

Keyboard Kids' Companion

Created by teachers & approved by kids

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Meet the Composers Fryderyk Chopin



On March 1, 1810, history was made in Żelazowa Wola, a small village near **Warsaw** in Poland. A teacher from France and a Polish housekeeper became parents to one of the world's greatest composers, Fryderyk Chopin (spelled *Frédéric* in French).

Fryderyk had three sisters. He was closest to his oldest sister, Ludwika. The Chopin family enjoyed time together.

Holidays were celebrated with special Polish foods, family concerts and plays, and poetry readings.

Fryderyk was particular about his appearance. Hairstylists and dressing servants prepared him for his concerts. His first public performance was at age seven—a fundraiser for Polish people left homeless or disabled by the wars. His mother sent him dressed in an outfit with a large white lace collar over a dark velvet jacket. When asked what the audience liked most, he replied, “My collar, Mama!” But they were far more impressed by his playing. He was an instant hit! The newspapers called him a “Polish **Mozart**.”

Fryderyk's mother was his first piano teacher, starting around age four. When he was six, his parents took him to Wojciech Zywny. Zywny insisted all students study J. S. **Bach's** music, an important influence on Fryderyk's future composing. Fryderyk took

lessons until age twelve. Afterward, the musical genius Fryderyk Chopin learned piano on his own. He studied composition and orchestration with Józef **Elsner**, founder of the Warsaw Conservatory.

Chopin's favorite composers were Mozart and Bach. He played Bach's music for his own inspiration. At age seven, his first composition was published. By age nineteen, Chopin was composing his Opus 10 **Études** for piano, which he wrote to challenge himself with technique puzzles.

Chopin took a long time to create his music. A perfectionist, he instructed that any of his music not already published when he died be destroyed. Fortunately, his sister Ludwika could not bear to do it.

We hear the sounds of his beloved Poland in many of his compositions, and his sadness about the wars. When Tsar Nicholas of Russia invited him to leave **Paris** and come to serve as Pianist to the Royal Court, with a lifetime salary, Chopin refused.

Wherever he lived or visited, Chopin was surrounded by royalty and other famous people. He enjoyed their company, and they loved his playing. He dedicated compositions to



Pape piano

Pianos of Chopin's Time

Everyone wanted Chopin to play their pianos!

Buchholtz: Chopin's favorite in Poland. His first published composition and many others were created on his Buchholtz. His piano was destroyed by Russian soldiers in 1873.

Aeolomelodikon: a combination organ and piano designed by a family friend of the Chopins. It could imitate wind and brass instruments and was competition for the **Aeolopantaleon**, which Chopin premiered.

Pape: Chopin didn't care for the one he heard, but Pape experimented with materials and design to achieve better sound and smaller, space-saving instruments. Pape held more than three hundred patents on piano designs. The most outrageous design, the “oven-piano,” had a heating element so that the pianist could practice and cook at the same time!

Stein and Graf: The main piano manufacturers in Vienna. Chopin chose Graf for concerts there.

Érard: Introduced the double escapement feature in pianos, which allows faster repetition of notes.

Pleyel: Chopin's favorite—“Pleyel's pianos are the last word in perfection.” Chopin felt that variety in tone color was as important as dynamics, and that Pleyel pianos were finally allowing for that.

Broadwood: Pleyel introduced Chopin to Broadwood. Chopin performed on Broadwoods in Britain.



Graf piano

royalty. He spent time with famous musicians Czerny, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Berlioz, and Rossini. He was close friends with artist Eugène Delacroix. He met Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and Charles Dickens (author of *A Christmas Carol*). Chopin dined with opera star Jenny Lind, (the “Swedish Nightingale” portrayed in the movie *The Greatest Showman*) the same evening her rival was performing vocal arrangements of Chopin’s **mazurkas**.

Chopin enjoyed drawing in his sketchbook, and he was very funny. He could do imitations of other people so well that he got people laughing hard at parties.

Chopin was a very popular piano teacher. He charged more for one lesson than the average worker in France earned in a week! Students placed the money on the fireplace mantel; he felt a gentleman should not handle money in front of others.

His playing transformed the piano world. He wasn’t impressed by flashy playing that was all the rage. Beautiful color, phrasing, stunning *legato*, and pedal variety made him sound different. He performed in only approximately twenty concert halls. The majority of Chopin’s performances were in the salons (living rooms) of royalty and wealthy people. When Chopin performed his final concert in Paris, Camille **Pleyel**, manufacturer of Chopin’s favorite pianos, created Chopin’s comfortable salon atmosphere on the stage with carpet, flowers, and chairs in a semi-circle for Chopin’s closest friends.

Poor health most of Chopin’s adult life meant many

medical bills. His sister Ludwika traveled to Paris to care for him at the end. He received many visitors, including royalty and famous artists. When he died on October 17, 1849, so many people sent flowers that Franz Liszt said, “...He seemed to rest in a garden.” For Chopin’s funeral, his own music and Mozart’s *Requiem* were performed. Nearly three thousand people attended the funeral. Huge crowds gathered outside the church as well, bidding farewell to one of Poland’s greatest treasures.

More about Chopin’s work

- His love for his birth country is heard in his music, including Polish national dances **mazurka*** and **polonaise***.
- He loved opera and wrote melodies to imitate singing styles, such as *portamento** and long **trills**.
- Inspired by Irish composer John Field’s creation, Chopin composed many **nocturnes*** and made the form famous.
- Chopin had already composed waltzes, but the first waltz he allowed to be published was written after hearing waltzes by Johann Strauss Sr. in the **Vienna** beer halls.
- His *études* (French for “studies” or “exercises”) were the first to make it as concert pieces.
- First composer to write *tempo rubato** in the score.
- Famous nicknames for his pieces were assigned by other people: “Raindrop” Prelude, “Revolutionary” Étude, “Military” Polonaise, “Minute” Waltz, “Aeolian Harp” Étude, “Winter Wind” Étude.
- He was called “Copernicus of the piano,” referring to the famous Polish astronomer whose great discoveries about the universe paved the way for future astronomers’ work.
- Robert Schumann called Chopin’s compositions “Canon buried in flowers,” recognizing Chopin’s work as changing the world of music, and beautifully colorful.

Definitions for terms with an asterisk (*) found in our digital edition.

Word Find

Read the biography of Fryderyk Chopin.
Find the **highlighted** words in this puzzle.

W	L	E	Y	E	L	P	N	T	B
Y	A	A	T	L	C	O	B	R	V
P	S	S	I	U	C	D	A	A	I
I	A	R	R	T	D	Z	C	Z	E
Z	T	R	U	A	Z	E	H	O	N
H	C	R	I	B	W	B	S	M	N
G	N	E	L	S	N	E	R	C	A
E	M	A	Z	U	R	K	A	S	H

ANSWERS: BACH, ELSNER, ETUDES, MAZURKAS, MOZART, NOCTURNE, PARIS, PLEYEL, TRILL, VIENNA, WARSAW

Scherzo

A Musical Joke

Q. What did the piano teacher say when it was time to buy more music books?

A. Where’s my Chopin Liszt?



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