

## Chopin's Polonaise: Classic and National Influences

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**Abstract:** The substantial contribution that Chopin brings to the genre of the polonaise is the transformation of a gallant dance, with conventional harmony, into a veritable heroic song with innovative harmonies. Thanks to a scholarly transformation of a folk motif, Chopin manages to introduce the folklore in his important works, as the national conscience asked artists to return to the popular sources of inspiration to express the desire for freedom of a people.

Chopin is not himself an inventor in the melody, but he knew like no other to chisel away melodic-harmonic structures and to merge the means of expression so masterfully that his music, often laconic, exudes a breath taking expressiveness. Chopin's rhythmic is the result of the fusion between the traditional rhythmic patterns of dance genres and the romantic conception of an asymmetrical, fluid rhythm.

He, very rarely, appeals to polyphony, melodic overlapping, meant to illustrate the emotional development across multiple plans. Instead, the harmony, often chromatic, has an especially important role in setting up the images, in painting the internal tumult and in evoking the tragic feelings.

Chopin, as Liszt, combined the national material with the most advanced techniques of contemporary European music, merging modernism with nationalism. For many Polish of the nineteenth century who listened to Chopin's music, this represented the national struggle, helping to cement the Polish spirit in a time when the country had no political status. Like many other romantic categories, nationalism can be applied to Chopin's life and work. His music had and still has nationalism association for some listeners. However, should be considered the artist's intentions, words and actions to reveal a more complete picture of his life and his place in the historical context.

Chopin composed his first Polonaise at the age of seven years, and enhanced very much his style during his creative career. As in "Nocturne", Chopin perfected the existing form, also surpassing those who had initiated it: Oginski and Kurpinski. The nationalist character reveals in all genres that Chopin composed; it is only natural that this particular character appears more evident in those genres that arose from national dances – Polonaise and Mazurkas. It is often said that Chopin's creation starts with the Polonaises and ends with Mazurkas, which is just outlining the nationalist aspect of his work.

Chopin's Polonaises created at maturity have a new form, becoming true epic poems that revive images of the brilliant past of Poland; the facts are visions full of lyrical pathos from which results the suffering for the country's tumultuous history. Although they have in common the great and narrative tone, Chopin Polonaises are extremely varied and full of plasticity, characterized by greatness and dramatism.

The Chopin's maturity process as a composer, from youthful lyricism of his music to virtuosity and salon elegance, to humour and folk orientation, and finally, to the drama and pathos of being a national composer with prophetic vision leads him to the transcendence (Polonaise - Fantasie,

Barcarolle, and final Mazurka). Those who have studied the evolution of Chopin's style surprisingly find that this occurs regardless of the form of his musical compositions. Its evolution can be seen in the Sonatas, Polonaises and Mazurkas from the same period.

### 1. Introduction

The substantial contribution that Chopin brings to the genre of the polonaise is the transformation of a gallant dance, with conventional harmony, into a veritable heroic song with innovative harmonies. Thanks to a scholarly transformation of a folk motif, Chopin manages to introduce the folklore in his important works, as national conscience asked artists to return to the popular sources of inspiration to express the desire for freedom of a people.

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He, very rarely appeals to polyphony, melodic overlapping, meant to illustrate the emotional development across multiple plans. Instead, the harmony, often chromatic, has an especially important role in setting up the images, in painting the intern tumult and in evoking the tragic feelings. Preoccupied with romantic harmony, Ernst Kurth considered Chopin's work the peak point and the crisis of the romantic language harmony together with Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The romantic aesthetics of the nineteenth century conceived the artistic creation as a process deeply linked with the experience of nature and transcendence. Historians often interpreted history only by using these categories. [1] In what concerns Chopin, his contemporaries perceived him as a nationalist composer. This interpretation is supported by the unique

political events of the period during which Chopin arrived in Paris, while the French have turned on oppression of Poles. Romantic inclination for exoticism and exaggeration leads to great writing and extreme exclamations about the effect of Chopin's music meant to stir up Polish patriotism.

Carl Dahlhaus [2] outlined many elements that may interact in the complex construction of nationalism, such as the "wandering" of local musical patterns through Europe, the evocative power of titles, the composer's intentions, the historical context of reception, the political use of the artistic excellence of a composer.

### 2. The Nationalism in Chopin's Polonaises

The Polonaises, Mazurkas and other works of Chopin with Polish historical associations were examined carefully in terms of nationalism. However, in the Polonaises, Chopin's intentions do not seem to indicate a strong nationalist intention. He wrote only seventeen Polonaises during his life and allowed only a total of six to be published. Chopin incorporates the Polonaises in many other genres, such further, dissociating Polish nationalism. Preludes are a perfect example. In these works can be seen, both in texture and in harmonic progression and composition techniques, the German Baroque influence. The audience loses any association that would connect the Polonaise with Chopin's contemporary Polish aristocracy. Across Europe, many composers from Bach's time used the Polonaise in their compositions, whether they were German, French or English. For these same reasons, the characteristic polonaise rhythm has not aroused Polish nationalist thoughts for the public from the early nineteenth century. Chopin was building a name for himself as a young pianist in his own country. But, for the rest of his life, Chopin

never returned to the works with Polish influences. [3] They represent the life of a young Polish artist using his ethnic heritage as a resource for its artistic creativity. Both piano concertos used national dances as a basis for the last movement, but this technique is often found in this genre. The public admired these valuable works for their musical qualities, but not for their nationalism; If their popularity due something to the Polish style, this is restricted to the last movement and is only a small part of their success. Programmatic music and opera were also powerful vehicles for the expression of nationalism. Chopin never used them and, in different occasions, he has avoided them, even when he was strongly encouraged by his mentors to use them. When Mickiewicz's poems have been associated with each of the four Ballads, Chopin took steps to stop this association. Directly quoting folk songs is another common way of expressing nationalism. Chopin used this method rarely and with one exception, he incorporated folk melodies of his youth. In conclusion, Chopin was called and acclaimed as a great Polish composer.

Like many other romantic categories, nationalist can be applied to Chopin's life and work. His music had and still has nationalist association for some listeners. However, should be considered the artist's intentions, words and actions to reveal a more complete picture of his life and his place in the historical context. Another feature that might be applied to Chopin is that of a diplomat. He sang for kings, queens and aristocrats regardless of nationality, political conviction, and relations with him or with loved ones. Thus, also in his music, nationalistic characteristics or ethnic identity or traditional music or dances served a single purpose: to elevate his own art.

### **3. The reception of Chopin's music in 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Chopin, as Liszt, combined the national material with the most advanced techniques of

contemporary European music, merging modernism with nationalism. For many Polish of the nineteenth century who listened to Chopin's music, this represented the national struggle, helping to cement the Polish spirit in a time when the country had no political status.

However, his music did not immediately influence Polish composers. In the difficult years that followed the insurrection, musical life in Poland was conservative and insular and the music that Poles needed was less that of Chopin and rather that of Moniuszko. The truth is that very few Polish composers of the late nineteenth century were able to agree with what Chopin had left them. Only in the early works of the Chopin's successor, Karol Szymanowski, who lived in the early twentieth century, we find entirely Chopin's legacy. [4] It is indeed questionable why the Chopin's legacy was not used by the Poles but rather by the Russians. Here, its impact is considerable and inspiring for the formation of the radical nationalist style like that of Balakirev's. From this point of view, Chopin can be seen as a messenger of the future, as one of the forerunners of a development that culminated with the radical changes of the musical language in the first part of the twentieth century.

### **4. The evolution of the Polonaise in Chopin's creation**

Chopin composed his first Polonaise at the age of seven years, and enhanced very much his style during his creative career. As in Nocturne, Chopin perfected existing form, also surpassing those who had initiated it: Oginski and Kurpinski. The nationalist character reveals in all genres that Chopin composed; it is only natural that this particular character appears more evident in those genres that arose from national dances – Polonaise, Mazurkas. It is often said that Chopin's creation starts with the Polonaises and ends with Mazurkas, which is just outlining the nationalist aspect of his work. Chopin's Polonaises starts with the first piece composed in 1818 and dedicated to his

godmother, Countess Skarbek. The following Polonaise created will be dedicated to beloved persons, a total of nine, of which only some of the last will appear in the creation list: op.71 No. 1. 2. 3. It cannot be overlooked neither Polonaise in C for cello and piano, composed at 19 years, nor the attempt to create a Polonaise with an orchestra accompaniment, Grande Polonaise brillante in E flat major, op. 22, preceded by an Andante spianato in G major .

Chopin's Polonaises created at maturity have a new form, becoming true epic poems that revive images of the brilliant past of Poland; the facts are visions full of lyrical pathos from which results the sufferance for the country's tumultuous history. Although they have in common the great and narrative tone, Chopin Polonaises are extremely varied and full of plasticity, characterized by greatness and dramatism. [5]

Polonaise is an old Polish dance that has undergone many transformations over time, from the simplicity of folk dance to a solemnity of the court dance, slowly executed in a grave and majestic manner in front of the King. It is the form in which is known in France of the sixteenth century by the nobles who were part of the Henry III of Valois retinue, who, before becoming king of France, was elected King of Poland. At this stage, the Polonaise loses the initially dancing character, turning into a solemn dance, procession type, with an ABA scheme. Specific rhythm, harmony and melody had no folk connotations. We find compositions inspired by the old Polish dance since Baroque, met in creations of G. Fr. Handel, J.S. Bach and W. Fr. Bach, but we cannot know whether Chopin knew them or not. Researchers mention his connection with Polonaises that less famous composers created in the era of Oginski, Kuprinski, Elsner - predecessors and direct precursors of Chopin. But higher resonance seems to have had on him a page created by W. A. Mozart - Sonata Polonaise-Rondo in D major.

Grande Polonaise in E flat major op.21, and Polacca Brilliant in E major op.72 by CM von Weber obviously contributed to the evolution of the romantic genre, the harmonic treatment, shine and piano style, but we do not know if Chopin knew about any of them.

In the hands of Chopin, Polonaise has taken some of the finesse of Sonata and Sonatina from early classical piano. On the other hand, the Polonaises from Franciszek Lessel and Mary Szymanowska attributed to this dance some virtuoso manner belonging to composers such as Hummel, Field and Weber.

These stylistic influences on a simple dance forms was the surface of a much deeper Polish music that will make the transition from Iluminism to Romanticism. There is a general trend in music history to see Slavonic music from the early nineteenth century as having a weak relationship with Western Europe. At that time Polish composers seemed to closely follow Western European music of yesterday, especially in the composition of the symphony or chamber music. Undoubtedly, the music of Mozart, Haydn and even Beethoven were known in Warsaw at the time when Chopin was forming and there are many signs as the Poles were sensitive regarding the uniqueness of their achievements. However, neither the symphonic art copied from west nor the severity church cantata had a huge impact on the young Chopin. Warsaw audience was more receptive to concerts bravely composed by virtuosos such as Hummel, Field and Weber or miniature works written for piano salon music. It can be said that this was an international trend, found also at Polish composers, including Chopin. Only in rondo, variations and concerts we can find a perfect Polish Brilliance style, but bravely parts of violinists like Jozef Karol Lipinski or the pianist-composer Franciszek Lessel have influenced to some extent Chopin's work.

Another Polish fingerprint left on Chopin's music composed during the period when he lived in Warsaw was going to reveal a range of heterogeneous styles: Baroque cantatas for the

church composed by Jacob Golabek, classical symphonies and chamber music by Elsner, bravery and solo concerts Lessel and Jozef Desczynski, miniatures composed by Szymanowski, Kurpinski's Italianate works, etc. Ironically, on this range of styles, the concept of Polish national idiom was very popular in the early nineteenth century, not only in treaties discussed by Waclaw Sierakowski or by Elsner but also in local newspapers. For clear political reasons, Polish composers were encouraged to write music, saying the Polish identity. In practice, however, the spirit of Polish music has not progressed too far and was only used as an option of a subject or modal and rhythmic introductions, feature derived from the Polonaise, Mazurka and Krakowiak. [6]

National style considerations played a minor role in influencing Chopin as a composer. From the beginning, Chopin did not present a great interest for symphonic compositions, chamber and church music. Chopin was more attracted by the Italian opera, chamber music or virtuoso performances.

You can see some influences in the Polonaise in G minor presented to Countess Skarbek in 1817. Waclaw Pozniak [7] has demonstrated similarities between Polonaise in B major and Polonaises of Oginski and Jozef Chominski demonstrated similar links between early Polonaise in G minor and in F minor composed by Elsner. As form, he adopts Oginski's model with both main sections and the trio governed by simple exposures and responses in conventional articulated periods. Technically, the pieces are not exigent, with a simple texture, as well as harmonies. It is also obvious that the young composer explored in a simple way the potential of his environment, trying textures and contrasting registers and testing a variety of accompaniment patterns. Right from the beginning, his creativity was inseparable from physical limitations and potentialities of the piano.

Four years separate the two works composed in 1817 by the following - Polonaise in B

major, which provides the earliest signature of Chopin, indications of dynamics, phrasing and tempo. He dedicated it to his teacher Zywny, whose mark is clear in both this Polonaise and in that in G minor. They are no longer dancing parts but works for the salon. Sophisticated Polonaise in G minor is remarkable for a composer so young. Right from the beginning, the work marks a distinct advance upon the three previous Polonaises. Even a look at the left hand is enough to demonstrate the new technique. Here, for the first time, the classic accompaniment model paves the way for extensive and differentiated characteristic pattern with hints of melody hidden in his left hand that Chopin would later make his own style.

Polonaises in A major and in G sharp minor are more viable than most Polonaises composed by Chopin's predecessors compatriots. Polish writers found that the way they are built and nature themes passages from the Chopin's works, clearly indicates, however, that he was influenced by several factors. In particular, some of the texture of his writing suggests striking parallels with the music of Hummel and Weber, none of whom were Polonaises foreign. In one of the most popular of Hummel's songs, appeared in no less than 38 editions, we find a rondo 'a la polacca' La Bella Capricciosa op 55, and we can discover some of the similarities between this piece and Chopin's Polonaise in A flat major. However, there are similarities between Grande Polonaise Op 21 composed by Weber's and the Polonaise in G sharp minor composed by Chopin.

These similarities do not mean that Chopin used the works of Weber and Hummel as some direct models. They serve to demonstrate the assimilation of characteristic gestures of the virtuoso style that is gaining more and more ground in piano literature from the early nineteenth century. This Polonaise is primarily an essay of virtuosity and ornamentation, two concepts that were closely linked in the piano concerts in the early nineteenth century,

especially the music of his mentor, Hummel. In addition, like Hummel, Chopin was already a professional of improvisation, a factor that had a significant impact on his compositional style.

### 5. Innovation in Chopin's Polonaise

Chopin composed nine Polonaises before leaving Poland. Only later, in France, his genius matured. The seven future examples are exciting through the brilliance and innovation of their piano. Polonaises op 26 were composed between 1834 and 1835 and were dedicated to his friend J. Dessauer. The beginning of this song is a tragic and grandiose proclamation that changes quickly to a reach lyrical theme. An indecisive quality work that shows the two main characters: a furious, frenetic Allegro appassionato and a passionate Meno Mosso, which according to Huneker "is gentle enough to draw a princess". [8] Left hand melody creates a strange effect, and can present a challenge for pianists.

Polonaise in E flat minor op. 26, no. 2 is a masterpiece of great colour and diversity. Start Maestoso thrilling sets the mood for the most spectacular flash of vitality. Meno Mosso is a beautiful choral statement. This Polonaise is sometimes referred to as Siberian uprising. It is also said to be one of the Chopin's most realistic compositions.

Polonaise Op 40, No. 1 was composed in 1838 and was dedicated to his friend Jules Fontana. This paper is very popular. It is a majestic explosion of energy: Allegro con brio creates a mood of vibrant glory.

Concerning Polonaise in C minor, Op 40, No. 2, Anton Rubinstein saw in this paper a bleak picture of the fall of Poland, while Polonaise in A major was a portrait of its former greatness. Acquiring a suitable tonal quality of the song on the left hand octave can create challenges for pianists and, unfortunately, this work is rarely sung.

According to Liszt, Polonaise in F sharp minor op. 44 is the "sinister hour that precedes a hurricane" [9] while John Ogdon sees in

it "Goya intensity". His songs are very powerful and are presented in octaves, while the left hand jumps between registers rather frenetic. The middle section is a mazurka and it is quite comforting, as it is introduced in a unique way.

Polonaise in A flat major, op 53 - Polonaise Eroica is one of the most popular works of Chopin and is well known throughout the world. He composed it in 1842 and dedicated to Monsieur Auguste Leo.

Polonaise in A flat Major, Op 61 - Polonaise - Fantaisie was composed only four years before his death (1845-1846) and dedicated to Mrs. A. Veyret. It is a masterpiece of 18 pages and it is one of its most beautiful creations. When executed properly, this is an impressive range of romantic songs, impressionistic harmonies and virtuoso technique. The interpretation of this work is highly subjective and thus varies considerably among modern pianists.

Chopin's Polonaises are closely linked to the national component of his music. The most celebrated of them are difficult to understand without an awareness of Chopin's patriotic feelings and the tragedy of Poland during his lifetime. He composed during childhood until the end of his life, leaving posterity eighteen works of this genre: sixteen piano Polonaises, one for piano and orchestra and one for piano and cello. Their style has changed over time and their importance and rank gradually increased, moving from conventional salon miniatures to expansive dance poems.

### 6. The dominance of the minor

Chopin came into contact with the folk music of his native country very early. The harvest festival of Obrowo gave him important ideas. One day he asked a peasant's wife to sing a song at the top of her voice. She sang a mazurka. At the age of 14, Chopin had already come across the central native dance, the mazurka, which, apart from the polonaise, was to become one of the most important genres in his folkloric music. In addition, other pieces

like the Sonata B-flat minor are claimed as highlights of his national music.

The preference for the use of the minor combined with a partial use of modal element equally characterizes Polish and Norwegian folk music. Therefore it is necessary to have a closer look at to what extent the minor is used as the preferred category in Chopin's works.

The dominance of the major is true for classical music in general and is changed only by the late Beethoven in favor of a stronger influence of the minor. The influence of the minor gradually increases in the Early Romantic period (cf. Weber, Schubert, Berlioz). In some areas of Chopin's works, however, the minor is used considerably more than by his contemporaries. He therefore differs from Mendelssohn (1809-1847) and Schumann (1810-1856), although in their music the minor is also of major importance.

In the Polish dances, the Mazurkas and the Polonaises the minor is predominant. As a result the dominance of the minor, which is a distinguishing feature of Polish Folk Music, is a fundamental principle of Chopin's aesthetic.

Chopin is especially attached to the minor and therefore made an important element of the folklore of his country a fundamental part of his personal style.

## 7. Conclusion

The art of works enrichment developed through contemporary practice of improvisation on known topics, presenting them in various forms, often by gradually increasing their virtuosity. It is known that many of Chopin's dance pieces were born as improvisation and melodic ornamentation of Polonaise in G sharp minor has something rhapsodic, like a spontaneous improvisation.

Liszt emphasizes that Chopin is the one that had one of the most important role in the rising of the genre to a new level of expressive terms, by the number and variety of his compositions, by the emotional tint and new innovative harmonic processes. The Polonaises of Frederic

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