Perusing the Mazurka in Society, Literature, and Music

The mazurka is a general term for a particular kind of Polish folk dance. It achieved its greatest popularity in 18th and 19th century society, though its influence can still be observed today. The mazurka originated in Poland in the 16th century in two adjacent provinces near Warsaw — Mazovia and Kuiavia (Trochimczyk). The term was coined in Mazovia, part of the Mazowsze region. The Mazurs created the first and most well established mazurka, hence the root "mazur" in the full term (Gorbaty). Their specific form of the mazurka was called the “mazur mazurka”. The name of the dance was intended to be representative of the province from which it originated. Soon after its advent, other forms of the dance began to arise within the various communities in surrounding provinces. There existed three primary variations of the mazurka: the mazur, the kujawiak, and the oberek (Cho).

The three types began to spread widely in the 18th century (Cho). Surrounding countries became increasingly aware of the mazurka. Eventually, Poland lost its independence and was subject to occupation by various empires, most notably Russia (Powers). In Polish, the term mazurka refers simply to a folk dance, whereas in Russian it connotes various types of dances. The mazurka was brought from Poland to Russia, and, upon its introduction, the Russians developed a strong fondness for it. The trinity of Polish mazurkas was thus as amalgamated into one dance. The Russians neglected to maintain the historical tradition of separate mazurka dances; despite dancing through all three forms, they saw them as one mazurka, which they collectively identified as the “Mazur-Dance” (Powers). The mazurka was popular among both Russian aristocracy and peasantry (Trochimczyk 2000), though there are differences in the styles
adopted by these two economic classes. Though the music and choreography were similar, the
dance was regarded with different degrees of prestige within these two social classes. Among the
Russian peasantry, the mazurka was one of the more popular folk dances, carrying a festive,
unadorned air. On the other side of society, the mazurka was a formal event. It was held as part
of a ball, a social gathering for aristocracy. Participants who wished to partake in dancing the
mazurka had to pledge to a partner prior to its commencement. In some cases, the partners
promised a dance to one another days before the ball. People would choose close acquaintances
or individuals that they highly respected as dancing partners. The mazurka was danced according
to standards of social and moral etiquette. Many balls ended with the mazurka as the final dance,
saving the best for last. These were not official rules, though they were customary. These
expectations defined the mazurka’s role in high society. A ball without a mazurka was simply
not a proper ball.

The mazurka eventually made its way into Russian literature. Many great works have at
least one scene that contains a mazurka, and it is often pivotal within the novel. There are various
literary functions that the mazurka fulfills. Consider the following passage from Ivan Turgenev’s
novel Fathers and Sons, which describes the first formal meeting between Arkady and Madame
Odintsov.

–Я видела вашего батюшку два раза и много слышала о нем,—

продолжала она,— я очень рада с вами познакомиться.
В это мгновение подлетел к ней какой-то адъютант и пригласил ее на
кадриль. Она согласилась.
–Вы разве танцуете?— почтительно спросил Аркадий.
–Танцую. А вы почему думаете, что я не танцую? Или я вам кажусь
слишком стара?
–Помилуйте, как можно… Но в таком случае позвольте мне пригласить
вас на мазурку.
Одинцова снисходительно усмехнулась.
"I have seen your father twice and heard a lot about him," she went on. "I am very glad to meet you."

At this moment some adjutant rushed up to her and asked her for a quadrille. She accepted.

"Do you dance then?" asked Arkady respectfully.

"Yes, and why should you suppose I don't dance? Do you think I'm too old?"

"Please, how could I possibly . . . but in that case may I ask you for a mazurka?"

Madame Odintsov smiled graciously. "Certainly," she said… (Turgenev 1975)

It is obvious that Arkady is attracted to Madame Odintsov at first glance: “Аркадий решил, что он еще никогда не встречал такой прелестной женщины” (Turgenev [1862] (1946) (“Arkady decided that he had never before met such a fascinating woman.”)) (Turgenev 1975).

Traditionally, dancing the mazurka would only occur between close acquaintances. Both Arkady and Madame Odintsov break this tradition, however. Arkady breaks it by daring to ask for Madame Odintsov’s hand and Madame Odintsov does so by accepting Arkady’s offer. This is an unexpected, bold, and untraditional move for these two characters, considering that they are strangers to one another. The mazurka can be interpreted as an intimate event that offers insight into certain characters’ personal relations and serves as an opportunity to express their romantic interest. It is perhaps one of the few times one is able to be intimate with one’s partner, to literally be in each other’s embrace. Concepts such as “going out on dates” did not exist, so the mazurka allowed dancers who liked each other to spend some uninterrupted time. It is during the mazurka that the pledge (made between dancers to be each other’s dance partner) is made and accepted by one’s romantic interest if he or she shares the same feelings.

Karolina Pavlova’s novel A Double Life expands upon the romance theme from Fathers and Sons. Similarly, the mazurka is used here to portray the personal relationships between
characters. In *A Double Life*, the mazurka is suggestive of intimacy. Take into account the description of Cecily when she and Dmitry are dancing the mazurka.

Две минуты спустя она с ним начинала мазурку и скользила в светлом кругу, обставленном стульями, среди толпы зрителей. Но кто из них мог видеть, как нежно была сжата эта трепетная, в первый раз поцелованная ручка? (Pavlova [1848] (1964)

Two minutes later she began dancing the mazurka with him and slipped into the bright circle, surrounded by chairs, among the crowd of onlookers. But who among them could see how tenderly that trembling little hand, which had been kissed for the first time, was grasped? (Pavlova 1996)

It is while dancing the mazurka that their love is finally realized. Pavlova even explicitly writes:

“Это действительно походило на любовь” (Pavlova [1848] (1964) (“This actually resembled love.”) (Pavlova 1996)

The mazurka here is used at the climax of the novel. Since it is a personal and social event, Cecily and Dmitry not only insinuate their intimacy toward one another, but they also relay this message to the other guests at the ball as well, and it is ultimately passed through gossip to all corners of high society. In all dances, people watch one another. Dancing with fervor and commitment establishes to the society who is courting or who will marry whom, especially if the two are young.

Pavlova also uses the mazurka to express her criticism of the lives of aristocratic women in the nineteenth century. This next passage from Pavlova’s novel is a short conversation between two friends, Cecily and Olga.

- Ольга! - сказала она, вбежавши к себе вверх и приглаживая перед зеркалom темные струи своих волос. - Ты ангажирована на мазурку?
- Со вчерашнего утра, - отвечала Ольга таким довольным голосом, что нельзя было сомневаться, кем она была ангажирована. - А ты?
- Только что, с минуту тому назад, - сказала Цецилия еще довольнее ее, бросая на диван свой чудесный шарф. (Pavlova [1848] (1964)

“Olga,” she said, after running upstairs to her room and gazing at the dark waves of her hair in the mirror, “are you promised for the mazurka?”
“Since yesterday morning,” Olga answered in a voice so content that one could have no doubt as to whom she was promised. “And you?”
“Since just a minute ago,” Cecily said, even more content, throwing her marvelous scarf on the sofa. (Pavlova 1996)

In the context of Pavlova’s *A Double Life*, the mazurka symbolizes the suppression of women’s knowledge and self-expression. The realm of life that Cecily participates in is restrained and limited. She is forbidden to dwell in a world of work and politics; her life is occupied by repetitive and trivial matters. She accompanies her mother in visiting and receiving visits from various acquaintances, and busies herself by preparing for social gatherings, having tea, and going for walks in the park. She is discouraged from developing creativity and expressing interests that fall outside the limits of her social role. The lives of the aristocracy are filled with material and social comforts, but the lifestyle is one-dimensional. In Cecily’s case, social etiquette has already determined that she will cultivate a personality that is ladylike and proper. There is only so much she can do with her life. The mazurka serves as a perfect opportunity for a young woman to demonstrate her good education. Cecily understands the expectations that come along with her education; she internalizes them and strives to realize them. When she asks her friend Olga whether she had yet pledged to someone to dance the mazurka, she asks out of curiosity and for the sake of following societal norms. They are expected to ask each other, just as Olga returns the same question to Cecily. By following society’s expectations of women, Cecily reinforces its values. As a female, Cecily must endure and accept the confined world she lives in. Her acceptance of this principle is apparent, and she is unable to break out of it. Nor does she attempt to break free of these constraints out of the agony of uncertainty. She may turn to her expressions that come alive during her dreams, but she has no means or resources to carry them out. Her knowledge is inadequate to build a foundation on which to lead a new life.
Thus the literary depiction of the mazurka offers a view into social mores in the
nineteenth century. This paper has only covered two novels in order to give the reader a glimpse
of how the mazurka is portrayed in Russian literature, but there are many other revealing
examples, notably Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. In *Anna Karenina*, the mazurka is a resource,
manipulated by Anna Karenina herself to suit her needs, and to indicate her superiority and value
in social status above all other women. Her social status is a position that only Anna Karenina
can have. She lives up to the expectation and she uses the mazurka cunningly to simultaneously
ruin Kitty’s status and demeanor, humiliating her, and ascend beyond a traditional woman of her
time. It is in dancing the mazurka that can such subtle and menacing plans come to fruition.

Having found a place in society and literature, the mazurka has made an impact on music
as well. Beginning in 1825, Chopin began to transpose Polish folk music for the piano, making
the dance a form of classical music (Piano Society). He composed some sixty different pieces
based on it (Vancouver Piano Society). The musical attributes of the mazurka thus can be studied
alongside its social context. Of course, Chopin’s mazurkas reflect his cosmopolitan background
and consequently are not the standard folk mazurkas one would expect. They are modified,
reflecting Chopin’s understanding of it (Gorbaty). Nonetheless, many people recognize that
Chopin did succeed in capturing its many faces. His collection of mazurkas is well known and
considered difficult to interpret by other musicians, like the traditional mazurka was to Chopin.

Moving towards the 20th century, the mazurka found its way to Brazil in the work of composer
Heitor Villa-Lobos. When he was introduced to it, he found the dance attractive and decided to
incorporate it into his music. One of his more famous works for solo guitar is a mazurka. Of
course, there is heavy Brazilian influence, but he does not stray too far from the standard
mazurka. The exact piece, that is the mazurka, is the first dance of his *Suite Popular Brasilienne*,


composed between 1908 and 1912. Titled *Mazurka-Choro*, this piece is one of the more easily accessible examples of the modern mazurka. One would understand more about the mazurka and fair well to listen to it if the chance arises.

The mazurka has come a long way from its origins as a traditional Polish folk dance. It is immortalized in numerous musical and literary works that will continue to shape human culture for centuries.

**Works Cited**


