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Słowacki's Chopin

ABSTRACT: Supposed analogies between Fryderyk Chopin and Juliusz Słowacki form a recurring thread that runs through the subject literature of Romantic culture. Legions of literati, critics, literary scholars and musicologists have either attempted to find affinities between Chopin and Słowacki (on the level of both biography and creative output) or else have energetically demonstrated the groundlessness of all analogies, opinions and assumptions. Consequently, stereotypes have been formed and then strengthened concerning the relations between the two creative artists, particularly the conviction of Słowacki's dislike of Chopin and his music, which – in the opinion of many scholars – the poet simply did not understand. Considerations of this kind most often centre on a famous letter written by Słowacki to his mother in February 1845. However, a careful reading of this letter and its comparison with Słowacki's other utterances on the subject of Chopin shows that opinions of the poet's alleged insanity, petty-mindedness or lack of subtlety in his contacts with Chopin's music are most unjust. The analysed letter is not so much anti-Chopin as anti-Romantic. It inscribes itself perfectly in the context of the thinking of "the Słowacki of the last years", since the poet negates crucial aesthetic features of Romantic music, but at the same time criticises his own works: *W Szwajcarii* [In Switzerland] and, in other letters, *Godzina myśli* [An hour of thought] and the "picture of the age", the poetical novel *Lambro*. It also turns out that what Słowacki says about the polonaises tallies with the opinions of musicologists and musicians writing about "late Chopin".

KEYWORDS: Juliusz Słowacki, Fryderyk Chopin, music, literature, Romantic poetry, Słowacki's letters to his mother, Romantic melancholy

Angels at the keys have stopped in silence
And listen to the fingers with an unseen ear,
Nothing here will sound of the earth, they'll knock out every note
That shines not with a godly spirit.
They'll flush out notes asleep in rows upon the lines,
Gather the black alphabet and blow it to the winds:
One must sail along that other shore, above the world,
Not tumble into human sin and crumble, rotting, into dust.

Szopen [Chopin], lines 1–8¹

¹ "Anioły przy klawiszach stanęły milcząco
I nasłuchują palców niewidzialnym uchem,

Thus begins the poem *Szopen* from Kazimierz Wierzyński's tome *Kurhany* [Kurgans] (1938). And although the angels here may differ somewhat to those which "ask for arms as if for alms" ("May the angelic alphabet, the sacred note in lines / Fetter no more hands with captive cord!" – exclaims Wierzyński's lyrical hero, striving to free himself from the angels' clutches), the intertextual game with Juliusz Słowacki's lyrical masterpiece (*Anioły stoją na rodzinnych polach...*) [Angels stand on native fields...] is evident. Słowacki's poem – according to the theory of intertextuality – is the pre-text for the intertext², the hypotext, clearly discernible in the hypertext of the poem about Chopin.³ Thus Wierzyński creates a space in which Słowacki's poetry and Chopin's music meet – according to the principles he dictates. By the same stroke, he provides an example of the reception of the poet's work as if "mediated" by the reception of the composer's work.

The "unearthly angels" from Słowacki extend their "holy care" over the playing Chopin and beguile him:

How sweet to circle 'neath holy care,
 To rock the lid into billowing lake,
 To leap across the keyboard's glass and run across the mist,
 As if along some steps, across a cobweb, silver gardens,
 With an angel's airy foot, a ray of sunshine and a vaporous trail,
 Higher still and holier...
 But ah, for how much longer?⁴

lines 9–15

Nic tu ziemią nie zabrzmi, każdy dźwięk wytrąca,
 Jeśli błysnie inaczej niżli bożym duchem.
 Wypłoszą nuty śpiące na liniach szeregiem,
 Czarny alfabet zgarną, na wiatry go zdmuchną:
 Płynąć trzeba tym drugim nadświatowym brzegiem,
 Nie ludzki grzech się toczyć i kruszeć na próchno."

Kazimierz Wierzyński, *Poezja i proza* [Poetry and prose], selection and afterword Michał Sprusiński, i (Kraków, 1981), 245.

² Włodzimierz Bolecki, *Pre-teksty i teksty. Z zagadnień związków międzytekstowych w literaturze polskiej XX wieku* [Pre-texts and texts. Of intertextual connections in twentieth-century Polish literature] (Warszawa, 1991).

³ The term "hypertextuality" is used here as understood by Michał Głowiński: 'O intertekstualności' [On intertextuality], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1986), 79–82; repr. in Michał Głowiński, *Poetyka i okolice* [On and around Poetics] (Warszawa, 1992).

⁴ "Jakże słodko pod świętą kołować opieką,
 W jezioro falujące rozkołysać wieko,
 Po szkle klawiszów skakać i biec jak po schodach,
 Po mgłę, po pajęczynie, po srebrnych ogrodach,
 Anielską lekką stopą, promieniem i smugą,
 Coraz wyżej i święciej...
 Ach, tylko jak długo?"

For the angels in Wierzyński's poem – it should be pointed out at once – have already undergone a certain metamorphosis (drawing protest from the reader of Słowacki's works), resembling more the rococo angels from the paintings of Jean A. Watteau. These frivolous angels, detached from the reality in which people "bent in misery and adversity" function, bowing to the "thorny crown", are only now to be forcibly embroiled in earthly problems, clad in armour and set in ranks of fighting troops which – *nota bene* – in the context of allusions to the "vampiric" song of Adam Mickiewicz's Konrad actually present themselves as a potentially Luciferian army:

Alarm! Awaken ye dead! Take pipes in hand!
 Blow the last trumpet, arms for the chapels,
 Armour the angels, lined in a squadron,
 Recruits of the gods beside crazed human misery,
 With God or despite Him! Hand me a sword.
 Trumpet the onslaught! I lead. I am Konrad.⁵
 lines 102–107

So perhaps Wierzyński's Chopin, rather than rejecting the "angelic" model of Słowacki's poetry, fighting a battle with it (the poem's last lines speak of the composer's funeral: "And by the coffin, victorious centaurs kneel. / And by the coffin, heavenly angels sing."), simply does not understand it. Or he does not understand Wierzyński, one should say, who creates false relations between his music and Słowacki's work – relations that sound like a "diabolus in musica". For this reason, Wierzyński's poem, inscribing itself within the broad literary-scholarly current based on real or imagined parallels between Słowacki and Chopin, may serve as a prelude to considerations in particular on the subject of those voices which would make of Słowacki and Chopin "two gods on their opposing suns"⁶.

For myself, the character and the course of those meetings between Słowacki and Chopin, taking place on the pages of literature, literary history or musicological treatises, are a constant source of interest and – often quite negative – fascination. Their scenarios are written by whole legions of writers,

⁵ "Alarm! Zbudźcie się martwi! Do ręki piszczele!
 Trąbić surmę ostatnią, uzbroić kapele,
 Anioły zakuć w pancerz, niech staną szwadronem,
 Rekruci bóstw przy ludzkim nieszczęściu szalonem,
 Z Bogiem lub mimo Boga! Podajcie mi szpadę.
 Otrąbić szturm! Ja wiodę. Ja jestem Konradem."

⁶ Franciszek German gave the following title to his essay: 'Fryderyk Chopin i Juliusz Słowacki. Dzieje nieprzyjaźni "na słońcach swych przeciwnych bogów"' [Fryderyk Chopin and Juliusz Słowacki. The history of the enmity of 'two gods on their opposing suns'], *Rocznik Chopinowski* 18 (1986).

critics and scholars displaying a marked predilection for creating analogies that serve to show a relationship between Chopin and Słowacki, on the level of both biography and creative work, or else energetically demonstrating the groundlessness of all analogies, judgments and assumptions of that kind.⁷

⁷These voices, often linked to comments on 'Słowacki's musical biography', his musical preferences and pianistic abilities (or their lack), could fill a quite sizeable anthology. See, among others, Juliusz Kleiner, *Muzyka w życiu i twórczości Słowackiego* [Music in the life and work of Słowacki], in Kleiner, *Studia o Słowackim* [Studies on Słowacki], iii (Lviv, 1910); Ferdynand Hoesick, *Słowacki i Chopin. Z zagadnień twórczości* [Słowacki and Chopin. Of questions relating to their work] (Warszawa, 1932); Tadeusz Demczyk, 'Fortepian Słowackiego' [Chopin's piano], *Kurier Literacko-Naukowy* 53 (1935); Józef Władysław Reiss, 'Juliusz Słowacki a muzyka' [Juliusz Słowacki and music], *Życie Śpiewacze* 7/8 (1949); Jerzy Starnawski, 'Zagadnienia kultury artystycznej w listach Słowackiego' [Questions of artistic culture in the letters of Słowacki], *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 1 (1953); Marian Piątkiewicz, 'Muzyka w życiu Słowackiego' [Music in Słowacki's life], *Ruch Muzyczny* 17/18 (1959); Alicja Okońska, 'Wpływ opery na dramaty Słowackiego. Zainteresowania muzyczno-operowe Słowackiego' [The influence of opera on the plays of Słowacki. Słowacki's musical-operatic interests], *Muzyka* 4 (1960), 1-2 (1961), 2 (1962); Dionizja Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, *Muza Słowackiego i Chopina. Opowieść biograficzna o Marii Wodzińskiej* [The muse of Słowacki and Chopin. A biographical tale about Maria Wodzińska] (Warszawa, 1986); Irena Chyła-Szypułowa, *Muzyka w poezji wieszczów* [Music in the poetry of the bards] (Kielce, 2000); Kazimierz Chruściński, 'Chopin i Słowacki – rozważania rocznicowe' [Chopin and Słowacki – anniversary reflections], *Ślupskie Prace Humanistyczne* 19a (2000); Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, *Dlaczego się minęli?* [Why did they not meet?], in *Romantyczne przechadzki pograniczem* [Romantic walks along the border] (Kraków, 2004) (Cieśla-Korytowska also deals with this subject in *Duch czy kalkuł?* [Spirit or calculus?], another chapter in the same book, and in the essay *To wszystko trwa jak Szopen... w poezji polskiej* [This all lasts like Chopin... in Polish poetry], in *Chopin w kulturze polskiej* [Chopin in Polish culture], ed. Maciej Gołąb (Wrocław, 2009)]; Jarosław M. Rymkiewicz, 'Chopin Fryderyk', in Rymkiewicz, *Słowacki. Encyklopedia* (Warszawa, 2004). An image of antipathetic or even hostile relations between Słowacki and Chopin has also been established by biographically-orientated novels (Adolf Nowaczyński, *Młodość Chopina* [Chopin's youth]; Jerzy Broszkiewicz, *Kształt miłości* [The shape of love]; Janina Siwkowska, *Pan Chopin opuszcza Warszawę* [Mr Chopin leaves Warsaw]; Tadeusz Łopalewski, *Fryderyk*), as Kazimierz Maciąg demonstrates in 'Literackie portrety "dziejów nieprzyjaźni" Juliusza Słowackiego i Fryderyka Chopina' [Literary portraits of the 'history of enmity' between Juliusz Słowacki and Fryderyk Chopin], in *Przez gwiazdy i błękit jestem z Wami. W 200. rocznicę urodzin Juliusza Słowackiego* [Through the stars and the blue, I'm with you] eds. Mariusz Chrostek, Tomasz Pudłocki and Jerzy Starnawski (Przemyśl and Rzeszów, 2009). Let us add that such a vision of the Chopin-Słowacki relationship was also perpetuated by Paulina Czernicka in the – probably fake – letters from Chopin to Delfina Potocka (see 'Teksty rzekomych listów Chopina do Delfiny Potockiej' [The texts of the alleged letters sent by Chopin to Delfina Potocka], in Jerzy Maria Smoter, *Spór o "listy" Chopina do Delfiny Potockiej* [The dispute over Chopin's "letters" to Delfina Potocka] (Kraków, 1976)); a few years ago, Piotr Szumiński attempted to undermine the verdict of the faking of these letters, in *Chopin i Potocka. Awantura o miłosną korespondencję* [Chopin and Potocka. The quarrel over the love letters] (Warszawa, 2005)].

They set for those literary encounters, as is evinced by Wierzyński's poem, a tone that often rings false; they create and perpetuate stereotypes concerning the relations between "the subtlest musician in poetry" and "the loftiest poet in music"⁸. Thus in the light of the enduring and vivid presence of the Słowacki – Chopin motif, I would be inclined to ask differently to Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, inspired by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's well-known poem *Spotkanie* [Meeting], not "why did they fail to meet?" and "today they still fail to meet"⁹, but rather "why are they forever nearing one another?" not to say "colliding" with one another (at times quite painfully, thanks to the efforts of various authors).¹⁰

The most familiar are perhaps the endeavours of Ferdynand Hoesick, to whom we owe the assertion that "between Słowacki's poetry and Chopin's music there exists some Goethian *Wahlverwandschaft*", that 'they are linked by a host of affinities [...]'¹¹. They also have their imitators, even – quite as-

⁸ Excerpt from an "anonymous" obituary written by Jan Koźmian and published in *Przegląd Poznański* 9 (Poznań, 1949), 688. Koźmian's authorship was confirmed on the basis of his *Pisma* [Writings], iii (Poznań, 1881), 217–218. Quoted in *Sądy współczesnych o twórczości Słowackiego (1826-1862)* [Contemporary views on the work of Słowacki (1826–1862)], collected and ed. Bogdan Zakrzewski, Kazimierz Pecold and Artur Ciemnoczółowski (Wrocław, 1963), 140.

⁹ Cieśla-Korytowska, *Dlaczego się minęli?*

¹⁰ Słowacki and Chopin are sometimes linked in a most curious way. Here is an account by the nephew of "the muse of Słowacki and Chopin", Maria Wodzińska, who, recalling Maria's son (to her marriage with Orpiszewski), writes, for example, thus: "It seemed to the child's parents that over their little one hovered the genius of those two immortal bards, who adorned the mother's brow with love, as if with a crown of stars". Ludwik, as the Orpiszewskis' child was named, "like Juliusz before him, picked up an open book and sang plaintively over it at length in lilting rhyme. Taking Fryderyk as his example, he would listen on his mother's knees for hours on end to the sound of the resonating strings as she played the piano". (Quoted in Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, *Muza Słowackiego*, 233). Unfortunately, the prodigious child died barely into his fourth year. Another, quite unusual, example of the work of Słowacki and Chopin being linked was provided by Juliusz Osterwa, who fell upon the idea for the harpists in the production of Słowacki's *Lilla Weneda* that he was directing to play (in the climactic chorus 'O święta ziemio polska' [Oh holy land of Poland], of course on their harps) "the rhythmically characteristic bass motif from the second part of the *A flat major Polonaise*". Tadeusz Szeligowski, 'O ilustracjach muzycznych' [On musical illustration], *Ruch Muzyczny* 19 (1946), 17.

¹¹ Ferdynand Hoesick, 'Słowacki i Chopin. Paralela literacka' [Słowacki and Chopin. A literary parallel], *Kurier Warszawski* 339 (1902), 2. Hoesick's arguments, printed in successive issues of the *Kurier Warszawski* 339–343 (1902), comprised the work *Słowacki i Chopin. Z zagadnień twórczości*. He was recently the focus of attention for Cieśla-Korytowska, in her book *Romantyczne przechadzki pograniczem*, and for Magdalena Dziadek in her paper 'Słowacki i Chopin. Pokrewieństwo losów, dusz, sztuki' [Słowacki and Chopin. An affinity of fortunes, souls and art], delivered to the conference 'Poeta "przez pryzma przepuszczoney". Juliusz Słowacki w 200. rocznicę urodzin' [The poet "through a prism". Juliusz Słowacki on the bicentenary of his birth] (Poznań, 16–17 October 2009; forthcoming).

tonishingly – today.¹² Yet the building of analogies between Słowacki and Chopin did not begin with Hoesick, as is frequently forgotten. The precursors are the obituary by Jan Koźmian, published in *Przegląd Poznański*, and the moving autobiographical reminiscence incorporated by Cyprian Kamil Norwid into *Czarne kwiaty* [Black flowers].

I will not concern myself here with quoting and evaluating passages from numerous essays demonstrating these analogies, which are often no more than free impressions.¹³ Neither is it my intention to analyse the career of the thesis that Chopin was Słowacki's favourite composer, since we know that he was not; the poet held John Field to be his "favourite in music". I wish to concentrate on those voices which associate the poet with the composer in opposition. They are based, of course, on the famous, and controversial, letter Słowacki wrote to his mother in 1845.

Defined as a "compromising text", a "torrent of caustic and unjust invective aimed at Chopin"¹⁴ and a letter "full of horrendous insults aimed at Chopin"¹⁵, this text, actually highly ambiguous, is generally read very unambiguously or tendentiously. The poet is often placed in a false situation, like the angels which Wierzyński – although in Słowacki "they ask for arms as if for alms" – forcibly attempts to armour. Particularly ambiguous – and perhaps most often quoted – is the beginning of the letter:

It is the custom of the English, particularly in the class of brewers and fat persons of a sanguine organisation, that once a month they use an emetic, without which they would flush with blood, gain flesh and lose all thought and energy. For those persons, long ago, God created the emetic, and now he has sent a more perfect medicine, namely the irritating music of Chopin. When you see such a weighty being, over whom the body maintains a daily victory, recommend to him one cure or

¹² E.g. Kazimierz Chruściński (Chruściński, 'Chopin i Słowacki', 8–9) follows the path beaten by Hoesick: "Both Julek and Frycek had an innate fertile imagination, sensitive to beauty, capable of penetrating another person's soul, and a facility for creating and writing, as is confirmed by their abundant correspondence [...]. Both were gifted pupils and students, always diligently prepared to answer", etc.

¹³ And the manifestations of inventiveness are various. Zdzisław Jachimecki states, for example, that Chopin was inspired to write the wonderful *Polonaise-Fantasy*, Op. 61 by the prologue to *Lilla Weneda*. Zdzisław Jachimecki, *Chopin* (Kraków, 1957), 141–142. Stanisław Przybyszewski – in a different style – links "late Słowacki" and Chopin as the composer of the *A flat major Polonaise*, for whom he reserved the enigmatic formula that "Chopin – on Her-Armenian – in this work dragged the King-Spirit from the grave and showed him to the nation [...]". Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Szopen a naród* [Chopin and the nation] (Kraków, 1910), 29.

¹⁴ Cieśla-Korytowska, *Dlaczego się minęli?*, 80.

¹⁵ Rymkiewicz, *Słowacki. Encyklopedia*, 64.

the other – but for persons withered and diseased fear both, since after an emetic they will lose part of their body, and after a Chopin concerto, part of their soul.¹⁶

Reading this passage out of context, one might arrive at the conclusion that the accusations levelled at Chopin's music are only ostensible. Of course, it is "irritating", but for uncouth, thick-skinned churls and "persons withered and diseased", who "feel no longer with the heart, but with the nerves". Requiring no more of music than that it move them, they are capable of neither assessing nor appreciating the compositional might of the man whom Norwid held up as the "chief" artist among us. Then Słowacki's letter would form an interesting dialogue with Norwid's *Promethidion*, where we find that famous "sort of conversation about Chopin":

– As for me, in him, I prize the Polish verve,
Not the romantic-nebulous melancholy,
And – although I have little notion
About art – I still know what music is,
And perhaps I know best from the player:
If someone takes my heart and opens it,
As one enters one's own home...

[...] For what would music mean to me,
If I had to study it like a hieroglyph,
Or, according to those notions of Bogumił's,
If I had to *confess in* a Mazurka!
What is beautiful pleases everyone,
And for that, no confessional is needed.

Ho! hop – my little horse, break from the manger...
*Ho hop!!... what say you to that reverend Bogumił?*¹⁷

¹⁶ Juliusz Słowacki, 'List do matki z lutego 1845 roku' [Letter to his mother of February 1845], in Słowacki, *Dzieła* [Works], ed. Julian Krzyżanowski, 2nd edn, xiii, *Listy do matki* [Letters to his mother], ed. Zofia Krzyżanowska (Wrocław, 1952), 467. Further quotations from Słowacki's correspondence are from this edition.

¹⁷ Cyprian Norwid, *Promethidion. Dialog Bogumił* [Promethidion. Bogumił dialogue], in *Pisma wszystkie* [Complete writings], ed. Juliusz W. Gomulicki, iii, *Poematy* [Epic poems] (Warszawa, 1971), 433–434.

– Co do mnie, polski ja w nim z a m a c h cenię,
Nie melancholiję romantyczno-mglistą,
I – chociaż małe mam wyobrażenie
O sztuce – przecież wiem, co jest muzyka,
I może lepiej wiem od grającego:
Jeśli mi kto serce bierze i odmyka,
Jak ktoś do domu wchodzący własnego ...
[...] Albo muzyka, co by mi znaczyła,

One may gain the impression that on that self-taught music lover, demanding of “the most beautiful of the arts” that – as people say nowadays – “it be light and fall easily upon the ear”, what is most essential in Chopin’s compositions would act just like an emetic.

Thus the irony of Slowacki’s words about the “irritating music of Chopin” would be aimed only ostensibly at the composer, and its real dart would be pointing towards primitive “connoisseurs” of the art. Yet such a reading clashes with the rest of the letter, which – let us add in the margins – is less readily invoked in treatises of the problem of interest to us here:

And you, my dear, tender, good, merciful, compassionate, you sat down to write to me having wept your whole soul out in a corner, having wept out in vain, and so sinfully, having wept yourself out because the semitones and dissonances of Ch[opin’s] polonaises tickled all your nerves. – So do you know what you wrote? – Here is a letter that to a nervous, sentimental person would seem filled with tenderness, but for a man of simple heart – is a letter written without heart [...]. Well, I shall tell you what you wrote. You begin with the simple accusation that I am wasting my ability, with the accusation that I do not write as I used to write [...] If I was indeed once thriving and have now come down in the world, since a wealth of ideas is a state in the land of the angels, and so if truly (and you know that I declined through no fault of my own), then tell me if it belonged to you to show me that you espied me in your elegant Chopin salon in a coat full of holes? [...]. I take God as my witness that I have criticised this critical letter with my soul, knowing full well that it did not issue from the depths of yours, but from that miserable, doleful atmosphere of the most beautiful spirits that err now among us, which insist that people pour dolour on their dolour. You are sick, and you want everyone

Żebym ją musiał jak hieroglif badać,
 Lub, wedle onych pojęć Bogumiła,
 Żebym się musiał w Mazurku s p o w i a d a ć!
 C o p i ę k n e m , to się każdemu podoba,
 I konfesjonał na to niepotrzebny.
 Ho! hop – koniku mój, rwij się od żłoba ...
 Ho hop!!... cóż na to Bogumił wielebny?”

Interesting in this context are the assertions of a musicologist: “The popularisation of Chopin’s works in society was influenced to a large extent, already during Chopin’s lifetime, by arrangements and simplified versions of his compositions published by several important publishing firms. It was this form of social functioning of Chopin’s works that shaped for many years the image of his creative personality [...]. From the notation of these arrangements, we see what the wide public expected of Chopin’s music. Chopin’s compositions were reduced to melodic skeleton and a highly simplified harmonic accompaniment. [...] Chopin was valued as the composer of ‘attractive melodies’. [...] and it is these salon arrangements that gave Chopin the stamp of a ‘salon composer’.” Jitka Ludvova, ‘Dzieła Chopina w społeczeństwie XIX wieku’ [Chopin’s works in nineteenth-century society], *Rocznik Chopinowski* 20 (1988), 246–247.

to wail to you in the same way. You feel no longer with the heart, but with the nerves [...] You like what touches your nerves, and detest healthy nourishment [...] Have you ever seen anyone become better, more beautiful, more merciful or turn into a hero the day after a great affection occasioned by Chopin's music? [...] If I were to write, say, *Indiana* in the style of Mrs Sand [...] with all Chopin's dissonant, bitter-melancholy might and nerve chafing art, and brilliance of colours [and] send it to you? [...] You would say it's a wonder of wonders [...] So there is a way of speaking hideous things that renders them angelic [...]. With [this] one evangelical tone, we can compare our works, to see their value. Well, I tell you that before Christ I would not dare declaim with ardour either *Switzerland*¹⁸ or other personal poems, but I would assuredly declaim the description of the battle on the steppe from the third act of *Salusia*¹⁹ or Wernyhora's drama in the fifth [...].

Słowacki then presents a vision of a "yokel" reading his poetry:

I picture him reading *Balladyna*²⁰ – that work entertains him like a fairytale, and at the same time teaches him some harmony and dramatic form. He picks up *Lilla* – the same. *Mazepa* he finds a little too declamatory. But he looked at *An Hour of Thought* or at *Lambro* and cast off disdainfully those melancholy complaints of an immature child. For *Sally*, *Fr. Mark* and *The Steadfast Prince* – that *Prince* which broke my inner bones – where there are thunderbolts of poetry – and with whom you have no connection, since it strikes at pure feeling, not at nerves, excites pain, not melancholy – does not unharden a man, but makes him strong and akin to a self-possessed angel [...].²¹

What clashes most strongly with the pro-Chopin interpretation proposed earlier is the fact that Słowacki employs the same formulas which he used to describe Chopin's polonaises to deprecate the value of his own youthful poems.²² Thus the ultimate resonance of this letter to his mother would be as follows: Chopin's popular compositions stand in opposition to misinterpreted works by Słowacki. The former "strike at nerves", "excite melancholy" and "unharden a man", whilst the latter act on "feeling", "excite pain" and render a man "strong and akin to a self-possessed angel". Hence the consternation of scholars and their attempts to make excuses for the poet. Below are some examples.

¹⁸ *W Szwajcarii* [In Switzerland].

¹⁹ *Sen srebrny Salomei* [The silver dream of Salomea].

²⁰ Titles in this passage: *Balladyna*, *Lilla Weneda*, *Mazepa*, *Godzina myśli* [An hour of thought], *Lambro*, *Sen srebrny Salomei* (see note 19), *Książdz Marek* [Father Mark] and *Książę niezłomny* (Słowacki's translation of Calderón's *The Steadfast Prince*).

²¹ Słowacki, 'List do matki z lutego 1845 roku', *Listy do matki*, 467–472.

²² By an amusing coincidence, Słowacki stigmatised the poem *W Szwajcarii*, which years later Hoesick would associate with Chopin's music. Hence, in the poet's opinion, as well, this work's expression is similar to that of a Chopin composition, although in this context the analogy takes on a decidedly pejorative significance.

Assuming a stance towards the question at hand, Konrad Górski and Franciszek German suggest that when writing the letter in question, Słowacki was of unsound mind, deluded by Andrzej Towiański's pernicious teachings and enfeebled by tuberculosis. German's remarks are also inflected by accusations – popular among other authors, too – that the poet was driven in his views on Chopin by base impulses, such as jealousy or even envy.²³ In this view, Słowacki would be jealous primarily over Maria Wodzińska. Yet one may doubt that personal sympathies or antipathies had such a power over the poet that under their sway he completely lost his capacity for sober judgment. This would be belied by a letter to his mother from April 1838, written in reaction to rumours of Chopin's alleged marriage to Wodzińska, where the poet, besides the news that “Szopen has wed Maria Wodzińska”, informs his mother of his troubles with playing an “exquisite, but devilishly difficult” Chopin *krakowiak*. Słowacki comments on the supposed marriage of Maria and Fryderyk, which he took to be a certainty, a little naively, a little ironically, but – in any case – quite amusingly, digressing on the subject of that couple's posthumous fortunes and creating a vision, in the spirit of Swedenborg, of an angel whose wings “will be of seven pedals and the teeth of keys”²⁴. Having consoled himself with these petty causticities, the poet did not show himself to be so small-minded as to scorn Chopin's music. He returned to his reading of a complicated *krakowiak* and to the piano, which he will abandon only when he begins to suspect that part of his poetic inspiration “is spilling through [his] finger-tips onto the keys”²⁵. This is as yet quite far removed from the angry tone that would not appear until the letter from 1845, discrediting the “bitter-melancholy” nature of Chopin's work. Juliusz Kleiner rightly observed that “Słowacki's attitude to Chopin's music under-

²³ Konrad Górski, *Mickiewicz – Towiański* (Warszawa, 1986), 77–79. German, ‘Fryderyk Chopin’, 151–168. Alicja Okońska writes in a similar convention, but suggests that Słowacki deliberately suppressed a fondness for Chopin's compositions: “Słowacki long remained under the spell of Chopin's music. Only the personal trauma connected with Maria Wodzińska and the influence of Towiański's ideas moved him to try and free himself from its charms.” Okońska, ‘Wpływ opery’, 111. Irena Chyła-Szypułowa disarmingly claims: “Yet the common object of sighs and romantic love drove a wedge between these geniuses of literature and music”, Chyła-Szypułowa, *Muzyka w poezji wieszczów*, 92; whilst Kazimierz Maciąg writes: “It seems that one essential cause of such distinct enmity may have been personal motivation”; Maciąg, ‘Literackie portrety’, 194.

²⁴ Słowacki, ‘List do matki z kwietnia 1838 roku’ [Letter to his mother of April 1838], *Listy do matki*, 349–350.

²⁵ Słowacki, ‘List do matki z 21 sierpnia 1838 roku’ [Letter to his mother of 21 August 1838], *ibid.*, 364–365. Equally unjustified would appear to be speculation that treats Słowacki's letter as an expression of envy on the part of a poet “*striving for recognition*” [emphasis A. S.], for whom Chopin's person “was a painful thorn”. Cieśla-Korytowska, *Dlaczego się minęli?*, 81. By the 40s, Słowacki was certainly not striving for recognition for his works (as is shown, for example, by passages from the letter of interest to us here).

went a fundamental change only when the poet's attitude in general to life and to art altered – during the mystic period”²⁶.

Yet such a conclusion paved the way for judgments emphasising Towiański's influence on the change in Słowacki's views on music. In Górski's account, the poet is regarded as virtually a passive implement in the hands of Towiański, who had personal scores to settle with Chopin for the latter's unwillingness to submit to the influence of his Circle. Hence we read the following:

Among [...] the aberrations should be numbered also the change [in attitude] of both Mickiewicz and Słowacki towards Chopin. This time, the Master's influence was dictated by vindictiveness for the decidedly critical stance that Chopin adopted from the outset towards Towiański's person and all his prophecies.²⁷

Górski then quotes Mickiewicz reproaching Chopin that “he might enrapture the crowds, but he takes the trouble to tickle aristocratic nerves”, before stating that “such a disparaging of Chopin was nothing compared to how Słowacki blackened him during the period when he was possessed by the Master”. In Górski's opinion, the poet was at one time spellbound by Chopin, but “the influence of that spiritual primitive, incapable of comprehending the moral values engendered by aesthetic experience”, wrought “devastation in his soul and his mind”²⁸. German strikes a similar tone, adding that “the rest was done by his illness, incurable and burdensome for both him [i.e. Słowacki] and those around him”, and “his mother, an exalted and oversensitive woman, could do nothing to help him from afar”²⁹.

For such circumstances, justification is sought, of which the poet actually has no need. The assumption that Słowacki remained under the sway of a “spiritual primitive”, although he actually broke with Towiański's Circle quite quickly, some two years prior to that letter about Chopin's polonaises, appears to suggest that the value of his poetry from that period is equally dubious. And yet Słowacki's late work gives no indication that its author is a person in whose body and mind some devastation has been wrought – although such interpretations have been proffered (and still occur today). The allusions to the influence of tuberculosis on the poet can be dismissed with a response in the same convention: well, the same illness dogged Chopin, and so perhaps Słowacki was right to seek sickly elements in his music? Such an interpretation would accord with all the interpretations of Chopin's music – beginning with those contained in Franz Liszt's book – in which the “idiom of *mor-*

²⁶ Kleiner, *Muzyka w życiu i twórczości Słowackiego*, 176.

²⁷ Górski, *Mickiewicz – Towiański*, 77–79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ German, ‘Fryderyk Chopin’, 165.

bidezza” rears its head, bidding us assume that “a sickly and suffering man must in his music give expression to that weakness, suffering and sickness”³⁰.

Let us quote Kleiner again, who with his characteristic perspicacity gives the following comment on that disputed letter:

This judgment is without doubt excessively one-sided and therefore unjust, and yet it is based on crucial elements of Chopin’s music; thus, however offensive we may find that assessment, it is still the only judgment of Słowacki’s on musical works that shows an insight into the essence of a work.³¹

A pertinent point. The poet, as we know, was often at the opera, but his accounts are disarmingly bereft of interest in the musical side of the productions he watched.³² Meanwhile, in the letter concerning Chopin’s music, the poet points to elements of melody and harmony and – in spite of a critical distance – devotes to them much more attention than does, for example, Zygmunt Krasiński, a man with musical sensibilities and who must have valued Chopin’s compositions, given that, on the occasion of some festivities organised by Potocka, which he was unable to attend, he wrote the following:

Thank God it was a success and they owed it to the fingers of Chopin on that piano [bought for Delfina by Krasiński]. I regret not the parcels, but those unheard notes.³³

The other mentions of Chopin in Krasiński’s letters to Potocka are of a completely different character:

Poor Chopin, so Lelia [George Sand] finally decided that even a dying brother was better than the healthiest courter?³⁴

³⁰ Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Chopin. Człowiek, dzieło, rezonans* [Chopin. The man, his work and its resonance] (Poznań, 1998), 151. Such reasoning gives rise to such things as Artur M. Swinarski’s 1947 poem *Słuchając Chopina* [Listening to Chopin], of which here is a sample: “The sick keys turn yellow – and even the scherzo is sick with Romantic consumption”.

³¹ Kleiner, *Muzyka w życiu i twórczości Słowackiego*, 177.

³² See, e.g., a description of the poet’s impressions after seeing Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Robert le diable* (‘List do matki z 10 grudnia 1831 roku’ [Letter to his mother of 10 December 1831], 40–41) or François Auber’s *La muette de Portici* (‘List do matki z 7 marca 1832 roku’ [Letter to his mother of 7 March 1832], 49). These questions have recently been addressed by Małgorzata Sokalska, *Opera a dramat romantyczny* [Romantic opera and drama] (Kraków, 2009).

³³ Zygmunt Krasiński, ‘List do Delfiny Potockiej z 8 stycznia 1848 roku’ [Letter to Delfina Potocka of 8 January 1848], in *Listy do Delfiny Potockiej* [Letters to Delfina Potocka], ed. Zbigniew Sudolski, iii (Warszawa, 1975), 225.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, 295.

And also this:

You did well to take the opportunity to hear that poor Chopin before he's extinguished. Everyone says that Mrs Sand portrayed him as Prince Karol.³⁵

Poor Chopin. The wax touched a fire from beneath the earth, a fire from hell, and melted. All those who so much as touched it were cursed. She's Don Juan in a skirt.³⁶

Similar quotations are manifold.

Not so Słowacki: he does not employ wordings in the style of "poor Chopin", but tends to focus on Chopin's music and attempts to explain why he cannot join the chorus of voices that delight in it. And his words by no means show that the poet "did not understand Chopin's music, despite the two artists' unquestionable spiritual affinity"³⁷.

As Słowacki perceives it, this music is "irritating" on account of its suffusion with "semitones and dissonances that tickled all the nerves", its "bitter-melancholy might and nerve chafing art" and "brilliance of colours". Musicologists write in a completely different way – avoiding value judgments, of course – about "late Chopin". One must bear in mind that Słowacki's opinion by no means necessarily concerns the whole of Chopin's musical legacy. Chopin's style passed through different phases of evolution, and the characterisation produced by Słowacki could hardly be applied, for example, to the mazurkas. So the poet could play on the piano what he found to be a delightful, albeit difficult, krakowiak and waltzes written no later than the thirties (such a date appears on Słowacki's letters informing his mother of his pianistic achievements), and a few years later express a critical opinion about the melancholy polonaises.³⁸ And the fact that some of them were indeed of a melancholy character is proven by Chopin himself, who in a letter to his publisher defined the polonaises comprising his opus 26 (in C sharp minor and E flat minor) as "polonaises *mélancoliques*"³⁹.

Słowacki's letter was written in 1845. Mieczysław Tomaszewski terms the years 1841–1845 in Chopin's life the "phase of reflective romanticism", enumerating features characteristic of works composed during that period (in-

³⁵ Ibid., iii, 237.

³⁶ Ibid., 635.

³⁷ Adam Czartkowski and Zofia Jeżewska, *Chopin żywy w swoich listach i oczach współczesnych* [Chopin alive in his letters and in the eyes of his contemporaries] (Warszawa, 1959), 505.

³⁸ So it is not how Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz writes, concluding his digressions thus: "In short, whoever listens to the nocturnes or the mazurkas throws up (throws up part of his soul)". Rymkiewicz, *Słowacki. Encyklopedia*, 64.

³⁹ Tomaszewski, *Chopin*, 342.

cluding the last three *Polonaises: in F sharp minor*, Op. 44, *A flat major*, Op. 53 and *A flat major*, Op. 61):

There is a greater role played by timbre, a greater harmonic subtlety, with an ever increasing chromaticisation and a Romantic concentration on sonority. On the tonal plan, it is paradigmatic patterns that prevail, and symmetry is often abandoned for proportionality. Texture is polyphonised; form is disturbed.⁴⁰

Chopin employs a whole range of dissonances that remain unresolved. For instance, there are chords with an added sixth or seventh on all the degrees, four-note chords of the seventh with a fourth instead of a third on the VII degree and a characteristic dominant seventh chord with a sixth instead of a fifth. Additionally, the composer underscores foreign notes with accents. At the same time, he decides to highlight the mood. Tracing the evolution of Chopin's style, Maria Piotrowska notes that in "late Chopin", the "action" withdraws into the background leaving space for the expressively articulated "mood", and that "expression of experience" is defined as "uncanny to the point of incomprehensibility"⁴¹.

Słowacki, contrary to appearances, was not alone in his judgments.

His [Chopin's] contemporaries felt this aspect of his compositions to be bizarre, to be "morbid eccentricity" (Schumann); Field [...] when in 1832–33 he became acquainted with Chopin, spoke of "a sickroom talent." [...] It is true that Chopin's sensitivity, developed to excess, was able to release pathological effects.⁴²

Thus writes the outstanding expert on Romantic music, Alfred Einstein, and opinions in a similar vein are quoted by other scholars as well.⁴³ In Polish Romantic poets, too, we find references to Chopin's "sick genius", for instance (perhaps surprisingly) in the letters of the author of *Tłumaczenia Szopena* [Chopin translations], Kornel Ujejski, who wrote, among other things, that

⁴⁰ Tomaszewski, *Muzyka Chopina na nowo odczytana. Studia i interpretacje* [Chopin's music re-read. Studies and interpretations] (Kraków, 1996), 28.

⁴¹ Maria Piotrowska, "Late Chopin". Remarks on the Last Works', trans. Joanna Nizyńska and Peter Schertz, *Polish Music Journal* 3/1 (2000).

⁴² Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (London, 1947), 219.

⁴³ See Irena Poniatowska, 'Twórczość Chopina w świetle pierwszych monografii. Przyczynek do badań nad recepcją muzyki w XIX w.' [Chopin's work in light of the first monographs. A contribution to research into the reception of music in the nineteenth century], *Rocznik Chopinowski* 20 (1988); Zofia Chechlińska, 'Zagadnienie znajomości utworów Chopina i ich roli w Polsce w XIX w.' [The question of the familiarity of Chopin's works and their role in Poland during the nineteenth century], *Rocznik Chopinowski* 20 (1988).

acknowledgement of Chopin was growing because the whole of European society was “sick”⁴⁴.

Of course, I cite these opinions somewhat tendentiously; but only in the light of arguments of this kind do Słowacki's virulent accusations begin to sound in consonance:

You are sick, and you want everyone to wail to you in the same way. You feel no longer with the heart, but with the nerves [...] You like what touches your nerves, and detest healthy nourishment [...].⁴⁵

This utterance is essentially not so much anti-Chopin as anti-Romantic. Negating the crucial aesthetic features of Romantic music that were manifest in some Chopin compositions (Liszt saw in the *Polonaise in F sharp minor*, Op. 44, for example, “the notation of an improvisation with the character of dreamy visions *à la Byron*”⁴⁶), the poet is also criticising *Lambro* (“a picture of the century”) and *An Hour of Thought*, about which Kleiner wrote that:

[...] a study of romanticism might begin [with it]. The fundamental traits of the Romantic psyche were concentrated in that oddly beautiful pair of friends with the stamp of sickness. For Słowacki regards Romantic features as a sickness of the soul, as if following Goethe's opinion that the Classical is healthy and the Romantic is sick.⁴⁷

Słowacki himself, in his ‘Second letter to the author of *Irydion*’, writes:

Whenever I have wished, after the fashion of contemporary poets, to commence a whimpering dissection of the heart or to adorn the melancholising of elaborate vi-

⁴⁴ Kornel Ujejski, ‘List do Wandy Młodnickiej z Pawłowa z 6 listopada 1885’ [Letter to Wanda Młodnicka from Pavliv], in *Wielkie serce. Korespondencja Kornela Ujejskiego z rodziną Młodnickich* [A great heart. Kornel Ujejski's correspondence with the Młodnicki family], ed. Zbigniew Sudolski, i (Kraków, 1955), 297. This is discussed in the margins of his considerations by Mariusz Pleziak: ‘O biograficznych kontekstach “Tłumaczeń Szopena” Kornela Ujejskiego’ [On the biographical contexts of Kornel Ujejski's *Tłumaczenia Szopena*], in *Od oświecenia ku romantyzmowi i dalej... Autorzy – dzieła – czytelnicy* [From the Enlightenment to romanticism and beyond... Authors, works and readers], eds. Marek Piechota and Janusz Ryba (Katowice, 2004).

⁴⁵ Słowacki, ‘List do matki z lutego 1845 roku’.

⁴⁶ Tomaszewski, *Chopin*, 343.

⁴⁷ Juliusz Kleiner, *Juliusz Słowacki. Dzieje twórczości* [Juliusz Słowacki. A history of his work], ed. Jerzy Starnawski, i: *Twórczość młodzieńcza* [Youthful works] (Kraków, 1999), 220. A similar undertone accompanies Kleiner's interpretation of *Lambro*, which he treats as “a study of the Romantic psyche, of the Romantic attitude to the world”, which Słowacki regarded as “abnormal, despite its beauty, despite its charm”. Juliusz Kleiner, *Słowacki*, 4th edn (Wrocław, 1969), 59.

sions with a simple legend, apparitions have cried from the lands of the past: Our hearts and bodies were sound.⁴⁸

The marvellous conductor Bohdan Wodiczko used to say that he did not like Romantic music, which

[...] admits of monstrous excesses, inflations of form, a thickening and swelling of instrumentation, a surfeit of expression, a demonstration of its innards, a choking on its own experiences, a bombastic monumentalism, pathos and essentially cheapness of ostensibly profound emotional qualities.⁴⁹

It is not my intention here, of course, to negate the aesthetic values of Romantic music or to come out on the side of its opponents. I wish only to show how disparately it can be interpreted, including by musicologists and musicians (whom, after all, no one suspects of petty-mindedness, insanity, crudeness or “mystic possession” – quite the contrary), since Słowacki’s utterance is parallel to their voices. The letter of the poet, who “saw clearly how much posing there was in various Romantic afflictions, how much falsity in various forms of the Romantic poeticising of life and the Romantic hiding from real tasks in the realm of fiction”⁵⁰, who “disdainfully” rejected also some of his own works as the “melancholy complaints of an immature child”, is not a “compromising text” written by a person “of unsound mind”. Granted, it is a text full of rhetorical fervour, but it inscribes itself perfectly in the context of the thinking of “the Słowacki of the last years”. We can disagree with him and maintain the position that “after hearing” Chopin, Liszt or Schubert we become “better, more beautiful, more compassionate...”, yet that does not give us the right to depreciate the poet by accusing him of petty-mindedness or to manipulate his letter.

“Angels at the keys have stopped...” – we ought to listen to them.

Translated by John Comber

⁴⁸ Quoted in Kleiner, *Juliusz Słowacki*, i, 185.

⁴⁹ Bohdan Pociąg, *Bohdan Wodiczko* (Kraków, 1964), 12. To illustrate this thesis, we ought to return once again to Zygmunt Krasiński, who in a letter to Delfina describes his experiences as follows: “Well, for the last few days, with my body greatly weakened and my soul in inconsolable dolour, I have conceived a passion for playing the piano alone, and that with my eyes closed or the candles extinguished. [...] Occasionally, there occurs a note that falters, like some of those that I heard under your hand [...], I press some of the keys with a swollen heart, I repeat this or that note more sharply, more strongly, as if it was saying ‘You’, and as if you could hear my soul calling in such a way [...]. This real scream of the heart, expressed with a false chord, is mighty, and I feel that there is no speech superior for the feelings than music! I feel then that I speak to you more eloquently than at any time with words! And thus I play sometimes for an hour, and I weep, that is, I converse with you!”. Krasiński, ‘List do Delfiny Potockiej z 31 grudnia 1843 roku’ [Letter to Delfina Potocka of 31 December 1843], 233.

⁵⁰ Kleiner, *Juliusz Słowacki*, i, 186.