

DANIEL WINFREE PAPUGA

INSTEAD OF A LETTER, I AM SENDING YOU TELLEFSEN

Drawing on the correspondence between the then young Thomas Tellefsen and his teacher Fryderyk Chopin during the 1840s, this paper explores the relationships between student and master and between the two pianist-composers, as well as the social life around them.

Letters constitute an important aspect of our documentation of the musical life of the nineteenth century. Liz Stanley claims that letters have three features that are shared with all forms of social interaction. First, they are essentially dialogical. A letter receiver is obliged to become a letter writer in an extended process of reciprocal exchange. Secondly, a letter is also tied to context. It contains different ideas and perspectives depending on who the targeted reader is. The content and focus of letters ‘take on the perspective of the “moment” as this develops within a letter or a sequence of letters, and may utilize a particular “voice” adopted by the writer or a particular “tone” rhetorically employed’.¹ Thirdly, letters are tied to expectations of how communication should occur and what can be expressed in what way, which means that quite often a letter avoids the ‘backstage’ details a researcher would prefer to learn and contains formulaic expressions of the time period instead. In addition, Stanley notes that letters are normally written because of distance between the writer and the receiver.² Having a material token from afar can be a way of evoking closeness and familiarity in a relationship.

The preserved correspondence of Thomas Tellefsen is addressed to two significant others: his mother and his father. The letters published

¹ Liz Stanley, ‘The epistolarium: on theorizing letters and correspondences’, *Auto/Biography*, 12/3, pp. 201–235, at p. 203. doi: 10.1191/0967550704ab014oa.

² *Ibid.*, p. 209.

in *Thomas Tellefsens familiebreve* in 1923 cover the period from Tellefsen's leaving his home town in 1842 until shortly before his death in Paris, in 1874. All of the 129 letters are written by Tellefsen, but the collection also includes autobiographical texts, pieces about Tellefsen by Norwegian critics and editorial comments. This means that we learn much about what Tellefsen wished to express, but little about the total relationship between him and his family. As Stanley writes, 'the loss of the "other side" of the correspondence influences readers' understandings of the remaining letters, for these were a part of something, and not the whole'.³

Chopin and Tellefsen both spent a large part of their lives in Paris, and their letters often reflect personal developments and historical situations. For example, Tellefsen's letters describe his search for a personal style and how various teachers in Paris influenced his piano technique and musical aesthetics. Already before officially beginning studies with Chopin, Tellefsen wrote compositions in what some considered a 'Nordic' musical idiom. But Tellefsen himself mentions influences from Bach and Mozart in addition to Chopin, Liszt and other contemporaries.

Chopin is mentioned sixty-one times in *Thomas Tellefsens familiebreve*, and the references give us a good idea of Chopin's influence on the young pianist even before the latter met his future teacher. Tellefsen wrote one of the first letters to his mother shortly before embarking for Paris for the first time. Tellefsen writes: 'The reason you haven't received a letter from me earlier is because I've had so much to prepare for tonight, when I'll be playing a Chopin concerto at the theatre. I'll get a fee of 10 dalers for that'.⁴

A month later, he writes that he has 'consulted with Juliane Lindeman about a teacher in Paris, and she believed that I should get hold of Chopin or Henri Bertini (*Le jeune*) [...] I don't doubt that Chopin stands above Kalkbrenner'.⁵

Once in Paris, Tellefsen realises that most of the famous pianists leave town during the summer, but he has the good fortune of making contact with a Norwegian pupil of Kalkbrenner's, Charlotte Thygeson, who offers to give him lessons at half price. She teaches a completely different way of playing than he had learnt at home in Trondheim:

³ Ibid., p. 210.

⁴ 5 May 1842, *Thomas Tellefsens familiebreve*, ed. Thomas Tellefsen (Oslo, 1923), p. 13.

⁵ 7 June 1842, *ibid.*

I've heard her play, but never imagined that something so wonderful could exist – yes, almost godlike. I had to change my style at once; I was holding my fingers too bent and too much towards me; I was sliding downwards on the key with my finger instead of decidedly striking it at the right point, so my playing lost a lot of amplitude.⁶

Although Tellefsen learned a great deal from Charlotte Thygeson and considered her a close friend, his opinion of *her* teacher after seven months in Paris was that 'Kalkbrenner tries to suppress every shoot of originality and genius'.⁷ Further in the same letter, he states that 'I would never have learnt more if I had been with Kalkbrenner – it's just the name – and I don't need that yet. Later, it will be almost necessary to be taught by a great master, and that will be Chopin – the god-like Chopin'.⁸

It was not until late 1844 that Tellefsen actually began studies with Chopin. In a letter to his father, he claims that his loftiest ambition has finally been fulfilled.

Even though I experience a lot of hardship, I also have some pleasant things. He is very interested in me, normally gives me three hours instruction instead of one – and is very nice to me. The first time I spoke with him, he said: 'I'll tell you everything I know about music. We'll speak like friends about that (*nous cause-rons amicalement de cela*) and everything will go fine, since there are *des germes d'originalité chez vous* (seeds of originality in you) which I appreciate very much'.⁹

In the same letter, Tellefsen reports that Chopin mentioned at their first meeting 'Vous êtes en peu "svärmerisch", mais c'est bien, comme tous les gens du Nord'.

Officially becoming Chopin's student did not solve all Tellefsen's problems: he felt that his future was uncertain, no matter where he lived. Yet he felt that there was no teacher in Norway qualified to lead him to a higher level, so he preferred uncertainty in Paris to uncertainty in Trondheim. He writes 'In Paris, they believe that I have talent; in Norway – as far as I can judge from the little interest I have met – there is just the opposite'.¹⁰

⁶ 28 June 1842, *ibid.*, p. 16

⁷ 1 February 1843, *ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ 28 December 1844, *ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*



One sign of Tellefsen's progress in musicianship is a greater discernment of other players' performance. He relates an exchange with Chopin after a concert in May 1845:

I have heard Thalberg four times – a beautiful and clear, crystal clear candle – [but] a man who ignores what it means to have a heart. I told Chopin my judgment and said that he must have changed his playing since last year, as I had shown strong enthusiasm the last time I heard him. But he laughed and said only 'mon cher, c'est vous qui êtes changé'.¹¹

In one letter, Tellefsen himself notes that writing is not an easy task for him, and he prefers to talk rather than write about many things. To his father, he writes in 1844: 'I'll have to speak with you to explain it a bit; the pen is a poor tool in my hand'.¹² Tellefsen's statement is echoed by his childhood schoolmate Bent Mogen Bentzen, from Trondheim, who claims that Tellefsen was more interested in music than in reading and was on bad terms with his schoolteacher.¹³

Many of Tellefsen's letters to his parents tell of his progress in his studies, but usually without any details of how it has come about. This passage is typical:

I can't tell you how much I have profited from being with him [Chopin]. Everything is clearer and easier for me, and with God's help and a lot of work, my fingers will also be supple and agile.¹⁴

Equally frustrating for modern readers are Tellefsen's references to his relationship with the violinist Ole Bull, who had come to Paris ten years before him and was now the best known Norwegian musician in Europe. In 1846, Tellefsen was on good terms with Bull, writing: 'Ole Bull is in Paris; he has visited me three times. We played music from 12 to 6 in the evening'.¹⁵ However, after the revolution two years later, he tells his parents that the relationship has soured:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 81

¹² Ibid., p. 74.

¹³ B. M. Bentzen, *Minder fra mit barndoms- og reiseliv: nedskrevne for min hustru og mine børn* [Memories from my childhood and travels: written down for my wife and my children] (Oslo, 1893), pp. 15–16.

¹⁴ *Thomas Tellefsens familiebreve*, p. 81.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

Regarding the question which Anna and Father made about me and Ole Bull, I can only say that I had an episode with that horrible person in Paris that was much to his discredit, but I won't bother to repeat it. [...] I cannot deny that I was involved in storming the Tuileries, and even one of those that tore down the throne. As a victory trophy, I can show you someday a piece of red velvet from the French king's throne, which I took and keep as a memento – but Ole Bull wasn't there; he wasn't even in Paris on 23 and 24 February.¹⁶

Chopin makes comparatively little reference to Tellefsen in his letters. However, those few references often imply a very close relationship with his student. Here is part of a note from Chopin to Camille Pleyel written from Scotland on 11 September 1848, in which Tellefsen is asked both to deliver news to Paris and to bring back information to his ailing teacher:

Instead of a letter, I am sending you M. Tellefsen [*sic*], who is going to spend a few days in Paris; M. Ed. Rodrigues spoke to you about him before the '48 revolution. He is my pupil; he has been most helpful to me and will be still more so by sending me news of you. He will tell you also all that I am doing. I wish he could tell you what I shall do, but I don't know that myself – all I know is that I shall always love you, always.¹⁷

As Professor Eigeldinger's paper at this conference will have shown, Tellefsen's letters from 1848 onwards report ever greater personal success, leading eventually to his becoming a teacher to many of Chopin's students after the death of his master in 1849, and receiving the patronage of many from *le beau monde*. Prince Czartoryski, for one, supported Tellefsen and allowed him to perform regularly at the Hôtel Lambert. Tellefsen writes in 1851: 'my success was complete, and it has given me a high position in Paris as a pianist and as Chopin's successor'.¹⁸

In many of the above examples, we have the problem of what is *not* expressed through correspondence, and we realise the need for further contextual research to help fill in the gaps between various communication media. To collect additional material on Chopin and Tellefsen is one of the reasons I myself have come to Paris this month, as Ringve Music Museum is preparing an exhibition entitled 'Between national identity

¹⁶ 8 June 1848, *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Peter Willis, 'Chopin in Britain: Chopin's visits to England and Scotland in 1837 and 1848', PhD thesis, Durham University, 2009, p. 221.

¹⁸ *Thomas Tellefsens familiebrev*, p. 105

and a community of cultures: Fryderyk Chopin and Thomas Tellefsen', which will open in Trondheim in April 2014.¹⁹ Along with other materials, such as interviews, concert recordings, illustrations and objects, we aim to use extracts from the correspondence of Chopin and Tellefsen to help in discussing national and cosmopolitan identities.

¹⁹ The exhibition 'Between national identity and a community of cultures: Fryderyk Chopin and Thomas Tellefsen' was held at Ringve Music Museum in Trondheim from 10 April to 10 September 2014.