

Introduction

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The life of Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin (1810–1849), the child of a French emigrant to Poland and a mother from impoverished Polish nobility, was framed by key historic events that defined his worlds in Warsaw and in Paris, exerting a profound impact on his professional and personal choices and on his art. In 1807, less than three years before Chopin was born, Napoleon Bonaparte established an eastern outpost in Warsaw in preparation for his Russian offensive. As a consequence, the Napoleonic campaigns cast a shadow over Chopin's earliest years, though Warsaw began to flourish after the 1815 Congress of Vienna. Similarly, the Revolutions of 1848, in particular the overthrow of the July Monarchy in France, darkened the composer's last years; he suffered a dramatic loss of income as his students and audiences fled the political turmoil in Paris, and it became impossible for him to sustain himself. These circumstances and the nasty breakup in 1847 from George Sand (the successful French writer who had been his consort for nine years), necessitated the ill-fated tour of Great Britain, which—given his fragile constitution at the time—undoubtedly hastened his demise.

Other political upheavals left indelible marks on Chopin's biography, too: just as he was entering adulthood, the Revolutions of 1830 shook Europe. The one in Paris was successful; it established the the July Monarchy that held sway during most of Chopin's years there and empowered the social circles that were later amply represented among Chopin's students and audiences. The revolution in Warsaw, however, which was intended to restore sovereign Poland, failed. This forced Chopin, about to start a concert tour, to become a permanent exile from his native country, and defined his mature personal and musical identity as that of Polish political émigré in France. The historical events culminating in the Polish revolution of 1830–31, known as the November Uprising, explain much about Chopin, his music, and his world.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Poland, at the height of its political and military power, comprised the territories of much of today's Poland

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and large parts of western Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania (with which it had had a dynastic union since 1386 and formed the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569). It fended off hostile neighbors—especially the Teutonic Knights, an ostensibly religious order founded to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land but better known for its territorial incursions into northeast Poland and the Baltic lands, which were characterized by brutality toward civilians and the use of mercenaries—and contributed to important military and diplomatic efforts of its allies. The most famous of these events (usually regarded as one of the proudest moments in Polish history) was the 1683 defeat of the Ottoman army at the Battle of Vienna, where the Polish King John III Sobieski, in command of the combined forces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Habsburg-headed Holy Roman Empire, decisively halted the seemingly relentless northward expansion of the Ottomans.

Thereafter, though, Poland slipped into an unstoppable decline. Starting in 1772, Poland's territory was gradually dismantled by its neighbors—Russia, Austria, and Prussia—in a series of three partitions, the last of which (1795) obliterated Poland's name from the map of Europe for more than a century. A few heroic efforts to stop these events—the Constitution of the Third of May 1791, which intended to rectify the political corruption that caused Poland's decline, and the Kościuszko Insurrection in 1794, an uprising led by the Polish general, Tadeusz Kościuszko, who earlier had distinguished himself fighting in support of the colonists in the American Revolutionary War—had little long-term effect, and only in 1918 was sovereign Poland reinstated and ratified in the Treaty of Versailles, at the close of the First World War.

When Napoleon entered Prussian-occupied Warsaw in 1807 he was cheered by the locals. With him were the Polish Legions—military units of Polish exiles, formed in Italy under the leadership of General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski—which had fought under the Little Corporal since 1797. Bonaparte recruited them with guarantees of restoring sovereign Poland, a promise unfulfilled beyond the establishment of the Duchy of Warsaw, a puppet state encompassing the territories immediately around Warsaw. In place of sovereignty, Poland saw economic ruin, as Napoleon's forces drew resources from local industries and agriculture, and suffered massive devastation brought upon by his reckless military campaigns. Among the thousands of Polish soldiers who perished under his command was the revered nephew of the last King of Poland, Prince Józef Poniatowski, who won numerous battles for Napoleon but died tragically during the 1813 Battle of Leipzig. Conditions in Warsaw were doubtless dismal in this precarious time, which was when Chopin's father, Nicolas (Mikołaj), received a

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teaching post there and relocated his family (including the infant Fryderyk) to the capital city.

The Congress of Vienna (1814–15), convened to address Napoleonic damage, forged a new agreement concerning Poland. Most of the historically Polish lands were to remain occupied by the powers that annexed them in the previous century; Kraków was given the status of Free City within Austria; the Grand Duchy of Poznań was granted limited independence from Prussia; and the territories around Warsaw became the semi-sovereign Polish Kingdom under the control of Russia. Although the Polish Kingdom was promised limited self-governance, with control over matters of religion, culture, education, and economy, even this semi-sovereignty was often violated by tsarist authorities. Still, the Polish intelligentsia in the Kingdom seized opportunities to restore Poland's cultural and economic assets by implementing beneficial policies and establishing the necessary institutions to carry them out.

Chopin's later childhood and adolescence in the Polish Kingdom took place during a period of relative stability. Warsaw prospered both economically and culturally, and Chopin was able to attend the highly regarded Warsaw Lyceum, where his father taught French, and the just-established Warsaw University. His musical skills were honed at the new Warsaw Conservatory, one of the first such institutions in Europe, and he participated in a thriving Varsovian musical scene that included concerts by international stars such as Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Angelica Catalani, Henriette Sontag, and Niccolò Paganini, and productions of internationally acclaimed operas, sometimes within a year or two of their world premieres. Polish operas were also performed, the most substantial of these composed by the talented but often adversarial co-directors of the National Theater, Karol Kurpiński and Józef Elsner—the latter Chopin's beloved composition teacher.

The rise of Polish national opera was part of a larger movement toward the articulation of Polish national identity. After the loss of the monarchical framework that had fostered polity and culture in the Polish lands, newer ideas of identity-based statehood, emanating from Germany, appeared particularly attractive to the Polish intelligentsia, who perceived that a language- and culture-based community could preserve and nurture Polishness in the absence of a territorially sovereign country. The most conspicuous products of this early nationalism were massive cultural undertakings such as the multivolume *Dictionary of the Polish Language* compiled by Samuel Bogumił Linde, a friend and neighbor of the Chopins, and the patriotically charged operas that employed Polish language, historical Polish subjects, and included folkloric music. The earliest of these

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was Jan Stefani's *Cracovians and Highlanders* of 1794, the premiere of which helped to arouse the masses, serving as a prelude to the Kościuszko Insurrection. The most beloved patriotic operas of Chopin's childhood included Kurpiński's *Jadwiga, the Polish Queen* of 1814 and Elsner's *King Lokietek* of 1818.

Numerous grassroots initiatives sought to foster a sense of Polishness among the populace. For example, the magazine *Diversions for Children*, intended to propagate the Polish language and to encourage children to write in that tongue, was well known in the Chopin household and especially treasured by Chopin's beloved younger sister Emilia—a girl with uncommon literary talents who in 1827 died tragically at age fifteen. To familiarize children with Polish history, the venerated poet Julian Niemcewicz wrote the *Historical Chants*, a cycle of poems about Polish historical heroes and events, which were set to music by amateurs and professional composers. Children of Chopin's generation learned and internalized these songs; indeed, Chopin improvised on *Historical Chants* at the piano well into his adulthood. Elsner and Kurpiński promoted the use of the vernacular within Catholic services by composing accessible settings of sacred texts in Polish for parish use, and they also advocated the use of patriotic songs, which started to take on new significance in the last decades of the eighteenth century, to honor the Polish heroes and historical events of this tragic era. These patriotic works included the Kościuszko Polonaise, the Dąbrowski Mazurka ("Poland Has Not Yet Perished"), the Poniatowski March, and the Polonaise of May the Third. In this new, intensely national context, Polish dances—*krakowiak*, mazurka, and polonaise—acquired new importance. The mazurka began as a fashionable ballroom dance and an occasional folkloric accent in Polish-themed operas, but after the November Uprising—and mainly through Chopin's influence—it came to symbolize Poland itself. The polonaise, on the other hand, had already acquired a mythic significance in the first decades after independent Poland fell, and by the time Chopin composed his mature pieces in the genre it had been enshrined by the poet Adam Mickiewicz as a nostalgic and mythic recollection of the noble traditions of Poland before the partitions.

Mickiewicz was the most important Polish proponent of the new Romantic trends that were closely related to the cultural phenomena taking place in Germany, England, and France. With the publication in 1822 of his *Ballady i romanse*, he stirred the imaginations of young poets and writers, many of whom were Chopin's friends, and Chopin's imagination as well. Polish Romanticism soon became intertwined with the nascent nationalism and the political aspirations aimed at reestablishing autonomous Poland, a sentiment that became more urgent in 1825 after

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the sudden death of the progressive Tsar Alexander I. Political conditions in the Polish Kingdom worsened under his reactionary successor Nicholas I. Armed revolt was brewing, and on 29 November 1830, only four weeks after Chopin's departure from Warsaw to embark on a concert tour, it exploded in the rebellion known as the November Uprising.

After a lengthy period in Vienna and several German cities Chopin arrived in Paris just as thousands of Polish exiles began to flood the French capital after nearly a year of bloody battles and the ultimate failure of the revolt. Beyond military and political repercussions, the historically Polish territories under the Tsar's control lost any semblance of cultural autonomy, and hosts of insurgents willingly or forcibly became exiles as part of the Great Emigration. More than five thousand emigrated to France, which—although sympathetic to the Polish cause—had not provided the support that the leaders of the Uprising had anticipated. The losses of human capital were crippling, as Poland's intelligentsia, writers, and artists settled in Paris. Among them were many of Chopin's friends and acquaintances: Józef Bohdan Zaleski and Stefan Witwicki, poets whose texts were often used in his songs; and such Conservatory colleagues as Antoni Orłowski, who established himself as the music director of the opera in Rouen (where Chopin gave concerts in 1838), and Julian Fontana, who remained his trusted amanuensis (though one who, in private, bitterly resented his famous and successful friend's selfishness). Chopin also made new connections among the émigrés, including those frequenting the gatherings at the Hôtel Lambert, residence of Prince Adam Czartoryski, which served as the center of Polish émigré life in Paris. Among these new acquaintances was Adam Mickiewicz, whom Chopin had admired as an adolescent and who proved an inspiring, even if at times frustrating, presence in his adult life. But his closest Polish friend was Adalbert (Wojciech) Grzymała, an exile who had held a prominent political function with the insurrectionary government, who with the patience of an older, wiser brother attended to the composer's emotional and practical needs.

Paris during King Louis-Philippe's July Monarchy (1830–48) became the European capital of music. Since 1795 the city had been home to the Conservatoire de Musique, the first modern-style institution of musical learning, and this plus the presence of affluent audiences, continually hungry for new musical talent, drew the greatest virtuosi to the French capital. When Chopin arrived there, the giant among Parisian pianists was Frédéric Kalkbrenner, but his fame was about to give way to a new generation of virtuosi—Sigismond Thalberg, Franz Liszt, and, of course, Chopin himself, who after the first few years of his career seldom performed publicly, but instead supported himself and maintained his

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reputation through teaching and private concerts in salons of his influential friends and patrons (many of whom were also his piano pupils). He also made money through publishing, mainly through the printing house of Maurice Schlesinger, one of the most successful among the host of Paris publishers. Next to performances by instrumental virtuosi, the other major draw for Parisian audiences was opera. Several opera houses premiered works by the foremost composers of the era; most notably, Meyerbeer and Halévy dominated the world of the Opéra, while the Théâtre-Italien belonged to Donizetti and Bellini (whose meteoric rise to fame was interrupted by his untimely death in 1835), though revivals of favorites by Rossini were also common. Chopin, devoted to opera since his Warsaw years, regularly attended performances, and drew inspiration from operatic melodic styles, dramatic strategies, and the genre's developing harmonic language. He also cultivated friendships with singers, most notably with the multi-talented Pauline Viardot.

Soon Chopin found himself in the cenacles of Parisian artistic luminaries; he frequented the same salons as writers whose work resided in the heart of French Romanticism—Alphonse de Lamartine, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo—and even the usually cynical Heinrich Heine showered his performances and compositions with unfeigned praise. Starting in 1838, Chopin's liaison with George Sand, a successful woman of uncommon intellect, offered additional opportunities to interact with notables. The most welcome visits involved such close friends as Eugène Delacroix, the painter who in the mid-1820s imbued his works with a new Romantic intensity of expression. Delacroix often stayed at Sand's estate in Nohant, where the Sand-Chopin "family" (the couple, plus her two young children) enjoyed fresh air, relaxation, creative vigor, and marmalade-making during their lengthy summer sojourns. These were joyful years when their feelings and commitment to each other were strong, before strains revealed fissures in the family structure they built and caused it to implode, ultimately setting the ailing composer on a path of descent from which he never recovered.

Thus Chopin stands like the protagonist of his own opera, an exiled Polish patriot whose tragic personal life is seen against the turbulent historical events of his time, while (paradoxically) his career continued to flourish in the warm glow of the July Monarchy, fading with the onset of the 1848 revolutions. Yet, as his gaze remained turned to the country of his childhood and the loved ones who stayed behind, many of his pieces spoke for and of Poland. So there is probably no better introduction to Chopin than one of the most famous passages in Polish literature, which describes a vision of Poland's history as expressed through music.

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This is Jankiel’s “Concert of Concerts” (Koncert nad koncertami), or simply “Jankiel’s Concert” (Koncert Jankiela), as it is known in Poland, which comes from the twelfth and final book of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*. Written during the author’s Parisian exile in the grim 1830s realities that followed the November Uprising, *Pan Tadeusz*—considered Europe’s last epic poem—is a nostalgic, idyllic vision of life in Poland-Lithuania in, roughly, 1811 and 1812. By 1811 Poland, partitioned among Russia, Prussia, and Austria, had suffered multiple failed political and military attempts aimed at keeping and restoring sovereignty. From the vantage point of 1830s Paris, however, the still hopeful era of two decades ago seemed idyllic indeed.

The scene in the “Concert of Concerts” is the highlight of the climactic and most joyful event of Mickiewicz’s story, the celebration of the young protagonists’ engagement. Jankiel—a Jewish innkeeper and Polish patriot who is also a fabled master of the dulcimer—is implored to perform. In some 120 verses, Mickiewicz describes how Jankiel musically narrates significant events in Polish history, starting with the hopeful unveiling of the Constitution of the Third of May in 1791 and ending in 1807 with the victorious return to Poland, alongside Napoleon, of General Dąbrowski’s Polish Legion. The music that evokes both these joyful events and the traumatic setbacks taking place in the interim uses well-established musical topoi connoting battle, suffering, sadness, and triumph. Moreover, Jankiel also makes use of familiar tunes associated with the depicted events, such as the Polonaise of May the Third and the Dąbrowski Mazurka. The reactions of Jankiel’s listeners, detailed in the poem, demonstrate their deeply emotional response to these topoi and song quotations whose narrative significance they immediately grasp.

Possible models for Mickiewicz’s Jankiel include Michał Józef Guzikow, a Jewish virtuoso on the “straw-fiddle” (a simpler predecessor of the modern xylophone), who was known to perform improvised fantasies on Polish songs, and Chopin himself, who often performed improvisations on patriotic themes in intimate private gatherings. An idealized amalgam of such improvised performances seems most likely, and this would have allowed Mickiewicz—highly sensitive to music as he was, and passionately nationalistic—to imagine a musical account of Poland’s recent history, so rendered that the patriotic ardor of Jankiel’s performance would likewise ignite a room full of joyous wedding guests. Here, then, is how one of Poland’s greatest poets conceived the effect an improvisation such as Chopin’s would have had.

The “Concert of Concerts” is immediately followed by a description of the guests dancing the polonaise, a passage that was likewise destined to become iconic for generations of Polish readers, and sets the stage for Chopin’s heroic polonaises.

“Concert of Concerts” and “The Polonaise”

by Adam Mickiewicz

Translated by Kenneth R. Mackenzie

(New York: Hippocrene Books, 1992), 562–70.

For none would dare
To play on [the dulcimer] in Jankiel’s presence there.
(The winter no one knew where he had been;
Now he was suddenly with the Generals seen.)
All knew that on that instrument was none
To equal him in skill or taste or tone.
They urged him on to play, but he refused;
His hands were stiff, he said, and little used,
He dared not play before such gentlemen,
And bowing crept away; but Zosia then
Ran up; in one white hand she brought with her
The hams used to play the dulcimer,
And with the other Jankiel’s beard caressed;
She curtsied; “Jankiel, play for me,” she pressed,
“It’s my betrothal, Jankiel, won’t you play,
You said you’d play upon my wedding day!”

Jankiel was very fond of Zosia, so
He bowed his beard, his willingness to show.
They brought the dulcimer and fetched a chair,
And sat him in the middle of them. There
He sat and, taking up the instrument,
He looked at it with pride and deep content;
As when a veteran hears his country’s call,
Whose grandsons take his sword down from the wall,
And laughs: it’s long since he has held the blade,
But yet he feels it will not be betrayed.

Meanwhile two pupils knelt before the Jew,
And tuned the strings and tested them anew.
With half-closed eyes he sat still in his chair,
And held the hammers motionless in air.

At first he beat out a triumphal strain,
Then smote more quickly like a storm of rain.

Adam Mickiewicz

They were amazed—but this was but a trial,
He suddenly stopped and raised the sticks awhile.

He played again: the hammers on the strings
Trembled as lightly as mosquito's wings
And made a humming sound that was so soft
'Twas hardly heard. The master looked aloft
Waiting for inspiration, then looked down
And eyed his instrument with haughty frown.

He lifts his hands, then both together fall
And smite at once, astonishing them all.
A sudden crash bursts forth from many strings
As when a band of janissaries rings
With cymbals, bells and drums. And now resounds
The Polonaise of May the Third. It bounds
And breathes with joy, its notes with gladness fill;
Girls long to dance and boys can scarce keep still.
But of the old men every one remembers
That Third of May, when Senators and Members
In the assembly hall with joy went wild,
That king and Nation had been reconciled;
“Long live the King, long live the Sejm!” they sang,
“Long live the Nation!” through the concourse rang.

The music ever louder grew and faster,
Then suddenly a false chord—from the master!
Like hissing snakes or shattering glass, that chilled
Their hearts and with a dire foreboding filled.
Dismayed and wondering the audience heard:
Was the instrument ill-tuned? or had he erred?
He had not erred! He struck repeatedly
That treacherous string and broke the melody,
And ever louder smote that sullen wire,
That dared against the melody conspire,
Until the Warden, hiding face in hand,
Cried out, “I know that sound, I understand;
It's *Targowica!*” Suddenly, as he speaks,
The string with evil-omened hissing breaks;
At once the hammers to the treble race,
Confused the rhythm, hurry to the bass.

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And ever louder grew the music's roar,
And you could hear the tramp of marching, war,
Attack, a storm, the boom of guns, the moans
Of children, and a weeping mother's groans.
So splendidly the master's art resembled
The horror of a storm, the women trembled,
Remembering with tears that tale of grief,
The Massacre of Praga; with relief
They heard the master's final thunder hushed,
As if the voices of the strings were crushed.

They've scarce recovered from their marvelling,
The music changes and a murmuring
Begins: at first a few thin strings complain
Like flies that struggle in the web in vain,
But more and more come up and forming line,
The scattered notes in troops of chords combine;
And now with measured pace they march along
To make the mournful tune of that old song:
*The wandering soldier through the forest goes,
And often faints with hunger and with woes,
At last he falls beside his charger brave,
That with his hoofbeat digs his master's grave.*
A poor old song, to Polish troops so dear!
The soldiers recognized it, crowding near
Around the master; listening, they recall
That dreadful hour when o'er their country's fall
They sang this song, and went to distant climes;
And to their minds came memories of those times,
Of wandering through frosts and burning sands
And seas, when oft in camps in foreign lands
This Polish song had cheered and comforted.
Such were their thoughts, and each man bowed his head.

But soon they lifted up their heads again,
The master raised the pitch and changed the strain.
He, looking down once more, the strings surveyed,
And, joining hands, with both the hammers played:
Each blow was struck so deftly and so hard,
That all the strings like brazen trumpets blared,

Adam Mickiewicz

And from the trumpets to the heavens sped
That march of triumph: *Poland is not dead!*
Dąbrowski, march to Poland! With one accord,
They clapped their hands, and “March, Dąbrowski!” roared.

The player by his own song seemed amazed;
He dropped the hammers and his arms upraised;
His fox-skin hat upon his shoulders slipped;
His floating beard majestically tipped;
Upon his cheeks two strange red circles showed;
And in his eye a youthful ardor glowed.
And when at last his eyes Dąbrowski met,
He hid them in his hand, for they were wet.
“Our Lithuania has waited long for you,”
He said, “as Jews for their Messiah do.
Of you the singers long did prophesy,
Of you the portent spoke that filled the sky.
Live and wage war!” He sobbed, the honest Jew,
He loved our country like a patriot true.
Dąbrowski gave the Jew his hand to kiss.
And thanked him kindly for his courtesies.

Time for the polonaise. The Chamberlain leaves
His place, and, throwing back his flowing sleeves
And twirling his moustaches, makes a bow
To Zosia: Would she start the dancing now?
Behind the Chamberlain they form a line,
As he leads off the dancing at a sign.

His crimson boots upon the greensward flash,
His saber glitters and his rich-wrought sash.
Slowly he steps as though from listlessness,
But from each step and movement you could guess
The thoughts and feelings that his breast inspire:
Now he has stopped as though he would inquire:
He bends his head to whisper in her ear;
She turns her head away, too shy to hear;
He doffs his cap to her and humbly bows;
She deigns to glance, but ne’er a word allows;
He slackens pace, his eyes upon her bent,

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And laughs at last—with her reply content.
He dances faster now, and, looking 'round
His rivals, pulls his cap with feathers crowned
Down on his brow, now thrusts it to the rear,
Then, twirling his moustache, cocks o'er his ear.
All envy him and follow him along.
He would have gladly stol'n her from the throng.
Sometimes he stops and with his hand raised high
Politely bids his rivals pass him by;
Sometimes he tries to draw aside, perchance
By changing course he may elude the dance.
But they importunate pursue him yet,
Entangling him within the dance's net;
Angered whereat his hand to sword-hilt flies,
As if to say: Plague on your envious eyes!
He turns about with proud defiant stare
Straight at the dancing throng: they do not dare
Stand in his path and, changing all about,
Set on again.

On every side they shout:
“Perhaps he is the last—you may not see, young men,
Such leading of the polonaise again!”
The pairs proceed in turn with merry noise,
The ring contracts and then again deploys,
As when the folds of a huge serpent curl,
The varied colors of the dresses whirl
Of ladies, soldiers, gentlemen, and gleam
Like golden scales lit by the sunset's beam,
Against the quilted darkness of the ground.
On goes the dance and shouts and toasts resound!