

The life of Frédéric François Chopin – illustrated by stamps

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According to a review in *la France Musicale* after a recital by Chopin the following was stated: “Chopin is a composer from conviction. He composes for himself and performs for himself... He is a pianist apart, who should not and cannot be compared with anyone.”

Frédéric François Chopin was born on 22 February 1810¹ as the second child and only son of Nicholas and Justyna Chopin at Zelazowa Wola, a small village fifty kilometers west of Warsaw. His father was a Frenchman from Lorraine that emigrated to Poland. When Frédéric was seven months his parents moved to Warsaw (figure 1) where his father was appointed as French teacher at the Warsaw Lyceum. The school was housed in the Saxon Palace, and the Chopin family lived on the palace grounds. When the Grand Duke Constatine requisitioned the Saxon Palace for military purposes, the Lyceum was moved to the Kazimierz Palace, on the grounds of the presentday Warsaw University (figure 2). The Chopin family had a spacious second floor apartment in the grounds.

The young Frédéric Chopin became conversant with music in various forms at a very early stage. His father played the flute and violin and his mother not only played but taught the piano. At a very early age Frédéric tried to reproduce what he heard or made up melodies. He received his first piano lessons not from his mother but his older sister Ludwika (Louise). Chopin’s first professional piano tutor was the Czech, Wojciech Zwiny. At the age of seven Chopin began giving public concerts and at this stage he composed two Polonaises (in G minor and B flat major). His next known Polonaise in A was given as a name-day gift to his teacher, Zwiny. (The Polonaise is a Polish dance) (figure 3) At the age of eleven Chopin performed in the presence of the Tsar of Russia.

As a child he showed a high intelligence as well as a remarkable ability in observation and sketching. His keen wit and sense of humor made him a welcome guest, and popular with his contemporaries. He was also praised for his piano performances.

In the autumn of 1826 Chopin began a three year course of studies in composition with the Polish composer, Józef Elsner (figure 4) at the Warsaw Conservatory, which was affiliated with the University of Warsaw. Elsner noted his “remarkable talent” and “musical genius”. Elsner observed, rather than influenced or directed the development of Chopin’s talent. After completing his studies with honours at the Warsaw Conservatory he made a brilliant debut as pianist in Vienna. Although he received many favourable reviews there was also criticism because he did not produce the forceful tone of for example, Liszt. Chopin who suffered of ill health was slightly built and not physically as strong as Liszt.

After a brief visit to Warsaw in 1831, he left for France, his father’s homeland. When he learned that the Polish uprising against Russia was crushed, he was very upset. The outcries of his torment found musical expression in his Scherzo in B minor, opus 20 and his “Revolutionary Etude” in C minor, opus 10, number 2.

He lived in Paris (figure 5 - View of Paris) for the rest of his life. Thanks to his father Chopin could speak French but he never lost his Polish accent. In order to enter the best society he took piano lessons with Friedrich Kalkbrenner. Chopin decided to create his own highly imaginative style, he was not only talented, he was also graceful and slim (figure 6 - Chopin as a young man)

in his appearance, he was an excellent conversationalist and mimic who soon gained friends in the artistic and literary circles. He also realised that he had to be well dressed to be accepted in the circles he frequented. To pay for his fashionable clothes (he was a fastidious dresser) he gave piano lessons to affluent students. He also gave concerts. The first concert was held in a smaller hall and he received ecstatic reception. The following venue where he performed was far too big to be of advantage to Chopin's light-handed keyboard technique, however, through the patronage of the Rothschilds who opened doors for him and he came to his right performing in private salons and at the social gatherings of the aristocracy and the artistic and literary elite which earned him the reputation of a snob.

In 1835 Chopin met with his parents in Carlsbad for the last time in his life. On his way back he met old friends from Warsaw, the Wodzinskis, and fell in love with their daughter, Maria. The following year in 1836 he proposed marriage to Maria. She accepted but her mother had reserves due to Chopin's ill health, this resulted in an indefinite postponement of the nuptials. Chopin voiced his feelings for Maria in his *Waltz in A flat major*, opus 69, number 1 and his *Etude in F minor*, opus 25 which he referred to as "a portrait of Maria's soul" The ending of this liaison was very difficult for Chopin and he called it "my Sorrow".

After the matrimonial plans ended, there was a brief episode where countess Delfina Potocka was Chopin's muse and romantic interest. He composed his *Waltz in D flat major*, opus 64, number 1 (*Minute Waltz*) for her. George Sand remarked that to her it evoked a picture of a dog chasing its tail.

During this period Chopin formed a friendship with Liszt (figure 7). Chopin was fastidious and reserved and Liszt an unashamed exhibitionist, due to the differences in their personalities the friendship did not last.

Mendelssohn (figure 8), a successful composer, was also in Paris in 1832 and he and Chopin became friends. They had much in common, both were real 'gentlemen', at home in the highest social circles and had an aversion to anything either sensational or exhibitionist. They just never understood or enjoyed each other's work. Mendelssohn was often disturbed "by the extreme passion that lurked beneath the elegant surface of Chopin's music."

During this period he also met the Irish composer, John Field (figure 9), the creator of the dreamily romantic style of music called the *Nocturne*. Chopin's own *Nocturnes* were modelled on those of Field, and he warmly acknowledged the Irishman as the pioneer of the form. Chopin broke away from Field's model and his *Nocturnes* begin with a dreamlike *largo* which contrasts with the rhythmically tense and sombre central sections. He also made use of the *rubato tempo*. Chopin's *Nocturne* number 10 was the object of a famous orchestral adaptation for the ballet "Les Sylphides".

In 1836 Chopin met French author and feminist Amandine Aurore Lucille Dupin, the Baroness Dudevant better known by her pseudonym George Sand (figure 10). Chopin was not initially attracted to her. They were opposites. Chopin was reserved, fastidious and plagued by recurrent ill health. George Sand was energetic and passionate and typically romantic. She was not very attractive, apart from her brilliant eyes, she was short and plump, often dressed like a man, smoked cigars and swore. George realised she was in love with the reserved musician. Chopin for his part, discovered that beneath her tough exterior was a sensitive, very feminine woman.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 3



Figure 5

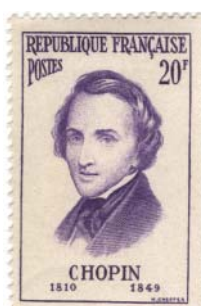


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15a



Figure 15b

They finally became lovers in 1838. Unfortunately George Sand had a lover, who grew violently jealous. The winter of 1838 she and Chopin fled to Majorca, partly to escape from the other lover and partly for Chopin's health. Spain was in the grip of a civil war, neither Chopin nor George Sand could speak Spanish. The deeply religious people of Majorca became inhospitable after discovering that the couple was not married and they were forced to take lodgings in a cold, former Carthusian monastery in Valldemosa. The weather was appalling and Chopin's health collapsed. He shipped his piano (figure 11 - Chopin's piano) to Majorca and had a lot of hassles with customs George Sand had to pay a big fine to have the instrument released from customs. Having his own piano gave Chopin the opportunity to compose. During this period he composed 24 preludes, 2 polonaises, opus 40 and the Scherzo, number 3 and Mazurka in E minor and did some revision on Ballade number 2 and his Sonata, number 2. The winter in Majorca is considered as one of the most productive periods in Chopin's life. Although they found the Majorcan doctors deplorable, they diagnosed Chopin's tuberculosis, which French doctors had failed to do.

The years George Sand and Chopin spent together were perhaps the happiest of their lives. They spent their summers at Nohant, her country estate south of Paris and the winters in the elegant apartment in Place d'Orleans in Paris. During these happy years Chopin composed some of his finest works, Mazurkas (a Polish dance) (figure 12), Nocturnes, Sonata in B minor and probably one of his most famous pieces, the Polonaise in A flat minor, opus 53. During this period Delacroix visited them at Nohant and he painted (figure 13 - Painting of Chopin by Delacroix) their portraits. After Chopin's father's death his sister Ludwika also payed them a visit.

Tragically this state of happiness did not last and their relationship ended in 1846. Hereafter Chopin's health began to deteriorate and he fell into a depression from which he never really recovered. Through the mediation of one of his pupils, Jane Stirling, Chopin gave concerts in England and Scotland. In 1848 he played for the benefit of Polish refugees and Chopin was shocked when he realised that the refugees only attended for the free food and drinks.

At the end of November Chopin (figure 14 – Portrait sketch of Chopin at the end of his life) returned to Paris. He was constantly ill but continued seeing friends. He did not have the strength to give lessons, but he was still keen to compose. He became poor and had to sell off some of his more valuable belongings to pay his bills. At his desire to have one of his family with him at the end of his life, his sister Ludwika agreed to come and stayed with him until his death a few minutes before two, on the morning of 17 October 1849. From fear of being buried alive, Chopin requested that his heart should be removed. It was preserved in alcohol and his sister took it in an urn to Warsaw where it was sealed in a pillar of the Holy Cross Church.

His funeral was held in the Church of the Madeleine in Paris. He planned his own funeral and the music played was by his request. In accordance with his wishes he was buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery. The funeral was attended by nearly three thousand people, but George Sand was not among them.

At present Chopin is still honoured by a piano competition in Poland. The first competition was held in 1927 and since 1955 the competition is held every five years. The competitions are commemorated with stamps of the posters (figure 15a and figure 15b - Posters advertising Chopin Piano competitions).

To commemorate the bicentenary of Chopin's birth in 1820 the Polish Post issued, on 22 February 2010, a numbered souvenir minisheet (figure 16). The perforated stamp in the minisheet shows the composer's head as depicted in the bronze statue by Waclaw Szymanowski which was erected in Lazienki Park in Warsaw. Thus honouring the romantic composer, Frédéric François Chopin.

Note

1. The parish record of the baptism (discovered in 1892) gives 22 February 1810 as his date of birth but the true date is widely believed to be 1 March, the date which the composer and his close family usually gave.