

## The Origins of Chopin's Melancholy

In the vibrant tapestry of musical history few figures have left such an indelible impression as the renowned composer and pianist, Frédéric Chopin. Employing a remarkable amalgamation of his Polish heritage combined with an artistically creative brilliance, it appears that he fashioned many of his compositions out of intricately entwined memories from his remarkable childhood. Like a painter shaping an assortment of colorful images from a broad palette, Chopin used his piano to skillfully transform his recollections into often-melancholic melodies that continue to captivate audiences to this day. Although just how he accomplished that remains largely shrouded by the enigma of musical genius, are there clues from his life that can shed light on the sources of his inspiration?

Some of those indicators might be traced to his letters to his friends. For example, "Oh, how miserable it is to have no one to share sorrows and joys, and, when your heart is really heavy, to have no soul to whom you can pour out your woes." Or this, "It is dreadful when something weighs on your mind, not to have a soul to unburden yourself to...I tell the piano the things I used to tell you." These are the laments of a lonely man, an individual deprived of close companionship. Chopin's music was recurrently imbued with this sense of sadness, a longing for a bygone era along with the reflections of his own bittersweet memories. A sad and lonely person often will turn to nostalgia in an attempt to recreate the past, but was Chopin really this lonely and if so, why?

Of all of Chopin's music his Nocturnes express the greatest manifestations of melancholy and nostalgia. He wrote his first one – Opus 72, No. 1 in E minor - shortly after the tragic death of his artistically talented sister, Emilia. She had died suddenly and unexpectedly in their family's home from a massive pulmonary hemorrhage at the age of fifteen. Then only seventeen, Chopin was devastated; he and Emilia had always been very close. This first nocturne is sadness incarnate.

Chopin's next foray into writing in this genre came in 1830, mere months following his reluctant departure from his beloved Poland for a highly uncertain future in Paris. Soon after arriving in the City of Light the twenty-year old Chopin became extremely homesick and lonely, terribly missing his friends and family, yet he swiftly rendered these feelings into what would become one of his most popular masterpieces, the Nocturne in E flat major, Opus 9, No. 2.

After his engagement to Maria Wodzinska was over-ruled by her aristocratic parents in 1836, Chopin once again entered a deep funk, wrapping a bundle of her letters together and calling them "My sorrow" ("Moja bieda.") Out of this misery he created the Nocturnes of Opus 27, containing some of the most melancholically beautiful

works he would ever compose. He had translated his feelings of loss and loneliness into works of art. For the rest of his life Chopin continued to steep his works in his deep emotional well of sorrow and longing.

Chopin's nostalgia, this melancholic sentimentality for the past, was prompted by his feelings of loneliness, disconnectedness or meaninglessness. Perhaps by revisiting his past he gained much-needed context, perspective and direction. Might it be possible to think that Chopin's obsessive dwelling on the past, while directing him to create the musical masterpieces the world still enjoys, actually allowed him to find solace and come to terms with his sorrows by becoming psychologically cathartic, even therapeutic?

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