ISADORA DUNCAN AND HER RELATIONSHIP TO THE MUSIC OF CHOPIN

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The pillars of Isadora Duncan's repertory were those dances composed to the music of Gluck and Chopin. The longest-lasting and most actively performed, they stretched from the earliest, slim beginnings of her career to almost the very end. Gluck was referred to as her companion of the "first hour," but I have taken the liberty of including Frederic Chopin as an equal of that first hour and, in specific ways, more equal than Gluck.

The observations presented here are not absolute, of course. They are a personal assessment drawn from a combination of factors. It was my privilege as an adolescent to study both music and Duncan dance. I also had the opportunity to see in cherished performances the outstanding exemplars of Isadora's tradition, the Isadorables and their finest pupils. There are my individual responses to the music of Chopin and my personal perception of Isadora Duncan as woman and as creative temperament. And there has been an ongoing investigation of written and oral documents on her life and critiques of her work.

The literature on Duncan tells us that she and music made beautiful things together; that music for this inspired woman was the grand source, the root of her creativity; that not only was pleasure and incentive derived from music, but in times of personal distress she reaped from it its consoling, healing, and meditative properties. Wagner had truly magnetized her; she composed a substantial number of dances based on his scores. Her stirring conceptions to Tchaikovsky's music earned her great acclaim. The Schubert program consistently remained memorable for audiences, while Beethoven, the master and titan, urged her on toward large and powerful dance visions. But she was artistic kin to Chopin, and it is in the environment of his music that I sense Isadora Duncan, artist, to be most herself.

I do not view the composer and the dancer to be twin souls--in personality there were more differences than similarities--but between the extraordinary and creative psyches of Duncan and Chopin there exist interesting parallels. Initially, what appears most striking in both cases is the intimacy of the expressional material that each of them revealed through a single instrument of art. For Duncan, the moving body was her voice, the sole apparatus--private, sensitive, flexible--with which she achieved utterances of remarkable eloquence. For Chopin, the piano, an instrument of versatility and incredible sensitivity under his touch, became an extension of himself and mirrored his every mood.

The first important composer for the modern piano, Chopin today retains the title "Poet of the Keyboard." No composer before him gave music so personal a voice. It was said that he could create out of his inmost soul, like no other. George Sand believed he could make an instrument speak the language of the infinite. He moved piano litature into a new era.

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Isadora was the first of a new era in dance, and actually a greater insurgent in art than he. Apart from his spectacular innovations in pianistic style, Chopin made no noteworthy contribution to the development of the larger musical forms, as did Beethoven, Berlioz, or Wagner. Isadora catalyzed Western dance toward radical change. As no previous dancer, she transmitted through movement a vivid range of moods and esthetic impressions from the human experience. She was a maker of poetic images woven with the delicacy and magic of motion. Many held the opinion that there was not a complex human emotion in Chopin's music that she did not express in her dance.

Chopin, whose outline of melody embodied the rhythm of dance, astounded his envious contemporaries--Schumann, Hummel, Mendelssohn, Liszt--with the richness of his melodic invention and tonal color. His psychological contrasts and intensities--melancholic, fragile, vivacious, rapturous, and strong--were consonant with the esthetic sensibilities and artistic energies propelling the dancer. Isadora identified in his music her own desire to articulate that which was beautiful, to revel as he did in the nobility of man's spirit, and to convey through her art medium that elemental passion for freedom so powerful in each: his directed exclusively toward his Polish fatherland; hers, more universal in scope, toward all humanity.

Technically, the composer was anything but simple. His musical intricacies have never ceased to challenge those who attempt to study him seriously. His melodic line could be luxuriously elaborate: flowing as if spontaneous, cascading with subtle fluctuations of tempo into elegantly long musical phrases, or intoning a tender, heart-wrenching simplicity. With soulful melodies and rhythmic shifts that took one by surprise, he produced an atmosphere somewhat restive, ambiguous, even suspenseful.

Suspense of motion is the key to the Chopin style and its technical mastery--his rubato rhythm. Schumann neatly described rubato as the left hand maintaining a firm rhythm, while the right handcan be "ever so slightly delayed, ever so slightly hastened" (James Huneker, Chopin: The Man and His Music). Liszt spoke of it as a swaying and balancing (Franz Liszt, Frédéric Chopin). Chopin told it this way: "Fancy a tree with its branches swayed by the wind. The stem is the steady time, the moving leaves are the melodic inflection" (Huneker). This in itself would create the unusual state of rhythmic irregularity and uncertainty that French writer André Gide found so essential in the playing of Chopin (Gide, Notes on Chopin), and it was early evident in Isadora's Chopin.

Adapting this almost schizophrenic situation to her dances was tricky. Rubato had to be worked at until it was properly nuanced, as Isadora found out. Victor Seroff, a biographer of Isadora and also of Chopin, discussed the enigmatic rubato with her toward the end of her life, and she conceded that it had taken time and much practice before she correctly sensed its elasticity of rhythm (Seroff, The Real Isadora). But her accompanist, Maurice Dumesnil, remarked: "Isadora was a born, not a made dancer" (Dumesnil, An Amazing Journey). She was a natural for this music.

To begin with, Isadora's personal grace and lyricism of form, her feeling for the flow of the music, her extended and decorative contour of line seemed to sketch visually Chopin's musical structure. Instead

of preoccupying herself with the pianistic embellishments, she phrased her movements more simply along the underlying linear curve that carried the heart of the music. It was always the deeper essence and meaning that illuminated her interpretations. Isadora possessed an uncanny suspense of motion, her disciple Maria-Theresa once commented. One could almost call it her own built-in rubato, with the same anticipation, hesitancy, and elusiveness of the Chopin style. Entirely appropriate was James Huneker's suggestion that Chopin's music "should be played in curves...delivered in a flowing, waving manner" (op. cit.). It should be noted that when Chopin was less romantic, more militant and tempestuous, he elicited a compatible interpretive response from the dancer: her movements became sturdy, strongly accented, on the beat with the music.

Chopin "done into dance" took the American rebel a major step forward in the development of her dance craft. The Duncan dance odyssey that began in London in 1900 was witness to the first of her choreographic efforts with the music of this most elegiac of composers. Largely, if not entirely, influenced by the distinguished musician and musicologist James Fuller-Maitland from the Royal College of Music, Isadora prepared for the first time Chopin preludes, a waltz, a mazurka. These few pieces became the nucleus from which grew one of her most popular program offerings.

The dances to Chopin pop up in the memoirs and journals of French artists and socialites during the years 1900 and 1901. When she is introduced to Vienna in early 1902 by the amazing Loie Fuller, it is with a Chopin prelude, and Fuller herself is dazed by the beauty of this dance as she watches Isadora perform it (Fuller, Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life). Still in 1902, there are accounts of her performing not only mazurkas, preludes, and waltzes, but nocturnes and even the heroic Polonaise in A flat. I mention this because of the paucity of data surrounding the origin and chronology of the Duncan repertory. Isadora, shall we say, was lax. She left little indication of what she did, when and how. These dates reveal a far earlier existence for much of her repertory, especially the Chopin pieces.

Before the close of 1902, Isadora emerged with a completely original program of Chopin's keyboard works to round out the full concert presentation that alternated with her more descriptive and pictorially based Dance Idylls. Depending on the country in which she appeared, the new program was billed as a Chopin Avond, Abend, Soirée, Evening. The known range of his eloquent music to which she danced is quite extensive. Over the years she explored this music ever more fully, reinterpreting and refining it with the deepening responses of her maturity.

Audiences in the early years were attracted to her Chopin evenings for a variety of reasons. For the most part they were not casual spectators. They came out of love for music in general, Chopin in particular, and the sheer curiosity of encountering a different esthetic experience already much talked about, if not unanimously praised. Captivated as they were by her youthful radiance and incredible charm, they were perturbed by her unorthodox manner of moving and by the imposition of dance on the music. Was this not an intrusion decidedly peripheral, even extraneous, on what they considered the dominent element--the music itself? As late as 1921, English critic Ernest

Newman, who was intoxicated with the pure beauty of her movements in the Chopin dances, nonetheless thought them an interference with his own preconceptions of the music (Newman, "Dances of Isadora Duncan," Living Age(Boston), June 1921).

The musically literate apparently assumed that, since her dance was an interpretation of the music, it should be a direct translation of the music's notation to the dancer's symbols, that it should coincide accurately with the rhythm, beat, structure, and dynamics as composed. The negative complaints went like this: music is fast, Isadora slow; music sorrowful, Isadora runs; music has a turbulent rush of sounds, Isadora plucks invisible flowers. The positive response differed: "Ah! Chopin! If he could have seen this child dancing, how the great master of melancholy and sorrow would have been overjoyed," wrote a reviewer for a Dutch newspaper (Algemeen Handelsblad (Amsterdam), April 8, 1905). The success of the Chopin program accelerated as the reports of a public enraptured by it mounted. The cynical critic periodically raised his pen to suggest sneeringly that if Chopin could be set to dances, one might as well go ahead and translate Roman history into madrigals. And so it went.

Isadora's appeal, personal and artistic, was enormous, so much so that on the whole critics would chide her gently, almost apologetically, if they took issue with some detail. It was surely their limitation, not her divine dancing...BUT dance the waltzes and mazurkas, dear Isadora; they lend themselves to choreographic configurations...BUT (and one could hear the gnashing of their teeth) stay away from the nocturnes, ballades, preludes, etudes; they just are not meant to be danced, dear girl! Poor Isadora. She was not a good listener and probably took enjoyable refuge in what we today refer to as selective hearing.

A young intellectual in 1904 Paris is lured by the posters on the kiosks he sees all over the city. They advertise Isadora's concert, a Chopin Soirée. Promised are waltzes, polonaises, the unifying of dance with music. What a temptation! It had to be seen. He did see it and left an especially fine critique of the evening, which was published a few years later in the Mercure de France. George Delaquys described Isadora Duncan as "a poem in a flying tunic. Behind the bodily beauty we had the feeling that a sensitive intelligence existed between the pieces and their gestures, as the writer in his choice of words, or the painter in his mixture of colors" (December 15, 1906).

There are times when I bless that fascinating rascal in Isadora's life, Gordon Craig, for having been such a marvelous witness to her Chopin and having left such a sensitive account of what took place on stage: "I went to see a dancer such as we see everywhere, but what I saw moving was something different--it was a poetess. Unable to speak--moving--this figure seemed to be everlastingly searching for the words of the songs she wished to sing" (Craig notebooks, Bibl. Nat., Paris). This was in 1904, in Berlin. He continues by describing a pattern of moving that is at once Chopinesque and Duncanesque. Isadora came through the curtains and walked downstage to the piano, where the pianist had just finished playing a short prelude. "In some five or six steps she was standing by the piano, quite still and as it were, listening to the hum of the last note...then there sounded the voice of Chopin again...she had not moved at all. Then, one step back or

sideways and the music began again as she went moving on, before or after it" (Craig, Index to the Story of My Days). This "moving on, before or after it" echoes Schumann's "ever so slightly delayed, ever so slightly hastened," not quite following the rhythm, but almost mysteriously against it.

In retrospect, we realize that with the Chopin choreographies Isadora Duncan was able to identify her dance as a creative art form equal to that of music of concert stature. With only occasional exceptions, she observed the custom of music for the piano performed by a pianist. Accompanying Duncan in the Chopin programs over the years were numerous pianists. Several were gifted musicians, with great reputations independent of their collaboration with her, among whom were the beloved Dutch composer and pianist Julius Roentgen (from her 1905-1906 Netherlands season), the eminent "prince of pianists" Harold Bauer, and Walter Rummel, distinguished pupil of Debussy.

With regard to the staging of her Chopin dances, most accounts compliment the highly effective visual organization she achieved by employing simple but thoughtful devices: plain draperies, uncomplicated but well-placed lighting, and soft costumes that blended with the harmonious relationship between the poetic quality of her movements and the tonal coloration of the music. With these minimal theatrical materials she accomplished, a reviewer reported, "sources of marvel."

The preludes, which musicologist James Huneker described as "pale-tinted mood miniatures," were set against the violet-lavender hues of her costume. For the "dances of the soul," the mazurkas, her tender, delicate, and gently seductive gestures floated in a pink-blue airiness of fabric through a rosy stage lighting that, in the words of a critic, "made one's nerves tingle." The melancholy "mysteries of night," the nocturnes, found the stage space enveloped in a deep blue, while from the left wing a projected circle of light eerily traced her solitary figure in its wanderings. The stage brightened for the polonaises: when they were "heroic battle hymns," she flashed forth in her short, fiery-red tunic; when they resounded with the stateliness and majesty of victory, she moved in pride and splendor, wreathed with roses (Huneker, op. cit.).

A word about the waltzes. For all their gaiety, their coquetry, their winsomeness, Chopin meant them to have an aristocratic bearing, which prompted Schumann to caution: "Dancers of these waltzes should be at least countesses" (Huneker, op. cit.). In her dances to certain of the waltzes, Isadora brought a delectable lightness and charm of spirit, her rhythms enticing, even rapturous at times, but she did not distort or make excessive the basic reserve of these dances. Her intrinsic musicality and artistic judgment imposed their own restraints on her interpretive license.

Isadora Duncan debuted in St. Petersburg toward the end of 1904. Eager for conquest, she could not have chosen a more fitting program with which to court a new and sophisticated audience. Whether or not she gave calculated consideration to the choice of program for her premiere event--and we may never know this--she must instinctively have sensed that for a first impression in this stronghold of European ballet, she had to put across the nature of her art in its most

striking departure from ballet. She had to present her most supple and fluent forms in their pure, abstract imagery, in their most evocative, expressive character. Chopin danced was just the challenge for the musically literate Russians and the aficionados of the Imperial Russian Ballet.

Just as Rodin's massive opus, the Gates of Hell, resembled nothing that had been seen before in the sculpture of his age, Isadora's Chopin evening in St. Petersburg was an enlightenment of the senses. Perhaps the single most significant impression received by the spectators of the dancer and the music was the extraordinary capacity of dance to articulate feeling. They were intrigued by the sight of the entire body in motion, as though "bewitched by the music." The individual dances were given careful scrutiny by music and theater critics. There were respectful comments pertaining to her fine plastic sensibility, the unity of gesture and music, her evocations of pleasure, melancholy, passion, and the expressiveness of her facial features.

The piece that moved them most, she had composed years earlier and had performed without accompaniment. Because of its strong symbolic dramatization of youth's struggle and apprehension of approaching death, it was given the title The Maiden and Death. Later, she set it to Chopin's B-minor Mazurka (opus 33, no. 4), and it was this version that so touched the Russians.

Alexander Benois, painter and designer for Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes, wrote of Isadora's debut visit and of its effect on the classical ballet in Russia: "The music of Chopin...lends itself well to choreographic interpretation and this, one of Miss Duncan's most interesting discoveries may induce our routine choreography to take a new direction" (Benois, Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet). More precisely, they lost little time in taking that new direction. Within short order there were two new ballets with unmistakable Duncanisms in them: Fokine's Eunice and his Chopiniana, the latter to become the exquisite Les Sylphides.

Fortunately, Isadora did not have to wait for the mass of dance literature that has since appeared to know of her visit's impact. However, it is doubtful that she could have foreseen its full ramification. Her later observations comment on the ballet's use of Chopin's music and on the adoption of simpler, freer costuming. Balletomane Arnold Haskell supported her comments: "Following upon Isadora Duncan, he [Diaghilev] was the first to use classical music for ballet purposes, and today the majority have forgiven him his 'vandalism' and accept the results" (Haskell, Dancing Round the World). Edwin Denby, the observer of contemporary American dance, traced in the Duncan dances to Chopin the style and plasticity of gesture that most influenced twentieth-century ballet: the yielding, pliant quality of the backbends, the expressive arm gestures, the amplitude of the phrasing. In particular he called attention to the rose-petal hands and loosely drooping fingers that were to appear in Fokine's Spectre de la Rose (Denby, Looking at the Dance).

The Chopin evenings grew to sophisticated adulthood. They became Chopin Recitals and enjoyed wide public acceptance still later when they emerged as Festival Chopin around 1918. Pianist and musical adviser Walter Rummel joined her at this time, and together they took

the Festival on an active itinerary in Europe. From her standard Chopin repertory she selected individual dances and regrouped them for their psychological enhancement of Festival Chopin's theme--Poland Tragic, Heroic, Joyous. In its social timeliness, the aftermath of the Great War, it told of the suffering, struggle, and ultimate triumph of human will. Audiences were ready for the signal of hope reborn and the irresistibility of life made manifest in its theme of regeneration--poignant, but uplifting and indomitable.

With Isadora's departure in 1921 to found a new school of dance in Soviet Russia, Festival Chopin was dismantled as a thematic entity. No clear picture of her concert activity in Russia with specific regard to the Chopin cycle is as yet available. On September 3, 1926, at her studio in Nice, she and the pianist Irakli Orbeliani revived for a single performance what was the last of Chopin Recital. The death of Isadora Duncan one year later brought to a close a relationship of inspired artistry between a poetess of the dance and the spirit of a poet's music.