SPEAKING of CHOPIN

by

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(*Excerpts reprinted from Mr. Rubinstein's foreword to* LIFE AND DEATH OF CHOPIN *by Casimir Wierzynski, copyright* 1949 *by Simon and Schuster Inc.*)

A painting of Chopin in Rubinstein's home

Speaking of Chopin's music is for me like confessing my greatest love. I am moved, stirred to the depths, happy. But as with the man, so with the music — my love has most often been tricked out in the garb of romanticism, has been made to appear completely unlike itself, and I must protest.

In his human relations, Chopin counted many romantics among his friends. But in his art he held himself free of them. He was irritated by their exhibitionism, their self-pity, their tendency to give a literary content to music. To all this he opposed a scrupulous self-discipline, a purely musical content, and classical norms. Of his twenty-four preludes, twenty-four etudes, four ballades, and four scherzos, not one has a literary designation, and when his English publishers added artful titles to his compositions, he was beside himself with anger.

Schumann's literary bent seemed to him ridiculous, he was repelled by Berlioz's noisy tumultuousness, and he held Liszt in slight esteem as a composer. Even Beethoven, the progenitor of romanticism, remained for him a genius whom he admired from a distance, who filled him with respect but also with uneasiness.

On the other hand, he loved Mozart ardently and unreservedly. Throughout his life he worshipped Mozart's *clarté,* his poise, his perfection of form, his art in expressing feelings without resort to extraneous means. Bach inspired him with an almost religious reverence. Chopin played Bach as one recites prayers, and it was a wish dream of his that his own works might have been judged by Bach.

These preferences and aversions suffice to show that Chopin cannot be labeled a romantic in the accepted sense of the term. His true place in music is in fact defined by the instrument whose essence he revealed to the world and in which he revealed a world. Chopin revolutionized traditional piano music and created a new art of the keyboard. In place of the old rules he introduced principles of his own, and his iconoclastic romanticism was at the same time an original classicism.

Even before this the piano had a magnificent history written in the pages of Beethoven, Schubert, and Weber, but it was Chopin who discovered its soul and gave form to its unique poetry. In the period of *Klavierauszüge,* when the piano was often used to play works that had been conceived in the spirit of orchestral or vocal compositions, or of chamber music, Chopin created an authentic piano music. His compositions are born of the piano and intended for the piano. All attempts to adapt them to other instruments end in failure or result in distortion.

Chopin was the Prospero of the piano; he cast his spell on it and transformed it. He touched the keys of what had been till then merely a percussion instrument, and worked miracles. How did this come about? The answer to this question contains the entire secret of Chopin.

First of all, he made the piano sing. This idea was not an abstract invention, nor was it born in him by accident. From his childhood he had a passion for opera, especially Italian opera; he had made himself an expert in vocal music, and he could have become a distinguished vocal teacher. He understood instinctively that a melody, if it is not to sound mechanical, must breathe like a human voice, and he commanded the piano to breathe. Thus was born his famous *tempo rubato*. He used it sensing in an uncanny way where this breath was needed, without losing sight of the basic framework of the composition and without overstepping its boundaries. He left behind the teaching that *tempo rubato* can be applied properly on one condition: namely, that the player must have an unerring sense in the use of it.

Chopin also possessed the secret of the pedal, and with this knowledge he opened a great unexplored world of new sounds and vibrations. He mixed sounds as paints are mixed on a palette, and produced colors that had not even been imagined before, and this in an ever more delicate variation. He developed his own alchemy of tones; he ventured unexpected combinations, created harmonies with extraordinary freshness, and opened up new horizons of musical poetry. This enabled his successors to make further discoveries; Debussy above all others excelled in such discoveries, although he exploited them for their magic rather than for their potentialities of musical content.

Chopin was a genius who lived for the sake of music and who acted through music. Simply by force of his compositions and without verbal statement, without expounding of theories, he overthrew the piano scholasticism of the established schools, according to which technical fluency was secured by means of a specific method of using one's hands, fingers, elbows, etc. He emancipated the pianist from servitude to pedantic canons and hastened the development of individual freedom in the realm of piano playing. Today no one finds it surprising that the performance of a given masterpiece is not limited to any one way of using the hands and fingers.

Nevertheless, Chopin's compositions present great difficulties for the performer. In the course of my world-wide travels I have met many promising pianists. As a rule they give adequate performances of Bach fugues; their playing of Scarlatti sonatas is almost always perfect; their interpretations of Mozart and Beethoven sound correct and are held to a good style; but when they come to Chopin, I am for the most part disappointed. Even if my young friends have mastered the technical requirements, they lack the key to Chopin's magic.

It seems to me proper to stress here that even the most difficult figurations of Chopin belong to creative music. Liszt cultivated technical preciosity; the difficulties he contrived were a camouflage and he exploited them for greater effect. Chopin was interested only in the musical idea, and the difficulties of his works are logically inherent in his thought. This requires a completely different attitude on the part of the performer. I can play a pyrotechnical Liszt sonata, requiring forty minutes for its performance, and get up from the piano without feeling tired, while even the shortest etude of Chopin compels me to an intense expenditure of effort. I never cease to marvel that such lofty heights of artistic invention were attained by a sickly, fragile man, and I am always filled with admiration for the strength of his mind, his creative will, and the purity of his musical intentions.

After a hundred years the works of Chopin have lost nothing of their vitality. How many great names have been forgotten, how many famous works have fallen into oblivion, while Chopin's piano music is still heard throughout the world. What has become of the renown of Kalkbrenner, Thalberg, Moscheles, Field and so many other contemporaries of Chopin, while his name shines with increasing splendor as the years go by.

It is extraordinary to observe how the most diverse audiences are conquered by the music of Chopin. I have met with lack of understanding for Bach in some places, with slight enthusiasm for Mozart in Italy, with a curious antipathy to Brahms in Latin countries, with distaste for Tchaikovsky in France — but Chopin has a hold on the hearts of men everywhere. This most national of composers is also the most cosmopolitan. I have always been struck by this fact when I played mazurkas in China, polonaises in Japan, and ballades in Australia or South Africa.

What accounts for this immediate understanding and indubitable love for Chopin among all peoples? I think that this is another of Chopin's secrets: the appeal lies in his directness, in the fact that he has a language of his own that is at the same time universal, in the boundless wealth of his musical ideas, which, in the view of Finck, a brilliant student of Chopin, would suffice for a half dozen average composers of symphonies and operas.

Chopin's secret was rediscovered by Debussy and Ravel. He has had many imitators, and two of the most felicitous of these were Scriabin and Szymanowski. Unfortunately, the later masters were unfaithful to Chopin's pianistic art. Schonberg, Stravinsky, Bartok, Milhaud, Honegger, Prokofieff, Shostakovich have written beautiful and great works, but they have lost contact with the soul of the piano. For them it has once again become a mere percussion instrument or not much more than that.

A return to the full potentialities of the piano can take place only through a return to Chopin's secret. But Chopin himself will remain unique.

When I am questioned as to how one is to play Chopin — whether in the romantic spirit or in the manner of the school that holds the piano to be solely a percussion instrument — I seek for an answer in Chopin himself. His meticulous precision and his economy of means are inseparable from his moving warmth and deep feeling. On the one hand heroism, with its absolute rejection of compromise, on the other, supreme delicacy and sensitivity — his world in all its richness revolves between these two poles.

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