



INTRODUCTION

The concept of Fryderyk Chopin as a figure and cultural subject needs revision. This very thought triggered the idea of writing this book and justifies the questions it poses to the spirits of the past. My main aim has been to go beyond the scheme which has always been used with regards to the famous Romantic composer. It has been my desire to follow the ways Chopin made a performative presence in the nineteenth century reality and read him as a cultural phenomenon, or a matrix of imagination in the realm of mythic thought.

I would like to hope that the immediate availability of my work in the international *lingua franca*, as well as its novel approach to the theme (the iconic persona of Fryderyk Chopin clashed with the postmodern methodology of performance studies), will open up a possibility for a wider debate. Some aspects of the challenges posed by the meta-narration and conventions which have been used to talk about Chopin in particular – but which create a discourse of talking about grand personas in history in general – might be discovered anew. Publications about Chopin have either been scientifically hermetic, meant for narrow audiences (mostly musicologists or musicians), or ultra-popular and over-simplistic when addressed to the wide public. It is my opinion that a new quality is needed when discussing great people in the humanities – where the historian’s critical apparatus can intertwine with a psychological and performative interpretation.

My project aims to be an interdisciplinary case study of Fryderyk Chopin – an outstanding and exceptional individual in society – incorporating the ways this musical genius made his appearance (both on the musical stage and *hors les murs*) in nineteenth century society in general. The performative aspect (“the making”) of the status of an artist as such – the analysis of the construct of an artist in society – is of great interest to me. Hence the principal question of the pedagogies of Romanticism, which can come down to “an artist or a performative philistine” – bearing in mind that perhaps “genius” incorporates both these notions, and more.

I have placed this phenomenon in the context of performative and theatre anthropology studies (mostly the work of Eugenio Barba,¹ Victor Turner² and Richard Schechner³) from the first half of the twentieth century. The choice of Chopin as the main reference was dictated by the extremely conventional image of this iconic figure: the existence of sentimental portraits, venerable sacred images, or studies which are more striking than accurate.

My study encompasses the thirty-nine years of his life (1810–1849) and draws on a rich source base of visual and verbal artifacts, witness accounts, letters (archival research on the whole corpus of letters exchanged between Chopin and various recipients), journals (mainly those of George Sand and Eugène Delacroix), press articles, literature, as well as recollections of journalists and Chopin's doctors, students and friends.

The conviction about the immanent co-dependency of human actions, inspired by the thought of Norbert Elias, plays a key role in this work. Following this thread, I have tried to delineate what functions are attributed to a genius, or furthermore – a genius in permanent malaise: to what extent can being such an individual lead to social transgressions, and to what extent is he or she simply an alienated human being, extremely different from everyone else?

Aristotle distinguishes between the historian and the poet on the grounds that the former describes “the thing that has been”, and the latter “a kind of thing that might be”.⁴ Poetry, says Aristotle, is thus both more philosophical and more important than history, since it deals not with “singulars” but rather with “universals”. Chopin's life shows that he was both a poet and a historian.

Hayden White argues in *Metahistory* that in order to understand the intellectual point of any given history, we must first distinguish between the “chronicle” and the “story” that together constitute the history. The chronicle is simply the linear, temporal record of events, whereas the story is an arranged construct that provides the chronicle with the appearance of continuity – with a beginning, a middle and an ending.⁵ This is what Aristotle's historian writes. Arranging their material after the fact, historians of the Aristotelian mold conclude with an “ending” whose actual achievement or performance predates the composition of the history.

¹ Ian Watson, *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and The Odin Teatret*, pref. Richard Schechner, Routledge, London, New York, 1993; Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning Down the House*, trans. Judy Barba, Routledge, London, New York, 2009.

² Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, pref. Richard Schechner, PAJ Publications, New York, 1988; Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1975.

³ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writing on Culture and Performance*, Routledge, London, New York, 1993.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in: *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, Random House, New York, 1941, p. 1464.

⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973, p. 5–7.

The poet, on the other hand – and the Romantic poet (or artist) in particular – composes the relative “middle” of the history, looking forward to an “end” that has not yet occurred. This is the point at which the Romantic artist draws upon myth as a means of shoring up his or her view of that future ending, arguing by overt or implied analogy in an effort to transform the present so that the future may be shaped by a public acting in enlightened partnership with the visionary artist.⁶

I have incorporated the discourse of historical anthropology of Jürgen Habermas⁷ and Richard Sennett⁸ touching on the history of *la vie quotidienne* and approaching the changes of habits and identity in the “long historical process”. In these terms, Chopin seems to have been placed in a space “in-between”, within Arnold van Gennep’s rites of (social) passage⁹ and Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle.¹⁰ On the other side of the spectrum I have placed cultural concepts such as the genius, the tubercular, the melancholic, the virtuoso, and the dandy, and looked at their resonance in Chopin’s biography.

I believe my research into the social reception of Chopin, his entire generation and subsequent generations of Polish artists who functioned as émigrés while Poland underwent multiple waves of social upheaval underscores how seriously academia and performance arts take the interplay between the role of the artist and its social construction on an historical and global basis. Hence the analysis of Chopin’s connection to nationality, folk culture but also the Freemasons and Biedermeier culture.

The second half of the twentieth century marked three momentous “turns”: the linguistic, the cultural and the performative. The first one emphasized language’s role in constructing perception, the second one tracked the everyday meanings of culture and culture’s formative effect on identities, and the third one acknowledged how that observable, quotidian behavior, both of individuals and of groups, derives from collective, often unconscious, influences. These turns created an opportunity for innovative exploration, flexing under many circumstances and transforming from one instantiation to another.

Performance studies are a branch of the history of ideas and were used as such as a methodological tool in my work. The history of ideas is for all the humanities a field of dialogue and mediation, exchange of information and experiences, a place where mutual scientific conclusions are reached. That is why, as Arthur Lovejoy wrote, it cannot be created by a single scientist, but by a group of academics with a common goal in mind. This understanding implies an interdisciplinary approach.

⁶ Stephen C. Behrendt, “Introduction: History, Mythmaking, and the Romantic Artist”, in: *History and Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1990, p. 14.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M, 1990.

⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1992.

⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Émile Nourry, Paris, 1909.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1995.

Aby Warburg,¹¹ as the patron saint of interdisciplinary investigations, was therefore one of my guides through the dense matter of my studies.

The performance of Chopin's life and work is open to speculation and fantasy, as the majority of sources were destroyed during the two world wars, the Warsaw Uprising and as a result of personal vendettas of people from his circle who were willing to shape the desired image of the composer to the benefit of themselves. Every generation of biographers and scholars projects its own aesthetics and desires on the blank canvas called Fryderyk Chopin.

The book, like a music concert, consists of three parts. I divided the three "Chopinian performances" in three areas: the performance of the body, the performance of spirit, and finally – the performance of action. Each of these Chopinian performances is a symbolic cultural act and a revelation of Romantic pedagogy: his genius, tuberculosis, virtuosity, dandyism and other discourses. Deciphering these concepts places us closer to understanding the philosophy of nineteenth century culture – both high and popular.

Part I – "The Performance of Romanticism" talks about Chopin as a suffering melancholic genius. The first chapter, "The Performance of the Body", investigates the connections between TB and genius in the sections: "Romantic Genius and the Divine Malady"; "Tuberculosis: Its Romantic Metaphors in Popular Culture versus Medical Etiology"; to finally reach Chopin's case study under a performative lens in "Fryderyk Chopin – the Suffering Genius – Case Study under a Performative Lens". Later I investigate "Banishing TB – Internal and External Asylums – Mallorca and Nohant" and look at Chopin's double face: "The Many-Faced Disease – Chopin *Aut Deus, Aut Daemon*". The last two sections are about two significant liquids in the cultural understanding of TB – blood and water: "Blood And The Uncanny – Chopin, Vampirism, and Romantic Gothicism" and "Water and the Melancholic Victory of Sorrow". I end this chapter with "*Le dernier regard aux traits du Grand Maître* (KFC II 463): The Exemplary Agony of the Ultimate Romantic Genius".

The second chapter covers "The Performance of Spirit". Different aspects of Melancholy and Genius are investigated: "Genius, Melancholia, and Inspiration"; "*Furor Romanticus – Furor Melancholicus*"; "Chopin's Algorithm of Existential Sorrow – *Moja Biéda*" and "From *Melancholia Generosa* to Modern Genius". In the next sections I discuss "*Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae* – Some Aspects of the Romantic Genius, *le Génie Mélancolique*", to finally talk about Chopin's unique status of a Romantic prophet: "*Voir clair dans le ravissement* – Chopin the Romantic (Non-) Prophet" and conclude with "Romantic Genius and Psychoanalysis – the Concept of Inward Performative Personality and Shame".

Part II describes "The Performance of Individualism", exploring the idea of Chopin as a unique Romantic Virtuoso and Dandy. In Chapter 3, "The Virtuoso Performer", the main focus is on the relations between virtuosity and performance, as

¹¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Aby Warburg, The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2017.

well as deciphering the phenomenon of public concerts, which Chopin had so rarely: “Towards the Blue Note – Paris of ‘Pianists, Asses and Virtuosos’”; “Performance on the Verge – Between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Building the Grounds for *Correspondance des Arts*”; “Shifting Codes of Representation – the Virtuoso of Caricature and Improvisation” and “The Epiphany of the Virtuoso: Pinpointing the Mystery”. The last three sections in this chapter are: “*Microcosme et Microthée*: The Piano as the Divine Telegraph and the Instrument of the Nineteenth Century”; “*Bel Canto*, or the Tubercular Song” – where the connections of the nineteenth century malady and song are looked at – and “*Tempo Rubato*: Towards Celebrityism à Rebours”, tackling Chopin’s unique manner of becoming a celebrity.

In the second chapter of Part II, Chapter 4, detailing “The Dandy Performer”, I analyze the external and internal factors of becoming a dandy in Chopin’s case, with sections covering: “*Le Beau Monde* – Chopin’s Presence in the Romantic Salons”, his attire and fashion choices as an *arbiter elegantiarum*, as well as his apartments and the symbolic notion of home in “Playing House”. In the following sections I discuss “*Lucrezia Floriani*’s Doll Effect”; “Gender Ambivalence in the Representation of the Genius Dandy” and conclude with Chopin’s imaginary worlds: “Chopin *Flâneur*? *Espaces Imaginaires*”.

Part III introduces “Chopin as an Idea” and the ongoing performance in his after-life. It places the composer in a scheme of multiple Romanticisms: “*Genius Patriae*: On Chopin’s Polishness and Cosmopolitanism”; “Romantic *Volksgeist* – Chopin and the Mythical Slavic Soul”; “Transcendental Chopin – Conversations with God”; “Chopin’s Epistemology – *Tere bzdere kuku* – Music as Existence”; “‘Mason without an Apron’ – Chopin and Freemasonry” and “Chopin the Philistine? In the Arms of Biedermeier, ‘Domesticized Romanticism’”.

Following Part III, the epilogue “In the Shadow of the Romantic Paradigm” examines the growing desire to “performatize Chopin”. The conclusion – “The Ultimate Artist – Chopin against Philistinism and Performativity” – sums up the ideas and concepts touched upon in the work and proves that despite the cultural tendencies, Chopin actually escapes common propensities.