

What Motivated Chopin?

Unraveling the often tangled strands of mystery behind someone's discovery of his or her lifelong passion makes for an interesting story. In the case of Frédéric Chopin it's an especially fascinating one. First, in that he demonstrated his remarkable musical talent at such an exceptionally young age, and then in how extraordinarily quickly that skill developed. Certainly, this was a testament to his genius, yet even with such inborn aptitude there must have been motivation accountable for his success. Just where did that motivation come from?

Born into a rather ordinary family of modest means – his mother was a house servant and his father a middle school French teacher – the young Frédéric spent many hours sitting beside his mother at the piano as she would sing traditional Polish songs. From her he keenly observed how to play the instrument. What fingering she didn't teach him directly he later figured out on his own. Interestingly, his love for the subtle shading of piano music might have been abetted by the fact that their piano was a "giraffe," a tall instrument with an extended vertical keyboard, its thin strings vibrating with their countless overtones literally inches from his sensitive ears.

Undoubtedly, the first reinforcement Chopin received for his noodling on the piano came from his parents. Whether that praise was lavish or merely doled out intermittently, the latter possibly driving him to attempt even greater accomplishments, is unknown. What's certain is that they soon came to realize they were quickly over their heads in meeting their talented son's burgeoning need for further musical instruction. Seeking help quickly, when Frédéric was six they hired the colorful Wojciech Żywny, an itinerant Bohemian violinist. Never a pianist, Żywny often made his living traveling from town to town, playing gypsy tunes on his violin. However exotic his character and lifestyle, he was well trained in the music of Bach, Mozart, and Hummel, and perhaps most importantly, he was affordable!

Żywny and the young Frédéric quickly developed a warm relationship, one that would last many years. Not knowing the piano well, Żywny let his pupil keep his unusual piano technique, yet imbued in him an abiding knowledge of and deep love for the music of these old masters. Anxious to please his esteemed teacher Frédéric quickly advanced and at seven began writing his own music. His first piece, a work of amazing ability, he called *Polonaise for Piano-Forte*. Żywny quickly recognized Chopin's special talent and began to ignore his other students to give Frédéric his concentrated attention. Żywny's extra reinforcement would only serve to ramp up his talented pupil's creativity.

At the age of eight Chopin first performed in front of a formal audience. The impact of that experience on him was life changing. His parents' admiration and his teacher's encouragement had been wonderful enough, but the public accolade following this concert brought the definition of praise to a new level for the precocious student. He

had played for the Grand Duke Constantine, the Russian ruler of Poland, and in so doing became Poland's "wunderkind," the new Mozart. Incredibly, over the brief span of only several years of musical instruction this child wonder possessed sufficient skill to impress not only his country's leading official but also to become the talk of Poland's musical elite.

It's interesting to examine just how the young Chopin reacted to this moment. He was overcome by the audience's reaction to his performance. His mother, too anxious to attend this concert, had dressed him in a new jacket and a lace collar – perhaps one she had made herself. Later when she asked him what the audience liked best, he replied, "Oh Mama, everybody was looking at my lace collar." Was this the start of his dandyism? Perhaps, yet despite his many affectations Chopin never became a conceited man, as evidenced by his many self-effacing letters and the views of his numerous friends. At the age of fifteen, he would receive even more royal praise, this time a diamond ring from Poland's then-reigning tsar, Alexander I. Being in the spotlight as a youth immeasurably boosted Chopin's confidence and helped reaffirm his obsessive drive to perfect his musical skills.

Beyond loving parental admiration, strong encouragement from his teacher, and high praise from audiences and royalty, what else could propel the young Frédéric to even greater heights? For a faint-hearted young man flush with hormones, the attention of a pretty girl would certainly fit the bill. His *Piano Concerto No. 2* written when he was twenty, with its beautiful *Larghetto* movement, was inspired by Chopin's distant idolization of Constantia Gladkowska, a pretty nineteen year-old Polish soprano. Despite the fact that they had met only briefly at a concert at the Warsaw Conservatory, Frédéric was immediately smitten. He found it impossibly embarrassing, however, to express his impassioned feelings for her directly. Rather like secreting a flower into a diary, he poured out his ardent emotions for her in his music, a process that would become his lifelong custom.

When Chopin was twenty, his music was nearly fully formed, self aware, and no external influence would significantly change its character. He was already a highly original and supremely talented exponent of the nationalist element in music. For the rest of life he never wavered in his powerful sense of a Polish national tradition. His profound meditation on the self and on his country's embattled and moribund condition would sit alongside emotion-packed and highly refined narratives of his joys and sorrows. Maturity would bring with it a retreat from any further need for public adulation and large-scale displays of his talent. Contrarily, instead of trying to carve out a virtuoso's fame for himself, Chopin preferred to remain within his close circle of friends, and only reveal the secrets of his genius to a chosen few.

Unlike that of his childhood years the motivation of his adulthood would shift from the need for either personal or public praise, and transform itself to embrace his pride, his sense of accomplishment, and the challenge of establishing an enduring legacy for his Art.

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