

# Recognition

Nearly everyone enjoys praise for his or her ability to do something well. In fact, receiving positive acknowledgment for an achievement is a fundamental building block in creating our identity as individuals. For those who possess some special aptitude or skill, public accolades and admiration play critical roles in the further advancement of that talent. Notably, receiving that recognition early in life is crucial for the development of a prodigy. This was especially true for Frédéric Chopin.

At the age of six it was obvious Frédéric had an extraordinary proficiency at the piano, so much so that his parents never hesitated to invite their neighbors to private gatherings where their boy could show off his talents. From an early age Chopin received loads of praise for his musical skills. That praise would only accelerate his already rapid musical development. Sometimes too much attention can jeopardize the future for a fragile young talent, similar to the risk of moving a delicate flowering plant from the greenhouse into the garden too early in the spring. Fortunately for Frédéric, he blossomed, basking in the light of public exposure.

By the age of seven young Chopin was recognized in a prominent Warsaw newspaper for the composition of his astonishingly advanced *G minor Polonaise*. When he was eight he performed for the tsar's mother, Maria Teodorovna, also to great acclaim. Amusingly, Frédéric seemed then to be more enamored with what he wore at that concert – a handmade lace collar over a dark velvet jacket and short pants – than he was with his playing! No matter, people were already hailing this precocious child as the next Mozart.

At nine years Chopin was performing in the homes of the Polish nobility and aristocracy, largely through the efforts of his first music teacher, Adalbert Żywny, a colorful character well connected to Warsaw's musical community. Horse-drawn carriages would arrive at the Chopin home to pick up the boy and deliver him to palaces or to various soirees in Warsaw where he would perform his own compositions and then delight his audiences by improvising on their suggested themes. Once, he received a gold watch from a celebrated soprano singer, Angelica Catalani, for her appreciation of one of his performances. Similarly, a few years later Chopin would receive a diamond ring from the Tsar himself and became the subject of a widely read proclamation in Warsaw's newspapers announcing that he was, without doubt, the city's finest pianist.

One might think that this much praise so early in life would have had adverse effects on Chopin's developing personality, yet that was not the case. Although convinced of his musical skills and proud of them, he remained quite modest throughout his life. As much as he enjoyed the attention lavished upon him after large concerts, he eventually preferred playing before smaller and increasingly more select groups. In those settings he felt completely at ease. This dislike of playing before large audiences probably stemmed from

his appearances in Vienna when his unique style of playing was often too soft to be heard toward the back of larger halls. By then the Viennese public's opinion of professional pianists had become rather close-minded in its tastes, leaving Chopin feeling compelled either to adapt to its preferred format by using the more robust pianos he disliked, or to abandon these larger venues altogether. Reluctantly, rather than change his unique and cherished style of playing, he decided to leave Vienna behind and try his luck in Paris. It turned out to be a very wise decision.

Being aware of what an audience wants is key to success for any musical professional. Partly by choice and partly due to his worsening health issues, Chopin slowly accepted his concertizing limitations, constraining him to retreat further into the protected sphere of the private soiree. Conversely, his friend, Franz Liszt, used the power of his flamboyant keyboard pyrotechnics to attract huge audiences. Once Chopin said to Liszt, "Even if you fail to charm audiences, you can still deafen them. But what am I to do?" He enviously realized his delicate and nuanced performances could never match the soaring energy of Liszt's. Frédéric, however, would ultimately find his stunning success in another domain.

Seeking public recognition of one's talent is an essential element in the development of a serious pianist. To that end, a musical festival presents a marvelous opportunity for an aspiring musician to polish his or her technique. Becoming more comfortable performing for others is a fundamental ingredient for that success. The Chopin Foundation presents its annual Chopin Festival in a sincere effort to provide aspiring young pianists with an intellectually rigorous yet comfortable event where they can demonstrate and hone their skills before a congratulatory and nurturing audience.

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