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BIOGRAPHY

Chopin's Heart: The Quest to Identify the Mysterious Illness of the World's Most Beloved Composer
Steven Lagerberg
CreateSpace
978-1-4564-0296-9
Four Stars (out of Five)

“The archetypal composer of the Romantic Age” is how Steven Lagerberg adoringly describes Frederic Chopin in this lovingly crafted, meticulously researched, and generously illustrated book. Despite the title, this is no dry physician’s postulating postmortem. While the last third of the book does resemble something of a medical paper, albeit one mercifully rewritten for the layman, it is the first one-hundred pages that truly engage and delight the reader.

Retired physician, amateur musicologist, piano enthusiast, and great admirer of the nineteenth-century Polish composer, Lagerberg knows his subject—and his subject matter. The author’s medical training informs his engrossing study of Chopin’s life—and work—through the prism of the artist’s lengthy and eventually fatal illness.

Lagerberg is not the first to delve into the arguments and mysteries over which of many suspected maladies brought Chopin’s young life to a close in 1849. The presumptions of scientists and doctors both past and present are presented, along with Lagerberg’s own observations and conclusions.

Whether Chopin succumbed to tuberculosis (then called “consumption” because it “consumed from within”) as his own doctors believed, or cystic fibrosis, as more modern pathologists suspect, is a question Lagerberg weighs.

In many ways, *Chopin's Heart* is not one work but two: a biography and a paper for a medical journal. Bonding them together is a dramatically riveting segue to the journey taken by Chopin's heart. Cut from his fresh corpse in Paris pursuant to his dying request, the heart was preserved in alcohol (rumored to be fine French cognac), smuggled past Tsarist border guards into then Russian-occupied Poland, and later interned in a church in Warsaw. Much revered by Poles, a century later it became part of the drama of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. That story involves a Nazi SS general, a Catholic archbishop, and others in a cast of characters worthy of an adventure novel.

"My investigation into the identity of Chopin's illness has only served to heighten my appreciation for both the man and his music," writes Lagerberg. "I find it truly breathtaking that he was able to continue to compose his masterpieces despite his prolonged and repeated episodes of serious illness." The author aims to show that, while "illness spares no idols," it also may provide the desperate spark of artistic creation—and set fire to a soul that refuses to "go gentle into that good night."

Lagerberg also believes that modern medicine can learn from a better and final diagnosis of whatever did kill the famous composer. "Chopin certainly changed the course of Classical music," notes Lagerberg, "but now can his heart also have an impact on scientific discovery?"

The author tries very hard to bring lay readers along on that journey of discovery, yet here is where many may fall by the wayside. The last third of the book is a different and more difficult read. While far from a dry clinical study, Lagerberg has had to set aside the passionate prose of the music lover for the more workmanlike language of the physician.

Regardless of the answer to the mystery of Chopin's death, as the author points out, "his heart's long journey may not yet be over."

Mark G. McLaughlin