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Frederic Chopin - poet of Polish freedom

One hundred sixty years ago, in September 1863, during the January Uprising, the Russians demolished the Zamoyski Palace in Warsaw, throwing the piano once played by Fryderyk Chopin out of the building's window. The moment made history.

Fryderyk Chopin's music aroused patriotic sentiments even before his scores left the printing presses. Even back when he was known only as the son of the proprietor of one of Warsaw's finest boarding houses, he would perform for his colleagues in the evenings, improvising on historical themes. Later, the guests at his salon in Paris could listen to the entire poems, only fragments of which he poured onto paper. The nationalist, patriotic feature of his work was apparent not only to Poles. It was recognised already by Robert Schumann, the first international reviewer of the young Chopin (it was he who, with regard to Chopin's Variations pp. 2, wrote 'Hats off gentlemen, a genius!'). In his review of Chopin's Piano Concertos, he characterises the artist alluding to the November Uprising: "So he stood, supplied with the deepest knowledge of his art, aware of his power and hence armed with courage, when in 1830 the mighty voice of the peoples rang out in the west. Hundreds of young men awaited that moment, but Chopin was the first on the ramparts [...]. Fate had prepared something more for the meeting of a new time and new relations: it distinguished Chopin and made him interesting through his expressive, original Polish nationality. [...] if the autocratic monarch [the tsar] knew what a dangerous enemy threatened him in Chopin's works, in the simple melodies of the mazurkas, he would ban them. Chopin's compositions are cannons buried in flowers." The echoes of Kurpiński's insurrectionist song *Litwinka* in op. 49 or the 'heroic' developments of the polonaise in op. 53 were evident immediately upon listening.

Chopin left ample evidence of his patriotic commitment. The outbreak of the 1830 uprising became a watershed moment in his musical style. When his friends, nigh forcibly, stopped him from returning home and taking up arms, he wrote that he 'thunderbolts on the piano' at nights. He began to introduce dark tones, violent contrasts and numerous chromatic runs that break down the classical simplicity of the major-minor style. According to his family accounts, it was also then that he wrote the Etude in C Minor, known as the 'Revolutionary', the violent Scherzo in B minor and even a sketch of the Prelude in D Minor, published many years later in the op. 28 cycle referring to Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Chopin was well versed in the geopolitical situation, as best evidenced by a letter to Julian Fontana from April 1848, in which he writes, among other things: 'Our

people are gathering in Poznań. Czartoryski was the first to go there, but God only knows what direction events will take [...] horrible things are likely to happen, but when it all ends, there will be a great, big Poland; in a word: Poland.”

When in September 1863 (14 years after the composer’s death), Russian troops demolished the Zamoyski Palace in Warsaw in retaliation for the January Uprising participants’ attempt to assassinate the governor Theodor Berg, surely nobody realised that the destruction of the piano would take on a symbolic dimension. Cyprian Kamil Norwid, who met Chopin in Paris as a youth, immortalised this moment, raising it in his famous poem *Chopin’s Piano* to the status of a clash of cultures and value systems. It was an important act of including Chopin’s work in the discourse of the independence struggle, perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Ignacy Jan Paderewski in his famous speech in Lviv in 1910, on the 100th anniversary of the composer’s birth. Indeed, the address opened the path of political activity for the future Polish prime minister: “Chopin embodies everything we have been forbidden: the colourful kontushes, the gold-lined belts, [...] the clank of the nobles’ sabres and the scythes or our peasant’s, the moan of the wounded chest, the rebellion of the shackled spirit, [...] the slavery’s pain, the freedom’s mourning, the tyrants’ curse and the victory’s joyful song.” It is clear why the German occupation authorities banned his songs during World War II.

In 21st-century Poland, Chopin’s music still holds a special place. Millions of Poles follow the International Chopin Piano Competition every five years as Warsaw fills with the composer’s music, from the philharmonic hall to the taxis. Today we also understand the extraordinary universalism of Chopin’s work, whose genius finds a way into the hearts of people from all over the world and helps to build international communities of those who admire beauty and truth.

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