

FINCK HENRY THEOPHILUS

THE MENTOR: FAMOUS
COMPOSERS, VOL. 1,
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Henry Finck

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FAMOUS COMPOSERS

FRÉDÉRIC FRANÇOIS CHOPIN	1810-1849
FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY	1809-1847
FRANZ PETER SCHUBERT	1797-1828
ROBERT SCHUMANN	1810-1856
FRANZ LISZT	1811-1886
JOHANNES BRAHMS	1833-1897

While it is generally understood that the three great musical countries are Italy, Germany, and France, it must not be forgotten that Poland revolutionized the music of the pianoforte, the most popular and universal of all instruments. That small country looms up very big indeed in the history of the piano. Paderewski, the greatest pianist of our time, and one of the best composers (although his day as such has not yet come), is a Pole, and so is the pianist who ranks next to him, Josef Hofmann. Karl Tausig, in his day, was a piano giant; while three other Poles are well known to all music-lovers of our time,—Moszkowski and the Scharwenka brothers, all of them composers for the same instrument.

CHOPIN, THE SOUL OF THE PIANO

Greatest of all the Poles, however, is Frédéric François Chopin. While his name is usually printed with the French accents, and the French are inclined to claim him as their own because his father emigrated from France to Poland, he himself was as thoroughly Polish in all his sympathies as his mother, and there is reason to believe that his paternal ancestors also came originally from Poland. Some of the traits that have endeared his music to all players and listeners—its elegance, its charm, its polished style—make it seem French; but the Poles also are noted for these same qualities; and in other respects Chopin's music is as thoroughly and unmistakably Polish as it is an expression of his unique genius.

This is true particularly of his polonaises and his mazurkas. Polonaises seem to have been played originally at the coronation of Polish kings when the aristocrats were marching past the throne; while the mazurkas were quaint old folk dances. In Chopin's pieces the aristocratic and the folk elements are artistically blended, and that is one of their principal charms. Like Luther Burbank's wonderful new fruits, they unite the raciness of the soil with the qualities of his own creative genius.

Why does an audience invariably applaud a Chopin *valse* enthusiastically, provided it is well played? Because the Chopin *valse* is both popular and artistic. No one thinks of the ballroom while it is heard: it is enjoyed because of its enchanting melody, its rhythmic swing, its elegance, and its exquisite harmonic changes. Why are his *études* applauded with no less fervor? Because, though modestly called studies, they are dazzling displays of skill and at the same time lofty flights of poetic fancy, astonishing in their originality, like most of his works. "Preludes," he called more than two dozen of his short pieces; but they are so many precious stones, every facet polished by a master hand.

His splendid sonatas were for a long time underrated, because he refused to cut them according to traditional patterns; but in these days of musical free thinking we laugh at such objections and applaud his sonatas as much as his short pieces.

While the public loves Chopin for the reasons hinted at, experts hold him in highest honor also because he discovered the true language of the piano, which all the composers who came after him had to learn to speak. By his ingenious use of the pedal to combine "scattered" tones into chords he revealed an entirely new world of ravishing tone colors of extraordinary richness and variety. Quite new, too, were the dainty ornamental notes that here and there bedew his melodies like an iridescent spray. He created not only a new style of playing, but also pieces of new patterns, or forms; whereas most of even the greatest masters had contented themselves with accepted traditional forms and simply enlarging or improving them.

When Paderewski plays a Chopin mazurka, he varies the pace incessantly, with most enchanting, poetic effect. This is called "tempo rubato." It was used before Chopin, notably by opera singers; but it was through him that it became the accepted mode of interpreting all poetic music, not only for the piano, but for the orchestra. Thanks to Chopin's influence, combined with that of Wagner and Liszt, no good pianist or orchestral conductor of our time performs a piece of music in monotonous metronomic time, except in a ballroom.

MENDELSSOHN'S MUSICAL SUNSHINE

When Mendelssohn's parents called him Felix they chose the right name for him; for Felix means happy, and throughout his life few things occurred to cast on him shadows of dark clouds like those which occasioned the gloomy moods of Chopin, Beethoven, Schumann, and Liszt. While Chopin also had his happy moments, a vein of sadness twines through most of his pieces. It is significant that of these pieces the one most often heard is the funeral march from one of his sonatas; whereas of Mendelssohn's pieces the one most in vogue is the jubilant wedding march from his music to "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Evidently there dwells in most souls a love of both the sad and the cheerful in art.

There was a time when Mendelssohn's popularity was second to that of no other composer. His short piano pieces known as "Songs without Words" in particular enjoyed unbounded popularity, thanks to their tunefulness, which all could appreciate. The thing was overdone, and as in all such cases the inevitable reaction came, these pieces being looked on now as mere sentimental trifles. Paderewski, however, has shown that if played in the modern way they appeal as much as ever to music lovers. He has the audacity to use the *tempo rubato*, which Mendelssohn would have none of; but there is reason to think he would like it as used by Paderewski.

MENDELSSOHN'S SONGS AND CHORAL WORKS

While the songs of Mendelssohn enjoyed for a generation as wide popular favor as his “Songs without Words,” it is not likely that they will ever recover their lost ground,—ground which they lost because, though tuneful, most of them are superficial. There is no doubt a good deal of “small talk” in many of Mendelssohn’s works, and small talk has no enduring value. But while the songs of this master are now neglected, his choral works, “St. Paul” and “Elijah,” still awe and thrill modern audiences, because in them, as in the oratorios of Handel and Bach, religious fervor is expressed in terms of noble music.

It is a curious and somewhat paradoxical fact that, while Mendelssohn’s personal sympathies were on the whole rather with the conservative classicists in the matter of form than with the modern progressives, by far the greatest of his works, particularly for orchestra, are those in which he heeds the modern craving for realism and program music, as illustrated in his “Fingal’s Cave” overture, the “Scotch” symphony, and the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” music. The overture to this is one of the marvels of music; for it is amazingly original from every point of view, though written by him when he was only seventeen years old.

It is commonly assumed that Italy is the land of melody; but Theodore Thomas used to maintain, and rightly, that the prince of melodists was the Austrian, Franz Schubert. Tunes flowed from his brain as spontaneously as water flows from a gushing well. He slept with his spectacles on, so as to lose no time when he jumped out of bed to jot down the melodies that came to him like inspirations from above. While he read a poem, the music suitable for it often sprang from his brain, Minerva-like.

SCHUBERT, GREATEST OF MELODISTS

It is this spontaneity of Schubert's melodies that explains their vogue, their universal popularity. Strange to say, during his life (which, to be sure, was pathetically short) his wonderful songs were, with a few exceptions, neglected, partly because with his melodies there were associated harmonies and modulations which to us are ravishing, but which to his contemporaries were "music of the future." The shrill dissonance of the child's cry when he thinks the Erlking is seizing him in the death-grip was as revolutionary and as far ahead of the times as anything Wagner or Liszt ever wrote. It was Liszt, by the way, who directed the world's attention to the marvels of Schubert's songs by playing them in his matchless way on the piano. Seeing how they moved audiences, the singers then took them up, and more and more convinced the world that among song writers Schubert was indeed king.

It is one of the strangest facts in musical history that the great masters who came before Schubert—while some of them (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven) wrote a considerable number of songs—reserved their best inspirations for their operas, symphonies, and sonatas. Schubert was the first who was willing to put his best into a "mere song," and that helps to explain his appeal to all music lovers.

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