



Chopin's
POLISH
BALLADE

OP. 38 AS NARRATIVE
OF NATIONAL MARTYRDOM



JONATHAN D. BELLMAN

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Jonathan D. Bellman

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In memory of my father

Dr. Samuel Irving Bellman (z"l; 1926–2009)

Professor Emeritus of English,

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

For Deborah Ann Kauffman

and Benjamin Howard Bellman

Mihi vita cariores sunt

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PREFACE

We have always valued instrumental music as it has *spoken to us*, and can never listen to the delightful works of Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Ries, Onslow, and some others, without having their sentiment—nay, when we are in a fanciful humor—their *story*, as clearly impressed upon our minds as if it had been told in words.

Henry F. Chorley, *The Atheneum*, 15 March 1834

This is the meaning of this poem, and all Chopin's works are poems. Only seek and you will find, and you will be a thousandfold rewarded for your researches.

Jean Kleczyński, *The Works of Frederic Chopin: Their Proper Interpretation*, 1880

The age of description is over.

Hans Keller, "The Chamber Music," in *The Mozart Companion*, ed. H. C. Robbins Landon and Donald Mitchell, 1956

The Second Ballade, op. 38, of Frédéric Chopin (composed in 1836–39 and first published in 1841) occupies a secure position on piano recital programs, yet seems to be one of the most incompletely understood pieces in the entire nineteenth-century repertoire. It is known to have existed—to have been performed by the composer, in fact—in at least two radically

different versions, though he published only one, and such basics as the key and the proper ending are still matters of debate. The form of op. 38 as published is notoriously problematic, so much so that completely contradictory views of it go back more than a century. There is probably no other work of similar stature about which there is so little consensus on the most fundamental issues.

No artwork appears in a vacuum. Some reflected light is shed on op. 38 by a group of almost offhand remarks made about the work by certain of Chopin's contemporaries—remarks that both open windows into the ballade's cultural and musical worlds and (predictably) raise further questions. More may be gleaned from the work's musical style and style referents, from its relationship to the contemporary Parisian operatic and amateur repertoires, and from the cultural milieu and nationalistic aspirations of the diasporic Polish community in 1830s Paris, a community with which Chopin associated. The Second Ballade is a piece in which aesthetic, popular, cultural, and personal realms intersect in striking ways, yet the work's very familiarity has tended to obscure its radical and unique aspects. To pianists and music scholars it is completely familiar, one passage proceeding predictably after the next; anything radical and interesting has virtually to be reimagined because of the music's secure and familiar place in our piano culture.

The critical literature on Chopin in general and the ballades in particular has grown in recent decades, but it seems that many core issues are still being wrestled with, and that the ballade as a musical genre shares its secrets far less willingly than the sonata or the symphony. In the course of this study, the work most helpful to me has been that of Jeffrey Kallberg (on Chopin in a variety of musical and cultural contexts in Paris), Halina Goldberg (on Chopin in the context of broader Polish culture and literature), Jim Samson (on the ballades as a genre and Chopin's biography), James Parakilas (on Chopin's ballades in relation to poetic models and the genre of the instrumental ballade that evolved after Chopin's op. 23), David Kasunic (on Chopin's ballades and their formal and aesthetic relationships to opera), and John Rink (on the reception history of Chopin's ballades). Not only has the work of these scholars provided a wealth of raw material and discerning thought for me to mine and reflect upon, but they have all been unfailingly generous with their time and resources as, in the long gestation of this project, I returned repeatedly with questions and requests for advice.

The decision to concentrate on Chopin's Second Ballade without assuming the responsibility of formulating a coherent view of the four ballades as a group was made because of my unwillingness to forgo—as must be the case in all genre studies—the full examination of a single work's unique qualities in order to identify broader generic patterns: not

what makes a work special, in other words, but what defines the family resemblances of a group of works. I do devote a chapter to Chopin's First Ballade, op. 23, but that is necessary background in that it is the first—unavoidably, Chopin's first essay in a new genre will provide crucial context for his second. The two works are related in general aesthetic and narrative ways yet very different with respect to form and musical procedure, and in any case a study of the Second Ballade that ignored the first would be impossible. As the subject of my story is the Second in its time, though, there was no need to expand the picture to encompass the Third and Fourth, except in certain tangential ways.

If nothing else, Chopin's Second Ballade serves to illustrate the complexity of the ways in which in a single, relatively brief musical work—a justly celebrated work, though (less sentimentally) but one of myriad piano pieces from the 1830s that takes at most eight minutes to perform—engaged with its time, and with listeners ever after. It is a unique masterpiece. I hope this study will demonstrate how studies of other masterpieces that foreground the individual works rather than the other members of their generic families might contribute to a better understanding of each, rather than less helpfully reinforcing the more common view of *The Repertoire* as a great jumble of works that are examples of this or that template, approach, or pattern.

My love affair with op. 38 dates back decades, to my years as an undergraduate piano major at the University of California, Santa Barbara; a certain young pianist named Deborah Kauffman performed it on her senior recital. Perhaps the original impetus for this study, though, was an almost offhand remark by Jeffrey Kallberg in his 1982 doctoral dissertation. He mentioned a couple of intriguing contemporary remarks made about the Second Ballade by people close to the composer but then needed to return to other matters in his already titanic study of the Chopin sources and manuscripts. Before shutting the door on the subject of op. 38, though, he made the observation (on p. 100) that “a thorough study is warranted.” To him, then, goes the credit for the original nudge in this direction.

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Two friends never saw the end of this project. The pianist Walter Schenkman (z"l), with whom I had animated discussions on these and related subjects, made his final departure (at the piano, in fact) one evening at the time I was readying the manuscript for first submission; his lively reactions will be missed. And let this book also be to the memory of my friend Jonathan Pevsner (z"l); the focused writing phase occurred simultaneously with the final stages of Jonathan's heroic battle against lung cancer, and our almost daily correspondence throughout this time will remain a lasting memory for me.

Finally, with deepest love, my gratitude to my wife, Dr. Deborah Kauffman, who not only puts up with me, both when I'm writing books and when I'm not, but who also produced all my musical examples on Finale. She and our son, Benjamin Howard Bellman, make my life ever joyful and invigorating.

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CHOPIN'S POLISH BALLADE

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I

TWO VERSIONS, TWO KEYS, AND “CERTAIN POEMS OF MICKIEWICZ”

Three persistent issues have bedeviled the reception of Fryderyk Chopin's Second Ballade, op. 38, and all three were first raised in Robert Schumann's review of the newly published work. In the 2 November 1841 issue of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Schumann recalled his first encounter with the piece in 1836, when Chopin had visited Leipzig and played it for him (among other works); at that time, it had ended in a different key and been structurally very different from the version later published. Schumann also remembered that Chopin had made an apparently offhand remark about drawing inspiration for the First and Second Ballades from the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz. In what would become one of the most frequently quoted passages from the entire Chopin literature, Schumann wrote:

We must direct attention to the ballade as a most remarkable work. Chopin has already written one composition of the same name—one of his wildest and most original compositions; the new one is different—as a work of art inferior to the first, but equally fantastic and inventive. Its impassioned episodes seem to have been inserted afterwards. I recollect very well that when Chopin played the Ballade here, it ended in F major; now it closes in A minor. At that time he also mentioned that certain poems of Mickiewicz had suggested his *Ballades* to him.¹

1. “Wir haben noch der Ballade als eines merkwürdigen Stückes zu erwähnen. Chopin hat unter demselben Namen schon eine geschrieben, eine seiner wildesten eigentümlichsten Kompositionen; die neue ist anders, als Kunstwerk unter jener ersten stehend, doch nicht weniger phantastisch und geistreich. Die leidenschaftlichen Zwischensätze scheinen erst

Schumann had recorded his immediate impressions of the meeting with Chopin in two places: his diary and a letter to his old teacher, Heinrich Dorn. The diary entry for 12 September 1836, the day Chopin visited, is disappointingly fragmentary and vague. The piece that most caught Schumann's fancy was the Ballade no. 1 in G Minor, op. 23, which had been published just two months previous: "In the morning, Chopin. . . 'His *Ballade* I like best of all.' I am very glad of that; I am very glad of that. Doesn't like his works being discussed. [Noting pieces played:] . . . two new ones—a *Ballade*—*Notturmo* in D flat. . . [I] bring him Sonata and Etudes by me; he gives me *Ballade*."²

Chopin would have given him a copy of the new publication, the Ballade no. 1 in G Minor, op. 23, as a gesture of professional courtesy, particularly because he was being given copies of Schumann's works. What might not immediately be clear from Schumann's cryptic notes is which Ballade Schumann liked "best of all," since—as we know from the 1841 review—he knew both: he was *given* the one but heard the other (albeit in different form). His inclusion of a ballade among the "two new ones" does not clarify which it was; he had mentioned a ballade already, but because the "D-flat Notturmo" (the Nocturne, op. 27 no. 2) had also recently seen print, both publications might have been considered equally "new." So we know from the 1841 review that he preferred the First Ballade and that he heard the Second on this visit, but his jotted notes yield nothing more definite.

The matter of what Schumann was given versus what he had heard is clarified somewhat by his description of the meeting in a letter to Dorn of 14 September, two days after the visit:

später hinzugekommen zu sein; ich erinnere mich sehr gut, als Chopin die Ballade hier spielte und in F-dur schloss; jetzt schliesst sie in A-moll. Er sprach damals auch davon, dass er zu seinen Balladen durch einige Gedichte von Mickiewicz angeregt worden sei. Umgekehrt würde ein Dichter zu seiner Musik wieder sehr leicht Worte finden können; sie rührt das Innerste auf." *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 15 (1841), 141–42. The English translation is from Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld ([New York]: Pantheon, [1946]), 143, although I emend Rosenfeld's translation to include Schumann's plural, *Balladen*; he inexplicably gives the singular ("daß er zu seinen Balladen durch einige Gedichte von Mickiewitz angeregt worden sei"). If we take it literally, Chopin told Schumann in 1836 that "some poems of Mickiewicz" inspired both ballades, the recently published op. 23 in G Minor and the version Schumann heard of what would become op. 38, which apparently already had the title "Ballade." For whatever reason, Schumann does not comment much on the novelty and generic significance of an instrumental work titled "Ballade," as many other commentators have done.

2. Quoted in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, 3rd ed., ed. Roy Howat, trans. Naomi Shohet, with Krysia Osostowicz and Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 268–69.

From Chopin I have a new ballade. It seems to me to be the work which shows most extraordinary genius (if not greatest inspiration); and I told him that I like it the best of all his works. After a long pause to reflect, he said emphatically: “I am glad of that, for it is my favorite also.” He also played me a host of newer etudes, nocturnes, and mazurkas—all incomparable.³

So the favored ballade was the one Schumann *had*, as opposed to the one he had simply heard, which would have been the G Minor, and it was probably one of the “new ones” mentioned in the diary entry; F. Gustav Jansen, who published this letter in his 1904 anthology of Schumann’s correspondence, even inserts “G moll” in brackets after the “new ballade” reference.⁴ Still, we know that after Chopin’s visit Schumann knew two ballades: the one he preferred above all and received a copy of, and the one (“inferior to the first”) he later described having heard Chopin play in a form different from what it would later become. The only explicit reference to a “ballade” other than the G Minor lies in Schumann’s plural from 1841; Chopin said that “some poems of Mickiewicz” suggested *seine Balladen* to him. This—though it is at five years’ distance from the actual conversation—is the clearest indication that the early version of op. 38 had already acquired the title “Ballade.”

Painstaking examination of these fossil shards of memory is necessary because so much has been extrapolated from them, and not always judiciously. All we can say for sure from Schumann’s accounts is that he preferred the G Minor Ballade but did hear a different version of op. 38 in 1836. Although the Second Ballade did not speak to Schumann as the First did, he still thought highly of it, at least in its published version. Although it might appear that Chopin’s dedication (in 1841) of op. 38 to

3. “Von Chopin habe ich eine neue Ballade. Sie scheint mir sein genialischstes (nicht genialstes) Werk; auch sagte ich es ihm, daß es mir das liebste unter allen. Nach einer langen Pause Nachdenken sagte er mit großem Nachdruck—“das ist mir lieb, auch mir ist es mein Liebstes.” Außerdem spielte er mir eine Menge neuer Etüden, Notturnos, Masureks—alles unvergleichlich” (my translation). *Robert Schumanns Briefe: Neue Folge*, ed. F. Gustav Jansen (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1904), 1:78. This passage is also quoted in series 8, vol. 1, of the supplemental volumes of Robert Schumann, *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*: Ernst Burger, *Robert Schumann: Eine Lebenschronik in Bildern und Dokumenten* (Mainz: Schott, 1998), 151. Translation is a bit of a problem here; the German words *genialisch* and *genial* mean “possessing genius,” but with *genialisch* there is also the implication of unconventional, high-flown, boundless, and extravagant genius. Schumann seems to be suggesting not an either/or relationship between the terms, but rather that the first is somewhat more accurate than the second. I am grateful to Stephen Luttmann for his help with this knotty little phrase.

4. Schumann, *Robert Schumanns Briefe*, 1:78.