

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle
Baum Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Willis
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Zola Lawrence Twain
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Andersen London Descartes Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte
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Chopin and Other Musical Essays

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RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
TO
MRS. JEANNETTE M. THURBER

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CHOPIN to C

THE GREATEST GENIUS OF THE PIANO-FORTE

Leipzig, the centre of the world's music trade, exports about one hundred thousand dollars' worth of music to America every year. I do not know how much of this sum is to be placed to the account of Chopin, but a leading music dealer in New York told me that he sold three times as many of Chopin's compositions as of any other romantic or classical composer. This seems to indicate that Chopin is popular. Nevertheless, I believe that what Liszt wrote in 1850, a year after the death of Chopin — that his fame was not yet as great as it would be in the future — is as true to-day as it was forty years ago. Chopin's reputation has been constantly growing, and yet many of his deepest and most poetic compositions are almost unknown to amateurs, not to speak of the public at large. A few of his least characteristic pieces are heard in every parlor, generally in a wofully mutilated condition, but some of his most inspired later works I have never heard played either in private or in the concert hall, [4]although I am sure that if heard there they would be warmly applauded.

There is hardly a composer concerning whom so many erroneous notions are current as concerning Chopin, and of all the histories of music I have seen that of Langhans is the only one which devotes to Chopin an amount of space approximately proportionate to his importance. One of the most absurd of the misconceptions is that Chopin's genius was born in full armor, and that it did not pass through several stages of development, like that of other composers. Chopin did display remarkable originality at the very beginning, but the apparent maturity of his first published works is due to the fact that he destroyed his earliest efforts and disowned those works which are known as posthumous, and which may have created

confusion in some minds by having received a higher "opus" number than his last works.

Another misconception regarding Chopin is that his latest works are morbid and unintelligible. The same charge was brought by philistines against the best works of Beethoven, Schumann, and Wagner. The fact is that these last works are of an almost matchless harmonic depth and originality, as superior to his earlier works as Wagner's last music dramas are to his first operas. I make this comparison with Wagner advisedly because, although I have [5]the most exalted notions of Wagner's grandeur and importance, I do not for a moment hesitate to say that in his own sphere Chopin is quite as original and has been almost as revolutionary and epoch-making as Wagner. Schumann was the first to recognize the revolutionary significance of Chopin's style. "Chopin's works," he says, "are cannons buried in flowers;" and in another place he declares that he can see in "Chopin's G minor Nocturne a terrible declaration of war against a whole musical past." Chopin, himself, modest as he was in his manners, wrote to his teacher Elsner, in 1831, when he was twenty-two years of age: "Kalkbrenner will not be able to break my perhaps bold but noble determination to create a new epoch in art."

Now, why has the world been so slow in recognizing that Chopin stands in the very front rank of creative musicians? One reason doubtless is that he was so quiet and retiring in his personal disposition. His still, small voice was lost in the din of musical warfare. He warmly defended the principles of the romantic school, if necessary, and had decided opinions of other musicians, especially of the popular pianists of his day who vitiated the public taste with their show pieces; but he generally kept them to himself or confided them only to his friends, whom he even occasionally implored to keep them secret. Had he, like Richard Wagner, [6]attacked everybody, right and left, who stood in the way of the general recognition of his genius, his cause would have doubtless assumed greater prominence in the eyes of the public, even though the parlor piano does not afford so much play-ground for warfare as the operatic stage.

The chief reason, however, why musical authorities have so long hesitated to acknowledge that Chopin is one of the very greatest explorers and pioneers in the domain of their art, is to be found in what, for want of a better term, may be called æsthetic Jumboism. When the late lamented Jumbo was in New York he attracted so much attention that his colleagues, although but little inferior in size, had "no show" whatever. Everybody crowded around Jumbo, stuffing him with bushels of oranges and apples, while the other elephants were entirely ignored. As elephants are intelligent animals, is it not probable that Pilot, the next in size to Jumbo, went mad and had to be shot because he was jealous of the exclusive attentions bestowed on his rival? In æsthetics, this Jumboism, this exaggerated desire for mammoth dimensions, seems to be a trait of the human mind which it is difficult to eradicate. It is a suggestive fact that the morbid, sham æstheticism which prevailed in England a few years ago, chose for its symbol the uncouth sunflower. And many who know that a sunflower is less beautiful [7]and fragrant than a violet, will nevertheless, on visiting a picture gallery, give most of their attention to the large canvases, though the smaller ones may be infinitely more beautiful. It cannot be said that the critics of art or literature follow the popular disposition to measure genius with a yard-stick; but in music there seems to be a general tendency to do this. Liszt remarks, apropos, in his work on Chopin: "The value of the sketches made by Chopin's extremely delicate pencil has not yet been acknowledged and emphasized sufficiently. It has become customary in our days to regard as great composers only those who have written at least half a dozen operas, as many oratorios, and several symphonies."

Even Schumann, and Elsner, Chopin's teacher, seem to have been affected a little by this irrational way of looking at music. Schumann, in a complimentary notice of Chopin's nocturnes, expresses his regrets that the composer should confine himself so strictly to the pianoforte, whereas he might have influenced the development of music in all its branches. He adds, however, on second thought, that "to be a poet one need not have written ponderous volumes; one or two poems suffice to make a reputation, and Chopin has written such." Elsner who was unusually liberal in his views of art, and who discovered and valued his pupil's originality long before

Schumann did, nevertheless bowed [8]before the fetish of Jumboism in so far as to write to Chopin in Paris that he was anxious, before he departed this Vale of Tears, to hear an opera from his pen, both for his benefit, and for the glory of his country. Chopin took this admonition to heart sufficiently to ask a friend to prepare for him a libretto; but that is as far as the project ever went. Chopin must have felt instinctively that his individual style of miniature painting would be as ineffective on the operatic stage, where bold, *al fresco* painting is required, as his soft and dreamy playing would have been had he taken his piano from the parlor and placed it in a meadow.

Besides Chopin's abhorrence of musical warfare and his avoidance of the larger and more imposing forms of the opera, symphony, and oratorio, there were other causes which retarded the recognition of his transcendent genius. The unprecedented originality of his style, and the distinct national coloring of his compositions, did not meet with a sympathetic appreciation in Germany and Vienna, when he first went there to test his musical powers. Some of the papers indeed had a good word for him, but, as in the case of Liszt and later of Rubinstein, it was rather for the pianist than for the composer. On his first visit to Vienna he was greatly petted, and he found it easy to get influential friends who took care that his concerts should be [9]a success, because he played for their benefit, asking no pecuniary recompense. But when, some years later, he repeated his visit, and tried to play for his own pecuniary benefit, the influential friends were invisible, and the concert actually resulted in a deficit.

Chopin's letters contain unmistakable evidence of the fact that, with some exceptions, the Germans did not understand his compositions. At his first concert in Vienna, he writes, "The first allegro in the F minor concerto (not intelligible to all) was indeed rewarded with 'Bravo!' but I believe this was rather because the audience wished to show that they appreciated serious music than because they were able to follow and appreciate such music." And regarding the fantasia on Polish airs he says that it completely missed its mark: "There was indeed some applause by the audience, but obviously only to show the pianist that they were not bored." The ultra-Germans, he writes in another letter, did not appear to be quite

satisfied; and he relates that one of these, on being asked, in his presence, how he liked the concert, at once changed the subject of conversation, obviously in order not to hurt his feelings. In a third letter, in which he gives his parents an account of his concert in Breslau, in 1830, he says that, "With the exception of Schnabel, whose face was beaming with pleasure, and who [10]patted me on the shoulder every other moment, none of the other Germans knew exactly what to make of me;" and he adds, with his delicious irony, that "the connoisseurs could not exactly make out whether my compositions really were good or only seemed so."

Criticisms culled from contemporary newspaper notices and other sources emphasize the fact that the Germans were at that time blind to the transcendent merits of Chopin's genius. The professional critics, after their usual manner, found fault with the very things which we to-day admire most in him—the exotic originality of the style, and the delightful Polish local color in which all his fabrics are "dyed in the wool," as it were. How numerous these adverse criticisms were, may best be inferred from the frequency with which Schumann defended Chopin in his musical paper and sneered at his detractors. "It is remarkable," he writes, "that in the very droughty years preceding 1830, in which one should have thanked Heaven for every straw of superior quality, criticism, which it is true, *always lags behind unless it emanates from creative minds*, persisted in shrugging its shoulders at Chopin's compositions—nay, that one of them had the impudence to say that all they were good for was to be torn to pieces." In another article, after speaking in the most enthusiastic terms of [11]Chopin's trio, in which "every note is music and life," he exclaims, "Wretched Berlin critic, who has no understanding for these things, and never will have—poor fellow!" And seven years later, in 1843, he writes, with fine contempt for his critical colleagues, that "for the typical reviewers Chopin never did write, anyway." And this, be it remembered, was only six years before Chopin's death.

Not a few of the composers and composerlings of the period joined the professional critics in their depreciation of Chopin's works. Field called his "a talent of the sick chamber." Moscheles, while admitting Chopin's originality, and the value of his pianistic achievements, confessed that he disliked his "harsh, inartistic, in-

comprehensible modulations," which often appeared "artificial and forced" to him—these same modulations which to-day transport us into the seventh heaven of delight! Mendelssohn's attitude toward Chopin was somewhat vacillating. He defended him in a letter against his sister's criticisms, and assured her that if she had heard some of Chopin's compositions "as he himself played them" for him, she too would have been delighted. He adds that Chopin had just completed "a most graceful little nocturne," of which he remembered much, and was going to play it for his brother Paul. Nevertheless, he did not recommend the pupils at the Leipsic Conservatory to study [12]Chopin's works, and various utterances of his are on record showing that he had a decided artistic antipathy for the exotic products of Chopin's pen. To give only one instance. In one of the letters to Moscheles, first printed in *Scribner's Magazine* for February, 1888, he complains that "a book of mazurkas by Chopin, and a few new pieces of his are so mannered that they are hard to stand."

I have dwelt so much on the attitude of the Germans toward Chopin, because I am convinced that in this attitude lies one of the main reasons why no one has hitherto dared to place him in the front rank of composers, side by side with Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner. For the Germans are the *tonangebende* (the standard-setting) nation in music to-day, and, as there seems to be a natural antipathy between the Slavic and the Teutonic mind, the Germans are apt, like Mendelssohn, to regard as mannerism what is simply the exotic fragrance which betrays a foreign nationality. The ultra-Teutons still persist in their depreciation of Chopin. In the latest edition of Brockhaus's "Conservations-Lexicon" we read, apropos to Chopin's larger works, that "he was deficient in the profounder musical attainments"(!) Dr. Hanslick, generally considered the leading German critic of the period, in a 534-page collection of criticisms, discussing twenty concert seasons in Vienna, has only about half a dozen and by [13]no means complimentary references to Chopin. And even the late Louis Ehlert, in his appreciative essay on Chopin, comes to the conclusion that Chopin is certainly not to be ranked with such giants as Bach and Beethoven. This is Teutonism, pure and simple. No doubt Chopin is, in some respects, inferior to Bach and Beethoven, but in other respects he is quite as unquestionably superior to them. He wrote no mammoth symphonies, but

there is a marvellous wealth and depth of ideas in his smaller works—enough to supply half a dozen ordinary symphony and opera writers with ideas for a lifetime. His works may be compared to those men of genius in whose under-sized bodies dwelt a gigantic mind.

Schumann appears to have been the only contemporary composer who did not underrate Chopin. Whether he would have gone so far as to rank him with the greatest of the German composers, I cannot say, for he avoids direct comparisons. But if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Schumann flattered Chopin more than any other master, for his pianoforte works are much more in the manner of Chopin than of Bach or Beethoven. I do not mean direct imitation, but that unconscious adoption of Chopin's numerous innovations in the treatment of the piano and of musical style, which are better evidence of influence than the borrowing of an idea or two. He himself testified to the [14]"intimate artistic relations" between him and Chopin. Moreover, his praise of Chopin is always pitched in such a high key that it would seem as if praise could no higher go. It was he who first proclaimed Chopin's genius authoritatively, and to this fact he often referred subsequently, with special pride. The very first article in his volumes of criticisms is devoted to Chopin's variations on "La Ci Darem," published as "opus 2." In those days, Schumann used to give his criticisms a semi-dramatic form. On this occasion he represents his *alter ego*, Eusebius, as rushing into the room with a new composition, and the exclamation "Hats off, gentlemen! a genius!" He then analyzes the variations in glowing poetic language and rapturously exclaims at the end that "there is genius in every bar." And this was only one of the *early* works of Chopin, in which he has by no means attained his full powers. Of another quite early work, the second concerto, he writes that it is a composition "which none of us can approach except it be with the lips to kiss the hem;" and later on, the Preludes, the most inspired of his works, led Schumann to exclaim that Chopin "is and remains the boldest and noblest artistic spirit of the time."

Schumann would have found it difficult to induce any of his countrymen to endorse his exalted opinion of Chopin, but the Hungarian Liszt joined [15]hands with him heartily, and pronounced Chopin "an artist of the first rank." "His best works," he says, "con-

tain numerous combinations of which it must be said that they did nothing less than create an epoch in the treatment of musical style. Bold, brilliant, enchanting, his pieces *conceal their depth behind so much grace, their erudition behind so much charm*, that it is difficult to emancipate one's self from their overpowering magic and estimate them according to their theoretic value. This fact is already recognized by some competent judges, and it will be more and more generally realized when the progress made in art during the Chopin epoch is carefully studied."

That Elsner, Chopin's teacher, detected his pupil's originality, has already been stated. Fortunately he allowed it a free rein instead of trying to check and crush it, as teachers are in the habit of doing. But there are some passages in Chopin's early letters which seem to indicate that the general public and the professional musicians in his native Poland were not so very much in advance of the Germans in recognizing his musical genius. Liszt doubts whether Chopin's national compositions were as fully appreciated by his countrymen as the work of native poets; and Chopin writes to a friend, apropos of his second concert at Warsaw: "The *élite* of the musical world will be there; but I have little confidence in [16]their musical judgment—Elsner of course excepted." Elsewhere he complains of a patriotic admirer who had written that the Poles would some day be as proud of Chopin as the Germans were of Mozart. And when in addition to this the editor of a local paper told him he had in type a sonnet on him, Chopin was greatly alarmed, and begged him not to print it; for he knew that such homage would create envy and enemies, and he declared that after that sonnet was published he would not dare to read any longer what the papers said about him.

Chopin's want of confidence in the judgment of his countrymen showed that, after all, the national Polish element in his compositions was not the main cause why they were not rated at once at their true value. It was their novelty of form, harmonic depth and freedom of modulation, that made them for a long time *cavière* to the general. This was again proved when he went to Paris. Chopin was a Pole only on his mother's side, his father having been a Frenchman, who had emigrated to Poland. It might have been supposed, therefore, that there would be a French element in Chopin's genius which would make it palatable to the Parisians. But this did

not prove to be the case. In the remarkable group of musicians, poets, and artists who were assembled at that time in Paris, and who mutually inspired one another—a group which included [17]Liszt, Meyerbeer, Hiller, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Heine, George Sand, the Countess D'Agoult, Delacroix, etc.—there were no doubt not a few who knew what a rare genius their friend Chopin was. George Sand wrote in her autobiography: "He has not been understood hitherto, and to the present day he is underestimated. Great progress will have to be made in taste and in the appreciation of music before it will be possible for Chopin's work to become popular." Heine also wrote that his favorite pianist was Chopin, "who, however," he adds, "is more of a composer than a virtuoso. When Chopin is at the piano I forget all about the technical side of playing and become absorbed in the sweet profundity, the sad loveliness of his creations, which are as deep as they are elegant. Chopin is the great inspired tone-poet who properly should be named only in company with Mozart, Beethoven, and Rossini."

But aside from these select spirits and a small circle of aristocratic admirers, mostly Poles, Chopin was not understood by the Paris public. At first he could not even make his living there, and was in consequence on the point of emigrating to America when a friend dragged him to a *soirée* at Rothschild's, where his playing was so much admired that he was at once engaged as a teacher by several ladies present. In a very short time he became the fashionable teacher in aristocratic circles, where his [18]refined manners made him personally liked. As he refused to take any but talented pupils, teaching was not so irksome to him as it might have been. Nevertheless one cannot but marvel at the obtuseness of the Parisians who put into the utilitarian harness an artist who might have enchanted them every evening with a concert, had their taste been more cultivated. He *did* play once, when he first arrived, but the receipts did not even meet the expenses, and the audience received his work so coldly that his artistic sensibilities were wounded, and he did not again appear in public for fourteen years. Occasionally he played for the select aristocratic circles into which he had been introduced; but even here he did not often meet with the genuine appreciation and sympathy which the artist craves. "Whoever could read in his face," says Liszt, "could see how often he felt convinced that among

all these handsome, well-dressed gentlemen, among all the perfumed, elegant ladies, not one understood him."

As for the French critics they seem to have been as obtuse as their German colleagues. To give only one instance: M. Fétis, author of the well-known musical dictionary, states in his article on Chopin, that this composer is overrated to-day, and his popularity largely due to the fact that he is fashionable. And in his article on Heller, he asserts, more pointedly still, that "the time will undoubtedly come [19]when the world will recognize that Heller, much more than Chopin, is the modern poet of the pianoforte." In this opinion Fétis probably stands alone; but many who have not studied Chopin's deepest works carefully, are still convinced that the pianoforte compositions of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann, are of greater importance than Chopin's. So far am I from sharing this opinion that if I had to choose between never again hearing a pianoforte piece by any or all of those composers, or never again hearing a Chopin composition, I should decide in favor of Chopin. Some years ago I expressed my conviction, in *The Nation*, that Chopin is as distinctly superior to all other piano composers as Wagner is to all other opera composers. A distinguished Cincinnati musician, Mr. Otto Singer, was horrified at this statement, and wrote in *The Courier*, of that city, that it could only have been made by "a patriotically inclined Frenchman or a consumptive inhabitant of Poland;" adding that "he would readily yield up possession of quite a number of Chopin's bric-à-brac for Schumann's single 'Warum.'" I am neither a patriotic Frenchman nor a consumptive Pole, and I am a most ardent admirer of Schumann; nevertheless I uphold my former opinion, and my chief object in this essay is to endeavor to justify it.

All authorities, in the first place, admit that Chopin created an entirely new style of playing the [20]pianoforte. Many have pointed out the peculiarities of this style—the use of extended and scattered chords, the innovations in fingering which facilitate *legato* playing, the spray of dainty little ornamental notes, the use of the capricious *tempo rubato*, and so on. But it has not been made sufficiently clear by any writer how it was that Chopin became the Wagner of the pianoforte, so to speak, by revealing for the first time the infinite possibilities of varied and beautiful tone-colors inherent in that

instrument. To understand this point fully, it is necessary to bear in mind a few facts regarding the history of the pianoforte.

The name of pianoforte was given about a century and a half ago to an instrument constructed by the Italian Cristofori, who devised a mechanism for striking the strings with hammers. In the older instruments—the clarichords and harpsichords—the strings were either snapped by means of crow's quills, or pushed with a tangent. The new hammer action not only brought a better tone out of the string, but enabled the pianist to play any note loud or soft at pleasure; hence the name *piano-forte*. But the pianoforte itself required many years before all its possibilities of tone-production were discovered. The instruments used by Mozart still had a thin short tone, and there was no pedal for prolonging it, except a clumsy one worked with the [21]knee—a circumstance which greatly influenced Mozart's style, and is largely responsible for the fact that his pianoforte works are hardly ever played to-day in the concert hall. For, as the tone could not be sustained, it was customary in Mozart's time to hide its meagre frame by means of a great profusion of runs and trills, and other ornaments, with which even the slow movements were disfigured. Under the circumstances, these ornaments were justifiable to some extent, but to-day they seem not only in bad taste, but entirely superfluous, because our improved instruments have a much greater power of sustaining tones.

Czerny, the famous piano teacher, touched in his autobiography on the peculiarities of Mozart's style. Beethoven, who gave Czerny some lessons on the piano, made him pay particular attention to the *legato*, "of which," says Czerny, "he was so unrivalled a master, but which at that time—the Mozart period, when the short staccato touch was in fashion—all other pianists thought impossible. Beethoven told me afterwards," he continues, "that he had often heard Mozart, whose style from his use of the clavecin, the pianoforte being in his time in its infancy, was not at all adapted to the newer instrument. I have known several persons who had received instruction from Mozart, and their playing corroborated this statement."

[22]In view of these facts, we can understand why Beethoven did not like Mozart's pianoforte works as well as those of Clementi, in which there was more *cantabile*, and which required more fulness of

tone in the execution; and we can understand why even so conservative a critic as Louis Ehlert should exclaim, apropos of Chopin's "entirely new pianoforte life," "How uninteresting is the style of any previous master (excepting Beethoven) compared with his! What a litany of gone-by, dead-alive forms! What a feelingless, prosaic jingle! If anyone should, without a grimace, assure me sincerely that he can play pianoforte pieces by Clementi, Dussek, Hummel, and Ries, with real enjoyment even now, I will esteem him as an excellent man—yes, a very honest one; but I will not drink wine with him."

Were it not for what I have ventured to call the fetish of Jumboism, I am convinced that Professor Ehlert would have written Mozart's name in this last sentence in place of Clementi's. By excepting Beethoven alone from the list of "uninteresting" composers preceding Chopin, he *implicitly* condemns Mozart; but he does not dare to do so *explicitly*, although such a confession would not have affected Mozart's greatness in other departments of music, which is undeniable. Indeed, if Professor Ehlert had been perfectly sincere I am not quite sure that he would have excepted Beethoven's [23]sonatas. Although they teem with great and beautiful ideas, these sonatas are not really adapted to the intrinsic nature of the pianoforte, and hence fail to arouse the enthusiasm of those whose taste has been formed by the works of Chopin and Schumann. It was no doubt an instinctive antipathy to Beethoven's unpianistic style (if the adjective be permissible), which prevented Chopin from admiring Beethoven as deeply as he did some other composers, whom he would have admitted to be his inferiors. And Beethoven himself does not seem to have regarded his pianoforte works with the same satisfaction as his other compositions. At least, he wrote the following curious sentence in a corner of one of his sketch books in 1805; "Heaven knows why my pianoforte music always makes the worst impression on me, especially when it is played badly." He must have felt that his ideas found a much more appropriate and adequate expression in the orchestra than on the piano. Not being a radical innovator he did not, in his treatment of the pianoforte, go beyond Clementi; and so it remained for Chopin to show the world that the pianoforte, if properly treated, will yield tones whose exquisite sensuous