

Sex and Chopin

Did the great composer have a torrid affair with a raunchy Polish countess? On the eve of the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death, Jessica Duchen hears from his admirers about a romantic life

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When word got out that Tony Palmer was making a film entitled *The Strange Case of Delfina Potocka*, reactions among scholars of the life and music of the great Polish pianist-composer Fryderyk Chopin were not exactly mixed. "It's fine, as long as it's made clear that it has as much to do with Chopin's life as *Lilac Time* has with Schubert's," said one. "Hasn't he got anything better to do?" asked another.

If he had wanted to upset the entire academic world surrounding the composer, Palmer could not have chosen anything better. But put this suggestion to him and he looks positively crestfallen. "I don't set out to be controversial," he says. "I'm trying to tell the truth as I see it, which may be a limited vision, in the hope that other people will respond."

It is known that Chopin, living in Paris, was acquainted with Countess Delfina Potocka and that she sang to him on his deathbed. It is not impossible that they had an affair at one time. A renowned beauty and a fine singer, she possessed what one recent Chopin biographer, Jeremy Siepmann, describes as a "notoriously hospitable vulva". The poet Zygmunt Krasinski, with whom she did have a torrid liaison, described her dramatically: "She is a Don Juan in petticoats, a woman whose ardent, strong soul, truly endowed in highest measure with all the gifts that God has lavished upon Polish women, has been spoilt by Paris and London... Nevertheless, in this soul there remain smouldering fires that become volcanic expressions."

A hundred years later, in 1940s Poland, a woman named Paulina Czernicka made approaches to a radio station, claiming that she possessed love letters written by Chopin to Delfina Potocka, whom Czernicka said was her own ancestor - letters that not only claimed Delfina as the love of Chopin's life but also turned out to be both pornographic and anti-Semitic. After the resulting furore, the letters were proved almost indubitably to be forgeries and their story condemned as spurious.

If the letters were fabrications, though, why should the Chopin cognoscenti seem so worried about them? The reason could be that the refined, exquisite Chopin is a hero - to composers, pianists and music lovers alike, and especially

to Poland. Nobody likes to see their hero painted in anything less than a heroic light. And these letters are hardly the stuff of heroes.

The facts of the case, which frame Palmer's new film, are simple. Czernicka, an amateur musicologist, appeared with typed scripts which she claimed to have copied out from original manuscripts. The authorities read them and were shocked and frightened by the potential damage to this national hero's image. They asked for the originals; she couldn't, or wouldn't, produce them. She was prosecuted, fined heavily and discredited. She died in suspicious circumstances, apparently by suicide, in 1949. A photocopy of an alleged manuscript was proved to be a compilation of other photocopies of sections, phrases or words from Chopin's known manuscript letters. The originals have never turned up.

The facts of Chopin's life, too, are perfectly straightforward. He was born in Poland in 1810, escaped revolutionary turmoil in Warsaw to settle eventually in Paris, contracted tuberculosis early in life, weighed less than seven stone, was a quiet, ethereal, angelic pianist, wrote stunningly beautiful and often nationalistically Polish music almost entirely for the piano, lived with the controversial French writer known as George Sand, and died of his terrible disease at the age of only 39.

But Tony Palmer's argument is perennial to most biographers, novelists and film-makers: do the bare facts of his life tell you anything about the soul of the man? The answer - uncomfortably, for most of us - tends to be no.

"If you want to make a film about a composer, you have to find a way into the music and through the music to the person," Palmer explains. The story of the mysterious letters provided the angle that he needed; the film, he says, does not take any stance on their veracity or otherwise. He accedes readily that the flashback episodes to Chopin's life are mainly fictitious, taking place in the mind of Paulina Czernicka; but there are times, he adds, when fiction can get closer to the essence of a character or an era than plain fact. "The novels of Dickens are fiction, but they tell us a great many truths about Victorian England," Palmer points out. "The fact that it is through fiction that you learn something doesn't invalidate it."

The timing for the resurfacing of this controversy could not be more pertinent. The forthcoming musical season sees pianists and concert halls the world over commemorating the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death. To list all the concerts would require several packed pages. Any pianist will tell you that Chopin is incomparable; nobody else, barring the composer's own idols, Bach and Mozart, ever wrote for the piano with such concentration, such purity, such imagination and fantasy. To listen to music such as his Ballades, Nocturnes, Sonatas, Mazurkas or Preludes is to discover a sound-world of exceptional visionary power and magic.

"Why is Chopin special?" asks Palmer. "Why is a diamond special? Because it's perfect and it's beyond value. Every time you turn it, it shows a different facet, it sparkles in a different way. It's elegant and beautiful beyond belief. There's not a note out of place. The Prelude in A major is 45 seconds long: within those 45 seconds, he tells us a whole world. It's perfection. And there aren't many people

who can do perfection in 45 seconds. That would be my justification for this approach: I want as big an audience as possible to listen afresh to this music, and then ask themselves how it came about."

Although the most famous of Chopin's melodies are now universally familiar, Chopin the man has always been supremely elusive, constantly subject to misrepresentations and misunderstandings. An early biopic desperately over-romanticised him, showing him coughing globules of lurid blood on to gleaming piano keys. Biographers have often portrayed him as an effete, dandyish figure. He was fastidious, possessed of exquisite taste; he was ill, feverish and tormented, but also somewhat oversensitive about his sizeable nose; he adored high society and was a superb mimic with a quick, sharp wit.

George Sand, in her autobiography, describes him as a creature of paradox: "Chopin was a summation of those magnificent inconsistencies which God alone can permit Himself to create, and which have their peculiar logic. He was modest by principle and gentle by habit, but he was also haughty by instinct, and full of a legitimate and unconscious pride."

It is true that Chopin was ill and physically weak for most of his life; what was true of the body, however, did not necessarily apply also to the spirit. "Chopin is usually seen as a consumptive wimp," says Palmer. "But if you really want to understand him, just listen to the music. That is not the music of a consumptive wimp. This is somebody who had his finger absolutely on the pulse of life, passion, sex and energy. It wasn't his fault if he got tuberculosis and conked out!"

He draws a comparison with the Brontë sisters' novels: "These are some of the most passionate novels of the 19th century. The fact that they all died young of tuberculosis or childbirth doesn't make you think that they were wimps. We know, because words are easy to understand, that the reverse was the case."

The Delfina letters, were they genuine, would prove that Chopin was not quite so refined after all. Yet there are aspects of Chopin here that have never been hidden, but have simply gone under-remarked; here the letters could seem consistent with known fact. Some observers of Chopin may have described him in such terms as "an angel crossing the sky", but in person Chopin was evidently no more an angel than was Mozart. The anti-Semitism in these letters is nothing revelatory: Chopin's published letters are liberally peppered with anti-Semitic sideswipes, such as accusing Jewish folk music of "masquerading as Polish music to entice the masses".

Such attitudes were widespread throughout 19th-century Europe, and since Chopin was nowhere near as virulently expressive of these views as the notorious Wagner, biographers have tended to play down this aspect of his nature. Additionally, the Delfina letters pour scorn on the sexual emptiness of his relationship with Sand; but it is widely thought that he was too ill in any case to have maintained a physical relationship with her for very long. Sand herself speaks of their liaison in her autobiography as "eight years of maternal devotion", rather than in terms of physical passion.

More suspect, though, is the contrast between Sand's account of her deepening affair with him in its early stages, given in a 47-page letter to one of Chopin's closest friends, and the language of the suspect scripts. Sand: "He seemed to despise (in the manner of a religious prude) the coarser side of human nature and to blush for the temptations he had had, and to fear to soil our love by a further ecstasy."

Chopin wrote in an alleged letter to Delfina: "Let the creator... drive women away from him and the strength collecting in his body will not go into his cock and balls but will return to his brain in the form of inspiration. Think how much of that precious fluid and strength I have lost, ramming you to no purpose..." This extract has of course added to the evidence of forgery, since it links creative energy with sexual impulse - a Freudian concept familiar by the 1940s, but unheard of 100 years earlier.

But why should anyone have invented such things about Chopin? Some Chopin experts speak of Czernicka privately in such unacademic terms as "psychopathically obsessed with Chopin" and "menopausal old bat". On the other hand, as Palmer points out, "This does not explain why she, a middle-aged amateur musicologist living under the fierce Communist administration in Poland in the 1940s should dare to come forward with letters saying that the young Chopin was very much in sympathy with the Polish uprising in 1830-31 against Poland's Russian rulers."

In the absence of the original manuscript letters, Czernicka's case can never be proven; meanwhile, the balance of evidence certainly points in the opposite direction. And Chopin the human being remains as paradoxical and elusive as ever.

- The Strange Case of Delfina Potocka will be screened across Europe on dates surrounding the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death on 17 October.