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INTRODUCTION*

In *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann's narrator declared that romanticism had 'emancipated [music] from the sphere of a small-town specialism [...] and brought her into contact with the great world of the mind'. And a little later he referred to 'an art which progresses from the solely musical into the universally intellectual sphere'.¹ Mann was articulating the agenda of the Romantic generation of composers, given expression in two models of artistic synthesis. The first, a version of Théophile Gautier's so-called 'transpositions', is close to Liszt's aesthetic in his early pianistic poems, as spelt out in the preface to *Album d'un voyageur*. Here correspondences work to irradiate what he called the 'intimate, poetic meaning of things'. The second is more ambitious, suggestive of a composite multi-genre artwork, a type of modern epic. And this seems germane not just to Wagner's project but also to Liszt's later aesthetic for the symphonic poem, which he expounded in his essay on *Harold in Italy*.² Here the alliance of a musical process and a prestigious poetic concept would allow an entrée to the highest spheres of art. Music might be enhanced and even dignified, Liszt was suggesting, through its association with the poetic.

Ironically, it was thanks largely to a developing aesthetic of absolute music, associated especially with Beethoven reception and with the thought of Schopenhauer, that programme music acquired this newfound ambition. Programme music, we need to remember, had been around for centuries. There was nothing novel about it. But as so-called 'absolute music' was increasingly freighted with expressive ambition, it forced a separation. On one hand that aesthetic made possible a programme music of much greater pretension, opening a pathway to a higher synthesis with the poetic. For the historian and Liszt apologist Franz Brendel, he who coined the term 'New German School', it was perfectly feasible, indeed it seemed entirely logical, to view the symphony as a kind of generic pre-history of the symphonic poem. On the other hand it sealed music off from the pollutions of context, investing its expressive qualities with a unique sense of privilege: music *qua* music. There is a timeline here, involving an inversion in discipleship. To put it over-schematically, where composers looked outwards towards sister arts (towards 'the great world of the mind') in the early nineteenth century, writers and artists looked towards music as an exemplary model in the later years of that same century and well into the next. 'All art aspires towards the condition of music', was Pater's famous dictum. 'De la musique avant toute chose' was Verlaine's.

* All articles submitted to this second issue of Chopin Review were peer-reviewed by the principal editor.

1 Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (London: Vintage Books, 2015 [1947]), 205.

2 Franz Liszt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Lina Ramann (Leipzig 1881–99), iv: especially 24–25.

This goes some way towards explaining the foregrounding of music, and of its composers, in the literary fiction of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And among the composers, Chopin assumes a rather special significance. If we are to understand his fascination for men of letters at this time, we might start by recognising that he stood apart from the prevailing tendency of his composer contemporaries to seek correspondences with the world beyond: the world of letters, of nature, of ideas. He was, in short, an exponent of absolute music in an age defined by music's relation to the poetic. In the later nineteenth century this essentially classical orientation could be rather easily transmuted into the embodiment of a post-Schopenhauer ideal, a music that bypassed the phenomenal world and its symbols to gain direct access to the noumenal. Thus, there is 'song character' in the nocturnes, but without words. There is 'story character' in the ballades, but without a programme. And as for nationhood, another source much tapped by the Romantics (another 'extramusical' referent, to invoke Hanslick's confused and confusing term), Chopin avoided the ambitious projects – operas and programme pieces – favoured by others and settled instead for transforming two dance pieces, giving them weight and modernising them, and even then invoking, we might say, the spirit of the dance rather more than the dance itself.

That he was espoused by the Polish nation is hardly news. But Anna Tenczyńska has an original take on this marriage in her essay on representations of the composer in émigré poetry. Nothing fosters nationalist sentiment more than exile, and nothing evokes place more than displacement. In poetic depiction by other exiles, Tenczyńska tells us, Chopin was caught somewhere between complementary narratives of nostalgia and acculturation, but with the latter in the end succumbing to – or perhaps inciting – the former. There is 'the deadly cold of exile', a familiar trope since at least Ovidian times. But there is also 'the darling of Parisian salons', very much at home there, but at the same time capable of transmuting the rustling of women's gowns (Bernard Scharlitt's description) into the mythicised melancholy of a nation.³ Tenczyńska explores an extensive world of nuance lying behind these characterisations, and in the process she reveals not just how exiles viewed an iconic exile but how one historical moment viewed another.

Poetry aside, the Chopin that emerged from Polish criticism evolved from a romantic nationalist to a modernist. In the early twentieth century he was a figure 'ahead of his time', as portrayed in the writings of critics such as Zdzisław Jachimecki and Adolf Chybiński, and of course in the essays – as also (indirectly) the later music – of Karol Szymanowski. As it happens, this modernist narrative was already a presence in nineteenth-century Russian criticism, notably in writings by Alexander Serov and Vladimir Stasov, and it culminated in the famous 1922 essay by Boris Asafiev.

3
Bernard Scharlitt, *Chopin*
(Leipzig: Breitkopf &
Härtel, 1919), 73.

Despite the irony of Russia's appropriation of Chopin, noted by Tony Lin, he was viewed by the critics not just as 'Glinka's guide to new artistic forms' (Stasov), but as the composer who introduced Europe to 'peculiarly Slavic melodic shapes and modulations' (Serov): not just a 'Polish composer', in other words, but a 'Slavonic composer'.⁴ His representation in Russian poetry is a less familiar story, and it is given welcome exposure here by Lin in a sequence of close readings of selected texts. We learn how poems from different periods – some by canonical, others by little-known, figures – underscored the emotional potential of Chopin's music in different ways. And again there is a timeline. In poetry by Miatlev, Fet and Severianin, the music is emblematic of romantic love, while in Pasternak and Akhmatova it takes on a more tragic dimension, whether alluding to the fate of the Polish nation (Pasternak) or to a more deeply personal suffering and trauma (Akhmatova).

In a little-known essay on Chopin by the Greek composer Manolis Kalomiris, the composer is compared to Digenes Akritas, the hero of Byzantine epics, whose dual origins (Arab-Greek, East-West) might be thought to epitomise the double-descendedness that commentators like to take as a determining factor of modern Greek cultural identity.⁵ It is hard not to spot the rather crude symbolic mapping. Chopin's dual origins (Polish-French) are read as East-West, and thus as a kind of validation of Kalomiris's project for a Greek national music: what he himself called a Greek-oriental style. It is a far-fetched comparison, to say the least, but there is a grain of truth, nonetheless, in Kalomiris's assessment of Chopin's significance for the national element in music, even down to the East-West orientations. I have already alluded to his formative influence on Russian constructions of a modern national music, looking east, as it were. But he was no less formative of the distinctively idiomatic world of *fin de siècle* French pianism, and this time looking west. Indeed it became all too tempting for French critics to accommodate Chopin's unique pianistic style within an historical narrative that connected the late eighteenth-century clavecinistes to Fauré, Debussy and Ravel. This is the true significance of the symbolically potent double homage in Debussy's later music: to the late eighteenth-century masters in his sonatas, with their title page, 'Claude Debussy, musicien français', and to the memory of Chopin in the dedication of his late etudes.

That France should have sought to appropriate Chopin was all but inevitable. This was, after all, his second homeland. His reputation had been created in Paris, and it was preserved and enhanced after his death by French journals, French publishers and the Conservatoire. In light of that, it is hardly surprising that his romantic association with the novelist George Sand should have caught the imagination of anyone with an interest in French cultural history. And what an implausible liaison it was: the classical composer out of step with the social romanticism of his age and

4 Vladimir Stasov, *Statyi o muzike* [Articles on music] (Moscow, 1974), 244; Alexander Serov, 'On some forms of contemporary music' (1858), published in *Sovietskaya muzika* (1948), 5, 72.

5 Manolis Kalomiris, 'The national vibration in Chopin's music', in *Bulletin of the National Conservatory of Music* (Athens, 1961), 21–36.

the romantic writer who all but epitomised the political mission of art; the emotionally reticent artist and the 'life writ large'. Could there be an easier prey to romantic myth-making than this story, complete with its Majorcan escapade? Getting the history right with Chopin and Sand was never going to be easy. As Belinda Jack points out, it divided their friends at the time, and it has divided the commentators since.

The one certainty is that in any consideration of Chopin in fiction, Sand is an ineludible presence. Yet to seek him out in the pages of *Lucrezia Floriani* may not really be the way to go. Novelists seldom portray 'real' characters *in toto* in their fiction (I leave aside the biographical novel, as discussed by Kamila Stępień-Kutera in this issue). Even Adrian Leverkühn, briefly discussed in Stępień-Kutera's essay, is not quite Schoenberg. Sand herself put it well. 'People who don't produce imaginative work think that it all comes only from memories, and always ask you, "Who did you want to depict?" They are sorely mistaken if they think it's possible to turn a real person into a character in a novel, even in a novel as un-novelistic as *Lucrezia Floriani*' (quoted by Jack). As I discovered in a recent (and feeble) attempt at novel writing, lived experience is a smorgasbord for the novelist, available for picking and mixing. Without question there will be fragments of Chopin in Prince Karol de Roswald, but there will be bits of others too: a mannerism from here, a turn-of-phrase from there, a moment or an incident from both here and there. As Jack suggests, Chopin's reaction to *Lucrezia Floriani* may not have been nearly as ingenuous as many have assumed. In any case, much more fruitful than such speculation is Jack's attempt to tease out some parallels between the two artists by exploring Sand's interest in and knowledge of music, given that music – and especially local *berrichon* music – plays a more prominent role in her later novels than I for one had realised.

In the end it is worth remembering that, however much their personal relationship may have deteriorated, Sand remained utterly captivated by Chopin's music. The briefest conspectus of her references to the composer leaves us in no doubt that she was in awe of his creative genius. Indeed we are all in awe it, and it is probably best that we remain just a bit mystified by it. How did this young man from a fairly unremarkable background in Warsaw come to write music of such ineffable beauty? The present collection of essays makes no attempt to answer this, preferring to demonstrate how his music was constructed afresh in the creative imaginations of others. Yet the sheer diversity of that response raises a second question. If it is multiply claimed and multiply interpreted, we may ask, how can this music exhibit a stable profile? It is a reasonable question, and one that has been addressed to other canonical figures in both music and literature, often with consequential reference to a receding, or even a vanishing, text. But it begs yet another question. Why is the music multiply claimed in the first place?

Happily the answer to that question, unlike the others, is very simple: because it is worth claiming.

Our final essay opens out to the world beyond Chopin. Although music, and its composers, featured prominently in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, the specific genre of the biographical novel, distinct from putative fictional portraits as also from biographies, is a more recent development. As far as I am aware, Chopin has not yet been the subject of a biographical novel, though he was a presence in the somewhat analogous genre of biographical drama as far back as Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. It is in any case fitting to end this exploration of music in fiction with a tribute to the very different approaches to the genre taken in three of the most successful biographical novels dealing with composers. As Kamila Stępień-Kutera notes, the biographical novel made its own particular demands, walked its own tightropes, generated its own controversies, and developed its own discursive voice (witness the 1968 debate discussed in her essay). Yet, as she also notes, the borders between biography and fiction are not entirely clear-cut. Only a certain number of 'facts' are available to the biographer, after all. For the rest s/he inhabits a world closer to narrative fiction than one might initially suppose.

Stępień-Kutera's conclusion raises an issue that confronts biographer and biographical novelist alike. The trickiest thing to discuss in biographical terms is the composing itself, in all its experiential complexity. Composers spend many hours of their life – and they are doubtless among the richest and most satisfying – just sitting at a desk struggling with recalcitrant musical materials, rejecting, refining, elaborating. Yet it is hard to do biographical justice to this, unless one plunges right into the heart of the music itself. Stępień-Kutera refers to *Doctor Faustus*, with which I began these introductory remarks. What is truly astonishing here is not just that Mann had the courage to grasp the nettle of music's technical nature (and I do not just refer to his discussion of dodecaphony), but also that these pages – the lengthy debates, the lectures on music history, the analytical accounts of musical forms and processes – are among the liveliest and most engaging in this entire, truly extraordinary, novel. Only Marcel Proust comes close to anything comparable. Who would have thought that dealing with the minutiae of counterpoint could make for such a page-turner?