

The Newsletter of the **Canadian Chopin Society**

January 2019

Impromptu

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**CANADIAN
CHOPIN
SOCIETY**

As we greet the start of 2019, the countdown to the Fifth Canadian Chopin Piano Competition and Festival begins! This event marks a new chapter in the history of the Canadian Chopin Society, as we move our Festival and Competition to The Royal Conservatory in Toronto. We are excited about this development, which will broaden our audience, and provide the competitors with an opportunity to perform in world class facilities. The distinguished jury led by Krzysztof Jablonski will identify three young pianists who will receive funding for travel to Warsaw for the preliminary round of the 18th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in 2020. The Canadian Chopin Competition will be framed with a Festival bringing the opportunity for audiences to learn more about the master and immerse themselves in his music.

We invite you to contribute to the success of this event by renewing your membership in the Chopin Society, moving up to the “supporting member” level, or becoming a new member. Consider also joining our team of volunteers, or one of our working committees. Spread the word about our Festival to your friends and fellow music lovers to help us fill every seat in Koerner Hall for the competition finals!

Please mark the dates – August 23 - 29, 2019 on your calendar. We hope to see you there!

Dr. Janet Lopinski
Artistic Director

SAVE THE DATES

The Fifth Canadian Chopin Piano
Competition and Festival
August 23 - 29, 2019

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CHOPIN SOCIETY UPDATES

2016

- Celebratory Concert at The Royal Conservatory featuring Charles Richard-Hamelin and Tony Yike Yang, laureates of the 2015 International Chopin Piano Competition.
- Lecture Recital featuring Eric Liu, laureate of the 2015 International Chopin Piano Competition.
- Lectures by Polish musicologist Piotr Myslakowski.
- Canadian Chopin Society Scholarship Program launched.

2017

- Canadian Chopin Society Scholarship award presented to Annie Zhou.
- Jazz in June fundraiser at Granite Ridge Golf Club featuring the Ault Sisters.
- Participation in the Scotiabank Waterfront Marathon.

2018

- Concert featuring Coco Ma, Eric Guo, and Kinga Mitrowska at Mississauga Polish Day.
- Canadian Chopin Society Scholarship award presented to Eric Guo.
- Participation in the Scotiabank Waterfront Marathon.



ROYAL CONSERVATORY SCHOOL
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The Canadian Chopin Society
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A Special Music Appreciation Event
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FREE ADMISSION



Dr. Janet Lopinski
Lecturer

Eric Lu, Pianist
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The Canadian Chopin Society
presents

Jazz in June

with



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in support of The Canadian Chopin Society Scholarship Fund
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\$60.00 for members, \$75.00 non-members
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Granite Ridge Golf Club 9503 Dublin Line Milton, Ontario L9T 2N7 Toll Free Booking: 877-465-3126

SAVE THE DATES

Friday August 23 - Opening Reception and Gala Concert
John Paul II Polish Cultural Centre, Mississauga

Wednesday August 28 - Solo Recital by Krzysztof Jablonski
Koerner Hall, Toronto

Thursday August 29 - Canadian Chopin Competition Final Round
Koerner Hall, Toronto



CHOPIN

A Life and Times

An Interview With Alan Walker

By Janet Lopinski

In the literature of musical monographs, the monumental three-volume biography of Franz Liszt written by Alan Walker stands out as a masterpiece, presenting for the reader an unparalleled account of this composer's life and music.

Dr. Walker was born in England, where he earned certificates in piano from the Guildhall School of Music and Royal College of Music, and multiple degrees from the University of Durham. After lecturing at the Guildhall School of Music and University of London, he worked as a producer with the music division of the BBC for over a decade. He moved to Canada in 1971 and served as chairman of the music department at McMaster University, launching the first graduate program in music criticism in Canada.

Notable awards received in the course of his long and illustrious career include the Hungarian Liszt Society Medal, American Liszt Society Medal, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Honorary Fellow of the Guildhall School of Music, Honorary Doctorate from McMaster University, the Pro Cultura Hungaria Medal from the Government of Hungary, and the

Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary. Dr. Walker has been an active member of the Canadian Chopin Society, and was recognized as its first Honorary Fellow in 2013.

My first introduction to the work of Alan Walker was the *Chopin Companion*, a wonderful collection of essays that I came across as a graduate student. A few years, and many volumes later, I had the pleasure of hearing Dr. Walker lecture at The Royal Conservatory in Toronto, and was struck by the depth of his knowledge, and how

The release of his biography, Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times represents a decade of research, including study of primary sources in Warsaw, Paris, London, Washington, D.C., and New York.

he spoke as if he had known Liszt personally. Shortly after, I had the pleasure of serving with him on the jury of the First Canadian Chopin Piano Competition, and since that time have enjoyed the opportunity to become more closely acquainted with Alan and his work.

It was a great pleasure to discover several years ago, that with twenty-five years of focus on Franz Liszt behind him, Dr. Walker was turning his attention to the life of Chopin. The release of his new biography, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times* represents a decade of research, including study of primary sources in Warsaw, Paris, London, Washington, D.C., and New York. On one occasion, our paths crossed in Warsaw, and we met over cocktails at the historic Bristol Hotel, located just steps away from streets often walked by Chopin.

Janet Lopinski (JL): We are all familiar with your definitive and critically acclaimed three-volume biography of Franz Liszt. When did the idea of writing a full biography of Fryderyk Chopin first occur to you, and how did the idea become a reality?

Chopin: A Life and Times *(continued)*

Alan Walker (AW): After my Liszt biography was published, a work that had taken me 25 years to complete, I started to suffer from the literary equivalent of post-partum depression, and knew that the only way to cure it was to start work on another book. I immediately thought of writing about Chopin. Few of my colleagues in the field of Liszt research know that since my early childhood Chopin has always been my first love. Still, the decision was not easy because there are dozens of biographies of Chopin out there (some of them very good), and I saw no point in writing another one unless I could find new things to say. I also knew that I would have to travel to foreign archives to study essential documents. I am not the sort of biographer who stays at home and makes things up as I go along.

JL: Your research for this book extended over ten years, and included examination of primary sources in Warsaw, Paris, London, New York, and Washington DC. Tell us something about your experiences in Warsaw, and your interaction and collaboration with the Fryderyk Chopin Institute.

AW: I always enjoyed my work at the Fryderyk Chopin Institute and found the archivists there invariably helpful. As you know, the Institute is sponsored by the Polish government and its state-of-the-art facilities exist to conserve and promote the heritage of Chopin and his music. The head of the Institute, Dr. Artur Szklener, has assembled a first class team of specialists who make everything available to the visiting scholar and do their best to deal with Chopin-related questions, often of the most esoteric kind. And when they cannot help, they put you in touch with people who can. That is how I met Piotr Mysłakowski. Piotr's research on Chopin has transformed the field,

especially that part of it dealing with the composer's early years in Warsaw and its environs. It was Piotr who drove me hundreds of kilometers across Mazovia in search of Chopin-related locations – Szafarnia, Sanniki, Kalisz, Kikół, and of course Żelazowa Wola, Chopin's birthplace. No location was too remote. We even undertook the 300-kilometer journey from Warsaw to "Antonin", Prince Radziwił's hunting lodge where Chopin stayed and gave lessons to the Prince's daughter, Wanda. These expeditions were a reminder of what I have elsewhere described as the "geography of biography" – the indispensable experience of visiting the places about which one writes, or risk losing the possibility of bringing them to life on the printed page.

JL: The book has been described as a "corrective biography". Can you comment briefly on that, and give us a few examples of the most grievous errors or most extravagant myths that have been corrected?

AW: Contrary to the literature, Chopin was never a pupil at the Warsaw Conservatory and never studied the piano there. Rather, after he had finished his studies at the Warsaw Lyceum, he enrolled in the newly-created High School for Music, which was linked to the University and was where he studied composition with Józef Elsner.

There is a charming story attached to the D-flat major Prelude (nicknamed "The Raindrop") which was supposedly inspired by the sound of rain falling on the roof of the Valldemosa monastery where Chopin and George Sand stayed during the winter of 1838-39. The architecture of the monastery would have made that impossible. There is an entire floor above the cell where Chopin stayed, making raindrops or anything else that happened to fall on the roof

impossible to hear. The first edition of the Preludes (1840), proof-checked by Chopin, carries no mention of raindrops. The tale comes to us from Sand's autobiography, published five years after Chopin's death, in which she sometimes lets her novelist's pen run away with her.

We are told that when Chopin left Poland in November 1830, he took with him a goblet of Polish earth which was sprinkled over his grave when he was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery, on October 30, 1849. It's a romantic legend, but nothing more. In any case, why would Chopin take Polish earth with him when he left Poland, since he had every intention of going back after briefly visiting Vienna? It was the November Uprising, which broke out three weeks after he left home, that prevented him from returning and forced him to settle in France – minus that goblet. It was Chopin's family in Warsaw who sent Polish earth to be sprinkled over his grave at the time of the unveiling of the composer's monument in Père Lachaise Cemetery, one year after his death, on October 17, 1850. It has been well said that facts are stubborn things.

Chopin suffered from tuberculosis, not cystic fibrosis – a rival medical diagnosis that only gained currency after WWII. A visual inspection of Chopin's heart was carried out on April 14, 2014, when the organ was temporarily removed from its resting place in Warsaw's Church of the Holy Cross. Many photographs were taken and the membrane vesicles associated with tuberculosis were clearly visible.

The deathbed note in which Chopin was supposed to have instructed his physicians to open his body so that he did not have to suffer the fate of being buried alive, was not written by Chopin. It was written by his father Mikołaj Chopin, shortly before the latter's own burial in 1844, as a graphological analysis

Chopin: A Life and Times *(continued)*

of the handwriting shows.

JL: Can you share one of your favourite anecdotes about Chopin in his childhood and youth in Poland?

AW: This is a difficult stretch of territory which we must cross with caution. Many of these childhood anecdotes were passed along to Chopin's first biographer Maurycy Karasowski (1877) by the composer's younger sister Izabella, drawing on memories that were already more than fifty years old at the time, and impossible to confirm. Still, there is one that for me contains the ring of truth. When Chopin was only eight years old and already a well-known prodigy he gave his first public concert in Warsaw, playing a concerto by the Bohemian composer Adalbert Gyrowetz. We are told that Chopin's mother Justyna had dressed Fryderyk somewhat like an English boy of fashion, with short knickerbockers and a large white lace collar over a dark velvet jacket. When Fryderyk got home and Justyna asked him what the audience had admired most, he is supposed to have replied, "My collar, Mamma!" Before dismissing the story as a branch of fiction, we should recognize that it chimes with everything we know about Chopin in later life. He was meticulous to the point of obsession about his personal grooming. His pre-concert ritual often involved tailors, hairdressers, and personal valets, whose approval had to be met before he faced the scrutiny of an audience.

JL: Now that you have completed what I'm sure will become the definitive biography of Chopin, to stand alongside of the Liszt biography, I think it is safe to say that you are more closely connected with these two composers than any other living being! If we could



bring both of them back today, what do you think they would say to each other?

AW: First some background. Whatever the existing biographies tell us, there were never any close bonds of friendship between Liszt and Chopin, except perhaps during Chopin's first couple of years in Paris. At that time (1831-33) Liszt helped Chopin to get established, and in return Chopin dedicated his first set of Etudes, op. 10 to the Hungarian

composer. Later on their friendship cooled. Chopin did not like Liszt's compositions although his admiration for Liszt the pianist was unbounded. We must remember that Chopin died when Liszt was only 38 years old, so he never witnessed Liszt's growth as a major composer, the creator of the B minor Piano Sonata, the "Faust" Symphony, and the late works which opened the door to Debussy, Ravel, and Bartók.

So the question you ask is an intriguing one, even though we have to use our imaginations to come up with a plausible answer. I think the two composers might be pleasantly surprised to learn that they are both now in the Pantheon – fixtures in the concert hall. During their respective lifetimes this did not seem to be a likely possibility. I hope that Chopin would acknowledge the importance of Liszt's celebrated masterclasses in Weimar, Rome, and Budapest in which he introduced Chopin's music to the next generation of concert pianists, three of whom became leading exponents of Chopin's music: Hans von Bülow, Moriz Rosenthal, and Raphael Joseffy (who also became one of Chopin's editors). I can imagine Chopin saying to Liszt: "And there's something else we have in common as well". "What's that?" Liszt might ask, still searching for connections. "We both have international airports named for us. The Fryderyk Chopin Airport in Warsaw, and the Ferenc Liszt Airport in Budapest!" That's progress.

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