

« Why did Niecks write Chopin's biography? »

by Jens A. Jorgensen

THE LIFE OF CHOPIN: FREDERICK CHOPIN AS A MAN AND MUSICIAN by Frederick Niecks became “a model for all biographies” (*The Monthly Musical Record*, 1924). It is still an important reference for Chopin scholars. It was published by Novello, Ewer & Co. in both London and New York in 1888, 1890 and 1902; and by F.E.C. Leuckart in Leipzig in 1890. The 720 pages of the two-volume blue-cover biography, with a portrait of Chopin by Teofil Kwiatkowski opposite the title page, provide a meticulous review of the composer's entire life and a detailed and highly complimentary analysis of his work.



Niecks defended Chopin's music

Born in Düsseldorf, Frederick Niecks (1845-1924) studied violin, piano and composition at the University of Leipzig. He moved at the age of 23 to Dumfries in Scotland, where he worked as church organist, music teacher and chamber artist. In a letter to the editor of *The Monthly Musical Record* on 1 July 1875 regarding the ranking of “the great names”, Niecks defends Chopin and Schumann as “the most striking musical individualists of this century”. Afterwards, he became a regular contributor to the periodical on mainly Schumann, Weber and Schubert – ‘thereby earning a few guineas to supplement his other income’.¹



In 1879, Niecks began to work on the biography of Chopin. Its preface is highly critical of earlier monographs by Franz Liszt, M.A. Szulc, and Moritz Karasowki. He divides his “chief sources of information” in two groups: publications and correspondences; and conversations with Chopin's pupils, friends and acquaintances. It was published in 1888.

In 1891, Niecks became Reid professor of music at the University of Edinburgh, and he retired in 1914. The above periodical wrote in 1915 that the biography had “indirectly led to” this position. While praising Niecks' career, it also observed: “His whole professional life has been one long big accident” ... including “the manner in which he first came to be regarded as the greatest living authority on Chopin”. Niecks' only other biography, *Robert Schumann* was published by his wife in 1925 (350 pages). It raises the **question** how come Niecks as a young free-lance violinist-organist earlier had the capacity to complete the comprehensive 10-year Chopin project.

Novello an unlikely publisher

In London, biographies of the great Austrian, German and Italian composers were in 1875-1900 typically published as booklets. Sampson & Company's extensive series, for example, did not include Chopin. Niecks acknowledges in his biography that Chopin is “not a compeer of Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven” (II, 331). Novello were recognized for their vast series of popular, inexpensive vocal scores of oratorios and choral works (the whole Novello family were singers). Their monographs of Mozart (1882) and Bach (1884-1885) by such prominent scholars as Otto Jahn and Philipp Spitta were only translations. It took 12 years after 1884 for Novello to publish the second edition of their compact single-volume Beethoven monograph of 407 pages, written by the distinguished Sir George Grove.

Novello presented Niecks' biography in a full-page advertisement in their own *The Musical Times* on 1 January 1889. However, an overview of this quarterly's editorial coverage in 1844-1900 (by Edward Clinkscale in 1994-1995) makes no reference to Chopin, only to national composers and to “sacred and secular works of foreign composers such as Berlioz, Gounod, Verdi, Brahms and Dvořák”.

¹ Dr Christopher D.S. Field, Honorary Fellow, University of Edinburgh, kindly provided information in September and October 2004 on Niecks' life and work in Scotland. Other sources include the University of Edinburgh; publications specified in this essay; many composer monographs published in London during the 1875-1900 period and acquired for the purpose of this essay; and Icons of Europe's research findings reviewed at the expert roundtable and press conference hosted by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute on 1 March 2004 at the Warsaw Philharmonic.

Given the musical culture in Britain at the time and the nature of Novello's business, it seems **strange** that Novello: (i) invested in a 10-year scholarly Chopin project with a highly uncertain commercial potential; (ii) entrusted a young free-lance and relatively unknown German violinist-organist with this huge task (in English); (iii) and published the biography simultaneously in London and New York twice in rapid succession, and had it so quickly translated for Leipzig.

Jenny Lind a chief source

Niecks names Jenny Lind (1820-1887) as a "chief source of information" in the preface of the biography (I, viii). He refers briefly to her seeing Chopin in London. In one of the few but guarded quotes by her, he recalls her saying that Chopin impressed her "not only as an artist, but also as a man", ... that "he could not but have been right in the Sand affair", and that she "visited him" in Paris (II, 284).²



Jenny Lind had married in 1852 and settled in London in 1858. She knew the Novello family well since 1847. Around the time Niecks got started on his biography, she commissioned her own comprehensive monograph, *JENNY LIND – THE ARTIST: MEMOIR 1820-1851*, written by H.S. Holland and W.S. Rockstro and edited by her German husband Otto Goldschmidt (1829-1907). It is "Dedicated by gracious permission to Her Majesty the Queen".



The 930-page two-volume blue-cover book, with a portrait of Jenny Lind next to the title page, was published in 1891 (by Murray, Scribner's and Brockhaus) in one go in London, New York and Leipzig – the same three cities where Chopin's biography had appeared shortly before. It makes a cross-reference to Chopin's letter of 11 May 1848 in Niecks' book. An abridged edition was issued in New York in 1893. Niecks' publisher, Novello published the *Memoir's* chapter XI of vol. II and its Appendix of Music as a separate booklet in 1894 in both London and New York.

Jenny Lind had since 1849 continued to commemorate Chopin in various ways. She sang an arrangement of his mazurkas twice for Queen Victoria in 1855-1856 and had later a concert tour in former Poland. As a "chief source of information", she could pay a lasting tribute and at the same time ensure that Niecks' book and her own *Memoir 1820-1851* would match each other on her secret relationship with Chopin in 1848-1849.



Did she not go further?

Jenny Lind went perhaps further than just being a chief source of information. That is, she could well have **commissioned** Niecks' biography of Chopin, without Niecks necessarily being aware of her identity as patron. This conclusion is supported by the limited resources of Niecks and the lack of a normal business rationale for Novello; as well as by her strong motives, her well-known philanthropy, her sense for symbolism and grand schemes, the striking similarity and timing of the biography and her own memoir, and her many contacts in Britain, Germany and the United States.

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IMAGES: Chopin by Teofil Kwiatkowski, "etching after a charming pencil drawing in my [Niecks'] possession" (II, 344), opposite title page of vol. I of the biography; Frederick Niecks, Reid Professor, University of Edinburgh; Jenny Lind in her final year of 1887, woodcut, *The Illustrated London News*; Queen Victoria in an 1885 photo; and the only found letter in which Jenny Lind specifically names Chopin: "Meinen Sie vielleicht Chopin mit dem Verlust den ich – und auch Sie in diesen Tagen erlebt sollen? Gott! Ich habe wirklich so vielen lieben Freunde verloren, dass ich auch alles gefasst bin!" (9 November 1849), The Royal Library, Stockholm, 2003.

² Europe-wide research revealed in 2003 that Jenny Lind, the Swedish soprano, megastar and philanthropist, travelled in May 1849, with the knowledge of Queen Victoria, incognito to Paris in an unsuccessful attempt to marry Chopin. Jenny Lind made all along made an elaborate cover-up of her relationship with Chopin.