

Frédéric Chopin

Today is Halloween, but I am not going into that now. However, Debbie and I have been commemorating a soul recently: the soul of Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849). Chopin once was sort of a role model to me. How come?

Chopin as a role model

I try not to live up to anything or play any role – perhaps my definition of stoic. Just be. Life will take care of itself, and of me as expression of it. But I remember thinking about one “goal” when I was young.



Frédéric Chopin in 1849 (wikipedia)

I started playing the piano officially when I was 7, but I could play the first movement of the Mondschein sonata (Beethoven) at the age of 5, just by hearing my father play it and copying that by memory. As soon as I heard music from Chopin though (which my mother played often), I forgot much about poor Ludwig and tried to know everything about this Polish-French idol.

I was most impressed to learn that he had a rather poor health all his life and died young, being only 39. To see some one live relatively briefly and yet be so prolific and become immortal, immediately freed me from any concern about a normal life expectancy – if ever I could only reach that age myself. So I did, and fulfilled my, as far as I can remember, only serious goal. Not because of my own doing, but it came as grace. I never could concern myself enough about “the future” to have other long time goals, although of course I contracted and fulfilled some

minor wishes (piano playing, driving license, law school, job, marriage, to name but a few).

But getting to be 39 and beat Frédéric some how stood out.

Ever popular

So, Chopin was a genius composer with bad lungs. Some even conjecture that he could have had CF, dying young with lung infections and hemoptysis, not having fathered children. In his relatively short earthly life this Polish composer created all the music a pianist could ever want. There is no composer who meant more for the piano than he did. He received much acclaim already while alive, most of this time in Paris where he escaped the Russian occupation of his native country. Robert Schumann, after hearing one of Chopin's early compositions (the opus 2 Variations on Mozart's "*Lá ci darem la mano*") said: "Hats off gentlemen! A genius". After his 1832 concert debut in Paris at the Salle Pleyel, a critic wrote "Here is a young man who ... taking no model, has found, if not a complete renewal of piano music, ... an abundance of original ideas of a kind to be found nowhere else ...". And Franz Liszt, who also was amongst the audience, remarked: "The most vigorous applause seemed not to suffice to our enthusiasm in the presence of this talented musician, who revealed a new phase of poetic sentiment combined with such happy innovation in the form of his art". Chopin would however only give few more than thirty piano recitals in his life. He would certainly have been surprised to see how popular his music still is. Not only with hardcore lovers of classical music, but with a large selection of people who love music in a broader sense as well, because his beautiful melodies are very pleasing to the ear and very well composed indeed. For all moods there are lots of pieces he composed, even some for piano and orchestra although most of his work are miniatures composed for piano solo.

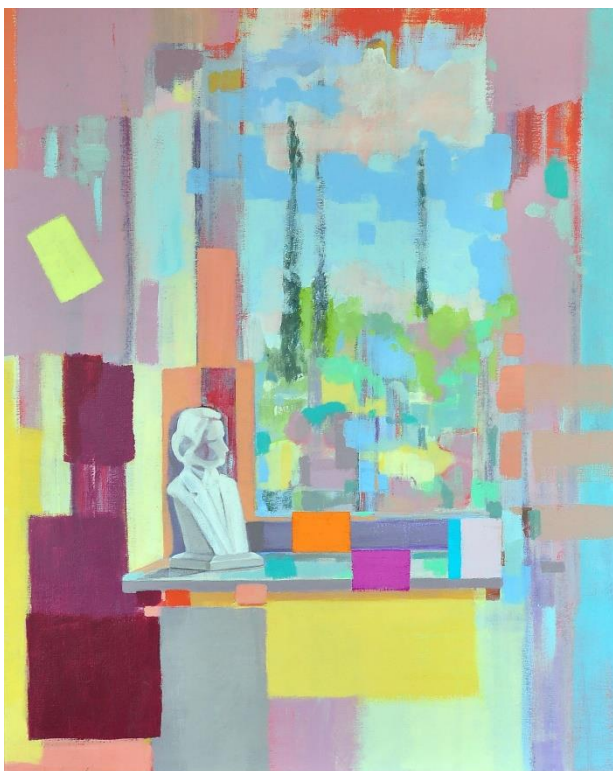
As an amateur pianist I played Chopin from a young age, probably I was around 7 when playing his more easy music like the Waltzes and Mazurka's. Most of these are small pieces based upon Polish folk songs and very popular. Later I also learned the romantic Nocturnes and some of his fierce Polonaises, that are a bit longer and harder to play generally speaking. And I also came to love his set of 24 Preludes. Many composers have made sets of these little pieces that originally were meant to set the mood for a concert, but later became fully grown separate compositions on their own. For instance Bach, Debussy, Rachmaninov, Scriabin and Shostakovich composed Preludes like these, as a set depicting an entire universe of compositional possibilities and human emotions.

So Chopin is not far away from my fingers usually, but last month was still special. To start with, because of new medication I recently have considerably raised my energy level and are able to play the piano longer again, much to my delight and that of Debbie's. I played through all of the Mazurka's in two days, rediscovering my favorite hobby because of this and it's great to experience that my ability has not decayed too much – on the contrary. And after that I rediscovered another great piano composer, Frederic Mompou. More about him in my next story. Back to Chopin now.



The Chopin Competition

Secondly, I was very inspired lately because in Warsaw there was the 18th international Chopin Competition, held every five years since 1927, where the best pianists in the world showed their musicality in the hope of winning a prize and international fame. In total 500 pianists applied, of which 150 were selected to play in the preliminary round. Of those, about 80 were selected to perform in the main competition, that spanned three rounds and a finale. In each round about half of the contestants were selected to enter the next, so after three weeks of competing only 12 finalists were chosen.



Chopin © 2016 Debbie Parkins - acrylic on canvas

Entering the finals of this competition is a big deal for a pianist. It means international acclaim and many more possibilities to play concerts around the world and become well known. However, to launch an international career as a pianist it is not absolutely necessary to enter into competitions, many have become famous without, for instance Arcadi Volodos who became legendary because of his first CD's with virtuosic arrangements of some of the most difficult piano pieces known. After establishing his name, he now records and plays what he chooses, and stays far away from his virtuoso youth. And nowadays one can even become world-famous via YouTube, as for instance shown by Hayato Sumino, who runs the popular [YouTube channel Cateen](#). But of course, he would not have arrived at the third round in the

Chopin Competition only for this – he is an exceptional pianist to start with. But it was surreal to see that, while most YouTube video's of the other contestants only had a few hundred or perhaps a few thousands viewers, [one of Sumino's performances](#) in the contest had over 1 million viewers. Still, winning one of the prizes in the Chopin competition is a secure start of a career.

Only the first six finalists get an official prize which is very prestigious, let alone winning one of the first three. Almost all of those pianists that have won a first, second or third prize have become world famous legends, and even some of the “lower” scoring pianists have. Names like Vladimir Ashkenazy, Bella Davidovich, Maurizio Pollini, Martha Argerich, Garrick Ohlsson, Christian Zimmerman, and more recently Rafal Blechacz and Seong-Jin Cho are well established in the world of piano playing.

The Pirate

Sometimes a candidate even becomes famous without entering the final, like [Ivo Pogorelich](#) who was rejected in the competition of 1980, after the third round, causing an uproar in the jury when Martha Argerich protested this decision of her fellow jurors and quit. Pogorelich was sort of a pirate-pianist, who had very original thoughts about how piano music should be played, and not all the jurors could follow his choices. Pogorelich always wondered what [inspired the composer](#) for writing a certain composition, and tried to interpret this, instead of trying to imagine how the composer wanted the piece to be played. Every competition needs musicians like this, who change the paradigm and cause a shock in the ears of the listeners. Some love this, and some hate it. But mostly these pirates become very well loved and known with the general public nevertheless. The pirate of this competition in our view was [Georgijs Osokins](#), who already competed in the previous competition of 2015, reaching the finals. But apparently, he aspired for a higher place and tried again, like some other contestants as well. That mission did not succeed, because he was not allowed into the third round, but he played a very original Chopin and he looked like Glenn Gould doing it, sitting on a low table chair.



Our favourites



The Piano © 2021 Debbie Parkins - mixed media on paper

We listened to a lot of contestants these last three weeks. Not to all of them, because there were too many to follow all of the recitals all those long days. But we will be listening to the recordings that are on [YouTube](#) and will be available for quite some time. So the circus is not over yet, fortunately. We enjoyed all of the recitals very much, although of course one has certain favorites and it is more or less a gamble to predict which of the candidates will be allowed to the next round. So some of our

favorites were rejected after round two, one of them [Evren Ozel](#), and some did not make it into the finals to our dismay, like Piotr Alexewicz, Szymon Nehring and Nikolay Khozyainov. We are sure however that these pianists also will find their way to the concert stages in the world in the time to come. Most of them already have, since pianists like these are mostly playing from a very young age, having done many concerts and won many other competitions as well. The finalists were all great. I will mention some of our favorites whose musical personality we found attractive. The complete list is on the [website](#) of the Frederic Chopin competition. We loved the musical perfection of the winner, [Bruce \(Xiaoyu\) Liu](#). We admired the deep philosophical musicality of [Alexander Gadjiiev](#) (shared second prize), the honest vulnerability of [Eva Gevorgian](#) and the warm cordiality of [Leonora Armellini](#) (fifth prize).

Our favorite pianist however is the winner of the third prize, [Martín García García](#). The sheer joy he conveys when playing Chopin's music was very enticing and he seemed such an honest and cheerful human being as well. Interviewed after one of his recitals, he was asked about the secret [how to play a Mazurka](#). His answer was endearing: "I play a Mazurka as if every note dances in a beautiful Polish dress with every previous and next note". That is priceless - or, in his case, winning him the third prize overall in the competition (and the prize for the best [Concerto](#)). And he understands very well what is needed for playing the piano on this level: the piano has to almost disappear. It is merely used as a tool to make music, and for this it must not stand between the player and the music. "[My relationship](#) with the piano is not existent. It's like my relationship with my hand – it's there. The less I can think about the piano, the better".

Dedication

What we most enjoyed however was not the competition itself, because it is always a shame that so many great musicians who all deserve a prize, could not be awarded one in this system of counting points and subjective taste of the jurors. We were most moved by the dedication of all these young people, who had put in so much talent, sheer determination and love for music in the 17 to 29 years of their lives to bring alive the wonderful music of Chopin. And to see human beings from all over the world, from all nationalities and beliefs, both the pianists, the public and the jurors, ignoring all those differences and finding each other in this one love for art and beauty – that was a most inspiring example of going beyond the personal layer of ego and mind, and joining in the one Wholeness we all share. A fountain of music directly from the fountain of aliveness.

Now, back to my piano!



J.Paul Jordaans
Grathem, 31 October 2021
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