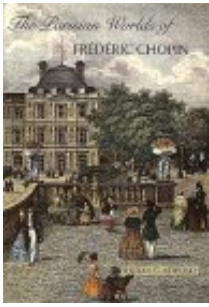

The Parisian World of Frederick Chopin by William G. Atwood (1999) 470 pages.



To the reader who does not know Paris, the first part of this book may be a little disconcerting as the author gives us descriptions of the city's areas (*arrondissements*) during the first part of the 19th century. There is a crying need for a map, particularly because nine homes of Chopin are discussed. What is more, the chapter devoted to the Polish "Great Emigration" does not explain the significance of Adam Czartoryski. After all, he was the uncrowned king of Poland, well acquainted with the composer and Chopin's important patron.

This being said, the book offers an excellent picture of the cultural history of Paris during the years when Chopin lived there (1831-1849). It offers a panorama of the complex world of opera, theater, painting, journalism, science, and even medicine of that time, but above all of music. It was a difficult period of French history: 15 years earlier the defeat at Waterloo ended Napoleonic glories. The victors were quite lenient (after all, they restored the Bourbon monarchy), but the constant friction amongst politicians was worrisome.

While this period had little political tranquility, there was still legendary Paris, a magnet radiating throughout Europe, and this story is captivantly narrated. There emerged a new social class, the "common man." The steadily advancing industrial revolution, in its infancy when Chopin arrived, caused immense changes in social stratification and in the cultural life. As Atwood tells us, suddenly the *grisettes* in the *Vie de Boheme* and the humble courtesan of *La Dame aux Camelias* (later *La Traviata*) became the center of the public attention. New musical currents included concert halls and even dance halls, as well as the rising popularity of the opera. Once again Paris was the cultural leader but on a larger, more popular scale. One is amused to read that in one season alone, the boulevard melodrama shows included 195 assassinations, 300 poisonings, and 400 arson attempts.

Chopin was fascinated with the theatre but was lukewarm towards the Opera. He was indifferent towards the painting world, although Delacroix was his faithful best friend. During his tour of England, the local press dutifully reviewed Chopin's concerts. His mazurkas were described as "souvenirs of Poland," his polonaises as "gentle breezes," his waltzes as "sighs," and his ballads as "murmurs of the River Seine." -- As to his view of politics, he expressed deep resentment of the comment made by Pope Gregory XVI that the Polish uprising in 1830 was a "disruption of the social order."

The dust jacket states that Chopin left Warsaw after "Russia's brutal repression of the insurrection." This is incorrect: Chopin left Warsaw for Vienna before it started and arrived in Paris in the fall of 1831, after the insurrection ended.

George Suboczewski
