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*It all began with George Sand.
Novelistic portraits
of Fryderyk Chopin and his music
in foreign literature. A survey*

ABSTRACT: The literary works discussed in this article exploit the motif of Fryderyk Chopin and his oeuvre in a variety of ways. The earliest novel is *Lucrezia Floriani* (1846), penned by the French writer George Sand, Chopin's companion. The creation of Prince Karol (Chopin's name in the novel), as if "detached" from the Polish composer's biography, is an interesting, although none too original (even within the context of Sand's oeuvre) example of the Romantic hero.

Popular output, aimed at a readership seeking above all scandal and emotion, is represented by the German writer Hermann Richter's novel *Drei Frauen um Chopin* (1935) and the contemporary thriller of collective authorship *The Chopin Manuscript* (2008). In these works, the composer is a tool designed to give readers the illusion of becoming acquainted with his biography or to interest sensation-seekers.

Artistically the most interesting novel is *Preludes*, by the Danish writer Peer Hultberg (1989). Besides its original artistic form, the author is the only one to deal with musical material, attempting to present in prose that which ought to form the heart of every work about the brilliant musician, but which was achieved only by Cyprian Norwid in *Fortepian Szopena* [Chopin's piano].

KEYWORDS: Fryderyk Chopin, George Sand, Hermann Richter, Peer Hultberg, literary biography, French literature, German literature, literary motifs

In the mid-1840, when George Sand's affair with Fryderyk Chopin was coming to an end, in the circle of their friends it was commonly said that a new novel was being prepared by the Polish composer's lover. Thus, when the daily *Le Courier Français* began to print *Lucrezia Floriani*¹ in the middle

¹The novel appeared in print as a book publication a year later. In Poland it has been used and cited in fragments in most works relating to Fryderyk Chopin's biography for decades. Still, it is curious that the translation of Aurore Dudevant's book which should arouse Polish reader's interest most did not appear in a full edition until one and a half years after being written (George Sand, *Lukrecja Floriani*, transl. Zofia Jędrzejowska-

of 1846, the readers showed a great deal of interest, especially after noticing that it was a typical roman à clef: the eponymous character, actress and writer, was supposed to be the author's spokeswoman, while Prince Karol de Roswald (in love with Lucrezia) was indentified with Chopin. Plentiful evidence for such a reception of the novel is provided by the writer's, as well as the composer's, social circle: e.g. Eugène Delacroix, Marie d'Agoult and Hortense Allart de Meritens. The latter said: "Mme Sand [...] preys on Chopin with those tasteless, vulgar details, in cold blood, which cannot be justified as it is in the case of her doppelganger"².

The author was concerned to produce such an interpretation of the novel, placing obvious or probable hints to make the reader interpret the book according to her intention. And so, we learn that Karol has Slavic relatives and was in love with Princess Lucia (Maria Wodzińska?). His partner is the mother of a number of children and "a widow [...] having many ex-lovers"³. The drawings by Maurice Sand (in the Polish edition, where Prince Karol is a spitting image of Chopin) made unambiguous identification easier. Furthermore, Mieczysław Tomaszewski, in his postscript to the book, states: "one would have to be blind and deaf to doubt, after reading the novel about the lovers from Lake Iseo, that George Sand, in presenting the two characters in the book, depicted her own situation"⁴.

Interestingly enough, Chopin himself, at the time when the novel was being written, did not seem to notice the analogy between the fictitious world and the real one. When being acquainted with the book – Mme Sand read it to him herself – he stayed utterly calm, not noticing the interpretative possibilities evident to other listeners. Still, soon after the lovers' parting, the composer wrote in his letter to Wojciech Grzymała that he would like to curse Lucrezia. It follows from the statement that the relationship between the truth and fiction was, at least by 1848, evident to Chopin.

Prince Karol in the novel is permanently jealous. The book abounds both in veiled allusions and in detailed descriptions of his obsessive jealousy. Karol is not only jealous of the men entering Lucrezia's life, but also of a kiss planted on a dog's head. The insane jealousy and love unite, having almost physiological symptoms; we read in the novel:

Waszczuk (Warszawa, 2009) [French orig. *Lucrezia Floriani*]]. All my citations come from this edition.

² "Pani Sand [...] wydaje nam na łup Chopina z niesmacznymi, kuchennymi szczegółami, z zimną krwią, której nic nie usprawiedliwia, jak to ma miejsce z jej sobowtórem", Ferdynand Hoesick, *Chopin. Życie i twórczość* [Chopin. Life and works], iii (Kraków, 1966), 44.

³ "[...] wdowa [...] po wielu kochankach", Sand, *Lukrecja Floriani*, 109.

⁴ "Trzeba być ślepy i głuchym, żeby po lekturze powieści o kochankach znad jeziora Iseo wątpić w to, że prezentując obie osoby powieściowego dramatu, George Sand ukazywała zarazem sytuację własną". Ibid., 315.

His lips and cheeks were white, his eyes motionless and glassy, his teeth firmly clenched. [...] Karol did not feel or hear anything. He was unconscious. [...] he did not show any signs of life. He was shivering strangely and let out a faint moan.⁵

The fictitious character of Prince Karol is a peculiar combination of introversion and hysteria: "The more irritated he was, the colder he became towards people, and it was only his icy courtesy that allowed one to guess at the fury raging within him"⁶. The explicit opinion about the hero is made easier (and clearly suggested) for the reader by the first-person narrator, who always judges Prince Karol's reactions and his behaviour pejoratively. The accusatory and personal form of narration enabled the readers of *Lucrezia Floriani* in the 1840s (especially those who knew Mme Sand) to identify the characters of the novel with the author and her friend, which they probably did.

It seems likely that our doubts as to George Sand's intentions when writing *Lucrezia Floriani* would be removed when we learn of the writer's reaction to the ultimate separation from Chopin. Her letter to Emmanuel Arago contains the most explicit comment:

What a relief to me! What troublesome bonds have been broken! For nine years my continuous resistance to his narrow-minded and despotic thinking has struggled with attachment, compassion and concern so that he would not die of sorrow. For nine years, while feeling myself full of the life force, living my life to the full, I have engaged in a relationship with a dead body, under the permanent and apparent threat of his opinion and that of his coterie, of which I was constantly aware. [...] Thank God, it is not I who will kill him and, at last, I can begin a new life after those nine years of slow torture by his caustic remarks.⁷

It would be difficult to find more ruthless words; even if they give vent to her temporary emotions on a particular occasion, they definitely and plainly show the terrible aversion which must have developed in the relationship, and confirm that *Lucrezia Floriani* must have been its literary expression.

⁵ "[...] jego wargi i policzki były białe, wzrok nieruchomy i szklisty, zęby mocno zaciśnięte. [...] Karol nic nie czuł i nie słyszał. Był nieprzytomny. [...] nie dawał znaku życia. Wstrząsały nim dziwne dreszcze i wydawał zduszone jęki". Ibid., 94-95.

⁶ "Im bardziej był rozdrażniony, tym większy chłód okazywał na zewnątrz, i tylko lodowata kurtuazja pozwalała domyślać się szalejącej w nim furii". Ibid., 268-269.

⁷ "Cóż to za ulga dla mnie! Jak uciążliwe więzy uległy zerwaniu! Od dziewięciu lat mój nieustanny opór przeciw jego wąskiemu i despotycznemu sposobowi myślenia walczy z przywiązaniem, litością i obawą, by nie umarł z żalu. Od dziewięciu lat, czując w sobie pełnię życia, związana jestem z trupem, pod nieustanną, widoczną i stale uświadamianą sobie groźbą opinii jego i jego koterii. [...] Bogu dzięki, to nie ja go zabiję, i mogę wreszcie rozpocząć nowe życie po tych dziewięciu latach powolnego zadarczania mnie nakłuciami szpilki", *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina z George Sand i jej dziećmi* [The correspondence between Fryderyk Chopin and George Sand and her children], ed. Krystyna Kobyłańska, ii (Warszawa, 1981), 236.

Most present-day readers and interpreters of Sand's oeuvre would agree with the opinion that her literary works seem to be schematic, emotional and full of sentimental exaggeration; the narration is monotonous, and it offends with its declamatory and bombastic metaphor. All this means that the modern reader's reaction to her writing is less than enthusiastic. The legend of the great writer, who shocked readers with outrageous dress and behaviour, proved to be much longer-lasting than the literary value of her works, while *Lucrezia Floriani* will surely remain the cornerstone of the legend of the author, as well as of Chopin.

It seems that a similar example of a literary work aimed at an immediate effect, perhaps causing a scandal, is the book *Trzy kobiety. Powieść o Chopinie*⁸ [Three women. A novel about Chopin] by a second-rate German writer Hermann Richter, published ninety years later. As the title suggests, the composer's biography is based on the story of his three lady loves: Maria Wodzińska, George Sand and Jane Stirling. The author's basic thesis about the special importance of women for the artistic achievement of the outstanding pianist is – as one of the reviewers states: “[...] Utter nonsense which is not believable, even by people who know nothing about Chopin, for whom this book was primarily written”⁹.

Richter's novel is addressed not only to readers who know “nothing” about the Polish artist, but also to the audience seeking not the truth itself, but perhaps sensation or even scandal in the composer's biography. That is why the author takes special delight in emphasizing the sensual character of Chopin's affairs. Here is a characteristic fragment presenting his taking a walk with Maria Wodzińska:

Suddenly Maria pulled Chopin into her arms and began to kiss him. Warmly. Passionately. Uncontrollably. [...]. Chopin embraced her carefully. As if he was afraid that he could injure this miracle of nature. He was kissing her hair, forehead and eyes, gently and lightly. Then, a spark of passion flew from her to him and, crazed with joy, he began to kiss her on the mouth.¹⁰

⁸ Hermann Richter, *Trzy kobiety. Powieść o Chopinie* [Three women. A novel about Chopin] (Warszawa, 1937) [Ger. orig. *Drei Frauen um Chopin. Roman* (Leipzig, 1935)]. The writer (born in 1887), famous for only this novel in Poland, is the author of Johannes Brahms' and Joseph Haydn's biographies, treated in a similarly romantic way.

⁹ “[...] fałsz wierutny, którego nie wolno wmawiać nawet ludziom, nie wiedzącym nic o Chopinie, dla których książka ta w pierwszym rzędzie została napisana”, Jadwiga Hoesick-Hendrichowa, ‘Dwie nowe książki o Chopinie oraz jego listy’ [Two new books about Chopin, and his letters], *Śpiewak* 9 (1937), 108. The review concerns the first German edition of the novel.

¹⁰ “Nagle Maria porwała Chopina w ramiona i poczęła go całować. Gorąco. Namiętnie. Niepowstrzymanie. [...] Ostrożnie otoczył ją Chopin ramieniem. Jakby się obawiał, że może uszkodzić ten cud natury. Delikatnie i lekko całował jej włosy, czoło i oczy. Potem iskra

Similarly, using almost the same conventional metaphor, characteristic of popular literature, another passage tells us:

[George Sand] took Chopin in her arms and kissed him on the mouth. For the first time. The kiss was burning him like hellfire. He experienced the same feeling as when, at Duchess Czartoryska's party, she held him in her hands for the first time. He could see a spark of desire flickering in her eyes, it flew to him and threatened to burn him.¹¹

In any case, love is consistently presented in a melodramatic way, using naive and incredible effects. When Chopin receives a letter informing him that his engagement to Wodzińska has been broken, not only does lightning hit a window, breaking it at the opportune moment, but also the forlorn fiancé, in order to give vent to his despair, sits at the piano holding a skeleton in his arms, which, of course, had earlier been accidentally taken out of from the wardrobe by his friend.¹²

Still, Richter's Chopin is, first of all, an artist. That is why the literary hero, when faced with the dilemma: "love or art?", will always choose the latter, which is often presented in an artless, or too literal, way. We can find an illustrative example of such a choice in the description of a night scene taking place at Mme Sand's bedroom door:

At that moment, Chopin felt that Lelia¹³ was expecting him that night [...]. After a short while Chopin opened the door to Lelia's study. His blood was murmuring and singing. He was moving along hesitantly. [...] Once again he was strangely afraid of winning the woman – just as when he did not dare to write to Konstancja Gładkowska, when he did not dare to declare his love for Maria Wodzińska. [...] But his blood was singing and murmuring... Again he moved along blindfold, by a step, towards her bedroom. Would nobody help him?¹⁴

namiętności przeskoczyła z niej na niego, nieprzytomny ze szczęścia, począł ją całować w usta". Richter, *Trzy kobiety*, 77.

¹¹ "[George Sand] ujęła Chopina w ramiona i pocałowała go w usta. Po raz pierwszy. Pocałunek ten palił go jak ogień piekielny. Doznał takiego samego uczucia, jak wtedy – na przyjęciu u księżnej Czartoryskiej – gdy po raz pierwszy ujęła go w ręce. Ujrzał, jak w oczach jej zamigotała iskra pożądania, przeskoczyła na niego i groziła mu spalaniem". Ibid., 156.

¹² Ibid., 95-96.

¹³ It is the title of one of the books by Sand and, at the same time, the author's informal name often used (e.g. in the biography by André Maurois, *Lelia czyli życie George Sand* [Lelia or the life of George Sand] (Paris, 1952)).

¹⁴ "W tej chwili Chopin uczuł, że Lelja oczekuje go dzisiaj w nocy [...]. Po krótkim czasie Chopin otworzył drzwi do gabinetu Lelji. Krew jego szemrała i śpiewała. Z wahaniem posuwał się naprzód. [...] Znowu uczuł dziwny lęk przed zdobyciem kobiety – tak samo, jak wtedy, gdy nie śmiał napisać do Konstancji Gładkowskiej, jak wtedy, gdy nie śmiał wyznać swojej miłości Marii Wodzińskiej. [...] Ale krew śpiewała i szemrała... Znowu posunął się po

It is the wind which helps him, murmuring the autumn melody and, in this way, discouraging him from approaching the bedroom door, takes him to the piano. Mme Sand, hearing the sound of music, slams the door in despair.

According to the convention of popular literature, all the ambiguities in Chopin's biography are interpreted by the author of *Trzy kobiety. Powieść o Chopinie* [Three Women. A Novel about Chopin] in a manner devoid of any nuances. For example, the question of breaking off the relationship with Wodzińska is "explained" as follows: Even in Chopin's day people knew that at least two crucial factors were the cause of the end of their engagement: Chopin's health and the class prejudice of Maria's family; of course we also cannot exclude the influence of George Sand. According to Richter, the Wodziński family are to blame, because they immediately decide to marry their daughter to Count Józef Skarbek in order to save their impoverished financial situation. The fiancée's father puts it quite clearly: "The most important thing is: where can we get money? Quickly at that – and, unfortunately, a lot of money"¹⁵. Again, Richter presents the facts pretty loosely – in 1836, when the statement was supposed to have been made, Józef Skarbek was only 14 years old and, at least for that reason, it is difficult to imagine his marriage to Wodzińska.

Richter, undoubtedly in order to arouse the interest of German readers interested, presents a detailed picture of Dresden (which in the 1830s belonged to Saxony), where the affair with Wodzińska started; while Marienbad (Austrian in those days)¹⁶ and Leipzig, where Chopin meets Robert Schumann, are depicted more sketchily. Special emphasis is placed on the revolutionary trends that were then emerging in Saxony. In the novel, Chopin is their witness and supporter. The drive towards the unification of the German nations is also emphasised very clearly. The composer's friend, Adolf Gutman, cries out ecstatically:

"German unity would have been achieved already if we had found a leader with the courage to do the job."

omacku o krok naprzód w stronę drzwi jej sypialni. Czyż nikt mu nie pomoże?". Richter, *Trzy kobiety*, 197-198.

¹⁵ "Najważniejsze jest: skąd zdobędziemy pieniądze? I to szybko – i niestety; dużo pieniędzy". Ibid., 86. The biographers do not support the allegation about the Wodzińskis' critical financial situation. Also, Maria's marriage with Count Józef Skarbek took place only in 1841, i.e. 5 years after she and Chopin parted; see also: 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), 181-203. We can find a reference to her marriage in Richter's novel (144), but it is inconsistent with the true chronology; according to the author, Chopin learns about the event before he leaves for Majorca, i.e. by the end of 1838.

¹⁶ Marienbad is the present Mariánské Lázně in the Czech Republic.

“The king of Prussia,” added Chopin. [...].

“For the time being we do not have a man who would be brave enough to lead the nation with a strong hand, even with blood and iron – but the man will arise. Everybody believes that!”¹⁷

Admittedly, the above conversation ends with the statement that after uniting Germany, it will be Poland’s time to regain independence, and there is Chopin’s exclamation: “Poland has not perished yet!”, but the reader, knowing the future European history, will easily indentify the leader who is supposed to unite Germany “with blood and iron”, namely “the iron chancellor” who is, after all, referred to explicitly in Richter’s novel. In one of the most incredible episodes, Duchess Marcelina Czartoryska informs the composer:

“The German Reich under the leadership of a strong Prussia will come into being. And the man who is fighting for this with enduring willpower is Mr von Bismarck.”

“Bismarck!,” repeated Chopin. “The name has got a heroic sound!”

“Here is his portrait!,” said the Duchess, and showed Chopin a lithograph depicting the leading member of the Prussian Landtag.

Chopin looked at the portrait for a long time.

“Iron forehead, bright, bold eyes under bushy eyebrows [...] it seems to me, Duchess, that he is the man who will secure the unification of Germany”¹⁸.

“Chopin as Bismarck’s admirer” is absurd not only due to the absence of any sources or circumstantial evidence which might support this claim, but also for historical reasons – in 1849, when the composer was dying, the future chancellor had admittedly been elected to the Prussian parliament, but at that time he was an insignificant figure, and it was simply impossible for Duchess Czartoryska or Chopin to know about his existence.¹⁹

¹⁷ “– Jedność niemiecka byłaby już dokonana, gdyby się znalazł wódz, któryby śmiałą ręką dokonał tego dzieła.

– Król pruski, – wtrącił Chopin. [...].

– Chwilowo brak jeszcze człowieka, któryby miał odwagę poprowadzić naród silną ręką, w razie potrzeby choćby krwią i żelazem – ale człowiek ten zjawi się. Wszyscy w to wierzą!” Richter, *Trzy kobiety*, 204.

¹⁸ “– Powstanie Rzesza niemiecka pod kierownictwem silnych Prus. A człowiekiem, który walczy o to z wytrwałą siłą woli, jest pan von Bismarck.

– Bismarck! – powtórzył Chopin. – nazwisko to ma jakieś heroiczne brzmienie!

– Mam tu jego portret! – rzekła księżna, pokazując Chopinowi litografię, przedstawiającą czołowego posła Landtagu pruskiego.

Chopin długo przyglądał się portretowi.

– Żelazne czoło, jasne, śmiałe oczy pod krzaczastymi brwiami [...] zdaje mi się, księżno, że to jest człowiek, który wywalczy zjednoczenie Niemiec”. Ibid., 286-287.

¹⁹ See e.g: Christian von Krockov, *Bismarck. Biografia* [Bismarck. Biography], transl. Michał Misiorny and Jerzy Nowakowski (Warszawa, 1998).

The reader of Richter's novel, who is familiar with Chopin's biography will be surprised at the third name in the collection of the composer's great lady loves – Jane Stirling. She was a Scottish aristocrat and a pianist who supported her master and teacher financially at the end of his life; and undoubtedly, although involved in a relationship, she was viewed by him as a curiosity of some kind, and she could never count on his emotional involvement.²⁰ In his letter to Wojciech Grzymała, the artist, already in extremely poor health, Chopin ironically denied rumours of their romance: "She is too similar to me [...]. How could I kiss myself. [...] So I am not thinking of a wife at all, but of home, Mother, Sisters"²¹. On another occasion, during his trip to England, he wrote about the role of Miss Stirling and her sister: "My Scotswomen do not leave me alone, but either come to pick me up or take me around their family's places [...] – they will suffocate me with kindness, and out of politeness I will not refuse it to them"²².

Richter writes his novel as if he did not know what the composer actually said. Chopin – the main character of the book – claims several times that nobody "understands him so well" as Jane Stirling.²³ The Scottish pianist herself is almost engaged in regular warfare over Chopin with Mme Sand, arguing not only about his affections, but also about how to reform the world and about socialism: the writer opts for the necessity of radical changes, while Stirling prefers spiritual change in human beings.²⁴

A completely different literary language is used in the novel *Preludes*²⁵ by Peer Hultberg, a Danish literature specialist and prose writer, interested in Polish literature and culture.²⁶ The subject of the book is the childhood and

²⁰ Jane Stirling's role in Chopin's life is regarded as ambiguous; one emphasises not only the Scotswoman's merit in her attention to the keepsake remaining after the artist's death, but also her strange insensibility during his life: "Miss Stirling's lack of consideration is simply inconceivable, [...] while wanting to help the man she loved, she did everything to precipitate his doom" ("Nieogłędność panny Stirling jest wprost niepojęta, [...] chcąc pomóc ukochanemu człowiekowi, robiła wszystko, by przyspieszyć jego zgubę"), Stanisław Błaszczak, 'Chopin w Szkocji' [Chopin in Scotland], *Ruch Muzyczny* 1 (1968), 10.

²¹ "[...] za bardzo do mnie podobna [...]. Jakże się z sobą samym całować. [...] A więc o żonie nie myślę wcale, ale o domu, o Matce, Siostrach". A letter to Wojciech Grzymała of 30 October, 1848. Bronisław E. Sydow (ed.), *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina* [The correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin], ii (Warszawa, 1955), 283-285.

²² "[...] moje Szkotki pokoju mi nie dają, tylko albo po mnie przyjeżdżają, albo mnie po rodzinie wożą [...] – one mnie przez dobroć zaduszają, a ja im tego przez grzeszność nie odmówię", a letter to Wojciech Grzymała of 1 October, 1848. *Ibid.*, 278.

²³ E.g. Richter, *Trzy kobiety*, 277, 280.

²⁴ E.g. *ibid.*, 250-254.

²⁵ Peer Hultberg, *Preludia*, transl. Maria Krzysztofiak (Poznań, 2002), 201.

²⁶ Peer Hultberg (1935-2007), a Slavist, musicologist and psychoanalyst by profession. The main work of his life is the experimental novel *Requiem*. As a literature specialist, he wrote about the literary works of Waclaw Berent and Witold Gombrowicz. Apart from the

youth of Chopin. If we wanted to find a literary model for the author of the novel, we would surely refer to James Joyce and his *Ulysses*. The writing technique of *Preludes* seems to have much to do with Joyce's "stream of consciousness", full of personal confessions presented in the form of long, grammatically complex sentences, full of repetitions, and imitating the natural rhythm of spoken language.

Preludes, in spite of being a small volume (the book has only 200 pages), shows the development of Chopin's genius in an extraordinarily interesting way, as coming from various artistic inspirations.²⁷ A psychological portrait emerges from the first pages, while by the end of the book we are dealing with an extremely gifted student, even a composer exploring his talent. Frycek's [diminutive from Fryderyk] mother relates her early observations as follows:

As soon as you heard some music, don't, don't interrupt me now, I remember, a mother remembers, as soon as Frycek heard some music, he was not two years old yet, I distinctly remember, a mother remembers things like that, you were a baby, you were lying at my breast, I just sang a song and Frycek responded, it was quite different with other children, only Frycek responded [...], if only you saw Frycek's bright eyes, on hearing the first tones tapped by Frycek on the piano, no, we knew, my husband and I, at that moment, an unusual child [...], a mother can feel such things.²⁸

As a teenage artist, already fully aware of his genius, he describes his musical quest in the following way:

I have made some corrections to my fugue but it is still three-voice, I dare not compose a four-voice one, it is something exclusively for Bach, could it not be called a double fugue, some might regard it as counterpoint, but, in a way, it is a theme as well, in a way, a double fugue, I have composed a three-voice double fugue, it's true what Mr Elsner said about it, there were parallel fifths and parallel octaves in it [...].²⁹

novel analysed here, his study *Styl wczesnej prozy fabularnej Wacława Berenta* [The style of Wacław Berent's early fiction] (Wrocław, 1969) was also translated into Polish.

²⁷ One of the reviewers finds, in the novel, the influence of Rainer M. Rilke's poetics. Jan Zieliński, 'Kiedy Hummel' [When Hummel], *Nowe Książki* 11 (2003), 40-41.

²⁸ "Gdy tylko usłyszałeś muzykę, nie, nie przerywaj mi teraz, pamiętam, mama pamięta, gdy tylko Frycek słyszał muzykę, nie miał jeszcze dwóch latek, pamiętam dokładnie, matka pamięta takie rzeczy, byłeś niemowlęciem, leżałeś przy mej piersi, wystarczyło, że zaśpiewałam piosenkę, a już Frycek reagował, z innymi dziećmi było inaczej, tylko Frycek reagował [...], gdyby widział pan promieniejące oczy Frycka, po wysłuchaniu pierwszych dźwięków wystukanych przez Frycka na fortepianie, nie, wiedzieliśmy, mój mąż i ja, w tym momencie, niezwykle dziecko [...], matka przeczuwa coś takiego". Hultberg, *Preludia*, 191.

²⁹ "Poczyniłem poprawki w mej fudze, nadal jednak jest trzygłosowa, czterogłosowej nie odważę się skomponować, to jest coś wyłącznie dla Bacha, czy nie można by jej nazwać

We see the Warsaw world at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the eyes of little Frycek. He is the narrator of most of the brief vignettes that constitute the novel. Some of them are based on episodes from young Chopin's life which are widely known and have often been used in literature (a watch from Angelica Catalani as the prize, the concerts in Warsaw salons, the performance in front of the Tsar's mother). Others, applying the principles of reliable fictionalised biography, present probable events (a concert at Duke Constantine's). One of the author's more interesting ideas is perhaps the description of Frycek's dreams of an international career:

I will play, I will play for kings and emperors, and I will play for the tsar. I will play in Saint Petersburg. I will be the tsar's court pianist. [...] I will add splendour to every ceremony, and silence will reign after every performance. In the evenings, when the tsar is be alone. He will say then, oh, Chopin, come here, call Chopin right now, and I will come, the tsar is alone, I am playing, and he is listening only to me, he reflects and rules when listening to me, he shapes the destiny of millions when listening to me. I can influence him through my music, our small Congress Kingdom of Poland will enlarge its borders to become great Poland, like before, fifty years ago, Poland and Lithuania, from sea to sea [...].³⁰

When reading *Preludes*, we also get to know Chopin's family: his parents and sisters, the maid, and his first teachers: Wojciech Żywny and Józef Elsner, Doctor Malcz as well as the whole group of characters, real or created by the author, where each one is characteristic in their own way. Hultberg impresses the reader with his thorough knowledge of the composer's biography, as well as his familiarity with the social, cultural and political life in Warsaw at the beginning of the Congress Kingdom of Poland. In the composer's childhood the writer identifies not only the initial stages of the musical development of a genius, but also various details, interesting items of news and biographical trifles which convey to us Chopin's personality as that of a sensitive man, full not only of romantic charm, but also of Freudian fears and obsessions. For example, we know about the adult Chopin that – like his father –

podwójną fugą, niektórzy uznaliby może, że to kontrapunkt, ale na swój sposób jest to też temat, na swój sposób, podwójna fuga, skomponowałem trzygłosową podwójną fugę, to prawda, co o niej powiedział pan Elsner, były w niej równoległe kwinty i równoległe oktawy [...]". Ibid., 190.

³⁰ "Będę grał, zagram dla królów i cesarzy, i zagram dla cara. Zagram w Sankt Petersburgu. Będę nadwornym pianistą cara. [...] Będę uświetniał każdą uroczystość, i po każdym występie zapanuje całkowite milczenie. Wieczorami, kiedy car będzie sam. Powie wtedy, o, Chopin, chodź tu, przywołajcie zaraz Chopina, i ja przybędę, car jest sam, gram, a on słucha tylko mnie, zastanawia się i rządzi, słuchając mnie, obmyśla losy milionów, słuchając mnie. Potrafię wpłynąć na niego poprzez moją muzykę, nasze małe królestwo kongresowa poszerzy granice i stanie się wielką Polską, jak kiedyś, przed pięćdziesięciu laty, Polska i Litwa, od morza do morza [...]". Ibid., 199.

he was absolutely terrified of being buried alive while in a state of lethargy. Peer Hultberg finds the source of this obsession in Mikołaj Chopin's story, in which he was supposed to witness the burial of a living man, an acquaintance. Such stories, as if taken from Romantic ballads, full of frenetic dreams or real nightmares, appear in *Preludes* on many occasions.

On closer examination, the original form of the novel turns out to be truly fascinating. Hultberg does not tire the reader with monotonous narration, but he tries, by all means possible, to vary its flow. In the book we find references to other texts, and to literary and musical forms (e.g. psalms and ballads). Chopin is indeed a Romantic composer, therefore the author, in creating his biography, refers to ways of telling stories about the artists from the period which are "time-honoured" in Polish Romanticism. When we read, for example, the fragment: "Child of this mortal vale, where are you coming from? Why is your look so pensive and why are your eyes red with tears?"³¹, we are aware of the undoubted reference to the beginning of the second part of *Nie-Boska komedia* [The Non-Divine Comedy] by Zygmunt Krasiński, where the author, adapting his text to a similar style, says about Orcio: "Why aren't you, my child, riding your wooden horsie [...] What do your blue eyes mean, lowered yet lively full of memories, although you are just a few summers old?"³².

The author of *Preludes*, like every writer presenting a biography of a historical figure in a fictionalised form, was faced with the problem of combining literary truth with faithfulness to the facts accepted by Chopin's biographers. It needs to be said that Hultberg solved the dilemma in a way that, in principle, should not meet any objections from Chopinologists. The writer achieved this result because, among other things, he consistently did not give any dates of the described events. Young Chopin's relations with his family and society are consistent with what we know about them based on the findings of researchers to date; the person especially important for Frycek is his father. Mikołaj Chopin, as presented in *Preludes*, has a considerable influence on his son: he is held in great respect as a wise man and a guide who introduces his child to the world of adults. The father also remains a special person for his son even after the latter grows up, as is confirmed by the correspondence between the composer and his family.

The only fact which surprises the reader familiar with the artist's biography is the information that Chopin was supposed to have a younger brother (by one year) who had the same names, and who died soon after birth³³; I

³¹ "Dziecię śmiertelnego padółu, skąd przybywasz? Czemu wzrok twój taki zatroskany i czemu oczy twe czerwone są od łez?". Ibid., 185.

³² "Czemu, o dziecię, nie hasasz na kijku [...]. Co znaczą twoje błękitne oczy, pochylone, choć żywe, pełne wspomnień, choć ledwo kilka wiosen przeszło ci nad głową?" Zygmunt Krasiński, *Dzieła literackie* [Literary works], i (Warszawa, 1973), 347.

³³ Hultberg, *Preludia*, 11.

must say that, in spite of a thorough search, I have not succeeded in finding the source of this information; it is thus probably the author's invention, intended to dramatise the artist's "idyllic and angelic" childhood. It may also seem strange to the reader that the book does not give a description of young Fryderyk's holidays in the country, which has so often been used in biographical literature. However, one needs to remember that the first of those holidays (probably but not certainly) took place only in 1823, while journeys to Szafarnia were much later (according to Mieczysław Tomaszewski); on this the writer is in accord with other biographers.

Hultberg ends "the preludes" to Chopin's adult life at the moment when, "in two years' time", he is to go to middle school. Frycek began his education away from home – not, indeed, at middle school indeed, but at a secondary school – aged 13, in 1823. Thus the plot of *Preludes* presents only the first eleven years from the artist's biography. The book deals with the subject of Chopin's childhood in prose in an innovative way. This allows us to look again and at Chopin's biography, seemingly so well-known, and always notice something new, something that is close to the readers of the generation which is celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the composer's birth.

A great curiosity in the literature based on Chopin's biography and his artistic activity is the novel *The Chopin Manuscript*³⁴, clearly written for the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the composer's birth. We read on its cover that it is "a page-turner, full of riddles and crimes" as well as "a brilliant thriller by fifteen authors"³⁵. One can learn from the minireview on the cover "flap" that the originator of the novel was Jeffery Deaver, who "thought up the characters and constructed the plot"³⁶, while the other authors wrote one chapter each.

The characters of the novel, as befits a thriller, are sharply polarised: the good guys are represented by Harold Middleton, who in the past hunted down war criminals, and in the novel fights evil alone, like a sheriff; Józef Pađło – a Warsaw police inspector; and, an FBI agent, M.T. Connolly, who is in love with the inspector (and is loved in return).³⁷ The dark side includes a mysterious Faust and Vukasin, who carries out his orders. Between these extremes

³⁴ Jeffery Deaver, Lisa Scottoline, Lee Child, Joseph Finder, David Hewson, Peter Spiegelman, S.J. Rozan, Erica Spindler, John Ramsey Miller, James Grady, P.J. Parrish, Jim Fusilli, David Corbett, John Gilstrap, Ralph Pezzullo, *Manuskrypt Chopina*, transl. Łukasz Praski (Warszawa, 2009) [Eng. orig. *The Chopin Manuscript*].

³⁵ Most authors of the novel (Deaver, Scottoline, Child, Finder, Hewson, Spindler, Grady, Fusilli, Gilstrap), are well known in Poland for other literary works of similar, sensational nature.

³⁶ Since the titles of consecutive chapters of the book are the first names and surnames of the authors, we learn that Deaver wrote the first chapter and the last two.

³⁷ M.T. Connolly in the novel admittedly has a first name (Marion) but, for some reason she does not like it, so her friends always call her by her initials.

there are a dozen or so characters, mainly unaware of the mechanisms governing the main conflict, who mostly become victims of the string of crimes which fill up the pages of the book. Frequent changes of location are also characteristic of the literary genre – the plot moves between Cracow, Warsaw, Rome, Namibia and a number of locations in the United States.

Chopin's role in the novel is purely formal, it is well illustrated by a dialogue between two characters:

"I can at least appreciate the culture", said the FBI agent.

"Have you ever heard anything of Chopin, Emmett?"

"Sure."

"What did he write?"

"That piece."

"This one?"

"You know, this well-known one."

Middleton smiled, and Kalmbach changed the subject.³⁸

The historical framework for the events of the novel is the conflict in the former Yugoslavia which started at the end of the twentieth century. Among the characters of *The Chopin Manuscript*, we find persons, organisations and events that made news: Milošević, Rugova, UÇK [Kosovo Liberation Army], the Srebrenica massacre, the September 11th terrorist attacks. The plot of the novel focuses on the search for the *Chopin manuscript* of the title, which contains an unknown sonata for piano and chamber orchestra. To make things more intriguing, the manuscript is supposed to include a formula for making an agent which would make it possible to carry out a full-scale attack exceeding by far all the known tragedies caused by terrorist groups so far. The origin of the formula in the manuscript is not clear (after all, Chopin himself could not have placed it there); however at the end of the novel the manuscript is found and the world première of the miraculously discovered composition is to take place in Washington, in an atmosphere characteristic of big events of popular culture:

The crowd of the audience began to gather long before the concert, and the queue extended far behind the construction site located near James Madison Hall. A lot

³⁸ " – Ja przynajmniej potrafię docenić kulturę – oznajmił agent FBI.

– Słyszałeś kiedyś coś Chopina, Emmett?

– Pewnie.

– Co napisał?

– Ten kawałek.

– Taki?

– No wiesz, ten znany.

Middleton uśmiechnął się, a Kalmbach zmienił temat". Deaver (et al.), *Manuskrypt Chopina*, 185.

of people did not have tickets, counting on ticket touts. But it was the world premiere of Chopin, not a Redskins pre-season match, so there were no tickets.³⁹

To keep up the suspense, the authors of the novel make the terrorists prepare the attack during the concert, where Chopin's music performs the function of ... a detonator. A microphone placed under the piano is to catch the characteristic sequence of tones and transfer the signal to a computer which will cause the explosion of tanks containing toxic gas. Of course, thanks to Middleton and the FBI officers, the attempt is thwarted, the main perpetrator is shot, his helpers are arrested, and good can now triumph.

The literary works presented above show various applications of the motif of Chopin and his works. Richter's novel and *The Chopin Manuscript* represent popular productions, intended for a reader seeking scandal and purely emotional impressions in literature. One might say that, in these books, the composer is only a tool for the purpose of giving readers the illusion of knowing the artist's biography (as in the case of Richter's book) or to arouse their interest in a sensational plot which, in fact, has nothing to do with the brilliant artist (it seems that, in the case of the thriller by fifteen authors, any name of a musical genius could replace Chopin). *Lucrezia Floriani*, in spite of the objections to the literary character discussed earlier, deserves to be valued much more highly. Prince Karol, in a way an "abstract" from Chopin's biography, can be regarded as an interesting, although not very original, example of a particular variety of the Romantic hero (even taking George Sand's oeuvre into account).

Preludes by Hultberg is undoubtedly the most interesting novel as a literary work. Apart from the originality of the literary form, the author of the novel is the only one to have tackled the subject of the music, trying to present, in prose, what should be the essence of every literary work on Fryderyk Chopin, and what was achieved at a masterly level only by Cyprian Kamil Norwid in *Fortepian Chopina* [Chopin's Piano].

Translated by Zdzisław Bernat

³⁹ "Tłum widzów zaczął się zbierać na długo przed koncertem, a kolejka ciągnęła się daleko za budowę znajdującą się obok Sali Jamesa Madisona. Wiele osób nie miało biletów, licząc na koników. Ale to była światowa premiera Chopina, nie przedsezonowy mecz Redskinsów, więc biletów nie było". Ibid., 184.