

## Sophisticated Restraint

Over the many years since Frédéric Chopin's death there have been countless descriptions of his musical style, however difficult it is to pinpoint exactly what it is that makes his music so unique. His particular combination of Classical and Romantic elements was unusual for the time he lived in. Chopin was an adherent of Mozart's aesthetic, principles Mozart once wrote in a letter declaring that music was capable of expressing all passions, sorrows and suffering. Nevertheless, he said, passions, violent or otherwise, should never be expressed to a degree that provokes disgust; similarly, music at its most terrible should never irritate the ear, but charm it. In other words, Mozart felt music should always remain music and exercise some degree of moderation. Chopin fully embraced this discipline and subsequently enhanced it to create his own complex method of composing that might be termed "sophisticated restraint."

Chopin lived his life in a similar manner. His attire, while always fashionable, was classically elegant. He spoke softly, rarely raising his voice. Even the colors he chose for the wallpaper of his apartment were never flashy or garish, but rather understated and classy. In the same manner his musical style demonstrated a sort of controlled elegance and he decried those pianists whose technique displayed excessively loud pounding of the keys. He claimed that manner of playing resembled the "barking of a dog," describing it as subhuman and that such harsh sounds should not inhabit the realm of human music as they resemble mere "noise."

Chopin possessed a grudging respect for Beethoven, teaching several of the famous German composer's works to his students, yet in his own music he largely ignored Beethoven's influence and innovations. Somewhat similarly, Chopin and Hector Berlioz were friends in Paris despite being polar opposites and would occasionally spend time together at various functions. Outwardly, Chopin was rather calm and collected, whereas Berlioz had an outsized personality, often being scatterbrained and unrestrained. It goes without saying that Chopin rather detested the latter's music for its expressive excess, its use of blaring horns, untamed rhythms and crashing cymbals. Other than the works of Bach and Mozart, Chopin revered the works of few other composers. His own work exists as a pristine island among an archipelago of others, often dark and enigmatic and unequivocally in a class by itself.

There is an analogy to be drawn between Chopin's physical appearance – with his elegant clothes and fine furnishings, a man who despised all that was uncouth and common and who kept himself aloof from the common crowd – and the elegant somewhat detached style of his works. There is in his music a certain restraint, a hidden reserve of power as Robert Schumann once noted, "Chopin's works are cannons buried in >lowers."

Chopin's music represents one of the highest forms of human achievement. The subtle complexity of his musical style, with its precise and integrated embellishments, its gracefully reserved dynamics and its painterly-colored emotions effortlessly communicates with the human heart. Chopin's style of music never needs to scream, only to sing.

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