

Of Hands and Heart

Characterizing the diverse styles of the great Classical music composers in only a few words can be a fun challenge. For example, some might describe the music of J. S. Bach as being “cerebral” or “pure.” Mozart’s works could be portrayed as revealing an “intelligent happiness” or being “innocently elegant.” Beethoven’s stylistic innovations bridged the Classical and Romantic periods and consequently contained elements of both. While his early works stressed poise and balance, they also possessed a strong sense of boldly dramatic struggles. Many of his later works became “heroic” statements, often possessing spellbinding rhythmic patterns and music of immense force. These are perhaps oversimplified descriptions, yet they can aid in the understanding of the exceedingly complex entity called music.

When it comes to characterizing the music of Frédéric Chopin, it’s a little more complicated. Nearly all of it was written exclusively for the piano, and more specifically, for the wide-ranging capabilities of the human hand. Although the piano had originated a full century prior to his birth, no composer by his time had yet managed to free the pianist’s hands from what by then had become a rather dogmatic technique. Breaking new ground, Chopin’s approach to the keyboard was radically different. He belonged to no school and subscribed to no dogma. Being mostly self-taught, he advocated the individualization of fingering, the unrestricted use of the thumb on the black keys, and an unequalled method of using the hands to sustain melodic lines. His artistic aim was to enhance legato passages and demonstrate the particular strengths of certain fingers, utilizing techniques intended to promote what would later become known as his “singing touch.” Such originality would never have arisen from students of the major European music conservatories who were customarily drilled into monotonously learning a highly restrictive method known as “finger equalization.” Chopin’s style was unique.

In his unfinished “Piano Method,” Chopin wrote, “As each finger is differently formed, it is better not to attempt to destroy the particular charm of each one’s touch, but on the contrary develop it...There are as many different sounds as there are fingers.” This idiosyncratic quality is one of the main reasons Chopin’s music does not transcribe well to any other instrument other than the piano. At first glance, his method might appear naïve, perhaps more similar to turning the pianist into a painter, the fingers into different kinds of brushes. For Chopin the hand represented nothing short of a kaleidoscopic palette of hues and shades, enabling him to create music of the most amazing beauty, sophistication, and artistry.

Another distinguishing feature of Chopin’s music is its emotional intensity. While his early works emphasized brilliantly intricate patterns of great originality, as he matured he increasingly mined the emotional depths of the human heart. Nearly every page of his later works contains a panoply of emotions, from white hot passages filled with anger, to passionate declarations of joy, or to wistful phrases of the most profound indigo-tinted melancholy. Hearing this soul-stirring music exquisitely expressed on the piano, audiences around the world continue to connect easily to these poignant and heartfelt feelings. This intensely emotional content of Chopin’s music is one of the fundamental reasons it remains so popular after nearly two centuries. The emotional landscapes of his musical compositions enchantingly depict what it is to be human. Long ago these feelings sprang spontaneously from his heart, yet still touch ours today.

A Chopin Festival presents a wonderful opportunity to celebrate these distinctive characteristics of this fascinating composer. It is also a time to applaud the energetic efforts of many diligent young pianists as they each endeavor to express themselves in a fresh way, with élan, eloquence, and grace, not with their words, but through their artistry at the piano. By encouraging these students’ commitment to learning this complicated music the Chopin Foundation wishes to demonstrate its steadfast support for the development of individuality and emotional identity - for Chopin’s music only truly comes alive with their hands and heart.