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Chopin's Last Heir : Carl Mikuli as seen through the eyes of Polish Reviewers

Very few of Chopin's pupils engaged professionally in musical life, and even fewer became concert pianists. This point has been discussed quite extensively by commentators, and it is well-known that many of Chopin's students, being aristocrats by birth, simply could not become professional musicians. On the other hand, Carl Filtsch, who came from a lower social class and was one of Chopin's most talented pupils, died at the age of fifteen¹. Thus, the number of public performances given by Chopin's students is relatively low, and written accounts of their achievements remains very limited. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's marvellous work provides the most extensive information on Chopin's didactic methods and his students². Yet we are still lacking a comprehensive study of their individual musical achievements, and in particular of their individual styles of playing. Hence we have no real documentary evidence of the extent and effect of Chopin's influence on the musical development of his students.

Carl Mikuli was one of Chopin's few pupils whose musical involvement had been professionally intensive. Having completed his musical education with Chopin and given concert tours of Eastern Europe for several years, he settled in Lvov in 1858, where he spent the next thirty years as the director of the Music Society³. From this time on there are regular commentaries on his career and musical output in the Polish press. Mikuli had by then abandoned his concert tours, however, he still performed regularly in the concert series of the Musical Society. These concerts, frequently organised by himself, could be described as mixed musical *soirées*: orchestra, chamber music ensemble, soloists all thrown together. It was Mikuli's habit to wear three hats on these occasions,

1 Filtsch died after having given a string of brilliant concerts in Vienna, Paris, and London ; see Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger : « Carl Filtsch, miroir de Chopin. En marge d'une publication apocryphe », *L'Univers musical de Chopin* (Paris : Fayard, 2000), pp. 265-284.

2 Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin vu par ses élèves* (Neuchâtel : La Baconnière, ³1988).

3 During the second half of the nineteenth century, Lvov was the second most important Polish cultural centre, second only to Warsaw.

switching from orchestra conductor to chamber musician to solo pianist. Critics usually praised him as a conductor and a chamber musician, although their reviews essentially provided a general survey and did not allow enough room for conclusions on the style of his interpretation. A review of a concert given on the 29 June 1869 only evokes « a triumph of true artistry »⁴. Another concert, which featured « Bach's Symphony in D Major » (probably C. P. E. Bach, or J. C. Bach, as the review does not indicate more than this), Beethoven's *Ruins of Athens*, and the « Hallelujah » from Haendel's *Messiah*, was simply described as « brilliant »⁵. Since such comments were to be found in journals from different aesthetic views, we may conclude that Mikuli was generally valued as a conductor and chamber musician alike. Equally high praise was showered on his concert repertoire, always programmed by Mikuli himself. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine precisely the content of his programmes, as sources are neither sufficient nor accurate. Most of the time only the composer's name is given, and rarely the title of the work ; it is an exception for the reader to be able to identify the piece from precise information. The most precise reviews are those of programmes including works by such « great » composers as Chopin, Beethoven, Haendel, Mozart, Schumann, Schubert, and Mendelssohn ; Brahms was among the youngest composers played⁶. Works by less renowned or well established composers were only sporadically performed (with the exception of Mikuli's own works). Works by composers of the New German School were practically not played at all. Liszt's late piano works and Wagner's compositions appeared very rarely, and usually then in choral transcriptions⁷.

Such choice of works provide indisputable evidence of Mikuli's aesthetic preferences, well-rooted in classical aesthetics : and this is precisely where Mikuli's and Chopin's paths cross. If Chopin's musical modernism is unquestionable, his education and general conception of music were also, as Jim Samson put it, « as firmly rooted in 18th century aesthetics as in 18th century theories »⁸. One therefore wonders to what extent Mikuli's aesthetic views were indebted to Chopin. Moreover, could it be possible that their convergent views may have resulted from close contact

4 *Dziennik Literacki*, 27 (1869), p. 435.

5 *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 4 (1876), p. 60.

6 See for example *Ruch Literacki*, 17 (1875), p. 275 ; in describing the works performed at the Music Society concerts, the author of the review lists all the composers' names.

7 For example a choir fragment from Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* was performed on 29 June 1869 ; see *Dziennik Literacki*, 27 (1869), p. 435.

8 Jim Samson, « Chopin's Musical Education », *Chopin Studies*, 6 (1999), pp. 28-37.

and a mutual understanding? However, could other factors have come into play? Mikuli's immediate environment may well have been one of these factors. At that time, a general resistance to new music, in particular as embodied by the New German School, prevailed in Poland. This is evidenced clearly in Polish musical writings, and in a general survey of Polish concert programmes. Performances of Liszt's and Wagner's works were marginal, and most of the time these were followed by unfavourable reactions echoed in reviews. Only towards the end of the century did attitudes begin to change. And tellingly enough, the first posthumous criticisms on Mikuli also date from the same period, as with this 1897 review published in *Echo Muzyczne*: « of all modern composers [Mikuli] only tolerated Brahms »⁹. However there was a notable difference between the concert programmes of the Mikuli's Music Society and those of other institutions in Lvov and in other Polish musical centres. Mikuli displayed an extreme fastidiousness in designing his programmes, centred around a few prominent works, with pieces by less-renowned composers still relatively rare and rather marginal to Mikuli's repertoire. The exact opposite could be observed in the concert programmes of other Polish institutions, favouring works by popular and fashionable, albeit lesser, composers. With the sole exception of Chopin's music, prominent works of the canonic repertoire were almost excluded.

During his lifetime critics appreciated Mikuli's programmes, for they invariably displayed a « sophisticated taste »¹⁰, or an « exquisite taste in concert programming »¹¹; « concerts organised by Mr Mikuli are marvelously programmed »¹², and so on. However critics kept accusing Mikuli of neglecting Polish composers when planning his concerts, apart from Chopin and some works by Moniuszko. Reporting on Lvov's musical life, a journalist from Warsaw wrote that although concerts organised by Mikuli were brilliant, the availability of Polish music was insufficient. Hence the Lvov audience was largely ignorant of Polish composers (Chopin excepted): « being used to foreign music, the audience fail to duly appreciate its own »¹³, and similar comments can be found in many other journals¹⁴. In a review published after Mikuli's death, he was even

9 M. M. Biernacki, « Wspomnienie pośmiertne » [Posthumous Memoir], *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 713 (1897), p. 254.

10 *Ruch Literacki*, 17 (1875), p. 275.

11 *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 22 (1884), p. 232.

12 *Kłosa*, 615 (1877), p. 239; see also *Dziennik Literacki*, 11 (1865), p. 88; 42 (1877), p. 238.

13 *Kłosa*, 615 (1877), p. 239.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 247; *Kronika Rodzinna*, 6 (1874), pp. 94-95; *Ruch Literacki*, 17 (1875), p. 275.

accused of having « despised Polish music »¹⁵. However, one should not conclude that Mikuli's concerts gave no room for Polish composers, although it cannot be denied that these were played much less frequently than would have been expected, as was the case with pieces by foreign and less-renowned composers. This conformed to Mikuli's attitude, since he strongly believed that supreme artistic quality of musical works was of paramount importance for the design of his programmes, and this may reveal a similarity between Mikuli and Chopin, since the latter only acknowledged works of the highest artistic value. The sole fundamental difference between the master and his pupil concerns their own attitude toward the « canonic » repertoire. By including the most valuable works in his concert performances, Mikuli unquestionably offered an essential contribution to the Polish culture of his time. The accusations he faced can well be understood. In the context of Poland losing her independence, art was perceived as a fundamental means of consolidating national identity. The function of art went far beyond aesthetics, and its social role was even more crucial. The criteria of a national art became a leading issue, and this gave birth to recurring claims about the development of a national art that are to be found in most of the musical writings of this time. This was a more general trend of the era, but it took on a particular significance in Poland, elevating it to the rank of patriotic duty. Hence any work deemed worthy of national value had to be performed and popularised. In this context, Mikuli's reluctance to promote the Polish repertoire was viewed as a form of betrayal. Mikuli's solo piano repertoire slightly differed from the programmes of the Musical Society. Chopin's works were of course prevailing, but he also played Hummel, Schumann¹⁶ and Thalberg, as well as Liszt's piano transcriptions¹⁷. It is worth noting that most of these works were virtuoso works, and therefore departed from the Chopin repertoire commonly assigned by Mikuli. Furthermore it seems that Mikuli did not include works from the Classical period – this repertoire being fairly well represented in the Music Society concerts. However, perhaps we should not rely excessively on the record of Mikuli's repertoire found in contemporary reviews, as these were not always accurate ; we should not dismiss the possibility that Mikuli also performed works of the Classical period – a point perhaps neglected by commentators.

Nevertheless Chopin was still the dominant composer in Mikuli's piano repertoire. Among Mikuli's favorite works were the Concerto

15 M. M. Biernacki, « Wspomnienie pośmiertne », p. 254.

16 See *Ruch Muzyczny*, 13 (1858), p. 104.

17 See *Ruch Muzyczny*, 26 (1857), p. 27 ; 4 (1859), p. 44 ; 17 (1859), p. 147.

op. 21¹⁸, the *Rondo* in c major for two pianos op. 73a, the *Krakowiak* op. 14¹⁹, several Nocturnes, including the op. 48 n° 2²⁰ and the op. 15 n° 2²¹, as well as Mazurkas (notably the op. 6 n° 1), etudes, the Scherzo in b flat minor, the Impromptu in c sharp major and the « Funeral March » from the Sonata op. 35²². Mikuli's repertoire seems to have favoured Chopin's early works, since reviews do not mention any of his late works. However Chopin's late works may simply have been omitted in the reviews. According to a journalist writing for *Ruch Muzyczny*, on a concert in Lvov, « Carl Mikuli [is] the unrivalled performer of works by his master, Chopin. It was probably the first time that such a plethora of Chopin's mazurkas, waltzes, nocturnes, etudes, and other works could have been heard »²³. Mikuli's possible predilection for Chopin's early works could have stemmed from his own personal preferences, but also from a wish to play Chopin's works that pleased his audience most. After all, Chopin's early works were still enjoying a favourable reception by audiences and critics both in Poland and throughout Europe, as it was widely documented in the contemporary press. As I have shown elsewhere, Chopin's later works were not appreciated or accepted until many years later²⁴.

With regard to his piano playing, Mikuli was highly valued primarily for having been Chopin's pupil. Commentators have maintained the idea that his pianistic style was very close to Chopin's – if not identical. Such a view can be found in a posthumous memoir by the composer Stanisław Niewiadomski :

By no means was he one of those stage giants capturing every audience by storm. A self-confident, triumphant virtuoso performance, that would exist and resound for its own sake only, had never been Mikuli's manner – as it had never been Chopin's. Mikuli's playing was highly poetic and refined ; his style, however, was rather the language of aristocrats than the one commonly grasped by masses. He usually performed for a chosen few that would not be impressed by technique, force, memory, or physical endurance ; moreover, such an audience, limited in its number, did not intimidate him, or deprive him of his inner calm [...]²⁵

18 *Dziennik Literacki*, 51 (1864), p. 759.

19 *Ruch Muzyczny*, 1 (1860), column 6.

20 *Dziennik Literacki*, 11 (1866), p. 176.

21 *Ruch Muzyczny*, 1 (1860), column 6.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ruch Muzyczny*, 26 (1857), p. 207.

24 See Zofia Chechlińska, « Chopin Reception in Nineteenth-Century Poland », *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, ed. J. Samson (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 206-221.

25 Stanisław Niewiadomski, « Karol Mikuli », *Dziennik Polski*, 15 (1897), pp. 1-2.

Aleksander Michałowski, an eminent concert pianist, also recalled Mikuli's performance after many years :

I visited Mikuli after one of my first concerts. I pleaded with him to play Chopin's second nocturne (e flat major) ; he consented. And I felt myself to be the witness of a truly unique, extraordinary moment [...] The pianist's tone, melodious and delicate, resembled something immaterial ; the way his music seemed to sing has stayed with me for years [...] I had the luck to listen to Chopin's pupil playing while he was visited by his master's spirit [...]²⁶

Similar features were emphasised by other contemporary reviews of Mikuli's concerts. In the aftermath of a concert given in 1854, an anonymous critic highlighted the « unrivalled lightness and melodiousness » of Mikuli's performance.

It seemed as if Mr Mikuli had not once touched his keys. The most difficult passages imaginable mingled with occasional chords, subtle as summer zephyrs. One hardly believes that he was actually touching the piano keys [...] never before have we heard such a melody in a piano performance. Not only the flageolet tones Liszt excels in, but the bass as well – all was seeped with melody, through and through. Were one to avert one's eyes from the performer, one could imagine the piano had disappeared, leaving behind a caressing violin or cello strings. Chopin shone in depriving the grand piano of such precise flaws that the instrument inherently carries. He transformed piano sounds into music sung by a flute or a violin. Mikuli's performance shows identical features²⁷.

Such opinions recurred throughout the plethora of reviews. Critics were unanimous in their praise of the absolute lack of noisiness in Mikuli's playing (« his performance is more about subtlety of shade and refined, elegant detail, than about force or bravado »²⁸), the melodiousness of sound, the lightness of touch (« his occasional poorer condition notwithstanding, Mikuli is invariably capable of capturing the audience – with his unrivalled touch, the purity of his phrasing, and the subtlety in all tones and shades of the piece he played »²⁹), as well as the delicate expression of all the sonic shades. According to the reviews, Mikuli's playing was absolutely devoid of any

noise carried by the pompous strike other virtuosos use to impress their audiences. His fingers brought soft, elegiac song to life, wistful and full of feeling [...] His touch

26 Aleksander Michałowski, « Moje najgłębsze wzruszenie muzyczne » [My Deepest Musical Thrill], *Muzyka*, 1938, p. 11.

27 *Nowiny*, 4 (1854), pp. 29-30.

28 [Anon.], « Karol Mikuli », *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 185 (1887), p. 195.

29 *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 4 (1883), p. 46.

on the keys cannot even correctly be called a strike – it is like the wind soughing amongst new leaves in an oak grove, a soft caress strumming the most sensitive strings of the soul³⁰.

Such were the features of Mikuli's manner of performing, also apparent when he was playing works by others composers than Chopin.

Furthermore, Mr Mikuli exposed us to an ingenious work by Robert Schumann [...], giving a masterful performance of his *Introduction and Allegro Appassionato* with orchestral accompaniment. The performance of Mr Mikuli as Chopin's student is melodious, soft in strike, albeit expressive and graceful in sound ; his tempo is unsurpassed, and therefore he renders the most difficult passages lightly and freely, with all the expression and grace planned afore by the author³¹.

However reviews also emphasised Mikuli's « pealing tones », « magnificent *legatos* », and « nearly mathematical exactitude of scales and trills »³². Such features attributed to Mikuli's playing were practically identical to those praised in Chopin's own playing. Significantly, similar qualities were identified in duchess Marcelina Czartoryska's playing³³, another of Chopin's pupils who gave occasional charity recitals in Poland.

If Chopin had numerous followers among composers, these were « second-class » composers who merely replicated external gestures integral to Chopin's own style. What about pianists ? Mikuli and Czartoryska seemed to have maintained in their playing a few characteristic features than can be truly described as integral to Chopin's own playing. However not all Chopin's pupils performed in his style. Quoting Moscheles, Niecks claimed that Adolf Gutmann, for example, had a forceful strike, which definitely formed no part of Chopin's playing, albeit – as testified by recordings – Gutmann's tone was also « soft and noble ». However, many of Chopin's former pupils tried to perpetuate Chopin's style of piano playing among their own pupils³⁴. Mikuli's most accomplished pupil, Raul Koczalski, is certainly the most telling proof

30 *Dziennik Literacki*, 15 (1858), p. 120 ; see also *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 22 (1897), pp. 253-255.

31 *Ruch Muzyczny*, 6 (1859), p. 46.

32 *Dziennik Literacki*, 27 (1869), p. 435 ; such were features of performing emphasised by Chopin in his work with pupils, as proven in their own accounts ; see Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin vu par ses élèves*.

33 « Sublime phrasing and tone shading, down to the most intricate detail ; a wondrously soft and subtle strike, marvellous performance of all details ». *Echo Muzyczne*, 20 (1881), p. 159.

34 See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin vu par ses élèves*.

we have of this perpetuation³⁵. Unquestionably, the so-called « Chopin school of piano performance » – if any – had certainly not got the *renommée* of Liszt's, the latter having taught many concert pianists whose inheritance is still perceptible today. Of course, this also explains why the Lisztian style of playing became much more common and increasingly dominant from the end of the nineteenth century, not to mention the tendency to escalate sound in music that was going to have an overall impact on the musical repertoire. Writing the obituary of Marcelina Czartoryska in 1894, Jan Kleczyński, one of the greatest Polish music critics of his time, could sadly, although rightly, claim that with her death, Chopin's playing « had become nearly extinct »³⁶.

English translation by Aleksandra Sobczak and Nicole Grimes

35 See Raoul Koczalski, *Jak grał i uczył Karol Mikuli* [How Carl Mikuli played and taught]. *Muzyka*, 78 (1937), pp. 216-218 ; I had the opportunity of listening to Koczalski's live performance, and it fully matched all categories attributable to the performance of Chopin and Mikuli alike.

36 *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 558 (1894), p. 278.