

The Legendary Life of Chopin, the Revolutionary Musician in Poland: On the Film *A Song to Remember*

LI Mingchun^{[a],*}

^[a]College of Music, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Received 14 August 2014; accepted 24 October 2014
Published online 26 November 2014

Abstract

A Song to Remember is a classic work filled with romantic elements. Generally speaking, it has described the life of Chopin in 1930s and 1940s during his residence in Paris France. Chopin has experienced the spiritual conflicts between love and hatred, and between body and soul in his fight for enterprise, for love, for himself and for his country. Later, he decided to raise money by touring performance for the Patriots in bloody battle until over-fatigued to the last breath of his life. The film particularly employs flamboyant colors, magnificent scenes, dainty pictures and various techniques of montage, which is extremely entertaining and is honored as “a colorful rhapsody”. When the film was shown in 1945 with ceremony, it has touched the mind of Chinese audience, evoking people’s deep response. It has also caused “big waves” in America. Although not very long, the film has explained the maximum meaning that Chopin has bestowed to his 39-year life by music, and it has also perfectly exhibited his innocent heart to write music for the country and people he loves.

Key words: *A Song to Remember*; Chopin; Music

Li, M. C. (2014). The Legendary Life of Chopin, the Revolutionary Musician in Poland: On the Film *A Song to Remember*. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 5(4), 81-84. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/5871>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5871>

INTRODUCTION

A Song to Remember is set in the historical background of 1930s and 1940s, mainly in Paris. However, in a unique

way, the film has used the producing method which was not popular until 1940s. It has not only adopted the rich colors for its background, but has also employed the visual structure and the technique of Montage which called for high skill. The method has got quite beyond the need of film production itself, but has properly given prominence to the romantic atmosphere of the film, making *A Song to Remember* really “forgettable”. The film has told us about the life story of Chopin, the great Polish pianist and musician. In the short tens of minutes, it has shown the common but great life of Chopin, and has explained the maximum definition of the value of life. In 1930s and 1940s during his residence in Paris, Chopin has experienced the spiritual conflicts between love and hatred, and between body and soul in his fight for enterprise, for love, for himself and for his country. Later, he decided to raise money by touring performance for the Patriots in bloody battle until over-fatigued to the last breath of his life. The film particularly employs flamboyant colors, magnificent scenes, dainty pictures and various techniques of montage, which is extremely entertaining and is honored as “a colorful rhapsody”. It is a film, but it is more like a piece of piano music full of Chopin’s blood.

Heinrich Heine, the poet of piano, has described Chopin like this:

he is born weak, but there is extraordinary talent behind his slim figure. He is not a gifted music performer, but also a poet and musician. When he improvises a piece of music in front of the piano, there will arise an unprecedented wave of warm torrent. At this moment, he is neither Polish, nor French, nor German, but exhibiting the more elevated bloodline from the country of Mozart, Raphael, and Goethe. His real country has become the dreamlike kingdom of music.

In the film *A Song to Remember*, as the carrier of the soul of music, the piano is also the carrier of the protagonist’s emotion. It is a special and beautiful way to express the “rich” spiritual world of the film, just like the music of Chopin, which is made moving and

touching for the outflow of the musician's love for his country. As another way to express emotion, the art of film should effectively take advantage of the big power of music, if it is supposed to render the emotions of its actors more impressive and acceptable to the audience. With its extremely powerful aesthetic function and exactly appropriate way of expression, music could always travel and function in people's emotional world without limit, just as an old saying goes "either in changing habits or diverting customs, no other means is more effective than music".

In the film, the life story of Chopin, the great pianist and composer of Poland is told. Within the short tens of minutes, the common while great life of Chopin is presented, and the maximum definition of the value of life is explained. The topic of the film is carried by the music. Chernyshevsky has said: "Art derives from life while gets beyond life". Therefore, the music produced by the protagonist Chopin is to great extent the expression of his own emotion, showing his strong and firm love for his country. With the change in the rhythm, the music by the protagonist has expressed the truest voice of the miserable people who are oppressed for a long time. The yearning and calling for freedom have given the most effective expression to the truest voice of the people. The music of the film ultimately aims at the mind of the audience, for good music is able to get rid of the longtime gloom in people's mind, purging people of their soul. With the proper music, the visual representation and expression of the film will surely leave an indelible impression on its audience. Taking 2 periods of Chopin's experience as the clue, the film will introduce the common while great life of the patriotic musician of Poland.

1. THE DELICATE DESIGN AND INVENTIVE MIND

Charles Vidor is the general director of the film, who is famous for creating momentous and sensational plots. And how did the subject matter come to his mind? Ernest Mali Sika has written a short story about Chopin, from which Sidney Buchtmann got the inspiration and adapted it into a play. To begin with, let's introduce the main characters of the film one by one: Prof. Joseph Elsner played by Paul Muni. This role is the mentor of Chopin. He is an eccentric, sometimes niminy-piminy and sometimes lardy-dardy, making the role of the professor discrete and incomplete. Novelist George Sand played by Merle Oberon. George Sand is hypersensitive in the film, and looks depraved and dissipated. She is always dressed like a man, arbitrary action, and strange in temper. What is more unacceptable is that she has many lovers in the film, which she does not regard as a shame but as a pride. And Fryderyk Chopin played by Cornele Wild. Although Chopin is the protagonist, he is a little humble, factitious,

narcissistic, infirm of attractions from the outside world and susceptible to gloom when his expectations fail.

Although *A Song to Remember* is adapted based on the life story of Chopin, the various scenes and central ideas of it are quite different from Chopin's life experience. Firstly, Chopin in real life showed great sympathy toward the nationalism of Poland, but he has never done anything for the revolution, so he was not called a Polish revolutionist in the real sense. When Chopin went to Paris, he was not accompanied by Elsner, and his life and goal have not been restricted or controlled by anyone. Even his conflict with George Sand was the personal behavior of himself, with no one else to blame. Furthermore, it should be rectified that Chopin has never participated in Polish people's war against the Czar and that Constancia has never travelled all the way to Paris to persuade Chopin into the revolution. It is intentionally and unintentionally hinted in the film that it was with the influence of George Sand that Chopin has employed quite contrastive music to highlight his own romantic and imaginative musical image. As a matter of fact, George Sand was not so concerned about Chopin's music and did not exert various influences on Chopin. Both the romantic and sentimental music and the passionate and patriotic rhythm are added into the film in order to highlight Chopin's patriotic spirit.

As far as Chopin's concert is concerned, it should be clarified that only the one in London was particularly arranged by him. His alleged national tour in illness and the threat to his life are invented to maintain Chopin's good personal image. The only cities he has stayed are Paris, Nottingham, Majorca and the London as is mentioned above. In fact, his travel is as short as the 39 years of his life. *A Song to Remember* leaves it audience the impression as if it were a feature film, in which there is definitely something fictional, for it is not a story without fictional elements. Therefore, the factual and the fictional are intermingled in this sort of film. Of course, the proportion and the arrangement between the factual and the fictional depend on the writer's design and ability. What this sort of film requires of the scriptwriter is not only the foundation and experience of writing but also his deep understanding of the characters in his own film. In short, the writer of the film should know music. Otherwise, there would be an embarrassing situation that the theme of the script is enormously different from the depth of the music adopted. The chief director Vidor is a person who has employed the technique skillfully.

Of course, I am not writing the article with the intention of criticizing it. As all things have both good and bad sides, what I mean to express here is that, judging from the objective perspective of an appreciator, it is indeed a film full of romance and imagination. Regarding *A Song to Remember* exactly as a film, if we could enjoy its fictional and magnificent story, we would admire it from the button of our heart. Chopin is such a musician

who is able to produce wonderful and beautiful piano music. In life, he has not only found his own love George Sand, but was also brave enough to fight against the oppression by the Czar. Although he has ungratefully betrayed Elsner, the man who gave him the artistic status in Paris, it should be admitted that the film is filled with sorts of plots, including music, sensation and conflict, etc. Miss Oberon has made very excellent performance in the work, and it is not exaggerating to say that it is the most extraordinary film in all her works. Paul Muni has also made perfect performance. His talent in performance is incomparable that the positive roles are loved to the highest degree and the negative roles are heated to the fullest extent among his audience. His performance is admired by everybody. His representation of the roles is so vivid and profound and his gestures are so rigorous that his work deserves to be called perfect.

I think Miss Oberon has made an affectionate interpretation of George Sand in the play, and she has fully understood the volatile and capricious moods of Sand. In the play she was dressed either in splendid formal attire or valiant men's clothes, and always discussed life with an arrogant tone. All these are important episode to attract people's attention. Her most remarkable skill of performance is reflected in representing the cunningness of George Sand in a simple way, especially her final triumph over Muni in their contention for Wild's love.

Later, when Chopin felt so guilty of his overlook of fellow people's life, he planned to go on tour performance to raise "funds" for Polish revolution. Upon learning the news, Oberon got very angry. She quarreled with her lover and spouted a memorable monologue. With these words, she told of the miserable experience of the past. What she meant to express is that men and women should be equal and as a woman, she should summon herself up. In her world, everything else has become not that important. The film is really very wonderful, for Miss Oberon has given such an influential performance with her unique style.

A Song to Remember lasts about 120 minutes, but the audience is not bored at all. This is attributed to Vidor who has arranged different events closely together. It deserves particular praise that even the minor roles who have less part in the film are played to life, such as Franz Liszt played by Steven Bekesy, the music publisher Louis Pleyel played by George Coehloris and Alfred Demsai played by George McReadie.

From what is mentioned above, everyone could realize that the film is produced by the first-class quality. The several plots which impress me most happened at Majorca when Chopin was already in bad health. Further affected by the bad weather, he was one day playing the piano with difficulty. George was standing nearby with a fierce expression on her face. She kept the gesture of putting the goose quill onto the straw paper, enjoying the music of the lover while planning how to take Chopin as her personal

estate. After the tour performance, Chopin's health got on the verge of collapse. Prof. Joseph Elsner called on Miss George Sand to visit the dying Chopin to fulfill the wish of the miserable man. However, George Sand ruthlessly told Joseph Elsner that she would never play that role and seriously condemned the latter for ruining a musical genius. The moment when Joseph Elsner turned for leaving, George Sand said with an arrogant tone like a queen: "continue writing, Mr Delacroix".

2. SIGNIFICANCE IN EMOTIONS, AND EMOTIONS IN MUSIC

The theme of the film is carried by the music. *A Song to Remember* has made use of several pieces of Chopin's classic piano music, such as the Polonaise in A-flat Major, the Etude in E Major and the Revolutionary Etude. The harmonious cooperation between the plot and the music in the film has further fore-grounded the effect of music on audience's emotion. As a result, the music has greatly promoted the development of the plot, giving the audience a very good aesthetic experience while they are enjoying the film.

As a member of the Poles, Chopin belongs to Poland. Both his body and soul are completely possessed by Poland. He has greedily absorbed the inspiration artistic creation from the folk culture of Poland like a bee. The Dance Music of Poland, alias the Polonaise, as one of Chopin's masterpiece, is also the most conspicuous feature of the film. It is the result of the synthesis of the tones of Polish folk music. Every time Chopin plays the Polonaise, his appearance turns as happy and enchanted as a child. He is honored as "a poet of piano", as his music is always full of romantic and imaginative flavor. When you are listening to it, it feels sometimes as if you are in the moonlight with the wind breezing and a nightingale singing softly in the tree, sometimes as if you are sitting alone in the serene woods with the clean spring running from inside the mountain, sometimes as if you are watching the starry night sky with the trains of thought traveling long distance within a short span of time, and sometimes as if you are on the sea beach with the evening breeze kissing the cheek, the white waves lingering on the sands, the sea rising and falling, and the water hitting the cliff. It is touching, intoxicating and dreamlike. If life is peaceful as it always is, Chopin might always be an innocent, romantic and sometimes naughty "poet". However, the elegant "poet" could not remain silent in front of the miserable fate his country, he couldn't but add some angry, sorrowful, exciting, and holy elements into his music, thus winning the honor of "a revolutionary poet". If his former poems are tender lyrics, the present ones are piercing snarls; if his former poems are softhearted praise, the present ones are scathing condemnation; if the former poems are delicate description, the present ones are

straightforward encouragement; and if the former poems are well framed oil paintings, the present ones are more like sharp and tough sword.

In the film, there are more than 20 pieces of music which are composed by Chopin, and the person who has accomplished the great project is the pianist Josee Ytterby. He has really learnt Chopin's music in earnest and tried to understand the spirit of it. His performance is extremely true to Chopin's, which shows that he has certainly made much practice in private. After the scenes of luxurious salon in Paris, the publishing house of music, the small hotel, the restaurant and the evening party for social intercourse, his health got worse. And in the end of his life, he looked so emaciated and exhausted. However, the film gives him a graceful ending. He died in a big bed in a large room, accompanied by many faithful friends. At that time, we are reminded of his *Nocturne in C minor*.

The Etude of C Major is written by Chopin with the grief for his conquered country. The essence of the music is embodied in the combination of the smooth sound on the left side and the rigid tune on the right side. At the very beginning of the work, a series of pouring semiquavers are introduced by unharmonious chords. It gives people a very sudden and strong impression just as it is the overall outburst of Chopin's inner emotion. Suddenly the sound on both sides of combine and pours again, just like the rush of a large army, momentous and irresistible. Afterwards, in the section of exposition, a rigid and bright tune appears in the high-pitched area. It symbolizes that the trumpet of revolution is sounded and the unswerving fight of the Polish people starts. It expresses the prowess of the Polish army in their resistance against invasion, their angry and boiling roars, and valiant sentiments. In the section of development, the music gets more and more intensive and the trumpet-like theme gets more and more keyed-up, pushing the whole music into the climax. It is an image of triumph, just like a moment of imagination in front of austere reality. The section of recapitulation shows the rigid tune of the former section again. However, when the end draws near, the music turns from strong to soft, and a sorrowful tune is exhibited. It sounds like the wail from the bottom of one's heart, and is like the composer's heartbroken cry for the fate of his country. Finally, the tune of the music gets excited again. With very strong strokes, the music pours down and ends rapidly in the chord of C major. It has expressed the hatred in Chopin's mind and his firm belief in the final triumph of revolution. As a jewel in the crown of *A Song to Remember*, this work has appeared many times in Chopin's tour performance to raise funds for resistance, and it has reflected Chopin's incomparable love for his country.

CONCLUSION

The film *A Song to Remember* is a classic film of biography. Compared with other kinds of film, it has distinctive features: through exaggerated scenes and techniques of expression, the plots and episodes of the films are rendered more real, vivid and touching. The heart of truly great man is definitely filled with the sincere love for his country. Chopin is such a common while great musician. In the film, his commonness is reflected in his common way of life, and he has even undergone much misery not experienced by many other people. Though the film *A Song to Remember* is not long, it has explained the maximum meaning that Chopin has bestowed to life through his music during 39 years of his life. It has also exhibited how he has been writing his own life of music for the country and people he loved, and how he has devoted his own precious and short life. The film has put the common experience of Chopin vividly on to the screen. Even after 100 years of Chopin's death, the film has made the music of the great musician still freshly remembered in the field of music and deeply buried in the heart of people of Poland and even the whole world. The shining characters of Chopin have been exerting influence on people of later generations, encouraging them to devote to and strive for their country and people. It is the film *A Song to Remember* that has typically inherited the common while great life of Chopin.

If we simply regard *A Song to Remember* as a fictional work, it has managed to be extremely luxurious and imaginative. Furthermore, when we are appreciating it, we could find the entertaining flavor in it. It is not possible for a single piece of work to win all positive assessments, either from harsh musicians or fastidious historians. Anyway, the beauty and enjoyment that the excellent film has left to its audience is indelible.

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