

An excerpt from  
*Chopin: The Reluctant Romantic*  
Victor Gollancz, 1995

## CHOPIN AND THE WALTZ

No form more typifies the glitter and grace of the Parisian salons than the waltz, and the Chopin waltz in particular (after the polonaise and the mazurka, it was his favourite dance), but in citing a certain symbiotic relation between them one must be wary of generalisations. There was no more equality amongst the Parisian salons than in any other social sphere; nor were they the sole progenitors of Chopin's waltzes. At some, the guest list read like a *Who's Who* of the arts and sciences, at others the emphasis lay more on substance than on personalities, celebrities or otherwise. Whatever their status, however, they shimmered on the surface of a society in ferment. Now, for the first time in European history, it was the commercial middle classes, not the landed aristocracy, who were setting the pace: culturally, socially and economically. Where once the nobility had used art, and music in particular, as an agent of political distraction (and indirectly, of oppression), the bourgeoisie now flaunted their ascendancy with an ostentation rivalling that of Louis XIV. The most conspicuous citadel of their taste for the spectacular was the Paris Opéra, dominated by Meyerbeer and reflected in the operatic pot-pourris which engorged the repertoires of virtuoso instrumentalists, and a worship of bravura which found its more individual expression in the (preferably gladiatorial) institution of the benefit concert, to which Chopin was a sporadic and rather unwilling contributor. More significant for music in general, however, and for Chopin's in particular, was the booming domestic market. No middle-class home worthy of a second glance could afford to be without a piano, and preferably a pretty daughter or a comely wife to play it. The ambitious bourgeois husband had a deep vested interest in the idleness of his womenfolk, a wife with a job being the surest sign of an inadequate breadwinner. And few things could proclaim their homebound leisure more agreeably than a dainty demonstration of feminine "accomplishments" at the keyboard. Nor were their attentions by any means confined to the demure and frothy. Cashing in on the mania for opera, a burgeoning music industry put out thousands upon thousands of operatic medleys, variations on favourite scenes and arias and other confections rather more remotely associated with the stage. And for those unable to aspire to such heights, the publishers disgorged a veritable Niagara of pieces with no operatic connection whatever but which lured the prospective customer with the false promise of dramatic and arresting titles. In the humbler reaches of bourgeois aspiration, Paris in the 1830s resounded to the strains of *The Aeronauts - an Aerial Barcarolle* - and all for a price of two francs. An only slightly greater outlay could net you more substantial fare, a particular favourite being *A Grand Characteristic Fantasy for the Piano, on the principal personages of the novel "The Mysteries of Paris", dedicated to Monsieur Eugène Sue by T. Latour, formerly pianist and composer to his late Britannic Majesty King George the Fourth*. The novel in question consists of a lurid sequence of murders, frauds, seductions, rapes and suicides. Monsieur Latour's music, purporting to illustrate all this, consists of twenty-two solid pages of waltzes.

At the same time, there was a curious inverse snobbery in the making, whereby an increasingly redundant aristocracy began to ape the habits and to cultivate the tastes of their social (but increasingly powerful) inferiors. Indeed the rise of the waltz was itself a manifestation of this tendency.

Emanating originally from Austria and Southern Germany, the taste for it swept across Europe like a kind of benign counterpart to political revolution and the ravages of cholera (though its benignity, it must be said, was hotly disputed). Writing in an English encyclopaedia, the much-travelled musical historian Dr. Charles Burney, described the waltz as "a riotous German dance, of modern invention." And he continued,

The verb 'walzen', whence this word is derived, implies to roll, wallow, welter, tumble down or roll in the dirt or the mire. What analogy there may be between these acceptations and the dance, we do not pretend to say; but having seen it performed by a select party of foreigners, we could not help reflecting how uneasy an *English* mother would be to see her daughter so familiarly treated, and still more to witness the obliging manner in which the freedom is returned by the females.

The objection, of course, was to the waltz's physical not its musical attributes. But Chopin himself had poured scorn even on these. "Here," he had written contemptuously from Vienna only months before, "they actually call waltzes 'works'." So, eventually, did he.

His own waltzes undoubtedly reached their finest flowering in Paris but it was in Warsaw that he had first discovered and explored the form. Like the mazurka and many other folk dances, it was a dance in triple time with a characteristic emphasis on the second beat, and some of Chopin's earliest examples might easily be confused with urbanised mazurkas. Curiously, they also anticipate the tone and style of composers whose works were as yet unknown to him. The beautiful A flat Waltz of 1830, for instance, sounds remarkably like Brahms (as yet unborn), while the slightly earlier E major might almost be Schumann. Chopin's Polish waltzes have little of the dash and the bejewelled elegance of his Parisian works, and unlike most of their later siblings could easily be danced to (the notion of the idealised "concert" waltz then being in its infancy). They retain something of the formalised grace and slower speeds of the minuet, with its courtly undertones, and follow their simpler structure. Only in the brilliant E minor of 1830 do we get a real foretaste of the Chopin waltz in its fullest maturity. With its cascading introduction, the panache of its almost militaristic repeated notes and its virtuoso coda, it found its way for many decades into the repertoire of virtually every performing pianist, and belongs there still.

With few exceptions, the hauntingly poignant A minor, Op.34 No.2, foremost amongst them, Chopin's mature waltzes are sparkingly extroverted affairs, shamelessly ingratiating (seldom has music been more evidently written to please), pianistically elegant and emotionally refined. Shrewdly designed for the ears of the salonistes and the fingers of the more advanced dilettantes\*, they assured Chopin's success both socially and commercially, and more perhaps than any of his other works have enjoyed a popularity which shows no sign of abating. That they have survived the surfeit of dross which once threatened to submerge the bourgeoisie of five continents is due entirely to the art which lies behind them, and to their Mozartian reflection of hidden depths beneath the surface. The ever-popular C sharp minor is both fashionably wistful and genuinely profound, but requires an artist of special reserve and insight to reveal both dimensions (different as they are, the recordings of Lipatti, Rubinstein and Horowitz are unsurpassed in this regard). That the A minor should ever have been published as a "Grande valse brillante" is a spectacular offence against the celestial Trades Descriptions Act and a perfect example of 19th-century commercialism at its crassest, the only accurate term in the title being "valse". Grand it emphatically isn't, and its "brilliance" lies wholly in the genius which contains tragedy within the bounds of fashion. In spirit and technique, it lies closer to Mozart's equally subtle Rondo in the same key, and like that work requires restraint, variety and technical control in equal measure if it isn't to sound merely coy. That Chopin himself gave the title to what was avowedly his favourite waltz is both interesting and revealing, the compromise between art and Mammon being blatant but solely verbal. If the A minor is unique in character amongst Chopin's

waltzes, it's wholly characteristic in its refinement. With a handful of unimportant exceptions (the *Bolero*, *Tarantella*, *Bourées*, *Écossaises*, *Galop marquis* and maybe one or two others), Chopin made no qualitative distinction between "light" music and any other. Sketches, alternative versions and anecdotal evidence indicate that he lavished almost as much care, attention and energy on these outwardly frivolous pieces as on his most cherished and hard-wrung works.

Where lesser composers (and greater ones with slipperier consciences) were often content to string together a sequence of waltz tunes like so many beads, Chopin took special pains over the structure and continuity of his waltzes, and the organic principle of developing variation lies in one way or another behind most of them, even when they appear most implacably sectional. Musical analysts can expose layer upon layer of thematic correspondences and derivations, some of which are useful in revealing the inner and often unconscious logic of the compositional process, many of which are content with arid observation, and all of which are irrelevant to all but the pedant if their functions are not audible. The ear must be the ultimate guide, and the listener may choose to listen, or merely to hear, or, best, perhaps, to commute between the two.

One of the little miracles of Chopin's waltzes is the variety of utterance which he discovers within an outwardly rigid framework, dominated by the square, relentless four-bar phrase, with its equally relentless oom-pah-pah accompaniment. Where his mazurkas revel in jagged rhythms and asymmetrical groupings, the waltzes flow with an apparently seamless regularity, a foreground of steady quavers often veiling a kaleidoscope of rhythmic and melodic shapes which will emerge under the hands of all but the most typewriterish players. And as usual, Chopin casts his net wide, drawing on the luscious thirds and sixths of Italian opera and combining them with the elusive cross-rhythms and harmonic ambiguities of the mazurka. No "respectable" waltzes were ever more replete with syncopations. Like Beethoven, Chopin was a master of rhythmic synthesis, using time-patterns to connect what was formerly separated and to extend what formerly seemed complete. A case in point is the very first waltz, Op.18, where the temporal motto of the first main group serves to underpin the contrasting second group, thus providing an organic link between the two. More characteristic still, however, is his reversal of its original rhythmic function. Where before it had an upbeat, forward drive, it now assumes a passive, backward-looking role, thereby enhancing the new section's relatively nostalgic character. Like Beethoven, too, Chopin often exploits the shifting tensions of the scale to pleasingly suspenseful effect (though never quite so explicitly as Beethoven in the finale of his First Symphony, where their varying degrees of expectancy are illustrated with perfect clarity and characteristic wit)<sup>1</sup>. In the waltzes, Chopin often uses the phenomenon to countermand the metre, with its implacable tripleness, achieving in the process an extraordinary and captivating flexibility. Take, for instance, the intrinsic duality of the right hand in bars 17 - 20 of the F major, Op.34 No.3, or the entire opening section of the A flat, Op.42, from bar 9 onwards. In the waltzes, as elsewhere, Chopin's creation and deployment of contrasting characters (both related and discrete) is hardly less vivid or subtle than Mozart's, and requires no less subtlety from the performer. No composer understood better than Chopin that in music context alters content. The pianist who "merely" repeats what Chopin *appears* to repeat is playing only half the music.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Chopin's Waltzes is their combination of rhetorical gesture and intimate reflection (again, a highly Mozartian trait). It was never his intention that they should be performed as a cycle, *à la* Schumann, but the fact that they can be is a tribute to the extraordinary resourcefulness of his imagination.

<sup>1</sup> These can be felt even without Beethoven's coy rhythmic teasing, simply by following his melodic sequence on the piano, beginning with C: 1-2-3; 1-2-3-4; 1-2-3-4-5; 1-2-3-4-5-6 and so on, each time assessing the relative sense of completeness accruing to the last pitch of each segment.