



Frederic Chopin



The very night he was born, little Frederic Chopin heard music. Peasants from the neighborhood played a happy serenade outside the window of Madame Chopin's room. They had brought their fiddles and horns, their singers and flutes, and the starry night air tingled with the gaiety of Polish songs and dances. It was February, 1810, in the village of Zelazowa-Wola, about thirty miles from Warsaw.

Justine and Nicolas Chopin were happily married. Nicolas was French by birth and education; Justine was a beautiful Polish girl he had met when he came to work in Poland. The family atmosphere combined French and Polish language and customs.

At the time of Frederic's birth, his family lived a busy, stimulating life on a great country estate. There Nicolas tutored the children of a noble family. So Frederic Chopin was one of the few great composers who enjoyed a happy childhood with a comfortable home and loving parents. He also had two adoring older sisters.

One day soon after the baby boy learned to crawl, Louise, the second sister, ran to her mother. "Mama, come quickly! Something must be wrong with Frederic. Yesterday and today, he crawls only as far as the piano. Then he sits there, not making a sound! He won't move."

Madame Chopin picked up her skirts and ran. Frederic smiled when he saw his mother coming. Then he leaned as close to the piano strings as he could get, and listened intently.

"Frederic, are you all right?" asked Madame Chopin, the way mothers always talk to babies, as if they could answer back. This time, Frederic did. He nodded his head and pointed to the strings.

When Madame Chopin went closer, the baby clapped his hands and laughed. For a moment, she looked puzzled. Then she walked over to the piano with firm steps. Frederic laughed again and pointed to the strings.



Then Madame Chopin picked up the baby, swung him in her arms, and laughingly kissed him.

"Frederic!" she said. "It is the vibration of the strings you like to hear! Don't you see, Louise? Whenever anyone walks or moves heavily, the strings vibrate. Frederic has discovered this, and that is why he won't move away from the piano. I am sure now that he has great love for music."

"Oh, Mama, he is just a baby. How do you know?" Louise looked very puzzled.

"Well, the first time I played for him, he began to cry. I was afraid he did not like music. Then I found out he was crying because I had stopped playing!"

"But how could you know that?" asked Louise.

"Because, Darling, he pulled my skirts and pointed to the harpsichord. So I played again, and he began to smile. I always take him with me to the piano now."

Louise laughed. "He's a funny baby." Then she ran to call her older sister. "Isabelle! Isabelle! The mystery is solved! It is to hear the vibrations of the strings that Fritz won't budge from under the piano."

When Frederic was about eight months old, his father was appointed supervisor and professor of French at a French school in Warsaw. Although the appointment was a great honor, the family regretted moving from the country to the city.

Soon after the move, another little girl, who looked exactly like Frederic, was born. Her name was Emilie, and she was Frederic's constant companion.

A few years later, when Frederic was about five years old, the children gave a play to honor their father's birthday. Written by Frederic and Emilie, it was happy and funny. Everyone had a fine time.

That night, long after the house was quiet, the children's nurse thought she heard a noise. Quickly lighting her candle, she saw at once that Frederic had disappeared! Smothering a cry, she hurried out of the room just in time to see him running down the stairs in his nightgown.

"Good Heavens," she thought to herself. "He's walking in his sleep. I must be careful not to frighten the child."



Quietly, she followed the little boy down the stairs and into the parlor. To her astonishment, Frederic climbed up to the bench in front of his mother's piano. He fingered the keys for a moment until he found a melody he had often heard his mother play. Then he played it himself.

"Glory be!" thought the nurse. "The child is playing the music in his sleep! Or else he is quite completely bewitched! I must run and tell Madame Chopin and the Master, and if need be, the doctor himself."

But when the Chopins saw what was going on, they motioned for Nurse to be quiet. Soon, the three little girls, the cook, and everybody else in the house crowded into the doorway of the little parlor to listen to the music. Frederic was playing all the songs and waltzes, mazurkas and folk music he had heard his mother play.

Suddenly Madame Chopin realized the room was far too cold for the little boy to be sitting there so long in his night clothes.

She tiptoed over to Frederic, speaking very gently as she did so. "It sounded so lovely, we all came down to listen, Fritz dear. But it is very cold here, and you are dressed far too lightly. Nurse will fix a little hot goat's milk to keep us from catching cold. Then, off to bed we shall go, all of us!"

"Mama! I'm sorry!" said Fredric.

"Why should you be sorry?" said his mother. "You have done nothing wrong, only something very nice. I had no idea you could play like that!"

"Neither did I," said Louise, excitedly. "Now we can have music in our next play! How can you play without any lessons or practice, Fritz? You play those waltzes better than I do, and I've been working on them for weeks."

"Me too," said Isabella. "Imagine!"

"Shh! No more conversation, my dears. Just run on to bed. Off to bed, everyone!"





When the house was quiet again, Madame Chopin smiled in the darkness. She said softly, "Louise said little Fritz played better than she! My dear, he plays better than I, and though, of course, I am an amateur, I am not considered too bad."

"You play beautifully, with great tenderness and expression," answered her husband.

"Not with the touch of Frederic," said Madame Chopin thoughtfully. "It reminds me of stories I have heard about Mozart as a child. I believe we have a musical genius in our little boy. Remember how he used to crawl under the piano to listen to the strings vibrate? And how he cried when I stopped playing? We must arrange for lessons at once. Talent should be encouraged."

The very next day, Adalbert Zywny, the best-known music master in Warsaw, came to see Professor Chopin.

"This is luck!" said Frederic's father. "I was just going to call on you."

Then he told Professor Zywny about Frederic's unusual interest in and aptitude for music.

"The boy should certainly be encouraged," said Professor Zywny. "May I hear him play?"

"Remember," said Frederic's father, "he has never had a lesson. Until last night, none of us had heard him play."

"I shall take that into consideration," said Professor Zywny.

They were just in time to hear Madame Chopin finishing a waltz, and Frederic asking to try it. The two men stood with the boy's mother, listening. A smile on Professor Zywny's face grew bigger as Frederic played.

"Do you think --" began Madame Chopin when Frederic had finished the waltz.

"I think this boy is a musician," said the Professor. "Frederic, you seem to have an instinct for the piano. Something tells me you could play music on it we have never heard -- music that is turning over and over in your head."

Frederic looked at the master as though he had performed a trick of magic. "Why, how did you know that, Sir?"



"Oh, we musicians have a language all our own," Professor Zywny said. "Suppose you play for us now. Play that tune I think you are hearing in your head."



Frederic began to play a variation of the waltz his mother had been playing. As he did so, he held his head as she always did. Then he imitated Isabelle and Louise at the piano. Finally, playing a melody with deep bass tones, he mimicked his father and Professor Zywny, too.

Professor Zywny was delighted.

"Good! Very good, indeed. I am glad you can have fun with your music, Frederic. That means you, yourself, enjoy it, so all who hear it will enjoy it with you."

To Frederic's father, he said, "It will be an honor, a privilege, and a very great pleasure to have Frederic come to me for lessons. The lessons will help him to understand the technique, the theory of this music for which he has such great natural talent."

It was not long before Professor Zywny had taught Frederic how to write the music he composed. So the boy and Emilie were able to write and perform a play with music for their father's next birthday.

Soon Frederic had the opportunity to test his musicianship before a larger audience. Professor Zywny arranged for a large private concert in the winter before Frederic was eight years old. It was a great success. He was proclaimed a second Mozart!

A few days after the concert, a very pompous cavalry officer, wearing much gold braid and riding a magnificent black horse, stopped in front of the Chopin house. His uniform showed that he was in the service of the Grand Duke Constantine, brother of the Tsar and Governor of Warsaw. He sent a page to the door with a message for Madame Chopin. The excited children gathered around her.

"What is it, Mama?" asked Frederic. "Who sent it?"

"Oh, Mama, is he not from the palace?" asked Isabelle.

"The palace!" echoed Louise and Emilie. "What did he want? What happened?"



"Goodness, children, " said Madame Chopin laughingly. "Give us a chance to find out. If it is good news, I shall read it to you at once. If not, you shan't hear a word . . . Now, don't look so crestfallen. I am only teasing. Of course it is good news . . . well, not bad, in any case. Listen: 'His Imperial Highness requests the pleasure of young Frederic Chopin's presence at 4:00 p.m. in the salon of the Princess Lowicka.'"

"Four o'clock!" said Frederic, astonished. "Does that mean today? It's already past one o'clock!"

"Apparently so," answered his mother, as the girls jumped up and down squealing in their excitement.

"However, can he be ready in time?" asked Louise. Little Emilie put her nose in the air and strutted around Frederic with the air of a princess.

~Wicker, Irene. Young Music Makers. E.M. Hale and Company, 1961

Recommended music to listen to:

- "Polonaise in G Minor"
- "'Minute'" Waltz
- "Mazurka in A minor"
- "Revolutionary Etude" Op. 10, No. 12
- "Raindrop Prelude," Op. 28, No. 15

Valse « Les Adieux »

Op. 69, No. 1 (Posthume)
- Septembre 1835 -

Frédéric CHOPIN
(1810-1849)

Tempo di Valse