

POLISH FOLK MUSIC AND CHOPIN'S MAZURKAS

by Jan Gorbaty

The traditional characteristics that make up Polish music were known in Europe for a long time; however, they reached their highest level of expression and development in the works of Frederic Chopin.

Since his early childhood, the traditions of the Polish national culture captivated Chopin. This captivation later gave birth to a new tradition, one that will affect the Polish musical culture for generations to come. This was accomplished through Chopin's unique personal and original style, and a craftsmanship equal to that of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. As for his inspiration, it was taken from the music and customs of Polish peasants as well as aristocrats. His work captures all the peculiar characteristics of that music's rhythm, melody and harmony. From an abundant variety of Polish dances, it was the polonaise, and even to a higher degree, the mazurkas that caught his attention. Consequently, his first composition was a polonaise, and his last a mazurka.

Chopin loved the Polish people, their traditions and history, and this sentiment shaped his music which reflects part of the Polish history. These were difficult times for Poland which was partitioned by three powerful neighbors: Russia, Prussia and Austria. Chopin's music expresses the rebellion, anger, frustrations and hopes of the Poland of his days. Indeed, he was expressing the feelings of his generation, although, on the other hand, several of his compositions express the carefree joy of his early youth.

Emotionally, Chopin was very much a man of his time and of his native land. In musical terms, however, he transcended his era and the borders of his country. His revolutionary innovations and changes in harmony, impressionism, color, expression and rubato were far ahead of his time, and his influence on future composers transpires in their creations. Certain compositional techniques found later in the work of many composers were actually originated by Chopin. Especially in the polonaise and mazurkas he created works of pianistic art which are heralded to this day in the concert halls of the world.

Born in Zelazowa Wola near the Warsaw, Chopin spent half of his life among the small nobility and peasants of two neighboring provinces Mazowsze (Mazovia) and Kujawy (Kuiavia). The inhabitants of Mazovia are called Mazurs: hence the name of their native dance-mazur, or, diminutively, mazurek--which the French called the mazurka. These dances, with their specific rhythm and steps, are sung as well as danced. Thus, the accompaniment for the dance was either vocal, with a text, or instrumental, or both. The instruments were mainly the shepherd's reed flute, violin and dudka-a variety of bagpipe, that produced one or two drones either a tonic note, or tonic and dominant notes.

In general, the form of the original folk mazurka consists of two or four parts of six or eight measures, each part being repeated. These are in either $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{8}$ time (Chopin's mazurkas are all in $\frac{3}{4}$ time.) The melodies of these dances are mostly based on church modes, especially the Ludian with sharpened fourth degree. Another atypical feature of the Polish folk music is a mixture of major and minor modes, also found in Chopin's mazurkas, and the so-called "Polish mode"-one of the oldest European scales consisting of the six DFGABC, similar to the Dorian mode.

One of the most important sources of information about folk dances and songs in

Poland is a monumental work put together by Henryk Oskar Kolberg, a Polish composer and ethnomusicologist contemporary of Chopin. Out of the 12,690 pieces of music and other folklore items that he collected, some were used by Chopin. It is a distinct possibility, however, that many of the melodies that have inspired Chopin had never been recorded, nor are they remembered today.

The original folk mazurka is a combination of three dances: a slow kujawiak, a moderate mazur, and a faster oberek or obertas. The dances differ in character, tempo, rhythm and accentuation, and they were usually performed in sequence as a unit called a "round dance" (okragly). In the province of Kujawy, the dance would usually start as a walking dance (chodzony), a polonaise-like, slow strut, with the rhythm accentuated by feet-stomping, which is never done in the polonaise. A little slower part would follow, accompanied by singing (ksebka), and then an even slower variety of kujawiak. Then the tempo would accelerate with a kujawiak proper (odsibka). At this point, the dancers, men and women, place their hands on each other's hips and spin - once clockwise and once counter-clockwise. As the tempo increases, the dancers go into a fast whirl called mazur or obertas in Kujawy, and oberek in Mazowsze. Originally, the oberek was a vivacious coda of mazur, and the order of dances might be reversed: oberek-kujawiak-mazur.

The mazur is known for its improvisatory character. It allows for new steps and figures, and is usually danced by a minimum of four, and up to a dozen and more couples. The dancers maintain an erect posture and their movements are reminiscent of those of a horse rider. They stamp their feet in an imitation of the sound of horse hoofs. One of the figures has a man genuflect on one knee and holds the female partner's hand as she whirls around him.

The mazur has a varied rhythmic structure with frequent dotted rhythm and irregular accents which can fall on any beat, usually on weak beats. Its melody has frequent leaps and, at the end of a phrase, an accented note on the second, or the first and second beat. It is interesting to note that Chopin uses the second and third beat. One of the most significant features of the Polish folk music, its very soul as it was, is its rubato. The term originates from the Italian rubare - to rob or steal - referring to "stolen" tempo: some notes are arbitrarily shortened, some lengthened by the performer. It is a free method of playing that deviates from the strict tempo requirements without losing the basic tempo. Chopin or his pupils did not leave a recorded explanation or a definition of the rubato. It is known that he advised his pupils to listen to singers for a "feel" of the rubato; most likely, he referred to the traditions Bel Canto whereas Italian singers used the rubato for expression. No definite rules are involved as the rubato requires musical intuition. But let us return to our discussion of the three basic components of the mazurka.

The kujawiak has a sentimental, melancholic melody. Its rhythmic patterns are varied; generally, the first beat has a stress rather than an accent, as the latter would suggest a waltz. It has two mazur symmetrical, four-measure phrases, and it is played with a great deal of rubato, frequently ending on the dominant. The four-measure phrase is more often found in the style of the kujawiak than the mazur. According to one theory, the strongest accent usually falls on the second beat of the fourth measure of a phrase; there is an alteration on the fourth and seventh degree of a scale, and a mixture of double and triple units.

The oberek, or obertas, is the fastest dance - more spirited than the mazur, generally void of ornaments or dotted rhythm. The accent usually falls on the second

beat of the eight measure, or as some theorists imply, on the third beat in the second measure, which is the accentuation that Chopin uses in his mazurkas (see Op. 24, No. 4).

The oberek's characteristic accents, fast tempo and its repetitive figurative melody, are easy to recognize - easier than the mazur or the kujawiak. The dancers often increase the tempo to a vertiginous whirl - this type of oberek is called the "mill" or "windmill" - while the melody acquires repeated figurations characteristic of a wave-motion (see Op. 50, No. 3, mea. 45).

Although most of Chopin's mazurkas combine the three dances discussed, they are played in the tempo of only one of them (ex., Op. 24, No. 4). Each piece contains contrasting sections, which are parallel to the remaining two dances in rhythmic foundation, if not in the tempo. We can also find there the waltz element common to many of Chopin's compositions (ex., Op. 50, No. 3). Interestingly, mixtures of waltz and mazurka elements are found in Polish dances and songs even before Chopin's time.

As a boy of fifteen, in a letter to his parents, Chopin described, a peasant dance he saw. This is what he wrote: "They started with leaps, waltz and oberek."

Most of Chopin's mazurkas were created out of his recollections and impressions of the character, color, melody and rhythm, and, of course, the tempo rubato so significant to the Polish soul. It is a folklore that is very hard to categorize. As Tadeusz Strumillo, a Polish musicologist, points out, "even the oldest sources show us that it was extremely difficult to differentiate between the mazur and its relatives: the oberek and the kujawiak." The same melody that is played in two-quarter time in one province of Poland, may be played in three-quarter time in another.

According to F.W. Maarks, Chopin uses in his mazurkas particular rhythmic cells and tempos of each of the three basic dances in varying combinations (see Op. 6, No. 1). Although there are consistent traces of the mazur, oberek, or kujawiak in all the mazurkas, none of them can be fully identified with any one of these dances. Rather, there are indications of the tempo, mood, and character—a contrast obtained by varying the rhythmic cells. Each section often has a mixture of all the three types of basic dances (ex., Op. 41, No. 1).

Sometimes it is virtually impossible to identify a mazurka, or even its section, as a mazur, kujawiak, or oberek. Even a minute analysis of original folk mazurkas does not provide parallels of rhythmic substructure to Chopin's mazurkas or their parts. According to Paul Hamburger, most of Chopin's dances cannot be traced to a single, definite folk model. Rather, they arise from a composite recollection of certain types of melody and rhythm, which is then given an artistically valid expression in the composition. In this respect, Chopin's "Polishness" is rather like Dvorak's "Czechness" and Bloch's "Jewishness". All three composers distilled their national flavors from a raw material that is not strictly folkloric, as opposed to those who start off with genuine, unadulterated folklore—e.g. Bartok, Vaughan Williams, or composers of the Spanish national school.

Three different theories claim the truth as to Chopin's use of the Polish folklore. According to Schimmerling, "the mazurkas are composed of the pure mazur section plus sections of an oberek and a kujawiak." Lichtentritt maintains that "the whole mazurka represents only one of the three types of mazurkas." And Hedley insists that the folk mazurkas were nothing more than a mild stimulus to Chopin. There may be a bit of truth in every one of these theories, but most musicians today, right or

wrong, tend to agree with Hedley. Chopin called his mazurkas "Little Pictures", meaning visualizations of the folk dances that inspired them. But later, away from Poland, they became a symbol of his beloved homeland. In the late mazurkas, which are close in character to the kujawiak, we find an intense longing and nostalgia for his native land.

Whatever the theories, there is no doubt that Chopin sought his inspiration in the Polish folklore, and that it had a profound influence on his work. His genius allowed him to incorporate the most important characteristics of the folk music in his art. The understanding of this fact is of particular importance to the interpreters of Chopin's mazurkas and polonaises. Analysis of compositions is, of course, of great importance to the pianist's intellectual work. But it is the comprehension of the composer's inspirational experience that helps develop the player's musical intuition. And it is the intuition that, in the final analysis, supersedes everything else.

About an Author

*Late **Prof. Jan Gorbaty**, a former faculty member of Rutgers University, New York University and Colleges of the City University of New York, and concert pianist, was the Founding President of the Greater New York Council and a long time Vice President of the Chopin Foundation of the U.S. He was awarded the Cavalier Cross of Merit of the Republic of Poland, signed by President Lech Walesa, for popularization of Polish music.*