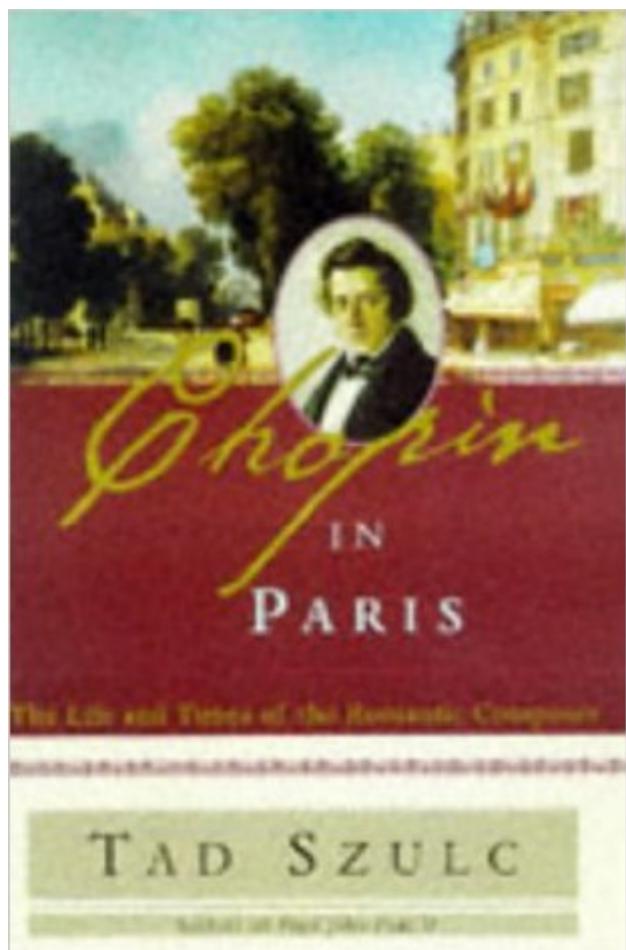


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Chopin In Paris: The Life And Times Of The Romantic Composer



Synopsis

Chopin in Paris introduces the most important musical and literary figures of Fryderyk Chopin's day in a glittering story of the Romantic era. During Chopin's eighteen years in Paris, lasting nearly half his short life, he shone at the center of the immensely talented artists who were defining their time -- Hugo, Balzac, Stendhal, Delacroix, Liszt, Berlioz, and, of course, George Sand, a rebel feminist writer who became Chopin's lover and protector. Tad Szulc, the author of *Fidel* and *Pope John Paul II*, approaches his subject with imagination and insight, drawing extensively on diaries, memoirs, correspondence, and the composer's own journal, portions of which appear here for the first time in English. He uses contemporary sources to chronicle Chopin's meteoric rise in his native Poland, an ascent that had brought him to play before the reigning Russian grand duke at the age of eight. He left his homeland when he was eighteen, just before Warsaw's patriotic uprising was crushed by the tsar's armies. Carrying the memories of Poland and its folk music that would later surface in his polonaises and mazurkas, Chopin traveled to Vienna. There he established his reputation in the most demanding city of Europe. But Chopin soon left for Paris, where his extraordinary creative powers would come to fruition amid the revolutions roiling much of Europe. He quickly gained fame and a circle of powerful friends and acquaintances ranging from Rothschild, the banker, to Karl Marx. Distinguished by his fastidious dress and the wracking cough that would cut short his life, Chopin spent his days composing and giving piano lessons to a select group of students. His evenings were spent at the keyboard, playing for his friends. It was at one of these Chopin gatherings that he met George Sand, nine years his senior. Through their long and often stormy relationship, Chopin enjoyed his richest creative period. As she wrote dozens of novels, he composed furiously -- both were compulsive creators. After their affair unraveled, Chopin became the protagonist of Jane Stirling, a wealthy Scotswoman, who paraded him in his final year across England and Scotland to play for the aristocracy and even Queen Victoria. In 1849, at the age of thirty-nine, Chopin succumbed to the tuberculosis that had plagued him from childhood. Chopin in Paris is an illuminating biography of a tragic figure who was one of the most important composers of all time. Szulc brings to life the complex, contradictory genius whose works will live forever. It is compelling reading about an exciting epoch of European history, culture, and music -- and about one of the great love dramas of the nineteenth century.

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Customer Reviews

I'm just reaching the middle of Chopin in Paris right now, and I already have a list of complaints that have become irritating. The book follows Chopin's life from childhood to his death, focusing primarily on the period of his self-selected Parisian exile. Other reviewers have noted the special place this moment holds in European cultural history and, if this is of interest to readers, they should peruse The Parisian Worlds of Frederic Chopin by William Atwood. That work is an exhaustive socio-politico-cultural history of the period, interesting and colorfully written. While it only touches on Chopin peripherally, it explains the why's and how's of Paris as certainly the musical and probably the cultural center of Europe at that time. Mr. Szulc's book does have its strong points. A recently written, authoritative account of Chopin's life is certainly overdue, and Szulc attempts this. He depends largely on textual sources, obviously, and much of what he says appears at first glance to be documented. For example, Szulc does treat George Sand very evenhandedly, letting the evidence speak for itself. Many, many writers have painted Sand as a depraved, blood-sucking harpy who robbed Chopin of his life, and Szulc resists the temptation. He relies heavily on the Andre Maurois biography of Sand and the correspondence in hand, and this presents a more fair and balanced picture of their relationship. On the plus side, Szulc manages to make it sound very dishy, heightening the interest. Many things detract from the effort, however, firstly his use of purple ink.

To concentrate on Chopin's time in Paris, and to try and trace his connections and acquaintances in that extraordinarily fertile artistic stamping ground, is a very good idea and focus for a biography of Chopin's short life. It is a fascinating milieu and it says a great deal for the facts uncovered here that the story can survive a verbose and gushing written style, and some factual carelessness. One is

confronted time and time again by statements such as these: 'The year 1834 was a good one for Chopin whose life, like the chord spread of an arpeggio, went alternatively from the bottom upwards or from the top downwards'. Or the final sentence in the whole book, a summing-up: 'Frederick Chopin gave the world a treasure in music. The world gave Chopin a treasure in human beings'. This is typical of the windy flow that so impedes the sense in this book. Don't editors read this stuff before it gets into print? Factually, the book falls down particularly badly when dealing with matters musical; for example we are told: 'Hector Berlioz made Romanticism's breakthrough in 1825 when he conducted a performance of his requiem at Saint-Roch Church. No performance of such magnitude and venturesome boldness had ever been presented before'. A muddle here - Berlioz's Requiem was written in 1837 and first performed at 'Les Invalides', and yes, did poleaxe the musical world. There was a Berlioz performance at St. Roch Church in 1825 - that was the Mass, an immature and not particularly large scale work (recently rediscovered and performed by John Eliot Gardiner) which Berlioz himself discarded after one performance, and which had no widespread impact. Also, the idea that Romanticism suddenly took everyone by surprise is fatuous.

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