

ROMANTIC ERA
CHARACTER PIECES
CHOPIN
POLONAISE IN A FLAT OP. 53



Early life

Frédéric François Chopin was born on February 22, 1810, near Warsaw, Poland. He was the second of four children of Nicholas Chopin, a Frenchman, and his Polish wife, Justina, who had been a well-educated but poor relative in the Skarbek household, where Nicholas had been a tutor. At an early age, Chopin displayed artistic talents—he was an artist, wrote poetry, and played piano without any formal instruction. The gifted child also began composing his own music and had his first piece of music published when he was just seven years old.

Young Chopin had a good education and later studied music privately with Joseph Elsner, founder and director of the Warsaw Conservatory. In 1817 Chopin's first composition was performed publicly. A year later he himself performed in public, playing a concerto (music written for one or more instruments) by Adalbert Gyrowetz. By this time the young Chopin began drawing comparisons to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), another composer who had demonstrated spectacular talent at a young age.

Musical training

In 1826 Chopin became a full-time student at Elsner's conservatory, where he received an excellent foundation in theory, harmony, and melody. Elsner, after recognizing that Chopin's style was too original to force into traditional patterns, granted Chopin the freedom to develop along clear personal lines.

After visiting Berlin, Germany, where Chopin was exposed to the music of George Frederick Handel (1685–1759) and Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), Chopin returned to Warsaw and heard Nicolò Paganini (1782–1840). Chopin recognized that he must leave Warsaw for exposure to other musicians. He went to Vienna, Austria, to try to arrange the publication of several of his works. After a successful debut at the Kärntnerthor Theater on August 11, 1829, he returned home only to prepare for a concert tour, this time through Germany and Italy. In Vienna Chopin composed the B Minor Scherzo and the G Minor Ballade, as well as others that demonstrated Chopin's fully developed personal style.

Middle period

When the twenty-year-old Chopin arrived in Paris, poor physical health prevented him from giving public performances. Nevertheless, he became a significant figure in Parisian artistic circles, numbering among his friends musicians, writers, and painters, as well as many wealthy and talented women.

Chopin recognized that he did not have the stamina (strength) to compete in public against such talents as Franz Liszt (1811–1886) and Sigismund Thalberg (1812–1871). So long as he was

able to earn enough by teaching, Chopin preferred composition to playing concerts. His musical tastes were public knowledge. Friendly with Hector Berlioz (1803–1869) and Mendelssohn, he was not impressed with their music. Nor, for that matter, did he appreciate Robert Schumann's (1810–1856) work, despite Schumann's warm welcome written for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* when Chopin first arrived in Paris. Schumann introduced Clara Wieck to Chopin's work, and eventually her performances of Chopin's pieces made favourable impressions on many audiences.

Final years

Several young ladies appear to have been the object of Chopin's affections over the years, but the most celebrated female with whom he had a relationship was Aurore Dudevant, known as George Sand (remember women couldn't publish things then so they had to make a fake male name), whom he met in 1836. For nine years, beginning in 1838, after he had composed the "Funeral March" (which later became part of the B-flat Minor Sonata), she was his closest associate. Despite failing health, the composer completed his twenty-four Preludes in Valldemosa, Majorca (one of the Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean).

In 1846 Sand's children became a problem. Chopin sided with Solange, Sand's daughter, in arguments against Sand and her son, Maurice. Separation became inevitable, and the beginning of the end for Chopin. His health failed, and he lost all interest in composition. Chopin then moved to England, where he gave several private performances in London and on May 15 played for Queen Victoria (1819–1901). After a rest in Scotland, he returned to London in the fall of 1848, where on November 16 he played a benefit for Polish refugees at the Guildhall. He returned to Paris shortly afterward, where he died of tuberculosis (a disease that attacks the lungs and bones) on October 17, 1849, in Paris, France.

Although Chopin's output was rather small compared to other great composers, his works such as his sonatas (music for one instrument) in B flat minor (1840) and the concertos in E minor (1833) are still some of the most popular pieces in classical music.

Polonaise in A flat major op 53

George Sand, Chopin's longtime lover and companion, responded vigorously to the Revolutions of 1848 as did many intellectuals of the day. When the 1848 Revolution began in France, women had no rights and Sand believed these were necessary for progress. Around this time, Sand started her own newspaper which was published in a workers' co-operative. This allowed her to publish more political essays, expressing her strongly felt convictions. When she heard Chopin's Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53, Sand was left with a deep symbolic impression which she communicated to Chopin in their private correspondence. In one of their letters, she wrote passionately, "*L'inspiration! La force! La vigueur! Il est indéniable qu'un tel esprit doit être présent dans la Révolution française. Désormais cette polonaise devrait être un symbole, un symbole héroïque!*" (Translated: "*The inspiration! The strength! The vigour! There is no doubt that such a spirit must be present in the French Revolution. From now on this polonaise should be a symbol, a symbol of heroicism!*"). In spite of Chopin's reluctance to bestow descriptive names on his music, music scholars and concert pianists have nevertheless associated the grand architecture of the music with this sobriquet, "Heroic."

The polonaise features many difficult technical aspects, including:

- Fast ascending chromatic perfect fourths
- Rapid, difficult octave scaling
- Trills with the weaker fingers
- Quick scales
- Fast arpeggios
- Broken chords
- Chords with wide fingering
- Use of a wide range of the piano keyboard

Structure

The tempo of the piece is *Alla polacca e maestoso* (“like a polonaise and majestic”). The form may be viewed as intermediate between ternary (A-B-A) and rondo (A-B-A-C-A), since the first interlude is much shorter than the second (16 vs. 74 bars). The main theme is preceded by an introduction of about thirty seconds in length.

The piece features a grand introduction with fast ascending chromatic notes in both hands, setting the mood of the piece, also; it shows the heroic side of Chopin’s art. The first theme is a dance-like theme and in the tonic key of A-flat major. It is the familiar part of the piece and has the left hand moving in pounding octaves. The theme is repeated up an octave with short trills that fill some of the auditory gaps in the theme. The first interlude presents a series of chord progressions that lead into a recount of the traditional polonaise melody, with the polonaise rhythm employed in the left-hand accompaniment. The main theme then repeats once more. The second, main interlude (or trio section) opens with six loud arpeggio chords before switching to a very soft bass ostinato of descending octaves first in the key of E major and then in E-flat major (written as D-sharp major). A march-like melody follows the descending octaves and this occurs twice, and then a long lyrical interlude firstly with harmonic chord progressions and frequent modulations. This ends in a descending passage before the main theme is replayed. The theme is played louder and more dramatically and ends in a coda including material derived from the main theme. A typical performance of the polonaise lasts seven minutes.

Here is a link to listen to the piece and have a look at how technical it is!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_iI1J0bALE

1. As a child, Chopin was compared to which other infamous composer?
2. Chopin was competitive, name two composers that he competed against.
3. Why was George Sand called George Sand?
4. Why is there no obvious form? Use your own words.