

# The Chopin Bicentennial: Celebrating at the Harpsichord?

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According to his birth certificate, Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin was born on February 22, 1810, a date confirmed by the composer's father in a sworn statement to the parish priest Jan Duchnowski in April of that same year.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this present *anno domini* 2010 presents us with an opportunity to celebrate another bicentenary; but of what practical use is this to harpsichordists or organists? Chopin was delightfully, but single-mindedly, a creator of music for the piano. Even his relatively small number of ensemble works (18 songs, four chamber pieces plus the late cello sonata, and two oft-performed concertos, plus an additional four compositions with orchestral accompaniment) employ the piano either as solo or collaborative instrument.

Nonetheless, some of us might wish to join the wider classical music establishment in commemorating the life of this poetic Pole, even though we had no music to perform. Thus it is with special delight that I share news of a Chopin composition in two voices (without specific indication of instrumental medium), a work almost completely unknown, but a worthwhile piece playable on the manuals of the harpsichord (or organ): the composer's unique *Fugue in A Minor*, a single-page manuscript dated 1841.<sup>2</sup>

Listed in Maurice J. E. Brown's *Chopin: An Index of His Works in Chronological Order* and included in volume 18 of the Paderewski edition of the solo piano works, this contrapuntal essay remains an unheard rarity. The only recent printing (outside the *Collected Works*) seems to be an overlooked 1998 publication edited from the original manuscript by Michel Leclerc, and offered by H&M Diffusion, 36, rue de la porte de Trivaux, 92140 Clamart (France). Comparison with a tiny facsimile of the holograph (pictured on the front cover)<sup>3</sup> confirms an accurate transcription of the short work. Fingerings, dynamics, slurs, and suggested tempo are editorial additions.

These brief comments about the piece appear on the back cover:

- Composed in 1841—without opus number.
- The first edition, and the only previous one, appeared in Warsaw in 1862.
- This fugue had been attributed to the composer Cherubini for some time.
- Arthur Hedley [author of a 1947 Chopin biography and principal contributor to the Chopin entry in *Groves VI*] writes: "The fugue . . . is decidedly the work of the Polish composer. An examination of the manuscript leaves no doubt."

With a duration of approximately four minutes, the *Fugue in A Minor* is built on an attractive tonal subject [Example 1] and is surely more than a mere exercise. It may be played on a single manual, but I have found it effective to utilize the second keyboard of the harpsichord for the right hand in the stretto passage [Example 2, measure 53], a move that clarifies the part crossing of alto and tenor, and which has the added advantage of softening the following two-and-one-half measure soprano trill. At the first note of measure 64, I return the top voice to the primary keyboard, rejoining the left hand. In some performances, depending largely on the instrument and my whim of the moment, I move one, or both, hands to the second keyboard for most of the last two measures, and I am equally free, according to my mood at the time, about the possible addition of a third to the final chord (either a C-natural, or even a C-sharp, thus accomplishing a "backward to the baroque" cadence by including a Picardy third).

So the work is by Chopin, unique to his catalog, and ultimately worth playing; but "why assign it to the harpsichord?"

For many years, I have hoped to discover some specific reference to Chopin's playing of a harpsichord or spinet,



Chopin in 1841, part of a larger drawing by George Sand (destroyed during World War II)

and I continue to think it likely, in such an economically challenged territory as Poland was, that the older, pre-piano keyboard instruments may have remained in use during the first part of the nineteenth century. Fryderyk's first keyboard teacher, Adalberg Zwiny, was an elderly transplanted native of Czechoslovakia. A friend of the family, he passed on to his young pupil his own two abiding passions: a love for the music of Mozart and J. S. Bach. In my mind's eye, I see the sixty-year-old Zwiny seated at a harpsichord, just as Mendelssohn's mentor Karl Friedrich Zelter was similarly placed in Eduard Devrient's description of the events leading up to the first 19th-century performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*. But of course, this is only conjecture.

However, Chopin's tonal ideals are more substantially documented, particularly in the memoirs of Alfred J. Hipkins, who, as an employee of the Broadwood piano firm, tuned their keyboard instruments used in Chopin's London concerts during the two trips the composer made to England during the last years of his life. Hipkins reminisced:

He was frequently at Broadwoods: of middle height, with a pleasant face, a mass of fair curly hair like an angel, and agreeable manners. But he was something of a dandy, very particular about the cut and colour of his clothes.

He was painstaking in the choice of the pianos he was to play upon anywhere, as he was in his dress, his hair, his gloves, his French; you cannot imagine a more perfect technique than he possessed! But he abhorred banging a piano; his *forte* was relative, not absolute; it was based upon his exquisite *pianos* and *pianissimos*—always a waving line, crescendo and diminuendo. . . . He especially liked Broadwood's Boudoir cottage pianos . . . two-stringed, but very sweet instruments, and he found pleasure in playing on them. He played Bach's '48' all his life long. "I don't practice my own compositions," he said to Von Lentz.<sup>5</sup> "When I am about to give a concert, I close my doors for a time and play Bach."<sup>6</sup>

Regarding keyboard instruments, then, it seems that Chopin preferred quiet, gentler sounds. Thus, he chose to play smaller, upright-style pianos rather than larger, grand instruments. He was, as well, a devotee of music from the previous century, including then little-known sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, as he wrote in letters to his Polish friend Delfina Potocka:<sup>7</sup>

My colleagues, the piano teachers, are dissatisfied that I am teaching Scarlatti to my pupils. But I am surprised that they are so blind. In his music there are exercises in plenty for the fingers and a good deal of lofty spiritual food. He sometimes reaches even Mozart. If I were not afraid of incurring disfavor of many fools, I would play Scarlatti in my concerts. I maintain that there will come a time when Scarlatti will often be played in concerts, and people will appreciate and enjoy him.

## Example 1



## Example 2



Bach will never grow old. . . . When I am playing somebody, I often think that I would make this note or that different. But that never happens when I am playing Bach. In his work everything is so ideally made that one cannot imagine it otherwise; the smallest alteration would spoil everything. Here, as in geometrical figures, the slightest change is impossible.

Genius has a big nose and a splendid sense of smell which enable him to catch the direction of the wind of the future. Don't think that I am imagining that I am a genius, possessing as I do an enormous nose; you understand that I mean quite a different kind of nose.<sup>8</sup>

Biographies of Chopin refer to his 1825 performances on two experimental instruments (the aeolomelodicon—a hybrid between piano and organ, and a slightly later improved version, the aeolopantaleon), and point out that he served as a church organist regularly during his developmental years.<sup>9</sup>

Further evidence of mature engagement with the organ is documented by written accounts from the composer's lover, the novelist George Sand, and in contemporary newspaper reports of Chopin's playing the organ of Notre-Dame-du-Mont in Marseilles for the well-attended funeral of his close friend, the tenor Adolphe Nourrit in 1839. At the Elevation, Chopin played the simple strophic song by Franz Schubert, *Die Gestirne*, a personal favorite of the singer. That Chopin's performance was not a virtuoso extravaganza is borne out by George Sand's comment: "The congregation, which had come en masse exercising its curiosity to the extent of paying fifty centimes per seat . . . was disappointed, because they had expected Chopin to make a row that would bring the roof down, and at least break two or three organ-pipes."<sup>10</sup> And she was right there beside him in the organ gallery!

Ultimately, I cannot prove that Chopin ever played the harpsichord, but if Liszt could transcribe the *Fourth* and *Ninth* of the *Opus 28 Preludes* for organ, or Wanda Landowska include a harpsichord

rendition of the *C Major Mazurka Opus 56/2* in her RCA Victor disc *Landowska Plays for Paderewski*, perhaps my assimilation of the *Fugue in A Minor* may be permitted, and, dare one hope, both be emulated and forgiven? Or possibly one might consider this one further offering among many offbeat tributes to Poland's favorite musical son in his bicentenary year. After all, why should the piano have all the good tunes? ■

## Notes

1. The entire document is quoted in an earlier citation by James Huneker, referenced in Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1978), p. 27.

2. I am, once again, indebted to friend and Dallas savant of musical curiosities John Carroll Collins for drawing my attention to this composition and for providing me with full bibliographic references.

3. Also available in a larger format in Frédéric Chopin, *Manuscrits autographe musicaux* (Valdemossa, Mallorca, 2003).

4. *The New Grove* lists 1898 as the first publication date, Leipzig as the venue.

5. Quotation from Wilhelm Lenz, *Die grossen Pianoforte-Virtuosen unserer Zeit aus persönlicher Bekanntschaft* (Berlin, 1872; English translation 1899).

6. Edith J. Hipkins, *How Chopin Played. From Contemporary Impressions collected from the Diaries and Note-books of the late A. J. Hipkins, F.S.A.* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1937), pp. 6–7.

7. Not all scholars accept these letters as authentic. Ruth Jordan, author of one of the best Chopin biographies (cited in Note 1), discusses this matter in the Foreword to her book (page 12), and sides with those who think they are genuine.

8. Stephen P. Mizwa, editor, *Frederic Chopin 1810–1849* (New York: The Macmillan Company, published under the auspices of the Kosciuszko Foundation, 1949), pp. 50, 52.

9. Jordan, *op. cit.*, page 45: Invented by Jacob Frederick Hoffman, a botanist (!). "There were not many musicians who had had a chance to try their hand at the new instrument and young Frederick, who had recently learnt to play the organ, was one of the first to master the technique."

10. Quoted in Camille Bourmiquel, *Chopin* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 93.

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