

## Chopin in the Time of Cholera and COVID

Frédéric Chopin was no stranger to epidemics. Although they occasionally threatened him, he managed to avoid them. His first encounter with a serious pandemic would occur in 1831 in Vienna. After many months of indecision and delay, the twenty year-old Chopin finally left his family and friends in Warsaw in November of 1830, determined to find his future on his own and away from the comforts of that city. He headed directly to Vienna, one of the world's leading musical capitals. However, instead of experiencing the wild success he had in Poland he found the staid Viennese rather indifferent to his music and disdainful of his soft style of piano playing. In the spring of 1831 he wrote in his journal, "I don't even care about music today. It's late but I'm not sleepy. I don't know what is wrong with me. And I've begun my third decade! The papers and posters have announced my concert. It's in two days, and it's as if there was no such thing. It's just doesn't matter to me. I don't listen to the compliments. They seem more and more stupid. I'd wish I were dead, except that I would like to see my parents." Increasingly melancholy, lacking success and thereby lacking funds, he was at a loss for inertia. A large cholera epidemic rapidly approaching the city from Hungary and the east helped galvanize his thinking. Chopin decided to turn west. He would try his luck in Paris. Little did he know that the French capital would soon be crippled by its own huge cholera outbreak.

The cholera epidemic of the spring of 1831 hit Paris hard. It rapidly disrupted all of society, changing the political scene, canceling music concerts, the opera, closing theaters, restaurants and schools. Many people took to wearing masks on the streets as no one yet knew how this terrible scourge spread. At the time it was thought to be spread by "bad vapors" floating in the air. It would be more than fifty years before it was determined that the disease was instead spread by contaminated water and food.

The death toll quickly mounted and by the time the young Chopin arrived in Paris that September, nearly 20,000 lives in the city had already been lost to the disease. The mood in Paris at the time was very dark, perhaps best captured in Eugène Delacroix's 1831 somber painting of Niccolò Paganini, one of Chopin's musical heroes. Delacroix, who had not yet met Chopin, but who was later to become a close friend of the composer, had seen Paganini perform at the Paris Opera in March. His gloomy painting depicts an ugly somewhat misshapen man holding forth on his violin in near total darkness. Paganini's funereal reputation yet astonishing skills playing the violin convinced many he must have made a deal with the devil. Indeed, many in Paris believed that "dark forces" had invaded the city and were responsible for the deadly epidemic. Conspiracy theories spread throughout the city nearly as rapidly as the disease. Luckily, Chopin had found an apartment far from the center of the epidemic and would survive.

Considering the enormous impact of the cholera pandemic in Paris, Chopin's success in being able to quickly ascend to the highest musical circles is even more amazing. His music captured the soul of the city, greatly impressed many of the world's best musicians, and served to guarantee his legendary fame. Chopin eventually would go on to face other cholera epidemics,

like the one during his visit to London in 1848, and another after his return to Paris in 1849. He paid them little mind. By then he was seriously ill and battling his own evil internal scourge, the tubercular infection that would soon end his life.

Today, the United States is facing a pandemic that has killed hundreds of thousands and disrupted the lives of millions. Hospitals are filled to capacity, businesses are shut, schools closed, and most travel has been brought nearly to a standstill. Literally overnight, the COVID-19 infection has decimated concert stages across the country, leaving countless musicians adrift and alone, without their indispensable audiences. Fortunately, the Chopin Foundation in Miami was able to present its National Chopin Piano Competition this past February and March, only days before travel restrictions and public health warnings would have made it all but impossible. Now the Chopin Foundation's Northwest Council is being forced to decide whether to proceed with the organization's beloved Chopin Festival planned for early 2021.

To cancel or postpone the Festival would deprive hundreds of piano students of an exciting performance opportunity and further delay their learning about the music of Chopin. Nevertheless, to attempt to present such a large event during the serious risk of contagion would be foolish. Presenting a virtual competition appears to be an attractive option, yet there are formidable logistical obstacles. A decision will soon need to be made.

The music of Chopin brings comfort and joy to millions. During this time of terrible disease and economic uncertainty more and more people urgently need sources of solace and beauty, anything to help restore their sense of well-being. What better tribute could there be than to provide consolation for those who have lost loved ones to this contagion and to lament the deaths of so many? Presenting an event involving so many of this community's youth also would emphasize the hope for and confidence in our country's next generation. Those who will make the final determination are experienced and wise. I am certain they will make the best decision.

Steven August, 2020