

“The Polish Romantics” with Tobias Koch, Saturday, February 23rd, 2019 –
Polonaises and Mazurkas

We all know and love Chopin’s *Polonaises* and *Mazurkas*. But how much do we know about these two quintessentially “Polish” dance forms? And what does it mean when we talk about the “Polish” quality inherent in this music?

Poland lost her independence in 1795, and spirit of this threefold partitioned nation was united and sustained around one common idea – Polishness. With any nation in crisis, the arts, music in particular, serves to unite and inspire its people, to connect them with its glorious past. And Poland’s folk tradition became the cornerstone of her arts.

Chopin was by far from being the first composer to have written Polonaises. Bach, Telemann, Beethoven and Weber all composed Polonaises. In Poland, there was almost a mania for both professional and amateur composers to write Polonaises and Mazurkas. As early as 1794, Michel Kleofas Ogiński composed what was to become an extremely popular work, *Polonaise in A minor*, subtitled *Pożegnanie Ojczyzny* (“Farewell to the Homeland”). The melancholy tone of its principal section became iconic and characteristic of the many Polonaises and Mazurkas composed during the 19th century, a sublimation of the composer’s patriotic feelings as well as a lament for Poland’s tragic history.

As a young composer, Chopin would model his early *Polonaises* after those composed by Maria Szymanowska, Józef Elsner (his own composition teacher), and Karol Kurpiński. From those early works, Chopin would compose *Polonaises* throughout his short life, culminating in one of his most original works, the *Polonaise-Fantasia*, Op. 61.

In the *mazurkas*, we can really trace the evolution of Chopin as a composer. Chopin wrote *mazurkas* all his life, a total of more than 40, not to mention the many others in manuscript forms. In writing the *mazurkas*, he drew upon the Polish tradition of folk *mazurkas* – music that he heard in the Polish countryside during his summer holidays - and also the popular and stylized *mazurkas*. *Mazurkas* were also written by near contemporaries of Chopin, composers such as Karol Kurpiński, Maria Szymanowska, Ignacy Feliks Dobrzyński, and Józef Krogulski. After Chopin, *Mazurkas* were written by Karol Mikuli, his own student, Ignacy Friedman, a pianist well known for his playing of Chopin’s *Mazurkas* and, most notably, by Karol Szymanowski.

Come and hear music by these “Polish Romantics”, music that expresses the range of emotion – sadness, suffering, a feeling of passing, and of losing everything – expressed in that one indescribable word in Polish – żal. Music that defines a nation.