

The Scent of the Lily

Nostalgia, an intense sentimental yearning for the past, played an important role in the life of Frédéric Chopin. On the persistent advice from his teachers, friends and family and at the tender age of twenty, he reluctantly decided to leave Poland to seek his fame and fortune in the wider world, beyond the musical limitations of Warsaw. It had proven to be an extremely difficult choice for him as he had enjoyed a marvelous childhood in Poland, one filled with unrestrained love and unbounded support for his musical talent. Yet shortly after leaving Warsaw and halfway to Paris he was shocked to learn that his country had been suddenly overrun by the Russian army, and that his family and friends now faced extreme peril. Wistfully, he then also recognized he might never be able to return to his homeland. That same night he tearfully wrote in his diary, "I will heal the wounds of the present by recalling the memories of the past." From that moment on he would spend the rest of his life doing just that - composing music that would evoke his profound feelings of love and loss for his family, friends and native land. Over time, Chopin's deep nostalgia would prove to be a distinguishing characteristic of his musical genius.

Deprived of being near his family and friends by virtue of the ongoing war in Poland and now living alone in Paris, he increasingly used his myriad reflections on his past to color his musical works with a poignant spectrum of melancholic hues and shades. Shortly after his arrival in France he would compose the enchanting nocturnes of Opus 9 (B flat minor, E flat major, and B major). These disarming works cried out with homesickness and nostalgia and vented his melancholic memories to float through the air like a heady perfume.

Soon afterwards he would use a similar design for the three nocturnes of Opus 15, these works revealing an even more overwhelming emotional depth. Chopin continued to draw upon his reminiscences of his Polish childhood to create these early musical masterpieces. It would become a paradigm he would employ forever.

For some the scent of the lily is too intense. Similarly, Chopin's music has been criticized for its potent and sweetly perfumed melancholic character, with a few calling his works excessively morbid and morose. Was Chopin lured by the seduction of nostalgia into taking refuge in an imagined past with only blurred ties to reality? Was he in fact nearly immobilized by his nostalgia, living with one foot in the past and one in the present? There can be little doubt that Chopin derived much of his emotional sustenance by leaning on those mournful memories. They helped sustain him through his darkest days and provided inspiration for his music, yet did they drag him down into despair?

It might be wiser to believe that Chopin mined the depths of his memories to fashion his masterpieces in another dimension, transfiguring those passionate feelings into positive affirmations of his talent. Indeed, for him his melancholic melodies represented a form of therapeutic expression. His known reluctance to reveal his

innermost feelings to others in conversation immediately vanished when he sat at the piano. It was through his incredible magic with his cherished instrument that his feelings wafted wordlessly through the air. Rather than creating a psychological conflict for Chopin, his past memories provided an incredibly vast wealth of ideas for his musical genius and helped remind the world of the eternally beautiful fragrance of music.

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