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Overture: Love—Love is a pink cake, or, Queering Chopin in times of homophobia

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Itamar

REVISTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN MUSICAL: TERRITORIOS PARA EL ARTE



AÑO 2021

7

 Facultat de Filosofia i Ciències de l'Educació



VNIVERSITAT
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REVISTA INTERNACIONAL

N. 7

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Edición electrónica

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Dirección Web: <https://ojs.uv.es/index.php/ITAMAR/index>

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I.S.S.N: 2386-8260

Depósito Legal: V-4786-2008

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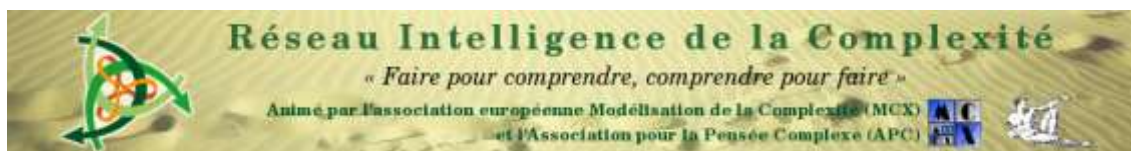
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Territorios para el debate

OVERTURE
Love
Love is a Pink Cake or Queering Chopin
in Times of Homophobia

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Abstract. An introduction to the three essays included in this section. The article highlights the right to know whether Chopin was gay and contextualizes this inquiry in a very long and pervasive historiographical tradition, essentially two-hundred years long, dedicated to examine Chopin sexual orientation, on the one hand, and on the other the more recent tradition of *queering* western classical music composers. The main point is not to demonstrate categorically that Chopin was “gay” (a relative, modern identity marker in any case) but rather to highlight the discourses that have presented him as unequivocally heterosexual.

Keywords. Fryderyk Chopin, George Sand, queer studies, queering of western composers, homophobia, populism / populist politics.

Resumen. Una introducción a los tres ensayos incluidos en esta sección. El artículo destaca el derecho a saber si Chopin era gay y contextualiza esta investigación en una tradición historiográfica muy larga y persistente, esencialmente de doscientos años de duración, dedicada a examinar la orientación sexual de Chopin, por un lado, y por otro la tradición más reciente de *queering* compositores de música clásica occidental. La idea central no es demostrar categóricamente que Chopin era “gay” (un marcador de identidad relativo y moderno en cualquier caso) sino más bien resaltar los discursos que lo han presentado como inequívocamente heterosexual.

Palabras clave. Fryderyk Chopin, George Sand, estudios *queer*, *queering* de compositores clásicos, homofobia, populismo, políticas populistas.

***Chopin some say loved George Sand,
He tried but once to hold her hand,
For once was enough; this lesson he learned
If your girl smokes cigars you're apt to be burned***
—Andy + Corkie, 1952



The ditty above, mistakes and all, comes from *Love is a Pink Cake* an illustrated book by Andy Warhol and the writer Ralph Thomas Ward (“Corkie”). It is supposed to have been Warhol’s first published book and includes a series of scenes of ill-fated love affairs from world history, including Anthony and Cleopatra, Orpheus and Euridice, Othello and Desdemona, and many more¹. The presence of Chopin and Sand in this collection of twenty-five bound lithographs does not come as a surprise. It is, indeed, one of the most fabled relationships in western culture; one that it is described, as I just did using a different word, as “the stuff of legend” by the Maison

George Sand in Nohant². “The stuff of legend”, of course, could mean, that it is an invention or “legend” with no historical basis or that, factual or not, it has been discussed so much that it has created its own reality.

In 1952, the baffling aspects of this relationship did not go unnoticed by “Andy + Corkie”, a duo of extremely perceptive artists. As such, in that relationship, they immediately discerned the “stuff of legend,” undoubtedly beyond historical veracity, something perhaps amusing. The lithograph collection, according to a Warhol scholar, is “a series of commentaries on love starting with a humorous meeting of George Sand and Frédéric Chopin in which Chopin tries to grab her hand, but in it she holds a cigar that can burn him”³. Another Warhol expert adds that “Ward’s

¹ Published originally in 1952, there have been several editions considered collectors’ items. For a recent, trade edition see, WARHOL, Andy; WARD, Ralph Thomas: *Love is a Pink Cake*, Taschen, Colonia, 2017.

² See,

http://www.maison-george-sand.fr/content/download/112627/1252919/version/274/file/docvisite_fichier_maison.de.George.Sand_angl_INTERNET.pdf. It reads: “The relationship between George Sand and Frédéric Chopin whom she loved and encouraged for nine years is now the stuff of legend”. See also Weber commentary in his essay included here.

³ LENIG, Stuart: *The Many Lives of Andy Warhol*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2021, p. 53.

rhyming couplets play on notorious love affairs and erotic incompatibilities. For example, of George Sand's relationship with Chopin and the rumors of her lesbian affair with Marie Dorval". In 1952, Warhol and Ward had had, also, an affair marked by "erotic incompatibilities", possibly like Sand and Chopin, and the lithographs were slices of their own autobiographical experience⁴.

The Chopin-Sand relationship is relevant here because it illustrates in an iconic way, perhaps standing for larger issues, how Chopin's sexuality has been a matter of debate for almost two centuries. When last November 2020, Moritz Weber made public through two radio programs, an article, and several press statements some of his findings regarding Chopin's homosexuality, the reaction was enormous and far-reaching⁵. There were articles in the most important news outlets in the world, including *The Guardian*, CNN, *Le Figaro*, *El Público*, and *Die Welt*, and the online underworld vibrated intensely—and probably still does. Some people were surprised; others were outraged. Many scholars shrugged their shoulders and mentioned that some of the facts had been known for some time. Even those who claimed not to be troubled by the news, reacted, responded, and contributed opinions adamantly. Everyone seemed to care.

To be sure, one of the main reasons for the strong reaction was the recent wave of homophobia in Poland, where, of course, Chopin is a national hero, and his name is commemorated in innumerable places, including the Warsaw airport as well as many streets and squares. The creation in Poland of horrendous "gay-free zones" outraged many people and human rights institutions including the European Council, which issued a strong condemnation of the homophobic measures⁶. Recently, homophobia has not only been very virulent in Poland, but beyond it. It is rampant everywhere packaged, one could say, in the world-wide populist movements that reveal a manifest discontent, among many voters, with democracy itself, a concern attested in recent 2020 USA elections and the current rise of far-right parties in Europe⁷.

Weber's radio podcasts and essays were not only well-timed. They were also part of a long history of attempts to decipher Chopin's sexuality that goes back almost two centuries, with numerous debates and controversies. Of course, there has always

⁴ MULRONEY, Lucy: *Andy Warhol, Publisher*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018, pp. 9-10.

⁵ <https://www.srf.ch/audio/passage/chopins-maenner-1-2?id=11862829> & <https://www.srf.ch/audio/passage/chopins-maenner-2-2?id=11865057> Originally in German, later re-issued in English.

⁶ See https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/poland-should-stop-the-stigmatisation-of-lgbti-people?fbclid=IwAR3uRoA-u574tlQGXXaUM796n1oSzyJ_yhBLW3x-JgwUMln868yxMzsfYto

⁷ Poland ranks very low in terms of LGBTI+ rights. See <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking#>

been a position, which I will call “formalist”, that poses that an artist’s private life, including his sexual orientation, does not affect the work or its reception. This is often mentioned when referring to Chopin’s sexuality⁸. Whether or not Chopin’s sexuality is relevant is one matter, but it is undeniable that the issue refuses to go away and musicians, listeners, and scholars have been genuinely interested in the questions around Chopin’s sexual orientation for almost two hundred years. And true: some of this curiosity has had aberrant results.

Think of the Potocka controversy. In the 1940s, Paulina Czernicka falsely claimed to own the letters belonging to her ancestor Delfina Potocka, written to her friend Chopin. The letters were not only graphic, but also pornographic—as they were also anti-Semitic. The forger was tried and sentenced in a court of law and, being mentally unstable, she apparently committed suicide in 1949. Nevertheless, the legend persisted, and it was even the subject of a very popular movie in the early aughts that, doubtlessly, has shaped many viewers’ ideas about Chopin’s heterosexuality⁹. Czernicka’s apocryphal Chopin letters have been discredited for a long time now, but just the fact that someone took the time to “invent” these letters is indicative of the issue at hand: Chopin’s sexuality is important to many people—heterosexual people especially¹⁰. As one commentator wrote in 1960: “should the letters prove to be authentic, they would help to dispel the lingering myth about Chopin’s alleged effeminacy and would give us a better insight into his private and artistic life”¹¹.

The articles in this collection are also part of a more recent tradition—that of the *queering* of composers of the sacrosanct western concert (or classical) repertoire. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, gender and sexuality issues came to the forefront of musicological and cultural studies. Since the pioneer 1994 book *Queering the Pitch*, discussion of queer issues, as they came to be known, and related questions have become more and more frequent¹². Whereas the “formalists” might argue that sexual orientation is a private matter, a large segment of society and the academic world demands *the right to know*. If queerness has been invisible

⁸ The “formalist” controversy has had many reincarnations including that by Saint-Beuve and Proust. As is well-known, French critic Charles Sainte-Beuve (1804-69) argued that biographical information is relevant to understand an artist’s work. Marcel Proust (1871-1922) advocated the autonomy of the artwork from its creator and context. See for example, SAINTE-BEUVE, Charles Augustin: *Portraits littéraires*, 1 Didier, Paris, 1844 and PROUST, Marcel: *Contre Sainte-Beuve: suivi de Nouveaux mélanges*, Gallimard, Paris, 1954.

⁹ It is available on YouTube: *The Strange Case of Delphina Potocka*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROoIkCVjt4o>

¹⁰ HELMAN-BEDNARCZYK, Zofia: “The New Edition of Chopin’s Correspondence”, in *Musicology Today* 13/1 (Dec. 2016), pp. 4–20.

¹¹ See a review of *Chopin: Listy do Delfiny* by Mateusz Gliński. Jerzy GOŁOS, *The Polish Review*, 19/1, 1974, p. 103.

¹² BRETT, Philip; WOOD, Elizabeth; THOMAS, Gary C.: *Queering the pitch: the new gay and lesbian musicology*, 2nd ed., Routledge, New York, 2006/org., 1994.

for a long time, this is simply no longer acceptable. In Chopin's particular case, what really matters is the same that mattered in 1994 when the volume was first published: "It is for our authors less interesting to assert that Handel or Schubert was 'gay' than to reveal the homophobia, as well as the pathetically limited terms, of a scholarly inquiry terrified that either might have been, or to examine and attempt to revalue models of musical difference that these composers represent and to which we can relate"¹³.

So, "formalists" might have a point: like Handel and Schubert before, it matters less whether Chopin was actually gay than to "reveal the homophobia" involved in brushing the question aside. The historiography of the cases of Handel and Schubert, as discussed in *Queering the Pitch*, are, as a matter of fact, very similar to that of Chopin. The evidence to demonstrate their homosexuality is real, but to many scholars it is insufficient. On the other hand, the perverse strategies to show that they were heterosexual, no matter how thin the evidence is, are pervasive and, perhaps, the "stuff of legend". In the longest essay of this collection, Weber, not only presents a lot of evidence for a gay Chopin, but he also shows a myriad of stratagems to falsify the records including mistranslations and the disappearance of documents. So, Weber not only shows that Chopin was gay, but also that he has been heterosexualized.

Of course, queer, gay, homosexual, sodomite, Uranian, inverted and other terms that refer to one's sexual orientation are historically bound. To be "gay" or claim a "queer" identity in 2021 is different from the early 1800s, when Chopin lived. The idea that one *is* gay has become prevalent in liberal democracies, but in different cultures and in other times, people who engaged in same-sex relationships (sexual or not), found and still find ways to perform gayness without *being* gay, without considering it their identity.

Nevertheless, a "gay" Chopin surely can make a lot of people uncomfortable: "formalists," homophobes, and especially populist politicians. And conversely, a Chopin totally dissociated of his queerness is useful to many. Consider Thierry Baudet, the Dutch extreme-right politician and pianist, who professes his love to Chopin and his music, and appears on TV playing the epic *Ballade No. 3* in a highly curated image of a conservative young man, which is completed by the fact that, apparently, he detests 80's disco music, an explicitly gay soundtrack to many¹⁴. To be sure, a "formalist", heterosexual Chopin is much more conducive to his political aims than the passionate young homosexual composer that transpires from his let-

¹³ *Queering the pitch*, "Preface to the First Edition", p. x.

¹⁴ N. A., "On the Chopin Block: Thierry Baudet, a populist prodigy, blows up the party he created", in *The Economist*, December 3, 2020.

ters. We know that with art there is always the mystery posed by the fact that, as George Steiner puts it, “the humanities do not humanize”¹⁵, and echo perhaps of Adorno’s sentence asserting that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”¹⁶. A heterosexual or even an asexual Chopin is very convenient to conservative political movements. To dissociate Chopin from his possible queerness is also dangerous. Steiner famously warned that “Gieseeking’s lustrous cycle of Debussy’s piano music took place within hearing of the trains bound for Dachau (...). One can play and sing Schubert in the evening and torture in the morning”¹⁷. And one can play an aseptic, formalist Chopin on TV and espouse extreme-right policies.

The idea of this collection, just to finish, emerged right after the gigantic repercussion of Weber’s radio programs. Energized by that response, both positive and negative, which in my view showed how unavoidably political Chopin’s music is, I approached about two dozen Chopin scholars and well as a few queer studies scholars and I requested a possible contribution. A few writers declined my invitation due to lack of time (the deadline *Itamar* gave us was indeed very tight, but at the same time I believed it was very important to continue the conversation that Weber’s radio programs had generated immediately, without delay). Thus, I approached quite a few Polish writers, but no one ever responded, perhaps because of lack of interest or perhaps, I feared, out of fear. I hope this collection will make a contribution, albeit small, to dispel some of the anxieties—political or aesthetic—that Chopin’s sexual orientation apparently have been generating for almost two centuries. Chopin’s love affairs seem to be a “pink cake”. As a Warhol exegete affirms: “Why the term “love is a pink cake? Perhaps, because in Warhol’s eyes love is luscious, attractive, tasty, and a wonderful surprise”¹⁸. Chopin’s love affairs are also a wonderful surprise that needs to be discussed.

The articles following this introductory remarks or **Overture** are organized as follows. First, we present **Act I**, the longest, “Chopins Männer”, that expands considerably Weber’s research presented in his 2020 radio programs. The focus of his essay is a thorough examination of Chopin’s letters, some of its translations, and

¹⁵ STEINER, George: “The Muses’ Farewell”, in *Salmagundi*, 135/36, 2002, p. 151.

¹⁶ W. ADORNO, Theodor: *Prismen. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10a, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, p. 30. The full excerpt, which is often misquoted, reads: “Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben”.

¹⁷ STEINER, p. 150.

¹⁸ LENIG, Stuart: *The Many Lives of Andy Warhol*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2021, p. 53.

more specifically the mistranslations, with special emphasis on the use of the masculine and feminine pronouns in the translations; and the inconsistencies in references such as footnotes, as well as the fact that some documents that could help elucidate Chopin's sexual orientation, such as letters to or from male friends, have been destroyed or disappeared.

This essay is followed by an **Entr'acte** focusing on the Polish film *Pragnienie Miłości*. Joan Estrany, a music critic who, having lived in Poland, is familiar with the country's language and culture, highlights the fact that the film focuses on Chopin's relationship with Sand's children, one with Maurice, full of tension and perhaps artistic rivalry, and another with Solange of clear heterosexual attraction. Estrany, a "formalist" at heart, asserts that Chopin's sexuality should not be an issue in the appreciation of his art. However, some will interpret this film and Estrany's evaluation of it as another instance of Chopin's heterosexualization since there is no real evidence of Chopin's attraction to Solange.

Taking as a starting point Jeffrey Kallberg's pioneer work, F. Javier Albo, in **Act II**, explores the feminine universe of Chopin's music¹⁹. His works have been described often in terms that allude to their femininity or even effeminacy. Beyond that, it is women through the teaching of the piano, the salons and drawing rooms, and their realm of taste-making and influences the main transmitters of Chopin's aesthetics. Beyond the composer's sexual orientation, there is no doubt that Chopin has been perceived as a feminine composer. His dedication to small forms and genres, his oeuvre mostly dedicated to the piano, an instrument played by women, mostly, and his whimsical, non-sonata, non-Germanic forms make him the center of women's universe.

This collection of essays presents some editorial challenges. To begin with, the essays are written in English, Spanish, and German. All essays have abstracts in English and Spanish, the main languages of *Itamar*. For the German text, we have respected the standard academic writing style. Polish names occasionally have different spellings and we have respected as much as possible the authors' decisions.

¹⁹ KALLBERG, Jeffrey: *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998.