

Fryderyk Chopin

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Opus 21

FRYDERYK FRANCISZEK CHOPIN—or, as he called himself during his many years in France, Frédéric Chopin—was born probably on March 1, 1810, in Żelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, Poland, and died on October 17, 1849, in Paris. He composed the F minor concerto in 1829 and was soloist in the first performance on March 17, 1830, in Warsaw.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, and strings.

Chopin composed his two piano concertos within a year of each other, having barely finished his formal studies. He had begun composition work at age twelve with Jozef Elsner, director of the Warsaw Conservatory, in 1822, his talent as a pianist having been recognized even earlier: he made his first public appearance as a pianist in February 1818, a month before his eighth birthday, playing a concerto of Gyrowetz. And even at that time he was constantly improvising little pieces, polonaises and the like. But it was his formal composition studies that ultimately led to his greatest and most enduring fame. Elsner attempted to teach him the traditional classical forms, supervising composition of the First Sonata, Opus 4, which is almost completely un-Chopinesque. Eventually, though, Elsner recognized that Chopin possessed such gifts that it was useless to impose an outside taste on them. He retained the private hope that Chopin would one day compose the great Polish national opera, though that hope was vain, since Chopin only desired to write music for the piano.

Few composers, indeed, have so consciously limited their output. Chopin never composed a piece that did not include the piano, and the bulk of his works are for piano solo. But it is on that instrument that he is most original. Despite his years of piano studies, he never became academic in the technical mechanics of performing, and his boundless imagination soon came up with new sonorities and devices that set him apart. Warsaw was something of a musical backwater, but visiting celebrities gave him some sense of the larger musical world. In 1828 he heard Hummel perform, and he quickly adopted the decorative elegance of that composer in his ensuing works. The following year he heard Paganini, who was such a powerful influence on instrumental music of the 1830s and 1840s by demonstrating the degree of virtuosic proficiency that might be possible.

In 1829, at nineteen, Chopin finished his formal studies and visited Vienna, where he attracted a great deal of attention, especially for works like *Krakowiak*, the exotic Polish character of which was new to that city. When he returned home on September 12 he began work on his F minor piano concerto (published as No. 2, though it was the first to be composed). His progress on the work was reported in a series of letters to his friend Titus Woyciechowski. In the earliest of the series, dated October 3, it is clear that Chopin has finished the second movement and probably also the first. Some of this music was inspired by recent romantic passions—remember, he was only nineteen years old—and Chopin mentions one of these to his friend. Titus knew that he had earlier been charmed by a young singer in Vienna, Mlle. Blahetka, but those tender feelings had now been driven out by a new passion for Constantia Gładkowska, a vocal student at the Warsaw Conservatory, whom Chopin describes as “my ideal, whom I have served faithfully, though without saying a word to her, for six months; whom I dream of, in whose memory the Adagio of my concerto has been written, and who this morning inspired me to write the little waltz [later published as Opus 70, No. 3, in D-flat] I am sending you.”

By October 20, Chopin had clearly written a draft of the finale and had showed part of the concerto to his former teacher Elsner, who praised the Adagio for its originality. After a visit to the home of Prince Radziwill, a musical aristocrat who lived near Poznan, Chopin returned to Warsaw, where he concentrated on finishing the concerto, which received its premiere in a concert he gave on March 17, presenting a number of his works for the first time; it was such a success that the program was repeated five days later. It was only a few months later that he wrote his second concerto, in E minor (published as No. 1), and a few months after that (November 1830) that he left Poland to study abroad, never to return.

It would be unrealistic to expect a piano concerto written by a budding young virtuoso not out of his teens to display a command of the symphonic style of concerto writing—the careful balancing of soloist and orchestra, the intricate development of thematic ideas, and so on—that we have come to recognize in the earlier works of Mozart and Beethoven. Not only was such a style inimical to Chopin’s original genius, but he had not even encountered the concertos of Beethoven, who had not yet been admitted to the Pantheon of Warsaw’s musical life. Hummel was the major composer whose concertos provided a basic model for Chopin, along with works of Ries, Gyrowetz, and Moscheles—concertos by keyboard virtuosos written to display their own technical prowess. But for all of Chopin’s youth and relative inexperience, his concertos are extraordinary in that special way that makes all of his best music personal and immediately identifiable.

The first movement’s orchestral exposition begins with a marchlike theme pensively presented in the strings and then taken over by the full orchestra. This opening presents a variety of ideas that seem for the most part inspired by

the stereotypes and standard gambits of any number of classical concertos. But when the soloist enters, after an atmospheric preparation, with a figure that descends through four-and-a-half octaves, Chopin's personality at once takes over, even when the soloist is simply laying out the themes that have already been heard in the orchestra. From this point on the piano part directs the course of the movement. While obviously influenced by the decorative art of such virtuosi as Hummel and Moscheles, Chopin's highly ornamental writing is far more expressive, far more poignant. He turns the appoggiatura and the suspension—devices done to death by the naive and superficial treatment of lesser composers—to new uses through his harmonic originality. From the standpoint of form, the first movement is as simple and straightforward as we might expect a student work to be; it is the content that proclaims the budding master.

The slow movement already reveals the genius of the composer. Elsner was right to praise its originality, which reveals itself in the extraordinary freedom with which Chopin has decorated the simple formal ABA outline, with an effective dramatic contrast in the middle section and a lavish outpouring of lyrical intensity. The finale is related to that Polish country dance, the mazurka, that Chopin made so wonderfully his own. The traditional mazurka was in triple time accompanied by strong accents on the second or third beat (when danced, the accents were reinforced by a strong tap of the heel). The mazurkas that Chopin wrote for solo piano were mostly in three-part song form. This concerto movement is a rondo with several sharply contrasting themes in mazurka style, closing with a virtuosic and dramatic coda.

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