

Chopin

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Extract from Chopin's Life Story

We hear first of that part of the programme in a letter to Gryzmala. *Starts for*
"Next week," says Chopin, "I go to Lord Tor- *Scotland*
phichen, the brother-in-law of my Scottish
friends, the Misses Stirling. He wrote to me and invited

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me heartily, as did also Lady Murray, an influential lady of high rank there, who takes an extraordinary interest in music, not to mention the many invitations I have received from various parts of England. But I cannot wander about from one place to another like a strolling musician; such a vagabond life is hateful to me, and not conducive to my health. I intend to remain in Scotland till the 28th of August, on which day I go as far as Manchester, where I am engaged to play in public. I shall play there twice without orchestra, and receive for this sixty pounds."

Chopin evidently started for Scotland early in August, for on the sixth of the month he writes to Franchomme, the 'cellist, from Calder House, the residence *At Calder House* of Lord Torphichen, some twelve miles from Edinburgh. He says his health is not "altogether bad," but adds that he has "become more feeble," and that the air of the north does not yet agree with him. The people, however, are good, though he says they are ugly; and there are "charming, apparently mischievous cattle, perfect milk, butter, eggs, and *tout ce qui en suit*, cheese, and chickens" to compensate for the ugliness! The park is very beautiful, with hundred-year-old trees; the lord of the manor very excellent. Above his private apartment (he notes this himself, though it seems odd enough), John Knox dispensed for the first time the Sacrament.¹ He has a Broadwood piano in his room, and Miss Stirling's Pleyel in his *salon*. He has paper and pens, too, in plenty, and a "perfect tranquillity," but he does not

¹ This is the subject of an unfinished painting by Sir David Wilkie in the Scottish National Gallery.



Calder House, Mid-Lothian
Where Chopin resided during his visit to Scotland in 1848

find one musical idea in his head. He is out of his groove, like an ass at a masked ball, or the highest string of a violin on a double bass. And he desires so much to compose a little, "were it only to please these good ladies, Madame Erskine and Mlle. Stirling."

About these "good ladies" it is necessary to say something before going further. Lord Torphichen, we have already learned from Chopin himself, was their brother-in-law. Both were members of a noted Scottish family, their father being John Stirling of Kippendavie, a cousin¹ of the William Stirling of Keir who in 1865 became Sir William Stirling-Maxwell. Jane Maxwell Stirling (Chopin's Mlle. Stirling) was a cousin and great friend of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, who regarded her as one of the most remarkable women he had ever met. Her sister Catherine became the wife of James Erskine in 1811, but she had been thirty-two years a widow at the date of Chopin's visit. Jane, the younger of the two sisters, had lived a good deal in Paris, and the fact seems to be established that she made Chopin's acquaintance by becoming one of his pupils. At all events, it is on record that soon after he met her he "began to like her," and we know that he dedicated two of his compositions to her — the *Deux Nocturnes* (Op. 55), published in 1844. It was said, not unnaturally, that she was in love with the composer, and the rumour got abroad that they were to be married. One day, when Chopin was ill, he remarked to a favourite pupil: "They have married me to Miss Stirling; she might as well marry death."

¹ Not a brother, as Professor Niecks says.

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Later on we shall see the extent of Miss Stirling's practical interest in Chopin. Meantime it is necessary to move with the composer to Edinburgh, which he now used as a centre for making a round of visits. At this time and for many years afterwards a Polish doctor named Lyschinski was practising medicine in the Scottish capital. He seems to have known something of Chopin, for we read that he met the composer at the railway station and addressed him in Polish. Chopin at first put up at an hotel, but he soon found that mode of life unbearable, and calmly told Lyschinski that he could not live without him. The doctor, who must have been a kindly soul, took his fellow-countryman to his house at No. 10 Warriston Crescent, turning the nursery into a bedroom, and sending the children to stay temporarily with a friend. Some very interesting reminiscences of this visit were conveyed by Mrs Lyschinski to Professor Niecks. It appears that Chopin rose very late, and in the morning had soup in his room. His hair was curled daily by his servant Daniel, a Frenchman of Irish ancestry; and his shirts, boots, and other things were of the neatest. In fact, he was "a *petit maître*, more vain in dress than any woman." He was so weak that the doctor had always to carry him upstairs. After dinner he sat before the fire, often shivering with cold; then, all of a sudden, he would take his seat at the piano and play himself warm. He could bear neither dictation nor contradiction; if you told him to go to the fire he would go to the other end of the room where the piano stood. Mrs Lyschinski once declined to sing when

he asked her, and he immediately flew into a passion. "Doctor," he said, "would you take it amiss if I were to force your wife to do it?" The idea of a woman refusing *him* anything he seemed to regard as preposterous. Miss Stirling often visited him while he was at Warriston Crescent, and Mrs Lyschinski used to chaff him about her as a "particular friend" of his, although she indicated to Professor Niecks that the lady's love was of the "purely sisterly" order. Chopin took it all in good part, remarking that he had no particular friend among the ladies: he "gave to all an equal share of attention."

On the 28th of August he was in Manchester for his recital there. He had a good audience, and everything passed off well, although he was in extremely low spirits. His old friend, Mr George A. Osborne,¹ met him just before the concert, and Chopin implored him not to attend.

"You who have heard me so often in Paris," he said, "remain with those impressions. Your presence at the concert will be painful both to you and me." Osborne, nevertheless, could not resist the temptation of being present, and the impression left upon him was just what Chopin had anticipated. "His playing," says Osborne, "was too delicate to create enthusiasm, and I was truly sorry for him."

¹ Osborne had studied in Paris under Pixis, Fétis, and Kalkbrenner. He resided in the French capital from 1830 to 1843 and came much in contact with Chopin. He was born at Limerick in 1806 and died in 1893.

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The best notice of this concert is to be found in the still flourishing *Manchester Guardian*. "Chopin's music and style of performance," says the critic of that journal, "partake of the same leading characteristics—refinement rather than vigour—subtle elaboration rather than simple comprehensiveness in composition—an elegant rapid touch rather than a firm nervous grasp of the instrument. Both his compositions and playing appear to be the perfection of chamber music—fit to be associated with the most refined instrumental quartette and quartette playing—but wanting in breadth and obviousness of design and executive power to be effective in a large hall."

From Manchester Chopin proceeded to Glasgow for his recital there. In the *Courier* the following advertisement had been appearing :

Monsieur Chopin has the honour to announce that his *matinée musicale* will take place on Wednesday the 27th September, in the Merchant Hall, Glasgow. To commence at half-past two o'clock. Tickets, limited in number, half-a-guinea each, and full particulars to be had from Mr Muir Wood, 42 Buchanan Street.

The net profits of this concert are said to have been exactly £60, a ridiculously low sum when we compare it with the earnings of later-day *virtuosi*; nay, *In Glasgow* still more ridiculously low when we recall the fact that for two concerts in Glasgow sixteen years before this Paganini had £1400. Mr Muir Wood, who had established a music-publishing business in Edinburgh and Glasgow, said: "I was then a comparative stranger in Glasgow, but I was told that

so many private carriages had never been seen at any concert in the town. In fact, it was the county people who turned out, with a few of the *élite* of Glasgow society. Being a morning concert, the citizens were busy otherwise, and half-a-guinea was considered too high a sum for their wives and daughters." The late Dr James Hedderwick of Glasgow tells in his reminiscences that on entering the hall he found it about one-third full. It was obvious that a number of the audience were personal friends of Chopin. Dr Hedderwick recognised the composer at once as a "little, fragile-looking man, in pale-grey suit, including frock-coat of identical tint and texture, moving about among the company, conversing with different groups, and occasionally consulting his watch," which seemed to be "no bigger than an agate stone on the fore-finger of an alderman." Whiskerless, beardless, fair of hair, and pale and thin of face, his appearance was "interesting and conspicuous," and when, "after a final glance at his miniature horologe, he ascended the platform and placed himself at the instrument, he at once commanded attention." Dr Hedderwick says it was a drawing-room entertainment, more *piano* than *forte*, though not without occasional episodes of both strength and grandeur. It was perfectly apparent to him that Chopin was marked for an early grave.

Ten years ago, in the course of some inquiries on the subject, I found two survivors of that Glasgow audience of 1848. The first was Mr Julius Seligmann, the President of the Glasgow Society of Musicians, who died in April 1903. I asked

A reminiscence

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Mr Seligmann to state in writing what he remembered, and he sent me the following :

Several weeks before the concert Chopin lived with different friends or pupils on their invitations in the surrounding counties. I think his pupil, Miss Jane Stirling, had something to do with all the general arrangements. Mr Muir Wood managed the special arrangements of the concert, and I distinctly remember him telling me that he never had so much difficulty in arranging a concert as on this occasion. Chopin constantly changed his mind. Wood had to visit him several times at the house of Admiral Napier, at Milliken Park,¹ near Johnstone, but scarcely had he returned to Glasgow when he was summoned back to alter something. The concert was given in the Merchant Hall, Hutcheson Street, now the County Buildings, and the horses and carriages before the hall towards the close of the concert were a splendid sight. The hall was about three-quarters filled. Between Chopin's playing, Madame de Margerite, daughter of a well-known London physician, sang, and Mr Muir Wood accompanied her. Chopin was evidently very ill. His touch was very feeble, and while the finish, grace, elegance, and delicacy of his performances were greatly admired by the audience, the want of power made his playing somewhat monotonous. I do not remember the whole programme, but he was encored for his well-known Mazurka in B Flat (Op. 7, No. 1) which he repeated with quite different nuances from those of the first. The audience was very aristocratic, consisting mostly of ladies, among whom were the Duchess of Argyll and her sister, Lady Blantyre.

Death has also claimed within the last five or six years the second enthusiastic member of that Glasgow audience of 1848 to whom I have referred—namely, Mr George Russell Alexander, son of the proprietor of the Glasgow

¹ Mr Seligmann has made a mistake here : Chopin was the guest of Mrs Houston, a sister of Miss Stirling, at Johnstone Castle.

Theatre Royal. Mr Alexander, in a letter to me, remarks especially upon Chopin's pale, cadaverous appearance. "My emotion," he says, "was so great that two or three times I was compelled to retire from the room to recover myself. I have heard all the best and most celebrated stars of the musical firmament, but never one has left such an impression on my mind." The cynic will have his own explanation of Mr Alexander's leaving the room to "recover" himself, but I am not disposed to be hypercritical. It is sufficient to note the general impression produced upon his listeners by this *virtuoso*, who seemed to them all to be dying on his feet.

There is still, I find, one survivor of the Glasgow recital of 1848 in the person of a lady now resident in Bedford, a member of a well-known Scotch family, who had the privilege of receiving some lessons from Chopin when she was in Paris in 1846. I quote from her letter to me of March 18, 1903. She says:

The lady to whom I was indebted for my introduction to Chopin was the late Miss Stirling of Kippenross, to whom he dedicated his two Nocturnes (Op. 55). During part of his stay in Scotland he was the guest of the late Mrs Houston of Johnstone Castle, Miss Stirling's sister. I was invited, with one of my sisters, to meet him. He was then in a most suffering state, but nevertheless he was so kind as to play to us that evening in his own matchless style. We four were his only auditors. It was at such times, and not in a concert-room, that he poured himself out. The following morning, a cold, ungenial day, we accompanied him to Glasgow. I have not preserved the programme of that memorable recital, nor can I now recall distinctly anything but the marvellous brill-

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iancy of the well-known Mazurka (Op. 7), and the equally familiar Valses (Op. 64), the second of which is so pathetic. I never saw Chopin again, but his tones still ring in my ears.¹

From Glasgow Chopin appears to have gone direct to the residence of the Stirlings at Keir; at anyrate we find him writing from there on the 1st of October. That date was a Sunday, and Chopin complains that there is "no post, no carriage (not even for taking the air), no boat, not a *dog* to be seen—all desolate, desolate." To make matters worse, a thick mist had settled down, and nothing could be seen of what the composer calls "the view most celebrated for its beauty in Scotland." Chopin became more depressed than ever. Things, he says, are getting worse with him every day. He cannot compose, partly from physical reasons, and partly because he is every week in a different place. Invitations he has in plenty, and cannot go even where he would like—for instance, to the *Bored to* Duchess of Argyll's. "I am all the morning," *death* he writes, "unable to do anything, and when I have dressed myself I feel again so fatigued that I must rest. After dinner I must sit two hours with

¹ In a second letter the same correspondent writes: "It goes to my heart to think of Chopin in his miserable state handed about among those kind and well-meaning, but tormenting friends, and forced to appear in public. Even had he been in possession of his full powers, his peculiar genius could not have been understood or appreciated in this country at that time. And I well remember one of his friends, a consummate musician in Paris, remarking that probably his music would die with him, or at least that it would not survive after those artistes had gone who could play in his own spirit, and had imbibed it from himself. But the result has been quite different."

the gentlemen, hear what they say, and see how much they drink. Meanwhile, I feel bored to death." When he has settled down in some measure he must continue his travels, for, as he remarks, "my Scots ladies do not allow me—to be sure with the best intention in the world—any rest. They fetch me to introduce me to all their relations; they will at last kill me with their kindness, and I must bear it out of pure amiability." Much of this depression was clearly due to the state of his health. Chopin was naturally fond of society, though he was not fond of being "shoved about" in the disgustingly bad manner which prevails even at the present time. When the guest had to be carried upstairs to his bedroom, there to be undressed by his "good Daniel," it was hardly to be expected that he would shine in the company of those who thought they were honouring him by putting such a strain on his feeble constitution.

A week after the Glasgow concert—that is to say, on October 4—Chopin gave an evening recital in the Hope-toun Rooms, Queen Street, Edinburgh. The tickets, as at Glasgow, were half-a-guinea *Playing in* each. Miss Stirling had grave doubts as to *Edinburgh* the support of the Edinburgh public at such an unheard-of charge, and, to make sure of the hall being respectably filled, she bought up £50 worth of tickets for distribution amongst her friends. The concert, as a natural result, was attended almost solely by the nobility and the profession. Even if the charge for admission had been less than it was there would probably have been only a small audience. Chopin was practically unknown in England;

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he was, we may say, wholly unknown in Scotland. Miss Stirling's fears were well-founded; and, however much Chopin may have deplored her irksome attachment, she clearly proved a good friend to him while in the North. The notices of the Edinburgh concert are not without interest. The following is from the *Courant*:

Chopin's compositions have been too long before the musical portion of Europe, and have been too highly appreciated to require any comment, further than that they are among the best specimens of classical excellence in pianoforte music. Of his execution we need say nothing further than that it is the most finished we have ever heard. He has neither the ponderosity, nor the digital power of a Mendelssohn, a Thalberg, or a Liszt; consequently his execution would be less effective in a large room; but as a chamber pianist he stands unrivalled. Notwithstanding the amount of musical entertainment already offered the Edinburgh public this season, the rooms were filled with an audience who, by their judicious and well-timed applause, testified their appreciation of the high talent of Monsieur Chopin.

Chopin himself says simply: "I have played in Edinburgh. The nobility of the neighbourhood came to hear me; people say the thing went off well—a little success and money. There were this year in Scotland Jenny Lind, Grisi, Alboni, Mario—everybody."¹

But the composer was already impatient to be at home

¹ Mr Adam Hamilton, the founder of the well-known Drechsler-Hamilton family, writes me that he was present at this recital. The audience, he says, was "very select, mostly ladies." What Mr Hamilton remembers best is Chopin's "quiet, graceful" style of playing.

in Paris. The "beautiful country of Walter Scott, with its memories of Mary Stuart," is all very well, but the sun does "nothing more than usual," *Impatient* and the winter advances. Everywhere he had *and ill* met with extreme kindness — "interminable dinners, and cellars of which I avail myself less." But Scotland was an alien country after all, and Chopin was never cut out for a cosmopolitan. "A day longer here and I shall go mad or die! My Scots ladies are good, but so tedious that—God have mercy on us! they have so attached themselves to me that I cannot easily get rid of them."

Back in London, Chopin took lodgings at 4 St James' Place. But it was merely a "passing through." He played at the Guildhall, at a ball given for the benefit of the Polish refugees, on the 16th of November. Patriotism would not allow him to refuse this small service to his countrymen. But his part in the affair was, *A parting* if well-intentioned, a huge mistake. The people *shot* who went into the room where he played, hot from dancing, were but little in the humour to pay attention to the most poetical of pianoforte *virtuosi*, and were anxious to return to their amusement. Chopin was in the last stage of exhaustion, and the whole thing resulted in disappointment to all concerned. It was the straw that broke the camel's back. The parting shot came from the other side, at Boulogne. "Do you see the cattle in that meadow?" said the composer to M. Niedzwiecki, who travelled with him. "They have more intelligence than the English."