Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Commissioner, Minister, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Alumnie, Students of the Chopin Promotion.

I am delivering this address on behalf of our Vice-Rector, Mrs Ewa Ośniecka-Tamecka. I know how proud she would have been to have presented you the life and achievements of a great Pole and a great European, Fryderyk Chopin. I am sure that everyone present will join me in wishing her a full and swift recovery.

Fryderyk Chopin's music is extraordinarily popular in Japan. No language is more universal than music. But the patron of Warsaw airport, of 'Polish spirit' (yes, it also comes bottled), and of this year's promotion at the College of Europe also symbolizes a revolution in European culture.

Until very late in the eighteenth century, composers were treated as hired servants, sometimes even as serfs. If they asserted their freedom, they could be kicked downstairs. Literally, in Mozart's case…

But by the middle of the nineteenth century, the greatest composers were treated almost as gods. They were national heroes, sculpted in marble and cast in bronze, raised by the public to the pinnacles of European civilization. Most reached those heights only after great struggle – something that entered the very idea of the artist.

Fryderyk Chopin was one of the first composers to take high art beyond privileged elites, to speak to whole peoples – without compromising on quality.

The yearning for freedom permeates Chopin's *oeuvre*. It was shared by many during the gloomy aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. It burst forth in Europe's 'Spring of Nations' in 1848-49.

Those aspirations were crushed in many parts of Europe. But within a few years it had become clear that absolute monarchies must bend or break. Seventy years after Chopin's death, most Europeans were freer – individually as citizens and collectively as nations – than they had ever been before.

We know what horrors the first half of the twentieth century visited upon Europe. Some of us have become blasé or even cynical about liberty. Yet we should not underestimate that yearning for freedom. It can still topple tyrants. It can still inspire creative genius.

Chopin will always be associated with Poland and her struggle for freedom. With Poland at her most Romantic.

The state that had once been 'Poland' – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – had been dismembered by Russia, Austria and Prussia in 1795 – fifteen years before Chopin's birth in 1810. Only Polish culture could cross those arbitrary frontiers. As Norman Davies has written, '"Poland" was just an idea – a memory from the past, or a hope for the future'. So *Poland's* history in the nineteenth century should be sought 'in the world of the Polish spirit'.

At the heart of that defiant spirit was a love of liberty. In the nineteenth century, those who considered themselves Poles (to start with, most of them were nobles), faced the challenge of persuading the majority of the population (most of them peasants), that they too had a stake in the struggle for Polish freedom.

There is a saying with a grain of truth in it: while most countries abolished their nobilities, the Poles made everyone noble. This may explain why they address each other in the third person as 'Pan' and 'Pani' – 'Lord' and 'Lady'.

This undertaking succeeded only in part. Besides modern Poland, other successor nations emerged from the diverse peoples of the old Commonwealth, including Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and Israel. The Commonwealth's territories were rich in borderlands: where languages, religions, styles, tastes and flavours met.

Many of the greatest artists of nineteenth-century Polish culture came from such places. Adam Mickiewicz, for example, was of partly Jewish descent, was born in what is now Belarus, began his most famous poem with the line 'Lithuania, my fatherland', and never visited either Kraków or Warsaw.

In contrast, the countryside of Chopin's childhood, the Mazovian plain with its weeping willows, was less of a borderland. Yet Chopin too was a child of overlapping cultures. The name, admittedly, is a bit of a giveaway…

The *Chapin* family originally came from the high alpine passes between France and Savoy. Resettling in Lorraine as artisans, the name changed to *Chopin*. I understand that it has now changed to *ChoPint*...

Lorraine was certainly a borderland. In 1766 the last sovereign Duke of Lorraine (in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation), had died. He was King Stanisław Leszczyński, who had twice found the Polish throne an ejector seat worthy of James Bond's Aston Martin. In a complex international transaction, he was given Lorraine so that it could be inherited by his son-in-law, Louis XV.

Nicolas Chopin, Fryderyk's father, was born in 1771, five years after Lorraine became part of France. He received a better education than any of his Alpine ancestors. His talent was noticed by Adam Weydlich, who managed the estate of the exiled Polish-Lithuanian aristocrat Michał Pac. In 1787, the Weydlichs moved to Warsaw. Nicolas Chopin went with them.

Eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania, for all its well-publicized problems, was a land of opportunity. It became still more attractive in 1791, when a strikingly modern constitution opened up social and political advance to urban citizens.

In these heady times, Nicolas could begin to feel a Pole. He would strive to bring up his children – three daughters and a son – in this spirit. He fought and was wounded during the

1794 insurrection against Russia. The Commonwealth disappeared from the map the following year.

Nicolas took up various employments, but was most in demand as a superb teacher of French and as a tutor in the households of the Mazovian nobility.

It was at the home of the Skarbek family, at Żelazowa Wola, where Nicolas met his future wife, Tekla Justyna Krzyżanowska, a poor relative of the hosts. They shared a passion for music, and married in 1806. It proved a happy union.

In 1810, the year of Fryderyk's birth, Nicolas began to teach at Warsaw's finest secondary school. The Francophile tastes of Warsaw's elites gave the Chopins contacts in high places.

Fryderyk Chopin received an excellent general and musical education which enabled his prodigal talent to shine. Aged just eight, in 1818 he gave his first public charity concert, in what is now the palace of the President of Poland.

Three years earlier, the Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw had been replaced by a small, but relatively liberal 'Kingdom of Poland', whose ruler was Tsar Alexander I. Alexander was so delighted with the young pianist that he gave him a diamond ring. Chopin would later, in exile, reject the title of 'The First Pianist of His Imperial Majesty Tsar of Russia'.

By that time, the 'Kingdom of Poland' was just the name of a heavily policed province of the Russian Empire. Its autonomous institutions had been abolished by Tsar Nicholas I, following the defeat of the 1830-31 Polish rising. This had been provoked by violations of the Kingdom's constitution and fears that the Polish army would be sent to suppress the cause of liberty in Belgium.

Chopin had left Warsaw shortly before the outbreak of the rising. He had received many invitations to perform abroad. Travelling through Germany, where he learned of the failure of the rising, he finally settled in Paris.

There he won acclaim as a virtuoso performer, respected composer, and sought-after teacher. He matched his talent against Europe's finest, and was fêted by the public and the greatest artists of the age. He shared an unconventional love with the writer Aurore Dudevent, better known by her *nom de plume*, Georges Sand.

Despite his successes, Poland's tragedy profoundly marked Chopin's music. He adapted traditional genres such as polonaises and mazurkas. Contemporaries were swift to discern patriotism – as both cause and effect. His fellow composer Robert Schumann wrote in 1836 that 'If the mighty autocrat of the North [that is, the tsar] knew what a dangerous enemy threatened him in Chopin's works, in the simple melodies of his mazurkas, he would forbid this music. Chopin's works are guns buried in flowers.'

Schumann was part of the *Polenwelle*, a wave of solidarity with the embattled Polish nation that swept through the German lands in the 1830s. But by 1848, the year Chopin gave his last concert (in London, to support Polish émigrés), Polish and German national aspirations clashed. The 'Spring of Nations' was over when Chopin died in Paris, probably of tuberculosis, on 17 October 1849.

Fryderyk Chopin may not have expected that his music would symbolize the cause of Polish freedom for more than a century and a half to come. It was not banned by the empires which partitioned the Commonwealth. Yet when played during the First World War by the virtuoso pianist and composer, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, it helped to convince many Americans, including President Woodrow Wilson, to support the restoration of a Polish state in 1918.

Chopin was, however, banned by the Third Reich, after it invaded and partitioned Poland with the Soviet Union in September 1939. Public performances of his music risked imprisonment or death.

It was intolerable to the Nazis that Slav *Untermenschen*, destined for slave labour, and for mass starvation after the extermination of the Jews, could have any high culture at all.

On the personal order of the Governor General, Hans Frank, on 31 May 1940 the magnificent monument to Fryderyk Chopin, unveiled in 1926 in the Royal Łazienki Park in Warsaw, was blown up and the remains were cut into pieces using gas burners. The Germans also destroyed copies of the monument, trying to prevent its potential reconstruction. It was finally replaced in 1958.

Chopin continued to symbolize Poland's aspirations to freedom, not least when played by great Polish-Jewish pianists such as Artur Rubinstein and Władysław Szpilman.

Szpilman survived the Warsaw Ghetto. Playing Chopin's nocturne in C-sharp minor helped to persuade a German officer to save his life. When Szpilman gave his first concert for Polish radio after the war, he again played the nocturne in C-sharp minor. This was the same piece he had been playing when German bombs interrupted his live broadcast on 23 September 1939.

So the significance of Chopin's music for Polish culture and national identity is immense. But Chopin is no isolated case. Many nations have their own great Romantic composer, whose music has sustained national awareness and pride.

So it is for Czechs and Dvořák, Finns and Sibelius, Norwegians and Grieg, or Hungarians and Liszt. Each adapted elements of the folk music that surrounded them. Each also encountered other European national cultures and the cream of the world's talent. Their genius synthesized the local and the national with the universal.

Seventeen days ago, welcoming you to Natolin, Madam Vice-Rector quoted the poet Cyprian Norwid on Fryderyk Chopin: 'By family a Varsovian, in heart a Pole, and by talent a citizen of the world.'

Students of the Chopin promotion, I bid you welcome to Warsaw and welcome to Poland. The world awaits your talents.