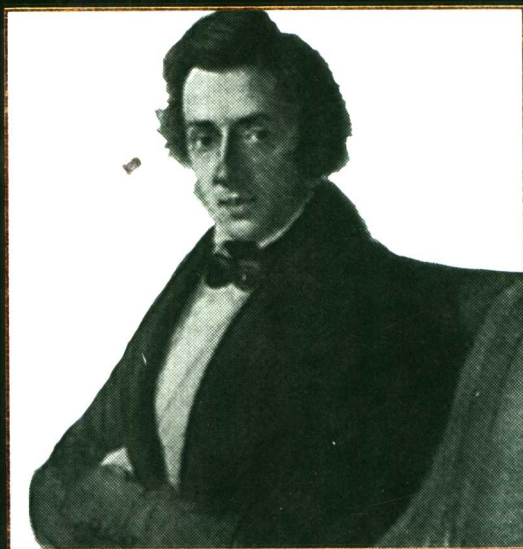


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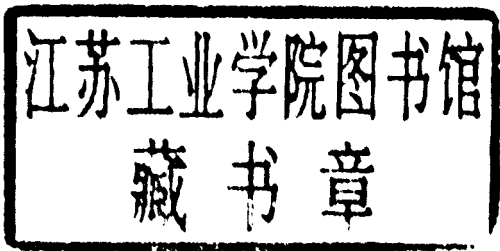
EDITED BY
JIM SAMSON



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The Cambridge Companion to Chopin

edited by Jim Samson



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Chronology

Biography

- 1810 Chopin born, 1 March, in Żelazowa Wola, son of Nicolas Chopin and Justyna Krzyżanowska. The family moves to Warsaw in October.
- 1811
- 1812
- 1813
- 1814
- 1815
- 1816 Begins to take piano lessons from Adalbert Żywny.
- 1817 Polonaise in G minor published.
- 1818 Plays at a charity concert in Warsaw, followed by numerous invitations to aristocratic homes.
- 1819

Music and musicians

- Beethoven: music of *Egmont*.
- Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto performed, Leipzig. Weber's *Abu Hassan* given, Munich. Liszt born.
- Field's first nocturnes published, Moscow. Thalberg born.
- Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri* given, Venice. The Philharmonic Society formed, London. Verdi and Wagner born.
- Final version of Beethoven's *Fidelio* given, Vienna.
- Schubert: *Erlikönig*. Maelzel invents the metronome.
- Schubert: Fifth Symphony.
- Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* given, Rome.
- Weber appointed Kapellmeister, Dresden. Part I of Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum* published.
- Beethoven: 'Hammerklavier' Sonata.
- Schubert: 'Trout' Quintet.
- Offenbach born.

- 1820 Hears the singer Angelica Catalani, who gives him a gold watch. Plays for the Grand Duke Constantin. Metal piano frames first used. Moniuszko born.
- 1821 Dedicates his A♭ Polonaise to Żywny. Weber's *Der Freischütz* given, Berlin. Beethoven: Piano Sonatas Opp. 110–11.
- 1822 Has composition lessons from Józef Elsner. Composes the G♯ minor Polonaise. Schubert: 'Unfinished' Symphony. Franck born. Royal Academy of Music founded, London.
- 1823 Beethoven begins the composition of his late string quartets. Spohr's *Jessonda* given, Kassel.
- 1824 Enrols at the Warsaw Lyceum, where his father teaches. Beethoven's 'Choral' Symphony performed in Vienna, and his *Missa Solemnis* in St. Petersburg. Schubert: *Die Schöne Müllerin*. Rossini director of the Théâtre-Italien, Paris.
- 1825 Edits (with his sister) the holiday diary *Szafarnia Courier*. Plays to Czar Alexander I. Rondo Op. 1 published. Schubert: 'Great' C major Symphony. Johann Strauss the elder forms his own orchestra, Vienna. Bruckner, Smetana and Johann Strauss the younger born.
- 1826 Enters Warsaw Conservatory. Polonaise in B♭ minor. Gives several concerts in Warsaw. Weber's *Oberon* given, London. He dies there. Mendelssohn: Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- 1827 His younger sister Emilia dies. Sonata Op. 4, Variations Op. 2. Visits Prince Radziwiłł at Antonin. Schubert: *Die Winterreise* and two piano trios. Liszt settles in Paris. Beethoven dies, Vienna.
- 1828 Visits Berlin. *Fantasy on Polish Airs*, Op. 13. *Rondo à la krakowiak*, Op. 14. Schubert: String Quintet in C and last three piano sonatas. He dies, Vienna. Auber's *La Muette de Portici* given, Paris.
- 1829 Meets Hummel and hears Paganini in Warsaw. Finishes at the Conservatory and gives two successful concerts in Vienna. Second visit to Antonin, where he writes the Polonaise Op. 3 for cello and piano. Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* given, Paris. Mendelssohn conducts Bach's St Matthew Passion.

- Infatuation for Konstancja Gładowska.
- 1830 Plays the two concertos at public concerts in Vienna. Leaves for Vienna with Titus Wojciechowski.
- 1831 Unsuccessful months in Vienna. Friendship with Dr Malfatti. Leaves for Munich, where he gives a concert, then Stuttgart, where he learns of the failure of the Polish uprising. The 'Stuttgart Diary'. Arrives in Paris early October. Meets Kalkbrenner, Hiller and Liszt.
- 1832 First concert in Paris. Friendships with Mendelssohn and Berlioz. First publications in Paris and London. Begins a highly successful and lucrative teaching career.
- 1833 Plays with Liszt at a benefit for Harriet Smithson. Other private appearances. Friendship with Bellini. Opp. 8–12 published.
- 1834 Visits (with Hiller) the Rhenish Music Festival, where he renews his acquaintance with Mendelssohn. Plays at one of the prestigious Conservatory Concerts in Paris. Opp. 13–19 published. The *Fantaisie-Improptu* composed.
- 1835 Travels to Karlsbad to meet his parents. Visits Dresden and begins his friendship with Maria Wodzińska. Visits Leipzig, where he meets Mendelssohn, Schumann and Clara Wieck. Seriously ill at Heidelberg. Opp. 20 and 24 published.
- 1836 Visits Marienbad to meet the Wodziński family. Proposes to Maria, but is pledged to secrecy by
- Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*. Mendelssohn: 'Reformation' Symphony.
- Bellini's *La sonnambula* and *Norma* given, Milan. Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* given, Paris. Schumann writes his early piano music.
- Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* given, Milan.
- Mendelssohn: 'Italian' Symphony. Brahms born.
- Liszt: *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. Berlioz: 'Harold in Italy' Symphony. First issue of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* published, Leipzig. Borodin born.
- Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* given, Naples. Schumann: *Carnaval*. Mendelssohn appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Bellini dies, Paris. Saint-Saëns born.
- Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* given, St. Petersburg. Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* given, Paris.

- her mother. Opp. 21–3, 26 and 27 published. First meeting with George Sand.
- 1837 The Wodzińska engagement is severed by her family. Visits London (with Pleyel) in July. Growing friendship with Sand. Opp. 25 and 29–32 published.
- 1838 Plays for Louis Philippe and at a concert by Alkan. Goes to Majorca with Sand. Completes the Preludes Op. 28 and the Second Ballade at Valldemosa. Opp. 33–4 published.
- 1839 Ill in Valldemosa. Returns to Marseilles in spring and spends summer at Sand's home, Nohant. Completes the B♭ minor Sonata. On return to Paris meets Moscheles, with whom he plays at Saint-Cloud. Op. 28 published.
- 1840 Quiet year spent composing in Paris. Opp. 35–42 published.
- 1841 Concert in Paris in April. Summer at Nohant including music-making with Pauline Viardot. On return to Paris joins Sand at Rue Pigalle. Opp. 43–9 published.
- 1842 Concert with Viardot and the cellist Franchomme in February. Summer at Nohant, where Delacroix is among the guests. Death of his close friend Jan Matuszyński. Moves to Square d'Orléans. Op. 50 published.
- 1843 Summer at Nohant. Opp. 51–4 published.
- Berlioz: *Grande messe des morts*. Liszt: *24 grandes études*. Field and Hummel die. Balakirev born.
- Schumann: *Kinderszenen* and *Kreisleriana*. Donizetti settles in Paris. Bizet and Bruch born.
- Berlioz: *Roméo et Juliette* Symphony. Musorgsky born.
- Schumann marries Clara Wieck and composes over a hundred songs. Paganini dies. Schumann's 'symphonic year'. Chabrier and Dvorak born.
- Wagner's *Rienzi* given, Dresden. Verdi's *Nabucco* given, Milan. Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* given, St. Petersburg. Schumann: Piano Quintet and other chamber works. Meyerbeer appointed Court Musical Director, Berlin.
- Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* given, Dresden. Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* given, Paris. Berlioz treatise on orchestration published. Leipzig conservatory opens. Grieg born.

- 1844 Death of Nicolas Chopin. Fryderyk's sister Ludwika visits him in Nohant. Opp. 55–6 published.
- 1845 Health deteriorates. The beginning of a major rift in his relationship with Sand. Opp. 57–8 published.
- 1846 Quarrels with Sand exacerbated by family difficulties. Publication of Sand's novel *Lucrezia Floriani*, a 'portrait' of her relationship with Chopin. Opp. 59–61 published.
- 1847 Marriage of Sand's daughter Solange to the sculptor Clesinger. Labyrinthine family quarrels resulting in Chopin's break with Sand. Opp. 63–5 published.
- 1848 Last concert in Paris. Visits England and Scotland under the protection of his pupil Jane Stirling. Plays at many functions and gives public concerts in Manchester and Glasgow. Returns to London, very ill, in November and plays at the Guildhall. Returns to Paris.
- 1849 Unable to teach or give concerts. Assisted financially by Stirling. His sister arrives in Paris to nurse him at his final home in Place Vendôme. He dies there on 17 October.
- Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto. Liszt's connection with Weimar begins. Rimsky-Korsakov born.
- Wagner's *Tannhäuser* given, Dresden. Schumann: Piano Concerto. Fauré born.
- Mendelssohn's *Elijah* performed, Birmingham. Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust* performed, Paris.
- Verdi's *Macbeth* given, Florence. Mendelssohn dies.
- Glinka: *Kamarinskaya*. Wagner flees to Weimar to escape arrest following the uprising in Dresden. Donizetti dies.
- Meyerbeer: *Le prophète*.

Images of Chopin



1836, watercolour by Maria Wodzińska, painted in Marienbad



1838, detail from a portrait by Eugène Delacroix, Musée du Louvre, Paris



1847, pencil drawing by F. X. Winterhalter



1849, from a photograph by L. A. Bisson

Contents

<i>Chronology</i>	<i>page</i>	vii
Myth and reality: a biographical introduction		1
PART 1: The growth of a style		9
1 Piano music and the public concert, 1800–1850 Janet Ritterman		11
2 The nocturne: development of a new style David Rowland		32
3 The twenty-seven etudes and their antecedents Simon Finlow		50
4 Tonal architecture in the early music John Rink		78
PART 2: Profiles of the music		99
5 Extended forms: the ballades, scherzos and fantasies Jim Samson		101
6 Small ‘forms’: in defence of the prelude Jeffrey Kallberg		124
7 Beyond the dance Adrian Thomas		145
8 The sonatas Anatole Leikin		160

PART 3: Reception	189
9 Chopin in performance James Methuen-Campbell	191
10 Chopin reception in nineteenth-century Poland Zofia Chechlińska	206
11 Victorian attitudes to Chopin Derek Carew	222
12 Chopin's influence on the <i>fin de siècle</i> and beyond Roy Howat	246
<i>Appendix</i> A historical survey of Chopin on disc James Methuen-Campbell	284
<i>Notes</i>	295
<i>List of Chopin's works</i>	328
<i>Bibliographical note</i>	333
<i>Index</i>	338

Myth and reality: a biographical introduction

JIM SAMSON

Biography is a discipline sufficient to itself, and one which presents formidable intellectual challenges. As a component of art histories, however, its explanatory value needs careful assessment. The traditional 'life and works', much favoured by English writers on music, highlights the difficulties. With notable exceptions it has been a hybrid genre, seldom addressing – except on a rather surface level – just how a composer's life may *explain* his music. More often than not we are given two books in one, even when they are interleaved rather than formally separated. And in writing two books in one, the author will be hard pressed to do justice to either. A worthwhile objective would be to translate the 'life and works' from a hybrid to a compound genre, and the present introduction, biographical in orientation, is programmatic of such an approach.

A key issue is to evaluate the respective roles of 'real' and 'ideal' biographies in the elucidation of a composer's creative output. For the biographer the task is of course clear-cut: to extract the real from the ideal. But for the music historian it is by no means so simple. The real biography bears directly, though in very complicated ways, on 'production' (*poiesis*) and is therefore a primary cause of the music itself. The ideal biography, on the other hand, bears on 'reception' (*aesthesis*), since it influences substantially the several ways in which the music has been 'made concrete'¹ or 'constituted' in the world. Both the real and the ideal biographies are therefore of concern to the music historian.

In the case of Chopin the gap between the two biographies is so wide as to render them at times oppositional. This is well known. A personality wrapped in secrecy made itself available to multiple interpretation, and the process had already started during his lifetime. We need only compare contemporary portraits and drawings with the one surviving photograph to measure something of the distance between myth and reality. Contemporary writing (criticism, letters, memoirs) rendered the myths specific and they were firmed up and validated after his death. Already in the first biography by Liszt (1852) there was a notable economy with the truth, initiating receptional traditions which culminated in the celluloid

biography of our own century. Apocryphal stories aside, the truly remarkable aspect of all this is the power of critical discourse to transform a composer of decidedly classical orientation into the archetype of a romantic artist.

In a 'biography' of the biographies² Adam Harasowski divided the many studies of Chopin into two categories, those that generated legends and those that set out to destroy them. A worthwhile, though apparently perverse, exercise would invert Harasowski's values, examining the legends positively as part of the 'effective history'³ of Chopin's music and at the same time questioning the reality portrayed by even the most conscientious and scrupulous biographies. The first part of this exercise would be a study in reception. Through a focus on the history of taste it would tend to deconstruct the musical work by revealing its multiple meanings. The second part of the exercise would examine issues at the heart of biography as a discipline. In particular it would address the single most serious lacuna in Chopin biography, a failure to meet the challenge of his compositions. Their creation, in all its experiential complexity, was after all integral to his life.

We will consider first the myths. Viewed reductively, they might be classified under three broad headings – the 'salon composer', the 'romantic composer' and the 'slavonic composer'. Each of these set the compass points for a particular reading of the music – embracing a manner of performance, listening and even editing – and for that reason they are a part of its legitimate esthetic property. They are among the constructs that have mediated between Chopin's singular creative activity and the social existence of his music, building plural layers of receptional insight which have influenced the understanding of determinate groups at particular times. The following remarks offer little more than a sketch of Chopin reception, a subject to which I hope to return in the future.

THE 'SALON COMPOSER'

A substantial income from teaching in Paris enabled Chopin to avoid the public concert and to restrict his appearances as a performer mainly to small gatherings of initiates in society drawing-rooms. From his earliest days in Warsaw he had been at ease in such circles, and his playing, with its discriminating sensitivity of touch, was best suited to them. His creative path reflected this. The limitation of medium was in itself an eloquent credo, but within it we may note a progression from public virtuosity (the concert music of the Warsaw years) towards a mature pianism at once more intimate and more powerful. Chopin never rejected the world of the salon, but he was in no sense confined by it. His achievement was to elevate some of its traditions to unsuspected creative heights, where they might yield nothing in stature to more epic and prestigious genres.

His association with the salon generated a number of powerful images which have proved enduring in Chopin reception. One celebrates the near-magical effect

of his playing, pointed up in numerous apocryphal stories of his childhood feats (he quietens the restless boys with his playing) and of his hypnotic presence as a performer (he exchanges places with Liszt in a darkened auditorium). A frequent description was the 'ariel of the piano'. In due course such images of Chopin the pianist were transferred to Chopin the composer, promoting notions of inspiration which hardly square with his remarks to Delacroix on counterpoint and form,⁴ or indeed with our knowledge (through manuscript sources) of his working methods.

We may mention two further associations with the salon. One is the cult of the feminine, the image of a composer 'for the ladies', reinforced not just in critical writing but in portraits, drawings and pictorial representations on nineteenth-century editions. Again this image was transferred to the music itself, especially the nocturnes, composed for 'a woman's sensitiveness of finger'.⁵ The reality was very different. Chopin enjoyed elegant feminine company, but he had harsh views on the fawning of his 'adoring women'. He himself used the phrase 'music for the ladies', but unhappily he meant it disparagingly. Another association with the salon was the 'sentimental drawing room composer'⁶ – the 'superficial genius' – and the appellation was encouraged by a self-imposed limitation of medium, by the connotations of small forms, and by the descriptive titles assigned to his music by publishers from Wessel onwards. His own comments on the trivialisation of his music by this means – Wessel included the Second Impromptu in a series of 'Drawing-room Trifles' – are a matter of record.

It is significant that the image of Chopin as salon composer was disseminated above all in Germany and England in the later nineteenth century. This is clear not only from a study of critical writing, but from the priorities of programming and from the creative praxes of a host of minor imitators in both countries. Chopin's music was a major influence on later nineteenth-century *Trivialmusik* in Germany and also on the ephemera composed for the Victorian drawing-room. A reception history would find much to investigate here. In technical terms there is the 'reduction' of Chopin's densely-woven textures into a handful of easy gestures which effectively translate 'art' into 'kitsch'. In esthetic terms there is the transformation of a cluster of original meanings (Chopin was initially viewed in both countries as a modernist⁷) by vicarious association with their progeny. And in social-historical terms there is the accommodation of a repertory to the needs of a particular status quo.

This latter point deserves to be amplified. The commodification of culture was taken further in England and Germany than elsewhere in Europe in the later nineteenth century. There is, however, a distinction to be drawn between them, albeit of a highly generalised nature. In nineteenth-century England musical life – and music – affirmed and legitimised, with no significant critical element, the bourgeois ascendancy – was indeed almost totally absorbed by it. Domestic piano

music, highly responsive to the external features of Chopin's style, was part of this broader affirmative culture. This was also true of the vast repertory of music designed for the home in late nineteenth-century Germany. Yet here the domestic repertory stood in a polarised relation to an autonomous music of high ambition – an incipient avant-garde. Significantly the constituency of Chopin as 'modernist' survived in progressive German circles well into the second half of the century and beyond, and his music proved directly influential in notable cases. It is an intriguing demonstration of the permeability of the musical work that Chopin proved no less an inspiration to the German 'avant-garde' than to the music of the bourgeois home.

THE 'ROMANTIC COMPOSER'

The term 'romantic' connotes ideas and motivations more clearly than styles. Above all it is grounded in the idea that the world may be more fully known through feeling, intuition and the creative imagination than through conceptual thought or empirical observation. In music a romantic aesthetic took its stand on the primacy of the emotions and on the capacity of musical language to *express* the inner emotional world, as well as the external perceived world. In the former sense we may indeed suspect that Chopin was a 'romantic' (at least in the music of his stylistic maturity), that he allowed his music to become, in Dahlhaus's phrase, 'a fragment of autobiography'. There is in his music an intensity, a passion, at times a terrifying power, which can rather easily suggest an inner life whose turmoils were 'lived out' in music. There are even moments where an expressive imperative appears to subvert structure in a manner that contrasts sharply with the 'proper distance' achieved by the classical composer.

We should be wary of too complete a subscription to this view. In his cast of mind, and also in his attitude towards his craft, Chopin had perhaps more in common with the classical masters he so loved than with his contemporaries. His mind was dominated by a love of order and precision, by a rejection of over-exuberant or sentimental types of thought. He shared little of the romantics' enthusiasm for the descriptive, denotative powers of music, remaining committed to absolute music in an age dominated by programmes and descriptive titles. Unlike his contemporaries he had only a passing interest in literature and the other arts and he had little sympathy with the big abstract ideas that fired the imagination of the age. Italian opera apart, he was guarded in his praise of contemporary composers, reserving his unqualified admiration for the masters of an earlier age, especially Bach, Handel and Mozart.

It is when we turn from intention to reception that the term 'romantic' takes on greater meaning in relation to Chopin. The nineteenth century produced a 'romantic' listener as well as a 'romantic' composer. The inclination of such a

listener was to seek out either a specific referential meaning in the musical work – and Chopin's music was granted a generous allocation of such 'meanings' in nineteenth-century criticism – or a hidden emotional content. These layers of understanding became a part of the ambience of the music for later generations, and at the same time they coloured the received wisdom about Chopin the man. For many he became quite simply the archetypal romantic composer – a figure wounded by love and exile, the 'hero of all sensitive souls'. Biographical myths followed in hot pursuit of this image, and unsurprisingly they focused on the love interest in his life.

The 'three loves' became the basis for fanciful imaginings remote from any contact with literal or psychological truth. Even Konstancja Gładkowska, to whom the youthful Chopin never declared himself, could inspire entirely fictional scenes in a Warsaw café – 'how he loathed and how unutterably he loved her'.⁸ Chopin was in reality a man concerned with proprieties, conservative in social attitudes to the point of snobbishness and much preoccupied with material and financial security. Anyone further removed from the image of the reckless lover it would be difficult to imagine. The celebrated trip to Majorca was a fiasco, not an idyll, and the dominating reality of George Sand's role in their relationship was her strong maternal instinct. These facts are now well-known, and it is somehow fitting that with the destruction of one romantic legend another should have surfaced. Those inclined to colour Chopin's life will have no difficulty in deciding which side to take in the celebrated controversy of the Chopin-Potocka 'letters'.⁹

In due course the romantic aura surrounded his music too. It was especially, though by no means exclusively, in France that Chopin the 'romantic composer' – the 'poet' of the piano who expressed the depths of his inner world to all of us – was cultivated.¹⁰ 'Chopin is *par excellence* a pianist of the emotions'; '[he] is first of all a poet, a sensitive poet who does his best to make poetry dominate'; he is 'an elegaic, profound and dreamy poet of tones'.¹¹ It was in France too that some of the more specific literary references were associated with his music (quite different from the fanciful titles attached to his works in England). His compositions were related in rather detailed ways to poetry by Lamartine and Jean-Paul, to stories by Charles Nodier and especially to characters from Shakespeare.

Above all it was France which promoted the view of Chopin as a composer 'de chambre de malade', a very particular dimension of the 'romantic' myth. From childhood his health was delicate and at the end of his short life consumption took a cruel toll of his creative energies. Yet the image of Chopin the consumptive, with 'the pallor of the grave', came to take on additional significance, interpreted almost as a philosophy of life and even as an explanation of his creative output. Through music he 'discloses his suffering'. Emotive descriptions by Liszt and others of his final years and particularly of his final hours (source of many an apocryphal account) fostered the image of a music imbued with a special quality of

melancholy, even morbidity. Field's 'talent of the sickroom' proved an insistent image and it fused well with aspects of a romantic ideology, where illness and creative inspiration would be linked as parallel (Schopenhauerian) escapes from the commonplaces of the world. Even the fresh winds of twentieth-century change have not wholly dispersed such images.

THE 'SLAVONIC COMPOSER'

There can be no doubt of the authenticity of Chopin's commitment to Poland and of his enduring preoccupation with the 'Polish question'. Nor is it inconsistent that he should have developed such feelings in all their intensity only after he left his homeland. The 'Stuttgart diary' – a response to the collapse of the 1830 insurrection – may be extravagant in its language, but it has a ring of sincerity that is missing from some of his letters to family and friends during the preceding year in Vienna. For all his social graces, Chopin always maintained that he could relax fully only with Polish friends, and it is his letters in Polish – their tone as well as their content – which afford us the most intimate glimpses of his inner life. Nevertheless there was something of the 'professional exile' about Chopin. Life in France agreed with him and he quickly put to the back of his mind any thought of returning to his homeland (he could easily have done so when the Czar offered the first of many amnesties in 1833). He was uncomfortable too with the circle of committed nationalists centred on the Polish Literary Society in Paris (and they with him), and he refused to serve the Polish cause in the most obvious way open to a composer, through opera and tone-poem.

This is not to argue that his music was untouched by Polish nationalism. His approach to the principal national dances – the polonaise and mazurka – changed significantly following the early years in Warsaw. In a manner that strikingly anticipates later nineteenth-century developments, he transformed these dance elements from colourful exoticisms (available to all) to potent evocations of Poland, and specifically a Poland oppressed. A comparison with Liszt is instructive. Both composers cultivated images of their native lands and used musical symbols to convey those images, albeit only in selected works. At the same time they combined national material with the most advanced contemporary techniques of European music, fusing, as it were, nationalism and modernism. Their music derived energy from national material but was not confined by it nor indeed by a nationalist esthetic. Unlike Moniuszko in Poland or Erkel in Hungary, they worked in the world at large.

Chopin's Polishness was of course elaborated substantially in later reception, with the customary selection of apocryphal stories, beginning with the urn of Polish earth which he supposedly took with him on leaving Warsaw. For Europeans his nationality became a way of explaining anything unfamiliar or 'exotic' in his music. In this connection there is an amusing repertory of stories about