single-barrelled pistol and rifle in USA; Charles Chubb patents burglar-proof safe; first German railway opens; Melbourne, Australia founded; first 'negative' photograph taken; Halley's comet makes second predicted return; Texas asserts its right to secede from Mexico; Second Seminole war begins	Reunion with parents at Karlsbad; falls in love with Maria Wodzinska; visits Leipzig and meets Mendelssohn, Schumann and Clara Wieck (later became Clara Schumann); falls seriously ill at Heidelberg; Opp. 20 & 24 published
People's charter initiates national working-class movement in Britain; Texas becomes a republic; Arkansas becomes state of the USA; Davy Crockett killed at Alamo; in South Africa, Boer farmers inaugurate the 'Great Trek'; Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State founded; pepsin discovered	Proposes marriage to Maria at Marienbad; meets George Sand for the first time, finding her initially repellent; Opp. 21–23, 26 & 27 published
	His marital hopes are dashed;

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1837	27	Birth of Balakirev; deaths of Hummel and John Field; Berlioz: *Grand Messe des Morts*; Mendelssohn: D minor Piano Concerto, E minor String Quartet; Schumann: *Davidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6 and *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12; Liszt (26) writes his *12 Grandes Etudes.*
1838	28	Schumann completes *Kinderszenen*, *Fantasia in C major, Op. 17,* and *Kreisleriana*, the latter of which he writes in three days; discovers Schubert's Ninth Symphony, which he sends to Mendelssohn; Berlioz: *Benvenuto Cellini*; births of Bizet and Bruch; Dickens publishes *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*
1839	29	Schumann composes *Humoreske*, Op. 20, *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, Op. 26; Mendelssohn conducts world premiere of Schubert's Ninth Symphony; composes *Ruy Blas* Overture and D minor Piano Trio; Liszt begins *Années de pèlerinage*; births of Cézanne and Mussorgsky; Poe writes *The Fall of the House of Usher*; Stendahl publishes the *Charterhouse of Parma*
1840	30	Schumann's miraculous 'year of song'; receives honorary doctorate from the University of Jena and marries Clara Wieck despite strenuous objections from her father; Mendelssohn composes and conducts his *Lobgesang* (Hymn of Praise); birth of Tchaikovsky in Russia; Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment* staged in Paris; first harmonium constructed; births of Monet, Renoir and Rodin in France; Lermontov writes *The Demon* and *A Hero of our Times*

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Victoria becomes Queen; constitutional revolt in Canada; Ernst Augustus becomes King of Hannover; Morse Code invented; Michigan joins the USA; Martin van Buren elected eighth President of the USA; constitutional revolts in Canada; first Canadian railways opened	visits London; his friendship with Sand; Opp. 25, 29–32 published
Boers defeat Zulus in Natal; death of Talleyrand; Richard Cobden establishes Anti-Corn Law League in England; 1440-ton steamship 'Great Western' crosses Atlantic in 15 days; Audubon completes *The Birds of America*; the term 'sociology' coined in France	Plays for Louis Philippe; liaison with Sand develops; they spend disastrous winter in Majorca; Op. 28 *Préludes* and *F major Ballade* completed; Opp. 33–34 published
First British–Chinese Opium War; Boers found Republic of Natal; first bicycle constructed; Uruguay declares war on Argentina; Prussia restricts child labour to 10 hours a day; baseball invented in USA; Cunard Line founded; Louis Blanc publishes *L'Organisation du Travail*; Goodyear's discovery of 'vulcanization' inaugurates commercial use of rubber; Louis Daguerre reveals photographic invention named after him	Summer spent at Sand's country estate; he completes the Sonata in B flat minor ('Funeral March'); *Préludes, Op. 28* published
Queen Victoria and Prince Albert are married; Afghan War ends with surrender to Britain; Lower and Upper Canada united by Act of Parliament; end of transportation of English criminals to New South Wales; moves to limit hours of child labour in England and USA; Darwin publishes his *Voyage of the Beagle*; invention of artificial agricultural fertilizers; first surviving photograph taken; Nelson's Column built in Trafalgar Square	Spends whole year in Paris, teaching and composing. Opp. 35–42 published
	Gives brilliant concert in Paris;

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1841	31	Schumann completes his First Symphony ('Spring'); Mendelssohn writes *Variations Sérieuses*; Wagner composes *The Flying Dutchman*; Rossini's *Stabat Mater* premiered in Paris; saxophone invented; births of Chabrier and Dvorak; Dickens publishes *The Old Curiosity Shop*; first edition of the humorous periodical *Punch* published in London
1842	32	Glinka follows success of *A Life for the Tsar* with second nationalist opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*; Schumann writes Piano Quintet and the lesser-known Piano Quartet; Mendelssohn completes *'Scottish' Symphony* and founds Leipzig Conservatory; Wagner's *Rienzi* staged in Dresden; births of Boito and Massenet; New York Philharmonic founded
1843	33	Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* produced in Paris; Schumann's secular oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri* performed in Leipzig; Dickens writes *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *A Christmas Carol*; William Wordsworth appointed Poet Laureate
1844	34	Schumann: *Scenes from Goethe's Faust*; Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto in E minor; Berlioz publishes his treatise on orchestration; Verdi: *Ernani*; births of Rimsky-Korsakov and Sarasate; Dumas (*père*): *The Count of Monte Cristo*

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Britain proclaims sovereignty over Hong Kong; New Zealand becomes British colony; Lajos Kossuth becomes nationalist leader in Hungary; American slaves revolt en route to Louisiana and sail to Nassau and freedom; founding of the *New York Tribune*; first university degrees granted to women in USA; discovery of hypnosis; first popular book on astronomy for the layman published	composes *Fantasia in F minor, Op. 49*; summer spent at Sand's country estate at Nohant; music-making with Pauline Viardot, the famous singer, pianist and composer
Riots and strikes in northern England; Boers establish Orange Free State; Opium War between Britain and China ends with Treaty of Nanking; rail link built between Boston and Albany in USA; Queen Victoria makes her first rail journey from Windsor to Paddington; first use of ether for surgical anaesthesia; the term 'dinosaur' coined in England	Gives concert with Viardot and the cellist Franchomme; friendship with the great painter Delacroix at Nohant; he is shattered by the early death of his close friend Jan Matuszynski
Military revolt in Spain; Maori revolt against Britain; Morse builds first telegraph system from Washington to Baltimore; first propeller-driven crossing of the Atlantic; world's first nightclub, Le Bal des Anglais, opened in Paris; advent of skiing as a sport; first tunnel under the Thames built	Withdraws from performance for 5 years; Opp. 51–54 published
Treaty of Tangier ends French war in Morocco; military revolts in Mexico; birth of Nietzsche; US–China peace treaty; weavers revolt in Silesia; YMCA founded in England; James Knox Polk elected President of the USA	His father dies; Chopin, overcome by grief, locks himself in his room for days on end; he is visited by his sister Ludwika; Opp. 55–58 published
	Health declines badly; family

Year	Chopin's Age	Arts and Culture
1845	35	Wagner's *Tannhäuser* performed at Dresden; Mendelssohn composes C minor Piano Trio; Schumann completes Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54; first artistic photographic portraits taken; births of Gabriel Fauré and Charles Marie Widor; Prosper Mérimée writes *Carmen* (on which Bizet's opera was to be based); Balzac begins *Les Paysans*; Poe: *The Raven, and Other Poems*
1846	36	Mendelssohn's *Elijah* premiered in England; Berlioz composes *La Damnation de Faust*; Schumann completes his Symphony No. 2 in C major; Liszt writes first *Hungarian Rhapsody*; electric arc lighting introduced at Paris Opéra; Balzac publishes *La Cousine Bette*; Edward Lear produces his *Book of Nonsense*
1847	37	Mendelssohn dies at 38; Verdi's *Macbeth* produced in Florence; Schumann begins opera *Genoveva* and composes his Piano Trios; Flotow's opera *Martha* opens in Vienna; Charlotte Bronté writes *Jane Eyre*, Emily Bronté: *Wuthering Heights*; William Makepeace Thackeray: *Vanity Fair*
1848	38	Schumann completes *Genoveva*, begins incidental music for Byron's *Manfred*, and the *Album for the Young*; Wagner composes *Lohengrin*; Donizetti dies insane at 51; births of Duparc, Parry and Gauguin; founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; Grimm publishes his *History of the German Language*; Alexandre Dumas (*fils*): *La dame aux Camélias*

Historical Events	Chopin’s Life
Anglo–Sikh war; second Maori uprising against British rule in New Zealand; Swiss Sonderbund formed for the protection of Catholic cantons; new Spanish Constitution drafted; first trans-Atlantic submarine cable; power loom invented in USA; first hydraulic crane constructed; rules of baseball codified; Engels publishes *The Condition of the Working Class in England*	tensions mount at Nohant
First Sikh war ends with Treaty of Lahore; revolts in Poland; Austrian and Russian troops invade Cracow; USA declares war on Mexico; first sewing machine patented; Irish famine follows failure of potato crop; lock-stitch sewing machine patented; first laboratory of psychology founded in USA; Zeiss optical factory founded	A major rift with Sand develops and intensifies; she publishes her novel *Lucrezia Floriani*, which pillories Chopin
USA captures Mexico City; Sonderbund war breaks out in Switzerland as Catholic cantons defend their union; Swiss railway opened between Zurich and Baden; British Factory Act sets 10-hour maximum for working day of women and children; Mormons found Salt Lake City in USA	Chopin sides with Sand’s daughter Solange in a major family quarrel, provoking final break; Opp. 63–65 published
Revolts in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Milan, Venice, Rome, Parma, Prague; serfdom abolished in Austria; Marx and Engels write *The Communist Manifesto*; Switzerland becomes federal union; Wisconsin becomes a state of the USA; Gold Rush in California; first convention for women’s rights held in New York; first successful appendectomy performed; safety matches invented	Gives last concert in Paris; visits England and Scotland; his health declines alarmingly; he gives his last recital (in London) and returns to Paris in greatly debilitated condition
	He grows too weak to teach;

Year	Chopin’s Age	Arts and Culture
1849	39	Liszt completes *Années de pèlerinage II (Italy)*; Meyerbeer’s *Le Prophète* produced at Paris Opéra; Otto Nicolai’s opera *The Merry Wives of Windsor* premiered in Vienna; Johann Strauss I dies at 45; Dickens publishes *David Copperfield*; Edgar Allen Poe dies at 40

Historical Events	Chopin's Life
Britain defeats Sikhs in India; Venice surrenders to Austria; Britain annexes Punjab; Livingstone crosses the Kalahari Desert; Fizeau measures the speed of light; Amelia Bloomer sets out to revolutionise women's dress	friends lend their anonymous financial support; his sister Ludwika comes to nurse him through his final illness; he dies in Paris on 17 October

8 Glossary

accelerando	getting faster
accidental	a flat, sharp or ‘natural’ not present in the prevailing scale
adagio	slow
agitato	turbulent, agitated
Alberti bass	a stylized accompaniment popular in the later eighteenth century, it is based on the triad, ‘spelled out’ in the order bottom-top-middle-top (as in C-G-E-G etc.)
allegretto	moderately fast, generally rather slower than allegro
allegro	fast, but not excessively
allemande	traditionally the first movement of a Baroque suite – a dignified dance in 4/4 time, generally at a moderate tempo
alto	the second highest voice in a choir
andante	slowish, at a moderate walking pace
aria	solo song (also called ‘air’), generally as part of an opera or oratorio
arpeggio	a chord spelled out, one note at a time, either from bottom to top or vice versa (C-E-G-C ; F-A-C-F etc.)
articulation	the joining together or separation of notes, to form specific groups of

	notes; when notes are separated, that is to say when slivers of silence appear between them, the effect is often of the intake of breath, and like the intake of breath before speech it heightens anticipation of what is to follow; when they are joined together, the effect is of words spoken in the expenditure of a single breath; see also ‘legato’ and ‘staccato’
augmentation	the expansion of note-values, generally to twice their original length
bar, measure	the visual division of metre into successive units, marked off on the page by vertical lines; thus in a triple metre (the grouping of music into units of three, as in 3/4, 3/8 etc.), the three main beats will always be accommodated in the space between two vertical lines
bass	the lowest, deepest part of the musical texture
beat	the unit of pulse (the underlying ‘throb’ of the music)
binary	a simple 2-part form (A:B), Part 1 generally moving from the tonic (home key) to the dominant (secondary key), Part 2 moving from the dominant back to the tonic
cadence	a coming to rest on a particular note or key, as in the standard ‘Amen’ at the end of a hymn
cadenza	a relatively brief, often showy solo of improvisatory character in the context of a concerto, operatic aria or other orchestral form. In concertos, it usually heralds the orchestral close to a movement, generally the first
canon	an imitative device like the common round (*Frère Jacques*, *Three Blind Mice*, *London’s Burning*) in which the same tune comes in at staggered intervals of time
cantabile	song-like, singingly
cantata	a work in several movements for accompanied voice or voices (from the Latin *cantare*, to sing)

chorale	a generally simple (and usually Protestant) congregational hymn; almost all of Bach's many cantatas end with a chorale; chorales are also frequently used as a basis for instrumental variations
chord	any simultaneous combination of three or more notes; chords are analogous to words, just as the notes which make them up are analogous to letters
chromatic	notes (and the using of notes) which are not contained in the standard 'diatonic' scales which form the basis of most western music; in the scale of C major (which uses only the white keys of the piano), every black key is 'chromatic'
clef	a symbol which indicates the positioning of notes on the staff; thus the C-clef shows the placement of Middle C, the G clef (better known as 'treble clef') the location of G above middle C, and the F-clef (bass) the positioning of F below middle C
coda	an extra section following the expected close of a work or movement by way of a final flourish
codetta	a small coda
concerto grosso	a popular Baroque form based on the alternation of orchestra (known in this context as the *ripieno* or *concerto*) and a small group of 'soloists' (*concertino*); the most famous examples are Bach's six *Brandenburg Concertos*
concerto	a work for solo instrument and orchestra, generally in three movements (fast–slow–fast)
continuo	a form of accompaniment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which a keyboard instrument, usually a harpsichord, harmonizes the bass line played by the cello

contrapuntal	see ‘counterpoint’
counterpoint	the interweaving of separate ‘horizontal’ melodic lines, as opposed to the accompaniment of a top-line (‘horizontal’) melody by a series of ‘vertical’ chords
counter-tenor	a male alto, using a falsetto voice, which seldom bears any resemblance to the singer’s speaking voice
crescendo	getting louder
cross-rhythms	see ‘polyrhythm’
decrescendo	see ‘diminuendo’
diminuendo	getting softer
development section	the middle section in a sonata form, normally characterized by movement through several keys
diatonic	using only the scale-steps of the prevailing key notes of the regular scale
diminution	the contraction of note-values, normally to half their original length
dotted rhythm	a ‘jagged’ pattern of sharply distinguished longer and shorter notes, the long, accented note being followed by a short, unaccented one, or the other way around. Examples are the openings of the *Marseillaise* and *The Star-Spangled Banner*; better still, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*: ‘Mine eyes have seen the glo-ry of the coming of the Lord’
double-stopping	the playing of two notes simultaneously on a stringed instrument
duple rhythm	any rhythm based on units of two beats, or multiples thereof
dynamics	the gradations of softness and loudness, and the terms which indicate them (pianissimo, fortissimo etc.)
exposition	the first section in sonata form, in which the main themes and their relationships are first presented
fantasy, fantasia	a free form, often of an improvisatory nature, following the composer’s

	fancy rather than any pre-ordained structures. But there are some Fantasies, like Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* and Schumann's *Fantasia in C* for the piano, which are tightly integrated works incorporating fully-fledged sonata forms, scherzos, fugues etc.
finale	a generic term for 'last movement'.
flat	a note lowered by a semitone from its 'natural' position, i.e. the nearest lower neighbour of any note
forte, fortissimo	loud, very loud
glissando	literally, 'gliding'; a sliding between any two notes, producing something of a 'siren' effect
Gregorian chant	see 'plainchant'
ground bass	a short bass pattern repeated throughout a section or entire piece; a famous example is 'Dido's Lament' from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*
harmony, harmonic	the simultaneous sounding of notes to make a chord; harmonies (chords) often serve as expressive or atmospheric 'adjectives', describing or giving added meaning to the notes of a melody, which, in turn, might be likened to nouns and verbs
harmonics	comparable to the falsetto voice of the male alto, or counter-tenor, the term refers to the production on an instrument, generally a stringed instrument, of pitches far above its natural compass. Thus the naturally baritonal cello can play in the same register as a violin, though the character of the sound is very different
homophony	when all parts move at once, giving the effect of a melody (the successive top notes) accompanied by chords
interval	the distance in pitch between two notes, heard either simultaneously or successively; the sounding of the first two notes of a scale is therefore

	described as a major or minor ‘second’, the sounding of the first and third notes a major or minor third, etc.
largo	slow, broad, serious
legato	smooth, connected, the sound of one note ‘touching’ the sound of the next; as though in one breath
major	see ‘modes’
measure	see ‘bar’
metre, metrical	the grouping together of beats in recurrent units of two, three, four, six, etc.; metre is the pulse of music
minor	see ‘modes’
modes	the names given to the particular arrangement of notes within a scale; every key in western classical music has two versions, the major and the minor mode; the decisive factor is the size of the interval between the key note (the tonic, the foundation on which scales are built) and the third degree of the scale; if it is compounded of two whole tones (as in C–E [C–D / D–E]), the mode is major; if the third tone is made up of one and a half tones (C to E flat), the mode is minor; in general, the minor mode is darker, more ‘serious’, more moody, more obviously dramatic than the major; the so-called Church modes prevalent in the Middle Ages are made up of various combinations of major and minor and are less dynamically ‘directed’ in character; these appear only rarely in music since the Baroque (c. 1600–1750) and have generally been used by composers to create some kind of archaic effect
modulate, modulation	the movement from one key to another, generally involving at least one pivotal chord common to both keys.
motif, motive	a kind of musical acorn; a melodic/rhythmical figure too brief to

	constitute a proper theme, but one on which themes are built; a perfect example is the beginning of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: ta-ta-ta *dah*; ta-ta-ta *dah*
natural	not a sharp or flat
nocturne	‘invented’ by the Irish composer John Field and exalted by Chopin; a simple ternary (A-B-A) form, its outer sections consist of a long-spun melody of a generally ‘dreamy’ sort, supported by a flowing, arpeggio-based accompaniment; the middle section, in some ways analogous to the development in a sonata form,) is normally more turbulent and harmonically unstable
octave	the simultaneous sounding of any note with its nearest namesake, up or down (C to C, F to F etc.); the effect is an enrichment, through increased mass and variety of pitch, of either note as sounded by itself
oratorio	an extended choral/orchestral setting of religious texts in a dramatic and semi-operatic fashion; the most famous example is Handel’s *Messiah*
ostinato	an obsessively repeated rhythm or other musical figure
pedal point	the sustaining of a single note (normally the bass) while other parts move above and around it
pentatonic	based on a five-note, whole-tone scale, as in the music of the Orient (analogous to the black keys of the piano)
phrase	a smallish group of notes (generally accommodated by the exhalation of a single breath) which form a unit of melody, as in ‘God save our Gracious Queen,’ and ‘My Country, ’tis of thee’
phrasing	the apportionment of the above
piano, pianissimo	soft, very soft
pizzicato	plucked strings

plainchant, plainsong	also known as Gregorian chant; a type of unaccompanied singing using one of the Church modes and sung in a 'free' rhythm dictated by the natural rhythm of the words
polyphony	music with interweaving parts
polyrhythm	a combination comprising strikingly different rhythms, often of two or more different metres
prelude	literally, a piece which precedes and introduces another piece (as in the standard prelude and fugue); however, the name has been applied (most famously by Bach, Chopin and Debussy) to describe free-standing short pieces, often of a semi-improvisatory nature
presto	very fast
recapitulation	the third and final section in sonata form, where the ideas of the exposition return, but in a different key
recitative	especially charactersitic of the Baroque era, in an oratorio or opera; it is a short narrative section normally sung by a solo voice accompanied by continuo chords, usually preceding an aria; the rhythm is in a free style, by the words
resolution	when a suspension or dissonance comes to rest
rest	a measured 'silence' (or to be more accurate, a suspension of sound) in an instrumental or vocal part
rhapsody	the name given to a number of highly disparate works in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries comprising a single movement of a generally Romantic and mostly virtuosic character; the best-known examples are Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*
rhythm	that aspect of music concerned with duration and accent; notes may be of many contrasting lengths and derive much of their character and

	definition from patterns of accentuation and emphasis determined by the composer
ripieno (concerto)	the orchestral part in a concerto grosso
ritardando, ritenuto	getting slower
ritornello	a theme or section for orchestra recurring in different keys between solo passages in an aria or concerto
scale	from the Italian word *scala* (‘ladder’). A series of adjacent, ‘stepwise’ notes (A-B-C-D-E-F etc.), moving up or down; these ‘ladders’ provide the basic cast of characters from which melodies are made and keys established
sharp	a note raised by a semitone from its ‘natural’ position, i.e. the nearest upper neighbour of any note
sotto voce	quiet, as though in a whisper
staccato	separated, the opposite of legato
syncopation	accents falling on irregular beats, generally giving a ‘swinging’ feel as in much of jazz
tempo	the speed of the music
tone colour, timbre	that property of sound which distinguishes a horn from a piano, a violin from a xylophone, etc.
tremolo	Italian term for ‘trembling’, ‘shaking’; a rapid reiteration of a single note through back-and-forth movements of the bow; equally, the rapid and repeated alternation of two notes
triad	a three-note chord, especially those including the root, third and fifth of a scale (C-E-G, A-C-E etc.) in any order
triplets	in duple metre, a grouping (or groupings) of three notes in the space of two (as in ‘One-two / Buckle-my-shoe’)

una corda	literally, ‘one string’; using the soft pedal on the piano
unison	the simultaneous sounding of a single note by more than one singer or player, as in the congregational singing of a hymn
vibrato	a rapid, regular fluctuation in pitch, giving the note a ‘throbbing’ effect
variation	any decorative or otherwise purposeful alteration of a note, rhythm, timbre, etc.
vivace, vivacissimo	fast and lively, extremely fast and lively
vocalise	a wordless piece for solo voice; the most famous example is Rachmaninov’s
whole-tone	an interval comprising two semitones, as in C–D on the piano; much of the music of the Orient, as well as of numerous folk cultures around the world, is built on whole-tone scales (see ‘pentatonic’ above)

9 Discography

Music excerpts are taken from Chopin's complete piano music, performed by Idil Biret, released as a 15CD set on Naxos.

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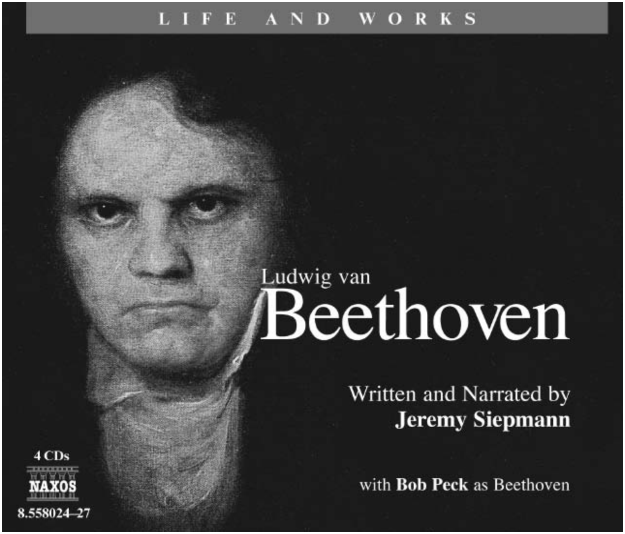
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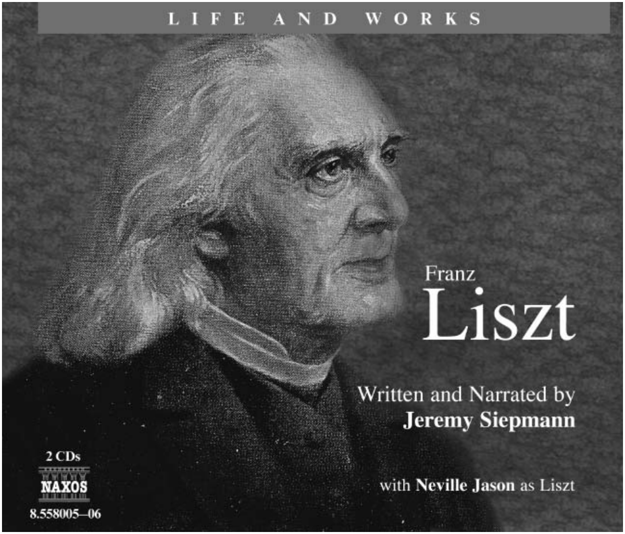
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Spoken Text 10

[1] I think it’s safe to say that Chopin was not only one of the most popular composers who ever lived but one of the most original – and the two very rarely go together. But with Chopin, that’s par for the course. He was the very embodiment of paradox. He wrote some of the most romantic music ever written, but he hated Romanticism. The only two composers whose music he really adored were Bach and Mozart. Probably the greatest single influence on his style was opera, yet he never even tried writing an opera of his own. In fact he confined himself, from the beginning of his career, to what, on the face of it, is the least vocal of all instruments – a basically percussive contraption in which every note starts at its loudest and then fades, willy nilly. The fact is that the piano is really a box of tricks – and no sorcerer ever drew more magical illusions from it than Chopin. With Mozartian simplicity and economy, he became the first composer to reveal what’s often been called the ‘soul’ of the piano – a world of sound that Mozart himself probably never even dreamt of. When Artur Rubinstein said that Chopin was the first composer who made the piano ‘sing’ he wasn’t far wrong.

[2] Music: Berceuse, Op. 57

[3] By the time he wrote that, Chopin had been living in France for very nearly half his life,

and with music like that he breathed new life into the French keyboard tradition, which had been in decline since the deaths of the two great Baroque pioneers Couperin and Rameau. More than that, he paved the way for Debussy and Ravel in our own century. Without Chopin they might have been very different composers (Debussy honoured Chopin above all masters). In some ways Chopin really was more French than the French. And in terms of the piano, he basically defined what French was. But his roots lay somewhere else altogether, and he never for a moment forgot it. His name was French because his father was French, but he was born in a little village 34 miles outside Warsaw in Poland. And it was in Poland – and more particularly *as* a Pole – that he developed his very distinctive, his *unique* musical character.

At the time of Chopin's birth in 1810, Poland had been under foreign domination for as long as anyone could remember. When he was five Warsaw passed out of Prussian hands and became – no, returned to being – a colonial outpost of the Russian Empire. Small wonder, then, that under their apparent acquiescence, the Poles fairly seethed with resentment at their foreign overlords. Nor had their dominion been only political. Much of what passed for Polish culture had likewise been imported. So it was significant (prophetic as it turned out) that the first piece of Chopin's to be published – he wrote it, by the way, at the august age of seven – drew its form and style from the most famous of Poland's national dances, the Polonaise.

4 Music: Polonaise in G minor

5 Within a year of starting lessons with Zywny, who introduced him to all of the musical establishment in Warsaw, Fryderyk had already attained a degree of local celebrity and was inevitably being talked of as a second Mozart. Before his eighth birthday he had composed a Military March and two Polonaises. On the publication of his second Polonaise, in G minor, he received his first printed notice, in the Warsaw *Review* of January 1818:

> The composer of this dance, only eight years of age, is a real musical genius ... He not only performs the most difficult pieces on the piano with the greatest ease and extraordinary taste, but is also the composer of several dances and variations that fill the experts with amazement, particularly in view of the author's youth. If this boy had been born in Germany or France, his fame would probably by now have spread to all nations. May the present notice remind the reader that geniuses are born in our country also, and that they are not widely known only because of the lack of public notice.

A month later, on the 24th of February, Chopin made his formal and triumphant debut as a pianist in a concerto by the Bohemian composer Adalbert Gyrowetz. Predictably, he caused a sensation. When asked by his mother, who'd been prevented by illness from attending, what the audience had liked best, the little boy is said to have replied, 'My English collar, Mama.' It has the ring of truth about it, reflecting both his innate modesty and his lifelong obsession with dress. From this concert dates his mutual (and again lifelong) love affair with the Polish aristocracy, who took him to their hearts, who practically adopted him. And from there on their patronage was to have a formative effect on the development of his character and outlook.

Far from being a frail, sheltered genius, hidden away from his less gifted contemporaries, Chopin was always popular among his schoolmates. Predominantly cheerful and given to laughter, he delighted in childish pranks and his ever-developing feats of mimicry and caricature enchanted his friends and family alike. Indeed, as he grew older, a number of professional actors protested that he was born for the theatre and that his talents were wasted on music.

In 1823, when he was 13, he reached the first major turning point in his career. Despite his astonishing musical accomplishment and his celebrity, his parents insisted on him having a proper general education. So, from the autumn of that year to the summer of 1826, music yielded by parental decree to Latin, Greek, mathematics, literature and science.

However fully he may have applied himself to his general education, though, it was music that remained the central focus of his life. Since 1822, he'd been studying, informally at first, with

Warsaw's most distinguished musician, Joseph Elsner, the recent founder of the Warsaw Conservatory. Among the earliest of Chopin's works to be produced under Elsner's guidance are the so-called 'Swiss Boy' Variations (his most sophisticated work to date), composed in 1824.

6 Music: Variations on a German Air

7 More important to Chopin than the composition of that work was his summer holiday in the village of Szafarnia, north-west of Warsaw, where he immersed himself in almost every aspect of country life. Everything either intrigued or amused him, but far and away the most significant encounter was his first prolonged and intimate exposure to Polish folk music, in its purest and most unadulterated form. From that summer onwards, the music of the Polish peasantry was the shining beacon whose light enabled him to create a truly national *art* music. In the years ahead, it would be Chopin, more than any other single figure, who put Polish culture on the international musical map.

Among the first fruits of his Szafarnian experience when he returned to Warsaw in the autumn were two Mazurkas, whose authentically rustic roots bewildered the city's connoisseurs and earned him his first critical rebuke, for 'violating all the rules of musical grammar'.

8 Music: Mazurka in G major

9 While he certainly enjoyed his local celebrity (and who wouldn't?), Chopin, at fifteen, was well aware that he still had much to learn. From now on, his musical development was entirely supervised by Elsner, whom he acknowledged as his principal mentor for the rest of his formal education. He now embarked for the first time on the systematic study of counterpoint, and his music soon began to reflect the influence of his teacher. At the same time, he was quickly discovering his own true voice as a composer. Two works in particular from this period

demonstrate the significant contrast between Chopin the industrious pupil and Chopin the burgeoning creator.

The Sonata in C minor, Op. 4, dedicated to Elsner, marks his first attempt at writing a major work: a large-scale, four-movement structure of self-conscious drama and unnatural gravity.

10 Music: Sonata in C minor, Op. 4 (opening)

11 Well, that was Chopin the gifted – more to the point, Chopin the well-behaved – student. But students of genius are generally more interesting when they're *not* well-behaved. And Chopin was a perfect case in point. The C minor Sonata could have been composed by any very gifted pupil. The Rondo *à la mazur*, on the other hand, from the same period, could *only* have been composed by Chopin. Here he forgets about academic orthodoxy and follows his instincts, and with intriguing results. For the first time in his output he gives us a work in which his own personality emerges in a strikingly individual and original way. As in those earlier, controversial mazurkas, he draws on his own, direct experience of the folk tradition, but what's most remarkable here isn't so much the raw material itself, with its catchy rhythms and unusual harmonies, it's the elegance and restraint in his use of it. Unlike almost any other composer of his time, he refuses to use the folk element as a springboard for virtuoso display. He seems to invite us, instead, to soak in the substance and character of the music itself. And this is important, because Chopin regarded the authentic Polish mazurka with an almost religious respect. There was no form which he used so often, and no period in his life when he neglected it. In fact, his mazurkas are as near as he came to writing a musical autobiography. The Rondo *à la mazur* itself may not be a masterpiece, but both in its timing and in its peculiar character, it stands, especially after that C minor Sonata, as a kind of declaration of independence at the very beginning of Chopin's formal apprenticeship.

[12] Music: Rondo *à la Mazur*, Op. 5 (1826)

[13] As both pianist and composer he rapidly evolved a style which was both unique and unmistakable. And there seems to have been an almost mystical connection between his musical imagination and his physical contact with the keyboard. More, perhaps, than any other great composer, he was effectively dependent on the presence of a piano for his musical ideas to take shape and flourish.

Now, so much has been made of the melancholy, the wistful, even tragic strain in his music that it's easy to overlook the sense of fun that's also there – especially in these earlier works. The brooding, introverted, tormented soul represented in many popular biographies and films isn't entirely mistaken, by any means, but there's little sign of it in the music and correspondence of his teens. On the whole, the music of this period is predominantly lightweight, even frivolous. From his earliest boyhood, Chopin had been surrounded by conviviality, both in and out of the home. And much of his music followed suit. Far from being monk-like or inward-looking, it's music to be heard, to be enjoyed and, most emphatically, to be applauded.

[14] Music: Ecossaise, Op. 72, No. 3

You can almost hear the delight and support of Chopin's friends as they gathered round the keyboard.

[15] By the time he wrote that music, Chopin's delicate health was an accepted fact of life, though others were readier to accept it than he was, and in letters he was apt to make fun of it … and he must have wondered at times whether his afflictions weren't preferable to the cure as he wrote to a friend in 1826.

> My head is tied up in a nightcap because it has been aching, I don't know why, for the last four days. They have put leeches on my throat because the glands have swelled and the doctor says it is a catarrhal infection. It’s true that from Saturday to Thursday I was out every evening until two in the morning but I am sure it’s not that.

and later:

> I go to bed each night at nine. All teas, soirées and balls are forbidden me; I drink an emetic water on doctors orders and feed myself only on oatmeal like a horse; and the air here is not so good for me as at Reinetz. They say I may have to go there next year. Personally I think Paris would be better for me.

But he wasn’t the only patient in the house. His mother’s health, too, was giving grave cause for concern, and in March of 1827 he reported to a friend,

> My sister Emilia has been in bed for the last month. She started to cough and spit blood, and Mamma became frightened. The doctor ordered blood-letting. She was bled once – twice; then countless leeches, blisters, synapisms, herbal remedies, all sorts of nonsense. During the whole time she ate nothing, and she got so thin that you wouldn’t have known her. Only now is she beginning to recover.

But the improvement was short-lived. In a little over a year, on 27th April 1827, Chopin’s youngest and in many ways closest sister (three years his junior) died after a long battle with tuberculosis. It was during this period, unsurprisingly, that he wrote his darkest work to date, the brooding, intense and precociously self-disciplined Nocturne in E minor.

⑯ Music: Nocturne in E minor

17 As time wore on, Chopin began increasingly to feel the frustrations of the big fish in a little pond. But though the outside world, with its great cosmopolitan centres, remained largely beyond his reach, he had tantalising glimpses of what he was missing when one or another of its greatest figures passed through Warsaw. Of these, the most illustrious was Johann Nepomuk Hummel, lionised throughout Europe as both composer and pianist, and himself a former pupil of Mozart, Clementi and Haydn. Despite the three decades which separated them in age, he and Chopin took to each other at once and Hummel's encouragement had a decisive effect on Chopin's immediate ambitions.

Still unknown outside Poland, Chopin, now nineteen, sent off two of his best-received works to publishers in Vienna and Leipzig. One was the derivative, academic C minor Sonata, the other, also written when he was seventeen, was the most brilliant, and the most strikingly individual thing he'd yet achieved: a set of variations for piano and orchestra on the duet '*La ci darem la mano*' from Act One of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. It was his first orchestral work, and as such it was negligible: Chopin himself frequently played it himself as an unaccompanied solo. Its musical ideas, on the other hand, and the sheer brilliance and originality of the piano writing, prompted Robert Schumann's celebrated critical headline, 'Hats off, gentleman: a genius!'

18 Music: Variations on '*La ci darem la mano*', Op. 2 (1827)

19 As it happens, it was this work more than any other which served as Chopin's passport to European fame, thanks largely to Schumann's ecstatic review of it. But the man who in many ways was to have the most fundamental effect on Chopin, both as a composer and as a pianist, was no pianist himself, but a violinist – very probably the greatest in history.

Niccoló Paganini, the so-called 'demon fiddler', had achieved feats of virtuosity on the violin which were beyond anything even imagined by earlier players. Liszt heard him in Paris in 1832, Schumann heard him in 1830 and Chopin had heard him in Warsaw three years earlier. Each of them, in their very different ways, became almost obsessed by the challenge of doing for the piano what Paganini had done for the violin. But, significantly, Chopin's only *overt* tribute to Paganini is a subtle and delicate set of variations on *The Carnival of Venice* – a popular tune which Paganini used as the basis for some dazzling variations of his own. Like Schubert in Vienna, Chopin was obviously as much impressed by the poetry and lyricism of Paganini's playing as by his diabolical virtuosity.

20 Music: Souvenir de Paganini (1829)

21 No-one seriously questions the connection between Paganini's visit to Warsaw and Chopin's increasing preoccupation with piano technique, yet Chopin himself left no written testimony whatever as to the quality and effect of Paganini's performance, and there's no evidence that the two men ever met. But it was at exactly this time that the 19-year-old Chopin began work on his epoch-making Etudes – the first keyboard studies since Bach to combine a practical purpose with the highest level of art. In their particular blend of method and inspiration they remain unsurpassed, and in the opinion of many unequalled, certainly in the piano repertoire.

22 Music: Etude in C sharp minor, Op. 10, No. 4

23 It was rapidly becoming clear that Warsaw, whatever its charms, was no place for a young genius on the threshold of official manhood. If Chopin was to make his mark on the world, he must go out into it. He accepted this himself, but characteristically, he dithered. As ever, when there were major decisions to be made, it was his father who dealt with the practicalities. Writing to the imposingly entitled Minister for Public Instruction, he appealed for government assistance:

> I have a son whose innate musical gifts call out for him to be educated in this art. His late Imperial Majesty Tsar Alexander, of blessed memory, graciously deigned to present him with a precious ring as a mark of his satisfaction when my son had the honour to be heard by the Monarch, His Imperial Majesty. His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke, Supreme Commander of the Army, has often been most graciously pleased to allow him to give proofs of his growing talent in His Most Serene presence. And lastly, many of the highest personages and musical connoisseurs can support the view that my son could be a credit to his country in his chosen profession if he were given the opportunity to pursue the necessary studies to their conclusion. He has completed his preliminary studies; all that he now needs is to visit foreign countries, especially Germany, Italy and France, so as to form himself upon the best models. For the purposes of such a journey, which might last for three years, funds are required which my modest resources, based solely upon my earnings as a teacher, are insufficient to provide.

But the Treasury, despite the sympathetic intercession of the Minister, was unmoved.

> Public funds cannot be wasted for the support of this class of artists.

So, it would have to come from private funds. And it did. After much soul-searching and painstaking calculation, Chopin set out with friends one warm summer evening, arriving in Vienna on the last day of July 1829.

It was typical of Chopin’s future way of life that one of his first priorities in Vienna was to find a hairdresser who would attend him on a daily basis. It was here, too, that he first made a point of the white gloves which were soon to become his unofficial trademark.

It didn’t take long for word to get around that a young pianist of astonishing accomplishment and a unique originality was in town. Within a week of his arrival Chopin was already in danger of becoming a legend. He gave in to public pressure and on the 11th of August he appeared for the first time before a public who had heard every great pianist of the age, including Beethoven.

Some could even remember hearing Mozart. The next day, he dispatched a report to his family:

> Yesterday, Tuesday, at seven o'clock in the evening, I made my bow on the stage of the Royal and Imperial Opera House! As soon as I appeared on the stage the audience began clapping; and the applause was so great after each variation that I couldn't hear the orchestra. At the end they applauded so loudly that I had to come back twice and bow. The journalists, too, have taken me to their hearts. Celinski will tell you how little was said against me. Hube heard the worst: 'It's a pity the young man *looks* so unimpressive,' declared one of the ladies. Well, if that's the only fault they could find with me then I've nothing to worry about.

Much to Chopin's irritation, the Viennese were surprised that such a refined and accomplished musician should have emanated from such a provincial and 'primitive' a place as Warsaw. As always he demonstrated the utmost loyalty to Elsner and his other teachers, claiming that the rankest dunce couldn't fail to benefit from such methodical and enlightened instruction. The Viennese, for their part, were as enchanted with the Chopin's modesty as they were impressed by his genius. When he left them, on the morning after his second concert, he had every reason to believe that his future career, in Austria at least, was all but guaranteed.

When he returned to Warsaw, half-expecting a hero's welcome, he was surprised, puzzled and angry to discover that the local newspapers had either mistranslated or deliberately distorted the rapturous reviews he'd received in Vienna. Indeed, one had exactly reversed the verdict: 'Here is a young man,' it now read, 'whose desire to please the public comes before the endeavour to make good music.' Now there are few musicians of whom this is less true. And it wasn't just his piano playing that had so excited the Viennese. After his departure there had been detailed discussion and praise of his compositions in two of the most important journals in Austria. For a youth of nineteen this wasn't bad going.

In the absence of appropriate celebration at home, Chopin's thoughts kept returning to Vienna and to the still greater musical world beyond. With every passing day, he found Warsaw's provincialism increasingly frustrating. As he wrote to his closest friend, Titus, now living elsewhere:

> You wouldn't believe how depressing this place is for me just now. If it weren't for my family's devotion I couldn't put up with it. How awful it is to have no-one to go to in the mornings, no-one with whom to share one's joys and sorrows … I now tell my piano things which I once used to tell you.

24 Music: Nocturne in C sharp minor

25 While Chopin constantly complained of being mired in Warsaw, he did nothing to escape it. And the reasons are not hard to find. Constantia Gladkowska was a young singer, still a student at the Warsaw Conservatory and surrounded by a living halo of male admirers, and of all ages. She had the dark good looks and melancholy air which personified Romantic notions of feminine beauty: sensitive, sensuous, vulnerable, she had a lovely voice and a gracefulness which went straight to Chopin's heart. It was his first intense experience of sexual infatuation, and on the evidence it seems safe to assume that he was as much in love with love itself as with the girl. But the evidence, it has to be said, is slim. As far as Constantia herself is concerned, we know surprisingly little. She seems to have enjoyed considerable celebrity in Warsaw, but there's nothing to suggest that she ever set foot outside Poland. As for their relationship, such as it was, all we have to go on is what we find in Chopin's letters – but not, interestingly, his letters to Constantia. There aren't any. Fully half a year after confessing his obsession to Titus, he still remained tongue-tied in the presence of the girl herself. Nor could he bring himself to write to her. The letters he did write were actually addressed to Titus, and it began to be a little unclear just who was in love with whom.

> Oh my dear beloved Titus! There is nothing in life I desire more at this moment than to see you. You said that you would like to have my portrait: if I could steal one from Princess Eliza I would send it to

> you – she sketched me twice, and they say that it's a good likeness … As long as I live I shall never give you up.

And later:

> Never, ever, have I felt your absence so much as at this moment! A single glance from you after each of my concerts would have been more to me than all the praises from journalists or people like Elsner, Kurpinski, Soliva and so on … I will send you my portrait, as soon as I possibly can; you want and shall have it, but nobody else shall. Well, I might give it to one other person, but not before you, who are ever dearest to me. Now, as always, I carry your letters around with me (I keep them like a lover's ribbon). In May, when I go for a walk outside the town, thinking of my approaching journey, what a joy it will be to take out your letters and learn again, beyond doubt, that you love me; or at least I can look at the hand and writing of one to whom I am absolutely and utterly devoted.

Chopin's letters to Titus are unique in his correspondence for the sheer abandon of their vocabulary. Many people have seen this as evidence of his homosexuality, though nobody suggests that it ever became physical. Others have protested that the extravagance of Chopin's language here was simply the common change of nineteenth-century Polish manners. But there's nothing like it in letters to his other friends, nor is there any evidence of Titus writing in the same vein. Only to Titus does Chopin write 'I keep your letters like a lover's ribbon', or 'I love you to madness', or 'My dearest life, my soul, give me your lips'. Only to Titus does he write like this:

> I must go now and wash. So don't embrace me now, as I haven't yet washed myself. You? If I anointed myself with fragrant oils of the East, you wouldn't embrace me, unless I forced you to by magnetic means. But there are forces in Nature, and tonight you will dream that you are embracing me. I have to pay you back for the dreams that you caused me last night!

It would seem that any homosexual yearnings on Chopin's part were not reciprocated, yet he clearly felt no risk in being so uncharacteristically unbuttoned. Whatever the truth, it seemed to have an alarming effect on Chopin's creative life, and his already chronic indecisiveness now threatened to swamp him altogether.

His father became seriously concerned about his son's mental stability. In the hope that a change of scene might help to focus his mind, especially if it held the promise of aristocratic patronage, he arranged for Chopin to spend a week at the country home of the influential Prince Antoni Radziwill. As a career move, the visit was a failure, but Chopin hardly noticed. His attentions were almost entirely focused on the Prince's two charming daughters, who seem to have put all thought of Constantia out of his head.

As a token of his gratitude and friendship, Chopin marked the visit with a polonaise for the cello-playing composer-prince to perform with his daughter Vanda, who was a fluent technician, if nothing else. Chopin was supposed to be giving her lessons, but found himself preoccupied with extra-musical matters. And why not?

> She was young (only seventeen), pretty, and oh what a joy it was to place her little fingers on the keys.

26 Music: Polonaise for cello and piano

Chopin was quite prepared to stay on at the Radziwills' indefinitely, but whatever he may have preferred, there was business to attend to in Warsaw.

27 As the autumn wore on, Chopin stagnated. He stopped composing, he barely touched the piano, he learned no new repertoire, he wrote none of the letters which he could profitably have written to the musical movers and shakers of Europe. Effectively he withdrew from the musical life of Warsaw, complaining of a desire to escape but doing nothing. He wandered the streets and

became a familiar if silent figure in the city's many coffee houses. There he would sit for hours with friends and acquaintances, enjoying the pleasure of their company but adding nothing to their conversations, which bristled with careless – with *dangerous* – talk of revolution. Finally – more as a means of distraction than anything else, he began work on a piano concerto, far and away the biggest and most demanding thing he'd yet attempted. Whether he wanted it or not, he soon received public encouragement.

Whatever the misrepresentations of the Polish press, news of his successes in Vienna had spread by word of mouth and there was mounting pressure on him to declare himself openly – not merely as an artist, but as a specifically Polish artist. The underlying chauvinism was neatly summed up by an article in the *Warsaw Courier* that December:

> Does Mr Chopin's talent not belong to his own country? Does he believe that Poland is incapable of appreciating him? Mr Chopin's works unquestionably bear the stamp of genius; among them is said to be a Concerto in F minor, and we hope that he will delay no longer in confirming our conviction that Poland, too, can produce distinguished talent.

But delay he did. It was a part of his creative process to suffer severe pangs of self-doubt, and though he'd basically finished his Concerto by the end of January, it wasn't until mid-March that he felt ready to try it out in public. On the evening of Wednesday the 17th, before an audience of 900, he made his way to the piano on the stage of Warsaw's National Theatre. Nervous as always, but looking the very picture of authoritative composure, he finally made his long deferred Polish debut as a fully-fledged concert virtuoso.

[28] Music: Concerto in F minor, Op. 21 (1829)

[29] Well, the popular and critical acclaim was all he could have hoped for. As he reported to

Titus:

> It seems that everyone was quite entranced. Mlle de Moriolles sent me a laurel wreath and somebody else has sent me a poem. Orlowski has written mazurkas and waltzes on themes from my Concerto, and Sennewald has asked for my portrait [to have it engraved and sold], but I could not allow that – it would be going too far: I have no wish to see myself used for wrapping up butter, which is what happened to Lelewel's portrait. They want me to give another concert but I have no desire to do so. You cannot imagine what a torture the three days before a public appearance are to me.

Nevertheless, he relented, and whatever torments he experienced in giving them, his two concerts had galvanised Chopin back into action.

They had all turned Chopin from a local into a national celebrity, and therefore a sitting duck for national gossip – not something he relished. As he wrote to Titus:

> I don't want to read anything more that people write about me, or to hear anything they have to say.

Not the words of a virtuoso hellbent on fame and fortune.

Now that he found himself in the glare of publicity, he was more reticent than ever about revealing his feelings to Constantia, and decided to remove himself from the limelight as soon as possible. As he declared to Titus, again:

> I don't intend to stay in Warsaw any longer than I must, and if you suspect it's because of a love affair, as many people in Warsaw do, you can put such thoughts out of your head and believe me when I tell you that where my self-interest is concerned I can be above all such things. Even if I *were* in love, I could be strong enough to hide an idle passion which could come to nothing anyway.

A strange protest, considering his earlier unburdenings; and he ambiguously returns to the subject later in the same letter:

> Let us consider that moment when I shall see you abroad; perhaps I shan't be able to control myself and I shall blurt out what I never cease to dream of, what is constantly before my eyes, what rings at every moment in my ears and gives me the greatest joy in the world, and at the same time the greatest misery. *But don't go and think I am in love – that is something which I am reserving for later on.*

Now that really is an extraordinary confession. Did he seriously believe that falling in love is a matter of rational decision, that it can be kept on a shelf and then taken, like medicine, at the appropriate moment? In any case, it looks at times as though he was already past that point.

In the aftermath of his two triumphonat concerts, Chopin suffered the inevitable anti-climax and sank back into a period of intermittent listlessness and some confusion.

> When I reflect, I feel so sorry for myself that I often become completely distracted. When I am preoccupied in this way, I might be run over by horses, and I would not know it. The other day I almost suffered such an accident in the street. On Sunday, struck by an unexpected glance from someone in church – it happened to come at some moment of pleasant numbness – I ran out at once; for a quarter of an hour I did not know what was happening to me, and, running into Dr Parys, I did not know how to explain my confusion to him. I finally pretended that a dog had run up against my feet and that I had stepped on it. Sometimes I act so like a madman that it frightens me.

30 But when it did, pressure of work provided a welcome antidote. Following his return to active musical life, he now began work on a second concerto. By mid-May, he had completed the first movement and was close to finishing the Adagio which very untypically he described in programmatic terms.

> This was not designed to create a powerful effect. It is rather a romance, calm and melancholy giving the impression of someone looking at a spot which caused a thousand happy memories. It's a kind of reverie in the moonlight on a beautiful spring evening – the accompaniment is muted – that is, the violins are stifled by a sort of a comb which fits over the strings and gives them a nasal and silvery tone. Perhaps it is not a good idea but why be ashamed of writing badly, against one's better knowledge since only the result, in actual performance, will reveal the mistake. In all this, you will recognise my inclination to do things wrongly, in spite of myself. Yes, it is so – in spite of myself, some idea comes into my head and I take pleasure in indulging it.

Chopin was now determined to leave Poland and seek his fortune in the world beyond. Before leaving, he completed the concerto but in the days leading up to its unveiling, his thoughts had already overtaken it.

> 31 Not later than a week after my concert, Warsaw will have seen the last of me! My trunk is bought, my outfit is ready, my scores corrected, my handkerchiefs stitched and my trousers tailored. It only remains to say good-bye – the worst of all.

There were many good-byes, and many mixed feelings. And Chopin hadn't made his departure any easier by finally declaring his love to Constantia at the last possible moment, or near enough. For her part, she was flattered, of course, surprised, certainly, and probably deeply puzzled. As a lover, Chopin's timing was as clumsy as his music was graceful. We don't know precisely what passed between them, but we do know that they exchanged rings, and promises to keep in touch by letter. Promises which probably remained just that. There's no evidence that they corresponded at all.

On the night before his final leave-taking, there was a great party, with much dancing and singing, and probably not a lot of sleep afterwards. The next day, his family and friends gathered at the coaching station, tearful farewells were exchanged, Chopin stepped up into the carriage, and was gone. Whether he suspected it or not, the Polish chapter of his life was now closed.

32 The Poland Chopin left behind him was simmering on the brink of revolution. But as he knew all too well, this was nothing unique. Politically speaking, the entire continent was to some degree in a state of profound turbulence. France was still recovering from the July Revolution of 1830; Belgium had just emerged from its war of independence with the Netherlands; Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal were all shaken, or about to be, by some kind of revolutionary disturbances – and on top of all this came the ravages of cholera. From its origins in India, the epidemic had now spread through Russia and Poland into Austria. And hard on the heels of Chopin's departure for Munich at the end of July, it swept through Vienna itself, leaving untold casualties in its wake and sending a wave of some 60,000 terrified refugees ahead of it. Businesses tumbled like ninepins, the houses of the afflicted were burnt to the ground, and the air was thick with smoke and the stench of decomposing bodies. In the panic many sufferers were buried alive.

In neighbouring Bavaria, not yet affected by the virus, Chopin now found himself marooned by lack of funds. The money he was expecting from his father hadn't yet arrived, so he had to stay on in Munich till it did. Fortunately, it arrived before the cholera, and Chopin continued on his way to Stuttgart, in good health and, to all outward appearances, in high spirits. Once there, alone and without any clear sense of purpose, he fell very suddenly and unexpectedly into one of those troughs of depression which were to become a regular feature of his adult life. It has to be said that a certain morbid streak was common to many artists of the Romantic era and on this occasion the 20-year-old Chopin offered his resistance:

> *Stuttgart*. How strange! This bed on which I shall lie has been slept on by more than one dying man,

> but today it does not repel me! Who knows what corpses have lain on it and for how long? But is a corpse any worse than I? A corpse too knows nothing of its father, mother or sisters or Titus. Nor has a corpse a sweetheart. A corpse, too, is pale, like me. A corpse is cold, just as I am cold and indifferent to everything. A corpse has ceased to live, and I too have had enough of life. Enough? … Why do we live on through this wretched life which only devours us and serves to turn us into corpses? The clocks in the Stuttgart belfries strike the midnight hour. Oh how many people have become corpses at this moment! Mothers have been torn from their children, children from their mothers – how many plans have come to nothing, how much sorrow has sprung from these depths, and how much relief! … Virtue and vice have come in the end to the same thing! It seems that to die is man's finest action – and what might be his worst? To be born, since that is the exact opposite of his best deed. It is therefore right of me to be angry that I was ever born into this world! Why was I not prevented from remaining in a world where I am utterly useless? What good can my existence bring to anyone? … But wait, wait! What's this? Tears? How long it is since they flowed! How is this, seeing that an arid melancholy has held me for so long in its grip? How good it feels – and sorrowful. Sad but kindly tears! What a strange emotion! Sad but blessed. It is not good for one to be sad, and yet how pleasant it is – a strange state … Alone! Alone! All alone! Oh my misery is indescribable! My heart can scarcely bear it!

But there was worse to come. Shortly afterwards, he happened on a piece of news which all but unhinged him. After months of increasingly bitter resistance Warsaw had fallen to the Russian army. Chopin knew nothing of the details, only that Poland, the cradle of his youth and the object of his pride, had yet again been crushed. It was an outcome not less terrible for being predictable and it can fairly be said to have changed his life, and his music, forever. The next entry in his diary, though, is a strange combination of genuine and spontaneous grief and fear and anger, with a curiously stilted literary style which suggests a certain calculation, as though he's quite consciously writing for posterity:

> *Stuttgart*. I wrote the above lines not knowing that the enemy has reached my home! The suburbs are stormed – burnt down! Johnny! Where are you? Wilhelm has surely perished on the ramparts. I see Marcel a prisoner! Sowinski, good lad, is in the hands of those scoundrels! Oh, God, art Thou? Thou art, but Thou avengest not! Hast Thou not seen enough of the Muscovite crimes – or – or – or art Thou thyself a Muscovite? My poor, kind father! Perhaps you are hungry and cannot buy bread for mother. My sisters! Have they fallen victims to the unleashed fury of the Muscovite scum?! ... Oh why could I not have slain even a single Muscovite! Oh Titus! Titus! ... Oh, God! God! Make the earth to tremble and let this generation be engulfed! May the most frightful torments seize the French for not coming to our aid!

Never again, not even in his diary, would Chopin so completely give in to unreasoning emotion. From that moment, so frightening in its loss of the control which he prized so highly, was born a reserve that never left him. Never again would he unburden himself as he used to do with Titus. In his future relations with women, as with his male friends, he would keep his cards close to his chest. And though he chose to live abroad, he was never so comfortable as in the company of Poles. From that night in Stuttgart, too, dates a fundamental change in his relationship to music – both his own and other people’s. There is no proof that the terrifying outpourings of the so-called Revolutionary Etude were born on that night, but there is equally no reason to doubt it. The mood of the music matches the mood of the journal, and there is no comparably sustained outburst in any of his later music, not even in the most passionate of the Preludes. Only, perhaps, in the B minor Scherzo, begun in the immediate aftermath of the Stuttgart crisis, do we find so open, so almost savage an expression of inner turmoil.

33 Music: Scherzo No. 1 in B minor

34 From that point onwards, the most violent emotions were tempered by the controlling hand of the master craftsman. It wasn't just for their music that Bach and Mozart were Chopin's favourite composers. They were, and remain, the ultimate craftsmen, who abhorred excess in any form. This could hardly be said of the Romantics – least of all, the German Romantics, in whose country, in whose culture, Chopin now found himself effectively stranded, and facing some tough decisions. For a start, where was he now to go? He could hardly go back to Warsaw. Apart from anything else, he was a known, albeit passive, associate of student revolutionaries. To go back would also be to strangle his career at birth. Another factor, of course, was the cholera.

In the end, the choice was almost inevitable, even for one of Chopin's indecisive nature. Paris was not only the capital city of his father's homeland but by general consent the cultural capital of Europe. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, painters, writers, poets, playwrights, many of the world's most famous and brilliant musicians had converged on the city, some of them, like Chopin, impelled by political disturbances in their own countries. Yet despite this imported galaxy of talent, music in France, certainly homegrown music, was at a low ebb. Apart from a few revolutionary contributions from Berlioz, there was no symphonic work of any substance being composed, no significant chamber music, very few vocal works, and where native-born Frenchmen were concerned no important instrumental music either. The taste was for trifles. Where the piano was concerned, Parisian salons resounded to the confectioneries of men like Herz, Kalkbrenner, Hünten and Pixis – not exactly giants (not exactly French either). Liszt was there too, but he was very young and his best music still lay years ahead of him. Anyway, into this relative void came a young, hauntingly elegant Pole who demonstrated in short order that you could write light music and still reach the highest levels of art. Well, *he* could anyway.

35 Music: Waltz in E flat, Op. 18

36 Chopin's first impressions of the French capital were overwhelmingly joyful. And they were by no means confined to the city's cultural life. 'Paris,' he wrote to Titus, 'is whatever you care to make of it.'

> You can enjoy yourself, get bored, laugh, cry, do anything you like, and no-one takes any notice because thousands here are doing exactly the same … You find here the greatest splendour, the greatest filthiness, the greatest virtue, the greatest vice … They really are a queer lot here! As soon as it gets dark all you hear is street vendors shouting out the titles of the latest pamphlets, and you can often buy three or four sheets of printed rubbish for a few sous, with titles such as 'How to Get and Keep a Lover', or 'Priests in Love', or 'Romance of the Archbishop of Paris and the Duchesse de Berry', and a thousand similar obscenities, often very wittily put together. Honestly, one can't be surprised at the way of making a few pennies that they think up. I must tell you that there is terrible poverty here and little money about. You meet with crowds of beggars with menacing looks on their faces, and you often hear threatening remarks about that imbecile Louis-Philippe … The lower classes are completely exasperated and ready at any time to break out of their poverty-stricken situation, but unfortunately for them the government is extremely severe on such movements and the slightest gathering in the streets is dispersed by mounted police.

When it came to private enterprise, on the other hand, they were inclined to look the other way: robberies and murders in the streets were commonplace, most thieves were armed, and pedestrians who ventured out alone at night were frequently putting their lives at risk. Or at least their health:

> At every step you see posters advertising cures for venereal disease … and what numbers of tender-

> hearted young ladies there are! But Chopin, to his evident sorrow, was temporarily out of the running.

> I regret that the memory of Teresa (notwithstanding the efforts of Benedict who considers my misfortune a mere trifle) has not allowed me to taste the forbidden fruit. I have got to know quite a few lady vocalists – and such ladies here would very willingly 'join in duets'.

Who Benedict was, or Teresa, for that matter, we have no idea, but the implication seems to be that Chopin himself had contracted some venereal infection.

On the whole, Parisian life, like the beauty of the city itself, acted on him like a kind of drug. For the first time in his adult life, he felt completely at ease with the society around him, both high and low, and the idea of staying on there enchanted him. For the most part he was able to forget the political turbulence which lay behind the glitter and the charm, but there was one clash between anti-government protesters and the police which brought him, for the first time, face to face with the reality of revolutionary politics in action.

> A huge crowd, not only of young people but of townsfolk, which assembled in front of the Panthéon, made a rush for the right bank of the Seine. They came on like an avalanche, increasing their numbers with each street they passed through, until they reached the Pont Neuf where the mounted police began to break them up. Many were arrested, but all the same a huge body of people collected on the boulevards under my window, intending to join up with those advancing from the other side of the town. The police could do nothing against the tightly packed throng; a company of infantry was brought up, hussars and mounted gendarmes rode along the pavements, the national guard showed equal zeal in dispersing the inquisitive and murmuring populace. They seize and arrest free citizens, panic reigns, shops are closed, crowds gather at every corner of the boulevards, whistles are blown, reinforcements are rushed up … You cannot conceive what impression the menacing voices of the

> rebellious populace made on me.

Fortunately, such eruptions were exceptional.

Once settled in Paris, Chopin quickly got to know the sizeable Polish community, mostly exiled aristocrats, through whom he soon became a favourite of the French aristocracy. But where the general public was concerned, he would remain unknown until a suitable concert could be arranged, and that involved, in those days, almost as much plotting as a military campaign. In 1831, the solo recital as we know it didn't exist. Not until Liszt in 1840 did a pianist have the presumption to monopolize a public concert (and by the way, it was also Liszt who coined the very term 'recital'). In the 1830s, a public concert was almost by definition a high-class variety act in which a symphony, say, was commonly dismembered, movement by movement, and then served up piecemeal over the course of an evening, interspered with songs, piano solos, vocal quartets, operatic arias and so on. Chopin's E minor Piano Concerto suffered exactly that fate. Anyway, after many delays and postponements, the big event was set up, every important pianist in Paris was there (so was Mendelssohn, who was passing through), and it established Chopin, without doubt, as one of the greatest musicians of the day.

As Liszt wordily put it,

> The most vociferous applause seemed insufficient for the talent that was opening a new phase of poetic sentiment and presenting happy innovations in the substance of his art.

What was that again? Was Liszt just possibly hedging his bets a little there? Maybe so, but in any case he seems to be describing Chopin the composer rather than Chopin the pianist. The truth is that for critics and audiences alike, Chopin as a performer had one big drawback, and he was already getting tired of hearing about it. As he'd written home to his family after his first concert in Vienna:

> The general opinion is that I play too quietly, or rather too delicately … there always has to be some kind of 'but' of course, and I'd prefer it to be that rather than have it said that I play too loudly. Anyway, it's the way I play – which once again the ladies found most attractive.

Now it's been put about by many people that Chopin didn't play louder because he couldn't play louder. OK, he was small and slight – five foot two inches and roughly a hundred pounds at his healthiest – but the fact is that there are plenty of children, smaller and lighter than that, who can produce masses of volume on a modern concert grand, which is a lot heavier than the pianos Chopin played on. The significant truth is that Chopin didn't play louder because he didn't want to play louder. His ideal sound world was one in which stridency and sheer steely-fingered power had no part. What mattered was the relative not the absolute loudness and softness of this note or that. And this was probably one of the reasons why Chopin hated giving concerts (he only gave about 30 of them in his life). His playing, and so far as he was concerned his music too, was simply out of place in a big hall. In the fashionable salons of the Parisian aristocracy, on the other hand, it fitted like a glove.

37 Music: Impromptu in A flat, Op. 29

38 Almost from the day he arrived in Paris, Chopin indulged his passion for opera to the hilt. Within a few weeks he met Cherubini and Rossini and became a regular visitor to all the Parisian opera houses, large and small. Compared to Warsaw, or even Vienna, Paris seemed to him like a corner of heaven.

> The crowd of people concerned with all branches of the art of music is quite amazing. There are three orchestras: those of the Académie, the Italian opera, and the opera in the Rue Feydeau are excellent. Rossini is the director of his own opera, which has the finest stage production in Europe. And Lablache,

> Rubini, Pasta, Malibran, Devrient-Schröder, Santini etc. enchant their fashionable audiences three times a week. Nourrit, Levasseur, Dérivis, Mme Cinti-Damoreau and Mlle Dorus are the stars of the Grand Opéra. Cholet, Mlle Casimir and Prévost are the stars of the Opéra-Comique: briefly, it is only here that one can fully understand what singing really is.

And it was in the quality and nature of the human voice, especially as used in the great *bel canto* tradition of Italian opera, that Chopin found the principal model for his own unique style of melody. But this pre-dated his arrival in Paris. Well before he left Warsaw, he'd realised that if melodies on the piano were to have the flexibility and expressivity of vocal lines they'd have to 'breathe' according to similar principles. In putting this perception into practice, aided by the pedals and an extremely individual use of harmony, he created an entirely new kind of melody – based on vocal styles, but uniquely pianistic. Ironically, not one of Chopin's greatest melodies, some of the most songful ever written, gains anything when entrusted to the voice, or to any other 'sustaining' instrument. On the contrary.

39 Music: Andante spianato, Op. 22

40 One of the most surprising aspects of Chopin's early years in Paris was his friendship, or more to the point, his abiding admiration for Friedrich Kalkbrenner (a former prodigy who'd made his formal debut at five and graduated from the Paris Conservatoire at thirteen). He could obviously play the piano – and very well too – but he was regarded by many of his colleagues as little more than a charlatan, and a man of insufferable vanity and conceit. Yet Chopin described him as 'the leading pianist of all Europe – the only one whose shoelaces I am not fit to untie.' And he went even further than that:

> I simply long to play like Kalkbrenner. If Paganini is perfection itself, Kalkbrenner is his equal. In

> truth, he is superior to all the pianists I have ever heard.

Whether Kalkbrenner agreed we don’t know but it seems likely. What’s well documented, though, is his astonishing offer to take the young Chopin in hand and in a three-year course of lessons ‘make a real artist’ of him (Kalkbrenner’s own words). Almost more astounding was Chopin’s initial enthusiasm for the idea, and his apparently total lack of pride:

> Kalkbrenner has convinced me that I can play splendidly when I am inspired but abominably when I am not – something that never happens to him. When he had observed me closely he declared that I had no ‘school’, that I am going along fine but might take the wrong turning. He added that after his death, or when he completely gives up playing, there will be no representative of the great school of piano-playing left. He says I couldn’t create a new school, even if I wanted to, since I haven’t yet mastered the old one, and sums me up thus: I have not a perfect *mechanism*, and the free expression of my ideas is thereby cramped.

On all the evidence available, and there’s no reason to doubt it, Chopin, who had by that time composed most if not all of his trail-blazing Op.10 Etudes, was already one of the greatest and most original pianists who ever lived.

41 Music: Etude in G flat, Op. 10, No. 5

42 One thing Paris wasn’t then, and isn’t now, is cheap – particularly to someone, like Chopin, with a naturally spendthrift nature. He was still living on his father’s money and wouldn’t have dreamed of sponging off his aristocratic friends. His much-deferred concert had cost him a lot to set up, but nothing had come from it in the way of securing a livelihood. Two weeks later, having harvested nothing but compliments, he was feeling seriously worried about his prospects.

In March he swallowed his pride and addressed a letter to the Concert Société of the Paris Conservatory, demonstrating in the process that the politics of grovel were still alive and well:

> Gentlemen of the Committee,
>
> I am exceedingly desirous of the favour of being allowed to appear at one of your admirable concerts and beg to submit an application for the same. Though I may have no special claim to put forward, I have confidence in your generous disposition towards artists and I venture to hope that my request will be favourably received.
>
> I am, Gentlemen, Your humble and obedient servant, F. Chopin.

The letter was eventually returned to him, with an unsigned note scrawled in the margin, presumably by the secretary:

> Request too late. Answered.

And the rest was silence.

Chopin was now 22 years old, still, much to his embarrassment, dependent on his parents, and with no visible financial prospects. The obvious course was for him to teach, but he now discovered to his surprise that getting pupils in Paris was no easier than arranging concerts – and the long-dreaded arrival of the cholera naturally made it harder still. In his letters home, he put a brave face on things, but we get a truer picture from a letter written by a Polish friend to his own family:

> Dear Chopin sends you his warm greetings. He has been so depressed of late that sometimes when I go to see him we haven’t the heart to say a word to each other. He is homesick. But please don’t mention this to his parents. The truth is, things are bad here. There is great poverty among artists. The

> cholera is causing rich people to flee to the provinces. The worst of all is that none of the musicians, although they are as numerous as dogs, look like dying. If half of them would, the others might do better. Well, there's still time for it to happen.

There was, and it did. The wonder is that Chopin, with his frail constitution, wasn't one of the victims. Within the first three days of the epidemic, Parisians were dying at the rate of a hundred a day. But this was just the beginning. Before long, the sick and the dying outnumbered hospital beds by three to one, and the daily death toll grew so fast that the newspapers gave up reporting it. By mid-April it had reached two thousand a day in Paris alone. The coffin-makers had more work than they could cope with, and as George Sand reported:

> The great movers' conveyances, now become the hearses of the poor, followed each other without let-up. Elsewhere, bodies were stuffed into old sacks and stacked pell-mell like so many lifeless bundles on carts, furniture vans, or any vehicle that could serve as a makeshift hearse. What was most frightening, however, was not the corpses but the absence of any kin behind these tumbrels; it was the drivers whipping up the horses, and quickening the pace with a curse; it was the passers-by, rushing frightened from the hideous cortege, and the despondent or apathetic expressions that stupefied all faces.

The worst casualties, unsurprisingly, were in the working-class districts, but the cholera was no respecter of class. The most fashionable streets were blanketed with the contaminated clothes, linens and personal effects of the dead and the dying. And the disaster soon had serious political repercussions. The cholera had claimed 20,000 lives, and devastated the economy, leaving much of the country in a state of poverty bordering on famine. In the following summer, riots flared up all over Paris. As the writer Jules Sandeau recalled:

> All Paris smelled of gunpowder, as though in the immediate aftermath of battle. The air was alive

> with a feeling of revolt, and a spirit of insurrection haunted streets, books and theatres … Everything was called into question: social as well as religious institutions, husbands as well as gods and kings. All one heard was blasphemies against the laws, the savage ridiculing of marriage, and wild aspirations for a better future. Public places teemed with twenty-year-old legislators who found Christ somewhat aged and who wanted to supplant him in the task of guiding mankind. The response of the authorities to this new threat of sedition was swift and merciless. The National Guard was called out, leaving in its wake a trail of bloodied corpses, hacked to death by bayonet and sabre or cut down in a hail of bullets.

Strange to say, and for reasons which nobody really understands, it was at about this time that Chopin's own fortunes took a dramatic upwards swing. There are conflicting stories as to how this came about, but according to one, a chance meeting with an emigré Polish prince led to a dinner at the home of the immensely wealthy and equally influential Baron James de Rothschild. After dinner, Chopin played for the assembled company and quite overwhelmed them – especially the Baron's wife, who begged him there and then to accept herself and her daughters as pupils. After that, the story goes, no well-born young lady could afford not to have lessons with Chopin. From that point onwards, he derived most of his income not from performing, nor from the publication of his music, but from teaching. And his many lady pupils were very decidedly worthy of the name. No-one was more surprised by this than Chopin himself.

> I have found my way into the very best society; I have my place among ambassadors, princes, ministers – I don't know by what miracle it has come about, for I have done nothing to push myself forward. But today, all that sort of thing is indispensable.

Indispensable – and expensive. As Chopin quickly discovered, a place in the highest society came with a price.

> I have five lessons to give today. You will probably imagine that I am making a fortune – but my coach and white gloves cost more than that, and without them I should not be in 'good taste'.

But here, as in practically every other aspect of his life, he found himself pulled in two directions at once. He didn't want to lose his place amongst friends for whom 'good taste', in the coach-and-white-gloves sense, was a symbol of oppression and exploitation. To these, he presented a very different face.

> I am all for the Carlists, I hate the Louis-Philippe crowd; I'm a revolutionary myself so I care nothing for money, only for friendship.

He was indeed a revolutionary – but only when the white kid gloves were off.

43 Music: Etude in C minor, Op. 10, No. 12, the 'Revolutionary'

44 For a man who claimed to care nothing for money, Chopin spent an awful lot of it on social window-dressing. Not only his gloves and coach, but his clothes, his private coach and its requisite coachman, his manservant, his hairdresser (who attended him daily), the decoration of his apartment, to say nothing of its location – all this cost him a small fortune.

But his cultivation by the aristocracy – and his cultivation of them – didn't isolate him from his professional colleagues. Yet to a certain extent he was isolated, not specifically by anyone, but within himself – as a result of his own outlook and perspectives. He enjoyed the admiration and friendship of such major figures as Mendelssohn, Liszt, Berlioz and Schumann, yet he was never really able to reciprocate it. He could enjoy their company, but not their music or their aspirations: the elevation of feeling over form, the glorification of literary, autobiographical or programmatic references, the pursuit of sensuality and the picturesque – most of this he found repugnant, and it couldn’t help but drive a wedge between himself and the musical standard-bearers of his time. As a gregarious expatriate Pole, living in Paris but speaking only halting French amidst a crowd of worshipful admirers, he felt himself, at some level, to be three times isolated: geographically, socially and artistically.

At the same time, his avid cultivation by the aristocracy was a threefold blessing. In addition to its obvious social benefits, it provided him with a guaranteed and appreciative audience for his music which saved him the torment of giving public concerts. Most importantly, though, it guaranteed a steady stream of well-heeled pupils whose fees enabled him to live in style. But he was very much more than merely a ‘society’ teacher. As with every other aspect of music, Chopin took his teaching very seriously indeed. One of his most important pupils, and a fellow Pole, Karol Mikuli, leaves no doubt on that score:

> Chopin daily devoted his entire energies to teaching for several hours and with genuine delight. Was not the severity, not so easy to satisfy, the feverish vehemence with which he sought to raise his pupils to his own standpoint, the ceaseless repetition of a passage till it was understood, a guarantee that he had the progress of the pupil at heart? A holy artistic zeal burnt in him then, every word from his lips was stimulating and inspiring.

And Maria von Harder, another pupil, bears him out:

> Chopin was a born teacher; expression and conception, position of the hand, touch, pedalling, nothing escaped the sharpness of his hearing and his vision; he gave every detail the keenest attention. Entirely absorbed in his task, during the lesson he would be solely a teacher, and nothing but a teacher.’

And that was the experience, also, of Emilie von Gretsch:

> It's wonderful to see how tactfully Chopin puts one at one's ease; how intuitively he identifies, I might say, with the thoughts of the person to whom he is speaking or listening; with what delicate nuances of behaviour he adapts his own being to that of another. To encourage me, he tells me among other things, 'It seems to me that you don't dare to express yourself as you feel. Be bolder, let yourself go more. Imagine that you're at the Conservatoire, listening to the most beautiful performance in the world. Make yourself want to hear it, and then you'll hear yourself playing it right here. Have full confidence in yourself. Forget you're being listened to, and always listen to yourself. I see that timidity and lack of self-confidence form a kind of armour around you, but through this armour I perceive something else that you don't always dare to express, and so you deprive us all. When you're at the piano I give you full authority to do whatever you want; follow freely the ideal you've set for yourself and which you must feel within you; be bold and confident in your own powers and strength, and whatever you say will always be good. It would give me so much pleasure to hear you play with complete abandon that I'd find the shameless confidence of the *vulgaires* unbearable by comparison.'

Gretsch discovered that, too – and in some of the most technically demanding pieces ever written:

> Chopin showed me the best way of practising his Etudes – and what a special joy it was to me to be able to play easily what had previously seemed to involve the most perilous difficulties.

45 Music: Etude in A minor, Op. 25, No. 4

46 Chopin's revolutionary approach to playing, teaching and writing for the piano was to a large extent determined by the accident of his particular physical characteristics. '*Souplesse avant tout!*' he used to repeat, almost like a mantra. 'Suppleness before everything!' Nor did his requirements stop with the hand and arm. He advised his pupils 'to have the whole body supple, right to the tips of the toes'.

Chopin's own suppleness was legendary. According to his friend and pupil Adolf Gutmann 'he could throw his legs over his shoulders, like a clown', while another observed that Chopin appeared to be made 'entirely of rubber'. Several pupils, quite independently, remarked that his fingers seemed to be without any bones. And rather surprisingly, given his generally fastidious and demanding nature, he could be as flexibile in his attitudes as in his joints. He was quite capable of saying, as he did to the 14-year-old Karl Filtsch (admittedly his most brilliant pupil),

> We each understand this music differently, but go your own way, do it as you feel it, it can also be played like that.

It all depended, though, on what day you happened to catch him. As Wilhelm von Lenz discovered:

> Chopin could not bear anyone to interfere with the text of his works. The slightest modification was a gross error for which he would not pardon even his closest friends, not even his fervent admirer Liszt.

Another feature of Chopin's teaching – as of his playing, and his writing – was a quite new kind of sound which depended not just on the hands and arms but on the careful use of the sustaining pedal (often wrongly called the 'loud' pedal). The effect sometimes suggested a pianist with four hands, but virtuosity, as such, was never his main aim. What he was after was an increased range of colour, of contour – and a new sense of freedom. Not an arbitrary freedom, but the soaring flexibility of the great bel canto singers. Again and again Chopin urged his pupils to study the great opera stars and to emulate them. Indeed, he used to tell them point blank, 'You have to sing if you wish to play.'

47 Music: Nocturne in B flat minor, Op. 9, No. 1

48 In 1835, Chopin’s professional life was interrupted by some very welcome and unexpected news. His parents, he learned, would be leaving Warsaw that summer on a trip to Carlsbad in Germany – the first time either of them had travelled outside Poland. They arrived at the spa late on the night of August 15th and found Chopin there to greet them. Three weeks later, after a blissful holiday, Chopin accompanied them on the first leg of their homeward journey. They parted at Tetschen, near the Polish border, never to see one another again – though nobody suspected that at the time.

The departure of Chopin’s parents was quickly succeeded by another reunion. On his way back to Paris, he visited Dresden, where some old friends, the Wodzinski family from Poland, were visiting a relative. Here he discovered with a body-wide blush that the daughter, Maria, whom he’d last seen when she was eleven, had matured into a powerfully attractive young woman. He wasn’t by any means the first to fall in love with her on sight, but fall in love he emphatically did, and it wasn’t long before she appeared to return the compliment. After a mere month in her company, Chopin steeled himself to one of the biggest decisions of his life and asked her to marry him. And she accepted. Her mother was delighted, but in those days it was the father’s consent that mattered – and that would hinge on his faith in Chopin’s health. To that end, Madame Wodzinska urged the pair to keep their plans a secret while putting Chopin to a test which he couldn’t afford to fail. ‘Stay well,’ she warned him ‘ *for everything depends on that*.’ If he’d really been intent on marriage, he might just have passed the test. As it was, he failed miserably. At Heidelberg, in October, he fell seriously ill with bronchitis. In November he suffered a second and worse attack, this time coughing up blood and suffering feverish hallucinations. Holed up in his apartment, he kept himself so secluded that he was widely rumoured to have died. The fact is, he was not following Wodzinska’s orders, and wasn’t ever likely to. His gregarious habits were too deeply ingrained. Come winter, he once more paid the price and fell ill again.

From this point onwards, it becomes clear from the surviving correspondence – and the lack of it – that Chopin the suitor had lost. But he might have lost anyway. From the moment of their parting, Maria seems to have communicated with Chopin almost exclusively through postscripts to her mother's many, busybodying letters. It seems all but certain that Maria quickly came to regard the whole thing as little more than a passing and diverting infatuation. The effect of all this on Chopin may be gauged by the fact that he gathered up his letters from the Wodzinskis, tied them together in a bundle labelled 'My Misery' – and kept it for the rest of his life. Mixed in with the pain of dashed hopes was a newly heightened sense of his own Polishness, and of his self-elected exile. Marooned, as he felt, by fate, and with his marriage plans in tatters, he turned again to the piano, and produced in the B major Nocturne, Op. 32, No. 1, a musical parable of love and loss whose surprise tragic ending is as powerful, in its way, as anything he ever wrote.

49 Nocturne in B major, Op. 32, No. 1

50 In the immediate aftermath of the Wodjinska affair – or non-affair, as it turned out – Chopin's health, ironically, improved. He soon returned to the social whirl of Parisian high society, and resumed full-time teaching, which apart from anything else had the added benefit of distracting him from any lingering thoughts of Maria.

Most of Chopin's pupils were women, mainly young women, and he clearly liked it that way. As the only boy in a family of five, he'd always been at ease with women, and they with him. And as he grew into manhood he can hardly have failed to notice that they found him sexually attractive. Unlike the flamboyant Liszt, whose effect on women was in most cases blatantly erotic, Chopin appealed to their hearts. And their imaginations. There was something mysterious and fascinating in the aura surrounding him, an elusive air of self-containment and hidden depths which was clearly reflected not only in his music but his appearance. To the critic Ernest Legouvé, this was hardly surprising.

> An elegant, pale, sad young man, with brown eyes of an incomparably pure and gentle expression, and

> chestnut hair almost as long as Berlioz's and falling on his forehead in the same way, Chopin could best be defined as a *trinité charmante*. His personality, his playing and his compositions were in such harmony that they could no more be separated than can the features of one face.

Anyone doubting the accuracy of this perception need only turn to the Nocturnes of 1835. If ever one could 'see' a composer's face in his music, it's here – the haunting, dispossessed brooding of the former matched by the sensual melancholy and delicacy of the latter. Both find Chopin in his finest, most uncompromising vein – in their subtle, luminous harmonies, their variety and originality of texture, their masterly integration of contrasts, and above all, perhaps, the depth and directness of their expression.

[51] Music: Nocturne in D flat, Op. 27, No. 2

[52] Not long after composing that, Chopin made the acquaintance of the woman who was dominate and to an important extent to inspire the most creatively fruitful period of his life.

George Sand (or 'Georges Sans', to pronounce it as she would have) neither sounded nor looked nor behaved like a woman – at least not in public, and not at this point. She was even then a famous writer (far more famous than Chopin) who delighted in scandalising so-called polite society and did it very well.

Born Amandine Aurore Lucie Dupin in 1804 (making her six years Chopin's senior), she was one of the most controversial and prolific novelists of the nineteenth-century, and with the sole possible exception of his mother, she was far and away the most important woman in the whole of Chopin's life. She had every reason to regard scandal as her birthright, being the illegitimate daughter of a then well-known public figure, one Martial de Saxe. At 18 she'd married Casimir, Baron Dudevant, thereby acquiring a title and a husband whom she left nine years later, taking their two children with her to Paris, where she proposed to earn her living from literature. She derived her masculine pen name from the first of her many lovers, the writer Jules Sandeau, and since 1831 she'd set Parisian tongues wagging with a whole series of defiantly erotic novels. On the face of it, she was the opposite of Chopin in almost every respect. Where he was reserved, formal and a fastidious follower of fashion, she was flamboyant, volatile and rebellious; he was polished, delicate (even dandyish) and impeccably cosmopolitan, she was ostentatious, rugged and outdoorsy; he was of humble origins but consorted with royalty, she was of noble stock and cultivated the company of peasants; where he clung to the badges of tradition and the aristocracy, she championed feminism, socialism and egalitarianism. Dressed in men's clothing and brandishing strong cigars, she courted controversy with an exhibitionistic stridency. Together they were to become one of the oddest couples of the century. At their first meeting, though, Chopin found her frankly repellent. 'When we went home,' reported a friend, ' Chopin said to me: "What an unsympathetic woman! *Is* she really a woman? Almost, I doubt it."'

Well, he was neither the first nor the last. According to the Countess d'Agoult, Sand's transvestism was unnervingly convincing.

> When dressed as a man she had a casual air, and even a youthful, virile grace. Neither the outline of her breasts nor the prominence of her hips betrayed her feminine sex. Nothing – be it the tight-fitting black velvet riding coat, the high-heeled boots, the tie wrapped around her rather plump neck, or the man's hat cocked cavalierly over her thick locks of short hair – could detract in any way from her uninhibited manner or the nonchalance of her bearing. She gave the impression of quiet strength.

Opinion amongst men was sharply divided. To Flaubert, she was simply 'that man who calls herself George'. To the poet and playwright Alfred de Musset (another of her lovers) she was unambiguously 'the most womanly woman I have ever known'. And he knew more than a few. Balzac, for his part, wavered: at one moment she was 'a writing cow'; but later, 'a nightingale in her nest … great-hearted, generous, devout, and *chaste*.'

She wasn’t in any conventional sense beautiful, but she sparked the fascination and excited the desires of men and women alike, of many different ages and from widely different pasts. The German poet Heinrich Heine, one of the most penetrating observers of the Parisian scene, wrote about her at some length:

> Her forehead is not high, her delicious chestnut brown locks reach her shoulders. Her eyes are somewhat languid, at least they are not brilliant, and their fire may have been dimmed by many tears, or may have consumed itself in her works, which have lighted conflagrations in all the world, have illumined many a dark prison cell, but also set on fire some temples of innocence … A good-natured smile usually plays around her lips, but it is by no means provocative. Only her somewhat protruding lower lip suggests sexuality. Her shoulders are beautiful, no, magnificent. Ditto, arms and hands, small like her feet. Her breasts I leave to others to describe, as I confess incompetence. Her body is a bit thick and seems too short. Only the head bears witness to her idealism and reminds me of the finest examples of Greek art. In this connection one of our friends likened her to the Venus de Milo in the lower hall of the Louvre. Yes, George Sand is as beautiful as the Venus de Milo; she even excels her in some respects – for example, she is much younger. She speaks naturally and with great charm … She possesses nothing of the bubbling *esprit* of her compatriots, and nothing of their verbosity either. Her silence, however, is not due to modesty or her absorption in somebody else’s concern. She is monosyllabic because of pride, not thinking it worthwhile to waste her intellect on you, or because of self-centredness, taking in the best of your thoughts to incorporate them later in one of her books.

And her books, too, provoked extreme reactions. Many deplored her, yet Heine rated her above Victor Hugo, and among her greatest fans were Dostoevsky, Thackeray, Henry James and Marcel Proust. To Elizabeth Barrett Browning she was quite simply ‘the finest female genius of any country or any age’. Baudelaire was less complimentary:

> She is stupid, she is ponderous, she is long-winded. Her moral ideas have the depth of judgment and delicacy of feeling of those of concierges and kept women.

And that, more or less, has been the verdict of posterity – though not perhaps a very just one.

George Sand's entry into Chopin's orbit coincided with the disintegration of his marital hopes for Maria. He, then, was vulnerable, and Sand, who was beginning to get tired of her present lover, was in predatory mood. In October 1837 she returned to Paris from her country estate at Nohant, in the Berry district. Calling on Chopin, who'd attracted her interest from the start, she detected at once a change in his attitude to her. And with good reason. Following another, undocumented meeting shortly afterwards, Chopin confided to his journal:

> I was quite overcome; my heart was conquered … She understood me … She loves me.

At just what point he qualified for the title of 'lover' we shall never know, but their relationship, by Sand's standards, developed only slowly, she taking the initiative, he characteristically holding back. We do know, though, that by the end of the following summer her patience was richly rewarded.

At that point, their affair was known only to a select few. Chopin, ambivalent as ever, wasn't ready to share the secret with most of his Parisian friends, many of whom found Sand both personally and politically repellent. And even she favoured the idea of putting the gossips out of reach. In view of Chopin's fragile health and her son Maurice's worsening rheumatism, they decided to head south, and stay through to the following spring. On the recommendation of friends who'd never actually been there, they opted for the island of Majorca, off the Spanish coast - a sun-drenched, unspoilt haven in which they could write, compose, explore, frolic and make love to their hearts' content. Having arranged that a piano would be sent for Chopin's use, they made elaborate plans to cover their traces. Unbeknownst to all but a handful of trustworthy friends, Sand would slip discreetly out of Paris in mid-October, Chopin joining her two weeks later at Perpignan, on the Franco-Spanish border, from which they would embark together on the holiday trip of a lifetime (the only snag, for honeymoon purposes, being the continual presence of Sand’s two children). At Barcelona, on the evening of 7th November, they boarded the ship that was to carry them to Palma. As they gazed upwards at the brilliant night sky and listened to the lapping of a quiet sea against the bows, the obvious rightness of their decision crowded all thoughts of Paris out of their heads. Chopin had brought very little with him, apart from several volumes of Bach, his own uncompleted manuscripts, including many of the 24 Preludes, and a sheaf of music paper. As he filled his lungs with the warm, scented air, he felt a pleasant mixture of contentment and excitement. Seven days later, the mood persisted. In time to catch the one postal collection of the week, he reported to his friend Fontana in Paris:

> Here I am at Palma, among palms, cedars, cacti, olive trees, oranges, lemons, aloes, figs, pomegranates etc. – everything that is to be found in the hot-houses of the Jardins des Plantes. The sky is like turquoise, the sea like lapis lazuli, the mountains like emerald and the air as in heaven. In the daytime, sunshine; everyone goes about in summer clothes and it’s hot. At night, guitars and songs for hours on end. Enormous balconies with overhanging vines: Moorish ramparts. Everything, including the town has an African look. In a word, life here is marvellous … It’s settled that I shall live in a wonderful monastery on the most fabulous site in the world: sea, mountains, palm trees, a cemetery, a crusader’s church, ruins of a mosque, olive trees a thousand years old. Oh, my dear friend, I am really beginning to live. I am close to all that is most beautiful. I am a better man.

Shortly afterwards he wrote to Pleyel, complaining that though he dreamt of music he couldn’t properly compose any for lack of a piano – an interesting indication of the extent to which this most pianistic of composers thought (and discovered) with his fingers.

All too soon, though, the euphoria of these first days in Majorca dissolved. Within a fortnight of arriving, he wrote in some disgruntlement to a friend:

> This is the devil's own country as far as the post, the population and comforts are concerned. The sky is as lovely as your soul; the earth is as black as my heart.

As so often, his spirits reflected his physical condition. Sand reported:

> Chopin has not been well. He suffers from the frequent changes of temperature. At last we are getting a proper stove, and may Heaven grant us its protection, for there are neither doctors nor medicines here.

An odd place, under the circumstances, to have brought a consumptive. Nor, for the moment, did it favour her own work. As she wrote in December:

> We are still not settled, and have neither donkey, servant, water, fire nor any safe means of dispatching manuscripts. In such circumstances I am cooking, not writing.

Chopin's health had in fact collapsed within days of their arrival, as he duly reported to Fontana.

> I've been as sick as a dog for the past two weeks. I caught a cold in spite of the heat, the roses, the oranges, palms and figs. The three most celebrated doctors on the island have been to see me. One sniffed at what I spat, the second tapped where I spat from, and the third sounded me and listened as I spat. The first said I was dead, the second that I am dying, and the third that I'm going to die. It was all I could do to stop them bleeding me or applying blisters and setons.

But he remained optimistic that a change of venue would bring about a change in his condition:

> In a few days I shall be living in the most beautiful surroundings in the world: sea, mountains,

> everything. Indeed, it's impossible to imagine anything more marvellous. I know I shall be alright there.

Two weeks later the travellers were ensconced in their new quarters at Valldemosa. It was, as Chopin described it:

> A queer place, situated between the cliffs and the sea, where in a cell with doors larger than any carriage-gateway in Paris you may imagine me with my hair unkempt, without white gloves, and as pale as ever. The cell is shaped like a large coffin, the enormous vaulting covered in dust, the window small. Close to my bed is an old, square, grubby box which I can scarcely use for writing on, with a leaden candlestick (a great luxury in these parts) and a little candle.

It wasn't what he'd imagined. He was not alright there. Nor did his work flourish.

> All this is having an absolutely wretched effect on the Préludes – God knows when I shall be able to finish them … Meanwhile my manuscripts sleep while I get no sleep at all. I can only go on coughing and await the spring, or something else.

And the weather was hardly calculated to improve his mood. Three days after Christmas, Sand reported to a friend:

> The rains here are such as one cannot imagine, frightening deluges, with the air so wet and heavy one cannot drag one's self about … I am all rheumatism … And our poor Chopin is quite feeble and suffering. For his sake I await impatiently the return of the beneficent season.

Now coughing badly, and covered in poultices, Chopin, for his part, continued to await the delivery of his piano, which had allegedly reached Palma more than a week earlier. Nor was its progress aided by Majorcan topography.

> I have travelled here from Palma many times, always with the same coachman but each time by a different route. This is a place where roads are made by torrents and repaired by landslides. You can't drive through this way today because it's ploughed up, tomorrow only mules can pass – and what vehicles they have!

Yet despite the frustrations, the poor state of his health and his generalized contempt for the local populace, his sense of enchantment returned:

> Tonight the moon is marvellous. Never have I seen it like this. Nature is kindly here, even if the people are scoundrels and thieves … You can have oranges for nothing, but they demand an enormous sum for a trouser button. All that, however, is a mere grain of sand when compared with the poetry which everything here exhales and the colouring of this most marvellous scenery, still unsullied by the eye of man. Few have ever disturbed the eagles which daily soar over our heads.

On the ground below, however, circumstances steadily worsened.

> The climate at Majorca was becoming more and more deadly to Chopin and I hastened to get away. Just to show you what the inhabitants are like - I had three leagues of rough roads to cover between my mountain retreat and Palma. We knew ten people who have carriages, horses, mules etc., but not one was willing to lend them. We had to make this journey in a hired cart without springs, and of course Chopin had a terrible attack of blood-spitting when we reached Palma. And the reason for this unfriendliness? It was because Chopin coughs, and whosoever coughs in Spain is declared consumptive; and he who is consumptive is held to be a plague carrier, a leper. They haven't stones,

> sticks and policemen enough to drive him out, for according to their ideas consumption is catching and the sufferer should therefore be slaughtered if possible, just as the insane were strangled two hundred years ago. What I say is the literal truth. We were treated like outcasts at Majorca – because of Chopin's cough and also because we didn't go to church. My children were stoned in the street … I should have to write ten volumes to give you an idea of the cowardice, deceit, selfishness, stupidity and spite of this stupid, thieving and bigoted race.

It was a relief to put the island behind them, but Chopin's condition was pitiful. By the time they reached the mainland, he was haemorrhaging badly and bringing up blood, as Sand vividly put it, 'by the bowlful'. On their arrival, he was examined by a doctor who stopped the bleeding and gave Chopin a sedative before pronouncing, to everyone's surprise, that Chopin was not in fact suffering from consumption, or from any other disease. His lungs were apparently sound, though the doctor diagnosed a 'weak chest', and the only prescription was rest. Sand's mood lifted at once, but as she indicated in a letter to a friend, the curse of Majorca followed them to the very shoreline of the mainland.

> Here we are at last in Barcelona, which seems a paradise by comparison. We came by steamer, however, in the company of a hundred pigs whose stench didn't exactly help to cure Chopin. But the poor boy would have died of melancholy at Majorca and I had to get him away at all costs. Heavens, if you knew him as I do now, you would be still fonder of him. He is an angel of gentleness, patience and kindness.

Chopin reciprocated, almost to the letter: writing to a friend some time later he remarks:

> If you could know her as I do today, you would love her still more.

And to another:

> My health is steadily improving – the blisters, diets, pills and baths and also the tireless nursing of my angel are putting me on my feet again – rather shaky feet … I have gone awfully thin and I look wretched, but I am now eating to gain strength. In addition to my eternal coughing you can imagine all the rage which those Spaniards put me into, as well as the other similarly pleasant experiences. I had to look on while she, continually harassed, nursed me (the less said about those doctors the better), made my bed, tidied my room, prepared hot drinks. She deprived herself of everything for me, while all the time she was receiving no letters and the children needed her constant attention in these unusual circumstances.

Add to this the fact that she was writing her books and we have evidence of an iron will and a love beyond passion.

Chopin's physical frailty and the distressing symptoms of his disease seem not to have affected Sand's pleasure in his company. They do seem, however (and not surprisingly), to have shifted the emphasis from the romantic and sexual to the maternal and vocational. Given Chopin's state of health and the constant proximity of Sand's children in relatively confined quarters, the circumstances were hardly conducive to the passionate sexuality which seems to have characterised their first month together. That Sand's love for him only grew during their hapless Majorcan winter seems clear in a letter written to a friend at the end of April:

> This Chopin is an angel; his kindness, tenderness and patience sometimes worry me, for I have the feeling that his whole being is too delicate, too exquisite and too perfect to exist long in our coarse and heavy earthly life. In Majorca, when sick unto death, he composed music full of the scent of Paradise; but I am so used to seeing him away in the skies that it doesn't seem to signify whether he is alive or dead. He doesn't really know on what planet he is living and has no precise notion of life as we others conceive and live it.

Perhaps not. But if Sand perceived the scent of Paradise in the music he composed that winter, then one can only conclude that her understanding of Chopin's music was deficient from the start.

[53] Music: Préludes, Op. 28

[54] For all his love and appreciation of Sand, Chopin's letters during this period give vent, though not for the first time, to a misanthropic streak strikingly at variance with his impeccable conduct in public, let alone Sand's characterisation of him as an angel. 'Bloody Germans!', 'rogues', 'swine', 'sharks', 'animals' … these are only a few of the bouquets strewn about his correspondence. In a single (and not long) letter of 12th March 1839 he refers to various of his friends, acquaintances and publishers as 'cheats', 'tricksters', 'swindlers', 'fools', 'imbeciles', 'Huns' and 'Jews' – the last being his most common term of abuse.

> I didn't expect such Jewish behaviour from Pleyel … And don't let Schlesinger take you in, like Pleyel ... This Pleyel, my God, who supposedly adores me! What scoundrels! … If we have to deal with Jews, let it at least be with orthodox ones … Schlesinger has swindled me all along, but it's best to go carefully with him, for this Jew would like to cut a figure in the world. If Pleyel makes the slightest difficulty, go to Schlesinger and tell him he can have the Ballade for France and Germany at a price of 800 … Jews will be Jews and Huns will be Huns - that's the truth of it, but what can one do? I'm forced to deal with them … The Préludes are already sold to Pleyel, so he can wipe the other end of his stomach with them if he pleases, but since they're all such a band of Jews, stop everything else till I get back.

To put such deeply unattractive behaviour in context, it must be said that, however repellent, the thoughtless, casual antisemitism evident in his correspondence was in no way peculiar to Chopin. It was common change amongst Poles of almost every class and political stripe. More revealing of Chopin's own character, and in some ways more disturbing, is his readiness to address the unsuspecting recipients of his abuse in terms of the sincerest friendship. Written at the same time as that was a letter to Pleyel himself.

> I am vexed, my dear friend, that Fontana has been troubling you with my affairs … I am writing him this very day to tell him not to bother you any more with this business. I wrote to you twice from Majorca and was grieved at receiving no reply. I learn from Fontana that you are still unwell, and that grieves me more than your silence … I expect to return to Paris when the fine weather comes …
>
> Au revoir, then, my dearest friend.
> Yours devotedly,
> F. Chopin

Chopin and Sand moved on from Barcelona to Marseilles, where they stayed, partly on medical advice, for the next three months. The wonder is that they could afford it. The ravages of their Majorcan winter had seriously hampered their creative activities, and their continued absence from Paris deprived Chopin of his principal income.

There's no doubting that their return to France marked the beginning of a new and important (in many ways the most important) chapter in Chopin's creative life. To the next few years would belong the majority of his finest works including the Sonatas, the F minor Fantasy, the late Nocturnes and numerous Mazurkas of prophetic originality.

55 Music: Mazurkas

56 The relative seclusion of Nohant, from the point of view of a gregarious Parisian, was a two-edged sword. And in their very different ways, Chopin and Sand were both gregarious, if often as a means of escape from themselves. As a friend remarked at the time:

> Chopin disliked being without company – a circumstance which he rarely allowed to arise. In the morning he liked to spend an hour by himself at his grand piano; but even when he practised – or how should I describe it? – when he stayed at home to play in the evenings, he needed to have at least one of his friends close at hand.

Sand, too, professed a dislike of solitude:

> I would rather play dominoes in a café than spend an hour of the afternoon alone. Alone! What horror!

Few writers, however, create in company, and Sand was no exception. While she reserved the afternoons for society and the mornings for sleep, she spent her nights in labour, writing for six or seven hours at a stretch and averaging a daily output of some 20 pages. Her use of ink and paper was as prodigious as her energy and concentration, and led to the production of 60 novels, several plays, numerous essays, and sundry other published works, numbering 104 in all. In addition, she wrote almost 20,000 letters, some exceeding 40 pages.

Chopin adopted a very different mode of life at Nohant. He would rise early, sometimes before Sand had gone to bed, work sporadically throughout the day, socialise in the evening when there were often guests, and retire early. As Sand put it at the time:

> We lead the same monotonous, quiet, gentle life. We dine out in the open, friends wander over, first one, then another, we smoke and talk, and in the evening, when they have gone, Chopin plays to me in the twilight, after which he goes to bed like a child, at the same time as Maurice and Solange.

Anyone doubting the congeniality of place and circumstance where Chopin's music was concerned need only look at the works which flowed from his pen during this first, idyllic summer: the B flat minor Sonata (except for the Funeral March which had been written two years before), the three Mazurkas, Op. 41, the G major Nocturne, Op. 37, and the Impromptu in F sharp major.

57 Music: Impromptu in F sharp

58 Sand has left us with a revealing picture of Chopin the creator at work:

> His music was spontaneous, miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without previous intimation of it. It came upon his piano sudden, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to hear it himself with the help of the instrument. But then began the most desperate labour that I have ever witnessed. It was a succession of efforts, hesitations, and moments of impatience to recapture certain details of the theme he could hear; what he had conceived as one piece, he analyzed too much in trying to write it down, and his dismay at his inability to rediscover it in what he thought was its original purity threw him into a kind of despair. He would lock himself up in his room for whole days, weeping, pacing back and forth, breaking his pens, repeating or changing one bar a hundred times, writing and erasing it as many times. He sometimes spent six weeks on one page, only in the end to write it exactly as he had sketched at the first draft.

With the fiasco of Majorca behind him, Chopin's health seemed to improve with every passing day. No fewer than three doctors had examined him and pronounced him free of consumption; his creature comforts were provided with unflagging devotion by a woman who loved him and understood the throes of artistic creation as well as anyone; surrounded by beautiful countryside under a cloudless sky, he composed and played without restrictions.

The pattern of Nohant summers was much the same from year to year. Guests would come and go, with no evident disruption of the creative routine already established. Among them, from the summer of 1842, was the great painter Delacroix, who savoured the experience.

> This is a delightful place and my hosts do everything in their power to make life agreeable. When we are not together for dinner, lunch, billiards or walks, one can read in one's rooms or sprawl on one's sofa. Every now and then there blows in through your window, opening onto the garden, a breath of the music of Chopin who is at work in his room, and it mingles with the song of the nightingales and the scent of the roses … I have endless conversations with Chopin, of whom I'm very fond and who is a man of rare distinction. I believe he is the truest artist I have ever met. I asked him one day what *logic* in music consisted of. He made me realise what harmony and counterpoint are, and how fugue is, as it were, pure logic in music. I thought how glad I would have been to learn all that. The fact is that true science is not what people ordinarily understand by that word; that is to say, something quite different from art, in the realm of knowledge. No; science thus envisaged and demonstrated by a man like Chopin is art himself. And on the other hand, art is not what the common herd imagine it to be – a sort of inspiration coming from I-know-not-where, something proceeding from chance and portraying merely the picturesque exterior of things. It is reason itself, adorned by genius but following a course determined and restrained by superior laws. Chopin told me that pupils usually learn about chords before they understand counterpoint, that is, the succession of notes which lead to chords.

In its outer aspect this summer was among the happiest of Chopin's adult life. His music, on the other hand, often seemed to tell a different story. None more so, perhaps, than the great Sonata which grew up, as it were, around the famous funeral march he'd written some years earlier. The work in general is a kind of apotheosis of turbulence, and it ends with a brief, fleeting finale which is quite unlike anything ever written, before or since. Indeed, these three pages (that's all there are) may well constitute the most enigmatic movement in the entire history of sonata form. As a self-contained Prélude, less than 90 seconds long, it would be astonishing enough; as the conclusion of a major virtuoso work of more than twenty minutes' duration, it simply takes the breath away. Its weirdness is timeless, its restlessness eternal. And with its famous, funereal companion it inadvertently heralded the last and darkest phase of Chopin's life.

59 Music: Sonata in B flat minor – Funeral March and finale

60 In the summer of 1839, there were pressing reasons to return to Paris. Beneficial though the country air and leisurely pace at Nohant may have been to his health, Chopin's financial position was doomed to worsen the longer he stayed away. Sand too, who'd shouldered the heaviest part of their financial burden, was increasingly hard-pressed, and there was still the education of her children to be settled. In Paris, Chopin quickly discovered not only that his liaison with Sand was well known but that its acknowledgement had done nothing to tarnish his own reputation, social or professional. Nor could he conceal his joy at returning to the hub of Parisian society. Throughout the early months of 1840, he and Sand worked tirelessly to regain the financial security ravaged by their Majorcan adventure. By the beginning of summer, their incomes had reached their former level and in June the pair decamped to Nohant, after an absence of some eighteen months. Their Parisian summer of the previous year was the only break in a pattern which characterised their lives for the next six years: the late autumn, winter and spring spent in Paris, the summer and early autumn at Nohant. In Paris, Chopin concentrated mainly on teaching, and very occasionally performing; at Nohant he gave his fullest attention to composition. It was there, in the next few years, that he composed many of his greatest works, none greater than the unique F minor Ballade which many people regard as the very pinnacle of his achievement. Well, it wasn't always so. It's one of the very few pieces of Chopin which were distinctly unpopular to begin with.

One thing that often baffled people was Chopin's approach to form. And you still hear it said that he couldn't handle large-scale forms, that he was basically a miniaturist. The point about Chopin's form is that it tends to be self-generating. It's the *result* rather than the *cause* of musical events. On the face of it, the F minor Ballade shouldn't work. It starts off sounding like a set of variations on a theme set out near the beginning, and then goes off and reaches a tremendous climax with entirely different thematic material. But fortunately we don't have to settle for the face of it. All we need is the music itself.

61 Music: Ballade No. 4 in F minor

62 On 21st February 1842, Chopin relented to widespread pressure and gave a public concert at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. It was another triumph, followed by what was to become the usual result of his public appearances: two weeks in bed, during which time he complained endlessly of exhaustion and sundry other maladies. And if Sand is to be believed, (and why not?), looking after him was no picnic.

> Gentle, cheerful and charming, Chopin could bring his intimates to despair when he was ill. There was no nobler, more delicate nor disinterested soul, there was no man more loyal and faithful in daily relationships. No one could surpass him in wit and gaiety; no-one had a fuller or deeper understanding of his art. But unfortunately no one ever had a temperament so uneven, an imagination more deranged and gloomy, a sensitivity so easily wounded, and emotional demands so impossible to satisfy. Nothing of this was his fault. It was all the fault of his illness.

But Sand herself was curiously ambivalent about the nature of his illness, sometimes acknowledging it as all too real, sometimes convincing herself that it was all in his head. Well, he *was* ill – medical hindsight leaves no doubt on that score – but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t also something of a hypochondriac. There’s no question that he was becoming increasingly difficult, but this may well have had more to do with Sand herself, and in particular her increasing maternalism, than with any physical ailments on his part. It’s often been suggested that Sand’s caretaking instincts psychologically unmanned Chopin, but his music tells a different story. The epic B minor Sonata, the A flat Polonaise, the Barcarolle and the Polonaise-Fantasy are hardly the products of an emotional eunuch. And whatever else may be said or thought of her, the fact is that it was Sand more than anyone else who created, and for a long time maintained, the environment in which his genius could flourish. The lighter Chopin we’d have had anyway, of course, and not only that. He was a great composer before he ever met George Sand. But it was she, almost single-handedly, who made possible a journey of discovery which might never have happened if he'd become a prisoner of fashion. And that was a very real danger. She gave him not only devoted companionship but a sense of family which he thought he'd lost. In that context he could afford the courage to fail, or at least the courage to risk failure. But there's no denying that the cost was high and their relationship itself was hardly a model of health. Quite early on, she began referring to him, quite openly, as 'the little one', 'the boy', 'little Chip-Chip' and so on. As the years wore on he became 'the poor child', and later, even 'my son'. Tell that to the psychiatrist.

Whatever the explanation, the apparent removal of sex from their relations had some disconcerting repercussions. From his early thirties onwards, Chopin's previously immaculate behaviour gave way to startling eruptions of temper and impatience, and Sand wasn't by any means the only victim. Increasingly, his students too were affected. One of these was a young Polish girl, Zofia Rozengardt, who'd travelled from Warsaw to Paris expressly to study with him.

> You cannot imagine a person who can be colder and more indifferent to everything around him. There is a strange mixture in his character: vain and proud, loving luxury and yet uninterested and incapable of sacrificing the smallest part of his own will or caprice for all the luxury in the world. He is polite to excess, and yet there is so much irony, so much spite hidden inside it. Woe betide the person who allows himself to be taken in. He has an extraordinarily keen eye, and he will catch the smallest absurdity and mock it wonderfully. He is heavily endowed with wit and common sense, but then he often has wild, unpleasant moments when he is evil and angry, when he breaks chairs and stamps his feet. He can be as petulant as a spoiled child, bullying his pupils and being very cold with his friends. Those are usually days of suffering, physical exhaustion or quarrels with Madame Sand .

And these were becoming both more frequent and more public. Yet even here there was a curious element of self-control and calculation. The fact is that the well-born ladies of Parisian society – the main source of his income, remember – never saw this side of him at all. But it would be wrong to exaggerate any of this. These were still exceptional lapses, and in many respects these years were amongst the happiest Chopin knew. And they bore some magnificent artistic fruits. It's perfectly true that circumstance and music don't always add up, but it seems safe to assume that the great B minor Sonata of 1844 gives a broadly accurate picture of Chopin's state of mind at the time. In its tremendous self-assurance and its wealth of melodic invention, it gives us Chopin not only at his most masterful but at his most spiritually healthy. Never was he less deserving of John Field's contemptuous quip that he was 'a sickroom talent'. The fact is that no other composer of the time was writing music of more natural and unprotesting virility.

63 Music: Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58 – Finale

64 In many ways, the B minor Sonata marked the high point of Chopin's spiritual health. But his physical health now began to decline dramatically, and this inevitably affected his state of mind. In the whole of the following year he managed to produce a mere three Mazurkas, and that was all. The summer brought no relief. Nohant seemed to have lost its charm for him, and he was engulfed by an enervating sense of boredom from which he did nothing to escape. Sand, for her part, increasingly avoided him, staying in her room and writing for longer and longer periods. Relations between them deteriorated almost by the day, and memories of past happiness were often eclipsed.

> I have never had, and shall never have, any peace with him … The day before yesterday he spent the entire day without speaking a word to a soul. Was he ill? Has someone annoyed him? Have I said anything to upset him? I shall never know, no more than a million other similar things which he doesn't know himself … But I must not let him think he is the master here – he would be all the more touchy in the future.

Far from feeling masterful, Chopin was suspended in a kind of limbo, and it was clear to everyone except Sand that he was growing progressively weaker. Sand herself stubbornly refused to acknowledge that he really was seriously ill.

By the end of June it was clear that the heat of the summer would not be confined to the weather. For some time there'd been increasing tension between Chopin and Sand's son Maurice. It now erupted into open warfare. Sand, for her part, sided with Maurice. Her patience with Chopin was fast running out.

> I quite lost my temper, which finally gave me the courage to tell him a few home truths, and to threaten to get sick of him. Since then he has been sensible, and you know how sweet, excellent and admirable he is when he is not mad.

Less than a week before this outburst, Sand had begun the serial publication of her latest novel, *Lucrezia Floriani*. The story is quite obviously based on her relationship with Chopin. Unsurprisingly, Sand casts herself as the heroine – invariably noble, tender and self-sacrificing. Chopin (thinly disguised as a Polish prince) emerges as helpless, jealous, self-pitying, demanding – and in the end the cause of the heroine's undoing.

Needless to say, the book was a gossip's dream come true. Those who knew the couple well were in no doubt about its nature. Yet in that summer of 1846, Chopin sat demure and attentive while Sand read the book aloud to the assembled company, and showed not the slightest sign of recognition or discomfort. Delacroix was appalled:

> I was frankly in agony during the reading … The victim and the executioner amazed me equally. Madame Sand seemed completely at ease, and Chopin did not stop making admiring comments about the story.

Since it seems inconceivable that neither of them recognised what the outside world could see at a glance, it's possible that Chopin, whose talents as an actor had been praised by actors, was defending his corner by deliberately spiking her guns – demonstrating in company that her attempt at character assassination had missed its target. But obviously that's something we'll never know.

In quantity, Chopin's music had now slowed to a trickle, but its quality only grew richer. The next year saw of one of the crowning glories of his entire creative life. In character, nature and quality, the F sharp major Barcarolle stands apart from most of Chopin's other work. Even in its title, it seems to invite a programmatic interpretation – something he was normally at pains to avoid. A barcarolle is a boating song, associated with Venetian gondoliers, and Chopin draws here on actual gondolier's songs – again, a very un-Chopinesque thing to do. And in the work's very opening gesture one can easily imagine the push of the gondolier's pole and the swish of the water against the bows as the boat moves off.

65 Music: Barcarolle, Op. 60

The F sharp major Barcarolle, which many musicians regard as Chopin's most perfect work.

66 The circumstances of his life, by contrast, were anything but perfect. That summer at Nohant, unlike the previous one, he persisted in trying to compose, but he now tired very quickly and found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. And the weather didn't help. No-one could remember a hotter or more humid summer. It sapped Chopin's energy still more, but he could no longer count on Sand for sympathy and support. Unlike the caretaking 'angel' of that terrible winter in Majorca, she now openly mocked him.

> Chopin is amazed to find himself sweating. He's really upset by it and complains that however much he washes, he still *stinks*! We laugh to the point of tears to see this *ethereal* creature refusing to sweat like everyone else – but don't ever mention it or he'll become quite furious. If the world were to know that he *sweats*, he could scarcely go on living. He only reeks of Eau de Cologne, but we go on telling him that he stinks like Bonnin the carpenter, and he goes scurrying back to his room, as though pursued by his own *smell*!

That autumn, for the first time, Chopin returned to Paris alone, leaving behind him a simmering cauldron of family tensions which was soon to gather all the force of a Greek tragedy, and the complexity of a Shakespearean one. Precipitated by the marriage of Sand's daughter Solange to the dissolute sculptor Auguste Clésinger, and fuelled by long-pent-up emotions, it led to a lethal soufflé of jealousies, malicious intrigues, lies and physical violence. As Sand reported to a friend in Paris:

> There has nearly been murder here. My son-in-law took a hammer and would perhaps have killed Maurice if I hadn't thrown myself between them, punching the former in the face and reciving from him a blow in the chest. If the curé who was there, and some friends and a servant hadn't intervened by main force, Maurice, armed with a pistol, would have shot him there and then. And there stood Solange, stirring the flames with icy ferocity, after having caused these dreadful outrages by her tales, lies and incredibly filthy stories … This pair of devils left yesterday. I never want to see them again, and they will never set foot in this house … I had to give Chopin a partial account of all this; I was afraid he might arrive in the midst of a catastrophe and die of grief and shock. Don't tell him the worst of what happened; we must hide it from him if at all possible. The Clésingers will probably, in their crazy and impudent way, force me to defend Maurice, Augustine and myself against the atrocious slanders they are spreading.

Which indeed they did. Chopin, who heard the story only from Solange, sided with her and wrote a letter to Sand, the effect of which was catastrophic. Her reply hasn't survived, but a deeply distressed Chopin showed it to Delacroix, who shared his reaction.

> One has to admit that it is horrible. Cruel passions and long pent-up impatience erupt in it, and by a contrast which would be amusing if it did not touch on so tragic a subject, the author often takes over from the woman, and launches into tirades which look as though they were taken straight from a novel or a philosophical homily.

But Chopin had more immediate problems to attend to. As he reported to his family:

> My friends came in one morning recently and said that I must give a concert; and that I should have nothing to worry about, merely sit down and play. For a week now all the tickets have been sold even though they cost 20 francs. The public are putting their names down for a second concert which I have no intention of giving. The Court has ordered 40 tickets and the papers had merely to mention that I *might* give a concert for people to start writing to my publisher from Brest and Nantes to reserve seats. This eager rush surprises me and I must begin practising for it today, if only for conscience's sake, for I really feel that I now play worse than ever.

It was now six years since his last concert, and absence hadn't made the heart grow fonder. It had only increased his fear and hatred of public performance – but in the circumstances, he had little choice. His ever more precarious health was having a disastrous effect on his teaching practice and he was in serious need of money. The concert, as ever, was a triumph and as usual, there were immediate requests for another, but this time it was politics, not exhaustion, that determined the answer.

In the winter of 1848, the streets of Paris resounded once again to the sound of revolution. Chopin didn't see the uprising himself – he was still bedridden in the aftermath of his concert – but he heard the news, and without even looking out of the window he could tell that the scene had changed. As he reported to his family back in Poland:

> Paris is quiet now, with the quiet of fear. Everyone has rallied to the cause of order. Everyone has joined the National Guard. The shops are open – but there are no customers. Foreigners, passports in hand, are waiting for the damage to the railways to be repaired. Clubs are beginning to be formed. But I should never stop if I tried to tell you what's going on here.

In fact, similar things were going on all over Europe. In France, they resulted in the overthrow of the king – and tumbling in his wake went that glittering and fashionable Paris which almost 20 years earlier had welcomed Chopin into its midst and celebrated him as one of the brightest jewels in its crown. Many of the streets were torn up and barricaded, communications and supplies were badly disrupted and the cost of living went through the roof. Many of the capital's wealthier citizens, including most of Chopin's pupils, had either taken refuge in the country or had left France altogether.

One consequence which he may not have anticipated was the immediate return to Paris of George Sand, eager as ever to support the socialist cause. For the first time since their break-up, the possibility arose that they might accidentally meet. It happened remarkably quickly. On Sunday 5th March he reported to Solange, who had now given birth:

> I went to see Mme Marliani yesterday, and as I was coming out I ran into your mother at the vestibule door. I said good-day to her and my next words were to ask whether she had heard from you lately. 'A week ago,' she replied. 'No news yesterday or the day before?' – 'No' – 'Then allow me to inform you that you are a grandmother. Solange has a little girl, and I am very glad to to be the first to give you

> the news.' She asked how I was. I said I was well, and then I called for the concierge to open the door. I raised my hat, turned away from her and walked back home.

And that was the end. He never saw her again.

As he considered his circumstances, the time seemed right to accept a long-proffered invitation from one of his pupils to visit Britain.

Jane Stirling was a well-to-do Scottish girl who idolised her teacher and was almost certainly in love with him. With her sister Mrs Erskine, she proposed to Chopin that he should now travel with them to London, where he could have all the students he wanted, a guaranteed welcome into the ranks of English high society, and potentially limitless opportunities to give and to attend concerts. Already there were Berlioz, Liszt, Kalkbrenner, Thalberg and the famous Swedish soprano Jenny Lind. There, too, he could meet such non-musical luminaries as Dickens, Carlyle and Emerson, and play before the young Queen Victoria, reputedly an avid music lover. Even if he'd wanted to, Chopin was in no position to refuse. He arrived in London on the evening of April 20th and was deeply touched by the arrangements that had been made for him.

> My good Mrs Erskine and her sister have thought of everything, even of my special drinking chocolate, and not merely of rooms. I shall be changing these, however, for better ones which have just become available in their street. I've only just noticed that this paper I'm writing on has my monogram, and I've met with many similar delicate attentions.

After a single night's sleep, he was then cast into the maelstrom of English high society with an enthusiasm and disregard for his health that left him more exhausted than ever. All in all, he was not enjoying himself. Days later, he lamented:

> I am wasting my time. I cannot get up before eight. My Italian valet, who thinks only of himself, wastes the first part of the morning for me, and after ten begin all sorts of tribulations which don't bring in any money … It's only the day after tomorrow that the Duchess of Sutherland is to present me to the Queen. If the Queen and Prince Albert are pleased with me – they already know about me – all will be well: I shall be starting from the top!

The occasion came and went. That evening the Queen wrote in her diary:

> There was some pretty music, good Lablache, Mario and Tamburini singing, and some pianists playing.

So much for starting at the top. And well down the social ladder, Utopia still looked a long way off:

> At last I have good lodgings; but no sooner have I settled in than my landlord now wants to make me pay twice as much, or else accept another room (I'm already paying 26 guineas a month). It's true that I have a large and splendid drawing-room and can give my lessons there, but so far I have only five pupils. I don't know what I shall do. In truth, my nerves are all to pieces: I am depressed by a stupid feeling of melancholy, and with all my resignation I am deeply worried and don't know what to do with myself.

And London didn't offer much in the way of compensation. Although a good many of Chopin's works had been both published and performed in England, they hadn't achieved anything like the popularity they enjoyed in France and Germany. The leading critic of London's *The Musical World* spoke for all too many when he declared that

> The entire works of Chopin present a motley surface of ranting hyperbole and excruciating cacophony!

No amount of success hardens an artist against remarks like that. But if the critics were out with their crossbows, the streets at least were reasonably safe. The same could hardly be said, at that point anyway, of the streets in Paris. On balance, Chopin was better off where he was.

On 23rd June, under mounting financial pressure, he gave his first English concert, at the home of a Mrs Sartoris, the wife of a leading industrialist. The occasion was very much a high society 'do', whose ticket holders included William Makepeace Thackeray, Jenny Lind and the highly esteemed Mrs Jane Carlyle, whose admiration for Chopin knew no bounds.

> I prefer Chopin's music to that of all others, for it is not a specimen of art offered to the general admiration, which is the effect that most music has upon me. It is rather the reflection of part of his soul, and a fragment of his life lavished on those who have ears to hear and a heart to understand. I think that each of his compositions must have taken away from the number of days allotted to him.

67 Music: Prélude in F sharp, Op. 28, No. 8

68 With the end of the social 'season' in July, the fashionable of London dispersed variously into the countryside, many of them headed for Scotland. Among them were the sisters Stirling and Erskine, who insisted on taking Chopin with them. On August 6th he was installed at Calder House, near Edinburgh, and despite his mood, he was impressed.

> It is an old manor house surrounded by a vast park with hundred-year-old trees. One sees nothing but lawns, trees, mountains and sky. The walls are eight feet thick; galleries everywhere and dark corridors with countless portraits of ancestors, of all different colours and with various costumes – some in kilts, some in armour, everything to feed the imagination. The room I occupy has the most splendid view imaginable.

In Scotland, the hospitality and dedication of his ‘dear Scottish ladies’, as he called them, reached new heights.

> I no sooner have time to wish for something than it is ready to hand - they even bring me the Paris newspapers every day. I have quiet, peace and comfort … My room is well away from the others, so that I can play and do as I please. I am completely free; for the chief consideration with these people is that a guest should not be restricted in any way. In my room I found a Broadwood, and in the drawing-room there is a Pleyel which Miss Stirling brought with her. Country house life here is most pleasant. The houses are elegantly fitted up: libraries, horses, carriages to order, plenty of servants etc. Although everyone in high society, especially the ladies, speak French, the general conversation is in English, and then I regret that I can’t follow it; but I have neither the time nor the desire to learn the language. Anyhow, I understand everyday conversation. I don’t allow myself to be cheated [did anyone try?] and I shouldn’t starve to death, but that is not enough.

The fact is that Chopin was now largely beyond the reach of those who were most eager to help him.

> It’s horrible. I am unwell and depressed, and my hosts simply weary me with their excessive attentions. I can neither breathe nor work. Although I am surrounded by people, I feel alone, alone, alone. All those with whom I was in most intimate harmony have died or left me. All that remains to me is a long nose and a fourth finger out of practice. I can feel neither grief nor joy – my emotions are completely exhausted – I am just vegetating and waiting for it all to end quickly. I haven’t a decent musical idea in my head – I am out of my rut – like a donkey at a fancy-dress ball – a violin E string on a double-bass – amazed, bewildered, as drowsy as if I were listening to Baudiot playing. I am vegetating, patiently waiting for the winter, dreaming now of home, now of Rome. I can scarcely breathe. I am just about ready to give up the ghost.

On a visit to Edinburgh, in September, he escaped briefly from his Scottish hosts and visited a Polish family, who'd recently settled nearby. The opportunity to speak and hear his own language again filled him with a kind of bitter-sweet joy, but it was short-lived. As soon as he left his new-found Polish friends, his spirits sank lower than ever.

> Nowadays I am not fit for anything during the whole morning, until two o'clock (lunch) – and after that, when I have dressed, everything irritates me and I go on gasping until dinner-time. Dinner over, I have to remain at the table with the menfolk, watching them talk and listening to them drinking. Bored to death (thinking of quite different things from them, in spite of all their politeness and explanatory remarks in French around the table), I must call up all my strength of mind, for they are by that time curious to hear me. Afterwards my good Daniel carries me upstairs to my bedroom, helps me to undress, puts me to bed, leaves a candle, and then I am free to gasp and dream until morning, when it starts all over again … In truth, I feel the world slipping from me, I forget things. I have no strength. Sometimes I seem to recover a little, but then I sink back lower still.

By now the summer was over. The London rich had returned to the capital, Paris was in a state of semi-chaos, while Chopin remained in Scotland, counting the minutes between periods of sleep, dreading the onset of winter, and unable to make any but the most immediately practical decisions. Beyond the aimless social engagements in his diary, his life had lost any sign of structure or purpose.

On the last day of October, Chopin finally returned to London, and for three weeks he never left his room. Despite the increasingly critical state of his health, though, he did struggle out once, to play at a charity ball for Polish refugees. But he soon wished he hadn't.

> As soon as I had finished I came home, but could not sleep all night. I had an awful headache, in addition to my cough and choking spasms. I had already been ill for two and a half weeks … I really

> have no heart for anything. Everything is now unbearable for me. Why doesn't God just finish me off straight away, instead of killing me by inches with this fever of indecision?

By the third week in November Chopin had decided to return to Paris before the winter imprisoned him in London. He left England early in the afternoon of 23rd November 1848, though he had to be helped onto the train and into his seat, and together they reached Paris, as planned, at noon the next day

But it was a Paris much changed. Many aristocratic families who, like him, had fled the uprisings of the spring, were unready to return. Among them, of course, were many of his pupils – the principal source of his income. He was too weak to compose, let alone to contemplate performing, so he was more than ever dependent on teaching if he himself was to escape the poverty which he now saw all around him. His prospects had never looked so bleak.

Though he put a brave face on it, his situation grew more critical by the day. His teaching soon dwindled to practically nothing, and the will to compose seems to have left him altogether. He now faced living entirely on the charity of his many well-to-do friends, and for a man of his pride this was a bitter pill to swallow. That summer some influential Polish friends arranged with the Russian authorities for his sister Ludwika and her family to obtain passports for Paris. No-one by this time was in any doubt as to the urgency of the mission. On the 8th of August, Ludwika, accompanied by her husband and daughter, arrived to nurse her brother through his final decline. Rumours of Chopin's imminent death spread rapidly, and a long sequence of friends prepared to take their leave of him. Among them was the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid.

> I found him dressed, but reclining on his bed, with swollen legs; this could be perceived at once, although he wore stockings and shoes. The artist's sister was sitting next to him, strangely resembling him in profile … He was in the shadow of the deep bed with curtains, leaning on his pillows and wrapped in a shawl, and he was very beautiful, and as always there was something perfect, something

> classical, in his most casual gestures … In a voice broken by his coughing and choking, he began to reproach me for not having come to him for such a long time. After that he spoke jokingly and wanted to tease me about my mystical tendencies, and since it gave him pleasure, I let him do it. He had fits of coughing, and then the moment came when he had to be alone. I said farewell to him, and he, pressing my hand, threw his hair back from his forehead, and said 'I am going …', and then began to cough. Upon hearing this I kissed him on the arm and, knowing that he was pleased when sharply contradicted, I said, in a tone that one uses with a strong and courageous person, 'You have been going, in this way, every year, and yet, thank God, we still find you alive!'

By the end of September, his condition had rapidly declined. On the evening of 12th October his doctor, fearing that Chopin wouldn't last the night, summoned a priest to administer the final sacraments. But Chopin didn't die as expected. The next day he was often in agony and was slipping in and out of consciousness. For four more days he hung on, suffering bouts of extreme pain with a strength and courage both moving and terrible to those who witnessed it. As one friend wrote, 'I have never in my life seen such a tenacious vitality.'

> The whole evening of the 16th was spent reciting litanies; we gave the responses, but Chopin remained silent. Only by his strained breathing could one tell that he was still alive. That evening two doctors examined him. One of them took a candle, and holding it before Chopin's face, which had become quite dark with suffocation, remarked to us that his senses had ceased to function. But when he asked Chopin whether he was still in pain, we quite distinctly heard the answer: 'No more.' These were the last words heard from his lips.

At around two o'clock in the morning on the 17th October 1849, Chopin died He was 39 years old. At his own request, his heart was cut out and sent in an urn to Warsaw, where it rests to this day in the church of the Holy Cross.

When the funeral took place three days later, more than 3,000 people crowded into the church while many hundreds more gathered silently in the streets outside. One year later, to the day, a Chopin monument, carved by Clésinger, was unveiled at the burial place, and a handful of Polish earth, brought to Paris expressly for the purpose, was sprinkled on Chopin's grave. It made a fitting end to the public mourning for Poland's greatest composer, but it left unanswered a question which can never be conclusively resolved. Beyond any doubt, Chopin's Polishness played a central role in his life and music. Of all his works, at least half are deliberately Polish in orientation (polonaises, mazurkas, krakowiaks and so on) and many of the rest are fairly riddled with Polish characteristics. Rhythms, certain turns of melody – certain types of harmony, whose roots lie deep in the Polish folk tradition. Apart from its intrinsic, its purely musical quality, his work takes on an added poignancy if you consider that much of it is the music of an exile. But is it? The fact is that Chopin *could* long since have gone back to Poland, without any danger of political reprisals (he'd never been political in the first place), but he chose not to. He never even visited, nor, as far as we know, did he ever even plan to visit it. The term 'self-imposed exile' is really a contradiction in terms. The fact is that Chopin was a citizen of the world, and his music retains its popularity not because it's Polish, but because it's universal. The most famous of all his specifically Polish works – the great A flat major Polonaise – is not about Polish nationalism but about nationalism itself, more to the point, about community, in its widest sense – about identity. It's not about Polish heroism, it's about heroism. Chopin's music is all but universally popular because it resonates with experience that's universally understood. It's not just about him, it's about us. When all is said and done, it's about life. About life – and the courage of living it.

69 Music: Polonaise in A flat, Op. 53

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