



The Parisian Worlds of Frédéric Chopin

By Dr. William G. Atwood

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In 1831, Chopin stopped in Paris on his way to London, fleeing his native Warsaw after Russia's brutal repression of an insurrection there. Entranced by the lively social and artistic scene in the city, the musician remained there until his death in 1849. In this engaging book, William Atwood recreates the Paris that Chopin knew, providing vivid details about its places, people, and politics, and showing how these affected the sensitive musician during an enormously fruitful period in his career. Drawing on many contemporary sources, Atwood brings to life the musicians, writers, artists, courtesans, salon hostesses, politicians, doctors, businessmen, and messianic Polish emigres who lived in Paris. He describes the theaters, music halls, and salons of Paris as well as its less glamorous worlds filled with the political conflicts and economic fluctuations of the July Monarchy. He tells about the city's newly awakened social consciousness and the philosophers and writers (including George Sand) who fostered it. The book sheds brilliant new light on both Paris and Chopin and will be delightful reading for lovers of the city or the musician.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

This book may be of greater interest to the historian--political, social, and cultural--than to the musician. As its title indicates, it is about France, particularly Paris, more than about Chopin, and presupposes considerable knowledge of French history. Chopin wanders through its pages as a peripatetic presence; there are quotes from his letters commenting on whom he meets, where he plays, what he sees and hears, with references to his friends, pupils, and publishers. The author, a New York dermatologist who has written two previous books about Chopin (including *Fryderyk Chopin: Pianist from Warsaw*), has prodigiously researched every aspect of French life between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. He quotes copiously from contemporary writers as diverse as Balzac, Heine, Berlioz, Mrs. Trollope, and Thackeray. A meticulously detailed guided tour through Paris is followed by an account of several generations of the royal family describing their politics, personalities, fortunes, and misfortunes, as well as their habits, love affairs, interrelationships, hangers-on, and adversaries, resulting in a bewildering profusion of names.

Among the most interesting chapters are those on the Polish refugee community--where Chopin had many friends--and those on the artists, writers, musicians, philosophers, and theologians (including numerous crackpots) who created the city's rich cultural life in its concerts, theaters, operas, journals, and famous private salons. The writing is lively, witty, and informative, marred only by occasional infelicities like "his inseparable sister," and the book abounds with excellent illustrations. Unfortunately, it also abounds with anti-Semitic slurs; Atwood misses no chance to point out, in an insulting manner, the Jewish origin of anyone he does not like, from the Rothschilds to Heine, Meyerbeer, and Offenbach. --*Edith Eisler*

From Publishers Weekly

Atwood's third book on Chopin (*Fryderyk Chopin: Pianist from Warsaw*) views the composer's life against the backdrop of Paris, from Chopin's arrival in 1831 until his death in 1849. Atwood captures historical details of the City of Light, nicely describing, for example, the Polish emigre community and the city's leading salon hostesses. Chopin's own insights into these various milieus are revealed in pointed comments drawn from his correspondence ("I am launching myself little by little into society, alas, with nothing more than a ducat in my pocket!"). Beginning with a panoramic tour through the arrondissements of Paris, Atwood notes Chopin's various residences and other landmarks of importance in his life. Several chapters on the intensely active musical life of Paris, from the salons to Chopin's beloved opera, and on the rise of journalistic music criticism, are of central interest. Yet Atwood's thoroughness becomes a problem in chapters that, by his own admission, explore aspects of Parisian life with which Chopin had little to do. For instance, his lover George Sand was a link to literary and radical political circles, but Atwood stresses Chopin's lack of interest in politics only after providing a detailed political history. A chapter on the visual arts includes Sand's observation that "her lover was a musician and only a musician, with little feeling for the other arts." Atwood's urge toward panorama takes the book away from its supposed central figure into the realm of more general cultural history from which Chopin often disappears. But what this study lacks in focus it makes up for in colorful anecdotes and personality sketches that will surely interest aficionados of music in 19th-century Paris. 151 illus.

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From Library Journal

Whereas Tad Szulc's recent *Chopin in Paris* (LJ 2/15/98) focused on the composer, Atwood's new work discusses Paris as Chopin knew it. Forgoing a preface, it opens with a summary like that of a contemporary travel guide, describing Paris in the 1830s and 1840s. Thirteen chapters follow, nearly all of them stating that

Chopin first arrived in Paris in fall 1831 and died there in 1849. But each chapter details a different aspect of Paris during these years, among them its community of Polish expatriates, salon society, concert halls, dance halls, opera, literature, art, and political currents. Many contemporary sources are cited, and Atwood, who has written elsewhere about Chopin, generously uses illustrations drawn from them to assist in presenting an absorbing picture of Chopin's "Parisian worlds."--Bonnie Jo Dopp, Univ. of Maryland Lib., College Park
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