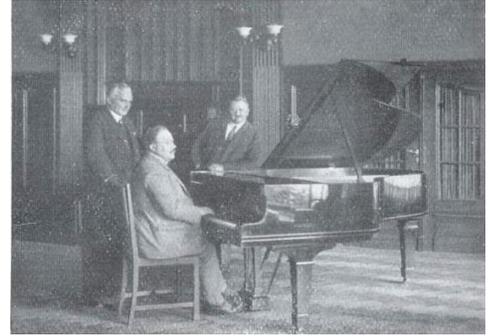


RAOUL KOCZALSKI

David C F Wright PhD

Raoul Koczalski was born in Warsaw on 3 January 1884.

His first piano lessons were from his mother, but he soon took instruction from Julian Gadowski. He made his debut at the age of four in 1888 at a private salon in Warsaw and immediately embarked on a tour of Russia, playing sixty concerts between September 1888 and April 1889. During one tour, he met and played for Anton Rubinstein who was greatly impressed.



Koczalski was, of course, acclaimed as a child prodigy, and by the age of seven had composed forty-six works. At the age of eleven, by which time he was playing the standard repertoire of Chopin and Liszt, he had given over one thousand concerts. Aged nine, he had conducted his own *Légende Symphonique* both in Berlin and Leipzig and was playing the first movement of Beethoven's *Waldstein Sonata Op. 53* in a recital. One reviewer referred to the fact that Koczalski had studied it with Hans von Bülow. The same year Koczalski played Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 2* in Hamburg.

It is sometimes difficult to believe that such a young person is so talented.

In 1891, Koczalski moved to Lemberg where he had some brief lessons with Ludwig Marek a few months before his death. He also had lessons in instrumentation from Henryk Jarecki. Marek was a pupil of both Liszt and Mikuli, and upon Marek's death Koczalski studied for four summers with Karl Mikuli (1821–1897), a pupil of Chopin. Koczalski wrote about these lessons in a book published in 1936. Most important to the young boy was the way in which Mikuli analysed the works that they studied together, revealing their spiritual and architectural qualities.

One wonders what spiritual qualities Chopin's music had or has. It seems a totally ridiculous comment.

Every aspect of playing the piano was addressed by Mikuli: 'Strictly based on Chopin's method, his teaching was so revolutionary that even today it commands all my admiration...' Koczalski said. He went on to say that Mikuli stressed above all '...the care for authenticity with which Chopin's works must be approached. Here there is no camouflage, no cheap rubato and no languishing or useless contortions.' Sadly, Chopin is played in an emotional and effeminate way today which does not enhance his mediocre salon music which is full of tedious clichés and tinkling cascades.

On 10 May 1893, the eight-year-old Koczalski '...who has created so great a sensation in Berlin, Vienna and other continental cities' made his debut at Prince's Hall in London and by 21 June was giving his fourth London recital in St James's Hall. In 1895, he gave five recitals of Chopin's music at the Salle Érard in Paris where critics compared him to Anton Rubinstein although this comparison was extremism.

Koczalski made the transition from boy wonder to finished artist remarkably well and his early experiences do not seem to have affected his later life. During his teens, he was appointed court pianist to the Shah of Persia. Between the wars, he established himself as one of the foremost interpreters of Chopin and, on his return to London in November 1924, he gave a series of four recitals of Chopin's music.

But his over preoccupation with Chopin did him no favours and he was typecast.

It is never wise for a pianist to devote himself almost exclusively to the works of one composer.

After commenting on the fact that Koczalski used music for the whole performance, a critic continued, 'M. Koczalski is a player of quite exceptional powers (he can do with a Chopin scale or ornament what only Pachmann at his best could do with it)... it soon became clear that he is no more superior to the gloss on the text or the pitfalls of personal interpretation than other performers are. His are different from those of other performers, but often quite as unlike what Chopin wrote, which is probably a good thing. To play Chopin as written reveals so many failures in the music.

Koczalski lived for many years in Berlin, but, after World War II, he returned to Poland where he was professor at the National Music School in Poznań. In October 1947, he played in Warsaw for the first time since the war and chose Chopin's maudlin E minor Piano Concerto Op. 11. The following year, he made preparations for the centenary of Chopin's death but after concerts in Berlin, Dresden, Zürich and Munich, he gave his last concert in Poznań in November 1948. He left 150 published works including three operas, six piano concertos, a violin concerto, chamber music, eight piano sonatas and twenty-four *préludes* dedicated to the memory of Chopin.

Although Koczalski made a few acoustic discs recorded in Poland after World War II, his main series of recordings were made in Germany in the late 1930s for Polydor. After his lessons with Mikuli, Koczalski had no other teacher, whereas Mikuli's two other famous pupils made recordings namely Moriz Rosenthal and Aleksander Michalowski who, both studied with other masters; and it may be true to say that Koczalski's recordings of Chopin are the closest we shall hear to the style the composer envisaged. which contradicts other opinions. Koczalski recorded much of the Polish composer's output including the complete *études*, *préludes* and ballades, three of the *impromptus*, some nocturnes, polonaises and the B flat minor Scherzo.

The most notable feature of Koczalski's playing is said to be its clarity and transparency. It is the opposite of the Leschetizky school of arm-weight and big tone production. In the *études* he plays with very little sustaining pedal, particularly in Op. 25 No. 1 and No. 11. He does not play the *études* as vehicles for display, nor as exercises, but plays them as music, the only exception being Op. 10 No. 12 which is delivered in a more Romantic style. The later recording of Chopin's *Berceuse* Op. 57 is a model of delicacy and clearly demonstrates Mikuli's stricture for no cheap *rubato* or languishing, whilst the recording of the *Nocturne* in E flat Op. 9 No. 2 may be of particular interest as it contains 'authentic variants', said to be written into Mikuli's score by Chopin himself.

All of Koczalski's Chopin recordings could be of interest to some and to those devoted to Chopin and a radio broadcast from Berlin in 1948 has survived of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor Op. 21, conducted by Celibidache. Solo pieces by Paderewski, Anton Rubinstein, Mussorgsky, Scriabin, Szymanowski and Bartók also exist from radio broadcasts and have been issued on compact disc by Archiphon.

He died in Poznan on 24 November 1948.

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