Chopin, the Listener

Anthony Zielonka
Assumption College, azielonk@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/mclc-faculty
Part of the European History Commons, and the Music Commons

Recommended Citation
There is an amazing collection here of interesting musical folk of every description: a multitude. Three orchestras: the Academy, the Italian, and Fédau’s, are splendid; Rossini is the régisseur of his own opera, which is produced better than any other in Europe. Lablache, Rubini, Pasta (she has now left), Malibran, Devrient, Schröder, Santini and others enchant us three times a week on a grand scale. Nourrit, Levasseur, Derivis, Mme Cinti-Damoreau, Mlle Dorus sustain grand opera; Cholet, Mlle Casimir, Prevost are admirable in comic opera; in a word, here, for the first time, one can learn what singing is. Certainly today, not Pasta but Malibran (Garcia) is the first singer in Europe—marvellous!

Letter to Józef Elsner, 14 December 1831

Writing to his former teacher, Józef Elsner (1769-1854), in Warsaw, barely three months after his arrival in Paris, Chopin (1810-1849) expressed his delight and excitement at having finally arrived in what was, at the time, indisputably the musical and artistic capital of the world. After mentioning the orchestras that could be heard there, he conveys particular enthusiasm about the opera, specifically the leading opera singers and the quality of the singing that he was able to hear in the French capital. The singers named in


Dr. Zielonka is Associate Professor of French at Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Birmingham (UK) in 1984 and is an authority on the works of Flaubert and Mallarmé.
this letter were indeed the stars of the time, and they had already attained legendary status during their lifetime. It is of course significant that Chopin, who revolutionized piano technique, writes at length about the Opéra, opera singers, and the singing he had experienced. This applies not only to his experience in Paris but recurs throughout his letters and throughout his life.

Chopin consistently sought to attend performances of operas and recitals given by opera singers. As a result, comments on orchestral performances, chamber music, or solo recitals by musicians, including pianists, are far fewer than evocations of the singing and comments on the voices he had heard. While the influence of operatic composers, particularly Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835), has often been mentioned as a source of Chopin’s inspiration, only recently have musicologists begun to pay serious attention to the precise nature and extent of that influence.²

In the first of three remarkable chapters that he devotes to the music of Chopin in his recent book, The Romantic Generation (1995), Charles Rosen asserts that “Chopin’s music is largely derived from his early experience of opera, the rhythms and harmonies of native Polish dances, and Bach [1685-1750],”³ and provides convincing examples of those influences:

Unlike Schumann, Liszt, and Berlioz, he mastered Italian operatic forms: there are many examples in his work of perfectly formed melodies in the Italian style, and even, in the F minor Concerto [1829-1830], a complete scena ... The additive construction that dislocates an established form, the dramatic interruption with a brief but literal quotation of a phrase from an earlier section - the technique comes directly out of Chopin’s experience of Italian opera. It may be compared to the way composers like Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini broke up conventional forms, interrupting the traditional slow-fast sequence of the aria, for example, with a chorus or even an entire scene. This kind of interruption was itself a tradition in opera by Chopin’s day, but he applied it to pure instrumental music with a dramatic force that was unprecedented.⁴

Rosen cites as examples of Chopin’s incorporation of this technique, among other pieces, the “monophonic” Finale of the Sonata in B-flat minor,

⁴Ibid., pp. 285 and 293.
Opus 35 (1839-1840), and the central section of the Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Opus 44 (1840-1841).

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, conductor and music critic Will Crutchfield also provides some fascinating evidence as to the profound and extensive impact the styles and ornamentation techniques of the singers Chopin heard bore upon his own compositions. He concludes that Chopin "... did indeed draw on what he heard at the opera, directly and without mediation, and what he drew became an essential component of his melodic style." In fact, none of the melodies Chopin heard passed spontaneously or directly into his own compositions. Chopin was one of the great scientists of sonority and laboured meticulously over each of his works to perfect his melodies and harmonies. Whatever he learned by hearing and studying operatic, choral, and instrumental works was incorporated into his own creative art in a highly sophisticated manner. The study of opera was, however, crucial to the development of that art, and it is significant that Chopin's first important composition was his *Variations on "La ci darem la mano"* (1827) from Mozart's (1756-1791) opera *Don Giovanni* (1786-1787), for piano and orchestra, Opus 2, which he wrote during his summer vacation of 1827.

Judging by the evidence provided in Chopin's surviving correspondence, it was in fact Rossini (1792-1868), and not Bellini, whose music Chopin had heard most often, and to which he responded most intensely and consistently. This had already surfaced in the earliest of Chopin's letters, in which he makes substantial reference to a musical performance that had impressed him. On 30 October 1825, a fifteen-year-old Chopin wrote, from Warsaw, to his classmate at the Warsaw Lyceum, Jan Białoblocki, in Sokołów, about the performance of Rossini's *Barber of Seville* that Chopin had attended in the Polish capital. He had clearly enjoyed the opera, and he makes some witty comments on the weaknesses of two of the female principal singers:

I liked it very much. Zdanowicz, Szczeurewski and Polkowski played well; also Aszpergorowa and two other women: one sniggering and with a cold in the head; the other tearful, thin, in slippers and dressing-gown, always yawning in time to the music. (16)

The other musical reference, in the same letter, is to the young pianist, Rembieliński; Chopin praises his technique, honed and perfected in Paris, and his own frustration with the limited musical opportunities and resources then available in Warsaw is apparent:

... a certain Mr. Rembieliński, a nephew of the President, has come to Warsaw from Paris. He has been there six years, and plays the piano as I have never yet heard it played. You can imagine what a joy that is for us, who never hear anything of real excellence here. He is not appearing as an Artist, but as an Amateur. I won’t go into details about his quick, smooth, rounded playing: I will only tell you that his left hand is as strong as the right, which is an unusual thing to find in one person. There would not be space on a whole sheet to describe his exquisite talent adequately. (16)

Chopin did, occasionally, express his appreciation of other talented pianists, including the German August Alexander Klengel (1783-1852), whom he singles out for praise in a letter to his friend, Tytus Wojciechowski, in Poturzyn, of 12 September 1829. The then nineteen-year-old Chopin detected a kindred spirit in this eminent interpreter and editor of Bach’s fugues:

Of all my pianist acquaintances I am most glad of Klengel, whom I met at Pixis’ house in Prague. He played me his fugues; one can say they are a continuation of Bach’s; there are 48 of them, and as many canons. (66)

Writing again to Tytus, from Warsaw, on 15 May 1830, Chopin comments on the excellent playing of another German pianist, Woerlitzer, then pianist to the King of Prussia:

He has called on me. He’s really only a child still, 16. His forte is the Moscheles Variations on Alexander’s March. He plays them splendidly; I think there is nothing lacking. He has been heard twice in public, and both times he has played these Variations. When you hear him, you will be pleased with his playing; although, between ourselves, he is not up to the title that he bears. (87)

Again from Paris, in another letter to Tytus Wojciechowski, Chopin enthuses over the pianistic technique of Frédéric Kalkbrenner (1785-1849), with whom he would form a lasting friendship, even dedicating the Concerto in E minor, Opus 11 (1830), to him. Kalkbrenner had helped arrange Chopin’s first concert in the French capital, held at the Salons Pleyel on 26 February 1832. Chopin writes to Tytus:

*On August Klengel, see the article by Joel Sachs in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (hereinafter, Grove) 10, p. 107. Subsequently, all references to and citations from The New Grove Dictionary of Opera will be indicated by Grove O.*
You would not believe how curious I was about Herz, Liszt, Hiller, etc. - they are all zero beside Kalkbrenner. I confess that I have played like Herz, but would wish to play like Kalkbrenner. If Paganini is perfection, Kalkbrenner is his equal, but in quite another style. It is hard to describe to you his calm, his enchanting touch, his incomparable evenness, and the mastery that is displayed in every note; he is a giant, walking over Herz and Czerny and all - and over me. What can I do about it? (154)

Seven years later, writing from Marseille to his friend Juljan Fontana, in Paris, he expressed his admiration for the talents of another pianist, Clara Wieck (1819-1896), the future Madame Robert Schumann:8

Yesterday I got your letter, with Pleyel’s and Jasia’s. If you liked Clara Wieck, you were right, she plays - no one better. If you see her, greet her from me, and her Father too. (193)

In addition to his comments on pianists and piano-playing, Chopin’s letters contain occasional references to other instrumentalists who had made a strong impression on him. At the age of fifteen, he wrote to his friend, Jan Białoblocki, about hearing a Czech clarinettist:

... who played the clarinet as I have never before heard it played. It will be enough if I tell you that he gets two notes at once with a single breath. (19)

Five years later, in August 1830, he wrote to Tytus Wojciechowski about his recent visit to General Szembek’s camp, where he had been favourably impressed by the military band’s playing of an arrangement from Auber’s (1781-1871) opera, La Muette de Portici, which had premièred barely two years earlier, in 1828:

Szembek is very musical, plays the fiddle well, has studied under Rode, is a thoroughly-paced Paganinist, and therefore belongs in a good category musically. He ordered his band to perform; they had been practising all the morning, and I heard some remarkable things. It’s all on trumpets: a kind called [the] Bugle; you would not believe that they can do chromatic scales, extremely fast, and *diminuendo* ascending .... I was greatly impressed when I heard the Cavatina from The Dumb Girl [of Portici, ie. “La Muette de

---

7 On Frederic Kalkbrenner, see the article by Paul Dekeyser in Grove 9, pp. 777-779.
8 On Clara Wieck (Schumann), see the article by Pamela Susskind in Grove 16, pp. 827-829.
Portici”] played on these trumpets with the utmost accuracy and delicate shading. (98)

In Vienna, in December 1830, Chopin made the acquaintance of the young Czech violinist, Josef Slavik, whom he considered to be a true genius. A virtuoso composer, as well as performer, who would die at the young age of 27, Slavik was, according to Alena Nemcova, “the first modern Czech violinist to achieve an international reputation,”9 He wrote from Vienna, on Christmas Day of 1830, to Jan Matuszyński, in Warsaw, about the young Czech’s remarkable spiccato playing:

I am just back from Slawik’s—a famous violinist with whom I have made friends. Since Paganini I have heard nothing like him; he can take 96 notes staccato on one bow, and so on; incredible. (130)

During his earliest travels outside Poland, Chopin enjoyed, above all, attending operas by popular composers of the time, including Spontini (1774-1851), Cimarosa (1749-1801), and Georges Onslow (1784-1853), as well as at least one oratorio by Handel. From Berlin in September 1828 he wrote to his family:

I am well, and since Tuesday they give something new in the theatre every day, as if on purpose for me. Still better, I have already heard one Oratorio in the Singakademie, ‘Cortez,’ Cimarosa’s ‘Il matrimonio segreto,’ and enjoyed listening to Onslow’s ‘Colporteur’. But Handel’s Oratorio: ‘Cäcilienfest,’ is nearer to the ideal that I have formed of great music. (43)

A year later, he wrote to his family, from Vienna, about the operas he had been attending there, and about the chance he had had to hear the celebrated violinist, Joseph Mayseder (1789-1863) play:10

I have seen three operas: ‘The White Lady’, ‘Kościuszko’, and Meyerbeer’s [1791-1864] ‘Knight of the Cross’ [sic]. The orchestra and choir are splendid. Today [Rossini’s] ‘Joseph [sic, ergo, ‘Moses’] in Egypt’ [1818]. In the Academy of Music I have heard Mayseder play solos twice. I like the town, which is fine to look at; they want me to stay for the winter. (51)

9On Josef Slavik, see Alena Nemcova's article in Grove 17, p. 378.
10On Joseph Mayseder, see the article by John Rutter in Grove 11, pp. 861-862.
In the fall of 1830, he reports on performances of operas by Auber and Rossini (Tancredi, 1813), which he had seen in Wrocław (Breslau) and in Dresden. In Warsaw, at this time and in many other major cities, Rossini appears to have been the predominant and most frequently performed composer. Chopin attended recitals at which he heard arias drawn from La gazza ladra [1817] and Semiramide (1823), as well as complete performances of Il Turco in Italia (1814), The Barber of Seville (1816), and Le Comte Ory (1828). He wrote to Tytus:

‘Comte Ory’ is good, especially the orchestration and choruses. The finale of the first act is beautiful. (84)

Several of Europe’s most prominent opera singers did, in fact, appear in Warsaw around 1830. The city was by no means a provincial backwater, but a cultural center in its own right - a crossroads where many pre-eminent European musicians performed. Tad Szulc has written that:

Warsaw, under the Kingdom [of Poland, established in 1815, and ruled by Tsar Alexander I of Russia], was as sophisticated and music-conscious as any city in Eastern Europe, at least when it came to its increasingly rich aristocratic and bourgeois elites. With a population of one hundred thousand inhabitants, Warsaw enjoyed a rich diet of opera presented at the National Theater and concerts at three concert halls .... Famous international performers, from the violin virtuoso Nicolò Paganini to the singer Angelica Catalani, came to Warsaw to appear before the highly knowledgeable audiences.11

On 15 May 1830, Chopin wrote to Tytus about his reactions to the singing of Henriette Sontag (1806-1854), who had sung at the premieres of Weber’s Euryanthe (1823) and of Beethoven’s Missa solemnis and Ninth Symphony (1818-1824):

Sontag is not beautiful, but extraordinarily pretty. She charms everyone with her voice, which is big, and we usually hear a range of only:12

![music notation]

but it is very highly cultivated; her diminuendi are non plus ultra, her portamenti lovely, and especially her ascending chromatic scales

---

12On Henriette Sontag, see the article by John Warrack in Grove 17, pp. 527-529.
are exquisite. She sang us Mercadante’s air very, very, very beautifully, Rode’s Variations; the last one with the roulades was particularly good; the variations on Swiss themes were so much admired that, when recalled, instead of bowing to express her thanks, she sang them over again! She is incredibly good-natured. Yesterday the same thing happened with Rode’s variations. She sang us the ‘Cavatina’ from ‘The Barber,’ the famous one, and from ‘The Magpie’ [1817]; you can imagine what a difference from everything that you have heard. She also sang that air from ‘[Der] Freischütz’ [1817-1821] that you know, marvellously .... But a little more about Sonntag. She uses a few embroideries of a quite new type, which produce an immense effect, though less than those of Paganini; perhaps because the type is slighter. It seems as if she breathed some perfume of the freshest flowers into the hall; she caresses, she strokes, she enraptureds, but she seldom moves to tears. Though Radziwiłł told me she so acts and sings Desdemona’s last scene with Othello that no one can refrain from weeping. (91-92)

It is clear from this letter that Chopin had had the opportunity to speak to Henriette Sonntag and that he had been able to discuss opera and singing with her during their meeting in May 1830.

The composer wrote extremely enthusiastically about another soprano, the Polish singer Konstancja Gładkowska, who sang in the Warsaw premiere of Ferdinando Paer’s (1771-1839) Agnese (1818) on 24 July 1830. She was a fellow student of Chopin’s at the Warsaw Conservatory, and he soon became infatuated with her, a feeling apparently not reciprocated. As he wrote to Tytus, on 21 August 1830:

Of all Warsaw I have been most occupied with Aniela. I’ve been to the performance. Gładkowska does not lack much; better on the stage than in a hall. Quite apart from the tragic acting—splendid, nothing to be said about that—the singing itself, if it weren’t for the F-sharp, and G, sometimes in the high register one could not ask for anything better of its kind. As for her phrasing, it would delight you; she shades gorgeously, and though on first entering her voice shook a little, afterwards she sang very bravely. The opera was cut down; perhaps that is why I did not feel any longwindedness or boredom ... At the end Aniela was recalled and showered with applause. (94)

13On Konstancja Gładkowska, see the article by Maurice J.E. Brown in Grove 7, p. 420.
On his second visit to Vienna, Chopin heard the famous German soprano, Sabine Heinefetter (1809-1872) in several different operas. He reported to his friends and family on the beauty of her singing. On 1 December 1830, he told his family about two operas by Auber, as well as one each by Mozart and Rossini, in which he had heard her sing:

The theatre costs me more than anything; but I don’t regret it because Fraulein Heinefetter and Herr Wild nearly always sing. During this week I have heard three entirely new operas. Yesterday they gave ‘Fra Diavolo’; ‘The Dumb Girl’ is better; before that was Mozart’s ‘Titus’, and today ‘Wilhelm Tell’. (125)

To Jan Matuszyński, he writes about the coldness of Heinefetter’s singing, which he says limits his enjoyment of a voice that is nonetheless outstanding for its technical perfection. In the same letter, Chopin comments on the singing of the famous Austrian tenor, Franz Wild (1791-1860): 15

After dinner came Wild: a famous—perhaps today the most famous—German tenor. I accompanied him from memory in the air from Othello [1816], which he sang like a master. He and Heinefetter support the entire opera here; it is true, it is a miserable one, quite unworthy of Vienna. Fräulein Heinefetter is almost completely lacking in feeling; a voice, such as I do not often hear, everything sung well, every note accurately performed; purity, flexibility, portamento; but so cold that I almost got my nose frost-bitten while sitting in the front row near the stage. Off the stage she is pretty, especially in masculine dress. In ‘Othello’ she is better than in ‘The Barber,’ in which, instead of a lively, innocent girl in love, she has to represent a thoroughly practised flirt. In Mozart’s ‘Titus’ [1790-1791], as Sextus, she is charming; in The Crusader also. She will soon appear in the ‘Magpie;’ I am curious to see. Wolków understood the ‘Barber’ better; if only she had Heinefetter’s throat. Certainly she is one of our first women singers, if not the first. (132)

He heard both singers again, in Rossini’s Le Siège de Corinthe (1826). Chopin’s letter to his family reveals how much he enjoyed the performance:

Rossini’s ‘Siege of Corinth’ has been given in the theatre; very good. I am glad I stayed for this opera. Wild, Heinefetter, Binder,

14 On Sabine Heinefetter, see the article by Charles Jahant and Elizabeth Forbes, in Grove 0, 2, p. 687.
15 On Franz Wild, see the article by Elizabeth Forbes in Grove 0.4, p. 1155.
Forti; in a word, all the best that Vienna has took part, and beautifully. I went once to hear it with Czapek; then on to supper at the place where Beethoven always used to drink. (146-147)

While in Vienna, Chopin commented several times, and with some degree of surprise, on the popularity of Johann Strauss’s (1804-1849) and Joseph Lanner’s (1801-1843) waltzes. A composer of waltzes himself, Chopin must have been pleased at the success of the genre in the Austrian capital, writing to Józef Elsner, on 26 January 1831, that:

Here, waltzes are [actually] called works! And Strauss and Lanner, who play them for dancing, are [even] called Kapellmeistern. This does not mean that everyone thinks like that; indeed, nearly everyone laughs about it; but only waltzes get printed. (137)

Even though Chopin had always enjoyed performances of Rossini’s operas, it was the performances he was able to attend in Paris that provided him with the true revelation of Rossini’s genius. This was almost certainly due to the quality of the singers who appeared there, most of whom were already living legends. Chopin wrote to Tytus, on 12 December 1831:

I had never really heard the Barber till last week with Lablache, Rubini, and Malibran (Garcia). Nor had I heard Othello till I heard it with Rubini, Pasta and Lablache and Mme Raimbeaux. If ever I had everything at once, it’s now in Paris. You can’t conceive what Lablache is like. Pasta is said to have gone off somewhat; but I have seen nothing more exalted. Malibran depends only on her marvellous voice; no one sings like her! Wonderful, wonderful! Rubini is a splendid tenor; takes his notes authentically, not in falsetto, and sometimes sings roulades for two hours together. (156)

Chopin enthuses over the excitement and quality of Meyerbeer’s new opera, Robert le Diable (1831), which he saw in Paris in November 1831. Here, he seems to have been overwhelmed as much by the visual and scenic aspects of the production, as by the quality of the singing of such stars as Laure Cinti-Damoreau (1801-1863):

See also Chopin’s letter to his family of the Wednesday before Christmas 1830, p. 129.

On Luigi Lablache (1794-1858), who was to sing the bass solo in Mozart’s Requiem at Chopin’s funeral, see the article by Philip Robinson in Grove O, 2, p. 1070. On Giovanni Battista Rubini (1794-1854), see the article by Julian Budden, ibid., 4, pp. 79-80. On Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865), see the article by Kenneth Stern, ibid., 3, pp. 906-907. On Maria Malibran (1808-1836), see the article by Elizabeth Forbes, ibid., 11, p. 577.
I don’t know whether there has ever been such magnificence in a theatre, whether it has ever before attained to the pomp of the new 5-act opera, ‘Robert le Diable,’ by Mayerbeer [sic], who wrote ‘Crociato’ [1824]. It is a masterpiece of the new school, in which devils (huge choirs) sing through speaking-trumpets, and souls rise from graves (but not, as in ‘The Charlatan,’ just in groups of 50 or 60); in which there is a diorama in the theatre, in which at the end you see the interior of a church, the whole church, at Christmas or Easter, lighted up, with monks, and all the congregation on the benches, and censers: even with the organ, the sound of which on the stage is enchanting and amazing, also it nearly drowns the orchestra; nothing of the sort could be put on anywhere else. Meyerbeer has immortalised himself! But he has spent three years in Paris to get it done; it is said he has paid 20,000 francs to the cast. Mme Cinti-Damoreau sings as superbly as possible; I prefer her singing to Malibran’s. Malibran amazes, Cinti delights, and her chromatic scales are better than those of Toulon, the famous flutist. No voice could be more highly trained; it seems to cost her so little to sing, as if she just blew it at the audience. Nourrit, the French tenor, has wonderful feeling! And Cholet, at the Opéra Comique, where they give [Auber’s] ‘Fra Diavolo’[1830], ‘La Fiancée’ and ‘Zampa’ [1831] (a fine new opera by Hérold [1791-1833]), is the first amant here: seducteur, tantalizing, marvellous, a genius with the real voice of romance. He has created his own style. (157)¹⁸

Later correspondence testifies to Chopin’s continuing interest in performances of choral music. At Easter, in 1845, he wrote to his friend, Stefan Witwicki (1802-1847), in Grafenbernig, (near Nuremberg):

I am sorry you cannot be with us and Delacroix [1798-1863] this evening at the Conservatoire, to hear Haydn’s [1732-1809] ‘Creation’ [1798]. It is only the second concert we are attending this year; the first was the day before yesterday, with Mozart’s Requiem [1791]. (281)

Stefan Witwicki had written the poems Chopin set to music in ten out of the total of nineteen songs that he is known to have composed. Significantly,

¹⁸On Laure Cinti-Damoreau, see the article by Philip Robinson, in Grove O, 1, pp. 871-872. On Adolphe Nourrit (1802-1839), see the article by Evan Walker, ibid., 3, pp. 625-626. On Jean-Baptiste Cholet (1798-1892), the French tenor, see the article by Philip Robinson, ibid, 1, p. 849.
Chopin included chorales in the central, quiet sections of several of his longer piano works, including the Polish lullaby in the Scherzo No.1 in B minor, Opus 20 (1831), in the Fantaisie in F minor, Opus 49 (1841), and in the Polonaise-Fantaisie in A-flat, Opus 61 (1845-1846).

Pauline Viardot, who included vocal versions of Chopin’s Mazurkas in her song recitals, became a close friend of the composer.  

He wrote to his family, in Poland, on 20 July 1845:

Mme Viardot, who will be passing through your town, also told me that she will call on you. She sang for me here a Spanish song of her own which she composed last year in Vienna; she promised to sing it to you. I like it very much and doubt whether anything finer of that type could be heard or imagined. This song will unite me with you. I have always listened to it with great enthusiasm. (286)

One of the most memorable highlights of the months Chopin spent in London during 1848, just one year before his untimely death, was watching and listening to the great Swedish soprano, Jenny Lind (1820-1887), who was enjoying great success singing the title role in Bellini’s La Sonnambula (1831) at Her Majesty’s Theatre.  

On 11 May 1848, Chopin wrote from London to Wojciech Grzymała:

I have met J. Lind, and she very graciously sent me a most excellent stall with her card. As I had a good place, I heard well. She is a typical Swede; not in an ordinary light, but in some sort of Polar dawn. She is enormously effective in Sonnambula. She sings with extreme purity and certainty, and her piano notes are steady, and even as a hair. (353)

Writing to Grzymała again, two days later, Chopin commented on the charm and appeal of Lind’s singing of Swedish folksongs, in which Chopin discerned an affinity with the Polish folk idiom with which he was familiar:

Yesterday I was at dinner with J. Lind, who afterwards sang me Swedish things till midnight. They are as distinctive in character as our things. We have something Slavonic, they something Scandinavian, which are totally different; and yet we are nearer to each other than the Italian to the Spaniard. (355)

On Pauline Viardot (1821-1910), see the article by April Fitzlyon in Grove O, 19, pp. 694-695. See also: Chopin’s letter, from London, to Wojciech Grzymała, of 8-17 July 1848: “Mme Viardot sang me my mazurkas among other things. It was very beautiful.” (360)

On Jenny Lind, see the article by Elizabeth Forbes in Grove 10, pp. 865-866.
He was obviously fascinated to hear, in her singing, parallels between concordant modal systems of the folk traditions in the popular music of Sweden and Poland.

Chopin attended a number of performances of *La Sonnambula* in London. In one of his last surviving letters from the English capital, addressed to his family on 19 August 1848, he describes the atmosphere at Her Majesty’s Theatre, where Queen Victoria (1819-1901) had received even more applause than Jenny Lind:

> The performance was most magnificent; the Queen received more applause than Jenny Lind; they sang ‘God Save,’ with the whole audience standing, and Wellington and all the local notabilities. It was an inspiring sight, that real respect and reverence for the throne, for law and order; they could not contain their enthusiasm. (372-373)

Surveying the evidence contained within these letters, one is forced to conclude that the experience of opera, in the theatre and in the concert hall, was of central importance to Chopin from an early age, and that it remained so throughout his short life. I have not attempted to identify here specific influences and sources of his own compositions in the operatic works that he heard. Suggestive and insightful comments along such lines have already been made by Charles Rosen and Will Crutchfield. The latter has noted specific echoes of Rossini’s *La gazza ladra* in Chopin’s music, and has suggested that it was this opera of Rossini’s by which the composer was most fascinated. Such suggestions remain rather fanciful, however. Since all influences were clearly intensely mediated and incorporated with great subtlety and sophistication into Chopin’s unique creative art, it is far less enlightening to look for direct echoes, influences, and quotations than simply to recognize that Chopin totally transformed what he had heard and learned within an astonishingly new and original musical landscape of his own. The task of tracing the influence of specific singers’ techniques, and techniques of ornamentation (the latter clearly being important and prominent in the first half of the nineteenth century) is obviously extremely difficult, and any such analysis runs the risk of being merely speculative, given the lack of accurate documentation in periods predating the age of sound recording. Nevertheless, Chopin’s letters suggest that these influences were significant and far-reaching. Reviewing his own statements on the performances he witnessed is, in itself, enlightening, revealing Chopin to have been a careful, attentive and eager listener, who did not hesitate to make disparaging remarks when a musical performance left him either disappointed or indifferent. He also discloses the intense enthusiasm and sheer thrill that he experienced
time and time again, as much in the opera house as in the recital hall. Chopin’s remarks and reactions provide fascinating testimony of a unique period in the history of opera and of singing, revealing just how deeply engaged he himself was in the great age of Romantic opera, virtuoso singing, and performance.