

Music 320 - 19th Century Music

Frederic Chopin (1810-49)

Biography:

- Polish born, educated at Warsaw conservatory; child prodigy
- His mother was his first piano teacher; he later studied with a Polish violinist (on piano) which may account for his very individual style.
- Left Warsaw 1830, Warsaw was on brink of insurrection against Russian dominance. By this time he was 20, had written a couple of piano concertos (to showcase his ability)
- Went to Vienna, then Paris 1831; this was his home for rest of his life.
- met Aurora Dupin (French novelist wrote as George Sand): an influence and caretaker

Musical Characteristics

- Chopin was best known as a writer of piano music. Gave very few public concerts, performed in private salons in Paris His piano works are described as "the authoritative assumption of the piano as a solo instrument;" fully liberated from vocal and orchestral influences, "pianistic."
- Piano works combine elements of **composition** and **improvisation**. Chopin used *rubato* (from same root as "rubare" to rob or steal); gives an improvisatory feel
- Melodies are characteristically haunting
- Structure: Some authors separate his works into short, medium, long
 - main difference is long ones use more repetition.
 - Chopin rarely used forms of classical period, e.g. sonata-allegro;
 - rarely used multi-movement formats like sonatas and concertos

Short piano pieces:

- **Etudes**: each etude concentrates on a certain technical problem for piano; usually only explores one theme.
- **Polish folk dances**, e.g. *Mazurka*, or international dances like *Waltz*. Very simple organization: idea, repeat; another idea, repeat.
- **Preludes** : basically have only has one idea; idea is slightly varied on repetition
- **Mazurkas**: a triple meter dance with strong accent on 2nd or 3rd beat; lively even fiery in character. Usually end on unaccented 3rd beat, scale degree 5.
- These short works aren't common among Romantics before Chopin; this is salon music, very intimate

Middle-sized works:

- This category includes many of the most popular works of Chopin: nocturnes, ballades, polonaises, scherzos. Most are still fairly simple ABA ideas or perhaps rondos (ABACA); sometimes expanded with coda.
- **Nocturnes**: popular because relatively simple technically, very free and expressive rhythmically. Longer opening idea than found in short pieces
- **Polonaises**: triple meter, moderate tempo, recurring rhythmic figure: an accented or elongated second beat; cadences on 3rd beats.
 - Wide range of emotion found: 2 of Chopins are laments or funereal, one is called "The Military," and of course the triumphant A-flat Major, op.53 (1842)

Long Works :

- Two concertos, three sonatas; concertos written before he left Warsaw in 1830; some influence from Weber, Hummel, Field. Written to promote himself. Similar to shorter pieces, but more repetitions to make longer. Orchestra is forgotten after opening statement.

Chopin's Harmony

- Lots of chromaticism and dissonance: had lots of influence on Liszt and Wagner
- Harmony often used chromatically moving inner parts; moved through enharmonic equivalents
- He made successions of dominant-tonic relationships that return to original key very quickly: just momentary justification of key, not a true modulation
- Dissonance was mostly passing; sometimes liked to hang onto a dissonance and resolve in a way you don't expect