Frédéric Chopin was born near Warsaw, Poland in 1810. He had one older sister and two younger sisters. His father, Nicolas Chopin, was a teacher who had moved to Poland from France as a teenager. Nicolas taught his children to read and write in Polish and French. Nicolas played the flute and violin, and Frédéric’s mother played piano. Frédéric began formal piano lessons with a professional teacher when he was 6 years old. It soon became clear that Frédéric was very talented.

At age 7, Frédéric wrote his first published piece, Polonaise in G Minor. He gave a public recital at age 8 and soon was invited to play in the homes of wealthy families in Warsaw.

He worked hard to become a good musician and studied theory and composition in addition to piano lessons. At age 16 he began studying music at the Warsaw Conservatory, and by the time he graduated he had written many beautiful piano compositions. During this time, Chopin travelled from Poland several times to perform concerts in other countries, where he met and heard the music of many interesting composers and pianists.

Who: Frédéric Chopin
What: Composer and Virtuoso Pianist
Where: He was born in Poland but later moved to France.
When: Born: March 1, 1810
Died: October 17, 1849

Chopin’s Childhood in Poland

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When was he born?
There is some confusion about what day Chopin was born – February 22 or March 1. The records from the church where he was baptized say February 22, but Chopin and his family said it was March 1. Today the March 1 date is accepted.

Where was he born?
Chopin was born in a house that was part of a large estate near Warsaw. Although most of the estate burned in a fire in the 1800s, this house survived. Today it is a Chopin museum, and every summer there are recitals of Chopin’s music.
Chopin Moves to France

When Chopin was 21, the Russian army invaded Warsaw. Chopin was traveling in another country at the time and decided it too dangerous for him to go back home. He went to Paris, France (His father was French, so it was a natural choice.). Chopin stayed there for the rest of his life. He missed his home and family very much and dreamt of seeing his country again, but he never returned to Poland. Although he was part French by birth and eventually received French citizenship, Chopin always considered himself Polish rather than French.

He poured his feelings into his compositions and often included some of the sounds and styles of Polish music in his pieces, especially the Mazurkas and Polonaises, which are pieces based on Polish dances.

Living in Paris, which was the cultural center of the world at the time, Chopin met many famous writers, artists, and composers such as Liszt, Mendelssohn, and Berlioz. The talented people of Paris quickly accepted Chopin. Even the important music critic Robert Schumann once said “Hats off, the gentleman is a genius.”

Chopin was in poor health throughout his life and wrote less music in his final years. He died at only age 39 in 1849, possibly of a lung disease called tuberculosis.

Chopin’s Music

Chopin was an unusual composer in many ways. For one thing, instead of writing music for orchestras, chamber groups, or singers, almost everything he composed was for piano. He invented ways of playing the piano that made it sound like it never had before.

Chopin gave instructions in his music so performers could make special blended sounds with the pedals. Listening to his music, people often say that it sounds like colors or like water because of these delicate, effects. He also broke away from the formal, Classical music traditions that were popular at the time, and his compositions were usually technically difficult and full of chromatic passages. They are often played with rubato to add to their emotional appeal. He attended operas in Paris and tried to capture the qualities of the human voice in his music.

Although musical ideas came easily to Chopin as he improvised at the piano, he spent weeks perfecting every detail. After he sent completed pieces to the publisher, Chopin sometimes frantically made last-minute changes. This is the reason why there are several versions of some of his pieces.

Unlike other Romantic composers, Chopin did not give his works descriptive titles. His pieces are just called etude or polonaise.

Chopin did not enjoy large performances and only gave about 30 public concerts in his career. He preferred the quiet atmosphere of small salons in private homes, where he played alone or with a few other musicians. His soft playing was perfect for small rooms, but Chopin sometimes wished he had more strength. He envied strong pianists like Liszt, who could get much more sound out of the instrument.

Compositions

Chopin composed over 230 works. Almost everything he wrote was for piano, although he did write some songs with Polish lyrics and a few chamber works. He composed two piano concertos and is considered one of the finest composers of piano music of all time. Some of his pieces include:

- ballades
- scherzos
- piano sonatas
- preludes
- etudes
- impromptus
- mazurkas
- nocturnes
- polonaises
- waltzes
Polonaise in G minor

Chopin’s first piece, Polonaise in G minor, was published when he was 7 years old. It is 38 measures long. He wrote another piece, Polonaise in B-flat major, that same year. (A Polonaise is a Polish folk dance. Chopin wrote over 20 of them.) The music below shows the beginning of this Polonaise.

What was Chopin like?

Chopin (shown in the picture above at age 19) was often sick as a child, but when he was well, he was a very good student and spent a great deal of time at the piano. As an adult, he earned a good living even though he did not tour as a concert pianist.

He spent his money on elegant clothes and fine living. He liked comfort and kept a carriage to travel around Paris. He was very emotional and often expressed his feelings with his music.

His poor health continued throughout his life, and he died young at the age of 39. He was small and skinny – only 100 pounds and 5’8” tall – possibly because of his illness – and often worried about his appearance.

His ill health may also be the reason that he was sometimes fussy or negative although he was said to have a good sense of humor.

If he was sometimes difficult to the people around him, he was also a musical genius who created wonderful music for pianists that is still enjoyed today.
Look for these words from this month’s articles in the grid above. They can be up and down, backwards and forwards, or diagonal!

Chopin  key  note  Polonaise
Classical  Liszt  Paris  Romantic
concerto  major  piano  scale
dynamics  Mazurka  phrase  sonata
France  minor  Poland  Warsaw
There are many things that will help you to play beautifully. Try some of the ideas on these pages to improve how you sound!

The Importance of Good Fingering

Your teacher has probably asked you to pay attention to fingerings in your music. You might have wondered why this is so important. Choosing good fingerings makes music easier to play, especially with more difficult passages. Your teacher can help you find the most comfortable way of playing a piece. A good fingering will help make phrases sound smooth and easy. Chopin was a strong believer in good fingering.

Musicality

Has your teacher ever asked you to play more musically? This can be a difficult concept to describe but it is at the heart of playing music expressively. Musicality is how a performer puts feeling into the performance so that the music does not just sound like a bunch of notes put together without any meaning.

Here are some ideas to help you play musically – although they depend on the music:

- Use dynamics and watch tempo markings
- Begin and end phrases softly and gently
- Group notes together in a logical way – notice which notes seem to go together, which should be more accented or louder than the others in the group.
- Express emotions and tell a story with the music.

Try playing this passage with different fingerings. Which one is easier to play? Does it sound better?

Your teacher is the best source of ideas for how to play your pieces musically. Notice how your teacher plays the work. You should also listen to recordings of other musicians and begin to develop your own ideas about how the music should sound.

Many composers, including Mozart and Chopin, said that music students should listen to the human voice and try to copy it in their playing. Most people become naturally expressive when they speak or sing (or else they sound like computer voices).

Notice how people’s voices change as they speak. Where do they become louder or softer? Do they speed up or slow down? What else can you hear? Use your observations when you play the piano.
Chopin taught many students during his years in Paris. He emphasized beautiful, expressive playing and advised them to only practice a couple of hours a day—not six or eight as some musicians suggested. Instead he wanted them also to spend time looking at art or taking walks. He thought that too much time at the piano took away from their focus and concentration and led to dull, mechanical playing.

He encouraged his students to play easily with a flexible wrist, and he constantly tried to find new and better ways to play the piano. He thought fingering was very important and often experimented with new fingerings. Chopin looked for fingerings that fit the shape of the hand and the music best.

This may seem obvious, but in Chopin’s time, there were accepted fingerings that everyone was supposed to use. In addition, the piano was still a newer instrument and musicians like Chopin helped develop new ways of playing it.

For example, Chopin often used the thumb on the black keys and passed it under the little finger. These were new ideas for pianists. Another revolutionary idea that he used was to play two consecutive keys with the same finger while still keeping a legato sound.

"Fingering is the basis of good playing."

– Frederic Chopin

The Importance of Listening

Learn to focus intently on your sound as you play. Notice all of the details. You cannot come up with a better sound if you do not pay attention to how you sound now.

Listen to other pianists. How does your teacher play? What do professional pianists sound like?

Listen to other musicians of all types. There are so many great musical works. Try music by other solo instruments, orchestras, bands, etc. The more you listen, the more musical ideas you will have.

Musicians today are very fortunate because there is so much music that is easily available.
Rooster Blues

This piece was written by Jack Oakman, age 13 who lives in South Carolina and studies piano with Dan McCurry. It received Honorable Mention, Older Division in the 2021 Composition Contest.
“This piece was inspired by a rooster call. When I think of a farm, I immediately think of roosters and their iconic sound. I decided to incorporate this into my piece as the melodic inspiration for my song. I also enjoy blues pieces so I decided to create a blues piece centered around the rooster call.”
Instrument Families

There are many different types of instruments from the tiny piccolo to the large string bass. Musicians group instruments that create sound in similar ways together. In addition to the standard orchestra and band instruments below, there are many other instruments that are played around the world.

**String Family**
- Violin
- Viola
- Cello
- String Bass
- Guitar
- Harp

These instruments are usually made of wood and have strings that are plucked or strummed or played with a bow to make sound. They are played in orchestras, ensembles, and as solo instruments.

**Woodwind Family**
- Piccolo
- Flute
- Clarinet
- Saxophone
- Oboe
- Bassoon

These instruments are made of wood or metal. Players blow through the instrument and press keys or cover holes to change notes. They are played in orchestras, bands, ensembles, and as solo instruments.

**Brass Family**
- Trumpet
- Trombone
- Horn
- Tuba

These instruments are usually made of metal and players blow through a mouthpiece to make sound. They are played in orchestras, bands, ensembles, and as solo instruments.

**Percussion Family**
- Various Drums
- Xylophone
- Triangle
- Cymbals
- and many more!

This is the largest group of instruments and includes anything that can be hit, shaken, or scraped. They are generally found in the back of a band or orchestra. Some percussion instruments play specific pitches while others just make unpitched sounds. They often keep the rhythm of an ensemble going.

**Keyboard Family**
- Piano
- Harpsichord
- Clavichord
- Organ
- Celesta

These instruments all are played by pressing keys on a keyboard to change notes. They play solos and also accompany other instrumentalists and singers.
Play each one of the following intervals and decide if they are spooky-sounding for a Halloween composition. Then write a short piece using those intervals and chords. You can write just a melody for one hand, or try using these chords and intervals in both hands. (You can play these intervals on any notes - just make sure they have the same number of steps between them.)

**Half step or minor second**

The notes are 1 half step apart

**Tritone or augmented fourth**

The notes are 6 half steps apart or 3 whole steps

**Major seventh**

11 half steps apart or 5 whole steps plus 1 half step.

**Diminished chord**

This is 2 minor thirds (3 half steps) or a minor third and a diminished 5th.

**Augmented chord**

This is 2 major thirds (4 half steps) stacked up.

Some intervals and chords sound very pleasant; we call them consonant. Others may sound unpleasant, harsh or jarring; those are called dissonant. Dissonant intervals and chords that sound a bit spooky or scary are great to use when composing Halloween music.

Sometimes the tritone is also called a diminished fifth. It is spelled differently than augmented fourth, but you are pressing the same keys and the sound is the same. (F♯ and G♭ are the same key)

For the augmented 4th the notes are C to F sharp - 4 letter names. For the diminished 5th, the letter names go from C to G flat - or 5 letters apart - but piano keys are the same.
More Rests

Rests seem like the easy part of music – you just don’t play. However, they are harder than they look. Rests are just as important as the notes you play, but students often skip rests or don’t hold them long enough.

What is a rest?

Rests are moments of silence in music. To make sure no sound comes from the piano during a rest, you have to lift your fingers off the keys completely. Often pianists get so focused on the music that they forget to lift up from the previous note, and the sound continues. Try this exercise to make sure you are lifting your hands off the keys for rests.

Play all four measures and listen carefully to the sound of the notes.

You should hear a clear difference between the first two measures and the last two measures. When you are playing the half notes, each note lasts for two beats. You hold it all the way until the next note is played. In the measures with quarter notes, you should hear a note for one beat and silence for one beat, then a note for one beat and silence for a beat. If you do not hear the beat of silence then you are not lifting your hand off the key during the rest.

REST REMINDER

When you see a rest in your music, make sure you lift your hands off the keys. Otherwise, the previous note will keep making sound, and there will not be a rest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Beats</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Rests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>⏯️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>⏯️</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>⏯️</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/4</td>
<td></td>
<td>⏯️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why do rests matter?

Think about how you speak or tell a story. There are pauses at the end of ideas or before something exciting happens. If you just speak without stopping, it sounds boring and hard to understand. Rests in music do the same thing and make music more interesting.

Rests may not seem so important when you are playing by yourself. You may think it doesn’t matter if you cut them short or skip them, but you are cheating the audience (even if it is just you) out of all the details of the music. They are just as important as the notes you play. When you play a duet or accompany someone else, counting rests accurately is critical. If one person does not count the rests, you will soon not be playing together.

Play the example below that comes from Haydn’s “Surprise” Symphony. In this piece the orchestra plays quietly and then surprises the audience with a loud chord. Notice the rest right before the forte chord. What happens to the surprise if you don’t pause for the rest?

Restful Games!

Fill in the Blanks

The circled spots in each example are missing a single rest. Decide which rest is missing and write it in.

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

Draw a line from each note to the matching rest.
Jokes

Q: What was the skeleton’s favorite instrument?
A: The tromBONE.

Q: What is a mummy’s favorite music?
A: Wrap (rap)

Q: Why did the ghost go to the concert alone?
A: He had noBODY to go with.

Answers to September Puzzles

Word Scramble (page 7)
String, Pedal, Keyboard
Answer: PIANO

What is it? (page 10)
A Guitar

Word Search (page 11)
Quiz (page 15)
1. a 2. c 3. d 4. b 5. b 6. put something under them like a footstool 7. b 8. b 9 mf

Musical Term: Rubato

This means to speed up and slow down at times while playing to be more expressive. Chopin was well known for using rubato in his performances and compositions.
Quiz

1. Chopin was born in Paris, France.
   a. true
   b. false

2. Chopin was a very talented _____.
   a. pianist
   b. trombone player
   c. flutist
   d. violinist

3. ⅃ is the same length as which note?
   a. ♪
   b. ♫
   c. ♬
   d. none of the above

4. Chopin thought musicians should do nothing but practice all day.
   a. true
   b. false

5. The violin is a ____ instrument.
   a. string
   b. woodwind
   c. brass
   d. percussion

6. Chopin mostly wrote music for _____.
   a. piano
   b. concert band
   c. violin
   d. orchestra

7. A polonaise is based on a ____ folk dance.
   a. English
   b. French
   c. Polish

8. Chopin always considered himself French.
   a. true
   b. false

Happy Birthday

These musicians were born in October!

1 - Vladimir Horowitz (1903-1989)
   Russian/American pianist

9 - Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)
   French composer

10 - Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)
    Italian opera composer

11 - Evgeny Kissin (b. 1971)
    Russian/Israeli pianist

12 - Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
    English composer

13 - Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007)
    Italian singer

14 - Gary Graffman (b. 1928)
    American pianist

20 - Charles Ives (1874-1954)
    American composer

21 - Sir Georg Solti (1912-1997)
    Hungarian/British Conductor

22 - Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
    Hungarian composer and pianist

25 - Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825-1899)
    Austrian composer who wrote waltzes

26 - Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)
    Italian composer and harpsichord virtuoso, son of Alessandro Scarlatti

27 - Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840)
    Italian violin virtuoso and composer
It can be difficult to find the right activities for your child. An activity that can have a great impact on their lives. At MYC, we encourage your child to be more creative, inventive, imaginative and expressive through our keyboard-based music education program. We provide children with a unique set of skills that will carry throughout their lives. Whether it's improving your child's grades, enhancing coordination skills for your child's athletic activities, or to learn the rewarding skill of playing the piano; Music for Young Children® is the first key to getting your child there.

Find the right program for your child at www.myc.com/our-program.