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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between Frederic Chopin and George Sand. It focuses on the idea that there are many contradictory accounts of this affair, and that the real truth may not be known.

Frédéric Chopin and George Sand Romanticized

Anna Deters

The relationship between Frédéric Chopin and George Sand, has been a subject of controversy, speculation, and romanticization since the two first met on October 24, 1836, in the candle-lit salon of Franz Liszt's mistress Marie d'Agoult.¹ Theirs was perhaps the first popular celebrity romance, the truth about which may never be known. Ruth Jordan, an expert on the subject, writes, "Over the years legend and truth have become so intricately woven into the history of George Sand's liaison with Chopin . . ."² In this essay I attempt to reveal the ways the Chopin/Sand liaison has been presented throughout the past as well as expose the influence of "legend" in its history.

Frédéric Chopin and George Sand were both famous in their day, and both epitomized the Romantic era in Europe. They shared an intense relationship that lasted almost a decade, but it is important to remember that this period is only a chapter in the respective lives of each. Both could be (and sometimes are) remembered without the other. Because both possessed an independent genius, their lives and personalities are equally and separately remarkable.

Chopin, born near Warsaw, Poland on February 22, 1810, ranks amongst the most revered teachers, pianists, and composers, of Western music. An expatriate who lived in France from 1831 until his death in 1849, Chopin was a prominent figure in the vibrant intellectual universe of Paris's salons. He was a romantic image in his day, a dapper, fastidious young man deeply devoted to the Roman Catholic Church, aristocratic conservatism, Poland, and the perfection of his art.

Unfortunately, huge gaps exist in Chopin's correspondence with family and friends, which inevitably makes it easy for biographers reconstructing his life to "stray . . . into the world of fiction."³ While certain information has been lost through the sieve of time, we do know that tuberculosis haunted his existence, influenced his personality and behavior, and ultimately caused his early death. His constant frailty shaped the way he felt about himself, the way he was treated by George Sand, and the way in which the future would perceive him and his music.

George Sand was very much the opposite of Frédéric Chopin. Born in Paris to quasi-aristocratic parents on July 1, 1804, she was originally baptized "Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin" but legally changed her name to "George Sand" at the dawn of her famous literary career. She even began dressing in men's clothes. A socialist, feminist, reviler of religiosity, and devotee of progress, Sand was throughout Europe a symbol of Romanticism and political liberty.

Born six years before Chopin and alive for twenty-seven after his death, she experienced life to its brim. She married, raised two children, divorced her husband, took on a series of lovers, composed thousands of pages of writing, and maintained her career and renown until her death in 1876.

This couple, so oddly paired, met, lived, and parted in a way that has since been subject to great controversy. To begin at the beginning of this intriguing story, I will address the highly romanticized first acquaintance of Frédéric Chopin and George Sand.

Biographers seem to agree that Chopin was intimidated and even repulsed by Sand at first but that she was instantly attracted to him. Sand describes herself as being “confused and dismayed by the effect of this being” on her, claiming that she is usually “so difficult to inflame.”⁴ Her letters consistently express her admiration of the pianist, and all sources agree that it was she who asked Franz Liszt to arrange their meeting. Liszt, in his flamboyantly Romantic, unreliable, 1852 biography of Chopin admits, “Chopin seemed to dread Madame Sand more than any other woman He avoided and put off all introduction to her.”⁵ We do not have this in Chopin’s own words, but Henri Bidou writes a similar account in his 1927 biography of Chopin. According to Bidou, a friend wrote to Liszt that Chopin had said, “How repellent that woman Sand is! Is she really a woman?”⁶ The value of this “evidence” depends on the historian’s faith in a game of “telephone.” Bidou also undercuts Liszt’s account when he claims the composer’s “brilliant description” of the meeting makes it “difficult to distinguish memory from invention.”⁷

Once Sand and Chopin had met, the budding relationship was given a life of its own in the hearts and imaginations of anyone interested. The love affair was made to feature a pursuer and the pursued, so it seems, and biographers—particularly male biographers—had a field day creating what I call the “Sand Seduction Theory.” Chopin, we believe, had little initial interest in getting to know Sand. “Nevertheless she succeeded,” writes Derek Melville in his 1977 biography, “in attracting Chopin, and, very probably, in seducing him.”⁸ To seduce him, Sand naturally would have engaged in “complex female strategy,” as Basil Maine suggests in his early 20th-century biography of Chopin.⁹ Why would this woman, this “mistress of all the tricks and tactics,” choose to pursue Frédéric Chopin?¹⁰ Because, as William Murdoch explains, “Chopin was exactly the type for which her soul was yearning—the ready-made prey for this odd mixture of vulture and vampire.”¹¹

Conservative, male biographers will protect their Chopin from shame. That woman, that seductress, intentionally wrapped their idol around her finger, enjoyed him for a while, and tossed him aside. Is this their way of absolving Chopin from being in love with a strong woman, a “masculine” character, a feminist? Maine claims that Sand “had completely overpowered” Chopin. He at least admits, “Of the tactics she employed in the contest we have no record.”¹²

There is no record of her "tactics," perhaps because Sand herself writes, "I have no wish to abandon myself to a passion although there is still a furnace smouldering in my heart."¹³ Here, Sand speaks of her own self-restraint. In a letter to their mutual friend the Comte Albert Gryzmala dated May of 1838, she implores him to find out for her whether or not Chopin is still "reserved for another altar" (referring to a previous Polish love interest) and, if so, she would have no expectations of him.¹⁴ Surely a woman would not struggle to suppress her own desires if she was "employing tactics" to ensnare the loved one. About this letter, Melville has the audacity to suggest that Sand only "imagined she was expressing her true feelings."¹⁵

While the male biographers of Chopin paint Sand as a seductress, female commentators of the relationship interpret things differently. "George Sand, in spite of the figure she cut in the popular imagination of her own day, and has cut ever since," writes Elizabeth Drew, "had nothing whatever of the courtesan in her nature."¹⁶ Still, probably because of the dominance and prevalence of biographies written by men, Sand is viewed as the temptress, the Eve who led Adam to his downfall.

The anti-Sand writings continue beyond the seduction theory. The "experts'" use of language strongly indicates their unfavorable bias against Sand. Murdoch even refers to her as "sinister" for daring to suggest that Chopin's works may some day be orchestrated.¹⁷ Melville writes that Sand "was responsible for making [Chopin] appear almost feeble-minded, as she always stressed and made much of any kind of weakness in him." He goes on to blame her for producing "a distorted picture of the man, and this distortion affected the judgement of his music by Victorian writers."¹⁸ Here, a biographer who never knew Chopin personally is severely criticizing the false impression given by Sand, who probably knew Chopin better than anyone else. "George Sand," he continues, "apart from being a novelist, was an expert at putting herself in a good light at the expense of others. Chopin did not escape."¹⁹ This is interesting because it is the case of a biographer totally discrediting a primary source and blaming it for "distorting" the truth about the man. Sand may have had personal motives to make Chopin look weaker than he was, but maybe Melville had motives to make Chopin seem stronger than he was. Whom can we trust?

Chopin's biographers are not alone in having a bias. They write in favor of Chopin because he is their hero; they admire him and dislike the idea that he may have been completely dominated by a woman. Sand's biographers—usually women—have larger political ideas in mind. Marie Jenney Howe, who published her biography of Sand in 1927, wrote during the height of the women's movement and the birth of the "new woman." The "about the author" section tells of Howe's involvement in "many phases of the woman movement" and "campaigns for woman suffrage." With this personal and political background,

she hails George Sand as “a herald of the new womanhood,” “a modern woman born one hundred years too soon.”²⁰ She criticizes Chopin just as his biographers attack Sand. “[T]here was something antipathetic to Chopin in a woman who wrote books, wore plain clothes, and was active in politics,” she writes. “His feminine ideal was a clinging and submissive woman.”²¹ Howe is, in effect, using Sand as a model for her own political agenda. Sand may have been born before her time, but Howe is resurrecting her and writing the history for her own purposes.

Just as I am doing, Melville too assesses the merit of Sand and Chopin’s biographers. He claims that Murdoch’s *Chopin* “is by far the best of all the Chopin biographies in English.”²² As already noted, Murdoch’s work is largely tinged with anti-Sand sentiment. Of Bidou’s biography of Chopin, Melville writes, “A great deal of space is devoted to paraphrasing George Sand’s writings, which, though interesting, are undeniably biased,” discrediting information favorable to Sand while hailing his own unfavorable insight.²³

“It is perhaps difficult to be fair in our estimation of George Sand,” writes Murdoch. At least he is aware. “Our sympathies are all for Chopin,” he continues, “not only because he was the weaker of the two, nor because he was more divinely endowed, but because he was the sufferer.”²⁴ George Sand comments on this statement decades before it is written. “His own particular circle will, I know, take a very different view,” she says. “He will be looked upon as a victim, and the general opinion will find it pleasanter to believe that I, in spite of my age, have got rid of him in order to take another lover . . .”²⁵ That Frédéric suffered more than George is possible. Tuberculosis was slowly killing him throughout his life, and it may or may not have been coincidental that he succumbed to death shortly after the break with Sand. “Time is a great physician,” he writes to a friend after he and Sand part; “I have not managed to get over it yet.”²⁶ Sand, instead of dying, “got over it” and went on to live a long and consistently productive, reasonably happy life. Maybe resentment is the burden her name will have to bear since she continued to live and Chopin had to die.

I am female, and maybe I am inclined to take Sand’s side because of this. Also, Sand’s life, writing, and liberality appeal to me. I admire Chopin’s music, but his personality seems so peevish and flat. (Then again, the fecundity of Sand’s pen allows a longer, wider view inside of her than Chopin’s limited and lost letters do of him.)

I feel that the attacks against George Sand are largely misogynistic; however, I cannot turn a blind eye on truthful-sounding things, negative though they might be. Melville says, “To say that she was a mass of contradictions and a most brilliant self-deceiver would be a masterpiece of understatement.”²⁷ I cannot deny that I have noticed this in her writings, as well. Near the very end of their relationship, Sand writes that she would rather hear that Chopin is

“much fonder” of her daughter and was taking her side in the crisis that was to split the pair than “hear that he is ill.”²⁸ “I am indifferent to everything so long as his health improves,” she says, implying that she is beyond selfish love.²⁹ Later, after she receives some news, she writes, “I see that as usual I have been the dupe of my stupid heart and that while I was living through six sleepless nights tormenting myself about his health he was employed in saying and thinking evil of me with the Clesingers.” She continues to commend Chopin sarcastically, saying “it is *magnificent*” of him to treat her this way.³⁰ Understandably, she is hurt and upset, but the contradiction still stands. If only those letters had been burnt like so many of the others!

Yet, there is another contradiction Sand could hardly have expected to get away with. In her autobiography she writes about her last encounter with Chopin. “I saw him again briefly in March 1848. I clasped his trembling, icy hand. I wanted to talk to him; he vanished. It was my turn to say he no longer loved me.”³¹ Easy as it is to be persuaded by Sand, Chopin had his own account of this incident. In a letter dated 5 March, Sunday 1848 to Solange, he writes “Yesterday . . . I met your Mother in the doorway of the vestibule. . . .”³² He goes on to relate a conversation that took place between them. According to Chopin, he inquired whether or not Sand had heard any news of her daughter, told her of the birth of her granddaughter, and then “bowed and went downstairs.”³³ He then decided to have a few more words with her, and, since he could not manage the stairs, sent a servant to fetch her. Their conversation ensued. “She asked me how I am; I replied that I am well, and asked the concierge to open the door.”³⁴ It is doubtful that Chopin would fabricate the whole second half of their meeting; and, while Sand was not outright lying about the incident, she did shape her account of it in a sly way. By making Chopin sound cold and distant, Sand may have for once been able to play the role of the victim.

The Sand/Chopin history abounds with contradiction. Liszt’s biography of Chopin is easily the best example of this. His *Vie de Chopin* is probably sheer romanticism at its best. The showy composer exposes his extravagant retelling of their relationship when he claims that Sand and Chopin’s legendary trip to Majorca was pleasant, enjoyable, and even good for Chopin’s health.³⁵ He claims that “The memory of the days passed in the lovely isle of Majorca, like the remembrance of an entrancing ecstasy, which fate grants but once in life even to the most favoured of her children, remained always dear to the heart of Chopin.”³⁶ The stay in Majorca was anything but the “felicity” described by Liszt. The island provided them with dreary weather, damp, archaic lodgings, and unfriendly locals. The “disastrous stay in Majorca” actually caused Chopin’s health to drastically worsen.³⁷

Liszt goes on to describe and romanticize the end of the relationship. “Chopin spoke frequently and almost by preference of Madame Sand, without

bitterness or recrimination. Tears always filled his eyes when he named her."³⁸ Again Liszt is sugar-coating the truth. Chopin, discovering that Sand was appealing to their mutual friends for news of his health, sarcastically, and most likely bitterly, exclaims, "Mme S., I know, wrote. . .to inquire *anxiously* about me!!! What a part she must be playing there; the just *mother*."³⁹ After the break he also only refers to Sand as "the Mother" versus the "my Lady" of earlier days.

Liszt also loves to glorify Sand's maternal role. He writes, "While engaged in nursing him, she felt no fatigue, no weariness, no discouragement. . . Like the mothers in robust health . . . she nursed the precious charge into new life."⁴⁰ Almost hilariously contradicting Liszt's assessment of Sand's nursing of Chopin in Majorca, the woman herself writes: "It was quite enough for me to handle, going alone to a foreign country with two children . . . without taking on an additional emotional burden and a medical responsibility." She refers to Chopin as a "detestable patient."⁴¹

Possibly the most fascinating debate concerning Sand and Chopin is the issue of Sand's 1846 novel *Lucrezia Floriani*, which "has been cited, at the time and subsequently, as the ultimate cause of the rupture between the lovers."⁴² The novel portrays Prince Karol (Lucrezia's love interest), which many believed to be modeled after Chopin. Prince Karol is depicted as a whiny invalid patiently nursed by the ever-loving loving Lucrezia.⁴³ Most biographers agree that Prince Karol is indeed an unflattering representation of Frédéric. "Undoubtedly she intended the novel merely as a warning to Chopin," one historian claims.⁴⁴ Sand herself denies the allegation. She writes that claiming Prince Karol to be Chopin is "too convenient and not reliable," and that "Liszt himself was unwittingly led astray in his *Vie de Chopin*" when he extensively quoted her novel as historical evidence. "Chopin, who read the manuscript on my desk daily," she writes, "had not the least inclination to see himself in it, suspicious as he was."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Chopin's friends later convinced him of their accuracy, and, while it was not the main cause of their estrangement, Chopin in his final days wrote, "I think I would feel easier if I could only bring myself to curse Lucrezia."⁴⁶

The controversy of the Sand/Chopin liaison will probably never go away. The camps will always be divided, just as they have been since their personal friends visited the pair at Nohant, Sand's chateau, and watched them in Parisian salons. Grzymala wrote that if Chopin "had not had the ill luck to know George Sand, who poisoned his whole life, he might have lived to be as old as Cherubini," who lived to be eighty-two.⁴⁷ Melville, of course, relished this comment. Another biographer mentions that another mutual friend commented that Chopin was Sand's "evil genius, her moral vampire . . . who torments her and may well end by killing her."⁴⁸ The irony of these statements is as beautiful as it is disenchanting. We can have our opinions, just as their friends did, but

no one, probably not even George and Frédéric, ever knew or ever will know the absolute truth.

Essentially, there is no truth, especially in an area so subject to the emotional complexities of personal relationships. History can be written, but it really is only a collection of stories compiled and molded by other personalities. Just as "One of the characteristics of writers of the Romantic Age . . . was to use their most personal experiences—and those of their friends—as material for novels," historians emplot facts for the basis for their narratives.⁴⁹

Endnotes

¹ Tad Szulc, *Chopin in Paris: The Life and Times of the Romantic Composer* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 145.

² Ruth Jordan, *George Sand: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1976), 191.

³ Derek Melville, *Chopin* (London: Clive Bingley LTD., 1977), 8.

⁴ Veronica Lucas, ed., *Letters of George Sand*, with an introduction by Elizabeth Drew (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD., 1930), 92.

⁵ Franz Liszt, *Life of Chopin*, trans. Martha Walker Cook, 4th ed. (New York: Oliver Ditson Company, n. d.), 169.

⁶ Henri Bidou, *Chopin*, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1927), 153.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸ Melville, 34-5.

⁹ Basil Maine, *Chopin* (New York: A. A. Wyn, Inc., n. d.), 63.

¹⁰ William Murdoch, *Chopin: His Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), 223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹² Maine, 65.

¹³ Lucas, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Melville, 34.

¹⁶ Lucas, 12.

¹⁷ Murdoch, 226.

¹⁸ Melville, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ Marie Jenney Howe, *George Sand: The Search for Love* (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1927), xiv, xiii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

²² Melville, 68.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Murdoch, 225.

²⁵ André Maurois, *Lélia: The Life of George Sand*, translated by Gerard Hopkins (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 317.

²⁶ Henry Opienski, *Chopin's Letters*, trans. E. L. Voynich (Desmond Harmsworth, 1932), 342.

- ²⁷ Melville, 35.
- ²⁸ A complicated family situation involving Sand's children, Solange Clesinger and Maurice Sand, was the crisis that finally tore Chopin and Sand apart.
- ²⁹ Lucas, 146.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ³¹ George Sand, *Story of My Life*, ed. Thelma Jurgrau (Albany: State University New York Press, 1991), 1110.
- ³² Opienski, 346.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Liszt, 170.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ³⁷ Charles Timbrell, "On the Trail of Liszt, Chopin, and Sand: 1834-47," *The Piano Quarterly* 135 (Fall 1986) : 54.
- ³⁸ Liszt, 181.
- ³⁹ Opienski, 360.
- ⁴⁰ Liszt, 173.
- ⁴¹ Sand, 1090-91.
- ⁴² Szulc, 327.
- ⁴³ Bidou, 232-33.
- ⁴⁴ William G. Atwood, *The Lioness and the Little One: The Liaison of George Sand and Frédéric Chopin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 208.
- ⁴⁵ Sand, 1107.
- ⁴⁶ Atwood, 270.
- ⁴⁷ Melville, 37.
- ⁴⁸ Atwood, 176.
- ⁴⁹ Szulc, 168.

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