

# Chopin Polonaise, Op. 40, no. 1 (“Polonaise Militaire”)--Arthur Rubinstein (1952)

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Essay by Annik LaFarge (guest post)\*



*Frederic Chopin*

At the age of seven, Frédéric Chopin published his first composition: a Polonaise in B flat major.<sup>1</sup> Originally a court dance, the Polonaise has been, since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, inextricably bound up with the spirit of Polish identity. Musicologist Halina Goldberg, in her book “Music in Chopin’s Warsaw,” observes, “it is the polonaise that embodies the idyllic and proud Poland.” The word itself means “Polish” in French, and this stately, elegant dance has retained its national popularity into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; today it’s a fixture of the *studniówka*, the Polish equivalent of the senior prom, where the first dance is always a Polonaise.

Chopin wrote 18 polonaises during the course of his life,<sup>2</sup> and op. 40, no. 1 is generally considered his most popular. It was composed on the Balearic island of Majorca, where the composer spent a harrowing but deeply creative three months in 1838-1839 with his lover, the writer George Sand and her two young children. This opus actually consists of two works: the bold, heroic no. 1 in A major, played here by Arthur Rubinstein, and a more sober companion piece, somewhat tinged by darkness, in C minor. Since it was published in 1840, this pair of polonaises has been credited with evoking the long, painful history of Poland’s oppression, a story of invasion and occupation whose roots date to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Poland was partitioned three times by a troika of foreign power represented by Russia, Austria and Prussia; by the year of Chopin’s birth, in 1810, Poland had been literally erased from the map of Europe, its name banned from official use. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein regarded the op. 40 polonaises as Chopin’s own narrative of his homeland: the A major being “a picture of Poland’s greatness” and the C minor the story of its “downfall.”<sup>3</sup>

Chopin ardently disliked the notion of programmatic music and never attached descriptive names to his works. “I indicate,” he once wrote in a letter, “it’s up to the listener to complete the picture.”<sup>4</sup> But his publishers couldn’t resist labeling his works with fanciful names, some of which Chopin lamented as “stupid titles.”<sup>5</sup> The op. 40, no. 1 work has come down to us as the “Military” Polonaise, and its exuberant trills and heroic octaves do indeed evoke the fanfare that

might accompany a triumphant army. It's often observed that this polonaise is unique in Chopin's oeuvre in that it completely avoids dynamic contrast. Chopin marked his score *Allegro con brio, energico* and *fortissimo*; he intended it to be played very loud, very fast, and with great verve, all of which are present in Rubinstein's stirring performance.

The A major Polonaise held a special, and deeply personal, meaning for Arthur Rubinstein, whose performance was chosen by the Librarian of Congress for its National Recording Registry as the iconic reading of this revered work. In his memoir, Rubinstein wrote that "speaking of Chopin's music is for me like confessing my greatest love." Born in 1887 to a Jewish family in the Polish city of Łódź, which was then still part of the Russian Empire, for Rubinstein hearing Chopin's music was "like coming home."<sup>6</sup> In 1939, while vacationing in the French seaside resort of Deauville, he learned in a radio broadcast that his homeland had fallen to the Nazis; what immediately followed the message that Warsaw had been bombed by the German air force was Chopin's A major "Military" Polonaise.<sup>7</sup> In the early years of the occupation all of Chopin's music was officially banned from the airwaves, but this Polonaise nevertheless became a fixture of Polish radio, serving as the "Signal of Warsaw" that began each broadcast.<sup>8</sup>

Rubinstein was widely heralded as one of the greatest pianists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He moved to California after the outbreak of World War II and became an American citizen in 1946; he made this recording in the RCA Studios in Hollywood on September 28, 1950. In the late 1990s, under the direction of executive producer Daniel Guss, a team of engineers and producers worked with the original tape and state-of-the-art equipment to remaster the recording so Rubinstein's vigor, poetry, and unique tone could be faithfully captured on the new technology of the compact disc. It was part of a massive, unprecedented publishing project for classical music: the 94-CD boxed set titled "The Arthur Rubinstein Collection: A Life in Music." According to producer Jon M. Samuels, the team brought decades of musical and technical knowledge to the process of improving the sound by compensating for the deficiencies of the master discs and tapes.

During the course of his long musical career, which extended from 1894 to 1976, Rubinstein made three commercial recordings of the A major Polonaise, including one in 1935 and another in 1964. The 1950 performance selected for the National Recording Registry is the only one that faithfully follows Chopin's score by including all the repeats the composer asks for. This is noteworthy because a hallmark of Chopin's music is his ability to conjure worlds of emotion in a most economical way. He worked mainly in shorter forms--Nocturnes, Études, Ballades, Polonaises, Mazurkas--but invested every note with meaning. French poet André Gide observed that Chopin "was the first to banish all oratorical development. His sole concern, it seems is to narrow limits, to reduce the means of expression to what is indispensable."<sup>9</sup> And so when Chopin asks for the repetition of a phrase or passage, we know that for him it was indispensable. This recording of the "Military" Polonaise is therefore significantly longer than the other two, but it is also, in Rubinstein's interpretation of the repeats, more artistically varied, both rhythmically and tonally. The result is a more mature, soulful, nuanced reading of the work, one that does indeed--in part through the insistence of those repeated phrases and passages--convey a sense of Chopin's unabating patriotic love for his homeland, and optimism about its future.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> “a Polonaise in B flat major”: some scholars claim the G minor polonaise was Chopin’s first, but the Chopin Institute, considered the world’s leading authority, goes with the B flat major work.

<https://chopin.nifc.pl/en/chopin/kompozycja/1>

<sup>2</sup> “Chopin wrote eighteen polonaises...”: The Fryderyk Chopin Institute,

[https://chopin.nifc.pl/en/chopin/gatunki/6\\_polonezy](https://chopin.nifc.pl/en/chopin/gatunki/6_polonezy)

<sup>3</sup> “as a picture...”: Huneker, James, *Chopin: The Man and His Music*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913, p. 329

<sup>4</sup> “I indicate...”: Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher*, p. 128

<sup>5</sup> “stupid titles”: Chopin to Julian Fontana, letter in October 9, 1841, *Chopin’s Polish Letters*, edited by Frick, p. 344

<sup>6</sup> Rubinstein, Arthur, “Speaking of Chopin,” Excerpts reprinted from a foreword to *Life and Death of Chopin* by Casimir Wierzynski,

<sup>7</sup> Rubinstein, Arthur, *My Many Years*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, p. 460

<sup>8</sup> This polonaise became a fixture: Kamila Staško-Mazur, “The voice of Polish Radio in the soundscape of Warsaw in 1945,” in *Sounds of War and Peace: Soundscapes of European Cities in 1945*, Edited by Renata Tańczuk and Sławomir Wieczork, p. 112

<sup>9</sup> “was the first to banish”: André Gide, *Notes on Chopin*, p. tk