

## Frédéric François Chopin

Maslow has learned that dead people don't necessarily spend a lot of time in cemeteries. They've got better things to do than return to their final stomping grounds just to make sure the flowers are fresh or, if they were Jewish, count the number of small stones left by old friends paying their respects. But when Maslow learns he might be able to commune with Balzac, Oscar Wilde, Molière, and Gertrude Stein, all in one place, along with all sorts of other famous creatives, he finds it hard to resist.

So, after yet another exhausting morning of drinking lattes, eating croissants, and staring at passersby, he gets on the #2 Metro at *Les Etoile* and takes it around the outskirts of the Right Bank to Père Lachaise, the largest cemetery in Paris—an architectural free-for-all of sepulchered memories, where the famous rub skeletal shoulders with the infamous and long forgotten.

He begins by paying his respects to Jim Morrison, whose grave is strewn with fading plastic flowers, cigarette butts, and votive candles. When he closes his eyes for a moment of silence, he, indeed, begins to hear music. But not the *bossa nova* bass line of “Break on Through to the Other Side,” which would seem most appropriate for the occasion. Rather he hears four deep, precise, and legendary funereal notes. From a few *chemins* away.

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A goddess muse rests sadly atop the marble monument, head hanging down in grief, holding a broken lyre. There's a bas-relief profile on the face of the pedestal. Flowering potted plants, roses, and wreaths—so vibrant, you'd think the funeral was yesterday—flow all the way down to the ground. With iron railings on three

sides and a thicket behind, the dearly departed is enjoying a kind of peace he rarely enjoyed in life. Like so many of his neighbors, he rests in a world of his own.

The profile is encircled by his first and last name and date of death: October 17, 1849. Above it, his name is strangely abbreviated, more appropriate for a rock 'n' roll star than a classical music genius: "A Fred • Chopin."

"Not yet," he whispers. "I need music."

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Maslow's encounters with the presumed dead are often heralded by striking synchronicities. So he's not all that surprised the next day when bright orange posters appear, plastered all over the Left Bank, announcing: "*Les plus belles Oeuvres de CHOPIN...sur piano Steinway...ce soir,*" at Église Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre—the oldest church in Paris. He knows this place. Years before, he stumbled upon it on while wandering down a side street in the shadow of Notre Dame. Curious, he had gone inside and, after sitting for a few minutes on an uncomfortable wooden chair gazing up at the Byzantine-style cross on the altar, he'd had an experience that even his new friends would consider transcendent. It is an auspicious choice of location.

Maslow's wife Cristina agrees to join him, although she'd far prefer to listen to a *Doors* cover band than a Chopin imitator.

He sits through the concert, edgy and alert. More like a guy waiting for his date to show up than a connoisseur of nineteenth-century piano music. While he's moved by the way the haunting music settles softly into ancient stone, he's more drawn to the sounds of late-evening birds trying to figure out what all the racket is about.

But, to Maslow’s surprise, the true composer doesn’t say a word. If he’s been whispering in anybody’s ear during the concert, it’s Cristina, who, as they leave the chapel, takes off on an inspired riff—a combination of musical appreciation and esoteric wisdom:

“That music...” she trails off in thought, as they stand outside, vaguely trying to decide what to do next, the crowd parting around them. “You could feel it flowing through your veins. Through the whole church. Down into the earth and up into the sky. I could see him pounding away. I could hear his dilemma. Trying to take all that force and make it as light as air. The sacred and secular. The ascetic and the life of flesh. As if every note were as solid as lead and fine as lace. I’m hungry. Let’s go across the street.”

The place is, inevitably, a piano bar, where you can eat cheese and bread and crème brûlée and drink red wine and strong coffee until 3:00 a.m. They sit in a corner surrounded by little Parisian tableaux: Two French men consoling a woman in distress. A birthday party with a constantly changing cast of multilingual characters. A group of students, hunched over and arguing heatedly. Waiters laughing and bickering so loudly that pretty soon you can’t tell them apart from the patrons. A guy alone leaning against the bar, belting out a few words of each show tune. The pianist throwing her hands up so high after each verse that you can’t see how she could possibly get them down in time to strike the next chord.

Cristina’s making notes in her journal, stopping occasionally to ask, “Was it yesterday we saw...?” “Who was it that told us about...?” “We have to make sure we see...” Maslow mumbles noncommittally. He knows she’s really asking herself more than him anyway. His mind is elsewhere. And she knows it.

Maslow is on his second glass of wine when he decides to force the issue. He beckons their waiter and explains in battered French that *nous* had just *attended* the concert across the *rue*, and would *aimer écouter* a little Chopin encore. It

seems the waiter couldn't be more pleased with Maslow's request—and the potential *pourboire* it will probably earn him—and walks officiously over to the piano player to pass it on. She glances across the room at them and smiles a seductive, red-lipped smile right out of the 1920s. She then stands up and bows. She's dressed like a man.

Maslow picks up his wine glass and shifts his chair so he can tilt back against the wall. Catches a glimpse of himself from an unfamiliar angle in the wall-wide mirror to his left.

He closes his eyes.

She begins to play.

“She's not really at home with *la musique*,” he begins, stumbling at first between French and English before settling. “Too abrupt at the end of that phrase, you see? A few notes, not as I intended, but minor. I appreciate she tries. As did I, so close to completing that piece...some details are still not right. The concert, well, different, no? You expect perfection there. But her energy...I like it.”

The pianist pauses, as if unsure whether to play more Chopin or return to familiar show tunes. “Cristina?” Maslow says. But she doesn't look up. Doesn't she hear him? Doesn't she hear *him*?

The pianist cries out boisterously: “*Ballade en fa mineur!!!*”

“Cristina?” Maslow repeats. But she keeps writing. He leans back again, closes his eyes, takes another sip of wine, and surrenders. The composer is sure of himself now. There's drama in his voice:

“The left hand holds the soul. The right hand holds the spirit and gives it room to soar, to explore the limitless realms of human experience.

“The left hand holds the homeland...Poland. The right holds the spirit of France and all of Europe.

“The left hand keeps you tethered, gently, to your purpose. The right will try anything!

“Listen to my left hand,” he says, now softly, confidentially, “and you will hear the journey of a soul on its way to completion, with flashes of joy and sorrow, and every other resonant emotion, but steadfast through it all. Listen to my right hand, and you’ll hear every transient image on that life’s journey—from the tubercular cough to the petty fears, from the tortured weeping to the transcendent flights across eighty-eight keys.

“Listen to my left hand, and you will hear the soul burst forth from its prison and join the right in the ecstatic reconciliation of opposites. Listen to my right, and you will hear it so viscerally joining spirit and flesh that you would swear that the right was left and the left was right.

“Everywhere I look I see left and right hands. The left hand of the East and the right of the West. The left hand of Islam and the right of Christ. The left hand of ingenuity and the right of ignorance. The left hand of wealth and the right of poverty. The left hand of terror and the right of fearless love.”

A long pause, between songs as well as voice. Then, at last, the funeral march. He whispers: “The left hand of Paradise and the right of Hell.”

His tone becomes deep, booming, and triumphant.

“When I sat at the piano or scribbled compositions, there was no left or right hand! There was only Frédéric François and his immortal soul, free to reach for the divine and simultaneously know its presence!”

Quietly again. “For purpose and its completion are inextricably linked, no? Like two magnets held apart but, by their very attraction, inevitably joined.”

Quickly now: “Does that mean one can cease one’s labors? No. Does it mean the path ends where it began? No. Does that mean all is pre-ordained? No. On the contrary, it’s all improvisation! But, ultimately the only question is how

you will travel, whether you will enjoy the journey, and when you will arrive. We all play on the same keyboard, my friend. Ah, but the possibilities are infinite.”

Lofty, even pompous now: “The explanations of conflict, my friend, are as many as the notes of my critics. But is it not, ultimately, simply left hands wandering aimlessly in search of purpose? And right hands wandering aimlessly in search of expression? I see countries, I see peoples, I see cultures, I see leaders, I see the earth itself. It is all the same.”

The voice booms again, “I was given the gift of two hands laboring mightily, inventively, resolutely together! They were my grail! They were my fountain of youth!”

Softly now: “Give me your most discordant notes, and I will make of them a symphony.”