

Chopin's Chaise longue: From Elegance to Eloquence

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Six weeks after Chopin's death, the contents of his last apartment on the Place Vendôme were sold at auction. In the inventory prepared for the sale, the most expensive set of items was described as "une chaise longue, deux confortables & quatre chaises demi-gondoles palissandre & damas de soie jaune & deux rideaux de soie jaune avec ornements." The appraised value of 1000 francs for this collection was nearly twice that of the next most valuable set of items. Purchased by someone named "Moore," Chopin's chaise longue and its accompanying chairs and drapes signify less about preserving relics of the composer's personal life (elsewhere in the auction the Saxon consulate Thomas Albrecht purchased three of Chopin's razors for 5 francs) than with reifying his habits of luxury. Chopin's refined taste served as a hallmark to his contemporaries: though perhaps not as omnipresent a filter as his Polish origins and his poor health, his perceived elegance served to distinguish his life and his music from that of many of his contemporaries.

Chopin's chaise longue not only serves to index his personal elegance, it also draws attention to the interior musical spaces he occupied. The chaise longue (we know from contemporary watercolors) sat prominently in the music salons of his Square d'Orléans and Place Vendôme residences. Anecdotes from the nineteenth century tell of an ailing Chopin teaching lesson from it. But more interesting is the placement of the chaise longue in these rooms, for it was arrayed in such a way that the pianist and person occupying the chaise longue could look directly at one another. This arrangement promoted conversation, both in the literal sense and,

metaphorically, through music. In any conversation, both parties must speak, and the notion that music could “say” (“*dire*” – Chopin’s word) was fundamental to the composer’s aesthetic.

The trope of music as an elocutionary act plays out most interestingly in Chopin’s waltzes, a genre that engages in numerous ways with notions of sociability. The Waltz in F minor (an autograph of which was once housed at the Abbaye de Royaumont) provides material and musical evidence of how elegance and eloquence could intersect as compellingly in his music as in his furniture.