

A Fateful Journey

It is a common wisdom that the unexpected experiences encountered during travel can change our lives. This is especially true if that travel occurs at a rather early age and if, most importantly, one is open to new experiences and perspectives. Frédéric Chopin, then an emerging twenty-one-year-old Polish musical genius, considered searching somewhere else for an even more auspicious future than what appeared to be available to him in Warsaw. His quest would begin in the fall of 1830 with an eleven-month journey that would ultimately lead him to confronting a new reality, one that would change his life forever.

As an impressionable teenager growing up in Warsaw in the late 1820's, Chopin began to be bombarded by unsolicited advice from his friends, family, and teachers. Their truehearted recommendations uniformly attempted to persuade the aspiring young pianist and promising composer that if he were to fulfill his ultimate potential and find his true fame, he would need to pursue his future elsewhere in the world. Consistently, the major musical centers of Vienna, Paris, and London were mentioned as prime candidates for a more successful launch of his professional career. Warsaw was no cultural backwater, but it was just too small.

Frédéric remained terribly indecisive, writing as late as October 3rd, 1830, in a letter to a close friend, "...where circumstances will carry me, I know not." Obviously, he must have had difficulty focusing his full attention on some vague future in another country when his present life was already filled with the eventful compositional activity of that past year. Together with his continuing infatuation with the beautiful young singer, Konstancja Gladkowska, these intense musical activities must have contributed to his paying scant attention to the increasingly disturbing political situation in his own country. Only months later, this inadvertent oversight would return to haunt him.

In 1830 Poland was facing a grave crisis. The Russian occupation of Poland had begun decades earlier, yet had become so dreadfully oppressive by that time that a widespread clandestine Polish movement was slowly and methodologically preparing for an attempt to overthrow it. The armed struggle of the November Uprising of 1830 would last for an entire year and its eventual tragic fate would have a major influence on our young musical prodigy.

Unaware of what was to come later in that month of November, somewhat impulsively, Chopin agreed to leave Poland. Mere weeks after he first performed his newly-penned *Concerto in E minor* at the National Theater in Warsaw, Frédéric decided it was time to move on to Vienna. At the last minute, his family, friends, and his music teacher, Józef Elsner, prepared for him an emotionally-charged farewell party at which they serenaded him and furnished him with a small urn containing Polish soil. Few of them realized the next weeks would herald the start of the fateful November Uprising. No one, especially Frédéric, could possibly imagine that he would never see his homeland again.

Arriving in Vienna a month later with high expectations for success, Chopin quickly immersed himself in the city's active musical life. Despite some initial success and being warmly befriended by many local Polish families, he gradually began to feel dejected and increasingly isolated. Especially difficult for him to accept was that for the first time in his life he was cut off from both his family and closest friends. Although he attempted to keep up with the news about the travails of the Polish resistance, the news was often incomplete and sketchy, a perplexing predicament that only added to his mounting worries. Chopin had always depended on his close-knit family and his dear friends for their continuous support and guidance. In Vienna he was alone, rudderless, and viewed by most as an outsider. To a close friend he wrote, "The people here are not my kind: good people, but good out of habit..." To top it off, his own beloved country was at war.

Also of distress to Chopin was his growing perception that his musical style never quite achieved a close accord with the firmly established musical traditions in this city of the old masters - Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Consequently, as the months went by, rather than giving more public performances, he instead spent more of his time composing. In July 1831, disappointed by his rather lackluster eight-month stay in Vienna and also concerned about a rapidly-spreading epidemic of cholera reported to be then sweeping through the city, Chopin decided to move on to Paris. He desperately hoped his style of playing and his unique compositions might garner greater favor in the City of Light.

Unhurriedly traveling through the cities of Linz, Salzburg, and Munich, Chopin arrived in Stuttgart at the beginning of September in 1831. Within a few days of his arrival he suddenly would learn of the brutal crushing of the Polish resistance movement in Warsaw by the greatly feared General Paskevich of the Russian Army. Frédéric was overwhelmed with the shock of this unexpected information. He could not imagine how his family and friends could possibly have survived the carnage. Chopin felt certain his parents and his sisters had been killed. His immediate reaction included enormous guilt and shame for pursuing his own essentially selfish plans for a thus far unsustainable musical career, and for abruptly leaving his homeland during its crisis. Simultaneously, he was consumed with rage and overcome with feelings of inadequacy. He would write in his diary, "I sit here idle, and I sit here with my hands bare, sometimes just groaning, grieving at the piano, in despair." He seriously questioned his very existence. All his plans for a bright future had thus far come to nothing.

During that same grief-stricken September night, Chopin sketched out an explosive piece that would become the 12th and last of his *Opus 10 Études*. He had been working on these pieces for months, but the terrifying news of that day led him to create an enormously powerful work that crowned these phenomenal *Études* and one that soon would become popularly known as the "Revolutionary *Étude*." Probably borrowing the key of C minor from Beethoven for its prevailing mood of apprehension and foreboding, Chopin composed a cohesive and stirring work of tremendous power and wild revolutionary fervor. He would also manage to record a prescient affirmation in his diary over the course of that long and emotionally charged night: "I will try to heal the pain of the present with the memories of the past." For the rest of his life, his

marvelous compositions would do just that, providing solace and support to his countrymen, conjuring up thrilling visions of a free Poland, and creating nostalgic reminiscences of the music of the peaceful rural Polish countryside he loved so much. Music would become the willing translator of his emotions, enabling him to communicate his feelings to an ever-expanding audience.

Finally arriving in Paris at the beginning of October in 1831, Chopin was not the same individual. He had changed from a somewhat naïve youth to a wiser more mature artist. His pilgrimage from Warsaw to Paris had lasted nearly a year. Having experienced a less-than-glowing success in Vienna and then undergoing the shock of his life in Stuttgart, he had been transformed. As a consequence, he had acquired a greater inspiration for his craft and also an elevated level of artistic purpose. This eleven-month fateful journey, during which he experienced both disillusionment and despair, had only reinforced his belief that his Art was important, not only to himself, but also to his country and to those he loved.

Chopin would not perform the *Revolutionary Étude* in public until late in 1832, when he was invited to an exclusively private concert in Paris. Together with his newly-acquired friends - a twenty-three-year-old Franz Liszt and a forty-year-old Rossini - he was asked to perform at a Christmas concert in the palatial home of a wealthy Austrian couple. Fittingly, he presented this amazing work to a new and receptive audience, perhaps thinking about how it might reflect the struggles he had to overcome to attain this lofty spot at the highest cultural circle in the musical mecca of the world.

(A few months ago, I had the great pleasure of hearing this soul-stirring piece performed by John Gade, a talented twenty-two-year-old pianist, in that same beautifully appointed room where a twenty-two-year-old Frédéric Chopin had performed it 185 years earlier. It was truly a breathtaking experience!)

Steven Lagerberg April 2018