

What's Not to Like About Chopin's Music?

Frederic Chopin's works were composed with precision, seemingly without an unnecessary note. His melodic invention, harmonic innovation, and command of counterpoint are a nearly invincible triad of superlative creativity. In his rare public concerts he was revered for his virtuoso technique, the thrilling beauty of his compositions, and his impossibly delicate touch. Today, there's no denying the greatness of his music, yet in retrospect that greatness came at a heavy price for those who were closest to him. And the peculiarities of his style continue to rankle some listeners today. Most assuredly a musical genius, he was also a complicated, cold, vain, calculating, and rather snobbish individual, and what's more, he knew it. "It is not my fault if I am like a mushroom which seems edible but which poisons you if you pick it and taste it, taking it to be something else," he wrote in 1839. "I know I have never been of any use to anyone – and indeed not much use to myself." Intricately combined with a wild imagination, Chopin's egotistical and neurotic character served to help him compose extraordinary music, yet did that emotive and cantankerous spirit spill over into his works?

Chopin's music is certainly filled with the entire spectrum of human feelings, perhaps too much so for some people's tastes. Indeed, many of his works project a plethora of rather overwrought emotions, ranging from anger, even rage, to melancholy and grief, all of which might be mixed together in the same piece with the rare passage expressing happiness and joy. Chopin had based a considerable part of his aesthetic as a composer on the sensitive playing style of the Irish composer-pianist, John Field. However, the famous 19th century music critic, Ludwig Rellstab, once wrote, "Where Field sighs, Chopin screams... where Field shrugs his shoulders, Chopin arches his back like a cat..." Obviously, for some like Rellstab, this sensory excess is excessive. They find it emotionally exhausting and would prefer much less of Chopin's rapid alterations of harmonic and rhythmic tension to a more evenly paced development with less emotional baggage.

It was once popular for music critics to describe Chopin's works as dainty, delicate, and fragile, even effeminate. Most of his compositions were written for solo piano and many were limited to only a few minutes in length. After finishing his two concerti early in his career, Chopin preferred to compose much shorter pieces more suited to the salon than the concert hall. Charles Ives, the inventive American composer, once wrote rather viciously, of Chopin: "One just naturally thinks of him with a skirt on, but one which he made himself." This perception of Chopin being feeble, weak, and effeminate undoubtedly arose from the fact that he was frequently very ill. For half of his life he had to deal with frequent episodes of fever, bronchitis, and laryngitis caused by his long struggle with tuberculosis. After long performances he sometimes had to be carried to bed. More contemporary reviewers of his works take a more enlightened approach and point out the strength and boldness embodied in his compositions. Now "effeminate" becomes "charming," "fragility" becomes

“mischievousness,” “fussiness” becomes “perfection.” What a difference a century makes!

As a life-long admirer of Chopin’s music I love the inventiveness and unpredictability of his music. I thoroughly enjoy the broad emotional palette he used to color his works. In fact, I relish the many emotional twists and turns that seem to turn on a dime, the roller coaster effects of its frequent mood swings, and the to-the-point brevity of his compositions. Musical works that go on seemingly endlessly, often being mere exercises in developmental technique, can bore me to tears rather than soothe my soul or excite my feelings. For me, Chopin’s music is timeless and very special. I also believe he never intended to write programmatic music despite the fact that many claim to tie his pieces to stories, myths, and poems. Chopin preferred music of abstract ideas and feelings, transcending visual, earthly images. Programmatic music was simply not part of Chopin’s musical ideology. And unlike Liszt who strove to compose finger-twisting works, Chopin didn’t consciously intend to write music that is incredibly difficult; if it’s difficult it’s because he couldn’t write it in any other way.

That Chopin might have been a rather neurotic and difficult person doesn’t really bother me. His music benefitted from his extreme sensitivity. Indeed, music was *the* predominant focus of his life such that even the many tragic events of his life, with all their troublesome disturbances, distractions, and turmoil, failed to play a significant role in diverting his concentration from his single-minded devotion to it. I am very grateful his miserable illness with its many debilitating intrusions couldn’t keep him from his noble effort at composition. With his magnificent music the world is a far better place!

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