

## JANE STIRLING

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Most of this essay originally formed part of a recorded article on Chopin given in 1972 but here is extended

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By far the most fascinating woman in Chopin's life was not George Sand, but Jane Stirling.

Jane Wilhelmina Stirling was born on 15 July 1804 at Kippenross House, near Dunblane in Perthshire, the year before the battle of Trafalgar when Nelson defeated both the French and the Spanish. She was the youngest of thirteen children. Her first sister was married by the time Jane was two years old. Her mother died when she was only twelve and her father died when she was sixteen, the year after the final defeat of Napoleon by Wellington. She was passed in to the supervision of her sister, Katharine, now Mrs Erskine, who was thirteen years older than she was. Katharine had no children and was now a widow. She did not remarry and so was available to be a companion to Jane.



Jane had a clear head and was a typical Scotswoman, a very strong character. She was different as well. She attended parties and balls and, as she was exceedingly pretty, she had many proposals of marriage. Some say that she had over thirty such proposals, all of which she declined. She was very particular and wished to remain single until she was certain of the right man. She remained sociable and went to the various functions but needed more than that. Kippenross House had a large library, a valuable collection of art and a Scottish harp. She was interested in all three and played the piano with clear skill.

In the second half of 1826 Katharine took her to Paris. They already had social contacts there and mixed with the French aristocracy as comfortably as they did with the Scottish. Thereafter they divided their annual social life between Scotland and Paris. Jane, particularly, became fluent in the French language and was a Francophile. She was a wealthy woman having inherited from her parents. It was a time of French and British co-operation. In 1827 their combined fleets destroyed Turkish and Egyptian ships at Navarino.

They met Chopin and, as Jane was very attractive, he took her on as a pupil. She admired him and he her ...and she could pay his exorbitant fees. She was six years older than he was and, latterly, he unkindly regarded her as a middle-aged spinster. In 1844 he dedicated his two Nocturnes Opus 55 to her. Strangely, he recommended her to the cellist Franchomme. One would have thought that he wanted her to himself but Franchomme taught the cello and she had expressed a desire to learn to play that instrument. Did she play it side-saddle as was the custom of the day?

Auguste Joseph Franchomme was born in Lille in 1808 and was four years younger than Jane. He was a cellist of distinction and wrote some works including a Cello Concerto. He died in Paris in 1884.

Whatever Jane's feelings, she kept them to herself since George Sand, the eccentric cigar smoking socialist, was still reigning supreme in Chopin's life. But in 1846 Chopin's relationship with Sand was breaking up and he was living a semi-bachelor life. With Chopin's permission, Jane took on some of his secretarial and other duties. Her social position meant that this service which she afforded Chopin, and the society in which he moved, achieved a great deal of good. She may also have suffered from loneliness and a sense of a lack of fulfilment and she was glad to be wanted and of service. She also had a crush on him. Perhaps, like Sand, she wanted to mother him and look after him. It is not unlikely that they became lovers for a while. What is clear is that she was a benevolent patroness. She kept him for some while. She was his agent and business manager. She arranged his concerts and particularly the Salle Pleyel concert. Only Katharine knew about the full implications of these arrangements.

Jane won the hearts of Chopin's parents. His sister, Louisa, also admired her and was grateful for what she was doing for Frederick. Over Christmas 1847, Jane sent Louisa a present, the Lady's Companion intended as a New Year's gift. But Chopin never talked of love for Jane. While he was grateful to her he may have found her too efficient and dominant but she had the right ideas. Chopin was to forget the past with all their traumas and he needed change. With her large family she could easily introduce Chopin to the well-to-do in London and elsewhere. It has been suggested that these introductions were her plan to get her family to meet him with a view to their approval of her possible

marriage to him. But there were other problems. Scotland would not be suitable for a consumptive.

Chopin did not consider this. He was glad to have someone make plans for him and thus ease his anxious personality. He had been considering a move to London as Paris was no longer in love with him and he had made contact with the Athenaeum Club in Pall Mall where Elgar and Sir Ivor Atkins were later to become members.

Jane made the preparations for the Salle Pleyel concert on 16 February 1848 ensuring that the heating was as Chopin would wish it and that the concert hall was aired. She arranged the flowers so that an intimate feel could be enjoyed. Chopin, dressed as immaculately as ever, but was clearly ill, playing Mozart's Piano Trio in E with Alard and Franchomme. Then followed his Cello Sonata and other short pieces for solo piano. He only played an excerpt from his Barcarolle because he was too weak to play the more invigorating part. He took his bow and walked unassisted to his dressing room where he collapsed in Jane's arms, exhausted.

On Maundy Thursday, 20 April, 1848 Chopin sailed to England. He rested a while in Folkestone before travelling to London where Jane had booked him in at lodgings at 10 Bentinck Street near Cavendish Square. He did not like London. It was grey. After Easter he moved to a superior apartment at 48 Dover Street, Piccadilly where he stayed until the end of July. Jane had provided him with his notepaper complete with his monogram and his favourite brand of drinking chocolate. Broadwoods sent over a piano as did Pleyels and Erards. And so his drawing room had three grand pianos. The landlord, seeing this extravagance, doubled the rent but that was no odds to Chopin as Jane paid it.

The year 1848 saw a wave of revolutions sweeping central and western Europe and the Second Republic was established in France.

But London waited to hear Chopin.

Chopin heard the major London orchestras perform and dismissed them unkindly. He called their performances like their roast dinners... solid, strong and nothing else. He complained that they had no idea how to rehearse.

Nonetheless he played for Lady Gainsborough, Lady Blessington, the Athenaeum Club and on 15 May before Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Prince Albert went over to talk to him and the Queen spoke to him twice. Through Jane he was introduced to 'all the best people' (what a pompous expression that is). But he did not like their attitude to music.

His money was running out. Jane came to the rescue again. But he did not want to be beholden to her and did not ask her again. She was always at hand but Chopin was bored and tired of her. He said very unkind things about these two Scottish ladies. Yet he could not do without them. Jane insisted that he went on long rides in the country for his health and she was right, but Chopin could not take the jolting and bumping of the carriage.

He acquired a manservant called Daniel who was Irish, but spoke French, who accompanied him on his outings and carried him to his rooms. There were times when Chopin was incredibly weak.

Jane, possibly to further her own desires, suggested that Chopin visit Edinburgh as the London season was coming to an end. Chopin had lost all hope for himself and become fatalistic. He did not care where he was. Everywhere was miserable to him.

Twelve miles east of Edinburgh was Calder House where Jane had arranged that Chopin should stay. She had also organised Pleyel's to send a piano from London. Two of her brothers in law were told to look out for Chopin since much depended on them for the success of this venture. Chopin arrived after a twelve hour journey on the train from Euston and was spitting blood. The Highland air made matters worse. The only thing that kept him going was the prospect of concerts and the income from them. A successful concert might earn him 60 guineas. The doctor at Calder House was Polish now living in Edinburgh.

The Scottish ladies decided that the family would visit a relative who lived in a castle by the sea and, of course, Chopin had to go. They drove along the cliff roads in two vehicles, the sisters in one and Daniel and Chopin in the other. The horse of Chopin's coupe were frightened by something and the reins snapped and the vehicle careered down the slope. The coachman had been thrown out. The coach crashed against a tree on the edge of the cliff. Daniel pulled Chopin out.

The accident did not deter him from giving concerts but he kept changing his mind about details of what he was to play. He went to Manchester by train to give a concert there and was put up in the home of a German Jew much to his

disgust. His antisemitism and extreme racism was decidedly evil. But another house guest was Jenny Lind and there are stories about his assault upon her. The concert was on 28 August. There were overtures by Weber, Rossini and Beethoven and sung excerpts from Italian opera. Between such items Chopin played his Andante spianato, the Second Scherzo and the Berceuse. He was so weak that he was carried on and off the stage. He was given good reviews but the general opinion was that he and his music were not understood. So wrote Charles Halle.

Jane Stirling, believing that Chopin's confidence was boosted and that this should continue, arranged a concert in Glasgow. She also arranged for him to stay with another widowed sister, Mrs Houston at Johnstone castle, a few miles from the city. Chopin was again in a quandary as to what to play. The concert was on the afternoon on 27 September at the Merchants Hall complete with nobles and several members of the Stirling family. But the concert was badly attended. The Glasgow Herald proclaimed that Chopin and his music were hard to understand. Mrs Houston gave a grand reception to Prince and Princess Czartoryski from Vienna who were visiting London to escape political unrest and travelled to Scotland to hear Chopin. His next concert was at the Hopetoun Rooms in Edinburgh and the tickets were half a guinea. Jane purchased a hundred herself and distributed them as complimentary tickets. It was Chopin's last appearance in Scotland. He could not stay in Scotland living off Jane and the kind people who put him up in various castles and stately homes.

These people expected news of Chopin's engagement to Jane. But he did not propose and this was put down to his reticence. Rumours of a forthcoming marriage reached Paris and Warsaw and was the social gossip of the hour. Chopin did not want Jane. Although she had been his greatest friend and advocate, even if he did not see it that way, he was bored by her. He made all sorts of feeble excuses. He wrote to a friend, "A rich woman needs a rich husband."

It was Jane's family that broached the subject and this, presumably, at her request. The debate took place in October. Chopin was nervous and tried to express the simple view that it was only friendship.

Most women would have been insulted by the rejection and turn on the one that rejected her.

Not so, Jane.

She accepted it with a loving grace that reveals the fundamental goodness of her character although some biographers have labelled her a vampire and, to add to this inanity, called Sand a saint.

He could not winter in Scotland and so bade farewell to that country and gave a concert in London for a Polish charity. He took lodgings at 4 St James's Place, Piccadilly and he was ill. Doctors came and went. Jane and Mrs Erskine came to his aid and tried to prepare him for the next world, bringing their Bibles with them. But there were Protestants. Nonetheless they were genuine and kind people. Chopin complained to a friend that the Scottish ladies were getting on his nerves.

His last public appearance was at London's Guildhall on 16 November, 1848 where he had to be carried. He was very ill with a sick headache and a swollen face. People left doors open or were always coming and going and Chopin found this insufferable. He played and the Poles loved it. The rest of the audience were merely polite. He was carried back to his lodgings and to his bed.

He left London on 23 November and was in Paris the following day still grumbling about Jane and Mrs Erskine who pestered him so.

Back home in Paris he was, at first, surrounded by friends who looked after his needs. But cholera came and the summer heat was fierce. Many left Paris who had promised to stay to help him but, one by one, Chopin's helpers left to escape disease and the infernal heat. They, along with Chopin, knew that he was dying and yet they deserted him.

Had Jane known about this she would have been there and stayed with him.

Chopin died on 17 October 1849. Jane's devotion remained unparalleled. She wore the garb of mourning for a very considerable time and paid the total cost of the funeral which was a lavish affair. It was at the Church of the Madeleine and there were about 3,000 people there. Jane also paid Louisa's travelling expenses from Warsaw. To prevent possible difficulties she purchased all of Chopin's effects not wishing that any would fall into unsympathetic hands. She paid for his Pleyel piano to be shipped to Louisa in Warsaw and had some of his furniture, which she had purchased, shipped to Calder House. It was displayed in a special room which became known as the Chopin Museum. She also acquired the death mask by Clesinger. She had commissioned the Polish artist Kwiatkowski to

produce an oil painting of him during his last weeks and this he did with Louisa, Princess Czartoryski and Grzymala in it, but Jane was not there.

On the first anniversary of his death she wrote to Louisa to send her some Polish soil which she scattered over Chopin's grave. She never forgot. Jane Carlyle called her Chopin's widow.

Louisa died in 1855. At Jane's death, four years later, she willed the museum to Justina Chopin and it was shipped to Warsaw. When Mrs Chopin died in 1861 it passed to her daughter Isabel but two years later much of it was destroyed during a Russian attack on Warsaw.

One item which still exists is a lock of his auburn hair which Jane had kept.

She evidently loved him and probably more so than anyone else.

And it makes Chopin's dismissal of her so grossly unfair and is evidence of how rotten and nasty a person he undoubtedly was. But he was suffering from manic depression and this is shown in some of his work particularly the awful Op 61.

Historical events that occurred in the final years of Jane's life were the rise of Darwinism and the Crimean War (1853-6). She lived during the reigns of four monarchs, George III (to 1820), George IV (1820-30), William IV (1830-7) and Victoria (from 1837) and about twenty British prime ministers including William Pitt (1804-6), Wellington (1828-30), Melbourne (1835-41), Robert Peel, for two terms, Palmerston (1855-58). The leading novelists of her day were Dickens (1812-70), Dumas (1802-1870), the Brontes, Mary Shelley (1797-1851) and for the first 28 years of her life, Sir Walter Scott who died in 1832. I have often wondered if she met him.

Jane died at Calder House on 6 February 1859, ten years after Chopin's death. The cause of her death was said to be an ovarian cyst. She was buried in the grounds of Dunblane Cathedral on 11 February in the family grave but the headstone does not include her name. Her involvement with Chopin will always be the matter of unnecessary and suspicious speculation and clashing opinion but there is no doubt that she had his interests at heart and that her kindness was not appreciated. The fact that she did not become Mrs Chopin did not cause her to become offensive. She was loyal to the end and beyond.

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