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Magical Returns And The Interior Landscape Of Chopin's Mazurkas

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MAGICAL RETURNS AND THE INTERIOR LANDSCAPE OF CHOPIN’S MAZURKAS

In 1880, the writer Marceli Antoni Szulc published an article in Poland’s leading music journal, Echo Muzyczne, in which he continued a discussion of Chopin’s compositions begun earlier in his 1873 monograph titled Fryderyk Chopin i utwory jego muzyczne [Fryderyk Chopin and his Musical Works]. The discussion concerned Chopin’s ability to conjure up musically ‘scenes’, ‘situations’ or ‘episodes’ that, according to Szulc, ‘reflected the state of the composer’s soul’. To illustrate his point, he turned to a select number of works, among them the A minor Mazurka, Op. 17 No. 4:

Chopin did not like program music, and yet more than one of his compositions, full of expressive character, could rightly be included in this category of music. Who, for example, does not know the No. 4 Mazurka of the Op. 17 set dedicated to Madame Lina Freppa? It was already known in our country by the title ‘The Little Jew’ before the artist went abroad. This is one of Chopin’s works that has the clearest stamp of humor, undoubtedly a recollection of his stay in the countryside. A Jew in slippers and gaberdine comes out of his tavern. Seeing a shabby peasant—who had just earlier left the tavern—rather tipsy, stumbling, complaining and falling all over the road, he calls from his doorstep: ‘wues ist dues?’ As if to provide contrast to this scene, the wedding party of a well-to-do serf at that moment briskly draws near the tavern, returning home from church amid spirited shouts from the wedding attendants who are zestfully accompanied by violins and bagpipes. The party passes and the drunk peasant begins anew his complaints of hardship—sorrows he had tried to drown in drink. And the Jew, turning towards the door and shaking his head, glumly remarks, ‘wues war dues?’

1 Marceli Antoni Szulc, Fryderyk Chopin i utwory jego muzyczne (1873; repr. Kraków, 1986), 285. Emphasis added. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
Szulc undoubtedly got things wrong. Presumably responding to the musical content of Op. 17 No. 4, he misinterpreted this mazurka to be the composition Chopin had called ‘Żydek’ [‘The Little Jew’] in an 1824 letter sent to his parents from Szafarnia. To lend credence to his supposition, and, it seems, for greater effect, Szulc added the crude program of the Jew in slippers speaking a concocted Yiddish. Of course, Chopin’s ‘Żydek’ had been nothing more than an offensive, prankish majufes—a degrading stereotype of Jewish song and dance that Jews were obliged to perform for gentile Poles throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the sound and nature of which were intended to make Jews look ridiculous. Chopin likely improvised some such majufes dance at the piano without intending for it to be written down. Whatever it was that Chopin played was not, however, an authentic Jewish folk melody, as several writers have suggested. In the folk-obsessed, truth-seeking climate of late nineteenth-century positivism, it seemed to Szulc that the only explanation for the musical distinctness of Op. 17 No. 4 was that Chopin had preserved in this mazurka a richer scene of village life—one that included not only the usual buxom wenches and strapping farmhands, but also the maligned Jewish innkeeper and peasant drunk. As subsequent scholars became increasingly attached to the idea of discussing Chopin’s mazurkas by way of folk content, the mistaken association of Op. 17 No. 4 with ‘The Little Jew’ generally escaped closer scrutiny or else received suggestive elaboration. Here, Leichtentritt’s 1921 account of the final section of the mazurka:

Szulc knew of the letter from Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki’s, Cmentarz Powązkowski pod Warszawą (Warsaw, 1855–58; repr. Warsaw, 1974), ii, 16; see, Szulc, 47. The fragment of Chopin’s 1824 letter, as quoted originally by Wójcicki, also appears in Krystyna Kobylanska (ed.), Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina z rodziną [Chopin’s Correspondence with his Family] (Warsaw, 1972), 35–6, and Bronisław Edward Sydow (ed.), Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina [Fryderyk Chopin’s Correspondence] (Warsaw, 1955), 40.

The proper Yiddish renderings would be ‘Vus iz dus’ and ‘vuz iz geven dus’. I am grateful to Bret Werb for his help with the Yiddish.


See, for example, Mieczysław Tomaszewski, Fryderyk Chopin: A Diary in Images, trans. Rosemary Hunt (Kraków, 1990); Tadeusz A. Zieliński, Chopin. Życie i droga twórcza [Chopin. His Life and Creative Path] (Kraków, 1993); Jeremy Siepmann, Chopin, The Reluctant Romantic (Boston, 1995).
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...[T]he melancholy beginning [...] finally runs its course into an almost grotesque, heavy, moaning dance with bitter whispering and sighing, and filled with half-pathetic, half-laughable jumping and gesturing. The characteristic sound of Jewish jargon has never been translated into music more successfully than here.®

While both Szulc and Leichtentritt rather successfully perpetuate all-too-common Jewish stereotypes circulating at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, neither reveals anything meaningful about the musical matter of Op. 17 No. 4.® Indeed, Szulc’s promise of a fruitful discussion of Chopin’s compositional ability to conjure up scenes that ‘reflected the state of the composer’s soul’ is never realized. Rather, like numerous other scholars—even those not persuaded by the ‘The Little Jew’ story—Szulc and Leichtentritt merely register aspects of this mazurka as being ‘strange’, ‘audacious’ or ‘weird’—to mention just some of the terms that have been used to describe Op. 17 No. 4.*

In this paper, I wish to get at the elusive quality of this mazurka by suggesting first that any ‘folk’ explanation is, at best, only half the story; that to begin to interpret this mazurka we must also situate...

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® Hugo Leichtentritt, Analyse der Chopin’sohen Klavierwerke (Berlin, 1921), 218. I am grateful to Michael Marissen for help with the translation. Already before Leichtentritt, Jan Kleczyński had added: ‘Marceli Antoni Szulc sent me from Posen a truthful testimony in which he says [Op. 17 No. 4] used to be called the “Little Jew”.’ See Jan Kleczyński, Chopin’s Greater Works (Preludes, Ballads, Nocturnes, Polonaises Mazurkas): How they should be understood (Warsaw, 1886; Eng. trans. London, 1896), 104; my emphasis. To be sure, the idea of Op. 17 No. 4 being ‘The Little Jew’ has also had its detractors. Scholars who have raised questions about the appropriateness of the association between ‘The Little Jew’ and Op. 17 No. 4, or of Szulc’s program for that matter, are James Huneker, Janusz Miketta, Józef M. Chomiński, Teresa D. Turło and Tadeusz A. Zielinski. None of these scholars, however, ever challenged the notion that ‘The Little Jew’ was an example of Chopin’s knowledge of authentic Jewish folk music.

* T. A. Zielinski, Chopin..., 634–635; Frederick Niecks, Frederick Chopin as a Man and Musician, 2 vols. (London, 1890), ii, 239.
it in the broader context of an early nineteenth-century preoccupation with history and an anxious need to possess the past in the aftermath of revolutions, wars and uprisings. For the violent disruptions that altered the socio-political landscape of Europe and its collective histories also profoundly changed the continuity of private life, making individual experiences far more important than they had ever been. In this climate, private space came to constitute the space of public discourse, and significations of home equally signified the nation. I wish to argue, then, that if we are better to understand what it is that Op. 17 No. 4 ‘poetically’ communicates, we need to take a closer, more nuanced look at the very real experience of Chopin’s exile. For in this experience of geographical dislocation and heightened time consciousness, we can find the conditions that inspired a new musical language, one that could at once magically recreate a reassuring image of the past while capturing the overwhelming uncertainty and melancholy of the present.

Already immediately following the publication of Opus 17 in 1834, critics such as this one writing for the Parisian Gazette musicale seemed to respond to the A minor Mazurka’s musical distinctness, its ‘poetic’ splendor, its ability to access otherworldly realms:

Among these four mazurkas [of the Opus 17 set], our favorite is undoubtedly the last. We will not even try to give an idea of this composition, so gracious and so constantly imbued with a rich poetry. It is here that music appears in all its poetic splendor, in the realms to which ordinary language cannot even aspire.

Such ‘otherworldly metaphors’, as Kallberg points out in his essay ‘Small Fairy Voices: Sex, History and Meaning in Chopin’, were commonplace when talking not only about Chopin’s mazurkas but also

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9 I am indebted in my thinking here to Peter Fritzsche’s insightful and provocative study of history and modern time, Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History (Harvard University Press, 2004).
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about his playing and his compositions more generally. Consider Liszt’s highly imaginative, Romantic evocation of an expanded universe in his description of Chopin performing his compositions:

[Chopin] knew that he was completely appreciated only in those too-rare gatherings where all the hearers were ready to follow and accompany him into those spheres that the ancients entered solely through an ivory gate surrounded by diamond pilasters crowned by domes, where all prismatic rays play upon a fawny crystal, such as the Mexican opal, its kaleidoscopic foci being hidden in an olive-colored mist that covers and discovers them by turn—spheres where all is entrancing magic, mad surprise, dream made manifest, and where Chopin so willingly sought refuge and delight.

By invoking here ideas of the otherworldly, I wish to suggest that, like other compositions by Chopin, Op. 17 No. 4 generically and structurally puts one in mind of fairy stories and folktales like those of the Brothers Grimm, with their idealized peasants, darkness, enchantment and quest. Although in this respect I could turn to any number of stories that partake of a fairy-tale mode of enchantment, I wish to enlist the help of one children’s story in particular.

The story is William Steig’s Tiffky Doofky, in which the protagonist is a good-natured dog (Tiffky) who also happens to be a garbage collector. Sensing that something out of the ordinary might happen and wanting to know what it will be, he visits Madame Tarsal, a fortune teller. He learns that on that very day, before the sun goes down, he is to fall in love with the one he’ll marry. He dreams of his love-to-be as he drives to the town dump, musing that he might even find her there. Instead, he finds an emerald necklace (on a bed of sauerkraut) and fastens it around his neck before heading to a picnic. Along the way, he helps an old chicken biddy, who mysteriously knows he is to meet his true love, and that it is her necklace he now wears. Tiffky is astonished, but also ready to believe in magic. The old biddy shoots an arrow and directs him to follow it wherever it leads, for there he will find his beloved.

In a conspiratorial parenthesis, Steig reveals to his readers that the old biddy is actually Madame Tarsal's enemy, who persists in trying to foil the duck's fortune-telling. The magic arrow leads him, not on a path toward his love-to-be, but to a strangely unknown countryside, where he rambles past scarecrows, well-dressed cats strumming mandolins, cows, and lunatics until the whole scene melts—vanishes—before Tiffky's astounded eyes and he finds himself back on the road he had been traveling. No longer spellbound (Steig explains how and why in another parenthesis), Tiffky soon meets Estrella, a fearless snake trainer, and, as the sun sets, it is instant love.

Steig's story turns on a conventional fairytale theme: that of perseverance in the face of all obstacles. Sensing the potential for some extraordinary happening, Tiffky boldly sets off in pursuit of it, undeterred by the strangeness that soon surrounds him. And as he moves with uncertainty toward an inner emotional change (that of true love), his outer journey echoes the wobbliness of the transformation. This inner/outer experience certainly resonates with numerous shaky characterizations of the emotional force of Chopin's music; that is, the manner in which many writers have believed that the composer's own, personal feelings are translated into particular musical notes. But this is not how I understand Steig's experiential frame to apply to Chopin's mazurka. Rather, it is Steig's capacity to present incidents of astonishment and wonder as if they are merely everyday happenings that most resembles Chopin's musical procedure in Op. 17 No. 4. In *Tiffky Doofky*, as in this mazurka, we encounter, not a simple episodic narrative, a sequence of events in real time, but rather a jarring rift in the fabric of the universe. The old biddy's magic arrow is time's arrow, one that transports Tiffky from one spot on the space-time continuum to another. There is, in short, a shocking sense of spatial and temporal discontinuity here, but Steig tenderly passes it off as part of an ordinary day's unfolding, a would-be daydream.

Of course, I am not claiming that Op. 17 No. 4 is about a canine garbage collector's search for his true love. But I do wish to suggest that the narrative progression of this story, its ability to incorporate seamlessly a dramatic disruption of space and time into a tale already in progress and make it seem somehow of a piece, can lend some insight into what it is that Chopin's mazurka communicates.
At the very beginning of Op. 17 No. 4, a trace of a melody enclosed within a repeating interval of a minor sixth is made to sound incomprehensible when it arrives in measure 4 on an A minor chord with an unresolved sixth above it, as though it were the middle of something rather than the beginning. This is, in part, a result of the repeating A in the bass that promises A minor but leads instead to an arrival on what seems to be a sixth chord on A in measure 4, which makes for a tonally mysterious beginning. Only at measure 20, when the piece cadences on the tonic in A minor, does one finally feel the first moment of tonal stability, a ‘rootedness’ in what is happening in the ‘now’ and not in what came before. But Chopin quickly dispenses with this tonal stability as the first theme returns. Significantly, as at the beginning, the tonal mysteriousness returns as the piece ends, suggesting the same uncertainty with which it began. What follows the melodic trace of the first few measures is an entire section that refuses melodically, harmonically and rhythmically to settle down. A mazurka fragment intrudes at measure 37, but it quickly passes. Then, when compositional devices conspire to create another musical discontinuity at measure 61 (by way of an almost imperceptible modal shift to A major through two c-sharp quarter notes in the right hand), Chopin turns this disruption enchantingly into a prolonged moment of relief. The simple, repeating melody reveals a regular phrase structure; the accompaniment and melody immediately settle into a clearly articulated and repeating rhythmic pattern; harmonically, things do not move much beyond V and I. Musically, we are now on terra firma; we are in the presence of an easily identifiable stylized salon mazurka; until, that

14 William Thomson, as well as other interpreters of this musical fragment, has analyzed the chord in measure 4 of Op. 17 No. 4 as an F major sixth chord, suggesting that Chopin is perhaps establishing here a tonal ambiguity that plays with A minor and F major. But it seems rather more fruitful to interpret the F of the chord in measure 4 as an unresolved sixth scale degree in A that sets up the uncertainty that strongly characterizes the outer sections of the piece. I am grateful to Michael Marissen for suggesting this intervallic rather than tonal reading. Such an interpretation also gives heightened meaning to the F naturals that dramatically sound in measure 91, effectively disrupting—erasing, even—the unstrained, cheerful dance music of the middle section. See William Thompson, ‘Functional Ambiguity in Musical Structures’, Music Perception, 1 (1983), 19.
is, it vanishes, in measure 91, significantly at the sound of $F#$—that most ambiguous pitch from the opening measures.

The strangely beautiful thing about the middle section of this mazurka is that, while it acts at first as a further intrusion upon an already unraveling work, it is paradoxically the most comforting moment in the piece. That is because it is readily comprehensible as a representation of something distant yet most familiar—an acoustic trace of some other time and place left behind. In a different mazurka context, say that of an early nineteenth-century Polish salon mazurka, such a ‘folk’ moment might more easily play up the harsher, more ‘primitive’ qualities of an indigenous folk practice in order to provide sectional contrast and a musical suggestion of that from which the stylized mazurka is drawn. But in the context of this mazurka, because the disruption acts as a recovered musical fragment—a remembrance of the past, of home, of Poland—it can only be idealized, its contours smoothed to suggest a simple, age-old perfection.

Chopin, in fact, enacts here the same sort of magical return to an idealized past as Mickiewicz does in *Pan Tadeusz*. So reassuring, so comforting is this return to the countrside of our longings, so real does it seem in its meticulous detail of the everyday, that one hardly notices the erasures that transform—to mention but the most famous example—the traditionally despised Jewish innkeeper into a Polish national bard, albeit one who must still perform for his good Polish gentiles even after suffering the blatant abuse of having his beard stroked by the charming, innocent Zosia.

This is why Charles Rosen, in his *The Romantic Generation*, is wrong when, following his very specific discussion of the Opp. 17 and 24 Mazurkas, he sums up matters with this assessment:

>the Romantic grotesque [...] is found nowhere else in Chopin with such clarity as in the mazurkas [...] It was the “folk” character, real or invented, that liberated the grotesque in Chopin, that enabled him to break so sharply with ideals of decorum and respectability.\(^{15}\)

The ‘folk’ in the trio of Op. 17 No. 4 and in the middle sections of many of the other mazurkas of these two sets (I am thinking, here, of Op. 24 Nos. 1, 2, and 4, and also the dolce sections of Op. 17 Nos. 1

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and 2) is not grotesque, but rather (as expressive markings indicate) soft, sweet and tender—fragments that hint at something precious but lost.

This comment is all the more frustrating as Rosen is largely right when he says: 'For the Romantic, the grotesque is a violation of the classical standards of beauty, an irruption of the ugly—the intrusion of life, in short, into art'. That the ‘folk’ should be an ugly irruption, a violator of beauty, an intrusion of life into art, bespeaks perhaps merely the prejudices of late-twentieth-century urban sophistication.

But if a lost Poland and gathering homesickness may have inspired the simple beauty of the middle section of Op. 17 No. 4, what could have inspired the uncertainty and distortions of the outer sections? One of Chopin’s earliest letters from Paris provides material for thought:

> But I write you nothing of the impression this big city has made on me after Stuttgart and Strasbourg. There is here the greatest splendor, the greatest trash, the greatest virtue, and the greatest vice; at every step, advertisements on venereal diseases; shouting, screaming, rumbling, and more mud than one can handle. One gets lost in this swarm, and it is convenient, in this respect, that no one asks how anyone else is doing.

It is perhaps noteworthy that in this same letter we also learn that Chopin contracted venereal disease from a Tyrolean singer en route to Paris and how this now prevents him from taking advantage of the sexual offerings so readily available to him.

We can only imagine that in Chopin’s Paris an absence of cultural, social and professional certainties left him without the fixed parameters, compositional or otherwise, that he may have relied upon for his bearings and balance at an earlier time in his life. One gets a sense of this when he writes to Tytus Woyciechowski in December 1831:

> All these changes and troubles, who could have foreseen them? Do you remember our talk in Vienna, the night before you left? The wind has blown me here; it’s good to rest, but perhaps one frets more when things are easy. Paris is whatever you choose: you can amuse yourself, be bored, laugh, cry, do anything you like, and nobody looks at you; because thousands of others are doing the same as you, and everyone goes his own road.

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16 Ibid., 427.
18 Ibid., 199.
Paris, ironically, may have provided the ideal freedom: an exilic space in which to rework the meanings and contexts of older, familiar sonorities while experimenting with new ones. As Poland grew more distant and unrelated to Chopin’s new Parisian reality, home and nation could become more readily a musical idyll. So many of Chopin’s mazurkas written after his arrival in Paris seem to possess this quality of interior landscape, intimate remembrances of things past. (I think here especially of Opp. 24, 30, 31, 41, and 50.)

That is not to say that Chopin did not pursue compositional strategies for creating an expanded time and space already in Warsaw. Op. 68 No. 3, composed before the composer went abroad, provides an excellent example of a somewhat similar discontinuity between past and present. Indeed, even Niemcewicz’s *Spiewy Historyczne* already in the second decade of the nineteenth century reveals a new awareness of history in the very fact of its existence, and in the manner in which the project was assembled; that is, as a collection of simple songs on historical subjects expressly for use in the home. Nor do I mean to suggest that Chopin worked out a formulaic approach to the mazurka that remained unchanged throughout his Parisian exile.

What I do wish to argue, though, is that while mazurkas such as Op. 17 No. 4 might well reflect the personal experience of Chopin’s exile, more importantly they also reflect the larger sense of dislocation that so many Europeans felt at that time. One need only consider the abundant European cultural productions of this time that elaborated both the idea of a ‘new’ order and the theme of a simpler, old-fashioned countryside, where graveyards and abandoned manor houses preserved memories of an unrecoverable past. A conception of history that saw the present severed from the past made possible very passionate and intimate kinds of cultural activity of the sort captured and reflected in Op. 17 No. 4. Perhaps this mazurka, then, like so many of Chopin’s mazurkas, still manages to hold our imagination not because of its unique Polish ‘folk’ content, but because in its evocation of home—that place of comfort and familiarity to which we return after our wanderings—it is so common and precious to us all.

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19 Peter Fritzsche engages this subject eloquently throughout *Stranded in the Present*, but chapters three and five are particularly meaningful to my understanding of Op. 17 No. 4.