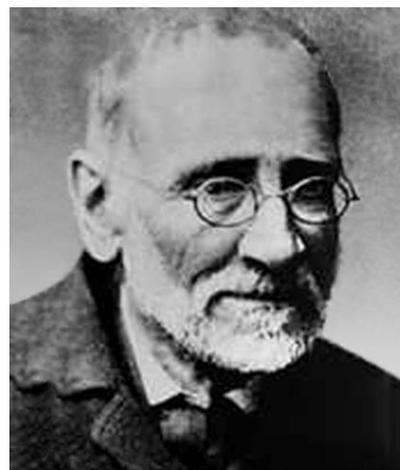


## OSKAR KOLBERG

David C F Wright PhD

Oskar Kolberg is best known for his excellent studies of folklore and his monumental work, *The People, Their Customs, Way of Life, Speech, Folktales, Proverbs, Rites, Witchcraft, Games, Songs, Music and Dances*. It is a work that has no equal.

He was born on 2 February 1814 in Przysucha Poland, and was the son of Juliusz, a professor at Warsaw University. Oskar became something of a composer in that composing was not his priority. He did, however, become a concert pianist in order to raise funds for his literary work.



He studied music in Berlin in 1835-6 with Karl Friedrich Girschner and K Rungenhagen having previously completed a course with Elsner and Dobrzynski. Kolberg originally wrote many songs and little piano pieces but few were published. His song ballad, *The Talisman*, came out in 1836 closely followed by his *Valse for piano*, a predictable and uninspiring work.

Most of his works were for piano and often set in traditional Polish dance forms and these works came into great demand and were eagerly published. By the 1850s, he was writing songs and some dramatic works including *Two Pictures from the Lives of Common People* which had unenthusiastic receptions because of their lack of quality and they were not original. By 1859, he had more or less stopped composing.

His works are mainly salon music as was Chopin's. Kolberg knew Chopin's father Nicholas. It is the Chopinesque style of Kolberg's music that makes his music predictable and totally unoriginal. So much of it is in 3/4 and, therefore, waltz time, with irritating tinkling at the top of the piano. As someone said of Chopin, " Does he know that the piano has a bass ?

It has been said that Kolberg inherited Chopin's perfection. This is the sort of banal remark that one often hears. The *Six Polonaises Op 1* are very close to Chopin and some have melodies and, occasionally, rhythmic drive but is so familiar and tedious.

I have never understood why some sonatas are called grande as is Kolberg's *Grande Sonata for piano Op 3*. Its only redeeming feature is that it shows some influence of Beethoven, possibly the first of the great composers for the piano. There are the usual pianistic clichés, a minuet, an adagio recalling Beethoven's *Pathétique Op 13*, which Oskar often played, and a finale which is a military march. The *Six Kujawskis Op 12* are not difficult but predictable and boring.

He died in Krakow on 3 June 1890.

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