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Spes phthisica: the case of Frederic Chopin

The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of *spes phthisica* (consumptive euphoria) on creative process of Polish composer Frederic Chopin's. The high productivity of the composer's work during exacerbations of tuberculosis is often cited in the scientific literature as important evidence of the positive impact of *spes phthisica* on creativity. To test this hypothesis, an analysis of the chronological relationship between Frederic Chopin's creative process (professional history) and the clinical course of pulmonary tuberculosis (medical history) was performed. The main material for the study was the Frederic Chopin's letters and the work of the composer's most respected biographers. Scopus, WebOfScience, MedLine, PubMed electronic databases, electronic repositories, and archives were searched without limitations in time. It has been established that in the winter of 1838/1839 (while resting in Mallorca) Chopin suffered a severe exacerbation of chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, which was accompanied by pulmonary hemorrhage, severe intoxication and vivid signs of pathological euphoria (*spes phthisica*). Despite this, the composer published an incredibly large number of new musical pieces in the autumn of 1839: Op 35-Op 41 (Sonata, Impromptu; Two Nocturnes; Ballade; Scherzo in three parts; Two Polonaises; Four Mazurkas). For a long time, many researchers attributed the composer's high publishing activity to the stimulating effect of pathological euphoria. The analysis of the composer's creative process in the winter of 1838/1839 showed that during this period he created only two small musical pieces Mazurka E-minor Op 41 and «Raindrop» Prelude Op 28. A study of the circumstances of the creation of these works showed that they were not written by Chopin due to pathological euphoria, but rather the opposite — contrary to it. All other pieces were created by Chopin much earlier, and it was during the period of remission of tuberculosis. These rules out the possibility of the stimulating effect of *spes phthisica* on the composer's creative process.

Key words: consumptive euphoria, Frederic Chopin's medical history, *spes phthisica*, tuberculosis infection.

2019 will mark 170 years from the death of the greatest Polish composer, Frederic Chopin. The mystery of the composer's illness is still the subject of debate, but researchers argue in favor of a diagnosis of tuberculosis [21, p. 4]. The question of the influence of Frederic Chopin's illness on his work has not yet been resolved. Consumptive patients were often noted to possess a special creative energy which the Greeks called «*spes phthisica*». Historically, the highest achievements and high performance of tuberculosis composers, poets and artists are often associated with these features of the psyche [16]. Doctor Arthur Jacobson was interested in the relation of addiction to art, he wrote about tuberculosis and its psychological consequences: «*the spes phthisica is a characteristic clinical trait of the tuber-*

culous ... thanks to spes phthisica lives of ... composers are shortened, physically, but quickened psychically in a ratio inversely as the shortening. Relatively abnormal hopefulness, optimism, buoyancy, represents the prevailing psychologic phase of tuberculosis. Out of this closely related trinity, too, grows the factitious physical energy of the victims» [13]. Later, «abnormal hopefulness, optimism, buoyancy» of consumptive patients were called pathologic euphoria identified with «*spes phthisica*» [14]. Observations of consumptive patients allowed establishing that tubercular patients' state of feeling is not a correct index of the state of their physical condition. So-called feeling of euphoria is so common in the tubercular when the disease is well developed, that it is believed by some to be one of the symptoms of phthisis [6, 17].

Numerous scientific publications on the high incidence of tuberculosis among composers in the XVII-

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XIX centuries indirectly confirm the hypothesis about positive effect of consumption on creative activity [3]. The important role of «*spes phthisica*» for Chopin's creativity has been discussed more than once [1, 4]. However, researchers who studied the relationship between the circumstances of Chopin's life, his illness and creative process, give contradictory assessments of the disease's effect on the composer's music [8, 18].

The current study aims to verify the hypothesis about the positive influence of «*spes phthisica*» (consumptive euphoria) on the Chopin's creative processes.

To achieve the goal, an analysis of the chronological relationship between Frederic Chopin's creative process and the clinical course of pulmonary tuberculosis was performed. To contribute to the study, we searched for sources in electronic repositories and archives, as well as in scientometric databases (without time limit). Identified sources were subjected to medical (anamnesic) and musicological analysis. We analyzed the sources in order to detect signs of «*spes phthisica*» (euphoria) during periods of acute illness.

Search for signs of spes phthisica in Frederic Chopin's anamnesis

From his earliest years Frederic Chopin often suffered from respiratory illnesses. However, most biographers believe that the phthisis in the composer developed only in 1835—1837 [20, p. 19]. One of the most severe and prolonged exacerbations of tuberculosis in Chopin developed in November 1838 during a time share with George Sand in Majorca. Sand and Chopin letters allow us to quite accurately determine the dates of his illness: «*Chopin arrived ... in good health*» [11, p. 162]. However, Chopin immediately became «*dangerously ill*». The illness was delayed and took a serious turn: Chopin coughed up blood. December 3, 1838 Chopin wrote to Juljan Fontana (a close friend and musical executor of Chopin): «*I have been as sick as a dog these last two weeks; three most famous doctors of the island. One said I had died, the second that I am dying, the 3rd that I shall die. And today I'm the same as ever*» [5, p. 186]. What attracts attention is that mismatch between Chopin's optimism and doctor's conclusion about his physical state. Chopin's perception of his illness very precisely coincides with the typical characteristic of euphoria in consumptive patients, who react with a paradoxical cheerfulness and optimism to the serious illness. Famous American psychoneurologist Julius Grinkler made the following description of the behavior of patients with *spes phthisica*: «*Patients who are coughing and spitting, sweating and suffering from colliquative diarrheas, will tell the doctor that if they could only get rid of their cough they would be well again*» [10].

Thus, the exacerbation of tuberculosis in Frederick Chopin was accompanied by pathological euphoria in the winter of 1838: this period of Chopin's life is most suitable for analysis *spes phthisica*'s influence on his

work. Chopin's illness continued for months after his arrival from Majorca, but summer 1839 he completed and published an impressive number of the compositions: Opus 28 and Opus 35—41 [15, p. 200—219]. It seems that the performance of the composer's creative work during this period is very high. But what is that really? A more detailed acquaintance with the life and creative process of Frederic Chopin opened up many circumstances that made it possible to objectively evaluate the effectiveness of his creative process in the winter of 1838/1839.

Analysis of Chopin's creative process in winter 1838/1839

Frederic Chopin и George Sand arrived in Palma on November 8, 1838 [19, p. 143]. Chopin asked Camille Pleyel (French owner of a piano manufacturing firm) to deliver one of his instruments to Majorca before leaving Paris. Chopin mentions that the lack of a musical instrument prevents him from writing music in all letters. Chopin wrote November 15, 1838 to Pleyel: «*I cant write any music because there are no pianos to be had here in that respect it is a barbarous country*» [11, p. 163]. December 3, 1838 Chopin wrote: «*I still have no piano. I fell seriously ill, but I am all right again*» [5, p. 186]. But Chopin did not «*all right again*». On the same day Sand wrote: «*Chopin suffers somewhat from the frequent changes of temperature*» [11, p. 168]. 28 December, 1838 Chopin wrote: «*Preludes aren't finished; I'm better now, and will make haste*» [5, p.189]. January 12, 1839 Chopin wrote to Fontana: «*I send you the Preludes*» [20, p. 30]. It was completely unexpected, since Chopin still has no Pleyel's piano: January 15, 1839 Sand said in a letter: «*Chopin always coughs much. His piano has at last arrived at Palma*» [20, p. 32].

In late January 1839, George Sand concluded: «*Our invalid did not seem to be in a state to stand the passage, but he seemed equally incapable of enduring another week in Majorca*» [20, p. 46]. On 13 February 1839 Chopin, Sand and her children left Majorca. Therefore, Pleyel's piano was in Chopin's possession during the one month. This circumstance could be an objective reason for the low effectiveness of Chopin's creative work, but we find out, that Chopin had another instrument from the very beginning in Majorca: «*a rented piano, in the first weeks only a miserable Majorcan instrument, which, however, in the second half of January was replaced by one of Pleyel's excellent cottage pianos*» [20, p. 37]. Of course, «*miserable instrument*» could not satisfy the demanding Chopin, but could well be used for work. It was on this piano that Chopin first performed for Sand *Palma Mazurka* and *Raindrop* prelude [19, p. 141].

From November 15, 1838 Chopin, Sand and her children found shelter in a remote Carthusian monastery. For the thousand francs Sand had then a complete establishment their new home. Sand wore herself out, shopping for sheets and mattresses, pots and

pans. The monastery housed guardian, housekeeper and local maid. Sand has brought from Paris the maid [19, p. 142]. Sand bought for Chopin's sensitive stomach tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, maize, onions, beans, a fish, sheep and a goat. In the morning Sand occupied herself with giving lessons to her children, the afternoon is being devoted to her literary work, Chopin devoting himself to composing mainly in the evenings [23, p. 197].

Chopin's repeated assurances that he «better now» throughout December 1838 — January 1839 were untrue, its do not correspond to his real physical condition. Words from Chopin's letters: «today I'm the same as ever», «I'm better now», can be considered as manifestation of euphoria. Many factors of the pathogenesis of euphoria can be traced in Chopin's medical history. First of all, it is a fever. American microbiologists René and Jean Dubos wrote in their book *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man, and Society*: «fever from any source can heighten emotion, sharpen perception and render intellectual processes more lucid and rapid. Since consumptives often experience mild fever without gross toxemia and without physical prostration, they may crave a full life and exhibit eagerness to seize the fleeting moments for creative efforts» [7, p. 64]. Since «Chopin suffers somewhat from the frequent changes of temperature» in winter 1838/1839, fever could have contributed to his pathological euphoria.

Once Robert Koch discovered *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, it was believed that toxins emitted by the bacteria brought about the effect of euphoria [12]. American physician Maurice Fishberg, autor of *Pulmonary tuberculosis* wrote: «tuberculous patients ... display enormous intellectual capacity of the creative kind. Especially is this to be noted in those who have a talent for imaginative writing. They are in a constant state of nervous irritability, but despite the fact that it hurts their physical condition, they keep on working and produce their best work» [9, p. 256]. Other researchers explained *spes phthisica* as a psychological condition where the unwillingness of the victim to accept the gravity of their circumstances led to uncharacteristic optimism and stimulation of creativity. By the mid-1950s, *spes phthisica* was considered exclusively as a psychological phenomenon. Famous English psychologist Bernard Hart, the author of *The Psychology of Insanity*, wrote: «The distressing conflict between the hopeless facts and all the patient's most cherished ambitions ... had been solved by a process of repression. The facts were shut out from consciousness, and the resistance to their entry assisted by the development in consciousness of the abnormal gaiety and elation which characterised the manic phase. This mechanism accounts for the condition known as *spes phthisica*, the astonishing cheerfulness and optimism which frequently characterises the last stages of pulmonary consumption» [2, p. 83]. Famous psychiatrist Eric Wittkower argued convincingly that such emo-

tional states were not specific to tuberculosis, and that *spes phthisica* was psychosocial rather physiological in origin [24]. This understanding of *spes phthisica* is fully in line with the psychological state of Chopin during the winter of 1838/1839. The absence of Pleyel's piano provides a convenient explanation for the composer's low creative activity, eliminating the discrepancy between reportedly good health and low work rates. Another indirect evidence of Chopin's euphoria may be George Sand's words: «In Majorca, while he was mortally ill, he composed music that was full of the perfume of paradise. But I have come to think that in his case being alive or being dead does not matter. He does not quite know himself in which planet he exists» [22, p. 277].

Thus, throughout his entire stay in Majorca, Chopin had all the necessary conditions for creative work. From mid-November 1838 Chopin did not leave the house even for walks. Sand and a few servants created the most comfortable living conditions for Chopin, therefore, almost all the time he was free to work. Sleep disturbance, persistent cough and fever adversely affected Chopin's physical condition. However, indications of physical exhaustion or respiratory failure are absent both in the letters of Sand and Chopin, and in the works of biographers. This suggests that the physical condition of Chopin allowed him to write music. Signs of pathological euphoria (denial of the severity of his own illness) are present in Chopin's letters from November 15, 1838 to mid-February 1839.

15 February, 1839 George Sand wrote to Carlotta Marliani again from Barcelona: «The climate at Majorca was becoming more and more deadly to Chopin and I hastened to get away. He arrived at Barcelona still spitting basins full of blood, and crawling along like a ghost» [11, p. 169]. Chopin wrote to Fontana on March 17, 1839 from Marseille about unfinished third Scherzo in C-sharp minor (Opus 39) and his physical weakness: «I don't know when I shall finish the Scherzo, for I am still weak and not fit to write» [5, p. 196].

Chopin resumed work on his music only in the summer of 1839 in Nohant: he finished the first two parts of Sonata No 2 in B flat minor, Opus 35 (the third part was written in 1837); prepared the publication Opus 36, Second Impromptu in F sharp minor (composed in summer 1838); finished Nocturnes № 2 in G major from Opus 37, the Two Nocturnes (Nocturnes № 1 in G minor was composed in summer 1838); prepared the publication Opus 38, Second Ballade in F major (composed in summer 1838); Chopin finished Opus 39, the third Scherzo in C-sharp minor (first two parts of Scherzo were composed in summer 1838); he finished Opus 40, Two Polonaises (№ 1 in A major and № 2 in C minor were sketched in summer 1838); he finished Opus 41, Four Mazurkas. Mazurka № 1 in C sharp minor, Mazurka № 3 in B major and Mazurka № 4 in A flat were composed in 1835—1838. Only Mazurka № 2 in E minor was composed in Majorca [15, p. 200—219]. Biographers believe that

«most of the Preludes were finished or sketched before Chopin went to the south, and that a few, if any, were composed and the whole revised at Palma and Valdemosa» [23, p. 203; 12, p. 44]. Thus, of all published summer 1839 compositions (Opus 28 and Opus 35—41) during the tuberculosis progression Chopin composed two small pieces only: Mazurka E-minor Op 41 and *Raindrop* Prelude Op 28.

Conclusion

An analysis of the medical history, the life and work of F. Chopin in October 1838 — September 1839

Conflicts of interest: none.

Acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting the article were jointly carried out by authors.

showed that the exacerbation of pulmonary tuberculosis was accompanied by euphoria during December 1838 — February 1839. No objective reasons limiting the creative activity of the composer have been identified: the illness was not accompanied by respiratory failure or physical exhaustion; the composer had a musical instrument (piano); living conditions for life and work were satisfactory. In this period of time, Frederic Chopin created only two small pieces of music, which makes it possible to eliminate the stimulating influence of euphoria on Chopin's creative activity.

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Spes phthisica: клінічний випадок Фредерика Шопена

Мета роботи — оцінити вплив *spes phthisica* (туберкульозної ейфорії) на творчий процес польського композитора Фредерика Шопена. Висока продуктивність роботи композитора під час загострень туберкульозу нерідко наводиться в науковій літературі як важливий доказ позитивного впливу *spes phthisica* на творчість. Для

перевірки цієї гіпотези проведено аналіз хронологічних взаємозв'язків між творчим процесом Шопена (професійний анамнез) і клінічним перебігом туберкульозу легень (анамнез захворювання). Основним матеріалом для дослідження були листи Шопена і праці найавторитетніших біографів композитора. Також проведено пошук джерел в електронних базах даних Scopus, Web of Science, Medline, PubMed, електронних сховищах і архівах (без обмежень у часі). Встановлено, що взимку 1838—1839 рр. під час відпочинку на Майорці Шопен переніс тяжке загострення хронічного туберкульозу легень, яке супроводжувалося легеневою кровотечею, вираженою інтоксикацією та яскравими ознаками патологічної ейфорії (*spes phthisica*). Восени 1839 р. композитор опублікував велику кількість нових музичних творів: Op. 35—41 (соната в трьох частинах, фантазія-експромт, два ноктюрни, балада, скерцо в трьох частинах, два полонези, чотири мазурки). Тривалий час багато дослідників таку високу видавничу активність композитора пояснювали стимулювальним впливом *spes phthisica*. Аналіз творчого процесу композитора взимку 1838—1839 рр. показав, що за цей період він створив лише два невеликих музичних твори: мазурку E-minor Op. 41 і прелюдію № 15 («Raindrop» prelude) Op. 28. Вивчення обставин створення цих творів виявило, що вони були написані Шопеном не внаслідок *spes phthisica*, а всупереч їй. Всі інші твори були створені набагато раніше, причому саме в період ремісії туберкульозу. Це виключає можливість стимулювального впливу *spes phthisica* на творчий процес композитора.

Ключові слова: туберкульозна ейфорія, історія хвороби Фредерика Шопена, *spes phthisica*, туберкульозна інфекція.

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Spes phthisica: клинический случай Фредерика Шопена

Цель исследования — оценить влияние *spes phthisica* (туберкулезной эйфории) на творческий процесс польского композитора Фредерика Шопена. Высокая продуктивность работы композитора во время обострений туберкулеза нередко приводится в научной литературе в качестве важного доказательства позитивного влияния *spes phthisica* на творчество. Для проверки данной гипотезы проведен анализ хронологических взаимосвязей между творческим процессом Шопена (профессиональный анамнез) и клиническим течением туберкулеза легких (анамнез заболевания). Основным материалом для исследования были письма Шопена и работы наиболее авторитетных биографов композитора. Также проведен поиск источников в электронных базах данных Scopus, Web of Science, Medline, PubMed, электронных хранилищах и архивах (без ограничения во времени). Установлено, что зимой 1838—1839 гг. во время отдыха на Мальорке Шопен перенес тяжелое обострение хронического туберкулеза легких, которое сопровождалось легочным кровотечением, выраженной интоксикацией и яркими признаками патологической эйфории (*spes phthisica*). Осенью 1839 г. композитор опубликовал большое количество новых музыкальных произведений: Op. 35—41 (соната в трех частях, фантазия-экспромт, два ноктюрна, балада, скерцо в трех частях, два полонеза, четыре мазурки). Долгое время многие исследователи такую высокую издательскую активность композитора объясняли стимулирующим воздействием *spes phthisica*. Анализ творческого процесса композитора зимой 1838—1839 гг. показал, что за этот период он создал только два небольших музыкальных произведения: мазурку E-minor Op. 41 и прелюдию № 15 («Raindrop» prelude) Op. 28. Изучение обстоятельств создания этих произведений выявило, что они были написаны Шопеном не вследствие патологической эйфории, а вопреки ей. Все остальные произведения были созданы гораздо раньше, причем именно в период ремиссии туберкулеза. Это исключает возможность стимулирующего влияния *spes phthisica* на творческий процесс композитора.

Ключевые слова: туберкулезная эйфория, история болезни Фредерика Шопена, *spes phthisica*, туберкулезная инфекция.