Chopin and Poland

Cory McKay
Departments of Music and Computer Science
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada, N1G 2W1

The nineteenth century was a time when people were looking for something new and exciting in the arts. The Romantics valued the exotic and many artists, writers and composers created works that conjured images of distant places, in terms of both time and location. Nationalist movements were rising up all over Europe, leading to an emphasis on distinctive cultural styles in music rather than an international homogeneity. Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin used this opportunity to go beyond the conventions of his time and introduce music that had the unique character of his native Poland to the ears of western Europe. Chopin wrote music with a distinctly Polish flare that was influential in the Polish nationalist movement.

Before proceeding to discuss the political aspect of Chopin's work, it is first necessary to establish that the musical styles of Poland truly are evident in his music. There are certain schools of thought, particularly in France and Germany, which hold that his work has much more in common with the music of western Europe than with Poland. It is argued that, although there certainly are some token elements of Polish styles in his music, the majority of his works were much more influenced by the music that he heard in the aristocratic salons while living in Paris. It has been said in conjunction to this that Chopin's music is really no more national in style than that of Schumann or Beethoven and that it was only the Romantic ideal of valuing the exotic that caused him to be hailed as a nationalist composer.¹

It is true that Chopin cannot have helped but have been influenced by the music he heard in Paris. It is also true that, although he had a Polish mother and was raised in Poland, his father was French. Finally, there is no doubt that Chopin was trained extensively in the conventional musical styles of western Europe while growing up in Poland. It is thus understandable that at first glance some would see the Polish influence on Chopin's music as trivial. Indeed, there certainly are compositions of his which show very little Polish influence. However, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that the music that he heard in Poland while growing up did indeed have a persistent and pervasive influence on a large proportion of his music.

The Polish influence is most obviously seen in Chopin's polonaises and mazurkas, both of which are traditional Polish dance forms. The polonaise originated in Poland during the 16th century as a stately processional dance in triple meter. It had diffused throughout Europe by Chopin's time, so his use of the form was something less than revolutionary. He did, however, write far more polonaises than most composers in the west and he treated the form more seriously than most of them. He was also much truer to the original form of the dance than most composers of the time, as can be seen in the particularly Polish character of the Polonaise in A flat Op. 53 and Polonaise in F sharp minor Op. 44. His first composition, at the age of seven, was a polonaise, and he continued to write them through his entire career.

The mazurka, on the other hand, was a form that was virtually unknown outside of Poland. It originated as a peasant dance in the province where Chopin was born, Mazovia. As a youth, Chopin frequently visited the Polish countryside and took great pains to write down the folk songs that he heard.

there. He drew on this collection for use in many of his later works, and it was probably here that he first encountered the mazurka.

The unusual harmonies, rhythms and the pervasive chromaticism of Chopin’s mazurkas seemed very strange to listeners accustomed to western European music, causing some critics to react badly. Ludwig Rellstab wrote this on the subject of Chopin’s first two books of mazurkas: “In search of ear-splitting dissonances, tortured transitions, piercing modulations, disgusting dislocations of the melody and rhythm, he is unremitting and, we would say, inexhaustible.” This type of criticism is an indication of how this Polish form was authentically different from western styles.

It is true that criticisms of Chopin’s unusual compositional techniques were also launched at pieces that were not so obviously Polish as his mazurkas, primarily his early nocturnes. However, there is no doubt that the mazurkas and their distinctly Polish character received a disproportionately high amount of criticism. Indeed, much of the strangeness for which pieces like the Nocturne in G minor Op. 15 No. 3 were criticized was a result of the presence of mazurka-like gestures that are incorporated into them.

A triple meter characterizes traditional Polish mazurkas, with a strong accent on the normally weak third beat. They frequently contain chromaticism and stray outside the realm of the major and minor into church modes, the Lydian in particular. It is true that Chopin did temper his mazurkas somewhat with the influence of western theory, but the significance of this should not be over-emphasized. He clearly allowed the Polish character of his mazurkas to shine through, building on it with western theory rather than obscuring it. Mazurka in F sharp minor Op. 6 No. 1, shown in example 1, is a good example of this. It shows how Chopin often mixed western diatonic elements and Polish chromaticism in the sequences common in the genre.

Polish folk music also shows some traits common in Arabian music, probably because of Poland’s proximity to Turkey. One such trait is the melodic use of the augmented second. This influence can be seen in some of Chopin’s music, such as the passage shown in example 2 from the Mazurka Op. 7 No. 1.

Chopin also incorporated the syncopated rhythms common in Polish folk music into his mazurkas. The second or third beat accents in traditional danced mazurkas are accompanied by foot stomping. Chopin applied this to his mazurkas through accents, as can be seen in example 3 from the Mazurka in D major Op. 33 No. 2. This was novel to the ears of his Parisian listeners, and several listeners, such as Charles Halle, were so disoriented with this syncopation that they insisted that the mazurkas are written in duple time rather than triple time.

Chopin also used the church modes common in the popular music of Poland, but took some steps to soften the blow to Parisians who had grown up listening almost exclusively to music in the major or minor modes. Example 4, from the Mazurka Op. 24 No. 2, shows one way in which Chopin did this. He uses the Aeolian mode but avoids the third in the dominant seventh chord in the fourth measure. G natural would have sounded out of place in the context of the seventh chord, while A sharp would have destroyed the Aeolian character of the passage.

---

4 Ibid., 236.
5 Ibid., 244.
6 Kelley, Chopin the Composer, 20-21.
7 Todd, Nineteenth Century Piano Music, 243-244.
8 Kelley, Chopin the Composer, 17.
Taking all of this into account, Chopin's use of techniques often heard in Polish folk music but uncommon in the western European music of the time cannot be doubted, at least in respect to his mazurkas. Contemporary Polish critics clearly perceived the influence of local styles in Chopin's music, as can be seen in the following excerpts from Polish newspapers:

The land which has given him life by its songs has influenced the character of his music. This is evident in the works of this artist where the sound of many of his melodies seems to be a joyful echo of our native harmony. The simple mazurka becomes transformed at his touch while it still preserves its own peculiar flavor and accent. To capture the charming simplicity of such native refrains as Chopin does with his exquisite playing and brilliant composition, one has to have a certain sensitivity to the music of our fields and woodlands and the songs of the Polish peasant.⁹

⁹ Todd, Nineteenth Century Piano Music, 246.
Example 3: Mazurka in D major Op. 33 No. 2 (mm. 1-8) (Todd, *Nineteenth Century Piano Music*, 242)

Example 4: Mazurka Op. 24 No. 2 (Kelley, *Chopin the Composer*, 17)

It is pleasing to the Polish people when reflecting on such magnificent talent, may even genius, to remember that in the greater part of his compositions as well as in his performance the spirit of the nation was evident.\(^{10}\)

French critics also recognized the Polish character of Chopin's music, but did so using somewhat different tones. Berlioz wrote that Chopin's "melodies, all impregnated with Polish elements, have something naively untamed about them that charms and captivates by its very strangeness."\(^{11}\) A French reviewer wrote in a Parisian newspaper that "M. Chopin has acquired a quite special reputation for the spiritual and profoundly artistic manner in which he handles the national music of Poland, a genre of music that still remains very little known to us."\(^{12}\)

It is thus demonstrated not only that Chopin's contemporaries in Paris saw his music as influenced by the music of Poland,

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 246.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 248.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 248.
but also that they commented on its strangeness and peculiarity. This stands in stark contrast to the writings of Polish critics who wrote about it in terms of familiarity and positive recognition. This is very good evidence that Chopin's music is authentically Polish.

Of course, it can be argued that, although the Polish influence on Chopin's mazurkas and polonaises is clear, this says nothing for the other types of pieces that he wrote. While it is true that Chopin did write some pieces that have very few traits that can be easily linked to the music of Poland, it is also important to recognize that the mazurkas and polonaises make up a very significant part of Chopin's output. He wrote fifty-one mazurkas, more than any other kind of composition. His polonaises come in a close fourth at twenty-one compositions, after the twenty-four preludes and twenty-four études. It should be remembered here that Chopin's polonaises are considerably longer than his preludes and études.

There are also a good number of pieces other than mazurkas and polonaises that display the Polish influence on Chopin's music. The *F-minor Concerto Op. 21* and the *Andante Spianato Op. 22* both contain imbedded mazurkas, as does the *Nocturne in G minor Op. 15 No. 3*. The *Fantasy on Polish Airs Op. 13* and the *Krąkowski Op. 14* are both imbued with Polish resonances. The same can be said of some of Chopin's ballades, such as *Op. 23 in G minor* and *Op. 52 in F minor*, as well as the middle section of the *Scherzo in B minor*, which is a Polish carol.

Aside from the syncopation mentioned above, Polish folk music often has constantly shifting rhythms and accents. It has been argued based on this that Chopin's famous use of rubato, something which he applied to the diverse range of genres that he wrote in, was derived from the music of Poland. The practice of rubato existed in Polish folk music for centuries prior to the birth of Chopin, although it had not necessarily been applied in exactly the same ways that Chopin used it.

There is also a large amount of testimony to indicate how strongly his upbringing in Poland influenced his compositions. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger wrote that it is Chopin's "lingering impressions of Polish folk music that constitute the essential foundation of Chopin's aesthetic orientation, laid down at an early age, and more or less immutably." Franz Liszt echoed this by writing:

Chopin was thoroughly imbued with certain unique sentiments, the most lofty of which he felt he had acquired in his youth; these were the only ones he wished to express in his art. His view of that art was so unvaryingly the same that his artistic predilections could not fail to be influenced by it.

Aside from his independent study of Polish folk music as a youth, Chopin was also influenced to write Polish music by one of his two main teachers, Józef Elsner. Elsner was one of the founders of Polish national opera and was also concerned with introducing elements of Polish folklore into high art.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Chopin preserved many stylistic characteristics of pre- Classical music. For example, he used an outmoded chromatic chaconne-style bass on the opening tutti of several of his pieces and often wrote music in terms of old-style ritornellos. This may be an indication that he was staying true to the musical values of the art music of his homeland.

---

13 Ibid., 223.
17 Rink and Samson, *Chopin Studies*, 102.
18 Ibid., 104.
20 Ibid., 203-204.
which was outside the mainstream of musical activity.

Both critics and Chopin himself noted the relationship between his compositions and Poland. One critic wrote, "We may safely maintain that not any nation may boast of such a great, truly national composer. In Chopin's works, every note is national, every note beautiful."\(^ {21}\) Chopin stated in 1831 that he "wanted to feel and in part have approached the feeling of our national music."\(^ {22}\)

Finally, French instrumental music was at a low at the time that Chopin arrived in Paris. There were few composers there who could have been strong influences, other than Berlioz, whose music is very different from that of Chopin.\(^ {23}\) Although he was well aware of the musical trends of his time, Chopin showed very little interest in any of the music that he heard in Paris, with the exception of the work of Bellini.\(^ {24}\) He wrote that "Everything modern escapes my brain." and attended performances in Paris more often out of a sense of duty than for the sake of enjoyment.\(^ {25}\)

Given this, in combination with all of the evidence presented above, the argument that the influence of the music that Chopin heard in France outweighed the Polish influence on his music becomes untenable. Although his often intellectual approach to music was probably derived from western sources, the character and feeling of Chopin's music was strongly Polish, as were many of the stylistic elements he used.

Now that the authentically Polish character of Chopin as a composer has been established, it is possible to deal with the relationship of his music to the Polish nationalist movement. However, in order to discuss this, it is appropriate to first briefly review the causes and history of the movement and Chopin's relationship to it.

At the time that Chopin was alive, nationalist movements were active all over Europe. Their fervent patriotism and craving for independence or political strength resulted in the unification of Italy and Germany. These movements were often characterized by an emphasis on literary and linguistic traditions, an interest in folklore, and a sense of pride in culture and national identity. Composers often played an important role in these movements by writing music that inspired and unified people in a common national cause.

When Chopin was born, Poland was under Russian rule. The peasants lived in poverty almost unmatched almost anywhere in Europe and even the aristocrats had virtually no power. Driven by a desire for independence, Polish army cadets and university students revolted in the "November Uprising" of 1830, demanding a constitution. The landed aristocrats and gentry helped establish a provisional government but soon ended up fighting amongst themselves over how radical reforms should be. The Polish peasants refused to support either group. Within a year, Russia sent in 180,000 troops to regain control. They ended all pretext of constitutional rule and executed thousands of Poles. Many fled to exile in western Europe, including 5000 who settled in France. They established a community in Paris, which was led by the revolutionary poet Adam Mickiewicz.

There is a good deal of debate on whether or not Chopin saw himself as being involved politically in the Polish nationalist movement. He was notoriously silent in regards to his politics, a fact that has been used to justify the argument that he did not write music with any political ideas in mind. However, despite the lack of direct evidence from Chopin himself, there is a good deal of evidence that suggests that he did indeed imbue his music with political ideas or, at the very least, that it was used by others for political purposes.

\(^ {21}\) Todd, Nineteenth Century Piano Music, 250.
\(^ {22}\) Ibid., 246.
\(^ {23}\) Wolff, Masters of the Keyboard, 188.
\(^ {24}\) Rink and Samson, Chopin Studies, 104-105.
\(^ {25}\) Ibid., 105.
Although it is true that Chopin's father was French, it is very relevant that he was brought up entirely in Poland, had a Polish mother and had mostly Polish friends and role models while growing up.\textsuperscript{26} It is also important to remember that his father, Nicolas Chopin, had been living in Poland for a good number of years when Chopin was born and identified himself fully with Poland despite his French origins. He served as a captain in the Polish revolutionary army in the revolt of 1794 and was friends with members of the independence movement in Poland.\textsuperscript{27} He mastered the Polish language and developed a Polish patriotism. Chopin was strongly influenced while growing up by the nationalist ideas of his father and his friends.\textsuperscript{28}

The virulence of Chopin's nationalist feelings at the time immediately following his departure from Poland are made apparent in the following diary entry, which was written after he discovered that the revolutionaries in Poland had finally been defeated and was unsure of what had happened to his family: "Have they fallen victims to the unleashed fury of the Muscovite scum? . . . Oh why could I not have slain even a single Muscovite!"\textsuperscript{29}

Chopin was also involved in the community of Polish refugees while he was in Paris. He was a member of the Polish Literary Society and was also a friend of Mickiewicz.\textsuperscript{30} He made significant efforts to help the community, such as the benefit concert for Polish refugees that he gave in 1835.\textsuperscript{31} Poland was constantly in his thoughts, as can be seen in his response to rumors of his impending marriage to Jane Stirling, where he stated that he was too wrapped up in thoughts of those that he had left in Poland to even consider marriage.\textsuperscript{32}

Given that Chopin definitely had personal beliefs influenced by Polish nationalism, the next issue to deal with is exactly how this was reflected in his music. Chopin wrote instrumental music and had a distaste for program music, making it difficult to attribute particular meaning to his pieces. His own silence on this issue exacerbates the problem. There are, however, two compositions that have gained recognition as being overtly political.

The first is the \textit{Nocturne in G minor Op. 15 No. 3}, which contains a combination of stylistic elements taken from both mazurkas and sacred chorales. This very unusual combination has been interpreted as a reference to the messianic brand of Polish romantic nationalism, which held that the coming war to liberate Poland would lead to the religious redemption of all humanity. The writings of this faction of nationalists blended elements of nationalism and religion in much the same spirit as this nocturne.\textsuperscript{33}

The second piece that has had overt political sentiments attributed to it is the \textit{Ballade in F major Op. 38}. Two contemporaries of Chopin wrote that it represented the plight of Poles in exile from their homeland by the Russians and Schumann wrote that it was based on several nationalistic poems by Mickiewicz.\textsuperscript{34} Chopin himself gave no indication of whether or not this was true, but there is no doubt that this ballade caused him to be publicly perceived as being more political than had previously been the case.

\textsuperscript{26} Wolff, \textit{Masters of the Keyboard}, 188.
\textsuperscript{31} Frederick Niecks, \textit{Frederick Chopin as a Man and Musician}, (Neptune City, NJ: Paganiniana Publications Inc., no date given), 280.
\textsuperscript{32} Rink and Samson, \textit{Chopin Studies}, 102.
\textsuperscript{33} Todd, \textit{Nineteenth Century Piano Music}, 252.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 252.
In general, Chopin's musical nationalism was more cultural than political, which is to say that it evoked the character of Poland without making overt references to its political situation. Rather than making direct allusions to the occupation of Poland, it served as a symbol of the uniquely Polish culture that politically active nationalists could identify with and rally around. In the face of Russian oppression, the Poles needed to reaffirm their cultural identity and Chopin and his music helped to do this by symbolizing Poland's strength and spiritual individuality.

After the defeat of the Polish independence movement by the Russian army, the only form of nationalism permitted in Poland was cultural. If Chopin's music had been obviously political, the authorities would not have allowed it to be published or played in Poland. The cultural brand of nationalism in Chopin's music may well have caused it to be more politically effective than it would have been if his political views had been more obvious.

There is no doubt that Chopin's music was very well received in Poland, despite his absence. His music was played more in Poland in the years of 1831 to 1862 than the music of any other composer. Its wide distribution increased its effectiveness as a unifying nationalist tool, an effect that was furthered by the common practice among nationalists of setting patriotic texts to Chopin's music.

Polish writers used Chopin's music to express political sentiments, albeit in subtle ways, due to Russian censorship. One commentator wrote that "Poland has lately given the musical world a genius the equal of whom does not and certainly will not exist for a long time: it is Chopin . . . this Byron, Mickiewicz of pianists...

Reference to such revolutionary Romantic figures as Mickiewicz and Byron could well have been interpreted by Polish readers as a covert testimony to Chopin's political power. Further allusion to the patriotic character of Chopin's music is given in the following excerpt from a Polish article:

In his music the national character is revealed in its finest splendor: The very same air that we breathe, the same sky to which we raise our eyes, the same longing and sorrow that permeates the songs of our people. He has sung most movingly of our unhappiness, he recounts better than anyone the greatness of our past and of our hopes, he alone has sapped the sweetest nectar from the flowers that bloom in abundance on our native soil . . . He is one of the worthiest representatives of our nation.

It was not only writers inside of Poland that perceived the political importance of Chopin's music. One French critic wrote this on the subject of Chopin's mazurkas:

It is said that there is always a memory of the absent and oppressed country in the melodies of this pianist-composer. Fortunate are countries that have poets like Thomas Moore and Chopin; through their songs, they keep alive the traditions and the love of the country where they were born, and nurse it with a sweet and noble hope of liberation.

Wilhelm von Lenz, one of Chopin's pupils, wrote that Chopin "represented Poland, the land of his dreams, in the Parisian salons under Louis-Phillipe, salons which his viewpoint allowed him to use as a political platform. Chopin was the only political pianist. He incarnated Poland, he set Poland to music!"

It is perhaps Schumann who most perceptively expressed the situation by writing the following:

If the mighty autocratic monarch of the north knew what a dangerous enemy threatened him in Chopin's works, in the simple tunes of his mazurkas, he would forbid this

---

36 Ibid., 214.
40 Ibid., 253.
music. Chopin's works are cannons buried in flowers.41

It is difficult to determine if Chopin intended for his music to be interpreted and used in this way. He never made any clear statements either way, but given his background in nationalism it is perhaps more likely that he at the very least approved of the way in which his works were used by the nationalists.

All of this brings home how important Chopin's Polish roots were to him, both musically and politically. His music not only brought awareness of Polish culture to western Europe, but was also used as a patriotic symbol by those fighting for the freedom of Poland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Niecks, Frederick. *Frederick Chopin as a Man and Musician*. Neptune City, NJ: Paganiniana Publications Inc. (no date given).


41 Ibid., 249.