

Chopin's Castoff Compositions

“Spal je wszystkie” (Burn them all)

In October of 1849, as Frédéric Chopin lay dying in his Place Vendôme apartment in Paris, he implored his oldest sister, Ludwika, to destroy all of his unpublished compositions. No one, perhaps not even their creator himself really understood how many there were. Weeks after his death many of these works were discovered locked and hidden away in a beautiful small cabinet Chopin had kept with him as he moved to his various apartments during his last years. Despite her solemn agreement with her esteemed brother to undertake this task Ludwika soon became overwhelmed with the sheer number and magnificent quality of these laid-aside works. She gradually began to question her weighty promise to her renowned sibling and to consider her options. To her everlasting credit, she chose to not to reject them, but rather to resurrect them, saving many for posterity.

An accomplished pianist herself, Ludwika was astounded by the superb energy and vitality of these discarded works, and after consulting with Chopin's mother and remaining sister, she decided to solicit the assistance of Chopin's long-term colleague and assistant, Julian Fontana. Fontana, a pianist, composer, lawyer, author and translator, had met Chopin at the University of Warsaw where both studied under the prestigious Polish composer and music teacher, Josef Elsner. They also had roomed together for two years at the apartment on Chaussée-d'Antin shortly after Chopin arrived in Paris. Chopin ultimately would rather possessively rely on Fontana for correcting and copying his compositions as well as for facilitating their publication.

Fontana carefully selected twenty-three of these unpublished pieces and grouped them into eight posthumous numbers, Opus 66 to Opus 73. These were ultimately published in 1855 and include the *Fantasia-Improptu*, eight mazurkas, five waltzes, three polonaises, three éccosaises, a nocturne and a rondo. In 1857 Fontana went on to publish seventeen of Chopin's songs as Opus 74. A number of additional works of Chopin were subsequently published and have been identified

by alternative numbers in the catalogues of Maurice J. E. Brown, Krystyna Kobylanska, and Josef Chominski, including the magnificent *Nocturne No. 20 in C# minor* as well as the *Nocturne No. 21 in C minor*.

Why did Chopin abandon these works? Several explanations are likely. He was known for his fastidiousness and so it is very unlikely that he was merely careless and had misplaced them. The haunting and haltingly beautiful *C# minor Nocturne*, written just before he left Poland and dedicated to Ludwika, intimated his impending separation from his sister and might have been too painfully sorrowful for Chopin to share publicly. One of the works, the *Fantaisie-Improptu in C# minor*, contained features that were distressingly similar to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," making it likely he would have been embarrassed to have it published. Some, mainly those written during his youth, did not match his subsequent uncompromisingly high standards. And others, like the *A minor Waltz*, just recently discovered at the Morgan Library in Manhattan, with its rather bizarrely explosive opening bars, were probably given to students and friends as private gifts and were never intended for publication. Might there be more of his musical treasures yet undiscovered?

Many of these discarded works have now joined the established Chopin repertoire and have become highly cherished pieces among audiences everywhere. Fortunately, Ludwika's agonizingly uncomfortable yet fatefully heroic decision to ignore her brother's dying plea and rescue these abandoned yet splendid pieces, each unfolding like a delicate butterfly from its concealed chrysalis, endowed the world with glorious gifts for untold generations of music lovers.