

*Paweł Majewski*

## Introduction

### I. How to Write the Story of the Chopin Competition

The person, life and work of Fryderyk Chopin have been studied, analysed and described in the minutest detail. We can safely assume that the edifice of Chopin studies is now complete and it will not be easy to add as much as one more useful element to its structure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This is why while working on the book that you are now holding in your hands we have not tried to explore Chopin's biography and his oeuvre. We have accepted the existing knowledge in these fields, accumulated over more than one and a half centuries, as given and mostly undisputed, though we are aware of the ongoing controversies and debates concerning some specific questions. Our book, rather than to Chopin and his output of music, is dedicated to the International Piano Competition of his name, which has been held in Warsaw for nearly a century.

The main aim of our publication is therefore to present a detailed account of the debates and controversies that have accompanied the successive editions of the **Chopin Competition** (abbreviated hereafter as **ChC**) and its other non-musical aspects, on the basis of press reports as well as surviving archive materials, most of which have not been a subject of research so far. Since the sources we refer to are nearly unknown and forgotten, our book contains numerous long quotations. It is not, however, a mere anthology. It also comprises the results of our attempts to interpret those quotations and thus present the public discourse related to the Competition, as well as our own multi-layered sense-forming narration. Our book therefore *does not* aspire to become a detailed report from each of the ChC editions.

Our discussion of the Competition history is governed by a few general methodological principles. First of all, we have assumed that passing aesthetic judgments on specific Chopin performances is not our pigeon. Should our readers wish to learn which ChC edition represented the highest per-

formance standards, they may be disappointed with this book. One of our main subjects is the Polish dispute about ‘how best to play Chopin’<sup>1</sup>, and we emphasise the fact that no agreement and no lasting compromise has ever been reached with regard to this issue.

Nor did we attempt to collect all the available backstage anecdotes and personal memories of the Competition participants and jurors. Several books dedicated to such memories have been published, so our readers can satisfy their interest in this respect. On the other hand, we have had no intention of creating a dull repertory. This is why we have included mentions of events which prove that the ChC is not only a noble celebration of art, but also the work of fallible people who have their weaknesses, make mistakes and commit blunders. Of much significance to the image that we present here is also the reception of the Competition in the collective consciousness of the Polish society, and the various cultural initiatives undertaken in the context of the Competition.

## II. Methodological Remarks Concerning the Interpretation of the Chopin Competition as a Cultural Phenomenon

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the world’s humanities have gone through a hail of new experiences and ‘turns’, one of which was a turn toward analysing performing arts in their phenomenological aspect. This means that, rather than writing texts about other texts, as it has been done for the last two centuries, academic experts in the arts began to write about images, sounds and activities.

Realising the scale of the qualitative change brought about by applying this method is not easy, since the change is apparently not great. The study of graphic arts, music, theatre and film has developed for a long time and led to major achievements. It must be stressed, however, that until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century those disciplines of study treated their objects of research as **texts** of a specific kind, i.e. as entities characterised by inherent and stable meaning or set of meanings, which can be identified in the studied material as a result of intellectual procedures defined by text-centred humanities focused on literary and philosophical text analysis.

Thus, a study of the ‘theatre’ focused on the process of staging the literary text, and saw all the textual-descriptive accounts of the given produc-

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this book, single quotation marks refer to concepts, notions, words used in a non-literal or ironic sense, as well as ‘quotations within quotations’. Double quotation marks are used for quotations from sources, as well as names of hotels, titles of newspapers and periodicals, etc. (translator’s note).

tion as precious evidence, since they enriched or modified the playwright's own stage directions. 'Pictures' were studied as visual manifestations of a set of ideas in the artist's mind, which could also be expressed using language (this was especially the case with iconology and the related school in art history). 'Film' was approached as a quasi-literary work in which a sequence of moving pictures replaced a sequence of sentences (this was the stance represented by a large proportion of 20<sup>th</sup>-century film theorists and critics). 'Music' was a manifestation in actual performance of the notated score (which led to the absolute reign of formalist schools in musicology).

The game of meaning and understanding had its clear-cut and relatively unambiguous rules. The artistic process had its stable instances or moments, namely, the author (painter, composer, film director, producer, etc.) and the work, as they manifested themselves to the researcher's mind. If the author was abolished, as in structuralism, the situation became even simpler. The researcher took a work of art and submitted it to all kinds of analyses in perfect isolation from the outside world, very much as a biologist dissects a specimen of a newly discovered species in an immaculately clean lab. External circumstances, such as performance contexts, the audience and its reactions, emotional and political oscillations along the trajectory of reception – loomed somewhere in the background, but were of little consequence. Those researchers who wished to take serious interest in the qualities of the material manifestations of works representing the performing arts, the qualities which unfold in real time and are not found in the source text, had to face two major obstacles: the disrespect of the academic circles and the resistance of language itself; the latter proved much harder to deal with.

What did such textual studies and interpretations fail to grasp? Certainly all the ephemeral qualities and phenomena related to performing arts, as well as the majority of audience reactions, what is now referred to as 'the affective sphere'. What is more, text-centred methods were not suited to the study of spontaneous phenomena, improvisation, artistic actions, happenings, hybrid forms of artistic activity, borderline phenomena combining different arts, as well as grassroots projects which had no specific personal author. Audience behaviour commanded attention only when it took extreme forms (fainting, hysteria, protests), and even in such cases it played a merely anecdotal role in academic narration. (One rare exception was the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, where audience behaviour became an autonomous episode in European cultural history, marking the end of the *belle époque*. Still, even in this case it was all too frequently dismissed as a 'scandal' until Modris Eksteins presented his interpretation of the event<sup>2</sup>.) Most impor-

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Eksteins, *The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, A Peter Davison Book / Houghton Mifflin Company 1989.

tantly, text-centred studies and their discourses missed what Walter Benjamin referred to already a hundred years ago as the 'aura' – a unique, non-discursible, non-reproducible, elusive quality of the work's functioning, which has a bearing on its reception by listeners / spectators, who perceive the work of art not only by means of analytic intellect expressed through language.

What in a way justifies all these 'rigid' textual approaches to the work of art is that they were largely a reaction to the oversensitive, even mawkish Romantic and post-Romantic type of perception. When Eduard Hanslick published his ground-breaking treatise *On the Musically Beautiful* (Germ. orig. *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1854), which laid the foundation for formalism in musicology, his aim was to counteract the flowery style that characterised the music critics of the day. Though he never quite achieved this goal, he did outline the fundamental opposition which was to define all the modern styles and ways of writing about music. 'Music' was to be conceived as inspiring either emotions or the human reason, and could therefore be discussed in either emotional or rational terms. Notably, it was only extremely rarely that scholars considered the possibility of a fruitful combination of these two, or of going beyond such bipolar models and conceiving of music (especially classical one) as a correlate of the human corporeality, and not – of the emotional and mental spheres.

The change of approach at the turn of the new millennium therefore proved to enrich the field, but also made research far more difficult. How are we supposed to 'study in words' one-time actions, fleeting sounds and short-lived images? When in the 1970s and 80s McLuhan's successors initiated the debate on the mutual relations between the oral and the literate in the language communication of human cultures, in the heat of their discussions about the superiority of the oral to the literary or vice versa they forgot about one significant element – namely, that oral and written transmission of linguistic messages are so different from each other that trying to apply the same model of interpretation to both of them and 'weighing' them on the same scales of cultural value simply makes no sense. One fundamental difference is the 'difference in time', of which already Plato and some other ancients were evidently aware. *Verba volant, scripta manent*; what is spoken exists only at the moment of speech and only for those present, who are aware of the act of speech. What is written lasts in time and space.

The same difference (and all the related intellectual problems) can be observed when comparing the 'textual' and 'phenomenal' approaches to performing arts. The 'textual' stance misses the aura, but this is the price it pays for the luxury of dealing with the lasting traces of events in the form of their verbal or audio-visual (but approached as quasi-verbal) records. The 'phenomenal' stance is an attempt to recapture the aura, in the sense of all the non-textual (sensual and emotional) qualities of the phenomenon, but

the price for this is likewise high; namely, the loss of the inter-subjective structure of insight. Attempts to describe the 'essence' of any artistic performance in a text frequently boil down to the observer's collected impressions and to the utopian endeavour to reproduce an ephemeral event by means of a verbal account, which in the former times was the domain of persons of letters, not – of scholars. In short, whatever ultra-modern theories we may use to prop up our line of argument, we always find ourselves returning – albeit in a roundabout way – to the Romantic discourse.

The performance of a musical work can only be preserved in the form of a recording or a textual account. However, neither of these media can preserve what Benjamin calls 'event aura' or in fact (even in audio-visual version) – the extra-musical qualities which are part and parcel of such a performance. Professional recordings are engineered as a rule in a way that does not reflect the performance context, which might distort 'pure reception' as an ideal theoretical-musicological construct. The memory of a music performance is therefore of necessity imperfect and paradoxical in a peculiar fashion. Describing someone's performance is difficult even if we heard it and saw it in person. How, then, should one give an account of the early performances of the then young artists who are now in the evening of their lives, or have long been dead?

The Chopin Competition as an object of research whose aim is to write its synthetic history – proves to be even more problematic because it spans a long period of time. A 'competition' is not the same as a 'concert' – an only apparently trivial remark. The point is not naively to attempt a description of 'how it really was' or even, perhaps less naively, to reproduce the broad spectrum of emotions expressed by artists, jurors, critics, and other listeners in the competitive context. We are not going to write 'a history of bodies and emotions' or 'a history of sensual experience' related to the Competition. Did Ivo Pogorelić ostentatiously chew gum during his performances merely to provoke the jurors, or because it really helped him focus on the instrument? And did he really chew gum at all? Should we believe witnesses who claim that he changed Chopin's notated score on purpose and was therefore disqualified, or perhaps those who claim that he reproduced faithfully every single note, but submitted Chopin's music to overly daring dynamic and agogic deviations? This last question may be the easiest to answer if we listen to the recordings carefully, comparing them to the scores (in the same editions that were used during the Competition in 1980). Question No. 2 is harder to address since the cameramen stood too far from the podium to close up on pianists' faces (only in the last few editions, thanks to television and online streaming, have viewers been able to savour the performers' every involuntary facial expression). But if we look hard, perhaps this doubt can also be resolved. It is the first and possibly most interesting of our questions that will forever remain unanswered.

It is therefore desirable that our anthropologically-oriented ‘history of the Chopin Competition’ should follow the direction mapped out by the social sciences rather than by art studies or by the various now fashionable studies of bodies, emotions and sensual experience. A promising cognitive perspective is one that looks at the successive editions of the ChC as a status struggle between groups of performers, jurors, critics, and ‘ordinary’ listeners, taking place in changing political, social, cultural, technical, and civilizational conditions. A solid basis for this kind of studies has been proposed by Lisa McCormick and Pierre Bourdieu; it also seems worthwhile to draw on earlier authors such as Roger Caillois and even Johan Huizinga. One could also make use of the old classics of anthropology for a tongue-in-cheek attempt to view the Competition as a kind of alien and exotic religious ritual in which crowds of worshippers gather around their deities while the latter produce spellbinding sounds. Most of all, the public statements of persons who personally witnessed the successive editions need to be carefully examined since, though the aesthetic qualities of the ChC performances themselves may be hard to compare, a critical comparison of statements concerning those qualities may well be attempted. What emerges from such a comparative study is an image of the Competition as a field of symbolic struggle centred on the idea of an ideal Chopin interpretation.

### III. The Chopin Competition as a Democratic Agon of the Modern Era<sup>3</sup>

Agonism is one of the most long-lasting features of human communities, confirmed since the beginnings of humankind in all the documents of our past, from archaeological finds and the oldest historical records, to the infinite wealth of information from modern and most recent history. The vast category of ‘agonism’ comprises all those social practices whose aim it is to prove that some people are better than others, for instance, because they are stronger, prettier, richer, more gifted or better skilled at various activities. Most likely the predilection for rivalry and for constantly testing one’s worth against that of others is part of ‘human nature’ (however we might understand this term), derived from our biological evolution. At its deepest, most primeval level it may have to do with the laws of natural selection, which favour those individuals who are best fitted to the conditions of the external environment.

---

<sup>3</sup> This section of the introduction has been adopted and revised from the 1<sup>st</sup> issue of the periodical *Chopin Review* of 2018, where it appeared as a review of Lisa McCormick’s book *Performing Civility* (see next footnote).

Originally the only field of competition in the human world was fighting and physical violence. Some researchers claim that already cave paintings, such as those in Lascaux and Altamira, may have resulted from some form of competition – but these are only ungrounded speculations, and we lack any evidence that might give such claims even a semblance of plausibility. Written records of the oldest historical cultures likewise mention only one type of *agon* – the military one. It is in ancient Greece that we find the earliest forms of symbolic competition.

Many 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century books stress the unique character of Greek culture as compared to other ancient cultures. What was rarely observed, however, is that among the many innovations and inventions, novel ideas and concepts that the Greeks contributed to human life, one of those that proved of the greatest significance, was their ability to transfer conflicts onto a symbolic plane, and to transplant agonistic behaviour from the spheres of war, struggle and violence into that of contests, games and regular forms of competition whose aim is a symbolic rather than material advantage. The concept of *kleos* (Gr. κλέος – renown, glory), already appearing in Homer's epics, in classical Greek referred to both forms of competition, primarily to the fruits of military victory, but with what we might now call 'cultural' connotations, since it was associated with achieving a solid, advantageous and positive status in the memory of the future generations. In the classical period (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), this symbolisation of struggle was complemented by the tragic and comic *agon*, represented by the earliest 'artistic contests' in the strict sense of the term as known to historians. Like modern competitions, those ancient ones functioned in complex social contexts which we can only partly understand today.

The European Middle Ages did not contribute much to the model of agonism worked out in ancient Greece. We usually follow Norbert Elias in assuming that institutions of 'high culture' began to take shape in those medieval societies which achieved sufficient internal stability for the ruling social classes to be able and willing to invest in such activity – which brought no military or political benefits, but could increase their prestige. Such were the social origins of courtly culture, with its troubadour tournaments, poetic contests and musicians' displays of skill. The Renaissance took over these institutions, giving them a strong and extensive base in the form of institutionalised artistic patronage. This model of (what we might term, after Elias) 'civilised' agonistic behaviour represented by institutions of 'high culture' continued till the end of the feudal era. Rulers still engaged their troops in deadly combat and exposed their societies to the ravages of political feud. Still, they found entertainment and sought to gain splendour by taking passive and sometimes even active part in competitions between poets, painters, and music composers. Such contests were rarely given a strict formal frame-

work. There was no need for this, since the rivals were not so much the performing artists as the institutions of political power that stood behind them.

This state of affairs changed rapidly with the decline of the feudal system. The bourgeoisie that consolidated its power in Europe's geopolitically most important centres felt no need to prove its advantage over adversaries in either political, military or (a significant change) economic contests involving art. This was one of the reasons for art gaining Romantic autonomy. The agonistic factor was nevertheless still present in artistic practice, and – since in the 19<sup>th</sup> century art became independent of political patronage – the desire to prove one's worth in purely artistic contests became the more strongly felt.

This desire found its most distinct expression in the institution of classical music performance contests. The conditions for designing an *agon* were particularly favourable in this field. The participants had the same type of instruments at their disposal, as well as a relatively uniformly constructed set of music material to be performed. The same canon of music 'from Bach to Bartók', which constitutes the repertoire of the vast majority of music competitions, is at the same time part and parcel of the cultural capital of those social groups that make up the competition audience.

Detailed studies of the thus established relation between three groups: competition participants, jurors and the audience – are today the domain of scientists, whose efforts constitute a valuable contribution to sociologically and anthropologically oriented studies on music, understood not only and not primarily as the artistic work contained in the score, but also as a type of social-cultural practice engaged and situated in numerous contexts which exhibit no close relation to acoustic phenomena<sup>4</sup>.

The institution of music performance competition (since its beginnings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) involves a tension (frequently reaching the limits of destructive contradiction) between arbitrary aesthetic judgments related to acts of music performance and the proposed explicit and objective character of the criteria for assessment. Researchers point to the strong impact that this tension exerts on all the groups involved in the competition procedures, and explain how the jurors, the audience and the performers themselves attempt to relieve or at least neutralise such tension. The problem cannot be solved on the basis of aesthetic and social principles functioning in Western cultures; its presence is most likely one of the key factors generating the society's interest in such competitions. What potential for excitement would such events hold, after all, if their participants' abilities were measured with a calliper or a metronome?

---

<sup>4</sup> One of the most important studies of this kind is L. McCormick's *Performing Civility. International Competitions in Classical Music*, Cambridge–New York 2015.

The same is true, in fact, about all other great competitions which receive much media coverage. People watch the Olympics, FIFA World Cup, or world championships in any other sports discipline because they want to experience the emotions resulting from the ambiguity of competition scenarios, not for the sake of strict rules. No one would dedicate attention to such contests if they did not contain the element of uncertainty. The only obvious element of assessing performers in a music competition are their mistakes. Everything that goes beyond the musicians' mere technical competence invites fascination. In the present world, already fed up with the excess of news, sensations, scandals, and transgressions, Goethe's maxim *in der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister* proves still highly relevant.

#### IV. Bibliographical Note

The history of the Chopin Competition has so far been the subject of several synthetic publications focused on factual detail, three of which seem to have proved of the greatest significance:

- Kronika Międzynarodowych Konkursów Pianistycznych im. Fryderyka Chopina 1927–1995* [*Chronicle of the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition 1927–1995*], eds B. Niewiarowska, I. Jarosz et al., Gdańsk–Warszawa 2000;
- Międzynarodowe Konkursy Pianistyczne imienia Fryderyka Chopina w Warszawie 1927–1970* [*The International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw 1927–1970*], ed. J. Prosnak, Warszawa 1970;
- S. Dybowski, *Laureaci Konkursów Chopinowskich w Warszawie* [*Winners of Warsaw's Chopin Competitions*], Warszawa 2005.

Memoirs and personal accounts include two notable books:

- J. Waldorff, *Wielka gra* [*The Great Game*], Warszawa 1993 and later editions;
- S. Wysocki, *Wokół dziesięciu Konkursów Chopinowskich* [*Around Ten Editions of the Chopin Competitions*], Warszawa 1982; 2<sup>nd</sup> extended edition: S. Wysocki, *Wokół Konkursów Chopinowskich* [*Around the Chopin Competition*], Warszawa 1986.

The most comprehensive online resource (as far as factual information and bibliography are concerned) is the website of the Fryderyk Chopin Institute in Warsaw (NIFC): [www.nifc.pl](http://www.nifc.pl).

All the above-mentioned publications (as well as many others, listed in the footnotes) have been of assistance to the authors during their work on this book.