

Chopin Rode a Donkey Part II

Victor Boulet

Victor Boulet is bursting at the seams. It's rare to find someone as dedicated to an enterprise, so committed to a life lived inseparable from art. The life of an artist, brutal entanglement.

“Rules to Keep the World away: Do not listen to people (more than is necessary); Do not look at people (ditto); Have as little intercourse with people as possible; When you come into contact with people, talk as little as possible” - Gwen John Papers (March 3, 1912)

***This as an initiatory offering, we will return to it again in a few months.

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Chopin is Victor's spectral companion. The pianist figured into Boulet's paintings starting in 2012.

Explosions of joy caught between grotesqueries - this is the condition under which Frédéric Chopin lived and worked. Between long periods of illness and despair he took to the piano and composed what he could with the energy at hand. The man had expensive taste and ever-shifting finances. Worse yet, his ambitions of greatness were corrupted by a failing body.

Chopin: A man bent on proper dress and luxurious conditions - gloves, tailored garments. Chopin: always in vogue.

Chopin's mazurkas, among his most acclaimed forms, were filtered into the pianist's compositions. Opus 41 is one such arrangement - consisting of four mazurkas - which engages brisk waltzes, twiddling fingers, melancholic digressions, and absurd experimentations. In a letter composed in 1839, Chopin explains to a friend that this set has achieved something crucial, “They seem as lovely to me as only youngest children can be to an aging parent.” The biographer Benita Eisler recognizes the pieces as achieving “the ultimate romantic requirement: beauty touched with strangeness.” With this composition Chopin's obsessive nature was “like flayed flesh” - laid bare.

A gray Chopin is reproduced throughout this series - a reflection of both illness and the composer's request that the walls of his Parisian abode be cast in gray. Margot the Donkey is painted and repeated just the same. Chopin rode Margot in a velvet saddle behind a surrogate family on their walks through Nohant. His perpetually failing health rendered foot travel unfeasible.

The conditions of feebleness and alienation under which Chopin endured life are inextricably linked to the nature of his compositions. Despair, fits of exuberance, and precise sensitivities are but a few aspects of his interior world that yielded expanded boundaries of possibility in his artistic production.

Enter Franz Liszt as friend, competitor, and eventual enemy. Wikipedia holds that they “had some qualities of a love-hate relationship.” Liszt and Chopin: Both prodigious children.

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Chopin was introverted, resigned to isolation in times of poor health. Liszt was a cult of personality: excessive, indulging in over-the-top showmanship. Both virtuosos excelled at their instrument and cultivating new pieces of music. Liszt drastically expanded harmonic capacities in his compositions, and basked in the creative potential of themes. Chopin invented new forms and fabricated his own unique versions of musical precedents. Chopin favored the Pleyel, “the last word in perfection,” refined, congruent, fundamental. Liszt favored the exorbitant Erard. April 26, 1841. Frédéric Chopin gives a concert at Salle Pleyel (Paris, FR). Liszt rushes the stage and embraces Chopin as the piano’s final notes ring out.

May 2, 1841. Franz Liszt publishes a review of the Salle Pleyel performance in the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*. No mention of Chopin’s compositional acumen or the works he performed. Chopin and company recognized this as Liszt’s attempt to usurp some of Chopin’s acclaim. Friendship terminated.

Chopin won. He focused. He put the poetics of work first. Liszt The Ham wanted the limelight, attention-seeker extraordinaire.

Dreamscapes meet the natural world. A double portrait of Lars Hertervig appears as a disruption to the Chopin-o-sphere. Hertervig: another child prodigy. Chopin was a key player in the Romantic era, while Hertevig inherited its effects. Hertevig suffered from illness of the mind, as opposed to Chopin’s bodily plight. Both exiled, the former by mind, latter by flesh. Consigned to “madness,” the painter devised his own version of nature’s sublimity, one marked by an anomalous filtration system.

The artist toils in solitude.

I am granted a day of solitary play - me versus the paintings. Me alone in a castle, waltzing with compositions. Mandatory endurance I cannot escape until the job is done. These works require situationizing, I am their caretaker. The paintings will rest below their inevitable hanging positions for one night and one night only. Lights off and perhaps in the glow of the moon I will sit on the wooden floor, looking for revelations in the painting’s temporary dispositions.

Victor Boulet gets his own folder in my Google Drive.

Victor’s paintings are crude assuages.

Surfaces worked and reworked, the precision of Victor’s marks. Scratches and protrusions. Clotted oils abandoned by the brush as it moves against the linen’s grain. Solemnity next door to the ass’s mocking toothery. A death mask invaded by a long-nosed jester.

Something crucial happens when you can’t make heads or tails. Understanding is processional. Mystery is a virtue, mystery is honest. Submit to it.

Victor Boulet is an artist. You will never see Victor Boulet in a pair of Nikes.

- Reilly Davidson

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