

Nocturne

Dearest Anne, I am writing to you in such misery tonight. Whether the clock has struck two or three I do not know, but there is not a half hour's light left in this poor candle stub. Becky, the little servant girl (God bless her), smuggled it up to me and I dare not go in search of another lest I be discovered - for I fear then they will take away my piano forever. Oh Anne, what a state has befallen me - I am locked in a garret with strict orders not to be disturbed. Disturbed! - as if external stillness could calm this raging fury - but then the good doctors don't account for that - I believe they don't think it can exist, they don't think anything can exist inside of a woman, they think we are all beautiful empty shells waiting to be filled with their dreams and desires - but I do run on. Surely you will soon agree that I am quite mad - and you mustn't! Anne you must believe me when I tell you I am of clear, lucid mind as I write to you this blackest of nights.

But let me go back, in an orderly fashion. You recall the last time we had the pleasure of a visit. I had come to see Mr. Liszt to request a copy of the Field nocturnes. Well of course he wouldn't see me, so I left

the request with his man. It was never answered. Then quite a while later, Lord Ashbury - what a name, have you ever considered it? ash and bury - Lord Ashbury gallantly presented me with the complete edition. He thought he was doing me such a pretty favour - which he was - and expected my gratitude and rapt attention in return - but it irked me that he, who knows nothing about music, should have his request attended to, while I had been virtually ignored. And besides the man is such an irritation.

Indeed, one day he laughed so heartily - I didn't realize he had come into the parlour, I was concentrating on my finger crossings - he laughed when he saw me stumbling over and over crossing finger three over four and two. With much condescension he announced that finger two crosses over finger one, as if I had got it all confused and backward. Well - I stood up, slammed the piano shut, and said maybe his fingers couldn't cross three over, but mine, well prepared by hours of petit-pointe could and would! And they shall, sister, they must, if I am to play this new nocturne of mine as it must be played!

But I am so tired - not because of these late nights spent writing, nor because of the hours of concentrated

practice, but because of the bickering and fighting just to be excused from garden parties, and afternoon strolls, and yes, petit-pointe, so I can work on my art - that is what is so exhausting. Oh how I wish I could spend more time - I need more time - but, well, you know mother. She is so upset with the time already spent practising, she tells me over and over I can play well enough, and certainly Lord Ashbury is delighted - well enough for whom, I demand, I do not want to delight Lord Ashbury or any other Lord - but they cannot understand. When I do play for guests, she criticizes me for not being a gracious host because I refuse to play their requests (but do you know what they ask for?), and she thinks it's perfectly insulting when I play on and on oblivious of their presence, their polite applause, or when I suddenly stop in the middle of a piece to make a note of something I hadn't realized before - In short, my intensity is embarrassing.

But back to Field. His nocturnes are beautiful - but in a pretty sort of way - really they are such stunted silly little things. But I suppose he can't be faulted for that (even though he studied with Clementi, played before Haydn - oh what I'd give for chances like that) - for what does he know of the night? For him it is a time of rest, a time of serenity and peace of mind, a time of semi-

consciousness. But we know the night. The night - the real night - belongs to women. Profit, power, and idle curiosity are the fathers of invention, but necessity - necessity is the mother of invention. It is no accident that the person first to discover that tallow on a string could burn, could give light to the night, was a woman. No accident at all. For it is in the night that our sentence of self-sacrifice (if we be wives and mothers) and artifice (if we are not) is suspended - it is a time to put down our irons and pots, our smiles and hairpins, and take up the work close to our souls. The night is vitalizing - vital! Our minds are not anaesthetized but bursting forth in full consciousness, in searing awareness. Oh, it is beautiful and peaceful, yes, but in a fiery bright kind of way, and the stillness is that of a roaring silence.

But all of this brings me no nearer to my miserable state of confinement. Let me go on. You may have heard that Liszt's latest 'friend' is a young man from Poland, named Chopin. And perhaps you were aware of the concert he arranged featuring himself (of course) and this Chopin. (He would never consider befriending me - he will never arrange a concert introducing me to society - though he knows I'm good enough, and though, God knows, I've tried to make his acquaintance - his fancy is

caught instead by some young foreigner.) Well of course I had to go to the concert. After all, if Liszt is sponsoring him, he must be good - in fact, he studied at the conservatory in Warsaw (another chance I'll never have). Even if he is not good, one always learns something from others to further one's own work. And, these concerts are my only chance to meet other musicians (though I know the only reason I am allowed to attend is because mother sees concerts as social events not musical events - and she knows people like Lord Ashbury will be there - all of which irritates me because I know I'll be treated not as a fellow musician but as a social fixture). But quite apart from all of that, it has been said that Chopin has picked up where Field left off - which of course interests me greatly.

I must write in haste now, so I shall not tell you who was there, what they were wearing, and what the talk was about - besides, that bores both of us and of course it's not at all important. What is important is what happened.

Anne, I'm not sure what came over me, but near the end of the concert I began to cry. The music was so beautiful - this Chopin, he can write - if I could have heard these pieces, studied them but a few months ago, I

would've been saved much time in my own development - he can write - but then I thought, so can I. And there I was a mere spectator in the audience while I knew so well that my place should be up there at the keyboard. I started to shake and I could not stop. Chopin has gone beyond Field, but only a little of the way. There is so much further to go, and my nocturnes will never be heard. Neither Liszt nor anyone else will ever take me seriously - they find women charming, and that's it. Charming! No one would call Chopin's nocturnes charming! Oh no, they call them passionate! But he doesn't know what the word means - let them listen to me! Do they really know what a nocturne is? A nocturne is restless beauty, it is melancholy and depression of the darkest kind, it is the very soul of the night! Like Field, Chopin's chords are not broken, they are merely taken apart and presented one note at a time - but a broken chord, Anne, a really broken chord must sound broken, it must sound wounded - it must lie there on the staff in pieces.

Then of course there was an awful fuss over me, people fretting about, making much ado. When they went to loosen my stays, lest I faint, well you can imagine the shock dear mother got when she discovered I wasn't wearing a corset - 'in a public place, you should be

ashamed of yourself!' - I haven't worn a corset in months and months, why you can't play a piano if every time you lean forward a bit it bites into you, and of course they all think I'm some sort of hussy now. They all think lots of things now. Some maintain I was simply moved by the sensitivity of the music - I expect Chopin loves that one. Liszt, of course, just declared it the frailty of women and suggested we be allowed to attend only the few pieces immediately preceding the cakes and ices - which sent me into another rage. Some of the women, if you can believe this, claim I was upset because Liszt introduced Chopin to Aurore (you surely remember Mme. Dudevant) and not to me.

But of course, the final diagnosis was that I was suffering from hysteria. The doctor prescribed total rest and total isolation - which brings me to how I am now, to how I've always been, to how I probably always shall be - raging in the black night, my candle sputtering, totally confined.

love, Amelia