

John R. Reed

The Woman Who Played Chopin

I have never heard you play, of course. Even our conversation was brief. Your new novel had just appeared and you were the center of attention, while I was there by chance, a friend of the host. You were saying: "I used to play often. Who knows, I might have become a famous pianist. I used to dream about that kind of fame. But I came to loathe it because my parents feverishly forced me on in lessons more and more relentless and thus less enjoyable. Lately I've taken it up again and, strangely, I'm fascinated by Chopin."

"Chopin is my favorite composer," I remarked enthusiastically, and you turned, almost startled, smiling enigmatically.

"I suppose you have a favorite composition."

"*The Prelude in A Minor*," I replied.

"I love the melancholy pieces, so full of the sensuousness of grief. They make me think of Chopin slowly dying, but I won't read a word of his biography. I don't want to spoil the music with history. It is so relieving to have in music a form of expression free from utterance."

And then you moved away, the various guests fluttering around you, eager to compliment and praise, to bathe perhaps in your success, so I knew that it would be impossible to talk with you seriously. Nonetheless, I watched you the whole evening. How gracefully you held yourself, your head thrown back elegantly, a trifle stiff, like the bust of Nefertiti. I pictured your fingers sympathetically caressing the white and black keys, and thought how yearning and fulfillment are unexplainable sensations in the artist's fingers, never needing to be uttered aloud as so much passion, suffering, and love must be.

I had never read any of your books, but now I consumed them feverishly in the way a child explores each new sensation that stimulates his undeveloped emotions. I read uncritically, losing myself in the tales. I began with the most recent of your three novels, which told the story of a passionate young woman who frees herself from the domination of unimaginative parents to become a famous actress. After

suffering disappointments in love and setbacks in her career, she succeeds at last, but in her artistic eminence, is driven to haughty isolation. The preceding novel was much shorter—a touching story about a child's discovery of adult hypocrisy. Your descriptions of New England settings touched responsive chords in me. I thought of my own childhood in Vermont, of the yellow-green lichen on granite boulders under an endless sky, of walks in the rough, unused meadows, of the huge crows along the dirt roads flapping away suddenly with gigantic caws, big as eagles it seemed to me. I came home from those excursions with tansy seeds in the frail hairs of my arms and tiny burrs clenched in my socks, so that my mother had to work them free. I remember her lips pursed tight, almost as though she were going to kiss me goodnight, as she plucked out the tenacious little spears. But your first novel moved me most. It told of a lonely young woman befriended by a young man who is dying. She is a gifted writer, brilliant and proud of her brilliance; but the youth, who is two years younger, possesses a wisdom nurtured by grief that is more profound and true than her hard, logical rationality. His death teaches her this wisdom. Thereafter, she sees herself as his disciple, determined to share his warmth, love, and compassion with a world devoid of true feeling.

For years I had neglected the piano. I would sit down some evenings to play through pieces that I knew well, occasionally attempting an unfamiliar etude only to discover how greatly my abilities had decayed. But after reading your novels with their plangent, bittersweet tone, my interest in playing revived. Why should I merely listen to Chopin's music when I could play it myself, be a part of that sensuous sorrow? At first I was ashamed to play the beloved notes so poorly. My fingers stiffened, my arms seemed all elbow as I opened a copy of the *Preludes*. But before long, accepting my humility, almost abasement, before these beautiful compositions, I regained a degree of mastery over them. Their loveliness responded to my relentless patience. Night after night I played through the same two or three pieces until they shaped themselves precisely to my mood. Then I turned to others. I never attempted the *Prelude in A Minor*. That would have been too bold.

While my fingers became more and more at home, probing, grazing, pressing the keys, I imagined the first time that these notes sounded under Chopin's own febrile hands. I dreamed of the joy he must have felt as the sounds assembled themselves according to his will, assumed the precise yet ambiguous form he demanded of them. What relief he must have felt when his fear, his suffering, his love echoed in his ears transformed—utterly changed. Did he know that in discovering this comfort for himself he also created a balm for later generations with

their own sorrows and longings, sorrows and longings perhaps never known before? Like so many great artists his talent was shaped by coincidences of pain and yearning by which the pain and yearning of so many others would find expression if not cure, perhaps, in some rare ironic cases, *begetting* the same incurable pain and yearning that he felt.

The more these reflections absorbed my mind, the more I considered the sufferings that underlay Chopin's music. And I thought of George Sand, that masterful woman, a girl of the fields who freed herself from the hypocrisies of her time to find great joy and pain in her art and in her many loves. But this love was unique. How passionately she sought him, how lovingly she tended him in his illness, like mother, nurse, and bride combined. She tended him in Mallorca, Paris, Nohant. She opened to him the lovely meadows of France, where the white and yellow butterflies dazzled up like frail splashes from the waves of buttercups and wild thyme. It was a beautiful refreshing exile; but exile and isolation always, even in the midst of love, carry the inescapable infection of loneliness. And thus, despite those days of tingling air and endless skies, he composed the excruciating *Funeral Sonata*. His illness was not a bodily impairment, but a malady of the spirit, unfamiliar then, but evident everywhere today: a rage against destiny, a langour of dismay—perhaps because ideals now seem fruitless, art pointless, love of any kind unattainable except in dreams.

But she, the lusty little frenchwoman so sensitive to physical and mental stimulation, prompting and urging relentlessly, irritated him with her passion to discoveries in himself that were new forms of suffering but which transmuted his inarticulate agony to music. I pictured the two of them separated by a suite of elegant rooms—she upright at her desk, a file of pens ranged before her near the clean sheets of paper, beginning to focus her dream images into precise characters, acting out their several passions, yearnings, loves, he, with fingers gliding and probing among the keys as though he fondled a woman, permitting his vague dreams yet vaguer life through the deceptive order of his music, translating his incomprehensible desires from one unknown language to another, for music is the art closest to dreams, its real order, sometimes obvious but as often hidden, leading its obsessive themes through repetitions and transformations to a great irrational beauty that cannot be recaptured without reviving the same haunting emotions and which can be recalled only through those emotions.

Dreams have interested me as long as I can remember. As a child I often could not tell when my mother left my bedside, for she appeared immediately in my dreams, transformed to an uncommon beauty,

leaning above me protectingly, or guiding me into the meadows, naming the trees by the color and shape of their leaves in the crisp autumn air—silver maple, sugar maple, beech, and oak. Later, when it was clear that I would never be a successful pianist and when I had instead begun my training as an anesthetist, I was tantalized by the small signs and gestures, sometimes words and even whole sentences that communicated my patients' dreams in fragments to the alien and public world outside their minds. To me, these are the tenderest, most vulnerable moments—the sleeper's trance is his alone, unrecoverable, yet susceptible to the slightest external influences. It is a mysterious and frightening region on the boundary between reality and illusion, a region that is neither wholly real nor wholly fantastic. Sometimes it seemed that I was shaping fragile dreams, even though I could never see them or know their emotions. The wakings were always disappointments as I watched the dreamers return to their world of blood and pain.

Dreams have the same unreality as music, the same half-suggested landscapes, movements of unfelt water; you cannot tell if what you feel is the music's order or that of your own being. One terrifying beauty of dreams is that you cannot certainly say that you are dreaming while you dream, for it is a law of dreams that they may not be dismissed as dreams. No matter how much you doubt the dream while you dream, you cannot master without killing it.

It was long after our meeting that you began to appear in my dreams. At first you merely passed in the distance, or were a member of an anonymous crowd. Then, in one dream, you tried to speak to me, but we were separated by a whirlwind of dry leaves and lifted dust. And then, without warning, the memorable dream occurred. As usual, I had been listening to Chopin. It had been a long and difficult day. After a late, hurried dinner, I settled in my easy chair with half a decanter of wine. After a glass or two, I let my head fall back and closed my eyes, following the familiar music, but gradually I became aware of a rushing sound, like water tumbling along a spillway. I rose heavily from my chair and staggered to the door which opened directly onto a strange woodland scene. Before me was a calm lake into which a small but vigorous stream burred. Shadows of the tall evergreens on the uneven shores sent pointed patterns out from the dark banks toward the grey, shimmering center of the lake. It was early evening. Loons warbled eerily far off.

I was conscious of being unwell and realized immediately that I had come to this isolated place to rest and recover my health. The tingling air and calm surroundings were sure to remedy my condition. A fishing rod and tackle stood beside the door. On my feet were heavy

rubber-cleated boots. A down jacket with numerous pockets kept me warm. Steadily feeling stronger and more confident, I decided to explore the surroundings. Although my cabin seemed to be situated in a remote wilderness, I had walked no more than a few yards before discovering a huge public park with a path and benches beside a stream with steep banks that descended a long slope at the top of which a huddle of buildings signified the tacky end of a small village. Young women in gay yellow and pale green dresses with floppy, old-fashioned hats like monstrous butterflies strolled happily along the path. Their sprightly laughter merged with the sound of the water. I resented their intrusion, yet longed to be among them, to end my isolation and share their happiness. Suddenly I recalled that friends were expecting me. I hurried up the hill to where the one long street that divided the village rose to a slight hump before running down in a slow curve to the shoreline where many small boats were docked near a weatherbeaten boat house. Raised boardwalks followed the unpaved street almost to the water's edge. It was an old lumbering town or trading post suitable for men accustomed to harsh and heavy work.

Unrecognizable sportsmen, apparently my friends, greeted me in the street and led me by the arm to a hardware store. We conversed eagerly as we stomped along in our manly boots, with zesty anticipation of adventures to come. A small group of young women, wives and friends unexpectedly here in a masculine world of hunting and fishing, appeared on the street before us. They laughed to see our surprise. You were among them, smiling and aloof, a stranger to everyone but me.

I was embarrassed. We were all insignificant and you were a famous writer, yet there seemed no need for introductions. The girls accepted you immediately; the men were quietly appreciative. We all went on to the hardware store which was a wonderland of appliances, weapons, and tools like those old general stores in Vermont and Maine that I had known as a child. But as we examined the various objects made of steel, ceramic, and wood, the room slowly transformed itself to my cabin. Only you and the men were left. It was growing late, time to sleep, since great exploits were planned for the next day. We stood about awkwardly waiting for you to leave, but unable to speak. Completely unaware of our dismay, and with the masterful aplomb of a princess or movie star, you undressed and slipped under the covers of my bed. The whole room was charged with an inexpressible passion of love or sorrow. The harsh, feathered roughness of the wooden walls contrasted with the vulnerable whiteness of the sheets.

"What are you doing?" I asked, perplexed, yearning, and afraid.

"If you don't understand now, you never will," you said and gazed at me with shining, overwhelming eyes. My friends left silently like soldiers dismissed. I came to you.

When I woke, the music had ended. It was very late, yet I could not sleep again. The dream haunted me all that night and for days and days after. As its vividness slowly faded, I began to fear that I would lose the dream entirely, though a spectral sense of suffering and love, of exile and redemption, remained.

In an effort to recover the dream, I kept myself awake long after my usual hour one night, then duplicated the circumstances of the earlier evening. At first I could not sleep, but followed Chopin's melodies, the fragmenting and refashioning of wrenching tunes and harmonies, alertly. Gradually, however, I dozed and dreamed of you again. We had long conversations of great importance, none of which I could recall on waking. Repeating the experience another night, I met you again. We walked along a woodland path where dustmotes hung like veils in the quiet sunlight and into endless meadows where the wild flowers made broad lemon stains against the pale green grass. We walked hand in hand or with you slightly ahead of me, your hair swaying as lightly as the grass when you turned to look back at me with your shining eyes, raising your slim arm sometimes to point out the many different birds whose names I did not know. You showed me strange mushrooms and warned me of the poison sumac, blood-red in the fall season.

So vivid were these things after waking that it soon became obvious to me that you were not merely *in* my dreams, you were *sharing* them. The dreams were too crystalline, too intense for one mind to have evoked. You too were willing them. Perhaps, through Chopin, you were calling me into that strange world, intensely real, though it was a dream. For the first time my love for you fully disclosed itself to me. I understood why that brief exchange so long ago had meant so much to me. In that moment a sympathetic chord had been struck, reverberating in us long after, becoming clear only when all else is silent, as dreams sing in the silence of sleep.

In our dreams we have been afraid to mention this, afraid that the dreams, recognized as fragile domains of our own creation, might resentfully disappear. But here, in this duller, more substantial world, we can speak of it. Surely at those special times you too play Chopin and follow him into the dream. Tell me, is not your favorite also the *A Minor*?