



**Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times.** By Alan Walker. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018. 727 pp. ISBN 9780374159061.

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Over a hundred biographies of Frederic Chopin have been published since his death in 1849, some two dozen of them in this century alone, and any new biographer faces a challenge to justify his entry into this crowded field. It is not clear what prompted Alan Walker to write a monumental volume of over 700 pages. It could not have been scholarship produced in “recent years” pertaining to George Sand, by which Walker means Georges Lubin’s edition of Sand’s letters completed in 1995 and Sand’s biography by Curtis Cate

published in 1975 (p. 8), as these sources have been used by Chopin scholars for decades. Similarly, biographical information about Chopin’s friends and teachers from Warsaw can be found in the existing biographies and online reference sources (e.g., NIFC).<sup>1</sup> In the end, Walker has only weasel words to justify his enterprise: “the times are generally absent from the story of Chopin’s life” creating “the void . . . waiting to be filled” and those cataclysmic events “are given short shrift in the many sanitized versions of Chopin’s life . . .” (p. 19).

To his credit, Walker consulted some recently published Polish sources clarifying details of Chopin’s early life, e.g., the dating of Eliza Radziwiłł’s drawing of Chopin in Antonin in 1829 (p. 101), and his correct spelling of Polish names is commendable. At the same time, however, recent scholarship reinterpreting aspects of Chopin’s biography is largely absent from his book. In fact, Walker rarely mentions contributions of other authors, which makes him appear as a pioneer conqueror of a *terra incognita* of Chopin’s life and leads to a compilation of the existing scholarship without due references (exs., the circumstances of Catherine the Great’s death in 1760 on p. 58 n. 17; the story of Astolphe Custine on p. 304; information on the Polish exiles in Paris in 1830 on p. 216; the account of the cholera epidemic in April 1832 on p. 228; quotation on p. 299 attributed to “one popular biographer” instead of a specific author). To make the

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1. The website of the Fryderyk Chopin Institute (<http://en.chopin.nifc.pl/institute/>)



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story flow, anecdotes known from older biographies take up space along with trivia and lengthy digressions (exs., the issue of Solange Sand's real father, pp. 360ff; Liszt's affair with Marie Pleyel, p. 322 n. 2; or the fate of the piano Chopin used in Valldemosa, p. 389 n. 32).

Walker's attempt to provide a broader historical context consists of inserting information collected from reference sources and surveys into the biographical narrative. Such method rarely produces new insights; more specific sources would have to be used to illuminate decisions and motivations of the main protagonists beyond what we already know. Further, information Walker provides is not free from errors. For example, Nicolas Chopin could not fear conscription into Napoleon's army in 1790 (p. 24), had he returned to France, because no such army existed at that time and conscription was not introduced until 1793. There was no "Warsaw Uprising" in 1830-1831 (p. 180 and elsewhere) but a November Uprising. There was no "King Louis-Napoleon" (p. 611)—Louis-Napoleon was President of the Second Republic and then Emperor. It is not true that Napoleon "attacked and took Moscow" in 1812 (p. 26)—Moscow was deserted when Napoleon arrived. And if 4,500 francs was a "very large sum" in 1849 (p. 623) how could 6,142 francs be a "moderate sum" (p. 628) at the same time?

Retelling Chopin's life story with a few new details and background information may easily take up 700 pages but is not likely to forge new ways of looking at Chopin. In fact, Walker's biography effectively reinforces the existing clichés, including those that have already been questioned: about Chopin being "fully formed" by the time he left Poland; about his "close" rapport with the Polish aristocracy; about his connections with the Polish circles in Paris; or about his frequent appearances in the salons. To these, Walker adds a portion of anachronisms reflecting preoccupations of present-day academia, rather than nineteenth-century reality: about Chopin's anti-Semitism, his allegedly insincere conversion forced by Fr. Jelowiecki, the priest's questionable integrity, or George Sand's rebelliousness being a result of her three-year stay in a convent as a young girl. The certainty with which Walker "knows" these things and confidence with which he states his opinions is a reminder that no evidence is needed or doubt allowed in the political correctness department.

Finally, the readability of the book is hampered by the use of cryptic acronyms in the footnotes, not only for the frequently quoted sources (such as Chopin's correspondence) but for all of them. An alphabetical listing of these acronyms at the end of the book does not correspond to an alphabetical order of authors' names, which makes the same author appear in different places, and the list an unhelpful substitute for the missing bibliography.