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## Poles throw bicentennial bash for Chopin

Poland throws bicentennial bash for Chopin, celebrating him as nation's greatest treasure

VANESSA GERA  
AP News

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The stirring strains of [Frederic Chopin's](#) music are reverberating across the world as music lovers celebrate the composer's 200th birthday this year — from the chateau of his French lover to [Egypt's](#) pyramids and even into space.

But nowhere do celebrations carry the powerful sense of national feeling that they do in Poland, the land of his birth, where his heroic, tragic piano compositions are credited with capturing the essence of the country's soul.

Poland is going all out to display its best "product," as officials bluntly put it, staging bicentennial concerts and other events in and around [Warsaw](#), the city where the composer — known here as Fryderyk Chopin — spent the first half of his life.

"Fryderyk Chopin is a Polish icon," said [Andrzej Sulek](#), director of the [Fryderyk Chopin Institute](#) in Warsaw. "In Polish culture there is no other figure who is as well-known in the world and who represents Polish culture so well."

Perhaps nothing better conveys Chopin's importance — literally — than his heart. It is preserved like a relic in an urn of alcohol in a Warsaw church, encased within a pillar with the Biblical inscription: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Just before his death at 39 from what was probably tuberculosis, a coughing and choking Chopin, fearful of being buried alive, asked that his heart be separated from his body and returned to his beloved homeland. His body is buried at the [Pere Lachaise](#) cemetery in [Paris](#), where Chopin spent the second half of his life.

Finding it unseemly, Polish authorities have repeatedly rebuffed scientists wanting to run DNA tests on Chopin's heart to explore a suspicion that he actually succumbed to cystic fibrosis, a disease not yet discovered in his day.

Sulek said Poland might one day agree but would rather have the world focus on the genius's life, not his death, during this bicentennial year.

Chopin was born in 1810 at a country estate in Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, to a Polish mother and French emigre father. Historical sources suggest two possible dates of birth — either Feb. 22, as noted in church records, or March 1, which was mentioned in letters between him and his mother and is considered the more probable date.

Since no one is sure, Poland is marking both. A series of concerts in Warsaw and Zelazowa Wola will take place over those eight days featuring such world-class musicians as [Daniel Barenboim](#), [Evgeny Kissin](#), [Garrick Ohlsson](#), [Martha Argerich](#) and [Krystian Zimerman](#).

Then, a refurbished museum opens in Warsaw on March 1 displaying Chopin's personal letters and musical manuscripts along with a multimedia narration of his life.

Celebrations span the globe, from music-loving [Austria](#) to concerts at [Cairo's](#) pyramids and across Asia, where his following is huge.

The astronauts who blasted into orbit on the Endeavor space shuttle Feb. 8 carried with them a CD of Chopin's music and a copy of a manuscript of his Prelude Opus 28, No. 7 — gifts from the Polish government.

The Endeavor commander, [George Zamka](#), who has Polish roots, told the Polish news agency PAP ahead of his trip to the International Space Station that listening to Chopin in space would enhance the majesty of the cosmos.

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"Chopin is universal," said [Mariusz Brymora](#), a Foreign Ministry official who helped put Chopin's music in space. "We are convinced that Chopin is Poland's best brand, Poland's best product. There is nothing else like him."

In [France](#), Chopin is valued as "the composer who ushered in the age of great French music," according to [Adam Zamoyski](#), historian and author of the new biography "Chopin: Prince of the Romantics."

Chopin's entire musical output, about 15 hours worth all together, will be played by some 60 pianists at the end of February in the central French city of Chateauroux and in Paris in an event entitled "Happy Birthday Mr. Chopin." The program will be filmed and later shown on French television.

And the small chateau in Nohant of Chopin's famous companion for eight years, feminist writer Amandine Aurore Lucile Dupin — best known by her nom de plume [George Sand](#) — has been fixed up and will host three weeks of concerts in June. Chopin wrote some of his masterpieces at that inspirational spot in central France.

Poland's parliament has formally declared 2010 to be the "Year of Chopin," and officials in Warsaw feel his Polishness must be stressed because many non-Poles still associate him primarily with France.

Chopin always had a strong Polish identity. He surrounded himself with Poles in France whenever he could and never felt fully comfortable with the French language.

The matter touches a nerve in Poland, which has more often than not been controlled by foreign powers over the past two centuries — most recently during the decades of [Moscow](#)-imposed communist rule thrown off in 1989. Poles don't want to lose credit for Chopin, a genius whose universal appeal is even greater than that of [Pope John Paul II](#) and [Lech Walesa](#) — at least according to Brymora.

In Chopin's day, Poland was partitioned by [Russia](#), Prussia and Austria and did not exist as a state. In 1830, soon after Chopin embarked on a tour of Europe, an uprising broke out in Warsaw against its Russian rulers. It was put down with brutality, and a period of Russian repression followed that sent many other Polish artists into exile.

Chopin never returned mainly because it would have been "regarded as a betrayal of the others who were in exile," Zamoyski said. "Many of them couldn't return without facing prison — or worse, death."

Poles hear in his music a deep nostalgia for his homeland, and stress the Polish elements in his oeuvre — particularly in his Polonaises and Mazurkas, styles rooted in Polish folk music.

[Halina Goldberg](#), author of "Music in Chopin's Warsaw," said that even before Chopin's death in 1849, Poles turned to his art to preserve a sense of their nationhood.

But others have also claimed him — Germans have said his music falls into the tradition of German Romanticism; Russians call him a Slavic genius.

"There is always a question of how much Polishness is in his music," Goldberg, a music professor at [Indiana University](#), said. "Much of it is in the ear of the beholder."

Certainly [Nazi Germany](#), which occupied Poland during World War II, heard something subversive and banned it. The Nazis were clearly aware of what German composer [Robert Schumann](#), also born in 1810, called Chopin's "cannons hidden beneath flowers."

"As Chopin was one of the rallying points of Polish identity, it was just one more thing that needed to be forbidden and destroyed," Zamoyski said.

After his death, Chopin was eulogized movingly by the Polish poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid, who wrote that: "In the crystal of his own harmony he gathered the tears of the Polish people strewn over the fields, and placed them as the diamond of beauty in the diadem of humanity."

Now that Poland is again independent, it can savor that beauty without the tears.

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[Associated Press](#) Writer Deborah Seward in Paris contributed to this report.

**Source:** [AP News](#)

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