

## JULIAN FONTANA

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Many say that all composers should be heard, and their neglect is both unfair and unjustified.

One can sympathise with this concept but, on the other hand, there is music which is very poor and may not merit performances or a valid interest and, I suppose this is a matter of opinion, but the music of Julian Fontana may be a case to consider.

He came from a family of Italian architects who had moved to Poland in the 18th century and so Julian was born in Warsaw on 31 July 1810. He was a student of Warsaw Grammar School where he became a friend of Chopin which influenced his life and music which became an unhealthy obsession. With Chopin, he attended the Warsaw Conservatory but, in 1828, studied at the Law and Administration Institute.

In November 1830, there was the unsuccessful political uprising and Fontana became a second lieutenant in the artillery following which he moved to Paris taking lessons from Chopin. Chopin was never an easy man to deal with being arrogant and lazy, bad tempered and anti-Semitic and Fontana may have lived in fear of him.

Fontana settled in London in 1833 and worked as a concert pianist and piano teacher but returned to Paris in 1835 and lived with his hero, Chopin, becoming his private secretary and copyist. Fontana composed piano music for which he had difficulties finding publishers. His music is cheap salon music often in the style of Chopin and lacking an original voice.

Always a restless man, Fontana was unable to stay in any one place for long. He went to Cuba in 1844 and it was not long before he became the director of the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra and introduced the piano music of Chopin there which was merely regarded as a curiosity. He met a married woman Camila Delcour and was besotted with her but there were problems and Fontana moved to New York where he performed at concerts and with the violinist Camillo Savori who had been taught by a pupil of Paganini.

In 1849, his beloved Chopin died of consumption. He also had the mental illness of manic depression as many have testified.

From that date, and in the last twenty years of his life, Fontana had many problems which ended in tragedy. In 1850, he married Camila and they went to Paris to live but she died in 1855. She was the one with the money but died without leaving a will and so Fontana received nothing. Her family took charge of her children from her marriage and her illegitimate child with Fontana who then began a major project on editing Chopin's work. There were so many errors, and there is still a legion of errors in the Polonaise-Fantasia Op 61. In the first four pages I listed twenty errors.

Severe back pain and deafness now blighted Fontana's life. Music was, in effect, taken away from him and to earn income he turned to literary work including a translation of Cervantes.

By inhaling carbon dioxide he took his own life on Christmas Eve 1869.

Some of his problems may be self-inflicted and, in suggesting this, I am not being judgmental. His restlessness, involvement with a married woman created difficulties (it always does) and living in the shadow of Chopin did not help him. It pays to be pioneer not a disciple.

I still feel that his music is poor but then there is so much piano music that is exemplary. But, as always, it is up to each individual to decide.

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