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**FRYDERYK CHOPIN'S ICONIC BIOGRAPHY "TAINTED"
BY GENDER, QUEER AND COSMOPOLITAN NOTIONS AS A POINT
OF CONTENTION REGARDING THE MODERN OUTLOOK
ON ROMANTICISM**

**IKONICZNA BIOGRAFIA FRYDERYKA CHOPINA "SKALANA" PRZEZ GENDER,
QUEER I KOSMOPOLITYZM JAKO NOWA ODSŁONA SPORU O ROMANTYZM
W UJĘCIU NOWOCZESNYM**

Słowa kluczowe: Fryderyk Chopin, piano, gender, Romantic «grand Polish» discourse, concept of Polishness, cosmopolitanism

Key words: Fryderyk Chopin, fortepian, gender, (arcy)polski dyskurs romantyczny, idea polskości, kosmopolityzm

The paper investigates three representations of Chopin, which are “unorthodox” according to the “grand Polish” Romantic model. Scholars from the classical school who have a fixed idea about what Romanticism is and should be, tend to be suspicious about new ways of representing Chopin that is the creation of new cultural phenomena by way of Chopin’s performative presence. Thus the pop-cultural presentation of Chopin’s biography, or postmodern notions applied to some aspects of his life or the mythical reality it created, may be viewed as a point of contention regarding the modern outlook on Romanticism.

In my paper I would like to take a deeper look (however one that is possible in an article this size) at three phenomena which “taint” the biography of the Romantic genius. Firstly, there is the notion of gender and the portrayal of Chopin in feminine terms in nineteenth-century historiography. Secondly, I will examine the phenomenon of queer and camp aesthetics, tracing the composer’s dandyism and his relationship with the cross-dresser artist George Sand. Thirdly, the paper will discuss Chopin’s dual nationality (despite his deep and genuine nostalgia for Poland) and his cosmopolitan approach to life and art, which ran contrary to the “grand Polish” discourse.

Gender ambivalence in the representation of the genius dandy

When the twenty-six year old Chopin met the thirty-two year old George Sand for the first time it is believed that he said: “What a resentful woman she is. Is she really a woman? I am inclined to have my doubts”¹. George Sand, on the other hand, was to write to her friend Charlotte Marliani: “Ce Monsieur Chopin, isn’t he rather a girl?”². The attraction must have outweighed the resentment as the two artists spent almost ten years together. It is a cliché to say that they were the exact opposite, but indeed from the nature of their relationship, it is possible to make some cultural and anthropological observations about gender and the discourse surrounding it.

Throughout his life, Chopin was metaphorically attached to various creatures of the realm of the imagination, such as elves, fairies, sylphs, angels, and sprites. He tended to be viewed either as a woman, a very young effeminate boy, or as a child, but very rarely as a fully-grown man. These descriptions of Chopin started to be made soon after his move to Paris and continued throughout his later years. They became even more marked during the creation of the Chopin myth that followed his death, and that has continued up to now. Mieczysław Tomaszewski in his study on Chopin’s personality explains that the contradictions and complexities of the artist’s nature lie in the “schizoid” type which he represented³. The logics of inconsistencies and ambivalences are to be traced in Chopin’s rich correspondence which shows him as a versatile writer and a personality grasping many different personas in one.

The matter seems much more complex than merely a Romantic trope of otherworldly beings which manifested a mode of praise, and drew attention to the transcendental and ethereal realms which were a result of Chopin’s idiosyncratic performance style. Along with this Romantic trope, the portrayal of Fryderyk Chopin carries implications of gender ambivalence and sexual ambiguity, introducing the subject of sexuality, desire and passion into our understanding of the composer.

Jeffrey Kallberg opens his study *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* with a thought so closely connected to the performative paradox, that it is actually unsettling:

At once exalted and shadowy, [Chopin] cuts a curious figure in contemporary culture. Ethereal composer and enervated *enfant mâle* (or so the popular biographical image of him would have us believe), he parries attempts to reconcile the music with the man. A Pole who wrote most of his works among Frenchmen, his music exudes exoticism at the same time as it partakes of the European common-practice tradition. Champion of the miniature at a time when many around him gravitated toward ever grander musical colossi, he confounds our abilities to hear his contemporaries and him on equal footing.

¹ Quoted in Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Chopin i George Sand*, Kraków 1990, p. 87.

² J. Barry, *George Sand. Żywot jawnogrzesznicy* (polish transl. I. Szymańska), Warszawa 1996.

³ M. Tomaszewski. *Chopin. Człowiek, dzieło, rezonans*, Kraków 2005, p. 13.

A male composer who wrote in “feminine” genres like the nocturne for domestic settings like the salon, he confuses our sense of the boundaries of gender. Central to our repertory, Chopin nevertheless remains a marginalized figure⁴.

Indeed Chopin is marginalized in terms of gender discourse, but also in the vast field of psychoanalysis, which would reach beyond the correlation of genius and/or madness. The eroticism of Chopin's life in the sense of Platonic understanding is completely dismissed and there is a big blank space in this area. I would call this field the “internal dandy” landscape, as it touches on a certain trait of personality.

During Chopin's lifetime and especially afterwards, writers feminized and infantilized Chopin's persona and his music. This is definitely connected with the composer fashioning himself as a child as well. It is no coincidence that the only true and real relationship Chopin ever had with a woman was very quickly transformed from a relation of two lovers into a relationship of a mother and a child, and remained as such for eight years. Sand referred to Chopin as *le petit, mon enfant, mon ange*, and it was in this way that she addressed her letters to him. She also communicated with Chopin's sister Ludwika and his mother Justyna with the tone of a “foster mother” to Fryderyk while he was far from home.

This approach was extrapolated into the field of music, which was also considered most suited to women, children and angels. Henriette Voigt highlighted Chopin's childlike naturalness as the main reason for her enthusiastic response to his art: “[h]e has enraptured me – I cannot deny it – in a way which hitherto had been unknown to me. What delighted me was the childlike, natural manner which showed in his demeanor and in his playing”⁵. Solange Clésinger on the other hand saw the angelic quality in Chopin's music: “The woman, the children (young Filtsch died so young!) brought a finer sense than the masculine talents did to this celestial music [...] Liszt played these adorable melodies badly. He botched them [...] Under the flexible and responsive fingers of Chopin's pale and frail hand the piano became the voice of an archangel...”⁶.

The angelic trope was taken up by women who understood him and wanted to surround themselves with Chopin's presence. Chopin was considered the incarnation of the piano. Edmond de Goncourt was not exaggerating when he baptized the piano as the “lady's hashish” – indeed the piano was an instrument played as a pastime mostly by women in the 19th century⁷. Danièle Pistone⁸ found two thousand scenes in nineteenth-century novels in which a piano appears: half of them involved young, single women and a quarter married women (we can imagine that some of them were among

⁴ J. Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre*, Harvard University Press 1996, Preface (x).

⁵ J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, trans. N. Shohet with K. Osostowicz and R. Howat, ed. R. Howat, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 269.

⁶ Cited in Eigeldinger, p. 280–281.

⁷ Cited in *A History of Private Life*, ed. by M. Perot, Ph. Ariès and G. Duby, vol. IV From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War, ambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989, p. 531.

⁸ D. Pistone, *Le piano dans la littérature française des origines jusque vers 1900*, Paris, Champion 1975.

Chopin's students). The social function of the piano was of primary importance. The great vogue for the instrument began after the Congress of Vienna and slowly entered the salons, replacing the "indecent" harps, cellos and violins. The July Monarchy popularised the piano among the petite bourgeoisie and its popularity flourished pretty much throughout the whole century.

The ability to play the piano enhanced a woman's chances on the matrimonial market and was well regarded among the higher ranks of society. For both women and men, it established a reputation and gave public proof of a proper and respectable education. That is why the bourgeoisie were ready to pay Chopin incredible sums of money to be among his students – 20 francs in gold when the students came to him and 30 francs when he had to visit them⁹. He, as the grand master of the piano, became one of the most exclusive and fashionable teachers in Paris, even more popular than Kalkbrenner or Liszt. He usually had five lessons during the day, sometimes seven. Chopin became one of the richest Poles in Paris overnight thanks to the position of the piano and the pianist in the social hierarchy.

Where did this fashion come from exactly? What metaphors did the piano convey? Pistone stresses that pianos were rarely the instrument of an amorous dialogue *per se*. For a very long time, however, the piano fulfilled the roles of friend, confidant, and soul-mate until it was transformed into expensive furniture, expressing social status rather than artistic self-expression. Young, solitary women in particular were portrayed as playing the piano, which helped them express feelings that could not be stated in language.

There is also the distant connection between love and the piano. Mostly the piano could convey the pain of the soul wounded by the end of love. The literary stereotype of a sensitive and understanding but not very beautiful woman was that she "performed her own autopsy with a few bars of Chopin"¹⁰. Chopin, according to the popular belief and stereotype, was the composer who understood the broken heart, the nostalgia for thwarted love and solitude.

Chopin's versatile nature can however break this stereotype easily with his acute sense of humour and cutting sarcasm like in the below letter to his dear friend Tytus Wojciechowski. The composer describes his daydreaming disturbed by a line of students who could not play the piano properly but felt it was a sophisticated need which had to be met:

Dlatego męczę się i nie uwierzysz, jak szukam jakiejś pauzy, co by do mnie cały dzień nikt nie zajrzał, nikt nie zagadał. Do Ciebie pisząc, nie cierpię, kiedy mi się dzwonek ruszy – i włączy jakieś coś z wąsikami, duże, wyrosłe, tęgie, – siądzie do fortepianu i samo nie wie, po co improwizuje, wali, tłucze bez sensu, rzuca się, przekłada ręce, z pięć minut na jednym klawiszu grzechocze

⁹ See: J.-J. Eigeldinger, *Chopin vu par ses élèves*, Fayard 2006, where one can find portraits of all Chopin's students and their rates, as well as Piotr Witt, *Przedpiekle sławy. Rzecz o Chopinie*, Warszawa 2009, p. 328 where he writes about Chopin's carrier strategies. Witt notes that 100 francs in gold had the same value as today 2–3 thousand Euros.

¹⁰ J. Laforgue, cited in *A History of Private Life, op. cit.*, p. 533.

ogromnym paluchem, który gdzieś tam na Ukrainie do ekonomskiego batoga i do lejc przeznaczony¹¹.

Another view in this kaleidoscope is the piano as an outlet for irrepressible passions. The piano replaced horse-riding and the walk through a storm, with the intended proximity of the three semantic fields. Long before psychoanalysis, Edmond de Goncourt saw a connection between playing the piano and masturbation¹².

As a sickly exile, Chopin was the perfect person to be looked after by many and all he seemed to want was simply to write music. As a reviewer wrote:

Chopin doesn't care for that kind of music which accomplishes nothing but to drown out the orchestra. On the contrary, pay attention to how he dreams, how he weeps, how he sings so sweetly, so tenderly, and with such sorrow, how he expresses to perfection everything that is heartfelt and noble. Chopin is the pianist of feeling par excellence¹³.

This representation leads us to the queer and camp notions which arise in the performative analysis of Chopin and contradict the “grand Polish model”.

Queer and camp notions

Chopin being so obviously “feminized” and “infantilized”, this also demonstrates in an unpatronising way how the “masculinized” star of George Sand could shine so bright. She is indeed like one of her characters, flickering between being Gabriel and Gabrielle. Honoré de Balzac, who visited Nohant in 1838, wrote in a letter to Ewelina Hańska that in the presence of George Sand he felt like he was with a man in terms of the conversation flow, the specific manner she had and the energy she emanated¹⁴. He depicted her in his novel *Béatrix* (1839) as Madame Félicité des Touches, a writer who used the male nickname Camille Maupin. This is a reference to the hermaphrodite from the novel of Henri de Latouche *Fragoletta ou Naples et Paris en 1799* (1829),

¹¹ Z. Helman, Z. Skowron, H. Wróblewska-Straus, (eds.), *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina*, vol. 2, Part 1, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2017, p. 130.

¹² See *A History of Private Life, op. cit.*, p. 533. The authors in general see the piano as a metaphorical instrument, basically used by women to idle away the hours awaiting the arrival of the man in their life, be he a husband, lover or protector. All the conventional scenes they quote are attributed to the female condition, leaving bourgeois men outside the parenthesis (as if they never had anything to do with the piano – unless as an object to send a woman they jilted). This contradicts the fact that the most acclaimed virtuosos of the time were men, at least on the official scene. However Chopin's students also prove that the gender mix varied and there is no single conclusion to be drawn concerning the matter. It is true however that the piano created spaces, which were unavailable for women in other circumstances and therefore it might be perceived as a nineteenth-century instrument of emancipation.

¹³ Translated in the appendix of concert reviews in William G. Atwood, *Fryderyk Chopin: Pianist from Warsaw*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 235.

¹⁴ J. Barry, *George Sand... op. cit.*, pp. 292–293.

to whom George Sand showed her early writings, and a lesbian character from Théophile Gautier's novel "Mademoiselle Maupin"¹⁵.

Both Sand and Chopin were considered geniuses in their time and both were represented as having characteristics of the opposite sex. However, there was an asymmetry in the respective "gendering" of their genius:

While the "truth" about Sand and Chopin as a couple will doubtless continue to entice and elude, some scholars have analyzed different representations of the two to better understand the cultural and social history of the middle decades of the nineteenth century. This approach also bears on the issue of genius during that time – for part of Sand's masculine image derives from the attribution of genius, as does Chopin's effeminacy. To be sure Sand did, in fact, dress in man's clothes, smoke little cigars, live an independent life, and succeed in literature – all practices that violated feminine norms of behavior in her time. And Chopin was, in fact, usually in poor health, thin, weak, and careful about his dress and interior decoration – all characteristics associated with femininity rather than masculinity¹⁶.

What is different are the representations of gender specifically in relation to their genius.

The collection of feminine and androgynous metaphors for Chopin imply acceptance of androgyny in a man of genius, but by contrast the sexual confusion and androgyny in representations of George Sand rendered her a dangerous figure, which the writer certainly understood and used in her work. Chopin's effeminacy distinguished him from conventional masculinity also in terms of music – the belief that his feeble energy made him focus on small piano pieces as opposed to classical genres for the orchestra and their alleged masculine energy. However, there were also voices that radically belied this – Chopin's effeminate qualities brought him closer to divinity and otherworldly sources of genius.

It is fascinating how the feminine and masculine elements also entered fields as distant from issues of gender as the eternal argument over the wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy¹⁷ and which was Chopin's favorite. He himself is said to have preferred the "feminine" Burgundy to the masculine "Bordeaux". Scholars followed the thread of Chopin's favorite flowers – violets, which he always liked to have at home. There were soirées organized in his apartments when every lady who visited the composer, would leave with a little violet bouquet.

¹⁵ Gautier made pleasure the ultimate criterion of artistic validity, and preaching hedonism put him at odds with both the bourgeoisie and the teachings of the Christian church. The writer, who refused to believe that the flesh was evil and that it was necessary to subjugate it, enjoyed his *enfant terrible* status and ideas which disturbed the philistine views of his bourgeois compatriots. His sensual philosophy and acceptance of bisexuality was a performance of its own kind.

¹⁶ W. Walton, *Gender and Genius in Postrevolutionary France: Sand and Chopin*. In: *The Age of Chopin: Interdisciplinary Inquiries*, ed. H. Goldberg, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 230.

¹⁷ W. Bońkowski, *Chopin gourmet*, Warszawa 2015, p. 53.

Chopin captured these paradoxes of his nature in an intimate letter to his close friend, Tytus Wojciechowski:

W ten moment, kiedy się zabieram do opisu jednego balu, na którym mnie bóstwo jedno zachwyciło z różą w czarnych włosach – odbieram Twój list. – Wychodzi mi wszystko moderne z głowy – przenoszę się jeszcze bardziej do Ciebie, biorę Cię za rękę i płaczę. – Miałem Twój list ze Lwowa. – Tym później się zobaczymy, a może i wcale nie, bo, serio mówiąc, moje zdrowie nędzne, - wesoly jestem zewnątrz, a szczególnie między swoimi (swoimi nazywam Polaków) – ale w środku coś mnie morduje – jakieś przecucia, niepokoje, sny, albo bezsenność – tęsknota – obojętność – chęć życia, a w moment chęć śmierci – jakiś słodki pokój, jakieś odrętwienie, nieprzytomność umysłu, a czasem dokładna pamięć mnie dręczy. Kwaśno mi, gorzko, słono, jakaś szkaradna mieszanina uczuć mną miota! Głupszym niż kiedy. Moje życie – daruj mi. – Już dosyć¹⁸.

The dichotomies male/female, intellectual/emotional, crude/spiritual, down-to-earth/poetic, heavy/light were intimately incorporated in the social values shared by the dandy. Dandyism represents a spectrum of sophisticated taste in dress and worldly opulence, though one whose functioning as a symbol of superiority is limited to the field of the intellect, rather than the emotions. The dandy is rather a loner, who considers love and erotic passion as a threat because both of these sensations require a momentary or permanent loss of self. The ideal held by the dandy – and certainly held also by Chopin – was conscious life with a mirror image of the reflective intellect as a guideline. This trope absolutely matches with that of gender ambivalence and the portrayal of Chopin as an asexual being.

In frenzied passion the inner self loses control of the body and loses the distant perspective of the calm observer who sees through others but who is reluctant to reveal his own feelings and sensations. As an aesthete who regards the self as a well-formed composition, the dandy considers love to be a kind of decomposition, a dissolution of the mental contours of the self¹⁹.

This is not to say that Chopin was incapable of love, but in some ways the only and true love he had was that of music.

Countess Paulina Plater, when asked to compare the merits of the three pianists who had played in her salon – Ferdynand Hiller, Chopin and Liszt – said that she would choose Hiller as a friend, Chopin as a husband, and Liszt as a lover²⁰. Whatever is said about gender ambivalence and the ways of “resolving it”, Chopin always

¹⁸ Z. Helman, Z. Skowron, H. Wróblewska-Straus (eds.), *Korespondencja...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, Part 1, Warszawa 2017, pp. 130–131.

¹⁹ H. Gnüg, “The Dandy and the Don Juan Type”. In: *European Romanticism, Literary Cross-Cur-rents, Modes and Models*, ed. by G. Hoffmeister, Detroit 1990, p. 232.

²⁰ L. Ramann, *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch*, Leipzig 1880–1894, vol. 1, p. 229. Quoted in A. Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811–1847* (vol. 1), Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 149.

embodied a strange dichotomy and paradox, which rose from within in the discourse of the dandy and would have been understood as the unity of grace and impertinence – the oxymoronic aversions, which came to life in this one being.

On Chopin's Polishness and cosmopolitanism

Chopin's life, work and reception from the nineteenth century until now, have been very often interpreted through the discourse of patriotism and national spirit. The "grand" tradition portrays him as a splendid virtuoso artist, individual with unique sensitivity but in his artistic activity supported by the foundation of folk art and strongly shaping the consciousness of Poles. Chopin's genius is in this representation associated with the spirit of national collectiveness where the spirit of Polishness allegedly inspired him and which was shaped by him at the same time. And yet Chopin's Polishness is one of the most difficult notions to grasp. It is referred to ubiquitously within volumes of myths, stereotypes and slogans such as "Chopin as the greatest Polish composer", "Chopin, whose Polishness can be felt by anyone who hears his music"; however at the same time contradictorily announced as "truly European", "absolutely universal", "understood by all nations, races and societies, on all continents around the globe" – all through the nineteenth century, throughout Chopin's lifetime up until today.

Since we are dealing with a phantasmatic reality – in the case of Chopin's connection to Polishness, Slavdom and folk culture, as well as transcendental ideas – all of these are a performance of an image of Chopin which has been useful in the history of culture, but at the same time are points of contention serving to divide rather than unite.

Chopin was the perfect cosmopolitan artist, associated with international, aristocratic Parisian salons, a virtuoso and dandy whose image was quite distant from Polish weeping willows and muddy meadows. Adam Mickiewicz criticized Chopin for his lack of "Polishness", and condescendingly looked down on his "tickling of aristocratic nerves" instead of moving the masses with his music²¹, creating a spiritual change, maybe even a revolution guided by the spirit of the Slavs. As we know, Chopin was far from sharing Mickiewicz's idea of the mission of art and avoided the masses by all costs.

There are many ways of looking at Chopin's Polishness. One may use such filters as the linguistic – the language of the composer to describe himself in the world and by traces of a "Polish spirit". It can also be done by recreating the patriotic canon among the émigrés and tracing Chopin's activity for the sake of Poles and Poland – which for him was a true civic duty. Finally there is the axiological aspect – by looking at the spiritual reception of Chopin as a figure in some ways peculiar and mediating between worlds – in the testimonies of his contemporaries and those who came later.

²¹ W. Mickiewicz, *Pamiętniki*, 3 Volumes, Warszawa, Gebethner & Wolff, 1926, vol. 1, pp. 173–174.

Chopin often wrote how one's native language was an important vehicle for one's well being and inner compass. This kind of symbolic human exchange Chopin understood as the biggest kind of consolation. The very sound of one's native language was like music which had the nostalgic power to spirit one away, back to the homeland. There is a theory stating the influence of the “Polish cadence” on the music of Chopin²². The author of this thesis, Krzysztof Bilica, stated that the cadence Chopin often used in his pieces, was an analogy to the polonaise rhythm: that in his musical notations he used the same rule of stressing the penultimate sound, just as in Polish the stress lies on the penultimate syllable. As a very “romantic” idea it belongs to the phantasmatic analysis of Chopin's Polishness, which constitutes a representative “grand Polish” discourse.

The idea that the language heard far from home brings you back to the place you consider your own is an obvious one. What is interesting is the absence of Chopin's “Frenchness” – after all not only did the composer spend half of his life in France, but he was also half French and he grew up hearing both Polish and French at home. This French side is usually negated by biographers and “altered”, even by people like Liszt, who wrote about Chopin's resentment towards writing letters – indeed writing in general – unless it was in Polish and to his nearest and dearest, so his handwriting was apparently unknown to most of his friends. Chopin only made exceptions for those who could speak Polish and therefore understood it in writing. Liszt writes:

[H]e always used it with the people of his own country and loved to translate its most expressive phrases. He was a good French scholar, as the Slavs generally are. In consequence of his French origin, the language had been taught him with peculiar care. But he did not like it, he did not think it sufficiently sonorous, and he deemed its genius cold²³.

Liszt contradicts the prevalent opinion that Chopin's French was quite poor, and that it was this that made him want to speak Polish in order to feel “fully himself”. It seems quite incredible for a musical genius with perfect pitch and absolute hearing of the most delicate tones not to be able to speak his father's native language impeccably unless it was a conscious decision. As regards grammar and spelling mistakes in French, Chopin admitted himself that the language was not his strong point and always jokingly announced it in advance, like when he wrote to Marie de Rozières from Nohant: *Je vous écrit sans dictionnaire pour vous confier ma lettre pour ma mère* (KFC II 389).

Chopin's intimate homeland – Poland – was therefore something quite different to what it is believed to be by most biographers. The composer understood that the price to pay for immigration would be huge, but that it was worth paying anyway – and as with the November Rising, he understood that his battle lay elsewhere. It is obvious to say that Chopin's Polishness of everyday life was manifested in more “positive” ways (in the sense of Auguste Comte's understanding) rather than in Romantic revolutionary

²² K. Bilica, *Wokół Chopina i Polski*, Wołomin 2005, „Muzyka” 1997, no. 4.

²³ F. Liszt, *The Life of Chopin* (transl. J. Pyschowski), ReadaClassic.com 2010, p. 67.

plotting. In the process of iconizing the representation of Chopin, adding symbolic qualities to it, some transgressions were made with regard to the desired connotations of “Polishness”, and that is when “Chopin” as a concept got in the way of Chopin²⁴.

The axiology of Polishness, the quest for Polish subjects in Chopin’s mazurkas and polonaises (Chopin systematically used Polish genres in his music) was a recurring topos in 19th-century responses to his music and more surprisingly in 20th-century scholarly analysis. These responses created art forms of different disciplines. One of the most famous examples is Teofil Kwiatkowski’s compositions, known as “Chopin’s Polonaise, or the Ball at Hôtel Lambert”, painted in the years 1849–1860²⁵. These images can be counted among the numerous mystical portrayals of the national procession of figures from the grand Polish past. In one of them, Kwiatkowski painted a scene in a Roman cloister, with the figures marching to the tunes of Chopin’s music.

Scholars often justified the belief about the “Polishness of Chopin” in the most peculiar ways, based on phantasmata and “feelings” treated as hard facts. Bohdan Pociąg has provided grounds for considering the national aspect of Chopin’s spirit as exclusively Polish by delving deeper into the history of Polish folklore and popular culture. His explanation seems quite extraordinary:

Without any doubt – the Polishness of Chopin’s music – we – his co-patriots, feel and differentiate as Polishness, because we know that this artist was Polish, raised in patriotic traditions, and that he himself felt Polish. And because we, the listeners of his music, are also Polish, therefore the certainty that our feeling of Polishness is true, that what we hear is indeed Polishness, that the expression of Chopin’s music (in a large part of his oeuvre) has a significantly Polish color. The mere feeling however is not enough. We are seeking for a precise confirmation, proof, something on which we could rely. We can find this support and confirmation of our feelings in how “they sang” and danced, may we add, in Poland at the time. The melodies which were sang and played, the rhythms of the dances of Polish origins, enrooted in Polish tradition, customs, culture – seem to be the only concrete, empirically palpable musical base and the sound test of the Polishness expressed in Chopin’s music²⁶.

Pociąg’s description sounds seemingly incredible; and yet it came from a scholar and is shared by scholars. This reference is summoned here to stress the poetic and phantasmic aura surrounding academic takes not uniquely on Chopin’s art, but above all else – on his presence in Polish culture and tradition. It is well worth listening to Chopin himself in his private letters, like this one to a friend, describing Chopin’s resentment to Wojciech Sowiński, author of *Chant polonaise, nationaux et populaires*

²⁴ See: I. Kurz, „Chopin”. *Między salonem a ulicą*. In: M. Sieradz (eds.), 2010. *Postscriptum*, Warszawa 2011, Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina 2013, p. 287.

²⁵ For more information about the relations between Chopin and Kwiatkowski, see: *Chopin i jego malarz Teofil Kwiatkowski, Malarstwo i rysunek ze zbiorów Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie i Biblioteki Polskiej w Paryżu*, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warsaw 2010.

²⁶ B. Pociąg, *Polskość Chopina* (ed. E. Sławińska-Dahlig), Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2012, pp. 47–48 (transl. D.M.)

avec accompagnement de piano ou harpe, textes et notices publiés par Albert Sowiński et traduits en français par C. Fulgence et I. de Frémont. The collection was published in Paris in 1830 and Sowiński was widely praised by his contemporaries yet Chopin could not stand this kind of expression of the spirit of Polishness:

Wiesz, ile chciałem czuć i po części doszedłem do uczucia naszej narodowej muzyki – zatem miarkuj, jak mi przyjemnie – kiedy on [Sowiński] czasem, to tu, to tam załapie coś mojego, czego piękność często na akompaniamencie zależy – i karczemnym, szenkatrynkowsko gęgetowsko organowym, parafialnym gustem zagra i nic nie można powiedzieć, bo więcej nad to, co złapał nie pojmie. Jest to Nowakowski na lewą stronę! A gada! O wszystkim, a szczególnie o Warszawie, w której nigdy nie był²⁷.

The national component both in Chopin and his listeners is a constitutive factor in this criticism. All together it forms a phantasmatic entity, which most definitely requires further and deeper study.

Chopin belongs among the “cultural ideas” and “performative entities” which are processed academically with – seemingly – the most extraordinary tools, such as those of “feeling”, “belief” or “spirit” or national identity based upon phantom knowledge. The other semantic field, which considers Chopin culturally and is widespread is Chopin’s attachment to Polish folklore and popular culture, though particularly to Mazovian songs and dances, and many scholars argue that this attachment is proof of Chopin’s Polishness and his national belonging.

This category is in line with the “spiritual content” of Chopin’s music as being a display of Polish spirit, which is often expressed as among the predominant character traits ascribed to the whole nation and its people, such as “sorrow”, “longing”, “homesickness.” Musically this can be considered as “arrhythmia”. The category of dying *du mal du pays* – “dying of homesickness” – creates an interesting counterpoint.

Despite the traditional views represented primarily by 19th-century Polish biographers in which “Polishness” occupies a central place in Chopin’s life and work, it appears that the composer constructed his identity or identities from various heterogeneous rather than homogenous elements. While his Polishness was of course deeply significant to him, at the same time it did not interfere with him being a fully cosmopolitan artist, who understood his position in the world and was not damned with an inferiority complex of having blood from a country which did not exist anymore. Chopin’s cosmopolitan image was as prominent a part of his exotic identity and in the salons of the international Parisian aristocracy this combination of traits ensured his success.

²⁷ Z. Helman, Z. Skowron, H. Wróblewska-Straus (eds.), *Korespondencja...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, Part 1, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2017, p. 130.

Conclusion

Over-romanticized sources, which still the bases for presenting the life and work of the composer, show Chopin as a delicate figure coughing blood onto the piano keys. The other vector is Chopin as a Romantic revolutionary in Warsaw or a Parisian exile playing the patriotic card. However as we are well aware, Chopin was no Romantic hero in the political or military sense, having taken no part in the November Rising. Adam Mickiewicz called him a «moral vampire» for that reason. It is vital to say that Chopin surpassed these two representations and lead to a more complex and more profound one, which has not always been recognized by Polish scholars.

It would appear that the application of categories and terms originating in the postmodern realm is sacrilegious towards “the grand tradition of Polish Romanticism”. The main actors of the romantic *espaces imaginaires* who – like Chopin – inhabit the spiritual *matecznik* – heart of Poland are considered beyond reproach and cannot be categorized by postmodern intellectual notions without generating considerable contention.

This raises the question of what Romanticism is for us today, rather than what it has been in the past, leading up to now. Polish intellectual tradition shows us that the evaluation of Romanticism has always been an existential barometer of subjectivity. Thus the examination of Chopin’s biography from an altered perspective through analyzing its points of contention allows us to discuss Romanticism and its counter-cultures, as well as to place this dispute in the internal development of Romanticism and its reception in the wider sphere.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi analizę trzech konceptów kulturowych, które „kalają” biografię Fryderyka Chopina, geniusza (polskiego) romantyzmu w ujęciu performatywnym. Po pierwsze, namysłowi poddana jest idea gender i rozmyta tożsamość płciowa Chopina w dziewiętnastowiecznej historiografii. Po drugie, fenomen queerowości Chopina, jego dandyzm i związek z cross-dresserką George Sand. Trzeci aspekt biografii artysty, który jest tu omawiany, to kwestia narodowości: przywiązanie Chopina do polskości, a zarazem kosmopolityczny modus życia. Tradycyjne ujęcia biografii Chopina, jak również organiczenia „(arcy)polskiego dyskursu romantycznego” czy też etnocentrycznej tradycji polskiego romantyzmu prowadzą do jednowymiarowej reprezentacji tej postaci. Spojrzenie na życie i twórczość kompozytora przez soczewkę kultury popularnej, a także z użyciem instrumentarium postmodernistycznego samo w sobie stanowi punkt sporu romantycznego, a także sporu o romantyzm. Zatem próba naświetlenia niektórych faktów i epizodów biografii Chopina z innej strony, a także próba obalenia tradycyjnego wizerunku Fryderyka Chopina wydają się ważne i ciekawe, gdyż pozwalają na inny ogląd romantyzmu i jego kontrkultur, a w dalszej perspektywie stawiają pytania o miejsce tradycji romantycznej w nowoczesności.

Summary

The paper explores three phenomena which „taint” the biography of Fryderyk Chopin, the ultimate (Polish) Romantic Genius. Firstly, the notion of gender and the portrayal of Chopin in feminine terms in nineteenth century historiography. Secondly, the phenomenon of the queer, tracing his dandyism and his relationship with the cross-dresser artist George Sand. Thirdly, his dual nationality (despite his deep and genuine nostalgia for Poland) and cosmopolitan approach to life and art. Over-romanticized sources, which are still the mainstream for presenting the life and work of the composer always stress the patriotic card and tend to be rather conservative. The creation of new cultural phenomena by way of Chopin’s performative presence is usually treated with distance and scepticism by scholars from the „classical” school. Thus the pop-cultural presentation of Chopin’s biography with postmodern notions applied to some aspects of his life or the mythical reality it created, may be viewed as a point of contention. Therefore the examination of Chopin’s biography from an altered perspective allows us to discuss Romanticism and its countercultures as well as to place this dispute in the landscape of Romanticism vs. Modernity.

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