

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### FOLK INFLUENCES ON MUSIC BY CHOPIN

Jan Stęszewski (Warszawa) <i>Folk music and Chopin: Review of proving arguments</i> . . . . .	9
Ewa Dahlig-Turek (Warszawa) <i>From Jan from Lublin to Fryderyk Chopin: A short history of Polish rhythms</i> . . . . .	17
Anna Czekanowska (Warszawa) <i>On the poetry of Chopin Mazurkas: Structure or mastery of performance</i> . . . . .	51
Piotr Dahlig (Warszawa) <i>On interpretation of „tempo rubato” in Mazurkas by Chopin: Ethnomusicological notes</i> . . . . .	61
Barbara Milewski (Easton) <i>Magical returns and the interior landscape of Chopin’s Mazurkas.</i> . . . . .	71

### BIOGRAPHICAL AND ARTISTIC CONTEXTS OF CHOPIN’S OUTPUT

David Rowland (London) <i>Chopin and early nineteenth century piano schools</i> . . . . .	83
Marie Paule Rambeau (Paris) <i>La présence française dans les années varsoiviennes de Chopin</i> . . . . .	97
Marta Pielech (Warszawa) <i>Unknown pieces by F. Chopin found in the library of the Museum in Kozłówka</i> . . . . .	121
Irena Poniatowska (Warszawa) <i>Maria Szymanowska and the brilliant style</i> . . . . .	135
Kinga Tarka (Kraków) <i>Fantasy genre in the brilliant style – a source of inspiration for young Chopin.</i> . . . . .	155
Zbigniew Skowron (Warszawa) <i>En route to Paris: New light on Chopin’s cultural contacts in Vienna, Munich and Stuttgart between November 1830 and September 1831.</i> . . . . .	175

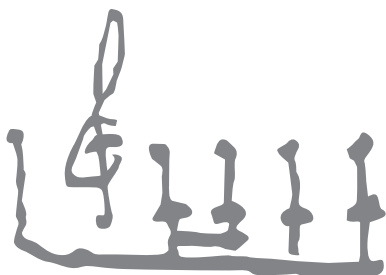
### STYLISTIC IDIOM OF CHOPIN’S WORK

Jim Samson (London) <i>Placing Genius</i> . . . . .	213
Mieczysław Tomaszewski (Kraków) <i>Stylistic idiom of Chopin – between datum and novum: From inspiration to the individual style.</i> . . . . .	221
Jan Ekier (Warszawa) <i>The problem of Variations for flute authorship</i> . . . . .	239
Wojciech Nowik (Warszawa) <i>„Fantaisie on Polish themes” in the perspective of intertextuality.</i> . . . . .	251

### CHOPIN INSPIRATIONS IN THE ANALYTICAL ASPECT

Artur Szklener (Kraków) <i>Did Chopin play dice? The music of Chopin and chaos</i> . . . . .	267
Halina Goldberg (Bloomington) <i>Phrase structure of Chopin's early works in light of Elsner's instruction</i> . . . . .	291
Elżbieta Zwolińska (Warszawa) <i>D Major Variations for 4 hands by Chopin in the context of Variations on the themes of Thomas Moore's songs by F. Ries.</i> . . . . .	303
Jeffrey Kallberg (Philadelphia) <i>On the scherzando nocturne.</i> . . . . .	315
Hartmuth Kinzler (Osnabrück) <i>A Scherzo by Beethoven as a Model for Chopin's opus 39.</i> . . . . .	325
David Kasunic (Princeton) <i>Playing Opera at the Piano: Chopin and the Piano-Vocal Score.</i> . . . . .	351
Bożena Schmid-Adamczyk (Genève) <i>La polymétrie dans Lento von gran espressione.</i> . . . . .	365
Alison Hood (Maynooth) <i>Intraopus Connections in Chopin's Nocturnes Opus 27</i> . . . . .	371

# FOLK INFLUENCES ON MUSIC BY CHOPIN





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## POLISH FOLK MUSIC AND CHOPIN: A SURVEY OF THE WAYS THIS RELATIONSHIP IS SHOWN

### THE PROBLEM

The oeuvre of Fryderyk Chopin is generally regarded as Polish national music, to some extent because it refers to Polish musical traditions and carries a patriotic message, and in particular due to its allusions to folk tradition. Of course, I do not question the existence in his work of familiar elements of this tradition, but I must draw attention to the fact that these connections do not exhaust the determinants of this music's 'nationalism'. And from an artistic and aesthetic point of view it is the value of the music as such that is most crucial, and only then do its composer's motivations and inspirations come into play. For this reason, I tend to share the view of Zygmunt Mycielski that 'Chopin invented Polish music'.<sup>1</sup> Whatever that statement might mean in its fine print, Mycielski pointed out that it was primarily thanks to Chopin's exceptional talent that his music became a symbol of musical Polishness in his own times and remains so today, and that the presence of folk elements in his work is not its most essential problem. However, it is hardly surprising that the question set out in the title of this paper has been addressed already by several generations of musicologists.

To get in medias res, I shall illustrate how the problem is expressed from the perspective of a foreign musicologist, quoting a statement by Jacques Handschin from 1964:

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<sup>1</sup> Mycielski Zygmunt, *Kilka myśli o Chopinie i polskiej muzyce współczesnej* [Several thoughts on Chopin and Polish Contemporary music] w: *Szkice i wspomnienia*, (Warszawa, 1999), 21–29.

‘Wie bekannt, wird die Impressivität von Chopins Kunst auch durch die Übernahme von Zügen der polnischen volkstümlichen Tanzmusik gefördert. Immerhin glaube ich, dass die Bedeutung des polnischen Elements bei Chopin überschätzt wird und dass man zu weit geht, indem man ihn zum Begründer der ersten „nationalen Schule“ in Europa macht (die Übertreibung geht in die Zeit von Chopin selbst zurück, als sich in Europa Polenbegeisterung mit anti-russischer Propaganda verband).’<sup>2</sup>

A brief comment on this passage: Handschin confirms, with some reservations, the old and common conviction that:

- the national character of Chopin’s music is linked to its reference to folk tradition (he emphasises, however, that it is overestimated),
- from the very beginning, political circumstances led to the national character of Chopin’s music being overvalued and its place in historical musical processes wrongly defined.

Handschin uses the term *volkstümlich*, which may be interpreted as signifying both folk tradition and also popular dance music in a folkish style. This last observation of Handschin’s moves one to take a look at the wider context of Chopin’s oeuvre as a source of inspiration.

The aim of this paper is to present a concise survey of the methods hitherto advanced for examining the contacts, inspirations and relations between Polish folk music in its regional varieties and hypostases, on the one hand, and Fryderyk Chopin and his compositions, on the other, as well as the limitations of those methods and also selected other ways of analysing the problem which have not previously been considered. As for any critical assessment, this should not be linked to the sociocritical conditions of musicological cognition formulated within the framework of the concept of ‘new musicology’.

#### SOURCES

The sources constituting the object of the analyses, comparisons and conclusions concerning the relationship between Chopin and Polish folk music can be quite precisely defined. This is important, since it is they, with their informational content, that inspire and delimit the enquiry undertaken and the results obtained.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Handschin, *Musikgeschichteim Ueberblick*, ii, suppl. edn (1964), 361.

## CHOPIN SOURCES

The direct sources originating from Chopin himself, besides his musical output, are unfortunately rather scant and confined to his correspondence. Ryszard Przybylski's wonderful book<sup>3</sup> allows me to pass over that part of the problem which concerns his correspondence. Perhaps just with the necessary rider that for the ethnomusicologist identifying Chopin's allusions to specific folk models the most crucial evidence consists of the composer's music itself, information relating to the properties of folk music as perceived by Chopin and information locating Chopin's possible contacts with verbal folk tradition in its original form and its secondary forms, that is, arrangements. Essentially, however, that part of the work has been largely carried out already.

Yet it is a most crucial, and remarkable, fact that we have neither sources nor knowledge which would testify that Chopin noted down in music the musical manifestations of folk tradition that he observed or that he recorded them in verbal, analytical descriptions and characterisations. In actual fact, except for jocular accounts from Szafarnia, featuring the words to a song associated with harvest festivals ('okrężne'), a rustic Catalani sitting on a fence, a Jewish musician and his dilapidated double bass, and also Chopin's unproblematic participation in the music-making of a local band,<sup>4</sup> little else has come down to us. The unique notation of the Szafarnian harvest song allows us, with a great deal of probability, to match it with a suitable melody, and yet Chopin made no use of such a harvest melody in his work.

We also have no recorded information of any greater interest shown by Chopin in the earliest collections of Polish folk music. This inclines one to postulate that Chopin's musical memory was the key source of his knowledge of folk music traditions, and the question ought to be posed as to how enduring and faithful to detail was this memory. As we know, musicians have a huge capacity for storing music in their memory banks.

<sup>3</sup> Ryszard Przybylski, *Cień Jaskółki* [A swallow's shadow] (Kraków, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See Bronisław Edward Sydow (ed.) *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina* (hereafter *KFC*) [The correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin] (Warszawa, 1955), i, 53–56.



His highly critical assessment of Kolberg's *Pieśni ludu polskiego*, the first series for voice with piano,<sup>5</sup> may have concerned two musical-aesthetic aspects: the triviality and incompatibility of the accompaniments to the folk songs, and insufficient accuracy in reproducing their original melodies. This would therefore be a justified criticism of the quality of the transmission of the original source, that is, the folk tradition. Whatever the case may be, this does signal that for Chopin the written records of folk music produced at that time probably left much to be desired, and it may explain why they failed to rouse his serious interest. So he must have trusted his own memory, although with the passage of time he complained that he could no longer recall how 'they sing back home'.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that his memory retained a general picture of these songs, but without the details. Were this the case, then it would constitute one of the reasons for the serious difficulties with finding concrete prototypes, for example in his Mazurkas.

Among the relatively early information relating to Chopin's quoting from folk material, one important fact is that Chopin improvised in Vienna on the theme of 'chmiel'.<sup>7</sup> It should be explained here that 'chmiel' is a ritual wedding song, and that in Polish folk tradition it is known in dozens of regional variants, which it is difficult to reduce to a single melodic-rhythmic thread or type<sup>8</sup>. So it will forever remain a secret, not only how Chopin improvised in Vienna, but also which version of 'chmiel' formed the object of that improvisation.

While remarking on the existence of different versions of 'chmiel', one should note the even greater significance of the expression 'Polish folk music' which scholars generally use without reservation. This is in fact an empty generalisation, as it encompasses heterogenic folk traditions—a whole range of essentially very different regional folk traditions and styles in Poland, their common denominator being the Polish song language. There is no doubt that Chopin had serious gaps in his knowledge and experience of many regional traditions, for example,

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<sup>5</sup> *Pieśni ludu polskiego* was first published in full in Warsaw in 1857.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Wojciech Grzymała from Edinburgh, 30 Oct. 1848, *KFC*, ii, 285.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to his family in Warsaw, Vienna 12 Aug. 1829, *KFC*, i, 93.

<sup>8</sup> J. Stęszewski, *Z zagadnień wariabilności muzyki ludowej* [The issue of variations in folk music] in: *Studia Hieronimo Feicht sepigenario dedicata*, ed. Z. Rissa, (Kraków, 1967), 55–63.



the folklore of Podhale or Kurpie. Thus his contacts with Polish folklore had a fragmentary character, *pars pro toto*. Given this situation, and in respect to the small number of identified adaptations of folk music in the Chopin oeuvre, it is difficult to declare whether the range of his experience of folk music may be considered representative. Although this is not, of course, the most important factor here.

At this point we must mention the output of Chopin himself, which is at the centre of our attention and around which are focussed all our scholarly intentions, including those which are designed to show to what extent this output is permeated by folkloric elements.

#### COMPARATIVE SOURCES: VERBAL SOURCES

The scholar cannot ignore the existence of such verbal sources relating to Chopin and his contacts with folk music both from around Chopin's times and from a somewhat later period. However, their value is limited, as Charles Seeger pointed out when speaking of the drawbacks of musicological linguocentrism.<sup>9</sup> External verbal sources are not, however, great in number.

#### COMPARATIVE SOURCES: SHEET MUSIC AND RECORDINGS

These sources can be divided into two basic groups. The first consists of the oral rural tradition. The second is constituted by popular songs.

The first group comprises material purposely gathered from the 1830s to the present day. The documentary value of this material varies greatly, and so making use of its earlier part, from before the advent of recorded music, requires a professional critique of the reliability of the sources before they are used as a point of reference for the Chopin oeuvre. The second difficulty, perhaps even more acute, is that this material, numbering tens of thousands of items, has never been set in order in an efficient music catalogue, which means that penetrating the material is a laborious and uncertain process, relying on memory and chance.

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Seeger, *Studies In Ethnomusicology* (Berkeley, 1977).