

Interpreting Chopin's Music Today: Mythologization of Art: *Kitsch*

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Abstract—The subject of this abstract is related to the notion of 'popular music', a notion that should be treated with extreme care, particularly when applied to Frederic Chopin, one of the greatest composers of Romanticism. By 'popular music', we mean a category of everyday music, set against the more intellectual kind, referred to as 'classical'. We only need to look back to the culture of the nineteenth century to realize that this 'popular music' refers to the 'music of the low'. It can be studied from a sociological viewpoint, or as sociological aesthetics. However, we cannot ignore the fact that, very quickly, this music spread to the wealthiest strata of the European society of the nineteenth century, while likewise the lowest classes often listen to the intellectual classical music, so pleasant to listen to. Further, we can observe that a sort of 'sacralisation of kitsch' occurs at the intersection between the classical and popular music. This process is the topic of this contribution. We will start by investigating the notion of kitsch through the study of Chopin's popular compositions. However, before considering the popularisation of this music in today's culture, we will have to focus on the use of the word kitsch in Chopin's times, through his own musical aesthetics. Finally, the objective here will be to negate the theory that art is simply the intellectual definition of aesthetics. A kitsch can, obviously, only work on the emotivity of the masses, as it represents one of the features of culture-language (the words which the masses identify with). All art is transformed, becoming something outdated or even outmoded. Here, we are truly within a process of mythologization of art, through the study of the aesthetic reception of the musical work.

Keywords—F. Chopin, musical work, popular music, romantic music, mythologization of art, kitsch.

I. INTRODUCTION

SINCE the middle of the 19th century, the notion of 'popular music' seems to be ubiquitous in the cultural context as prominent cross-genre music. Many scholars even refer to a new 'mythologization' of art [1] stressing the importance of 'art for art's sake' when studying historical or contemporary societies and individuals. If 'popular music' as a whole might seem to be associated to 'kitsch', it has become crucial to understand 'how the popularization of salon music becomes kitsch, i.e. how 'kitsch' is produced by the different societies' [1].

Popular music draws on theories already present in sociological or musical aesthetics. In his works Tomaszewski analyses the subject of Chopin's reception, the research on the nature of genre music (e.g. 'salon music') and musicological studies (e.g. 'Chopin's preludes, nocturnes'), the post modern

notion of 'kitsch' (which conceives the sense of places, societies and states as constantly in motion), or the increasing centrality of emotions feelings in popular music as a way to explore the world [2], [13].

'Popular music', today, is seen as related to the idea of 'kitsch' (of music of the low, of the masses), which includes 'simple music', but surpasses that notion. Firstly, it is based on the assumption that people and places are interconnected, where the latter are not fixed locations but are constituted from a variety of flows that constantly circulate through locations. Secondly, 'popular music' implies *kitsch*; as a consequence, fixed notions of identity and of 'passive' reception are disregarded in favour of a permeable notion of national boundaries and of the complexity of cultural exchanges. Thirdly, 'popular music' comprises the concepts of liberty and creation, conceived as the core of social and cultural life. For example, during Romanticism, "creation means the enrichment of imagination; valuable is what is original and eccentric"[1]. It becomes necessary to recall the principal ideas of Romanticism, which concern the way of feeling, thinking and moving, in conformity with supposed human nature. This is a new paradigm, which considers the emancipatory qualities of popular music, in opposition to the exclusive character of classical music (categories such as beauty and the sublime, etc.)

Problems related to the idea of 'kitsch' have always been present in the field of musicology. However, as part of sociology, musicology has incorporated 'kitsch' through the growing field of aesthetical perception of art, i.e. the investigation of the primacy of musical composition (sound, rhythms, repetition, etc.) as a modality of hearing (feeling) and being in the world. Thus, Zamoyski argues that "Chopin's music, instead of cutting us off from the world we live in, allows us to explore and construct the spaces of our everyday life"[2].

This is in resonance with the concepts of 'aesthetics' and 'practice', with aesthetical music, with the 'mobility' and the diffusion that are the heart of popular music studies [3], and, finally, with recent research projects developed in France and Poland (concerning, for example, the reception of music). Mobility studies are now broadening their perspectives into new territories belonging also to musicology, such as musical migrations, receptions, transfers as well as music history [3].

This contribution seeks to merge an approach and a methodology that have been developed especially in the works of Irena Poniatowska [1], [3], [10]. We can paraphrase her words to support the presence of 'kitsch' in form the "salon

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music" and to discuss its limits and advantages. The suggested areas of research are the following:

- Study of the aesthetic reception of the musical work of Frédéric Chopin.
- *Kitsch* in the emotivity of the masses
- Interpreting Chopin's music today

II. 'POPULAR MUSIC' IN A SOCIAL MODEL

It seems that, during the nineteenth century, decadence occurs at the core of artistic music, in the sense of a differentiation: it is important to emphasise the existence of a 'music of the masses' distinct from the 'music of the elites'. On the subject, Marcel Proust gives the following definition of 'popular music':

You can detest bad music, but, it cannot be despised, [...] Its role, insignificant in the history of music, is immense in the emotional history of societies [4].

Carl Dahlhaus, the German musicologist, writes about kitsch: "in music criticism particularly, kitsch is considered mainly –although not exclusively as a (pejorative) value attached to a composer's piece [...]" [3], [4].

Indeed, we cannot deny the existence of 'popular music', even if we find it distasteful and repulsive. Firstly, a salon composer in the European societies of the nineteenth century is a virtuoso pianist, for whom playing 'popular music' means "showing an emotional expression of his sentimental character" [1]. In fact, the role of salon composers is to seduce their public, with their *emotivity*, and their *romantic depth* ('profondeur romantique') in an elegant way; "a salon composer is elegant" [5]. And isn't this what some people could call *kitsch*? Secondly, it is necessary to consider the salon composer in the context of 'popular music' as a category of everyday music [6]. Thirdly, the language, in which salon composers produced their own music, is wrapped in a sort of criticism of the music itself (which involves misunderstanding and rejection). 'Salon music' is a popular music genre, also called 'Salons' in the plural. In (a) salon(s) musicians played salon music. Irena Poniatowska summarizes it in the following manner:

a salon composer is elegant, but this implies that he tightens the natural dimension and passionate rhythm, of sincere feelings, in a corset [...] dictated by fashion [...] He is emphatic to the point of impotence, well-mannered to the point of erasing his character traits, decorative and embellished by stupidity: his love is a degrading gentleness, his anger a poison [...], his excitement a vain noise [5].

A. Chopin's Decadent: Musical Work(s)

Chopin was likely referring to the European societies of the nineteenth century, in his snide allusion and the audience the Polish artist imagined evidently consisted of Chopinzees ('Chopin's listeners'). The salon in which the Romantic composer "played his mazurkas, nocturnes, scherzos, ballads and improvised songs from patriotic texts or in the rustic style of Polish poets. [...]", gathered a popular public, among whom

the forty ladies of the salon, such as Princess Marcelina Czartoryska [4]. She did not hesitate to relate that:

Chopin played like an angel, much too well for the inhabitants of the City, whose artistic education is a little problematic. He played a number of short pieces, after which the dancing began [7].

We realize that Princess Czartoryska describes the Polish composer in a historical dimension; we oscillate from 'salon music' to 'small salon music' in a style intended for the middle class (commerce, etc.). It should be noted that partially dominated in the nineteenth century a salon music with a lower artistic value, starts to be referred to as "leisure/entertainment music; it included simple dance music and program music without artistic ambitions". Schumann notices some lights and lacks of salon music [3]. In salon music, in effect, Chopin not only plays piano but:

"[...] is also able to play dances and accompaniment to 'leisure songs' or to songs aimed at fomenting patriotic feeling".

When seen from the standpoint of art and music history, the difference between the *music for elites* and *music for masses* is problematic and still unresolved, as is the relationship between *classical* and *popular music* [3].

Despite these issues, however, we can affirm that the Polish artist not only anticipated an unexpected turn in the history of music, but also split off from the European mainstream. We can suppose that Chopin would merely be freed from the Victorian and decadent avatars.



Fig. 1 Portrait of Chopin, Wodzinśka, 1835 [19]

B. Musical Forms: Nocturnes

In effect, we want to know whether Chopin could be called a 'Victorian or Decadent composer', and if his art, with which a popular public confronted; seemed more attuned to her increasing against, at least appeared intellectual, sexual or revolutionary? It could seem that the Polish composer, after having enough strength to escape complete corruption, lack the capability equipment of living a redeemed life through art.

According to studies on the aesthetic reception of Romantic music of the nineteenth century in France and Poland, the character of Chopin's musical work(s) is rather *national*

(*patriotic, polish, etc.*) [3]. Therefore, we can disregard the notions of identity and of 'passive' reception as in favour of a permeable notion of national boundaries and of complexity of cultural exchanges, placed in a social model [17]. We can then associate the notions of 'migration' and of 'mobility' to the notion of exchange.

These concepts are relevant because we are confronted with a kind of sacralisation of these works. This sacralising character of a musical piece is a function of its context ('where' and 'when') and its intentions ('why' and 'how'): it is seen as 'sacred' by composer, interpreter and listener. This relativism is connected not only to the repertoire, but also to how it is intentionally affected and changed. Further, what is important is also the relationship between composer, interpreter and listener, as well as the formal elements.

Moreover, we refer to nocturnes, in the plural, "as one of essential forms of a salon music" [8], which bring out a strong emotional response in the public. There is a narrative inconsistency in a melancholy perspective that may account for the strong criticism that surrounds this popular music. It is almost a sort of Preludes seen as the culmination of a Romantic aesthetics or something that surpasses these aesthetics towards a modern path. Preludes are also called the melancholy pieces comprised by an *American literary realism* [9].



Fig. 2 Chopin plays piano in Radziwiłł's Berlin salon, Berlin, Henryk Siemiradzki, 1887 [20]



Fig. 3 The author's pianino n°13153, August 1846 [21]

III. RECEPTION OF CHOPIN'S MUSICAL WORK IN TODAY'S CULTURE

One of the issues is the polish composer's image, which was first delineated in Poland and then spread to other countries, especially in poetry (France etc). Indeed, Chopin could not free himself from his image: "a rich sphere of feelings with a tendency towards melancholy, experiences dramatizing the state of his soul and external situations, were hidden under a mask of self-irony and a distance from reality, expressed with a great sense of humour and wit or "only tearful exile, weeping willow, sad colours in November, which in polish history has political connotations... as if his music did not express other emotions" [10].

We notice that the polish musicologist and historian Irena Poniatowska does not agree with the severity of criticism of Chopin in this regard. Poniatowska's moral position is clear and consistent with prevailing values, although the analogy of as a whole calls them into question. However, the tonal ambiguity of popular music is transferred to the intellectual classical music.

A. Interpreting Chopin's Music Today: Kitsch

It is worthwhile to ask: do today's image and work of Chopin still generate a sort of 'kitsch'? It seems that a Polish artist who, like Chopin, had strong message to convey, would be able to excite strong and varied reactions... In other words, public perception of this cause can be aroused through the awareness of Chopin, intended not merely to render his masterpieces sad (e.g. Nocturnes), but potentially revolutionary. Indeed, these loftiest feelings, which affect us, trivialize his masterpieces [10].

Yet, the problem is more complex. In fact, studies on music/musicology show that in European popular music there is often an ideological component to the way that an interpreter interprets a work that was originally recorded by an artist (composer) origin; the notion of ideological identity is associated to the notion of popular public. In addition, if we examine today's classical interpretations (piano) by Polish or International artists, we notice, very quickly, that they provide insight into this often misunderstood societies and musical genre. An analysis of several musical examples illustrates how Chopin's successors used his music to breathe new life into popular music, celebrated Polish national identity, and criticised popular misogyny.

B. The Polish Composer's Image

We could continue the research on the analysis of the European/International movement and its music to explain how today's interpreters embrace 'Chopinisme' and how they use it to articulate their sounds and rhythms in musical composition.

Zamoyski is supposed to cut through myths and legends, getting to the heart of Chopin's life and music [1]. The most interesting discovery of this research is the hypnosis of Chopin's music in different culture. Also, the core of emotion and feelings, within society on Chopin's music is still important, which includes the relationship between music and

literature called intermediality [11]. Zamoyski, in effect, draws attention to the biography and emotional life of this great romantic composer. The historian emphasises the literary image of his own Polishness through his compositions.

All that relates to Chopin's music can be analysed on three levels: intellectual, sentimental, and emotional [18]. It is close to the aesthetic views of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman and George Sand, for whom the language of music is the most indeterminable one among all the languages of the arts [18].

It is a truly poetic language, completely independent of words and written verse. It is, thus, poetry in its own right and for its own sake.

C. Composer's Defence

What about interpreting Chopin's music today as a tense *rubato* between the identity of a composer and her interpreter? Does it mean that the desire is not to break within the historical continuum of his works of art? In spite of *kitsch*, how could the work of Polish composer defend itself? What about American literary realism? These questions- and many others pull us out of what we are focusing on in the work of John Crowley entitled *American literary realism* [9].

In this regard, the Nocturne op. 9 n° 2 is of one of the most famous Chopin's nocturnes, where we can find an access key to his style. This nocturne, composed between 1830 and 1832, is tinged with melancholy. Furthermore, we can think of some arias by Rossini, the most impressive that we have heard, and of about fifteen ornamental variations from six different sources that fit this description in the world of improvisation of the late eighteenth century [16].

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the aim of this contribution has been to bring to light some of the myths that surround Chopin and his popular music. During his career as composer, Chopin was one of the key figures of European culture. In the words of the Polish historian Zamoyski, Chopin was a brilliant virtuoso pianist and yet the Polish composer gave only thirty public concerts in his lifetime [12]. Chopin was a national figure-head in his native Poland, even if the Polish artist lived in exile from the age of the nineteen [12]. Chopin's music is famous today and yet the composer wrote fewer pieces than many of his contemporaries. Chopin is a pianist of feelings *par excellence* and a Poet of sound [14]-[18].

For the Polish Professor Ekier, Chopin's characteristics pianist tricks are "articulation, tempi, rhythm, or the use of pedals" are concerned. "What is ideal in his interpretation is a combination of a melodious declamation with dramatic expression" [15]-[18].

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