

Frederic Chopin in Paris  
MUS 110: Introduction to Music Studies in a Global Context  
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Frederic Chopin is one of the most extraordinary romantic composers. "Chopin's music was admired, analyzed, applauded, compared, critiqued, described, discussed, dissected, examined, and judged to an exhaustive extent even before he died at the age of thirty-nine a century and a half ago, and the fascination has continued ever since." In Warsaw, a very young Frederic Chopin had been discovered as a talented composer. However, it is notable that most of Chopin's work during childhood and earlier years of his life resembled the composition styles of earlier virtuosos. It was not until moving to Paris did Chopin's music flourish and become original such that the sound of Chopin could be distinguished from others. As an appreciator of Chopin's music, migrating to Paris was a crucial turning point in his composing career piqued my interest. I'm curious about how living in Paris affected Chopin and why his music flourished in Paris. By discovering this turning point in Chopin's composing career, we will learn more about his musical identity, primarily how his life and emotions were written in the form of music. I believe that this topic would be interesting to Chopin admirers and people who enjoy romantic era music, as we would understand the composer and the music we hear.

In this paper, I research factors in Paris that changed how Chopin composed, what the changes were, and how his later compositions were unique. I will study how his social circle, culture, musical scene, and education in Paris changed compared to his time in Warsaw and their impacts on his compositions. Since articulations and dynamics make his music beautiful and unique, I will also consider how Chopin's piano was built differently from earlier composers and allowed Chopin to compose the way he wanted. Finally, to find out how Chopin's compositions in Paris were different from before and what defines "Chopinesque," I will be analyzing one of his works in Paris, "Etude in E minor, Op. 25, No. 1" (1837).

### Chopin in Warsaw

To understand how the composer's life changed in Paris, we should learn about his younger self in Warsaw. Early education and social circle played significant roles in shaping Chopin's early compositions.

Born in a middle-class family, Chopin's musical education was endorsed since he was very young. He had various instructors on keyboard techniques, music theory, compositions, and counterpoints. However, Frederic soon quickly mastered everything and overgrew his instructors. Chopin admired and was influenced by Baroque masters like Bach to the extent that he was believed to be more in tune with Baroque composers than his fellow Romantic era fellows. This can be shown by the fact that he used to play Bach's fugue daily, and Chopin's preludes were inspired by Bach's. Chopin was also known to idolize Mozart, though he disliked the idea of becoming a 'second Mozart.'

His social circle in Warsaw society includes three principal groups of people: professionals, middle gentry, and wealthy aristocratic families. Chopin knew quite a few professionals as his father, Mikołaj Chopin was part of a circle of Warsaw intelligentsia. This group of people was related to Chopin's formal education and interaction with classical music, which I had discussed. The second group, the middle gentry (szachta), were friends in school with Frederic. Thanks to them, Chopin interacted with Polish folk music, his mazurkas' primary inspiration. The last group knew Chopin because of his musical talent. Aristocrats loved listening to Chopin at the piano, so he was very

demanding in Warsaw's salons. That was why Chopin performed a lot in salons, and this would later have come relatable to his performing styles and compositions.

Frederic's education is reflected in his compositions with his interest in Folk music and Folk dances. For instance, his first two polonaises in 1817 were a transmutation of slow Polish court dance. During that period, Chopin composed multiple polonaises for performing in salons. However, the styles of these polonaises were indistinguishable from previous virtuosos like Hummel, Weber, and other non-Polish experts.

### The move to Paris

In 1829, Chopin went to Vienna to expand his musical horizon. The prodigy gave concerts and spent the winter of 1830-31 there. However, due to the Warsaw uprising against the Russian Empire beginning on November 29, 1830, Poles were no longer welcomed in Vienna. Consequently, Chopin found it hard to organize any performance. His friends advised him not to come back to Poland instead of following their musical dream. As a result, he chose Paris – the center of European culture at the time – as his next destination.

### Chopin's Paris society

"The romance Frederic Chopin found in Paris was also history in the making, and soon he, too, became part of it." It is worth mentioning that the moment Chopin moved to Paris, Romanticism grew strong. The people Frederic met at the time, and the Romanticism ideal in Paris had the most impact on his music.

The first significant person Chopin met was Mickiewicz, the writer who launched the Romantic movement in Polish literature. The 16-year-old Chopin in Warsaw, who was not aware of Romanticism, was interested in Mickiewicz's book "Ballads and Romances," but it was not until Paris that Chopin got to meet Mickiewicz. Because Mickiewicz was also a Polish immigrant, Chopin best related to the sense of nationalism in Mickiewicz's writings, and the writer's works were reflected in Chopin's ballades. Mickiewicz's "Ballady" portrays Poland's alienation, nostalgia, and powerlessness in the Great Emigration. Chopin's ballades also expressed his emotions as a Pole at the time. The correlations between the "Ballady" and Chopin's ballades were effectively pointed out in the article "Alienation and Powerlessness: Adam Mickiewicz's Ballady and Chopin's Ballades" by Dorota Zakrzewska, which is too detailed to be discussed in this paper. According to Chopin scholars, Chopin's ballades had such a strong sense of nationalism that every nineteenth-century European would have understood it. In Warsaw compositions, Chopin transmuted folk dances into his music. However, more and more Polish subjects were added to his music in Paris, evidently Mickiewicz's poetry. As a result, his music in Paris had a much stronger sense of Polishness.

The subsequent encounter worth mentioning in Paris is Chopin's encounter with the musicians there. Among all musicians, Franz Liszt was Chopin's notorious 'frenemy.' Liszt probably did not influence Chopin's composition, but the famous contrast between them would help portray Chopin's personality. Both admired the other and focused heavily on piano works, but they never had the same approach to composing. Liszt was an extrovert and loved performing at big concert halls. Therefore, Liszt's compositions were 'showy' and perfect for big concerts.

On the other hand, Chopin was an introvert and had disliked performing before a mass audience since he was little, only executing when he was inclined to. Chopin's music was not 'showy' but instead focused on being emotionally expressive, delicate, and beautiful. "He preferred the salon over the concert hall: in smaller acoustic spaces, his intimate compositions and artful improvisations fared much better, and the subtleties of his pianistic style were more audible." As a result, though Chopin was very famous in Paris's salons, he did not do many public concerts. Chopin shifted from composing rondos and concertos to more mazurkas, nocturnes, etudes. Besides Liszt, the encounters with multiple other Romantic composers and poetry also helped Chopin develop his sense of Romanticism.

In addition to friendships, Chopin's romantic relationships in Paris were also an inspiration for his works. He fell in love with Maria Wodzinskis during his time in Dresden; however, their relationship never worked out because her family was worried about Chopin's health. Chopin wrote many waltzes during his time around Maria. Among the waltzes, "Waltz Op. 69 No. 1" was written as Chopin's farewell to Maria when they separated. The piece was very sentimental and brought a deep feeling of melancholy as Chopin's goodbye to his loved one.

After his time in Dresden, Chopin returned to Paris, where Liszt introduced him to George Sand, who would be Chopin's partner for the next nine years. Though both Sand and Liszt were strongly politically involved, Chopin never had any interest in having a solid political standpoint. Despite a long accompaniment with Sand, Chopin never succumbed to her influence and was utterly indifferent to politics.

Thanks to Chopin's relations in Paris, he could identify precisely what he wanted to do as a composer. Chopin's works conveyed emotions towards his life events, such as his loneliness as an immigrant, a happy love story, and a painful breakup. His compositions did not serve any other purposes rather than being a work of art. Additionally, Chopin chose to focus on piano works instead of opera. Because the fact that Chopin could express all feelings through a single instrument showed why Chopin's piano sound was so emotionally rich and unique. In Paris, he also learned how to put a strong sense of nationalism into his music that people at the time could recognize.

### Chopin's piano

As Chopin was exceptionally known because of his work on the piano, it is crucial to consider that the piano construction industry was innovated in Chopin's era. Before 1800, the piano only had 5 octaves, a lot had changed since that period to Chopin's time, and his piano was close to the grand piano that we are using today. "New advances in fortepiano construction transformed it into a highly versatile and expressive instrument, permitting ever greater virtuosity. More remarkably, he used the new piano's potential for lyrical melodies (inspired by operatic bel canto) and employed a rich palette of sonorities through his imaginative use of the instrument's natural registers and pedals." The compositions of Chopin were different from Baroque composers in the sense that he took control of how his music should be performed. The uses of pedals, the volume, timbre of each note was all specified in his scores. Thanks to sentiments that Chopin sent into his pieces could be fully expressed by any performers and perceived by audiences. This shows why Chopin's piano sound was vibrant and colorful.

### Compositions in Paris

As mentioned above, Chopin focused on composing emotionally expressive music for salons. His reputation was built upon mazurkas, preludes, polonaises, nocturnes, ballades, and etudes. He still referenced and improvised Polish folk music and dances in some compositions and showed a strong sense of Polishness. He mainly composed for piano and developed new keyboard techniques. "All these works contain aspects constituting basic musical Romanticism traits: the sonorous material's melodic organization, the sonorous effect produced by the combination of sounds on different levels, the construction and the specific chords sequences (modulations)." He was writing poetry in the form of piano scores.

### Analysis of "Etude in E minor, Op. 25, No. 1"

To illustrate some features that we found about Chopin's compositions in Paris, we will be looking at one of his Etudes, "Etude in E minor, Op. 25, No. 1", published in 1836. This composition is neither inspired by Polish folk nor his love stories, probably by some random observations in his life. However, through this piece, we can see how poetic Chopin was and that he could create every sound with a piano.

The German composer Schumann once heard Chopin play the piece in person. Schumann was astonished: "Imagine an Aeolian harp capable of all sonorous levels, and an artists' hand animating it, adding here and there all kinds of fantastic embellishments, always, however, with a strong bass audible and, in the treble, a softly flowing cantilena, and you have some idea of his playing." From what Schumann said, we can see how rich and colorful Chopin's composition was. Listening to a recording of Daniel Barenboim playing the piece, I had the same impression that Schumann did: the sound from the piano was so dreamy and delicate that I could imagine a harp being played. One Chopin student recalled that when Chopin was teaching the piece, the composer told them to imagine a shepherd playing a peaceful melody to guide his flock, awaiting an approaching storm. This could illustrate some events in Chopin's life, like a love story, but we can never know for sure.

The piece starts with one melody, then goes through some variations of that melody, climbing to a climax, then returning to the original tune again. This ABA format is representative of Chopin's etude genre. Looking at the score, we can see how Chopin took control of the dynamics, as he notated pedal uses, ascending, descending parts of the phrases; and notably, the whole piece must be played legato. Therefore, we need a piano from Chopin's time or later to play the music how Chopin wanted it to sound. We can see characteristics of the romantic era in this work: the melodic organization of the sonorous material, the resonant effect produced by the combination of sounds on different levels, and modulations.

After listening to the piece, Schumann commented, "We felt as though we had seen a radiant picture in a dream which, half-awake, we ached to recover." This shows how poetic and romantic Chopin was and that his works were solely carefree works of art.

### Chopinesque

Throughout his time in Paris, Chopin had developed himself both as a person and a composer. He firmly believed in his path of composing: devoting to the art of piano, the art of expressing emotions, and indifferent to other matters. Chopin's passion for folk music and his descriptive

piano compositions set him apart from most composers. His piano technique was passed on to the next generation of Romantic composers, and his musical legacy stays forever.

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