

THE QUALITY OF NATIONALITY IN CHOPIN'S WORKS OF THE PARIS PERIOD

In interpretations of Chopin's music, it would be hard to say nothing about nationality, which Chopin, as Norwid asserts, 'raised to humanity', and so universalised, and which is discernible in his music from the first works to the last. Witness the mazurkas, which he began writing in 1824 and ended with his opus 63 and the unfinished sketch for a Mazurka in F minor, or the abandoned sketch for the Mazurka in F minor, Op. 63 No. 2, as Jeffrey Kallberg suggests.¹ He also wrote his first polonaises as an eight-year-old child and composed his last – the Polonaise-Fantasy – in 1846. But it is not just about those Polish dance genres, as Liszt also stresses. He considers that 'Chopin must be ranked among the first musicians thus individualizing in themselves the poetic sense of an entire nation' and calls him a poet 'who desires that the heart of his country should vibrate in unison with his own strains'.²

Only once did Chopin directly verbalise his attitude toward the question of nationality in music. On 25 December 1831, and so his first Christmas spent in Paris, he wrote to Tytus Woyciechowski: 'You know how much I wanted to feel, and I did partially come to a feeling for, our national music'.³ So what was that feeling of national *music* that Chopin took with him to Paris?

Our symposium is the first in a planned series of conferences with nationality as their leitmotiv. Thus I would like to focus on two ideas.

¹ Jeffrey Kallberg, 'Chopin's Last Style', in *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, 1998), 89–134, pp. 126–129.

² Liszt, *Life of Chopin*, tr. Martha Walker Cook (New York, 2005), pp. 91–92.

³ Fryderyk Chopin to Tytus Woyciechowski, letter of 25 December 1831, in *Chopin's Polish Letters*, tr. David Frick (Warsaw, 2016), p. 257.

The first is to stress that Polish nationality and style were born at a time when the country found itself in an exceptional situation, and they motivated activities – not just artistic – to a much greater extent than in other countries. The other idea is the conviction that it was precisely the strength of Chopin’s ‘Polishness’, his fascination with national and artistic ideals, that made Chopin ‘impervious’ in Paris to the other Romantic and philosophical ideas that he encountered. He forged an individual style in those *espaces imaginaires*, within him; he became a great innovator of music, but of music with a Polish stamp.

So we should return to source, to Chopin’s links with his native land. In his book *Polskość Chopina* [The Polishness of Chopin] (2012), Bohdan Pociąg begins metaphorically with the land that yielded up Chopin to the world. In that regard, one may cite Przybyszewski:

Our land shaped Chopin’s soul, fashioning it into a receptacle to hold all of his future impressions. This is the root of the continuity and uniqueness of his works, the individuality and what I call the metamusical element of his music.⁴

And Roman Brandstaetter, in the first paragraph of his poetical cycle *Pieśń o życiu i śmierci Chopina*, condensed Chopin’s relationship with his homeland thus:

The land of your music.
And the music?
I can’t image Poland without it,
Fryderyk.⁵

And concluding his cycle, in the penultimate poem, ‘Rozmowa z siostrą’ [Conversation with my sister], he writes:

In the mirror of death
All is truth,
And nothing is gesture,
Listen, sister...
I love this land...
In this land I am...⁶

⁴ Stanisław Przybyszewski, ‘In honour of the master’, tr. Piotr Szymczak, in Irena Poniatowska (ed.), *Chopin and his Critics. An Anthology (up to World War I)* (Warsaw, 2011), p. 107.

⁵ Roman Brandstaetter, *Pieśń o życiu i śmierci Chopina* [Song of Chopin’s life and death] (Poznań, 1987), p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

That is how he sees Chopin the poet. But we must take into account not just the composer's birthplace, but also the shaping of his national awareness and identity. Looking back over the whole of the nineteenth century, we have to state that Poland's situation under the partitions gave rise to a distinctive, and imperative, historical-social-ideological code. That code generated modes of thinking and was a powerful influence on the intellectual and artistic elites, affecting not just the content but also the expression of literary and musical output.

In nineteenth-century Poland, the canon of national culture developed in a sense into a 'closed', absolute system. As Andrzej Tyszka writes,

a canon may be socially accepted, but it may also be a tool of symbolic violence and even indoctrination. One cannot be a card-carrying member of a national community without participating in that sphere of stereotypes, notions, myths, topoi and archetypes that make up the *legendarium*. [...] The national culture was distinctly, perhaps even unilaterally, subservient to the idea of regaining and then sustaining and preserving independence.⁷

In Poland, that aspiration to showing national values in art was much stronger and arose much earlier than, for example, in Russian music, and later in Spanish and Scandinavian music. That is because it grew out of a robust opposition, a negation of Poland's disappearance from the map of Europe and of the 'non-existence' of that great nation to which the world had shown contempt, and it was associated with a sense of pain, despair and revolt.

Linked to this is the criterion of voluntary nationality, described by historians, signifying that human will gives the nation its meaning and creates the national community. As Kazimierz Brodziński wrote: 'the Polish nation [...] is by inspiration a philosopher, a Copernicus in the moral world. Misunderstood and persecuted, it stands its ground [...] for whilst all pride is a crime, nationality is a duty'.⁸

⁷ Andrzej Tyszka, 'Od kanonu do uniwersum kultury' [From the canon to the universal in culture], in *Wokół kategorii narodowości, wielokulturowości i uniwersalizmu w muzyce polskiej* [On nationality, multi-culturalism and universalism in Polish music] (Warsaw and Podkowa Leśna, 2002), pp. 165, 170, 173.

⁸ Kazimierz Brodziński, *O narodowości Polaków, czytano na sessji Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk dnia 3 maja 1831 r.* [On the nationality of Poles, read at a session of the Society for the Friends of Learning on 3 May 1831] (pp. 5 and 7).



The partitions thwarted Poles' national sense of significance in Europe. The consequence was a heightened desire to safeguard what was native. That family community, that walled gentry settlement, was idealised by Adam Mickiewicz in *Pan Tadeusz*, Stefan Witwicki in his *Piosnki sielskie* [Rustic songs] and Bohdan Zaleski in his descriptions of traditional life, not tainted by civilisation, in Ukraine. The noble manor was a symbol of thinking confined to one's own backyard, a critique of everything foreign. That influenced the xenophobic picture of nineteenth-century Polish culture, but it should be strongly emphasised that it also expressed the possibility of salvaging the *only* values which the nation could preserve as its own. Hence the rural populace began to be idealised as the repository of tradition, of old virtues and customs. That situation of national-symbolic, even metaphysical, tension induced in Poland the birth of great poetry – of Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński, then Norwid, and the music of Chopin, who, through their genius, raised the topos of nationality to the highest level in European culture. But the whole of Polish art, literature and music, not just that produced in exile, was condemned to nationality, to subordinating itself to that fundamental idea. Maria Bogucka writes that the monothematic, even obsessive, Polish culture, 'paid [for its mission] with the feebleness of one-sidedness, the neglect of many other themes'.⁹ The love of the homeland – the 'vampiric' homeland, demanding a sacrifice of blood – was eulogised in poetry and in song as the supreme sentiment, often entwined with the love for one's sweetheart. Poland was essentially lacking love poetry such as that written by Werther and Byron. There were, meanwhile, many rustic tales of girls' longing, but most often connected with their bidding farewell to a young man departing for war or with the hope that he would return from the war in one piece. That instrumentalisation of art for political ends gained a grand poetical dimension and a model in Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve], in Gustaw's metamorphosis into Konrad, in the annihilation of the form and dimension of personal experiences and the birth of the political figure, acting in the name of his love of the homeland.

⁹ Maria Bogucka, *Dzieje kultury polskiej do 1918 roku* [The history of Polish culture up to 1918] (Wrocław, 1991), p. 405.

Brodziński would repeat in his lectures: 'Without patriotic sentiment, the works of geniuses cannot soar'.¹⁰

In the aspiration to national self-definition in music, there was a move to treat as common (*ludowe*), and so national, not just the folklore of the common people (*lud*), but all popularised output, encompassing urban folklore, the culture of the noble manor and even folk-styled melodies, although – it should be emphasised – during the nineteenth century Poland possessed a collector of regional folklore unique in the world, namely Oskar Kolberg. It should also be said that the prevailing conviction in Poland was of the unity of multi-ethnic elements, which grew out of the concept of the multicultural Polish state prior to the partitions. Karol Kurpiński's quip on that poly-ethnicity was that just as the Greeks divided song into Lydian, Phrygian, Ionian and Dorian, so in our songs one can distinguish the characters of Cracow, the highlands, Greater Poland, Kujawy, Rus, Ukraine and so on.¹¹

Chopin's national awareness was formed in that spirit during the first period of the partitions – up to the November Rising of 1830–31. He assumed the whole baggage of national symbolism. The modern-day Polish nation took shape during that period. The concept of the nation as a political community was genetically linked to French Enlightenment thinking, whilst the idea of the nation as a cultural community was derived from German romanticism.¹² During Chopin's Warsaw years, memories of a political community were still alive, nourished by an irrational dream of freedom and sustained by the November Rising, for which society paid with greater enslavement than before. A patriotic spirit reigned among the intellectual youth of Warsaw; it was subjected to what might be seen as the pressure to mythologise the nation's history, to draw from it hope for the future, which was simply a duty to fight for independence.

¹⁰ Quoted in Mieczysława Demska-Trębacz (ed.), *Muzyka i naród, wybór tekstów* [Music and nation. A choice of texts] (Warsaw, 1991), p. 5.

¹¹ Karol Kurpiński, 'Odpowiedź Panu G. na uwagi umieszczone w Gazecie Literackiej Nro 7 nad artykułem (obacz Nro 2 i 3 Tygodnika Muzycznego o popisie uczniów Szkoły Muzyki i Dramatycznej)' [A reply to Mr G.'s remarks placed in issue no. 7 of the *Gazeta Literacka* above the article (see *Tygodnik Muzyczny* Nos. 2 and 3 on displays by pupils of the School of Music and Drama)], *Tygodnik Muzyczny i Dramatyczny*, 1821/7 of 17 February, pp. 25–28; quoted by Demska-Trębacz (ed.), *Muzyka i naród*, p. 10.

¹² Andrzej Walicki, 'Słowo wstępne' [Preface], in Janusz Goćkowski and Andrzej Walicki (eds), *Idee i koncepcje narodu w polskiej myśli politycznej czasów porozbiorowych* [Ideas and concepts of the nation in Polish political thought of the post-partition period] (Warsaw, 1977), p. 11.

In 1826–29, Chopin attended university lectures by Brodziński and Feliks Bentkowski, at home they sang Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's *Śpiewy historyczne* [Historical songs], which represented the catechism of patriotism at that time, and there was an all-pervading atmosphere of opposition towards the tsarist regime. While residing in Vienna, Chopin could not come to terms with the fact that he had not been fated to take part in the uprising. He expressed his hatred of the occupier and torturer in his letters and in the so-called Stuttgart Diary.

I shall illustrate the question of nationality in Chopin's music by drawing on three examples of fantasy form (with two complements). To begin with, Chopin showed his national identity by turning to motifs from popular songs and to Polish dances (mazur, polonaise and krakowiak). One such example is the *Fantasy on Polish Airs*, Op. 13 – a sort of virtuosic potpourri on national themes, in which he availed himself of ready exemplars in order to create an atmosphere of Polishness. There was the song from Franciszek Karpiński's popular idyll *Laura i Filon* [Laura and Philo], a krakowiak by Kurpiński and the traditional song 'Johnny rides from Toruń' ['Jedzie Jasio od Torunia']. This may be deemed a 'superficial' type of national style. During his stay in Vienna, from November 1830 to the summer of 1831, the carefree notions of the would-be composer wishing to conquer the musical Europe turned into despair following the outbreak of the uprising in Warsaw, into fear for his family and for Poland. The twenty-year-old Chopin underwent a violent initiation into maturity, a self-annihilation in despair, a symbolic death, so that a superior 'I' could be born, followed by the decision to take responsibility for his fortunes and for his entry into the 'new world' that was Paris. There also ensued an abrupt change in the language of Chopin's musical utterances, which gave rise to the drama and passion that are patently in evidence in the Scherzo in B minor, assuming that it was in Vienna that the idea (possibly a sketch) for writing that work arose. Here, the complicated pianistic figures do not serve virtuosity, but express a singular tension of musical thought, passing into passionate intensity. And there follows nostalgic remembrance and the reworking of the Polish carol 'Lulajże Jezuniu' [Hush, little Jesus], possibly during Chopin's first lonely Christmas in exile. We witness the first synthesis of Chopin's innovative musical language with the syndrome of nationality, in the deep layer of a work.

Example 1. Fryderyk Chopin, Scherzo in B minor, Op. 20

a. bars 9–16

b. bars 305–312

During the Paris years, Chopin gave direct expression to his Polishness in his songs, which he wrote exclusively to words by Polish poets, on rustic and patriotic themes. It is in the song ‘Wojak’ [Before the battle] (words by Witwicki) that Chopin issues a call to his fellow Poles: ‘To the fight, away’, bid farewell to your father, mother and sisters and hie on your horse to the battle. The giddy instrumental coda is quite startling. It is a combination of an artistic setting and a blatant political rallying call.

Example 2. Fryderyk Chopin, 'Wojak' [Before the battle], bars 42–50

42 *accel.*
 Le - źe! Niech się sta - nie! Leć na krwa - wy bój! Leć na krwa - wy

47 *ff* *rall.*
 bój! Leć na krwa - wy bój!

In the song 'Śpiew z mogiły' [Poland's Dirge] (words by Wincenty Pol), 'All in vain for freedom strove our valiant brothers, none were left to comfort Poland's mourning mothers', having perished, been taken captive or remained in exile. This is the greatest outburst of patriotism in Chopin's songs. Those songs were not published during Chopin's lifetime. The composer considered that they were not sufficiently polished, or perhaps they were too intimate for him, too close to his heart – a sort of national taboo. It has been written that people found it difficult to penetrate the inner sanctum of Chopin's soul. He protected what lay deepest, only occasionally crying out in 'sorrow' and rebellion in his letters.

Jan Węcowski is currently working on a study of reminiscences of themes from Polish religious songs in Chopin. And even in the etudes, and so in a technical-universal genre, the author has reached a layer where he finds, in the Etudes in C sharp minor, Op. 10 No. 4 and in A minor, Op. 25 No. 4, elements of the songs 'Święty Boże' [Holy God], 'Matko Najświętsza' [Most Holy Mother] and the carol 'Jezus malusieńki' [Dear little Jesus]. If his analysis is confirmed, then we will have evidence that Chopin preserved in his memory a great deal from

the Polish religious tradition in music; he played those songs in the Vis-
itandines' church as a schoolboy.

In Chopin's second fantasy, the Fantasy in F minor (1841), from the period of his most mature output, he revealed completely new means: esoteric form, partly improvised, partly thematic, dual structure (two modes, two keys (F minor, A flat major), two systems of theme construction (thirds and perfect cadence)) and a tone of elegiac complaint with a national subtext. According to Tadeusz Zieliński and Mieczysław Tomaszewski, that subtext consists of phrases from Kurpiński's 'Litwinka' [La Lithuanienne] – an insurrectionary song composed in 1831, which was also sung in exile. As Tomaszewski demonstrates, that subtext is also formed by the characteristic rhythms of the *duma* – a Polish variety of elegy that forms the bedrock for most of Niemcewicz's *Historical songs* ($\frac{2}{4}$ ♩ ♪ ♩ ♩ / ♪ ♪ ♩ ♩ ♩).¹³ So again we are dealing with the combining of innovative structural, formal ideas and Polish reminiscences, though in a veiled, visionary, symbolic form.

But let us return to the mazurkas and polonaises. Chopin retained the mazurka idiom in many genres: in songs, in the Prelude in A major from the opus 28 cycle, in the Nocturne in G minor from Op. 15 and also in the Polonaise in F sharp minor. He had the mazurka in his blood, so to speak. He wrote to his family in 1845 that he found himself in 'espaces imaginaires', 'and I'm a genuine blind Mazovian'; 'I have written 3 new Mazurkas' (Op. 59).¹⁴ He transformed that mazurka quality, as Norwid writes, into an aesthetic element that belonged to the whole of humanity, as occurred with the architectural styles of Ancient Greece (Ionic, Doric). But Ionic and Doric columns were preserved in their authentic form, whereas Chopin did not use authentic mazurkas. He created poems that alluded to various categories of traditional folklore – dance-like whirling or swaying, stamping, the disruption of a duple with a triple rhythm, irregular accentuation, drones, ostinatos, the relentless repetition of phrases, calls, dance-like pauses on a difficult figure and contrasts of expression – from the lively obertas and mazur through to the melancholy, wistful kujawiak. This was sublimation and synthesis, not a stylisation of the

¹³ Tadeusz Zieliński, *Chopin. Życie i droga twórcza* [Chopin. His life and creative path] (Kraków: PWM, 1998), 497; Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Muzyka Chopina na nowo odczytana. Studia i interpretacje* [Chopin's music re-read. Studies and interpretations] (Kraków, 1996), pp. 86–89.

¹⁴ Fryderyk Chopin to his parents, letter of 18–20 July 1845; in *Chopin's Polish Letters*, p. 369.



genre, combined with chromaticism, tonal ambivalence and the use of recitative in the bass (the Mazurka in B minor, Op. 33 No. 4) and of refined ornamentation (many mazurkas). But let us turn to an example of mazurka quality in a nocturne.

The Nocturne in G minor begins with a kujawiak melody, but it is halted on a single note and ends with a different phrase. Then in bar 69 a lively mazurka in G major appears, but the chord sequences are surprising, reaching G sharp minor and F sharp major, whilst the melodic phrases are modified and the mood gradually changes to tragic. The middle section is *religioso*; and that is how Chopin gets to the heart of Polishness: the folk tradition linked to an attachment to religion.

Example 3. Fryderyk Chopin, Nocturne in G minor, Op. 15 No. 3

a. bars 1–7

Musical score for bars 1–7 of Chopin's Nocturne in G minor, Op. 15 No. 3. The score is in 3/4 time and G minor. The tempo is marked "Lento (♩. = 60)". The dynamics include "p languido e rubato" and "dim.". The melody features a kujawiak rhythm with triplets and a long phrase ending on a single note. The bass line has a steady accompaniment with asterisks under some notes.

b. bars 64–69

Musical score for bars 64–69 of Chopin's Nocturne in G minor, Op. 15 No. 3. The score is in 3/4 time and G major. The tempo is marked "sostenuto". The dynamics include "cresc.". The melody is a lively mazurka with a chromatic bass line. The score shows a key change from G minor to G major.

Alongside the expressions of admiration, Chopin was also reproached for those sad, mournful mazurkas back home and in the émigré press. But they were appreciated in France as an exotic poetic of small piano

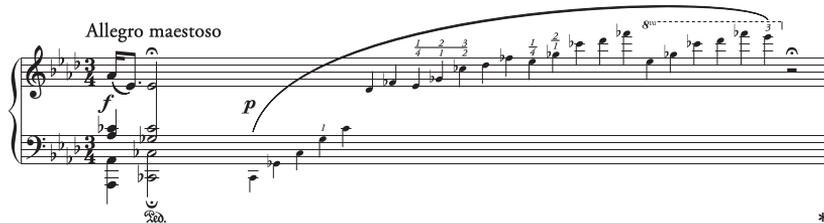
forms, on a national scale. George Sand even wrote that they were worth (two mazurkas from Op. 50) more than forty novels and the literature of the entire century.

And finally we turn to the poetical form of the Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61, which crowns that national genre distinguished by such wonderful polonaises as the F sharp minor and the A flat major and at the same time represents the culmination of the fantasy form in Chopin. I would invoke Eero Tarasti's interesting semiotic analysis of this form.¹⁵ In this polonaise, Chopin creates a new narrative type of form, despite the fact that in its overall outline it is a cross between sonata form and ternary form. The so-called introductory section brings the hatching of themes and motifs, of the germs of the structure, and not a conventional introduction. The way they are shown is new, even contrary to convention. The first chord signifies the inversion of the dotted rhythm that is characteristic of the polonaise; a spread C flat major chord with the notes *d flat* and *f flat* is led across the whole keyboard until the sound expires on a pause. One does not gain the sense of any form. This procedure is repeated four times as we descend into flat keys, bringing darkened hues. The polonaise theme emerges little by little: Chopin shows us a segment from the middle to the end, not from the beginning, and everything back to front. And when the whole theme eventually unfolds after the rhythmic signal, it gradually loses its rhythm – first  / then  / ending with triplets .

It also thrice enters the microcosm of the mazurka, but not its rhythm, rather a nostalgic phrase that is frequent in Chopin's mazurkas, and in the middle section it clearly refers to the expression and texture of a nocturne.

Example 4. Fryderyk Chopin, Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61

a. Beginning



¹⁵ Eero Tarasti, 'Sur la narratologie de Chopin', *International Review of the Aesthetic and Sociology of Music*, 15/1.

At first, Chopin's innovation and the poetic of the Polonaise-Fantasy's form were wholly incomprehensible, even for Liszt. But towards the end of his life Chopin again turned to the majesty of the Polish dance and particularly in the triumphant coda tackled the problem of nationality, as if it were not just about national style, but also about *derrière pensée*, about the survival of the nation.

