



Frédéric Chopin (1810–49). Perhaps the greatest of all composers for the piano was Chopin. Called a “musical genius” when he was a teenager, Chopin composed a remarkable variety of brilliant pieces—warlike polonaises, elegant waltzes, romantic nocturnes, and poetic ballades and études.

Frédéric Chopin was born on March 1, 1810, at Zelazowa Wola, a village near Warsaw, Poland. His father, Nicholas, was a Frenchman who had lived in Poland for many years. His Polish

mother was of noble birth. Several months after Frédéric’s birth the family moved to Warsaw.

Even as a small child, Chopin loved piano music. He began to take piano lessons when he was 6 years old. He started to compose music even before he knew how to write down his ideas. At the age of 8 he performed in a public charity concert. Chopin’s first published musical work, a rondo, appeared when he was 15 years old. When Chopin graduated from the lyceum, at 17, he was recognized as the leading pianist of Warsaw and a talented composer.

After Chopin gave two successful concerts in Vienna when he was 19, he began writing works designed for his original piano style. At the same time as his return to Vienna in 1830, Poland revolted against its Russian rulers. The uprising failed, and as a result the Russian czar put Warsaw under harsh military rule. Chopin decided to go to Paris, which was the center of the romantic movement in the arts. Except for occasional trips, Chopin spent the rest of his life in Paris. He gave lessons and concerts, and publishers paid well for his compositions.

The French loved him for his genius and his charm. Poets, musicians, wealthy Parisians, and Polish exiles were his friends. An important influence was a romantic friendship with Baroness Dudevant, better known as the novelist George Sand. Chopin died of tuberculosis on Oct. 17, 1849, at age 39.

Chopin wrote few concertos and sonatas. Instead he perfected freer musical forms. Among his compositions are some 50 mazurkas, 26 preludes, 24 études, 19 nocturnes, 15 waltzes, 11 polonaises, 4 ballades, and 3 sonatas. For his polonaises and mazurkas he used the rhythms and spirit of Polish folk dances.

Funeral March Chopin's Funeral March is part of the third movement of his "Piano Sonata No. 2 In B Flat Minor." The Polish composer wrote this piece in 1837, though he composed the rest of the sonata in 1839 at Nohant near Châteauroux in France. The English composer Sir Edward Elgar transcribed it for full orchestra in 1933 and its first performance was at his own memorial concert the following year. Words were also added at some stage to the tune, for a popular, if macabre, playground ditty ("Pray for the dead and the dead will pray for you!"). German composer and critic Robert Schumann, a contemporary of Chopin, said he heard "cannon concealed amid blossoms" in the textures of the Sonata. The "funeral march" has been played on numerous occasions at actual funerals. It was performed at the graveside during Chopin's own burial at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris in 1849 and was also used at the state funeral of John F. Kennedy and those of several Soviet leaders, including Leonid Brezhnev. The alternating ostinato bass on "Change Your Mind", a 14 minute epic by Neil Young from his 1994 album *Sleep With Angels* was borrowed from this piece. The "funeral march" has become well known in popular culture, especially in video games where it's often used when the player's character dies. The most famous use of the song in a movie is the classic 1944 Frank Capra comedy thriller *Arsenic And Old Lace* when Teddy gets Mr. Hoskins.

Minute Waltz is also sometimes called "The Waltz of the Little Dog." This is because Chopin was watching a little dog chase its tail when he wrote it. The little dog was "Marquis". He belonged to Chopin's friend George Sand. Marquis had befriended Chopin. The composer mentioned Marquis in several of his letters. In one letter dated 25 November 1846, Chopin wrote: "Please thank Marquis for missing me and for sniffing at my door."

The waltz was published by Breitkopf & Härtel. It was the first of three waltzes in a collection of waltzes called *Trois Valses, Op. 64*. The publisher gave the waltz its popular nickname "Minute". The word here means small or little. The tempo marking is *Molto vivace*, but Chopin did not

intend the waltz to be played in one minute as some believe. A typical performance will last between one and a half to two and a half minutes.

The time signature is 3/4 and written in ternary, or ABA form. The A section is characterized by a whirling line of eighth notes and triplets over the "om-pah-pah" rhythm of the waltz. The whirling line of the A section is abandoned in the B section. This section consists of a consistent half note and quarter note pattern from bar to bar. The B section breaks off and a long trill heralds the return of the A section, which is repeated in full. The waltz ends with a descending scale.

Études Chopin's *Études* are some of the hardest pieces of all the works in concert piano repertoire. Because of this, the music remain famous and are often played at concerts. Some of them have been given nicknames (but not by Chopin himself) - for example, the last *Étude* from Op. 10 has been called the *Revolutionary* because it was inspired by the November 1830 Uprising, when the Poles were defeated by the Russian Empire. All twenty-seven *Études* were published during Chopin's lifetime; Opus 10, the first group of twelve were written between 1829 and 1832, and were published in 1833, in France, Germany, and England. The twelve *Études* of Opus 25 were composed at various times between 1832 and 1836, and were published in the same countries in 1837. The final three, part of a series called "Méthode des méthodes de piano" compiled by Moscheles and Fétis, were composed in 1839 but with no opus number.

The first *Études* of the Opus 10 set were written when Chopin was still in his teens. Chopin's *Études* elevated the musical form from purely utilitarian exercises to great artistic masterpieces. At a concert in which Chopin performed his opus 25, Robert Schumann said "*À la Chopin*".