

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Frédéric Chopin

Born March 1, 1810, Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, Poland.

Died October 17, 1849, Paris, France.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11

Chopin composed this concerto in 1830 and was the soloist in the first performance, on October 11 of that year in Warsaw. The orchestra consists of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-nine minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Chopin's First Piano Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on February 17 and 18, 1899, with Emil Sauer as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting.

In September 1831, Chopin arrived in Paris, the home of Berlioz, Rossini, and Liszt; writers Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo; and painters Jean-Baptiste Corot and Eugène Delacroix. He entered the company of giants and quietly took the city by storm.

Few composers have hit their stride so early. Chopin was already something of a celebrity when he moved to Paris at the age of twenty-one, leaving behind his native Poland and his baptismal name, Fryderyk Franciszek (he quickly switched to Frédéric). Three months after Chopin arrived, Robert Schumann wrote a review of the young composer's newly published variations on "Là ci darem la mano" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* that included the now-famous line, "Hats off, gentlemen—a genius!" Chopin had not yet played a single note for the Parisian public.

Chopin taught himself how to play the piano as a small boy. He made up his own music almost at once, quickly recognizing the intimate relationship between improvising and composing. At the time he was seven, Chopin's first teacher wrote down one of his improvisations, a polonaise, and had it published. His next teacher, Józef Elsner, showed him how to notate on paper the music he invented at the keyboard; op. 1, a rondo for solo piano, was published in June 1825.

When Chopin gave the premiere of his F minor piano concerto—the one known as no. 2, although it was written before the E minor concerto—in the first public concert of his own music in Warsaw, on March 17, 1830, he was immediately acclaimed as a national hero. His first appearance in Paris, on February 26, 1832, again performing this concerto, drew the city's most discriminating musicians—both Liszt and Mendelssohn attended and were full of praise.

Chopin's reputation as a pianist is based on just thirty or forty concerts. Today he would be a public relations nightmare: he disdained all the trappings of the concert world; he saw no need for posters or program books, and he disliked playing to large crowds and in big concert halls. Once he settled in Paris, Chopin rarely performed in public more than twice a year; despite—or perhaps because of that—his fame and fortune only seemed to grow. It's difficult to imagine the impact of Chopin's piano playing from the comments that were written at the time, but it's clear that his way of playing, with its extraordinary sensitivity to touch and color, delicately shaded dynamics, and inimitable tempo fluctuations, was unique.

"Invention came to his piano, sudden, complete, sublime," wrote George Sand, the woman whose importance as a writer is now dwarfed by her celebrated cross-dressing and by her intense relationship with the composer. Chopin always drew a very fine line between playing and composing. Karl Flitsch, however, noted one crucial distinction:

The other day I heard Chopin improvise at George Sand's house. It is marvelous to hear Chopin compose in this way: his inspiration is so immediate and complete that he plays without hesitation as if it could not be otherwise. But when it comes to writing it down and recapturing the original thought in all its details, he spends days of nervous strain and almost terrible despair.

Of all the developments in music after Beethoven, none is more unlikely than Chopin's success. Within a decade of Beethoven's death, Chopin made a major international career writing mostly small-scale piano pieces. (Every one of his compositions includes the piano. He is unique among major composers; even Liszt, the other outstanding pianist-composer of the nineteenth century, eventually wrote significant orchestral and choral music.) Chopin never thought of composing a symphony, and only in his two piano concertos did he attempt to write for orchestra in the conventional large forms. And yet his impact on the composers of the day and his influence on the music of the future is incalculable.

Chopin's two piano concertos were composed, unapologetically, as showcases for a traveling virtuoso. Both are youthful works, characterized by piano writing of such imagination and beauty that Chopin's inexperience writing for the orchestra is immaterial. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to explain how these two works, written when he was just nineteen and twenty (first the one in F minor, then the E minor score that is played this evening) reveal such emotional depth and range.

Chopin didn't set out to make something new of standard concerto form; both inexperience and a lifelong disinterest in symphonic thought stood in his way. His models were the recent concertos by Johann Nepomuk Hummel—popular, effective, utterly workmanlike scores that were, themselves, updated knock-offs of Mozart's concertos. For a great innovator, Chopin was a man of surprisingly conservative tastes. The only composers he admired without reservation were Mozart and Bach (before a concert he often would play through *The Well-Tempered Clavier*). He disliked most contemporary music: he had no use for Berlioz or Liszt, and he once said that Schumann's *Carnaval*, which includes an affectionate parody of Chopin's style, was not music at all. Although the great painter Delacroix was arguably his best friend, Chopin nonetheless preferred the more traditional work of David and Ingres.

Chopin's own boldness and daring were apparent only when he turned to the keyboard. In the first movement of the E minor concerto, the music comes to life with the entrance of the piano. Suddenly, the same material that sounded unexceptional and a tad dutiful when played by the orchestra seems distinctive, poetic, and endlessly inventive. In Chopin's exquisite hands, the concerto is a monologue; it has little of the chamber-music intimacy between solo and ensemble that characterizes Mozart's works or the heroic dialogue between forces in Beethoven's. The orchestra is master of ceremonies, accompanist, and indispensable partner—introducing material, lending color and support—but the piano commands center stage. In passage after passage, Chopin writes music for it that is brilliant, virtuosic, and richly ornamented, yet never trivial. The first movement is grand and eloquent. The second, with muted strings, is one of Chopin's early nocturnes, without a single dramatic outburst to disturb its glossy, serene surface. This is Chopin at his most operatic, spinning a seamless, highly decorated, bel canto melody over the merest thread of accompaniment. The finale is a polka of sorts, and as always with the dances Chopin remembered from his youth, it brings out the most robust and spirited side of his quiet genius.

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