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Chopin
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The environment in which Chopin saw the light of day and developed was apparently a safe and welcoming nest, the atmosphere was saturated with agreement, peace and diligence; so those examples of simplicity, devotion and delicacy remained for him forever the dearest and sweetest

Franz Liszt, Chopin, 1852
All sources – letters, diaries, memoirs and recollections – and different voices say the same thing: Fryderyk Chopin came into the world, grew up and stayed to the end of his days surrounded by a happy, loving family. Franz Liszt was right: Chopin’s family home was indeed an oasis of “agreement, peace and diligence.” Liszt’s opinion, as Chopin’s friend and first monographer, was given with undoubted truthfulness, confirmed by other accounts: “In an atmosphere of pure domestic virtues, religious tradition, merciful actions and severe modesty, his imagination developed like sensitive plants, that have never been exposed to the dust of big, bustling drove roads.”\(^1\)

If, in respect of any composer, we could speak about “idyllic-angelic” childhood years, it would be in regards to Chopin. When discussing Justyna and Mikołaj Chopin’s home, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz coined the phrase “the singular home” and closed with this comparison: “This is one of the few examples of a family home in which its individual members are linked by an unusually strong relationship and attachment. Whilst Beethoven had to fight with his drunken father, and Bach, so early orphaned, was placed at the mercy and grace of his brother, Chopin was surrounded in his family nest by the sincere love of his mother, father and sisters.”\(^2\)

At the time of his birth that “singular home”, filled with an atmosphere of love, stood in Żelazowa Wola; in a quiet place, far from the hustle of the world, next to the slowly flowing Utrata river, on the edge of the Kampinoska Forest, on the ground of Sochaczewo district, in the Mazovia region, fifty kilometres from Warsaw.

Although the future author of Fantasy on Polish Themes lived here no longer than the first six or seven months of his life (later he merely glanced there a few times in passing visits), it is a special place on earth, as his birthplace, and has become permanently associated with his name. For those to whom Chopin’s music is close and dear it has become a focus for nostalgic pilgrimages and visits.

Chopin’s parents met in Żelazowa Wola, fell in love, and in 1806 married in nearby Brochów. The village had belonged for a mere eight years to the Skarbek family. The family was marked for a strange and quite specific turn of fate – the stuff novels are made from. The owner of Żelazowa Wola, Count Kacper Skarbek, captain of the National Cavalry, a playboy and reveller, married Ludwika, the daughter of a Toruń banker called Jakub Fenger to escape from his debts. The dowry was insufficient, the debts grew, and the count saved himself by escaping abroad, leaving a brave wife with five children in Żelazowa Wola. Her distant cousin and friend, Justyna Krzyżanowska, who had probably already been orphaned, assisted her in running the estate; probably orphaned, as genealogists researching her in detail have found the family line broken.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Franz Liszt, Chopin (Paris 1852, Kraków 1960, p. 123).
\(^2\) Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Chopin, Kraków 1955, p. 16.
\(^3\)
Mikołaj Chopin, the future composer’s father (1771–1844)
Poland has given him a knight’s sense and its historical suffering.
France – lightness, elegance and charm,
Germany – romantic depth

Heinrich Heine,
X Letter from Paris,
1838

Mazovian willow
No one yet has calculated how many days and hours young Chopin spent in stagecoaches. There would be a fair number, as he travelled extensively throughout the world. Not only as travelling is long associated with the life of artistes; Chopin liked to experience new countries and surroundings, to be amazed by beautiful landscapes and cultural masterpieces, to meet interesting people. One may read this in his letters, which can be read like a travel diary. He travelled across Poland and Europe and he felt at home almost everywhere. At least that was how it was in his early years. In his later years travelling demanded strength, which he lacked.

His astonishment when he first took a trip to Toruń in 1825, during his second vacation in a row in Szafernia, was still rather childish. Naturally, he visited Copernicus’ house, but not only: “I saw the leaning tower, the famous town hall, both outside and inside, where the greatest rarity is that it has as many windows as there are days in the year, as many halls as there are months, as many rooms as there are weeks, and that the entire building is in the best Gothic taste.” In his reporting he is usually – as in this – humorous: “All of this, however, can’t beat the gingerbread, oh the gingerbread, one piece of which I have sent to Warsaw.”

Two years later he wandered through Pomerania to Gdańsk, carried from manor to manor by friends of the Chopin family. No letters are extant from which we could find out what he saw in Gdańsk. There are three surviving letters, however, in which the sixteen-year-old graduate of the Warsaw Lyceum reported his journey to Duszniki one year earlier in detail: “We went through Błonie, Sochaczew, Łowicz, Kutno, Kłodawa, Koło, Turek, Kalisz, Ostrów, Międzybórz, Olesnica, Wrocław, Nimsch, Frankenstein, Warta and Glatz. We have stopped in Reinertz where we are still waiting; two weeks now I am drinking whey and the local water…”

His trip to Duszniki, of course, was not for sightseeing, but for his health. However, it was the beauty of the landscape that seemed to fascinate the young patient. He reported: “I walk in the mountains which surround Reinertz, and often impressed by the view of the valleys; with reluctance I descend, sometimes on all fours, but I still haven’t been where everyone else is going, as it is for me forbidden. Here near Reinertz is a mountain with cliffs called Heu-Scheuer, a place from which the views are amazing […], and I am one of those unfortunate patients not allowed to go there.” His rapture becomes a refrain: “Great views, offered by Silesia, charming and delighting me,” he relates to Elsner. He adds, probably sincerely, “but despite everything I still lack one thing, which the beauty of Duszniki can not replace, and that is a good instrument.”

Chopin’s first musical journey took place in 1828. The journey, however, was not to play but to listen. “I’m going to Berlin today. For one of Spontini’s operas.”

1 Chopin to Jan Matuszyński, Szafernia Aug. 1825.
2 Chopin to Wilhelm Kolberg, a friend from the Lyceum, Duszniki 18 Aug. 1826.
3 Ibidem.
4 Chopin to Józef Elsner, Duszniki 29 Aug. 1826.
First wanderings

The old Town Hall in Toruń. Fryderyk visited this town in 1825 and was truly moved by its monuments.

Stagecoach in watercolour by Piotr Michałowski from the 1830s.

The old Town Hall in Toruń
You are in the army!
Is she in Radom?
Have you dug the trenches?
You go to war. Come back as a Colonel.
May you have a lucky fight.
Why can’t I at least beat the drum!

Chopin to Jan Matuszyński
1 January 1831

Ary Scheffer, Polonia – the picture was made in Paris in 1831
It is not easy to imagine the atmosphere of those days, the last days before the uprising of 1830. On the outside, life went on normally. Seven hundred people attended Chopin’s farewell concert in the National Theatre. Chopin reported to Tytus Woyciechowski, not without joy and pride, “A full hall [...] tumultuous applause...”

As well as reporting on the success of his new concerto (E minor), Chopin seemed as interested in the success of Konstancja Gładkowska, who took part in the farewell evening. “Adorably dressed in white, with roses on her head, she sang the Cavatina from La Donna del Lago with recitativo such, apart from the aria in Agnieszka, as she has never sang...”

It seemed that everything was continuing as usual. However, this was only an appearance. After the spring concerts, reviews flooded forth, all out-bidding each other with superlatives. This time, the reaction to the event was just a few sentences in “Kurier Warszawski”. Maurycy Mochnacki, who at the turn of the year had taken up voice three times in the matter of Chopin’s concerts, was now silent, devoted to matters of another nature and importance. Shortly after, he wrote these meaningful words: “It is finally time to stop writing about art. [...] The bustle of weapons and the tumult of canons, these will now be our rhythm and our melody.” Under the surface of everyday life, the atmosphere thickened, which in November, always a dangerous time for the Poles, exploded into the uprising.

Chopin was a regular patron of the Warsaw cafes. In the “Kopciuszek” he could bump into Brodziński and Osinski, Kurpiński and Elsner, and hear opinions about his music. On the other hand, in “Honoratka” and, above all, “Dziurka” and “U Brzezińsk ” as K. W. Wójcicki confirmed – he could meet (and of course did meet) representatives of the young people involved – K. Gaszyński, D. Magnuszewski, M. Mochnacki. And here he could feel the anxiety and growing patriotic tension. Occupied by his own art, which at this time was going through its own “Sturm und Drang” – and by the muse behind his art – he did not notice which way events were turning. He left the country on his artistic journey almost on the eve of events decisive for the fate of his homeland and his own generation. That is also why it was not given that he would take part in this along with his generation. He left before notices appeared stuck on the trees in the Łazienki Park with texts such as “Belvedere available from the New Year.”

News of the so-called November Uprising reached Chopin in Vienna. Tytus Woyciechowski, who accompanied him there, returned immediately. Chopin was held back by his father, whose voice of authority supported the pleas of his mother. He was unable to oppose them, or his own instincts, which told him his parents were fair.
Uprising

Belvedere – view from the Łazienki Park

Maurycy Mochnacki in a portrait by Antoni Oleszczyński
Paris. The Conciergerie and the Pont au Change

Paris. The Louvre and the Pont du Carrousel
Chopin did not leave any recordings, as he could not. We cannot hear how he played. But the reports of those who did hear him play – so many we could fill an entire anthology with them – can carry us back to those times and those places. They can give us a point of entry to imagine and try to reconstruct that which is forever lost.

Maurycey Mochnacki, a listener and competent critic, was the first to try and capture that playing in words, three times. First and foremost, he stated concisely: “Chopin does not play like others.” Wilhelm von Lenz, in his later recollection, used similar words: “As a pianist, he was a phenomenon of unparalleled originality.” Ferdinand Hiller – despite the passing of years – was continually caught by his first impressions. “His miraculous playing,” he wrote many years after his first experience and hearing, “I will never forget to the last sigh. No one ever touched the keys so.”

Naturally a closer description of his playing was attempted. In the opinion of Ignacy Moscheles with whom Chopin played four hands: “He proceeded like a singer, occupied with expressing feelings.” Anton Schindler had no doubt as to the fact that “his playing is not calculated for applause. […] It does not impress with strength of sound or trinketry.” As Hiller remembered, “one felt the charm of his sound without the presence of the weight imposed by Liszt, Thalberg and others.” Comparisons were unavoidable; quite simply they were in everyone’s mouths in Paris.

Among Chopin’s very first impressions, after his arrival on the Seine, were to be found such comments as: “So, I don’t know if there is someplace with more pianists than Paris, I don’t know where there are more donkeys and virtuosi than here.” He only had to wait a short time before his own playing started to be compared to the greatest, and then constantly, like a refrain. Heine was brave enough to put forth a view which could have been amazing, given the endless fame of Liszt: “The brilliant pianist [Liszt] is here again and is giving concerts […] Next to him, all pianists disappear with the exception of one: Chopin, the Rafael of the piano.” Balzac concisely expressed his experience in a black and white bon mot: “Do not judge Liszt till you have heard Chopin. The Hungarian is a devil; the Pole an angel.”

In one review after a concert it is possible to read the opinion of a dry critic, Michael Bourges, trying to define more closely the differences between the most famous: “Liszt and Thalberg, as we know, call forth a great expression, yet Chopin does the same, but not in a noisy tumultueux manner, and this is because he pulls strings in the heart more intimate and delicate.”

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7 Chopin to Tytus Woyciechowski, Paris 12 Dec. 1831.
9 Honoré Balzac, letter to Ewelina Hańska, Paris 28 May 1843.
Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837), Viennese composer and pianist, cofounder of the brilliant style, which fascinated young Chopin.

John Field (1782–1837), Irish pianist and composer, famous for his playing and his nocturnes.
He is and will remain
the most daring and proudest
poetic spirit of our day

Robert Schumann,
“Neue Zeitschrift für Musik”,
1836

Eugène Delacroix, *Portrait of Fryderyk Chopin*
Adieu, Mio carissimo maestro, 
do not forget now about Dresden, 
or soon about Poland…

Maria Wodzińska to Chopin, 
15 September 1836
Self-portrait of Maria Wodzińska. Sketches made by Maria – portrait of the family, and also a portrait of Chopin even today are full of nostalgic traces of fleeting moments spent in Marienbad.
This history appears like a scene from another opera. Could anyone imagine Chopin as a Lord of the Manor, deeply settled in a Kuyavian village, with a thriving wife and group of children?

But Chopin dreamed of such plans. “There are days when I don’t know. Today I would prefer to be in Służewo, rather than to write to Służewo…” On 9 September 1836, he asked for the hand of 17 year-old Maria Wodzińska and he was accepted, admittedly, with certain conditions. He took the unravelling of his hopes painfully.

Chopin knew the object of his feelings connected to his idea of founding his own home from his earliest years. Three Wodzińskis from Służewo in Kuyavia, Antoni, Feliks and Kazimierz, grew up together with him in Mikołaj Chopin’s boarding house. He got to know their sister, Maria, as a child, and then forgot about her. She reminded him of her herself. Through one of her brothers she sent Chopin – in a gesture to remind the famous composer of herself – one of her own compositions.

“That made me more happy than I can say,” he replied with courtesy, “and immediately that same evening I improvised in one of the salons here on a prettified,” as he put it, “theme by Maria, with whom in the olden times we ran through the rooms of Pszenny’s house…” In response he sent his “estimable collègue” – through the brother – the recently published waltz (E-flat major op. 18) with a request: “Please take my elegant bow to Miss Maria, with much respect. Be amazed and tell yourself quietly: My God! How this has grown!”

She was then sixteen years old and the appearance of the young girl would be difficult to describe. Juliusz Słowacki, who had already fallen in love with her, thought her ugly, even very ugly. In other relations she had something striking, “slightly swarthy complexion, dark hair and beautiful eyes, which have burned more than one heart.” Słowacki was aroused to compose one of the most beautiful love poems in Polish literature – W Szwajcarii (‘In Switzerland’)

“Since she vanished like a golden dream,  
I am drying from grief, swooning from longing”

he confessed in the first verse. The last verse served Karłowicz in composing one of his most tragic songs:

“Whence the first stars that light up the sky  
There I will go till past the dark rocky ridge.”

When the author of the poems got the message, in fact not quite true, that Chopin had married “his Maria”, he was consoled by thoughts such as “maybe she went with him a little in likeness to me,” as he wrote, “as Chopin and I are similar like two drops of water.”
Chopin composed two lovely mazurkas, which are worth more than forty romances and express more than all of the literature of the age

George Sand to Eugène Delacroix, 28 May 1842
I dreamt of something else, 
but it didn’t come true

Chopin to Julian Fontana
10 August 1841

Though love and I,
as you know, for a long time don’t come 
in through the same door

George Sand to Emanuel Arago,
9 December 1846

Stormy sky
For Chopin this was not love at first sight. At first George Sand seemed even rather unpleasant to him. It was not easy, but in the end he allowed himself to be drawn into that romance which has been written forever into the history of the romantic era. The explosion of passion embraced them both and the near miss with the deadly threat that touched Chopin on Majorca did not just fail to weaken their union, but strengthened and consolidated it. The character of that union, initially violent and explosive, shaped itself into mutual, quiet devotion, and took the form of the passage of family life.

Fundamentally, they were like fire and water; therefore, it was clear that the Arcadian status quo, as it was in Nohant and which included the months spent in Paris, could not last forever. Firstly, the temperament of the author of *Lelia* would not allow the situation to continue. A double game started. From one side there was full sacrifice and care for the friend whose health was increasingly poor, and the appearance of sensitivity towards the recent lover; on the other side, the ever closer and more frequent contact with old and new friends. Chopin, despite his ability to withdraw completely into his compositional espaces imaginaires, started to feel jealousy which, for George Sand, was a category impossible to accept, isolated from the ideas and canons of her own “Religion of Love”. Franz Liszt described her leading principles thus: “Love is like a glass of water which you give to anyone who is thirsty.”

“I would run to you immediately, if it weren’t for this unhappy and passionate jealousy which you know,” she explained to Ferdinand François. “The same day as I confessed about you I was punished for my loyalty,” she clarified the situation for Pierre Bocage. “I very much like that boy. I don’t say that in front of Chopin, so that he won’t immediately start to detect love in everything. Though love and I, as you know, for a long time,” she confided to Emmanuel Arago, “don’t come in through the same door.”

This is therefore how love evaporated from George Sand. Her double games became increasingly tiring. She yearned to return to liberty, to unlimited freedom. “It was good that I got a little angry one day; it helped me to say a few words of truth and point out that one day I may have enough of this.”

At some point the idea of separation from the unloved lover arose through the mirror of her own novel. In a veiled, but clear way – Prince Charles of Roswald’s love affair with the former actress Lucrezia paraphrased her own situation. Page after page she read *Lucrezia Floriani* by the fireside, Eugène Delacroix, who witnessed the presentation of this “went through torture at the time of this reading.” As he said: “The executioner and the victim equally astonished [him]. Mrs Sand felt no embarrassment, and Chopin without any pretence, was delighted by the story.”

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2 George Sand to Ferdinand François, Paris, end of the year 1845.
3 George Sand to Pierre Bocage, Paris 20 Feb. 1845.
4 George Sand to Emmanuel Arago, Nohant 9 Dec. 1846.
5 George Sand to Maria de Rozières, Nohant 24 July 1846.
6 Compare Caroline Jaubert, Souvenirs, Paris 1881.