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The Young Chopin – Genesis of Romanticism

Presenter: Professor Terence Dennis, Head of Classical Performance Studies, Department of Music, University of Otago, Dunedin

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Chopin 1835, Watercolour portrait painted by the then 16-year-old Maria Wodzinska (1819-1896). Wodzinska and Chopin became engaged but never married. Wikimedia Commons

Terence Dennis's lecture on the young Frédéric Chopin was an engaging and entertaining account of the background and circumstances of Chopin's early years.

We learned of Poland's close connections with France, which can be traced back to the mid-18th century when the exiled King of Poland, Stanislaw Leszczyński, settled in the Duchy of Lorraine along with many of his supporters. Chopin's father, Nicolas, was born here in 1771 but was educated in Warsaw, eventually working as a tutor in the household of Count Skarbek. Here he met his future wife, Tekla Justyna Kryzanowska, the 24-year-old daughter of Skarbek's estate manager.

We gained a sense of the Russian influence on Poland, especially in 1792, when a large part of its territories was lost to Russia. Only with Napoleon's victory at Jena in 1806 was Warsaw liberated, with the Duchy of Warsaw established the following year. As a result, French influences were once again predominant in Warsaw. This rather unsettled and ever-changing political landscape explains to some degree the highly patriotic character of much of Chopin's early music, which included polonaises and mazurkas. Another important factor was the time he spent absorbing the exotic sounds and traditions of Polish folk music during the lengthy periods spent on his mother's family's country estates.

Chopin's first teacher was a violinist, Adalbert Zywny, a native of Bohemia, who is credited with inspiring Chopin's enduring love of the music of Bach. Dennis alluded to music that Chopin might have heard in Warsaw at this time; although it wasn't an important centre of music during the early part of the 19th century, it's likely he would have heard the Irish-born pianist John Field play as he passed through Warsaw on his way home from Russia.



*Cast of Chopin's Hand
Wikimedia Commons*

Italian opera also featured in Warsaw and it's likely that the young Chopin would have been exposed to this during these years. He certainly absorbed the bel canto style that prevailed in the music of Rossini and Bellini. Other influences were the music he heard in homes and drawing-rooms around Warsaw. While this included extracts from the various Italian operas so popular during this time, solo piano music was included. Predominant here was the polonaise, which had gradually evolved into a short character piece for piano solo. Chopin's earliest printed work was a Polonaise in G minor, written at the age of eight, and although it features the strongly heroic style typical of the form generally, his characteristic melodic and emotional beauty brings a new expressive dimension to this small form. This was even more evident in the second of Dennis's musical examples, a Polonaise in A-flat dedicated to Chopin's teacher, Zywny. Composed when Chopin was 11, it is significantly more advanced both harmonically and pianistically than the earlier G minor Polonaise.

Further influences include the music of composers such as Hummel and Moscheles. Hummel, whom Dennis described as a "first-rate second-rater", was a pupil of Mozart, and can be viewed historically as a link between the late Classical style and Chopin. His highly elaborate, decorative right hand figurations – features of the 'jeu perlé' style – were absorbed into Chopin's own style from an early stage.



Chopin's Piano, Valledemossa, Mallorca

Chopin began to compose mazurkas in 1825-26 at the age of 14-15. Since these were often 'presentation' pieces – gifts for friends – they often exist in several authentic copies, each with slight variants. Dennis played extracts from three of them, in the keys of D, G, and B-flat. Although early works, they are usually found at the back of modern editions.

Dennis continued by discussing Chopin's musical ideals. He believed that musical declamation should be grounded on vocal rules. He appreciated the way singers could sustain a melodic line, and the ease with which many were able to use their voices. Incorrect accentuation sounded "like a dog barking". As far as piano technique was concerned, Chopin believed that the relaxed wrist essential to good piano technique is the equivalent of vocal aspiration¹

The composers, Kalkbrenner and Weber, were also mentioned in the context of early influences on Chopin. Kalkbrenner was the most fashionable and popular piano teacher in Paris, and Chopin became acquainted with his music in his early teens while still in Warsaw. Weber wrote some "magnificent" polonaises, and according to Dennis, his four solo piano sonatas are also worthy of investigation.

One of Chopin's most significant early compositions was the set of variations for piano and orchestra on the theme of the duet 'La ci darem la mano' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Composed in 1827 when Chopin was 17, this is the first of the six concerted works that Chopin was to compose. The Variations were published as his Op.2 in Vienna in 1830, and became known to Chopin's contemporary, Robert Schumann, whose subsequent review of the work contained the famous phrase, "Hats off, gentleman, a genius!"

Another early work displaying many of the features of Chopin's brilliant early style is the Piano Trio in G minor, Op.8, written in the late 1820s. This is a piano concerto in all but name, with close affinity to similar works by Hummel. Another chamber work, the Introduction and Polonaise, Op.3 for cello and piano, dates from the same period, as does an early Sonata in C minor (published as Chopin's Op.4 in 1851), which he wrote while a student at

¹ Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's study, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher, as seen by his pupils* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) is the best source of information on Chopin's views on music and teaching, and was recommended by Dennis. This is available from the IRMTNZ Teacher Training Library.

the Warsaw Conservatory and dedicated to his teacher at the time, Józef Elsner. Dennis singled out the slow movement for our attention, a beautiful nocturne-like reverie cast, unusually, in quintuple time.

Dennis also mentioned the Polonaise Adieu in the uncommon key of B-flat minor composed in 1826, which he upheld as an excellent piece to select as an introduction to Chopin for an able student. It includes a reference to music by Rossini in its central trio section, and was, in fact, the last polonaise that Chopin wrote in Poland. The final works discussed were three polonaises, posthumously published as Op.71, in the keys of D minor, B-flat and F minor. These are also worth investigating as repertoire for more advanced students.

Although a little disjointed in its organisation, this was a lively and stimulating lecture, in which Dennis shared his enthusiasm, knowledge, and love for Chopin's early music. It is always fascinating to hear the seeds of a composer's most mature style in his earliest music, and Dennis deftly guided us through the labyrinth of Chopin's early years and music, on the way alerting us to many gems in the repertoire that might otherwise be overlooked.

Dianne James is an IRMTNZ Council and Auckland Branch Committee member. She has an interest in 18th-century music, especially Haydn, and has presented seminars to both Auckland and Wellington Branches on teaching his music. Dianne contributes regularly to Radio New Zealand's 'Pressing On' and 'Composer of the Week'.