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## *Chopin in the music culture of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. From Glinka to Scriabin*

**ABSTRACT:** This article deals with the reception of Chopin's music in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century, as broadly understood. The Chopin cult that developed in Russia was not only genuine, it was exceptional in Europe, giving rise to numerous artistic achievements in many complementary areas, above all composition, pianism and music publishing.

The author discusses the issue from an historical perspective, presenting profiles of six outstanding Russian composers in whose life and work the influence of Chopin was at its greatest. The first is Mikhail Glinka, a pioneer of the national orientation in Russian music, who drew abundantly on Chopinian models. The next generation is represented by Anton Rubinstein, the most famous Russian pianist of his times, and two of the Mighty Handful, Mily Balakirev and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. Among the last heirs to Chopin in Russia, pursuing their artistic careers around the turn of the twentieth century, are two composers who masterfully assimilated the stylistic idiom of the composer of the *Polonaise-Fantasy*, namely Anatoly Lyadov, known as the "Russian Chopin", and Alexander Scriabin.

**KEYWORDS:** Russia, Fryderyk Chopin, reception, Chopin style, national style, Mighty Handful

### Introduction

Russia has a special place on the extensive and impressive map of Chopin's music reception in the nineteenth century, both in terms of multiplicity and variety of achievements. There, the true cult of Chopin (different from so-called "chopinmania", which was popular in the West) developed to the highest degree, and the work of the Polish composer found numerous followers; it also constituted the foundation of the great Russian piano school, which was initiated at that time. We only need to recall the often quoted words of Anton Rubinstein – the eminent Russian pianist, educator and composer to realise the scale of this phenomenon: "together with Chopin's death,

the art of music collapsed”<sup>1</sup>. It is worth adding that we can find many similar statements by the creators of Russian culture – statements acknowledging Chopin’s enormous standing as an inspirer, or even co-author, of this culture.

Compared to other European centres of music life, Chopin’s reception in Moscow and St. Petersburg came somewhat late and developed on a large scale only after the composer’s death. The ground for it was prepared by concerts in Russia by prominent pianists who included compositions by the author of *Polonaise-Fantaisie* Op. 61 in their programmes. The first performer of Chopin’s compositions was Maria Szymanowska. She lived in St. Petersburg and repeatedly gave concerts there between 1828 and 1831. Her highly appreciated concerts gained the admiration of Alexander Pushkin himself. Moreover, by the end of the 1830s, Chopin’s work was being promoted by two of his students – Emilie von Gretsck from Riga and the famous Marie Kalergis. Last but not least, concerts given by Franz Liszt who visited Russia three times in the 1840’s, during which he played many compositions by his friend, had a significant influence.

However, a true explosion of interest in, even enthusiasm for, Chopin and his music, took place at the turn of the fifties and the sixties of the nineteenth century, which saw a rapid revival of musical life in Russia. It was then that “the Five” – the group of five composers with completely different professions (this is why they were ironically named the “dilettante circle”) who aimed to bring Russian music into the mainstream of the European music tradition, while simultaneously emphasising national and folk values – initiated their activities. Similar ideas provided the grounds for the foundation of the Russian Music Society (1859), followed by conservatories in St. Petersburg (1862) and Moscow (1866). Thus Russia entered the European music arena with impetus, manifesting to the world a professional usage of the language of the music of the Romanticism era on one hand, and, on the other, a wealth of its own and unique – because rooted in Eastern Orthodox Church – national tradition. It is appropriate to consider both these aspects as a novelty from the perspective of the history of music.

Chopin’s work fitted perfectly with the artistic ideas of Russian musicians of those times. It was not only because Chopin was an entirely national (and Slavic at the same time) composer, but also because he was an unquestionable role model of a great, world-class romantic musician, able to use a wide range of innovative and individual (as befits a romantic) means of compositional technique and expression. Therefore it is beyond any doubt – as I will try to demonstrate in this work – that it would be a mistake to underrate Chopin’s influence on the Russian music culture in the late Romanticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Rubinstein, ‘Wykłady z historii literatury fortepianowej’ [Lectures on the history of piano literature], in *Chopin w kulturze rosyjskiej. Antologia* [Chopin in the Russian culture. An anthology], ed. Grzegorz Wiśniewski (Warszawa, 2000), 77.

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Chopin's heritage in Russia, seen in terms of the influence which his music had on the attitudes and creative activities of many important figures in musical life, is the subject of this paper. It covers the era of Romanticism in Russian music, which reached its peak, later than in most countries of Western and Central Europe, in the second half of the nineteenth century. A number of composers, whose work is marked to a lesser or greater degree by the characteristic influence of Chopin, is presented below in chronological order. It starts with Mikhail Glinka – the first Russian romantic of a high calibre and, at the same time, the father of the Russian national school. It ends with Alexander Scriabin – the protagonist of Modernism, in both Russian and European music. The facts, relationships and artistic achievements described below throw a light on the multifaceted panorama of Chopin's reception in Russia, including, primarily, the issues of the Polish composer's image in publications and epistolography, as well as his influence on composing and piano playing.

## Mikhail Glinka

The founder of Russian national opera was perhaps the first composer from Pushkin's motherland who intentionally referred to Chopin. One may say that he simply initiated the long-term process of assimilation of Chopin's national music standard in Russia. As we know, this consisted mainly in the stylisation of folk dances and melodies. In his first opera, *Ivan Susanin* from 1836, he had already used three Polish dances – a mazurka, a polonaise and a krakowiak – in the ball scene in the second act. To this day this scene is considered the most popular part of this opera.

Vladimir Stasov, one of St. Petersburg's leading music critics at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, whose name has gone down in the history of music as a fervent supporter of "the Five", expressed clearly his opinion about Chopin's influence on Glinka's work. In an article written in 1857, a kind of obituary of the author of *Ruslan and Ludmila*, he stated:

Chopin was always one of Glinka's main teachers and tutors, thus we can say without hesitation that if there had been no Chopin before Glinka, then he would have been completely different [...]. Glinka often used many of Chopin's forms: they can be most clearly heard not only in the romances, but also in both his operas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Stasov, 'Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka', *Russkij Wiestnik* 20-24 (1957). Quoted after *Chopin w kulturze rosyjskiej*, 46.

The composer himself only once clearly admitted that he made use of Chopin's stylistic idiom. He mentioned the origin of his *Mazurka in A minor* of 1852 – the last one of his five compositions representing this genre – in notes from his third journey abroad.

During the second day of the journey – he wrote – we took a quite pretty lady into our stage-coach. Her company somehow entertained me while we travelled and I composed a little mazurka “à la Chopin” for her – this mazurka gained applause in Warsaw and Paris.<sup>3</sup>

Glinka's close relationship with Polish culture undoubtedly favoured his being inspired by Chopin. By the end of the twenties he was admiring Maria Szymanowska's music performance in St. Petersburg, and at the turn of the forties and fifties he visited Warsaw three times, altogether spending almost three years there. He had meetings there with many representatives of the Polish artistic community, such as Karol Kurpiński and Karol Lipiński. It is worth mentioning that the composer had Polish blood in his veins, being a great-great-grandson of a Polish nobleman descended from the Land of Łomża – Wiktor Władysław Glinka of the Trzaska coat of arms.

## Anton Rubinstein

Anton Rubinstein, whose contribution to Russian culture is immense in so many areas, has earned his place in history first and foremost for being one of the most eminent pianists of his time. He was considered to be simply the greatest – together with Liszt – piano virtuoso of the whole nineteenth century. Even as an eleven-year-old boy he did a great concert tour of Europe, quickly gaining fame as a child prodigy. During his stay in Paris he had the good fortune to meet Chopin in person. He was received by Chopin on the 8th of December 1841; prior to that, Chopin had listened to him playing at a concert at the Salle Pleyel a few months earlier.

Chopin's music undoubtedly dominated Rubinstein's repertoire throughout his whole piano career. He was appreciated by the critics as an unmatched performer of the Polish composer's pieces. He passed on his style to young adepts of the piano art, becoming the father of Russian Chopinism. He also takes the credit for introducing the tradition of Chopin recitals, i.e., a whole evening performance by a solo artist devoted only to Chopin's compositions, into the European concert life.

During his USA tour in 1872 Rubinstein gave a series of seven recitals, later known as the historical concerts, in New York, in which he presented the history of piano music from early Baroque to the present. The sixth and a half

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<sup>3</sup> Michał Glinka, *Pamiętniki* [Memoirs]. Quoted after *Chopin w kulturze rosyjskiej*, 39.

of the seventh recital, that is – statistically – over one fifth of the whole series, was filled with Chopin's compositions. Years later, Rubinstein repeated this artistic-educational project of historical concerts on the Old Continent – it was a great event of the 1885-1886 season in many European capital cities, from St. Petersburg and Moscow, through Vienna, Berlin and Brussels, to Paris and London.

The course of the history of piano literature, which altogether included 58 lectures, illustrated with his own performances of discussed compositions, delivered by Rubinstein during 1887-1889 at the St. Petersburg conservatory, was also a great success. Detailed analysis of Chopin's works was included in the course programme and the composer was introduced as a "person extraordinary in every aspect". Presenting particular compositions in sequence, opus after opus, Rubinstein clearly distinguished 24 *Preludes* Op. 28, presenting them as the true *chef d'œuvre* of Polish composer:

This composition by Chopin composition is an absolute *unicum*. It should be every musician's handbook, together with Bach's *Das Wohltemperiertes Klavier* and Beethoven's sonatas. The preludes are very short, but all are miraculously wonderful; whichever of them you are playing – you forget about the whole world. [...] Even if Chopin had not written anything but the preludes, he would have deserved immortality anyway.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth adding that – maybe because of Chopin – Warsaw was always close to Rubinstein's heart. He played several times in that city (1869, 1880, 1885), and allocated the income from one concert to the benefit of the Music Institute during his last visit. Moreover, many years earlier – in 1868 – he undertook, unfortunately to no effect, diplomatic endeavours aimed at paying homage to Chopin in the city of his childhood and his youth. In a letter to Baroness Edith von Raden, who was on friendly terms with the court of Tsar Alexander II, he wrote:

An idea came to my mind, but I don't know how to turn it into reality, and so I ask for your opinion: is it not possible to persuade the government to erect a monument to Chopin in Warsaw, either in a square, or only in the form of a bust in the conservatory, or any other place? There it would be generally appreciated, and it would make a good impression abroad. [...] It would be very kind of you, to make this idea feasible using diplomatic means.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted after *Chopin w kulturze rosyjskiej*, 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

## Mily Balakirev

“I don’t know why I give Chopin priority, but I know that his compositions touch me profoundly”<sup>6</sup>. Those words by Mily Balakirev were by no means merely a declaration – the leader of “the Five” proved to be the most zealous among Chopin “believers” in Russia. His enthusiasm for Chopin’s work manifested itself the same extent in all fields of his creative activity, as a composer, as a performing pianist, and, last but not least, as a music activist.

We can see Chopin inspirations in two trends of Balakirev compositional activity, namely in his piano music, and in the area of arrangements and transcriptions. Just like many of his predecessors and peers, he pursued Chopin’s genres – he composed 7 mazurkas and waltzes, 3 scherzos and nocturnes and impromptu for four hands, based on themes from two of Chopin’s preludes. At the same time he was far from copying Chopin’s idiom. He created his own, original style based on the synthesis of Russian, oriental and, to some degree, Polish elements. His last two mazurkas – *in F minor* and *in E flat minor*, which have themes taken from Eastern music and Russian folk music, can be an example of this characteristic blend.

Balakirev’s transcriptions of many compositions by Chopin for various performing groups played an important role in popularising Chopin’s music in Russia. Among these transcriptions we find pieces for a string quartet (*Etude in C sharp minor* Op. 25 No. 7), a choir (mazurkas: *in E flat minor* Op. 6 No. 4 and *in A flat major* Op. 41 No. 4), and also a piano extract of *Romance* from *Concerto in E minor*. At the end of his life, in the year 1908, the composer arranged *Suite in D minor* for orchestra, composed of four of Chopin’s works, slightly altered and combined on the principle of contrast: *Etude in E flat minor* Op. 10 No. 6, *Mazurka in H major* Op. 41 No. 3, *Nocturne in G minor* Op. 15 No. 3 and *Scherzo in C sharp minor* Op. 39. In the years to come this cycle gained the greatest popularity among all of the Balakirev’s arrangements and transcriptions.

At that time the author of “*Islamey*” *Oriental Fantasy* became famous as an outstanding performer of Chopin’s compositions. Together with brothers Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein he is considered to be a pioneer of the great piano playing tradition in Russia. Furthermore he arranged, together with Sergei Lyapunov, his pupil and friend, the publication of Chopin’s sonatas in 1908. For a long time this edition was considered a model in Russia.

Fascination with Chopin expressed itself not only in his creative activity, but also in the Russian composer’s life. In the year 1891 he went on his “sentimental journey” to Poland, wishing to visit places associated with Chopin. During his

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted after *Muzycy i krytycy rosyjscy o Chopinie* [Russian musicians and critics on Chopin] (Warszawa, 1949), 7.

stay in Warsaw he visited many times the Church of the Holy Cross, where – as we know – Chopin’s heart was buried. Afterwards he discovered, and – as a consequence – restored, Żelazowa Wola to the Poles’ memory. It was thanks to his efforts that Chopin’s monument was placed there in shortly after. The memory of this episode – very important from the perspective of the history of Polish culture – can be found in Balakirev’s letter of 1897 to the French composer Louis Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, in which he wrote:

I am pleased to recall that my admiration for Chopin unintentionally became the reason for erecting a monument to him in Poland, and it happened like this: During the autumn of 1891, when I was tired out by official duties (I was a director of the court music ensemble during the reign of Alexander III until his death), I asked for a vacation, and when I obtained it, I travelled to Poland in order to find the place of Chopin’s birth. After coming to Warsaw I turned to people seriously involved in music, I learnt where Żelazowa Wola was, and I immediately travelled there.

It turned out that the present landowner not only didn’t know that Chopin had been born on his estate, but he even didn’t know who Chopin was. The house, where the Chopin family is supposed to have once lived, and where probably the brilliant Frederic was born, was terribly neglected. After my return to Warsaw correspondents from the Polish newspapers came to me. I informed them about the condition of the house in which Chopin was born. Visibly surprised and outraged by what they heard, they wrote a number of articles to condemn the attitude of the community, and especially the attitude of the Music Society towards the Chopin memorabilia. As a result, Chopin’s monument was founded on 14 October 1894. As the unintentional initiator of this project I was also invited for the unveiling celebration. Unfortunately, due to the hostility between the brotherly nations, caused by their relentless history, none of the Russian musicians, and not a single Russian individual (except myself) attended the ceremony, and because the Polish people collected the funds needed for this purpose themselves, Chopin’s admirers from Russia didn’t have an opportunity to offer anything as a proof of their admiration for the brilliant musician.<sup>7</sup>

The origin of Żelazowa Wola as the location of the living cult of Chopin’s music, so important today, provides visible proof of close relations between the Polish and Russian cultures. It seems that Mily Balakirev placed his signature (well in advance) under the famous statement made by his great countryman Leo Tolstoy in 1907: “The Polish people may be loved for this one thing, they had Chopin!”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Chopin w korespondencji M. Bałakiriewa’ [Chopin in M. Balakiriew’s correspondence], ed. Artur Taube, *Muzyka* 7-8 (1950), 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> L. N. Tolstoj w wspomnieniach sowriemiennikow, ii (Moskwa, 1955), 374. See also Ludmila Korabielnikowa, ‘Lew Tolstoj o Chopinie’, *Rocznik Chopinowski* 7 (Warszawa, 1969) 113.

## Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov – the biggest individuality of “the Five” alongside Mussorgsky – also considered himself to be Chopin’s heir. This musician, who was very critical by nature and famous for his severe judgments, always spoke highly, even enthusiastically, about Chopin’s compositions. He appreciated them, first of all, for their innovativeness and national character of style, and for their indeed – unparalleled combination of genial melody with mastery of harmony. In the year 1894, according to a relation of his friend Vasily Jastrebecv, he said:

As a matter of fact, after the indefinably poetic sounds of Chopin every other music will seem rough and heavy, including the compositions of such giants as Beethoven and Schumann, not to mention Liszt, and you begin to almost hate Wagner with his bizarre and complicated music.<sup>9</sup>

Admiration towards Chopin’s music naturally influenced the compositional activity of Rimsky-Korsakov. The work in which the inspiration of Chopin, and Poland in general, manifested to the highest degree is his opera *Pan Wojewoda*, composed in 1902-1903. The composer dedicated it to the “memory of Chopin”. This is how he explained its origin some years later:

The idea of writing an opera with a Polish theme had occupied my thoughts for a long time. On the one hand I was haunted by several Polish melodies, which my mother used to sing to me when I was a child. I used them to compose the violin mazurka. On the other hand, Chopin’s influence on me was unquestionable both in the melodic verses of my music and in many harmonic solutions, something which, obviously, was never noticed by the penetrating critics. The Polish national element in Chopin’s compositions, which I adored, always enraptured me. In the opera on the Polish theme I wanted to pay my tribute as an expression of my admiration for this aspect of Chopin’s music, and I believed that I was able to write something Polish, something national.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the Russian composer managed to compose an opera not only based on a Polish theme, but at the same time filled with music of clearly national character, stemming from associations with both Chopin and Polish folk music. The Polish local flavour, expressed primarily in characteristic melodic phrases and dance rhythm formulas, is displayed in the vocal parts, and also in separate symphonic fragments, such as the polonaise and the krakowiak in Act I, the nocturne in Act II, and finally the mazurka in Act III. Those

<sup>9</sup> Quoted after *Chopin w kulturze rosyjskiej*, 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.



compositions achieved great popularity and to this day are performed as suites from the opera in concert halls.

## Anatoly Lyadov

In Russia great expectations were associated with this successor of “the Five”. Both Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov valued highly his first opuses, recognizing him as the most outstanding – alongside Alexander Glazunov – composer of the young generation. However, Lyadov was not given the opportunity to continue, on a larger scale, the work of his predecessors, in the area of huge symphonic and stage music. On the other hand, he became a true master in the field of vocal and instrumental lyric, and piano music turned out to be the most dominant trend in his work. He composed almost exclusively miniatures representing different genres, mostly those originating with Chopin, like the prelude, mazurka, etude, waltz, barcarole, impromptu, and, last but not least, the ballad. At the same time he borrowed much from Chopin’s music, converting Chopin’s style in a creative way in the scope of melody, harmony, texture and expression. Not without reason, he was given the name of “Russian Chopin” by the music critics of the day. Lyadov himself rejected such a classification – when he was 33 he wrote in a letter to his sister: “At present Chopin has already wandered very far from me; is it good, or bad – I don’t know”<sup>11</sup>. However it is enough to look at the catalogue of composer’s pieces, to see that Chopin’s influence reached much deeper.

## Alexander Scriabin

Alexander Scriabin – the composer working at the turn of the two great epochs: romanticism and modernism – was undoubtedly the most outstanding of all (not just Russian) of Chopin’s successors until modern times. His creative path considered as the “ontogeny” of individual style in some way does reflect – against the background of “phylogeny” – the whole hundred years of European music history. This is because Scriabin’s career as a composer could be described in terms of a “trampoline”, with Chopin’s music providing the initial impetus, followed by the influence of Wagner, before the composer finally developed his own, avant-garde music language, in many ways corresponding to the technical and composing norms of Arnold Schönberg and his students on the eve of dodecaphony.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted after Adam Nuer, ‘Ladov Anatolij’, in Elżbieta Dziębowska (ed.), *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM. Część Biograficzna* [PWM Encyclopaedia of music. Biographical part], v (Kraków, 1997), 267.

It took Scriabin much time to prepare for this “jump” into the deep and unknown waters of the “music of the future”. The whole first phase of the maturation of his style took a total of 15 years, more than a half of the composer’s artistic journey, terminated prematurely by his sudden death. The beginning of this period is marked with sketches of the *24 Preludes* Op. 11 (1888-1896) – the work which is a replica of Chopin’s opus 28, also in the concept itself, that of a series of miniatures all kept in major and minor keys and arranged in accordance with the principle of the circle of fifths. Later on “Scriabin fed on Chopin” for a long time, which resulted, among other things, in his first three sonatas, numerous series of mazurkas, etudes, preludes, impromptus, a few nocturnes and – remarkably – only one polonaise. *Two Mazurkas* Op. 40 (1903) is considered to be the borderline composition which indicated the first change in style, as well as the last tribute to Chopin.

It seems almost impossible that the composer, whose evolution was so intense and so dynamic, was, in essence, only an imitator of his master from the distant past. The early compositions of the author of *Prometheus* are nothing more than a neat pastiche of Chopin’s style – evidence of a specific “neochopinism” which preceded the neoclassical attitude of Stravinsky and Prokofiev by more than twenty years. When Rimsky-Korsakov heard the compositions with which Scriabin made his debut for the first time, it is believed that he said ironically: “The young man probably found an old suitcase full of unpublished Chopin’s music in a dusty attic”<sup>12</sup>.

As the same time as dynamic transformations of style took place in Scriabin’s compositions after 1903, his relation to the great Polish romantic was changing. As a modernist, Scriabin reminisced about his past fascination with Chopin only as an insignificant episode from his youth, definitely buried in the distant past. In one of his comments given to the Russian press in 1910 he said:

Yes, I liked, or, to be precise, I adored Chopin. I remember that, as a young greenhorn, I would go to bed with Chopin’s compositions under my pillow. This period has been over for a long time. I moved away from Chopin, and I moved away so far, that when sometimes I hear his naive nocturne, it seems strange to me how I could have cried because of this composition. [...] His extraordinary musicality still remains outstanding and vital for me.<sup>13</sup>

Further on in the quoted article Scriabin criticised Chopin slightly, pointing out his two alleged weaknesses – the lack of any evolution of style and too much loyalty to the national heritage. He stated: “Chopin as a personality was

<sup>12</sup> Quoted after Manfred Kelkel, *Alexandre Scriabine. Un musicien à la recherche de l'absolu* (Paris, 1999), 319, own translation.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted after *Chopin w kulturze rosyjskiej*, 104.

overwhelmed by nationalism. He was not able to create anything supranational, universal; his whole music reiterates the tragic history of the Polish nation”<sup>14</sup>. It may be considered a kind of paradox that Chopin’s idiom of national style, which was believed for half a century to be one of composer’s main assets, was defined as a restriction by Scriabin. We can observe one of the symptoms of the turn from romanticism to modernistic avant-garde in the Russian music of the early twentieth century in this sudden change of opinion about the predecessors.

## Conclusion

These reflections are far from presenting the whole set of issues referred to in the title of this sketch. Only six composers, for whom Chopin was a source of inspiration in life and music to the highest degree, have been presented here. The list of Russian heirs and followers of Chopin’s tradition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include many more names. It would be fitting to mention here at least by name the most significant figures: Pyotr Tchaikovsky, who owed Chopin a lot but would not admit it, Sergei Lyapunov, who composed the symphonic poem *Żelazowa Wola* as a tribute to Chopin, and also the famous pianists, such as, first and foremost, Nikolai Rubinstein (brother of Anton), Anna Jesipova or Felix Blumenfeld, who created the great Russian – and at the same time global – school of interpreting Chopin’s music.

The phenomenon of the reception of Chopin’s music in nineteenth century Russia is still an immense and unusually attractive area of research. This authentic cult of Chopin, embracing many trends of creative activity, on the one hand allow us to see the genius of the Polish composer in a new light, and, on the other, it demonstrates the great influence exerted by the Polish composer on the whole of Russian romanticism.

*Translated by Juliusz Stępniewski*

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

