

Music and trauma in Polanski's *The pianist* (2002)¹

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In 1946, the celebrated 35-year-old Polish composer and pianist Władysław Szpilman wrote his memoir, *Death of a city*, in which he recounts his traumatic ordeal during the Nazi occupation of Poland. With melancholic remove, he tells of the atrocities and lacerating indignities perpetrated upon him, his family and their community, and the capricious alchemy of indominability and improbability which together permitted his survival in hiding but which extinguished his entire family along with half a million other Jews in Warsaw.

Almost immediately withdrawn from circulation by Polish factions of the Stalin regime, Szpilman's book languished in relative obscurity for decades. Not until Szpilman's son Andrzej shepherded the manuscript to translation and republication did it finally appear in English, in the late 1990s, retitled *The pianist: The extraordinary story of one man's survival in Warsaw, 1939–1945*.

As adapted for the screen by Ronald Harwood, Szpilman's book is the basis of the Palme d'Or and Academy Award-winning film *The pianist* (2002) directed by Roman Polanski, himself a child survivor of the 1939 German occupation of Krakow. Film adaptations of pre-existing literary works often require deviations from the original text to oblige both the demands of movie storytelling and the narrative vision of the director. Film is also a narrative medium that occupies time and space differently from the written word. The divergences and discontinuities between book and film—compressions, expansions, distortions, additions and omissions—will invariably be grounded in an amalgam of directorial sensibility, production and budget considerations, studio politics, and the real logistical implications of transposing one aesthetic modality, writing, to another, the kinetic amalgam of sight and sound known as film. In this particular instance, with uncanny if unwitting prescience, Szpilman provided Polanski and Harwood liberating guidance, if not tacit permission, to make certain alterations, writing that:

as I look back on other, more terrible memories, my experiences of the Warsaw ghetto, a period of almost two years, merge into a single image as if they had lasted only a single day. Hard as I try, I cannot break it up into smaller sections that would impose some chronological order on it, as you usually do when writing a journal ([1946] 1999, p. 61).

At heart, then, this film can be understood as the titration of one man's Holocaust experience by way of another's. And so, in this regard, Polanski's *Pianist*

¹Revised, expanded version of a paper presented, with recorded musical examples, at the 2nd European Psychoanalytic Film Festival, London, UK, November 2003. Even more than Szpilman's memoir, Polanski's film, or my training and education as an analyst, it is the music—Chopin's *Nocturne in C# minor*, Op. Posth. in particular—which was the most significant ingredient in my writing this essay. Everything, in a manner of speaking, is in the music.

is inseparable from Szpilman's story. Both are unflinching and deeply personal accountings of physical, psychological and moral devastation. Following in the tradition of the fabled Scheherazade and, later, other artist-survivors of the Holocaust such as Paul Celan and Primo Levi, Szpilman's memoir and Polanski's film utilize narratives of traumatic experience as mechanisms of testimony, salvation and working through.

In this paper, I utilize Szpilman's memoir and Polanski's film interpretation of it in concert as points of entry to explore certain intrapsychic functions of music in the context of massive traumatization. That Szpilman is a world-class concert artist is more than incidental. Indeed, in a scene near the end of the film, Polanski graphically illustrates a pivotal encounter with a Nazi officer in which Szpilman's life appears to have been spared because of his ability to make music so magnificently. But to ascribe Szpilman's survival in that moment solely to the external aspects of pianistic accomplishment, however important, would be too reductive an explanation. More expansively, I propose to focus on the elements of time and memory in music and, flowing from that, the ineffable relationship between Szpilman's internal world and its expression in his chosen art—his life and self-identity as a pianist and composer, his relationship to music and to his instrument, and certain specialized characterological features unique to the highly trained professional musician. Utilizing three moments outlining roughly the beginning, middle point and end of Polanski's film, I hope to clarify how music can be understood to function as a complex, multiply determined expression of Szpilman's inner mental state, serving most significantly as a musical hallucinatory coping mechanism. Additionally, I consider Chopin's music as a symbolic, extra-narrative language in film storytelling, which can also be suppositionally interpreted as representational of Polanski's interpolation of his own creative working through of traumatic experience.

Since the end of the Second World War, both American and European cinema have amassed a vast Holocaust film literature, encompassing a kaleidoscope of perspectives from fiction to fable, documentary to allegory, journalistic reportage to commercial release, and telling the innumerable stories which are agglomerated under the singular rubric 'the Holocaust' from a broad range of vantage points and protagonists, including victims, survivors, their children, siblings, widows and widowers, Nazi perpetrators, conflicted German citizens and soldiers, politicians and jurists, post-war documentarians, historians, and so on (Akhtar et al., 2002). One genre, which includes Polanski's *Pianist*, endeavors against all odds to depict as accurately as possible the brutality, inhumanity and even banality of the Holocaust experience from inside it. Notable commercial releases of this type in the past decade include Spielberg's *Schindler's list* (1993) and Tim Blake Nelson's *The grey zone* (2001), adapted from his stage play of the same title. Benigni's *Life is beautiful* (1999) should also be included, although this film differs in its deliberate manipulation of conventions of realism, adopting a phantasmagorical style as its resolution to the crisis of representation attendant in depictions of genocide.

Even within this group, a film such as *The pianist* poses unique challenges to both viewer and commentator, most significantly the narrowness and interiority of

its focus. As contrasted, for example, with a film such as *Schindler's list*, where a sprawling cast of characters and special visual devices from the master filmmaker's repertoire (such as brief moments of color in an otherwise black and white film) are woven within a broader tapestry of violence and communal upheaval, *The pianist* is essentially one person's story set within his surround; it is an intimately personal and thus painful document of the horrors of traumatic isolation, loss, suffering, and ultimate survival.

A pervasive theme in writings by or about survivors of massive psychic trauma is that the reality of their experience lies so outside the realm of the knowable that it can scarcely be communicated through traditional channels. Radical traumatic experience draws an indelible line of demarcation between a time before and the time after; the space in between which—those excruciating moments during which the trauma was being lived—can defy imagination or comprehension. In its aftermath, language—our means of organizing and narrating experience—is often rendered deficient or even inapplicable, and so one of the chief characteristic symptoms of traumatic experience is silence. In the foreword to his father's book, Andrzej Szpilman writes that '[U]ntil a few years ago, my father never spoke of his wartime experiences' (1999, p. 7). So typical of the unspoken transgenerational transmission of traumatic experience (Adelman, 1995), it was only by clandestine readings of the manuscript, surreptitiously removed from a bookshelf in their home, that the 12-year-old Andrzej learned of his father's early life. He adds that he suspects his father originally wrote the memoirs 'for himself rather than humanity in general ... to enable him to work through his shattering wartime experiences and free his mind and emotions to continue with his life' (1999, p. 8). This is the enduring, unendurable paradox for the profoundly traumatized: to express the inexpressible. To psychologically survive trauma means more than to merely physically traverse it, to exist in the time afterwards. It must also include regaining the faculties of expressivity and connectedness to others which are so essential to life, to re-establish what Celan conferred as 'a desperate dialogue ... to a receptive you' (1972, p. 22), and so to reconstitute or revivify the self which had been frozen, fragmented or destroyed.

How might this be accomplished? Every survivor provides his own reply. Specific phenomenologic and intrapsychic responses to traumatic experience necessarily reflect each individual's idiosyncratic ways of registering, synthesizing and psychologically metabolizing life events. The effects of trauma on creativity, as well as, conversely, creativity as a response to or survival mechanism in trauma are similarly idiomatic. But, as we so often encounter in our consulting rooms, that desperate dialogue—the impulse to tell, retell and reify to another the multiple registrations and storylines of experience—may utilize primary process modes of expression in pre- and non-verbal, somatic, kinesthetic or aesthetic registers which circumvent spoken language. Szpilman's post-facto written account aside, it is the sound world of music that provides the most unfettered insights into his inner life.

In this regard, there is an ongoing, spirited debate regarding the precise nature of the relationship between music and affect, the essential contours of which question

what, or if, music ‘means’ or ‘represents’ something, and thus whether music is itself the site of some pre-encoded narrative to be transmitted to a listener; or whether music is isomorphically concordant with the listener’s emotions, and that, as Carol Pratt suggests, ‘music sounds the way emotion feels’ (1952).

Psychoanalysis provides a general resolution to this conundrum in appreciating the dynamic interplay between internal and external elements, an idea Gilbert Rose underscores in noting that ‘human emotion cannot exist embedded in the inorganic structure of aesthetic form. The structure can only offer the necessary perceptual conditions for an emotional response to occur’ (1992, p. 216). Thus, while we might imagine the entire spectrum of human emotion inheres in the music itself, the interaction between music and auditor might be more accurately construed as an ‘object relation’, a subjectively determined inter-relationship constituted of the full range of psychical operatives (e.g. projection and transference). In experiencing music, complex mental events are triggered and, in attempting to describe music’s effects within us—our aesthetic/emotional experience—we are immediately focused upon the internal psychological world of the listener, composer or performer. It is a world constituted of perceptions, distortions and condensations of time and memory, phantasies, archaically derivative defenses, all operating within an abstract primary process mode of registering, construing, constructing, and reconstructing experience. This entire array of psycho-philosophical conceptualizations has been lately synthesized by Feder, in the felicitous notion of *music as simulacrum*, music as ‘an analogue of the totality of mental life’ (in press).

Within this broad framework, two related aspects of the intrapsychic functioning of music on which I would like to focus here, particularly as they pertain to traumatic experience, are time and memory. Music, as Debussy proposes, is ‘rhythmicised time’. Most music of the Western classical canon—which is to say tonal music of the European tradition through the conclusion of the 19th century, and which certainly, then, includes the music of Chopin—is ‘discursive’, to employ Langer’s (1957) term, meaning that its formal structure unfolds successively in time, like a narrative. This narrativistic quality of music is not to be confused with the idea that the music itself contains narrative meaning, but rather connotes our relationship to organized sounds streaming into our ears and minds, and to which we respond. It unfolds in real time while spontaneously evoking internal regressive/associative responses, which in the mind of the listener can seem to skew, compress, expand, reverse, stop or defy time. Music listening is a psychological-auditory event, in other words, occurring in the present and which, like our perceptions of time itself, moves toward the future, but which can hearken or associatively link to a time before.

None of this, of course, is confined to physical listening; the mind’s ear is a fertile locus of auditory hallucination where mental functioning can be translated into conjured sound—auditory symbolization (Feder, 1981)—much as the manifest dream work resurrects and renders abstract latent primary process affect and symbolic content which has not yet reached the level of conceptual symbolization (Thass-Thienemann,

1968) as a display of absurd, chaotic or unreal but ultimately decipherable, or we could say in this context 'listenable', narrative imagery.²

There are important connections between these temporal aspects of music and traumatic experience. The linkages become more apparent when we consider the significance of rhythm, particularly gentle swaying or rocking motions, in becalming the distressed infant. Fetal and infant life alike are dominated by the rhythms of the body—its own and mother's—and these interoceptive, kinesthetic and biorhythmic experiences are no doubt vestigially retained and resurrected in later life (A. Freud, 1946, cited in Terr, 1984), perhaps most especially in moments of duress when the mind might regressively dissociate to a more primitive developmental state before an abstract time sense has consolidated. The use of slow rhythmic counting, cradlelike rocking or other lulling associated with early life are thus a not uncommon means of self-soothing during traumatic events. Similarly, both conceptual and sensory apprehension of time are frequently distorted if there is a traumatic breach of the stimulus barrier, whether directly or secondarily where we are traumatized as witnesses and in our identification with the victims (such as in watching a film like *The pianist*). There will often be a discontinuity between the sense of time experienced and time remembered, as well as significant alterations to perceptions of duration: spans of time can seem to become compressed or expanded—moving at warp speed, in slow-motion, or seeming to stand still.

In the film, this condition of time distortion is graphically animated in, for example, scenes in which horrific violence occurs either shockingly fast—a young woman asks an innocuous question and is unexpectedly shot in the head—or seems to take a lifetime—a row of men are pulled at random from a group and made to lie face down on the ground, each to then be mercilessly exterminated one after the other; the Nazi officer's bullet clip empties just before his last victim, who must endure the eternity which becomes his last seconds alive while the gun is being reloaded. During excruciatingly prolonged periods of trauma, such as the months and years that Szpilman endured in an insane ghetto environment, followed by the isolation and extreme privation of being in hiding, such distortions could serve to make the ordeal more psychologically possible, helping to ward off the hopelessness and psychic collapse which are hallmark responses in massive psychic trauma (Terr, 1984; Krystal, 1993).

Szpilman's memoir provides a telling elaboration of this, where the reality of time brutally interrupted is transformed into a reparative phantasy ensconced in music. Szpilman writes of

... the *Marne* [the famous First World War battle in September 1914 in which the French and British forces eventually succeeded, at great cost, in halting the German invasion of Paris]—that classic line of defence where everything must come to a standstill, the way it

²A related example concerns the case of a 73-year-old woman admitted for neurologic and psychiatric evaluation after complaining of debilitating musical/auditory hallucinations. She reported that Christmas songs, folk tunes and, eventually, non-verbal sounds intruded into her waking life with such volume and clarity that she was unable to distinguish whether the source was internal or external. At times, the sounds were 'heard' as irksomely out-of-tune. It was ultimately assessed that these musical hallucinations were a response to traumatic distress, precipitated by her learning of the dissolution of an important family relationship (Shapiro et al., 1991).

does in the fermata of the second section of Chopin's B minor *Scherzo*, in a stormy tempo of quavers going on and on, more and more tempestuously, until the closing chord, at which point the Germans would retreat to their own border as vigorously as they had advanced ([1946] 1999, p. 57).

The opening sequence of Polanski's film shows the viewer a wide shot of central Warsaw from behind a magisterial public sculpture—an image which, importantly, will reappear at the end of the film to reorient us to the same but now unrecognizable landscape of ruination, and which itself bears musical assonance when considered in reference to Robert Schumann's (1836) observation that 'a monument is a ruin facing forward, just as a ruin is a monument facing backward'. We are then introduced to Szpilman in the Warsaw Radio broadcast centre. He is at the piano performing Chopin's *Nocturne* in C# minor, Op. Posth. (*Lento con gran espressione*). In the next moment, sounds of explosions penetrate through the control booth into the studio but at first fail to interrupt his concentration. Suddenly, the studio walls are breached and, in a stunning aural/visual condensation which encapsulates all the traumatic themes about to unfold, the sanctum is violated; Szpilman is catapulted from the keyboard by the imploding debris, and the music is abruptly silenced. The date is 23 September 1939. In his memoir, Szpilman reveals an encounter (which Polanski does not incorporate into his movie) outside the evacuated broadcast centre with an elder colleague, an aged professor of piano who measures the past events of his life by reference to whom he was accompanying, where they were performing and what they were playing together. The maestro wonders aloud, 'How is this war to be waged without piano accompaniment; what [will] it be like?' (Szpilman, [1946] 1999, p. 26).

Beyond the simple historic fact that this was the piece Szpilman was playing as a part of his Chopin recital at that fateful moment, it can be taken as an important musical statement, interpretable on several planes, and which, thus truncated, will not be completed until very nearly the end of Szpilman's ordeal.

Chopin wrote the first of his canon of 21 nocturnes—the one in E minor (misleadingly catalogued as Op. 72)—when he was just 17 years old, although it remained unpublished until a decade following his death. This one, in C# minor, was actually only his second foray into the form, and was composed in 1830 when he was 20. Chopin continued to make periodic revisions to it over the years, and it ultimately came to incorporate self-quotations from other of his later works, including the solemnly poignant *Larghetto* movement of the F minor piano concerto; it was not published until 1875, nearly 15 years after his death (Harrison, 1978). A listener intuitively recognizes this as a work by Chopin from its distinctive emotional, melodic and harmonic features. The music quietly urges forward, restlessly searching, yearning it seems for something, perhaps consolation, even as it continually repeats itself and returns to its own beginnings. This is music, to borrow Burnham's trenchant observation regarding the music of Schubert, which is 'the sound of memory, not the sounds of memories' (2000, p. 658). Without delving into a musical analysis in which to support what must otherwise be a metaphoric description of the music's expressive character, these elements of musical vocabulary and syntax coalesce in ways which allow the music to evoke a feeling of wistful melancholy, to create a sound world we experience

as lyrical, inward, reflective, intermittently tense, and which invite the attentive listener to enter into his own introspective journey. In the context of its compositional history, it could be heard to signify parallel interrupted trajectories, between Szpilman, the consummate Chopin interpreter, and Chopin himself, the de facto Polish national composer, representing the truncated lives of half a million Polish Jews.

We can only attempt to imagine the dreadful, dead expanses of time Szpilman endured during his years in hiding, dense entropic moments during which his very life required absolute stillness and silence. Szpilman's description of his decline into total isolation is wrenching, starting as a man with a career, home and family, to having no home but still surrounded by loved ones, to a state of abject solitude and persistent mortal dread. He considers himself lonelier even than Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the prototypical solitary figure, whom he imagines cheered himself with the hope of meeting another human being again one day, a possibility he cannot fathom for himself ([1946] 1999, p. 182). This complete destruction of bonds to responsive others is anathema to life. The impact of such an erasure of recognition and dyadic communication signals psychological death, as psychic structure depends on continued environmental support, a sustained reliance upon basic empathic responsiveness, and relative freedom from persecutory anxiety (Auerhahn and Laub, 1987; Laub and Podell, 1995).

What might have enabled Szpilman to successfully traverse these suffocating cloistered periods? One factor is attributable to a host of specialized characterological features developed through his musical training. While all professional artists may, upon analysis, be seen to share certain overlapping characteristics, there will be important practical and psychological differences, as a consequence of both early personal history—itself a crucial, multi-determined ingredient in any individual's selection of an art form—and the vicissitudes and requirements of any given medium (literary, visual, plastic, auditory, and the like). In addition, of course, every individual is unique in unique ways; ultimately, generalities must yield to the particular meanings and significances of the artistic choices each artist devises.

Nevertheless, there are a number of elements that can be understood as distinct to the professional musician. The most significant of these may be the language of music itself, which in its written notation, formal structure, grammar and syntax is accessible only to those trained in it despite being something to which anybody can listen appreciatively. Other important components, to mention but a few and which are further specific to performers, include exceptional levels of discipline; a heightened toleration for isolation and waiting deriving from the intensive rigors of daily practice and concertizing (see also Altman, 1957, for a rich discussion of the multi-faceted significance of 'waiting'); augmented powers of concentration and recall memory; an effective sublimatory capacity to split off from real or imagined feelings of anxiety or threat and to remain at least superficially poised during moments of duress; and the capacity to 'lose' one's self, so to speak, within the imaginative act of internal music-making. Of these, the one which can be most fruitfully stressed here is a psychologically complex admixture constituted of a real physical relationship to the instrument—the piano as an object of importance in the external world and with which Szpilman would have an intimate, tactile (even

sensual) relationship—coupled with a more metaphysical relationship with the musical score and all that is entailed in integrating and internalizing it, encompassing the idiosyncratic constituents of artistry and interpretation, knowledge of style, musicology, music theory, performance practice and, perhaps most significantly, a richly populated internalized object world comprised of teachers, mentors, colleagues and composers. There are a number of additional pertinent factors, the elaboration of which I will leave aside in this discussion, but which, in brief, include oedipal and other developmental or psychosexual factors underlying the overdetermined decision, typically made at an early age, to become a concert artist and which of necessity become integrated aspects of character structure (sometimes seamlessly and sometimes conflictually) such as, for example, competitiveness, fortitude, resilience, control and a single-minded pursuit of mastery.

Polanski conveys this in essence in a poignant scene that depicts Szpilman in hiding. He is in a room where ‘everything has to be done without a sound’ ([1946] 1999, p. 135). Discovery would certainly bring dire consequence. He sits at a piano, his fingers moving suspended just over the keys, silently miming playing. While the presence of a piano in the room in which he was hiding does not precisely accord with Szpilman’s account, Polanski’s interpretive choice in so structuring this scene bears consideration. In his mind’s ear, Szpilman plays Chopin’s *Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise*, Op. 22, one of very few works in Chopin’s oeuvre not for solo piano.³ It elegantly communicates Szpilman’s unconscious reliance upon his intimate relationship with the piano and the vast repertoire of music stored in his memory as a musical-hallucinatory coping mechanism. He imaginatively conjures the existence of and dynamic interaction with others in this piece as a creative solution to the reality of inner torment, loss, isolation and silent solitude. It also takes on the quality of the latent wish underlying the dream work, and which, fantastically, is fulfilled, inasmuch as Polanski recapitulates this piece at the film’s end where Szpilman is shown in a triumphal performance after the war in a grand concert hall accompanied by full orchestra. Implicit is the notion that, both as a filmic narrative device of hopeful foretelling, and as a window into Szpilman’s inner life, this music represents salvation through connectedness to receptive others.

Finally, there is the powerful scene near the film’s end in which Szpilman, who has unwittingly chosen as another hiding place a building about to be occupied as a field office by Nazi commandos, is discovered by Captain Wilm Hosenfeld. Confronted by the question ‘what do you do?’, Szpilman responds that he is a pianist and, as there is a weathered grand piano in the salon, is ordered to perform for, as he reasonably imagines, his very life. While it is not the first time he is at a piano since

³In its original form, this piece was composed for piano and orchestra with the piano introduction played as a solo. The piece was premiered in this form in Paris on 26 April 1835 with Chopin himself at the piano. The Polonaise was composed in 1830 or 1831 at a time when Chopin (only 20 years old) was celebrating remarkable success as a virtuoso performer throughout Europe. The introductory *andante* was composed and added later, in 1834, almost as an afterthought, once Chopin had settled in Paris. But the orchestral accompaniment is so sparse and inconsequential that the work has since established itself as a piano solo, and is now only rarely performed with orchestra. The title *spianato* comes from the Italian word *spianare* meaning ‘to smooth over’ or ‘flatten’ but can also be translated as ‘simple’ or ‘plain’.

the war began, it has been, as he tells us in his memoir, more than two and a half years since he has practiced (Szpilman, [1946] 1999, p. 178). He is malnourished, dehydrated, exhausted, in shock, terrified. His fingernails are long uncut and crusted with dirt; his muscles are stiff. The piano, too, has been neglected. It is stridently out-of-tune and the swollen action unforgiving and unresponsive.

Earlier, in the ghetto café where Szpilman performed to earn bread money, we witnessed the dismissal and disregard of his music-making by its near-catatonic denizens, boorishly affecting casual normalcy in a horrifying masquerade where, like the ghetto itself, the reprehensible tried to qualify as acceptable. There, he continued to encounter a malignantly unresponsive and impersonal wasteland, suffering primary empathic failures and deficits in an environment nearly devoid of mutuality or responsiveness from others. If, as Lifton (1967, cited in Aberbach, 1989) suggests, 'the survivor's main defence against death anxiety and death guilt is the cessation of feeling', it may be that Szpilman's exquisite music-making was too full of feeling, a too-searing and too-real reminder of all that had been irretrievably lost. While there are times when art can effectively represent experiences and affects otherwise too intense or overwhelming to express directly, it can also destroy the protective mechanisms upon which the trauma victim relies to cover or obscure extreme experience. The encounter with Captain Hosenfeld is thus pivotal, paralleling the analytic encounter. Hosenfeld, the 'one human being wearing a German uniform' as Szpilman later considers him, is one of only a few among so many daemonic figures who listens to him (although, considering the earlier presence of Dorota and other allies who were instrumental in helping Szpilman survive, certainly not the first one). This moment—communicated by the wordless gestures of sight and the language of music alone—condenses the breadth of recuperative experience of which Szpilman has been so tragically bereft. Ensnared within the framework of rhythm and sound created by a fellow Pole who lived a century earlier, Szpilman is able to give form and meaning to a world of experience and, at least momentarily, to begin to reconstitute the possibility of a receptive other. It is not that he is making music which is so important, but that his music-making is heard.

In the scene in the film with Captain Hosenfeld, Polanski has Adrien Brody's Szpilman play the Chopin *Ballade* No 1 in G minor, Op. 23. In fact, he played the C# minor *Nocturne* (Szpilman, [1946] 1999, p. 178), the work that had been interrupted that September day five years earlier. What insights might be accessible concerning Szpilman's decision in that moment to play that piece and, less significantly, Polanski's artistic rationale for such a significant musical replacement (see also Beckerman, 2003, for another perspective)? My speculative answers, to borrow from the terminology of music, travel in contrary motion—the simultaneous progression of parts in opposite directions, one ascending, the other descending.

Music, as I am proposing here, can serve compound defensive or coping functions in transforming our perceptual and sensory experience of time to evoke temporally distant events or reminiscences, provoke a heightened or accelerated anticipation of a future moment, induce or relax states of tension, or seeming to altogether suspend time's ineluctable forward movement. Music's discursive narrativism engenders a sense of time's passage, of a beginning traveling toward an end. But for the cadence—

the formal tonal or rhythmic element that designates that end—to be heard, our ears must have been prepared; before an arrival ‘at home’ can be felt, the music needs to have instilled an expectation of going there.

For Polanski, crafting his movie nearly 65 years after his wrenching separation from mother and motherland, there has been no return home. So it seems a plausible conjecture that Polanski used the opportunity to interpose an artistic choice that reflects his own historical circumstances, and the resulting ways his life has been shaped by those experiences, selecting a work by Chopin that might convey his sense of the impossibility of ever returning to complete what had been interrupted. In contrast to the autumnal and introspective C# minor *Nocturne*, the 1st *Ballade*, Polanski’s musical selection, is a grander statement, filled with fantastic, dramatic moods. Two themes are developed which are transformed, made more complex and subjected to dramatic vicissitudes, leading to a turbulent coda, where, by its virtuosic climax, supreme tension yields ultimately to profound emotional relief.

For Szpilman, the choice will, of course, have been multiply determined. Given his mental and physical condition, and his keen instinct for survival, a work less demanding technically or overly taxing to a substandard piano than the 1st *Ballade* is certainly a sensible decision. More significantly, Szpilman’s selection of the C# minor *Nocturne* can be interpreted from an intrapsychic perspective as a reparative act, the attempted continuation of a life-giving dialogue which had been precipitously and catastrophically interrupted. In musical support of this idea, after a prolonged sequence of gossamer-like scalar filigree which pushes toward resolution and home but which painfully delays getting there, the *Nocturne* finally concludes using a very special kind of cadence (used frequently in the Baroque era but less so in the 19th century) called a ‘Picardy third’, in which a composition in a minor key ends with a major chord, here, arpeggiated—each note is added sequentially rather than played simultaneously—in contrary motion.

As if it were a sigh, the music seems simply to exhale until there is no more air. Tonally, the piece has ended where it began, save for the breathtaking modulation from minor to major, a shift as subtle as it is profound, and which allows us to imagine, as Władysław Szpilman must also have, a next inhalation to come. It is not the final gasp of death, but another breath taken in a life being lived.

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