

Chopin's Pianos

From the delicate instrument Bartolomeo Cristofori invented at the beginning of the eighteenth century to the massive pianos of today, the piano has sustained many evolutionary changes, perhaps none greater than those introduced during Frédéric Chopin's lifetime. The pianos Chopin played and that he used to pour out the secrets of his soul were very different instruments from modern pianos. For those long accustomed to hearing Chopin's works being performed on a Steinway or a Yamaha concert grand it can be a delightful surprise to listen to those same works performed on ancient instruments from his own time. In fact, to "rehear" his music suddenly filled with a panoply of unique sounds, articulations, and lots of subtle harmonics, is truly a revelatory experience. It certainly was for me when I recently attended the *1st International Chopin Competition on Period Instruments* in Warsaw. Chopin's works performed on these antique machines display an even more extensive palette of color and richness, with a depth of shading largely unattainable with the rather homogenized sound of contemporary pianos.

The first piano the young Chopin played is said to have been a vertically strung upright, called a "giraffe," with its wires strung in such a way as to cause those strings not struck to vibrate sympathetically in conformity with their respective overtones. Listening to the myriad of harmonic tones emanating from this instrument, with its soundboard mere inches from his impressionable ears, might have imbued this talented child with a lifelong admiration for those pianos capable of producing that similar quality of sound. Although in his first years in Warsaw Chopin played on a variety of instruments, he often chose the pantaleon, an unusual instrument resembling a large dulcimer. Without possessing dampers, it too gave a rich and resonating sound, quite novel at the time. However, the pantaleon lacked the articulation possible with the later Viennese pianos.

The early nineteenth century was a period of intense ferment in piano building and Chopin was always keen to try out the latest instruments. He was especially taken by the Graf piano, first manufactured in 1809 by an Austrian-German former cabinetmaker. Graf pianos were known for their delicate tone, and some of them, especially those with a second soundboard floating above the strings, produced a more mellow, blended voicing. With such instruments the young composer greatly enjoyed displaying the *style brillant*, so typical of his early works. However well suited to Chopin's delicately nuanced touch, these pianos sometimes failed to impress his audiences, as their faint sounds and subdued bass chords were either easily drowned out by any orchestral accompaniment or insufficient in volume to extend to the far reaches of a large concert hall.

It was not until Chopin arrived in Paris in 1831 that he would be exposed to the instrument that would quickly become his favorite - the Pleyel piano. Founded by Ignace

Pleyel in 1807, *Pleyel et Cie* (Pleyel and Company), had rapidly become a successful piano manufacturing firm, and during the 1820's had slowly shifted the center of piano excellence from Austria to France. Its well-designed and sturdy pianos became the preferred choice for not only Chopin, but eventually would also be selected by Saint-Saens, Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky. With its metal frame allowing for greater expression and its key mechanism flawlessly able to produce wonderfully light tones, the Pleyel satisfied Chopin's tastes perfectly. Obviously, this instrument became the favorite of many, pianists and listeners alike.

Among the numerous fine antique instruments available to the contestants at the Period Instrument Competition, a restored 1842 Pleyel quickly became their preferred piano. Having success on this fine instrument, however, was by no means guaranteed. Playing one of these early pianos is a very different experience from performing on a modern instrument. An old Pleyel is far less forgiving than a modern Steinway, and playing it requires a different technique. Fingers need to be positioned in a more vertically arched manner to produce the best sound and the pedaling needs to compensate for the fact that the strings of these old instruments simply do not possess the sustaining power of newer pianos. And to top it off, these old instruments come with a built in volume ceiling. Banging on them more forcefully does not result in a louder sound; it merely creates an unpleasantly loud dissonance. The learning curve for playing these period instruments is steep.

As he aged and illness progressively deprived him of strength and stamina, Chopin would comment that he at times preferred performing on the most modern pianos of his era, namely the Erard or the Broadwood. These pianos would provide a cover for his frailty by allowing him to express himself with a larger sound with far less effort. Yet whenever he felt stronger or was not performing in public he always returned to his preferred piano, the Pleyel.

Listening to the works of Chopin played on the pianos of his day may well be an acquired taste. Not everyone can easily adjust to the musical demands these instruments place upon their audience. The size and acoustics of the rooms in which they are to be played need to be chosen very carefully as these instruments do not lend themselves to performances in the customary setting of a large concert hall. Ideally, they should be played in an intimate space. Finally, the pianists who choose to play one of these old instruments will need to develop the expertise to demonstrate the full range of its capabilities.

Unfortunately, most of those living in North America will likely never have the opportunity to hear these ancient instruments played at a live concert, simply because these pianos are unavailable in their countries. Additionally, many of these instruments, now largely based in Europe, were made with ivory, a material now largely banned from international shipping. Most all of these pianos in the United States and Canada are

privately owned and remain unrestored. In this area of the world the skilled technicians required to restore and service them are largely absent. There are also very few piano teachers there who have ever had the experience of hearing these nineteenth century pianos played, much less even seen one. Despite all of the practical difficulties encountered in acquiring, shipping, restoring and servicing them, these instruments – if the right conditions are achieved - can offer an undiminished interpretation of Chopin’s music, and a greater understanding of the unique quality of his marvelous skills as a composer and as a pianist.

For me, the difference between the sound of the pianos of Chopin’s era and that of contemporary pianos might be likened to viewing a beautiful landscape portrayed in a painting done in an impressionist style as opposed to seeing the same image depicted in a more realistic manner. The latter’s precise brushwork contrasts with the more illusionistic brushwork of the former. Both are exquisite, with one’s preference determined by personal taste.

After attending the competition in Warsaw, Michael Moran, the noted musicologist and historian, wrote, “The greatest achievements in art should make one question accepted values and perceptions, enable one to see familiar things differently, reveal new previously hidden joys through another pair of uniquely gifted eyes.” For me and for the other attentive listeners the *1st International Chopin Competition on Period Instruments* provided a stunning new dimension in piano sound for our ears and easily met this often-elusive goal.

Steven Lagerberg

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