

Emotional Music

More than many composers Frederick Chopin used the fluid medium of music to express his innermost feelings. His works display a virtual kaleidoscope of pathos, ranging from the profound nostalgia and melancholy of his many *Nocturnes* to the unrestrained ecstasy heard at the end of his *Polonaise-fantasia, Op. 61*, from the carefree happiness of his *Ballade #3* to the terrible fear and fury of the opening bars of his *Scherzo, Op. 39*. Whatever impassioned feelings he might have found difficult to express in words he often let fly in his music. Why did he decide to compose music in this style?

The young Frederick was fortunate to grow up in a wonderfully supportive family, to have plenty of good friends, and to live in a place where it was common to celebrate life – especially in the countryside – with soul-stirring music, singing, and dancing. This earthy folk music, at times crude and unpolished, yet filled with emotive rustic charm, indelibly imprinted itself on the musical template of this impressionable young man's mind. In the years ahead his cherished memories of these vivid childhood experiences in rural Poland would remain for him a constant reminder of the once free, but then beleaguered soul of his beloved country.

As a young boy he would frequently sit beside his mother at the piano, absolutely captivated as she lovingly played and sang these songs for him. With his burgeoning love of music he soon found himself tapping out these same tunes on the keyboard with an extraordinary proficiency for one so young. Before he was even a teenager he would hear from many that he possessed a remarkable gift, a great talent for both writing beautiful music and also performing it, one that would bestow upon him a number of awards and empower him with that rarefied ability to attract and enchant audiences.

As a man of nearly twenty he would be repeatedly yet gently told by his family and friends that if he ever were to make something of his astounding artistry he would most assuredly need to leave Poland and attempt to seek his fame in Vienna, Paris, or London. Warsaw wasn't exactly a cultural backwater, but it certainly wasn't the musical Mecca from which to launch a successful international musical career. As if he were a frightened fox delicately coaxed from the protection of its den, Chopin, very reluctantly would come to accept this earnest advice to become, quite surprisingly to everyone, sufficiently brave to place his

fate entirely in the hands of complete strangers, far away in a foreign country!

Shortly after leaving Warsaw, Chopin was terribly shocked one day to hear about the brutal Russian suppression of the Polish resistance movement. That night he would compose the rousing *Revolutionary Etude, Op. 10, No. 12* and then later that same night write a lengthy entry in his diary that included the oddly uncanny and predictive statement, "I will heal the wounds of the present with the memories of the past." Rather amazingly, for the rest of his life he was to remain true to his word. That statement would become his legacy.

Arriving in Paris at the age of twenty-one Chopin found himself alone in an alien city, without much money, without an audience for his compositions, and lacking many of the connections necessary to succeed in a very competitive artistic arena. He was homesick, lonely, fearful of what was happening back in Poland and totally cut off from his strong base of support. An immigrant, he was a foreigner in a foreign land. To add to all that his health was increasingly becoming an issue for him - his chronic coughing was progressively getting worse and was sometimes bringing up blood. With all these many adverse factors acting against him how could he possibly succeed?

He would write music - music loaded with his innumerable feelings. He would instill in his compositions his emotionally laden sympathies for his family, friends, and the country he had left behind. If his mood seemed somber and melancholy it was because it precisely mirrored the way he felt. If he expressed fear and rage, he had solid reasons for doing so. If he expressed joy and exuberance in his works it was because he dreamed of a future in which his country would be finally free from the cursed oppression of its foreign occupiers and his loved ones would be finally able to live unencumbered from forcefully imposed restrictions.

Chopin's use of music to express his personal feelings about his homeland found tremendous sympathy and support from not only those in the Polish expatriate community living in Paris at the time, but also from countless others. Chopin's friend, Heinrich Heine, the famous German poet, would write, "Chopin does not derive his satisfaction from the fact that his hands are applauded by other hands for their dexterity," he wrote, "He aspires to a greater success, his fingers are the servants of his soul, and his soul is applauded by those who do not merely listen with their ears, but also with their souls." Chopin's unique style and soulful music possessed ethereal and imponderable qualities that soon would become universally appealing.

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