

CHEN LI

Fantaisie Impromptu

Translated from Chinese by Ting Wang

I.

FANTAISIE IMPROMPTU. That's Chopin, of course. The record—held in a pink sleeve (or it should be pink)—was a pirated copy: ten yuan apiece, or nine if you buy more. It wasn't mine though. It was lent to me by a high-school classmate of my classmate from primary school. They were attending an all-girls high school.

I was eighteen then and just about to graduate from a seaside high school. I loved Western classical music with the same surging passion as I did Chinese classical literature. At midnight, I wrote long, long letters (and paginated them), on blue papers, in black Parker ink—with a Parker pen (Parker, of course). I quoted the classics copiously—*Classic of Poetry*¹ said this, Tao Yuanming² said that, and one particular Ci poem from the Song Dynasty said this and that. Back then Romanticism was defined as staying up past twelve o'clock (in the a.m.), but not for the sake of college entrance exam, or as riding a bike alone to the beach to watch the sea, watch the sea, watch the sea. You sat on the tatami in front of the desk, writing with flying strokes, painstakingly—as the classics were about to be quoted—yet gleefully. Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptu* twirled around you time and again in the dead of night, especially that tuneful and engrossing melody in the middle section.



Back then, needless to say, you had yet to find this score. Nonetheless, in your head, under your pen, on the paper, on the envelope and the 2.5-yuan, special-delivery stamp that was glued onto it, were nothing but musical notes.

Youth. Love. In a barren, mediocre life, nobility and beauty beckoned.

Obviously, you knew Chopin is not just *Fantaisie Impromptu*; you knew Romantic music is not just Chopin, nor is it the only wrapping paper for dreams in a barren, mediocre life. Nevertheless, you let a borrowed pirated record fill your heart, all the time.

Returning home to teach after graduating from college, I bought a CD featuring *Fantaisie Impromptu*, in order to copy some beginner's music for the middle-school students I spent time with every day. I told them it's one of my favorite pieces of music. Those students—boys and girls, not all from the same class—often borrowed each others' cassette tapes and CDs for their listening pleasure. One student's tape of Chopin broke from being overplayed. Another asked his parents to buy him a piano and started taking private lessons to learn how to play, despite the pressure of his high-school entrance exam. Still another—a girl who was good at playing the piano—had everyone come over to her home and listen to her play at times. After getting into high school, she invited us once again. She opened the lid and sat in front of the piano; unexpectedly, that very piece—Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptu*—started to flow out through her fingertips. What a pleasant surprise to see the music from inside the record and cassette tapes suddenly turned into concrete musical notes, fluttering between the white and black keys in front of your eyes—especially when the pianist was someone you knew. She said she'd been eager to learn that piece well and play it for me. I recall the first time she and her classmates visited my home; when she saw I was living in an old wooden house with low ceilings, she muttered in surprise, "I'd thought my teacher must be living in a big white house, with the blue sky, blue sea, and white clouds right outside!" She had such assumptions because she thought the music, literature, and arts that I talked to them about in class were all so beautiful. I took them to the Mazu temple next to my house, with messy vending stands and trash in front of it.

I rarely replay this piece for myself. But if someone happens to be playing it on the channel picked up via the "mini-dish" (where music flows in when you turn it on, like turning on the tap), I simply indulge myself unscrupulously in the luxury of sentimentality. I had played a video recording of *Fantaisie Impromptu* being performed by Russian-born Stanislav Bunin—the First Prize winner of the International Chopin Piano Competition—for the students who were close to me. Bunin became our new idol in no time. That fall Bunin came to perform in Taiwan. Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in Row 16 of the National Concert Hall in

Taipei, were none other than my students—who had come from different parts of Taiwan—and me. Hadn't they finished their middle-school coursework? They were practically college students already. I don't remember if Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptu* was part of that evening's program, but I have no doubt that Bunin played *Fantaisie Impromptu* just for us.

Fantaisie Impromptu. After returning to the small, seaside town to teach middle school, you stayed with each class for three years until you sent the students away, and then restarted the cycle, receiving a new incoming class. In the first nine years, you—the author of two previous poetry collections—wrote no more than ten poems. You taught, lambasted, scowled, and bowed extemporaneously; off the cuff, you squeezed out the toothpaste of wisdom and imagination, leaving the flavor of fantasy between the kids' teeth. In the latter nine years, they burned up the school magazines you had edited for the students and disqualified you from being a homeroom teacher. You turned your pen into a phonograph needle, and let it twirl and sing on your manuscript paper. In nine years, you completed twenty books.

Now they ask you to be a teacher again. You return to being an early bird and attending the modified flag-raising ceremony: watching your students raise their hands to their foreheads upon hearing the national anthem, and salute a flag they can't see, while gazing at a wall in front of them. Amused, the students form crooked lines. You don't have the heart to scold them. In just two weeks, you have relapsed into your old habits: having the new students listen to Amis folk songs, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Bach, Grieg, Enigma. . . which they may like or dislike. You know Xie Zhongjing, Number 11, is late for morning class every day because his mom doesn't get up until 7:30 a.m. and takes him to school only after she finishes putting on her makeup. You know Cai Jialing, Number 28, is chubby, with a curious smell, and that she was often made fun of by her classmates while in primary school. And you know Wang Weiting, Number 35, participated in the piano competition in fourth grade; she beat your daughter, who was the runner-up.

I take out that CD featuring *Fantaisie Impromptu* again. That day, in the parking lot behind the big restaurant next to the school gate, I sat alone inside the car, listening to the piece. When that tuneful and engrossing melody in the middle section rose, the school bell rang abruptly, about three feet away. I was hesitant whether to finish listening to it. It is five minutes and forty-nine seconds long. *Fantaisie Impromptu*. Students were waiting for me.

2.

SO, ALL OF A SUDDEN, you realize your daughter has grown up. Not because for several weeks she has been practicing repeatedly Chopin's waltzes, one piece after another, in the next room—putting you under the illusion that Chopin has finally registered as part of your household, bringing along with him several musical notes that are prone to lose their footing and fall off the page of sheet music. But because you read her article titled “Three Nocturnes,” in which she, at thirteen, had written about Chopin:

I'm in love.

With Chopin. Ever since I first listened to his piano music, I have fallen in love with him.

Bach's music engages in dialogue, Mozart's has pearls-and-jades-like melodies, Beethoven's has brilliant fortitude, Debussy's is impressionistic with Oriental flavor—different styles of music, different senses of beauty. But I have a very special feeling towards Chopin. His music is delightful yet sentimental, noble yet melancholy, and it always makes my heart beat faster.

He uses music to express his emotions. Boiling patriotism in his polonaises, nostalgia in his mazurkas, romance and melancholy in his waltzes, and desolate loneliness, possibly due to torment from illness, in his late works. Listening to his music, I feel his sadness, joy, and anger; through the piano keys, I converse with him.

But I can't really understand this sentimental gentleman. I admire his musical talent, but can't see through his complicated inner world; I can hear his grief and indignation in his *Revolutionary Étude*, but can't relate to his tumult over the occupation of Poland. I read about his love story, but can't comprehend why he fell in love with the controversial George Sand, who was nine years his senior; I can sense the forlornness in his *Waltz in Sharp C Minor*, composed in 1847, but can't imagine his fear and anxiety while battling disease. . . .

Some say Chopin's music is limited to piano and isn't diverse enough; others criticize him for his overemphasis on musical beauty and for lacking depth; but I don't agree with them. He makes piano full of spirit and magic; he understands the piano's moods and expresses her emotions for her, and gives her life—just as Arthur Rubinstein said, he is “the poet of the piano, the heart of the piano, and the soul of the piano.” . . .

After reading this article, a teacher said, This student has copied lots of materials that she can't possibly understand at her age. But I know she hasn't copied anything. Chopin is not to be copied. Chopin is for one to listen to, to play, and to feel.

3.

IN THE SUMMER of 1999, I departed from the island of Taiwan—I had never been away before—to attend an international poetry festival in a country of tulips and windmills. On my return trip, I took a detour to Paris, for a two-day, whistle-stop tour. At the Louvre, I was trudging with sore feet through the exhibition halls one after another, when, amid a bunch of rousing and indignant Eugène Delacroix paintings, that portrait of Chopin caught my eyes. Yes, that's you. An oil painting from the year 1838. I stopped, feeling relaxed and at ease, as though I was back at home.

Yes, that's you. Frederic Chopin (1810-1849). That's you exactly, Chopin. No matter what language it's translated into, your name is poetry, every single day.

NOTES

¹*Shijing* or *Shih-ching*, also translated as *Book of Songs*, or *Book of Odes*, is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising three hundred and five works dating from the eleventh to seventh centuries.

² Also known as Tao Qian or T'ao Ch'ien, he was a Chinese poet who lived in the middle of the Six Dynasties period (c. 220 - 589 CE). Often regarded as the greatest poet during the centuries of Six Dynasties poetry, between the Han and Tang dynasties, he is also the foremost of the “recluse” poets.