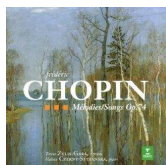


Chopin – Piesni (Songs) (Zylis-Gara) [1999]

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[01] *Spiew z mogily* (1836) [02] *Dwojaki koniec* (1845) [03] *Posel* (1830) [04] *Smutna rzeka* (1831) [05] *Melodia* (1847) [06] *Gdzie lubi* (1829) [07] *Zyczenie* (1829) [08] *Wiosna* (1838) [09] *Dumka* (1840) [10] *Moja pieszczotka* (1837) [11] *Piosnka litewska* (1837) [12] *Sliczny chlopiec* (1841) [13] *Pierscien* (1836) [14] *Nie ma czego trzeba* (1845) Teresa Zylis-Gara - soprano Galina Czerny-Stefanska - piano

His music has been described as ‘the epitome of the very soul of the piano’, ‘the piano brought to life’, ‘winged keys’. Indeed, Frédéric Chopin is usually associated with his piano ballades and nocturnes, mazurkas and polonaises, études and preludes, sonatas and scherzos. And yet, alongside that great road, there was a small path, modest but noteworthy: his songs both great and small.

It seems that Chopin wrote his songs casually—on the margin, as it were, of his piano works. He wrote them whenever he came across a poem describing his own mood or feelings at any given moment. He also wrote to satisfy social needs and friendship—his songs became an intimate diary of sorts. More than those by other composers, they bear an autobiographical aspect. Also, the lyrics—their choice never accidental—seem to betray his changing states of mind, his personal and historical contexts.

Chopin composed, in all, no more than thirty songs with piano accompaniment. Not all of them were put on paper. In turn, not all that were written down deserved preservation—some never went beyond a sketch, an outline, a design for a song. Thus, only eighteen remain. These can charm and move.

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Chopin published none of his songs. Although Liszt and Jane Stirling supposed that he planned to do so, there is no evidence to that effect; they remained among the *ineditae*. According to the last will of his most severe critic—himself—they were destined to share the fate of some forty unpublished piano works—the fire. Fortunately that did not happen. Julian Fontana, Chopin's schoolfriend, collected the scattered manuscripts and, with the family's consent, published sixteen songs—those which he thought worthy of the composer's name—in 1859. They were printed simultaneously by Gebethner & Wolff in Warsaw (as 'Zbiór spiewów polskich Fryderyka Chopina'—'A Collection of Polish Songs by Frédéric Chopin') and by A M Schlesinger in Berlin (as '16 Polnische Lieder'). Because of Russian censorship, Fontana was unable to publish one of those he had laid hands on in Warsaw: 'Spiew z mogily' ('Leci liście z drzewa'—'Leaves are falling') appeared separately in Berlin as 'Chant du tombeau' ('Hymn from the Tomb').

The songs were written in the twenty or so years between 1829 (possibly 1827) and 1847. Despite their similarities, they exhibit many differences of character and expression, of genre and style. The first few, still early Romantic, were unable to shake off conventions typical of sentimentalism and pseudo-classicism; the last, 'Z gór, gdzie dzwigali' ('Melodia'), a late-Romantic song, brought lyricism with a tragic hue, an expressive articulation of personality.

There are two strands in Chopin's songs that complement each other and entwine in a way characteristic of the Romantic songs of Poland where quite often, in life as in art, the erotic had to coexist with the heroic. The strand of the tender song manifested itself in those jotted down in young girls' and ladies' diaries and albums. It was expressed in genres well suited to the subject: the idyll or 'piosnka sielska' (e.g. 'Zyczenie', 'The Maiden's Wish'), the *romanza* ('Pierscien', 'The Ring') and an epic-lyrical scene ('Piosnka Litewska', 'Lithuanian Song'). And, finally, in a love-lyrical Lied, 'Moja Pieszczotka', 'My Darling'.

The other strand included songs relating to the contemporary history of his country and to the fate of a whole generation plagued by oppression, revolt, emigration. It was born in masculine company, in an atmosphere of reminiscences of the uprising and in moments of particularly acute pangs of loneliness and longing. Works of this strand related—in the conventions of their genre—to social and convivial songs (e.g. 'Hulanka', 'Merrymaking' or 'Drinking Song'), historical and rebels' songs ('Wojak', 'The Warrior'), Ukrainian *dumkas* ('Dwojaki koniec', 'The Two Corpses') and folk ballads ('Narieczony', 'The Bridegroom'). The latest few represent reflexive lyrics close to the Lied genre ('Melodia').

Chopin composed all of his songs to poems by Polish writers and his contemporaries: Witwicki, Zaleski, Pol, Mickiewicz and Krasinski. He was able to meet almost all of them. The greatest number of songs (ten) were written to poems by an early-Romantic poet from Warsaw, Stefan

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Witwicki (1801–1847), from the collection 'Piosnki Sielskie' ('Idylls', 1830). Witwicki was a friend of the family. He had strong folkloric interests and backed Chopin's emphasis on the national. Chopin dedicated his Opus 41 Mazurkas to Witwicki. Also of the Warsaw period was the composer's close acquaintance with the soldier-poet Bohdan Zaleski (1802–1886), the author of three texts set to music by Chopin in the 1840s. Zaleski's folklore stylizations were based on Ukrainian songs and dances. Wincenty Pol (1807– 1872), another freedom fighter of the November Uprising, published a collection of highly popular poems of the revolt, 'Songs of Janusz' (1836). According to Fontana, Chopin composed music to ten or even twelve of these on their publication. Only one has survived: 'Spiew z mogily', ('Leaves are falling').

Chopin composed two highly expressive love songs to poems by Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Poland's leading Romantic. One of these ('Precz z moich oczu', 'Out of my sight') might have been the first text put to music by the composer. Chopin's last song ('Melodia', 'Z gór, gdzie dzwigali') was written to a poem by another great Polish Romantic, Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859); they loved the same woman, Delfina Potocka.

Treating his songs as semi-private compositions, Chopin did not include them in any of his concerts, the more so as they were composed to Polish texts. It is quite possible that they could be heard at times in Warsaw, Dresden, and Paris salons, performed by some of his intimates: his sister Ludwika, Maria Wodzinska, Delfina Potocka. Fontana's publication, though belatedly, introduced the songs to the public, and they became a fixture in the repertoire of Polish singers. Others treated them with some reserve. It was by no means easy to sing them in Polish, while other languages—for the songs were translated and published in twelve other languages—made them lose their inimitable character. More successful on the concert platform were Liszt's piano transcriptions of six of them.

There is much to suggest, however, that the time has finally come for Chopin's songs, as can be seen, for instance, in the number of recordings of the whole collection in recent decades. They include such interesting interpretations as those by Eugenia Zareska with Giorgio Favaretto, Elisabeth Södeström with Vladimir Ashkenazy, Leyla Gencer with Nikita Magaloff, Stefania Woytowicz and Andrzej Bachleda with Wanda Klimowicz, Stefania Toczyska with Janusz Olejniczak, Teresa Zylis-Gara with Halina Czerny-Stefánska, Françoise Ogéas with Eva Osinska, and H Januszewska with M Drewnowski. --- Mieczysław Tomaszewski ,
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