

Frédéric Chopin - A very tainted genius

Next year is the bicentenary of Frédéric Chopin's birth, and major celebrations of his life are planned. But, says Jessica Duchen, while the composer's music was sublime, his personality was another matter entirely

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It's never a good idea to judge art by the artist's character, as we too often do these days, and there are few better examples of why not than Frédéric Chopin. He is set to be the romantic hero of 2010, his bicentenary year: concert halls and record companies are preparing a barrage of celebratory events and CDs. But anniversaries can be mixed blessings for the dead: look closely at any adored individual and it is likely that something less than savoury will be lurking. There's no doubting the greatness of the Polish pianist-composer's music; but that greatness came at a heavy price for those who were close to him, or tried to be.

What's more, Chopin knew it. "It is not my fault if I am like a mushroom which seems edible but which poisons you if you pick it and taste it, taking it to be something else," he wrote in 1839. "I know I have never been of any use to anyone – and indeed not much use to myself."

He was assuredly a genius; he was also complicated, cold, vain, calculating, snobbish, snide, anti-Semitic and impossibly hypersensitive. He suffered from TB most of his life – his cantankerous nature has been blamed on the disease that killed him in his 40th year. But that was only part of the picture.

Over-romanticised movies show Chopin as a delicate figure coughing blood on to the piano keys, or as a romantic revolutionary in Warsaw. Illness and exile earn him sympathy, and justifiably so. But he left Poland to escape a revolution, not to support it. Romantic hero he was not. Instead, the poet Adam Mickiewicz, whose work Chopin admired and who was, like him, a Polish exile, called him a "moral vampire" for his adoration of the aristocracy and for his somewhat two-faced attitude towards the native land he missed so much, not to mention his liaison with the older novelist George Sand, with whom he lived for nine years.

The relationship had many ups and downs, and while Chopin was too frail to have inflicted any physical hurt on his sometimes-adoring partner, his

predilection to preciousness and sulks weighed heavily on her and seem to have added up to a form of psychological water-torture. She soon found herself acting more as nursemaid than as lover, and her exasperation and claustrophobia is all too clear from some of her letters in which she grumbles about his hypersensitive jealousy: "Chopin's love for me is of an exclusive and jealous character. It is a little fantastic and sickly, like him ... it hurts him so much that I find myself forced at the age of 40 to put up with the ridicule of having a jealous lover at my side."

She found an outlet for her frustrations in her novel *Lucrezia Floriani*, which all the couple's friends took to be a portrait of their relationship. The neurotic and sulky Prince Karol, whose "malady" is spiritual rather than just physical, mirrors Chopin. Gradually he wears down the heroine, who refers to being "murdered with pinpricks", before she collapses and dies.

The couple eventually fell out over the issue of Sand's daughter Solange's marriage, of which Sand disapproved and which Chopin supported. The situation exploded in an utterly unreasonable way, with a hysterical Sand accusing Chopin of having been in love with the 17-year-old Solange himself. But friends observing them detected that the frustrations of nearly a decade were bursting into the open at long last.

Chopin was dependent on Sand, whose books were bestsellers, financially as well as emotionally. A revered pianist, he hated giving concerts. When he agreed to a public recital in Paris in 1841, Sand wrote to her friend Pauline Viardot, the singer: "He does not want any posters, he does not want any programmes, he does not want a large audience. He does not want anyone to talk about it. He is frightened of so many things that I have suggested to him that he should play without candles or audience on a dumb piano."

Since he loathed performing, Chopin earned money mainly by teaching. A young pianist called Zofia Rozengardt travelled from Poland to Paris expressly to study with him. Her account of this "weird and incomprehensible man" is not pretty.

"You cannot imagine a person who can be colder and more indifferent to everything around him," she wrote. "He is polite to excess, and yet there is so much irony, so much spite hidden inside it. Woe betide the person who allows himself to be taken in ... He is heavily endowed with wit and common sense, but then he often has wild, unpleasant moments when he is evil and angry, when he breaks chairs and stamps his feet. He can be as petulant as a spoiled child, bullying his pupils and being very cold with his friends. Those are usually days of suffering, physical exhaustion or quarrels with Madame Sand."

Chopin's music benefited from his extreme sensitivity. Yet in everyday life, that same sensitivity made him a man who was desperately self-conscious about the excessive size of his nose, rarely removed his kid gloves – preferred colours white or lilac – and was perhaps ruled by his nerves even more than by his illness. His dandyism – fussiness over his exquisite

waistcoats, dove-grey wallpaper, white muslin drapes and hats in the latest fashion – was part of an elaborate shell behind which he could hide, up to a point. His sometime friend and fellow pianist-composer Franz Liszt, while admiring Chopin as an artist, took him with a pinch of salt. "Chopin is all sadness," he wrote in a letter of 1834. "Furniture is a little more expensive than he had thought, so now we're in for a whole month of worry and nerves."

As for anti-Semitism, that was not unusual in the 19th century, especially in Poland, but it is still one of Chopin's most depressing characteristics. Regarding his publishers as "Jews" he deviously played one off against another. Not that he liked Germans, either. "Jews will be Jews and Huns will be Huns – that's the truth of it, but what can one do? I'm forced to deal with them," he wrote in 1839 to a friend who was helping with negotiations. "The Preludes are already sold to [the publisher] Pleyel, so he can wipe the other end of his stomach with them if he pleases, but since they're all such a band of Jews, stop everything else till I get back."

Chopin's egotistical and neurotic spirit probably went hand-in-white-kid-glove with the imagination that produced his extraordinary music. His works were wrought to perfection, but not so his personality. So, as the anniversary approaches, we will just have to love his works and lump the rest.