



## **Anton De Kontski As an Outstanding Pianist in the Era of Socio-Cultural Changes in The 19th Century**

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### **Abstract**

The main purpose of this work is to portray the profile of Anton de Kontski and to present his artistic path in the era of socio-cultural changes in the 19th century – extremely difficult time especially for Poland and Polish people, when most Polish artists were forced to emigrate and work abroad. Anton de Kontski was among the most versatile pianists and composers of the 19th century and one of the architects of the musical culture of that period, with its diversity of styles and standards. His vast artistic legacy is an important element of the Polish cultural heritage. The author provides to answer to questions: What socio-cultural changes took place in Europe in the 19th century? Why did the piano play a leading role in the development of musical life in the 19th century? What was the path of development of Anton de Kontski international music education and piano career? What was his repertoire and what was his concert activity like in the world? The intention of the author is also to popularize artistic achievements of this little-known pianist and composer, which will contribute to raising the awareness of how important he was for Polish and European musical culture.

**Keywords:** Anton de Kontski, history of 19th century music, piano music, Polish music, pianists of the 19th century.

### **Introduction**

This publication is devoted to Polish pianist Anton de Kontski. To prepare it the author analysed and compared the following sources: archival materials, publications, articles, unpublished materials, Internet resources and also used an information taken from direct conversations with the composer's descendants. Although de Kontski appears in many music dictionaries and encyclopaedias, both Polish and international, no monograph devoted to the artist has been published to date (the only study that has been written about him is an unpublished master's thesis by Agnieszka Toloczynska, titled *The Concert Activity of Anton de Kontski* and unpublished doctoral dissertation by Anna Parkita, titled *Anton de Kontski piano works in the context of 19th century romantic music based on selected works*). He remains in the shadow of his brother, Apollinary de Kontski – an eminent violinist, student of Niccolò Paganini, educator and founder of the Institute of Music in Warsaw (now the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music). The available publications dedicated to Anton de Kontski include only fragmentary references to his life and work. In analysing and critiquing the literature, the author attempts to piece together any scattered information regarding the pianist, supplemented with her own conclusions and observations.

The 19th century appears to be an era of contrasts, in which both brilliant artists and musical dilettantes had a place of their own. Various tendencies clashed with one another, given the coexistence of the Romantic and Classical trends and the crossing of styles. In Romanticism, music began to play an important role in the education system and the piano became an instrument that “defined” this epoch in a certain sense.

The 19th century was also a time of tremendous socio-political and economic changes in Europe, especially for Poland and Polish people. Most Polish artists were forced to emigrate and work abroad, mainly in Paris, which at that time was the European centre of musical culture. Aside from notable pianists such as Frédéric Chopin, other, lesser known artists also worked there and achieved their successes, such as Anton de Kontski.

Anton de Kontski. was among the most versatile pianists and composers of the 19th century and one of the architects of the musical culture of that period, with its diversity of styles and standards. His vast artistic legacy is an important element of the Polish cultural heritage. Born in Kraków, on 25 September 1816, de Kontski made his public debut at the age of five. As a child prodigy, he received numerous grants which allowed him to study with such household names John Field, Simon Sechter and probably Ludwig van Beethoven. He was showered with honours by European monarchs for his outstanding artistic achievements. During his long career (he died on 7 December 1899), foreign tours took him to almost all European countries, as well as the United States, India, Australia, New Zealand, China and Japan.

### **Social Functions of Music and a Role of the Piano in the 19th Century**

As late as the 18th century, music composed for wealthy patrons, royal courts or the church was called functional music and was not different from music understood as “art for art’s sake” (it was equally valuable). In Romanticism, the situation changed dramatically and a distinction was made between the two sub-types. After the French Revolution in 1789, individual social strata began to leave their mark on culture. The middle class (*bourgeoisie*) came to the fore and started to dominate in this sphere and dictate the terms according to their taste and education. This resulted in a clash between grand, professional and sophisticated art and trivial art and kitsch. This led to the coexistence of artistic music, guided by both the idea of contemplation of the past (old forms, genres, and compositional techniques) and the Romantic idea of freedom and spontaneity, and trivial music, that was ready for “immediate consumption” (Poniatowska, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

Given the limited perceptual capabilities of the average listener of the Romantic era, artistic music veered towards trivial music. This, among other things, led to a simplification of compositional means, trivialisation of the message, and structural deformations. Although its popularity increased among the middle class, who wanted to be closer to the world of great art, there was an increased demand for simple, flashy, and often downright primitive compositions. Thus, it became necessary to create works accessible to the masses, or to adapt the already existing (famous) works to the needs of an uneducated audience by making them simpler. This led to the “serialisation of music production.” Improvisations based on themes brought up by the audience during concerts also became a common practice. This behaviour was an example of a phenomenon that can be referred to as “social request.” The listeners were interested in a particular product for which they paid, so, in a sense, the job of the artist who wanted to “stay on the market” was to make sure that these expectations were met. All the deviations, on account of the desire to please the audience, led to the emergence of salon entertainment literature and its characteristic forms and genres (Parkita, 2020, p. 13).

The 19th century saw a kind of “phenomenon of musicality” (Poniatowska, 1991, p. 143). Due to the growing ambitions of the middle class to catch up with the upper classes, music began to play an important role in the education system. Its task became to adequately prepare the students to understand and perceive the value of art, and therefore, to prepare them for active participation in the cultural world. Regardless of the background, social class and nationality, it was in good taste to possess at least an elementary knowledge of the art of music and be able to play an instrument, at least at a basic level. In the model of bourgeois culture, music was supposed to be a form of escapism (as opposed to the ideas of the Enlightenment, where music served for the purpose of moral education), stimulate emotions and develop the need for sensory perception of the world. It was positioned above other arts because it was the most perfect way to express feelings.

In terms of social aspirations and the desire of “levelling upwards,” music was meant to be a sort of showcase for the middle class. Members of the middle class perfected their perception of music by experiencing it both at home, in everyday life, and at concerts, or by participating in amateur forms of music-making, which was, without a doubt, a great cultural achievement of the 19th century (Poniatowska, 1991, pp. 47-49).

“From the cultural point of view, a musical instrument is a product belonging to material culture, which is used to manifest spiritual culture” (Poniatowska, 1991, p. 14). Following this thought, we can consider the piano as an instrument that “defined” the music of the 19th century in a certain sense. Because of its technical, dynamic, expressive, and colour qualities, it was very popular and widely accepted.

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<sup>1</sup>Irena Poniatowska – a Polish musicologist, educator, and professor of the humanities.

It became an important factor influencing the creative process of composing music works, as well as a medium for certain notions that were inseparable from the ideas of that era, as a “link in the social interaction” (composer – performer – instrument – audience). It worked equally well in grand concert halls, aristocratic salons, and at home. Unlike the harpsichord, which was seen as unfit to express emotions due to its stable sound, the piano was a true carrier of expression. Poniatowska gives several reasons for such extreme popularity of the piano in the first half of the 19th century:

- having a wide range of dynamic and expressive means,
- the ability to be used in chamber music and to accompany songs,
- the ability to reproduce the harmonic and melodic structure of all, even the most complex musical works (operas, symphonies), and the ability to transcribe them, and create extracts and arrangements,
- use in music education as a means of education for aspiring artists (not only pianists) and a workshop for composers and opera singers,
- the opportunity for participation in music life not only for virtuosos, but also amateurs – learning the basic piano skills did not require a great ear for music, but only a little bit of talent and some manual dexterity,
- the constant development and evolution of the instrument and the resulting array of new means of expression, attracted new players and encouraged further exploration by both artists and piano makers,
- the versatility of applications and response to market needs – the piano pleased both the educated romantic artists, as well as amateurs who wanted to participate in art and treated it as a source of entertainment. The demand for pianos was growing. Piano education grew in popularity and a great number of publishing houses distributing educational literature (at various levels) and instrument making workshops appeared. This led to an exuberant concert life and cemented the position of the piano in the 19th century (Poniatowska, 1991, p. 19).

The role and importance of the piano at this time is also evidenced by the foundation of *Le pianiste*, a magazine dedicated solely that instrument, in 1833 in Paris.

The piano became an instrument that all notable families had to own. Some pianos were specially made to order and featured elaborate ornamentation or accessories (such as cabinets). Although for the majority of the middle class the piano served only as living room decor, an “obligatory adornment,” having one at home was a sign of social ennoblement and belonging to the upper classes. The location of the instrument usually allowed the listeners to gather around it, but not without the ability to have conversations with one another. It was therefore part of the style of the era to listen to music that served as an accompaniment to discussions about art. Only virtuosos such as Liszt demanded that the audience focus solely on them (Poniatowska, 1991, p. 20).

Salon music playing served both as entertainment and contemplation of beauty. However, artistic content was both felt and conveyed during the Romanticism was governed by its own rules. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers assigned very different roles and meanings to the piano. French musicologist Danièle Pistone portrayed the piano not as a pretext for socializing or a means of socializing, but as an instrument through which a solitary artist could present his talent to others during a gathering (Pistone, 1975, p. 263). Composer and musicologist Jacques Chailley claimed that “It was not the community that told the musician to express collective feelings, but the musicians called on the community to reveal their feelings and to share their joys and sufferings with them” (Chailley, 1961). Philosopher and art historian Hippolyte Taine saw the piano as an invention used to detach “from the dullness of mediocrity, from the unimportance of women and the misery of human existence” (Poniatowska, p. 23). There were also some who described it as too mechanical, incapable of expressing emotion or nostalgia. Heinrich Heine wrote in 1843 that “the dominance of piano and the triumph of the succession of virtuosos is proof of the victory of the mechanical over the spiritual” (Loesser, 1954, p. 415). In 1885, Louis Pagnerré stated in his book *De la mauvaise influence du piano sur l'art musical* that “The piano has produced many pianists but few musicians” (Pagnerre, 2009). The divergence of all these opinions undoubtedly shows how many functions this instrument had in human life and how great were its capabilities of expression.

Since in this time the middle class struggled for social respectability, the number of piano students increased greatly, as well as the number of music teachers at various levels. The principles of music and piano playing were taught by both governesses and trained professionals. The profession of pianist-teacher gained a very lucrative status (depending on social position). Not surprisingly, it was at this time that the methodology of teaching an instrument became extremely important. It is estimated that 109 piano schools were established by 1835 alone (Poniatowska, 1991, p. 51).

The place with the oldest musical traditions was the Paris Conservatory, founded in 1784. It became so popular both on a national and international scale that it eventually stopped accepting foreign students. The most dynamic development of music conservatories in Europe dates back to the first half of the 19th century (since the 1860s and 1870s). Soon afterwards, similar institutions also began to appear in America. Most of them had specialised departments for professionals and general departments for amateurs. By that time, the piano undeniably dominated the entire music education (POniatowska, 1991, pp. 49-50).

### **International Music Education and Piano Career of Anton de Kotski**

Anton de Kotski (Polish: Antoni Michał Kątski) of Brochwicz coat of arms was born on 25 September 1816 in Kraków (Parkita, 2020, pp. 27-28). From an early age, Anton de Kotski showed signs of a kind of musical genius. He was repeatedly referred to by his contemporaries as a “child prodigy” or a “young Mozart.” He was considered a piano virtuoso, but he knew how to play violin, sing and conduct. Anton’s musical education in his early years was provided by his father Grzegorz Kotski. On 3 February 1822, at the age of five he gave his first performance with his brother Karol at a charity concert organised by Grzegorz at the Society of Friends of Music in Krakow (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 16). Anton’s father greatest ambition was to give his children a music education. He devoted his entire life to building their artistic careers, organizing performances, soliciting scholarships and finding the right teachers. The Kotski family moved from one place depending on concert opportunities of their talented children and the needs of their education. The eldest son, Karol (1813-1867), became a violinist (Anton, 2021, p. 214). After moving to Paris, he found work at the Opera-Comique orchestra and also gave music lessons (Chechlinska, 1997, pp. 56-57). Eugenia (1815-1880), performed as a singer, but after getting married, she gave up performing and devoted herself to teaching (Anton, 2021 p. 215). Stanislaw (1820-1886) – pianist and composer, also devoted himself to teaching the piano (2021, p. 241). The youngest son, Apolinary (1824–1879) became a world-famous violin virtuoso, a student of Nicolo Paganini, and a composer (Chamczyk, 2019). He also founded the Institute of Music in Warsaw, which earned him a permanent place in the history of Polish culture. Anton, on the other hand, was the only one of his siblings to actively perform throughout his entire life.

At the age of seven, Anton began to study composition and piano at the School of Music in Jean Markendorf’s class. Some sources claim that because of Markendorf’s appeal, the boy was tutored in Vienna by Ludwig van Beethoven himself. In an interview in Australia in 1896, de Kotski described his meeting with the Master of Bonn in some detail. He said, among other things, that Beethoven, who was not widely known at the time, had a habit of listening to a piano through a metal tube placed against the instrument’s lid. He also mentioned the conversation books used by the master and recalled his housekeeper, Ms. Schnapps (N.N., 1896).

Also in 1825, Grzegorz de Kotski, who started to become more and more active as a manager of his children, wrote a letter to Tsar Alexander to gain his attention (and most probably also his financial support). The tsar ordered the young musicians to be examined on 16 August 1825, which included the principles of composition, basso continuo and a practical part. Anton performed *Allegro* from Ferdinand Ries’ *Piano Concerto in C sharp minor* and *Finale* from Johann Nepomuk Hummel’s *Piano Concerto in B minor*, while his brother Karol presented Pierre Jacques Joseph Rode’s *Violin Concerto No. 7* and Karol Lipinski’s *Rondo alla Polacca*. The examiners, including Jozef Elsner and Karol Kurpinski, gave the children a positive review, which was sent to Moscow, but the tsar’s death in 1825 brought an end to the father’s plans. In 1827, Grzegorz asked the Minister Secretary of State in St. Petersburg, who had heard his children’s performance, to ask the new tsar, Nicholas I, for support. The ruler was sympathetic to the Polish family and awarded the children a three-year stipend of 3000 Polish zloty, and afterwards, during his stay in Warsaw in 1829, he extended that stipend for another three years (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 17).

To ensure the best possible education of their children, the Kotski family set out for Russia on 17 October 1827. Along the way, the little artists performed in Lviv, Krzemieniec, Mitava, Vilnius, and Riga. During this time, the father made every effort to have Anton take piano lessons from John Field in Russia. It was to him that the boy dedicated his first *Piano concerto in F major* (Toloczynska, 2013).

In 1832, the Kotski family moved to Vienna. Father began organizing performances of his children in the Austrian capital as well. To do so, he reached out for support to the local Society of Music, which, after having them examined, helped publicise their talent. The efforts of Grzegorz allowed him, Anton and Karol to become members of this prestigious organisation. In 1833 or 1834 Anton began his studies at the Vienna Conservatory in the piano class of Sigismund Thalberg and in the composition class of Simon Sechter.

This was a time when he started to become independent from his siblings and work on his own stage image (Toloczynska, 2013).

In 1835 or 1836 the Kotski family settled in Versailles. Anton gave numerous concerts and his popularity grew. He also earned a living by giving piano lessons, composing and publishing his works. At that time, Paris was the piano capital of Europe, especially after the performance of Ferenc Liszt (whose greatest rival was Thalberg, de Kotski's teacher). Sechter's recommendation and the diploma of the Vienna Academy of Music gained him a favourable reception and interest of the Parisian bohemia. Anton soon established contacts with Polish expatriates (including Fryderyk Chopin and Adam Mickiewicz) and joined the Polish Society (Toloczynska, 2013).

As an outstanding pianist, Anton de Kotski was quickly recognised by the Parisian cultural elite and was given a seat on the jury at the Paris Conservatory. This meant that as a piano professor, he participated in the annual competitions at that school. In 1842, he became a member of the *Societe Academique des Enfants d'Apollon* – a society of both professional and amateur musicians, of that organisation, although he had the opportunity to perform under the auspices of that organisation earlier on (Poniatowska, 1999, p. 109).

In 1845, de Kotski wrote a piece that became a golden standard in the canon of music textbooks – *Methode de piano*, with a series of exercises titled *L'indispensable du Pianiste Op. 100* and it became a textbook used in Paris, Berlin and Petersburg (Poniatowska, 1999). The title card of *L'Indispensable du Pianiste* features likenesses of Clementi and Field – it is a kind of homage on the part of de Kotski's to the composers to whom he refers, as an heir to their tradition.

The Paris years were very fruitful for the artist, both in terms of performances and compositions. After numerous recitals, the press wrote extensively about his wonderful technique, fullness of sound, musical sensitivity and the temperament, with which he entered the stage and captivated the audience. The newspaper *La Revue et Gazette Musicale* placed him in the list of top pianists twice - in 1838 and 1843 (Poniatowska, 1999). After an astonishing success in the capital of France, practically all European concert halls were open to him.

In 1848, at the invitation of Queen Isabella II of Spain, de Kotski left Paris for Madrid and Seville, and accepted the position of court pianist. During his trip to Portugal (with concerts in Lisbon), he was asked by Ferdinand II Coburg to reorganise the local conservatory. Although plan never came to fruition due to excessive costs, de Kotski received the Order of the Immaculate Conception (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 24).

Two years later, Anton de Kotski returned to Poland for the first time since leaving to study in Vienna, to play several recitals with his brother Apolinary (he returned several more times in the 1850s: in 1851, 1852, 1853, and 1858). The musicians they delighted the audience and won the favour of the critics everywhere they played. In 1852, Anton gave seven concerts in Kraków alone, while in 1853, after a recital in Warsaw, the following review by Jozef Sikorski<sup>2</sup>, called the “father of music criticism”:

He needed no more than a few bars to present himself as a virtuoso of the highest order, proving that all the stories of his fabulous playing were true...after merely a few bars one could feel the spirit and softness of touch, the first of those several criteria that made a good pianist (Sikorski, 1853)

Anton de Kotski spent the years 1851–1853 in Berlin, where he was appointed court pianist to the Prussian King Frederick William IV Hohenzollern, and piano teacher to the Prussian Princess Ludovika. He gave numerous concerts (in Austria and Poland, and, according to some sources, also in Greece, Turkey, Egypt and Italy), he frequently left Prussia (Chechlińska, 1997).

After leaving the court of the Hohenzollerns, Anton de Kotski settled in Petersburg, where he remained until 1867 (Toloczynska, p. 25). During this time, he toured extensively around the country. In St. Petersburg, he founded the Society of Classical Music Lovers and his piano school, which was his main source of livelihood and brought in a sizeable income. Anton de Kotski's next place of residence was London (1867–1883). There, he was engaged in composing, teaching and performing. In the 1870s, de Kotski toured Europe, especially France, and went on a tour of Russia in the early 1880s.

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<sup>2</sup>Jozef Sikorski (1813-1896) - Polish musician, music critic, author of many publications.

The year 1883 brought the greatest change in the artist's life, as he left Europe, heading for the United States. He initially settled in Buffalo (a city on the Canadian border), but in 1892 moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he took the position of a piano professor at the local conservatory. During this period he also performed repeatedly in the USA and Canada, adding artistic lectures on Chopin to his artistic programme (Toloczynska, 2013).

As a patriot, Anton de Kontski maintained good relations with the Polish community in the United States. In 1891, he received an honorary diploma from the Union of Polish Singers in America and participated in the Union's conventions in Grand Rapids (1892) and Chicago (1893). He also composed the *March of the Polish National Alliance*, commissioned by Antoni Mallek, who held the position of general secretary (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 28).

In 1897, the nearly eighty-year-old artist decided to embark on a concert tour around the world that included Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, China, Japan, Siam, Russia, and Poland (Chechlińska, 1997). He returned to his homeland in 1899, where he gave two concerts (in January and March) at the Warsaw Music Society. The programme of the final recital was as follows: "Anton de Kontski[piano] *Sonata in F minor [Op. 310]*, Anton de Kontski *Meditation "La rose du soir,"* Anton de Kontski *Le Réveil de lion. Caprice heroique* Op. 115, [Ludwig van] Beethoven, [Ignaz] Moscheles, John Field, [Frederic] Chopin *Mazurka*, [Carl Maria] Weber" (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 123). Below is an excerpt from a review of the event:

To see an aged artist, born while Beethoven was still alive and preceded only a few years by Chopin, who knew and befriended the most eminent of people, whose names we speak today with reverence, to marvel at his vitality and temperament or technique that many a young person could be envious of – is a remarkable and extraordinary thing! (M. M. B., 1899)

After this concert, he headed east to play in Oryol and Kharkiv. He died suddenly on 7 December 1899 at the estate of his second wife's sister – most probably in Ivanchitsi near Zarichne - County of Novohrad-Volynskiy, Zhytomyr Governorate (Anton, 2021, p. 163).

### **Concert activities of Anton de Kontski**

An analysis of reviews from the 19th century press lead to the conclusion that Anton de Kontski was an extremely gifted pianist, whose performances met with favorable reviews from critics all over the world. Comments on de Kontski's style of playing were always full of appreciation and admiration, from his youngest years to old age. It should be noted that the artist was an active pianist for seventy seven years. Although audiences and critics were favourable towards him from his first performances in Kraków, the peak of his career came in the years he spent in Paris, 1835–1848. Making a name for oneself was extremely difficult among the Parisian cultural elites due to the fierce competition of artists from all over Europe and, consequently, the extraordinarily high expectations of listeners. Henrich Heine believed that the French capital was overcome by a plague of the piano (Atwood, 2005, p. 178). Therefore, success in Paris was for a pianist a ticket to the greatest concert halls of the world. This was the case of Anton de Kontski.

Toloczynska distinguishes several types of performances given by de Kontski's according to the occasion. These include:

- showcase concerts – held at royal courts or attended by distinguished guests such as: Tsar Nicholas I or the Emperor and Empress of Austria,
- salon concerts – more intimate, held at private home salons, extremely popular in the 19th century,
- charity performances – where the proceeds were donated to various worthy causes,
- concerts "at the request of the audience" – showing great interest in the artist's performance,
- farewell concerts (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 142).

The following reviews, opinions, and biographical notes that appeared in the nineteenth-century press are an invaluable source of information about de Kontski's piano style. The concert at the Salle Erard in 1839, performed with his brother Charles, was reviewed as follows:

Anton is accurate, expressive; there is much power and certainty in his playing; the notes separate in an exquisite fashion, and when he passes to the highest tones, they are as light and pleasant as raindrops beating on a roof. Anton dispenses them to the audience with an extravagance that testifies to a great wealth [...] is a poet of nature. (Poniatowska, 1999, p. 108)

In 1846, H. Blanchard wrote in *La Revue et Gazette Musicale*: “His ten fingers sing on the piano akin to the way Grisi and Persiani do it with their throats, performing Italian melodies, especially this melody from *La sonnambula*, in a delightful way with nuanced power and expression of sound”(p. 106).

The best description of Anton de Kontski as a pianist is given by Jozef Sikorski in his publication after a concert in Warsaw in 1853, during which de Kontski performed Johann Nepomuk Hummel’s *Piano Concerto in B minor*, Jan Ladislav Dusik’s *Piano Concerto*, and several of his own compositions. He says euphorically that: “his fingers are so nimble in fast passages is so advanced that we, even while idolising virtuosic qualities, have never dreamt of anything like it (Sikorski, 1853). In addition: “DeKontski’s craft is second to none among other pianists, his theory is as thorough as it can be in any musician, his passion as rich as the composition allows, and his treatment of the instrument is so exquisite, with eager use of its resources ” (1853). Sikorski also appreciated other virtues of de Kontski’s pianism, such as combining phrases into logical “finite” musical thoughts, the independence of each sound, and at the same time, their hierarchical ordering, the intricate performance of the *gruppettos*. The critics also praised the virtuoso’s dignified sound, the proper use of the pedal, which emphasised the qualities of the works he performed, and his skill in shading the dynamics, and his attention to detail (Toloczynska, 2013). Because of all these qualities of Antoni’s style of playing, he was often compared with Franz Liszt. Sikorski also commented that some people predicted de Kontski to become a new model, unless the Hungarian master improves his skill a bit (Sikorski, 1853).

Anton de Kontski’s technique was excellent, but also full of grace and inner energy, and his interpretation of piano works was extremely accurate, stylish and sophisticated. It means that each performance was preceded by a careful analysis of all elements of the work. “It can be described with two words: he understands and feels what he is playing” – this is how people commented on his concerts (Toloczynska, 2013). However, Anton himself coyly said that he spent little time practicing his instrument. In 1899, the old artist reminisced:

Oh! Working on music is by no means something I can boast about. “First of all, I had no time for it, since my parents [...] tried to give me a general education [...]. Besides, I never liked spending time sitting down and playing music, since I have always been a lively and energetic person, so my mother had to tie me down to the chair for an hour to exercise, and I was always so keen to get out of this captivity and spent not a single minute longer on playing and asked my mother to release me when that hour of exercise was over. Later on, my musical memory allowed me to devote very little time to my studies [...]. Aside from playing concerts while travelling, I don’t play at all. As you can see, I do not have a piano in my hotel, and I spend my time reading, chatting, and laying *solitaire*, since it does not put a strain on my nerves (K-z, 1899, p. 4)

It should be noted that, according to some sources, the artist had a phenomenal musical memory. According to Aleksander Poliński, who shared his observation with his readers in *TygodnikIlustrowany* in 1895, playing all the sonatas by Beethoven, Clementi and Pleyel, or a dozen of Bach’s fugues from memory was nothing out of the ordinary for de Kontski (Polinski, 1895).

Nonetheless, Anton de Kontski was undoubtedly a favourite of the audience. He enjoyed good health and had nimble hands to the end of his life, remaining active as a musician. When he gave concerts in Poland for the last time (at the age of eighty-three), people came in crowds to listen to the living legend. The reviews of the concert said:

For artists, old age is a kind of ominous stigma that makes us perceive even the most prominent talents with a certain disbelief – or anxiety, bearing in mind their former glory, that the once great artist may receive an unpleasant remark or a patronising review instead of praise. It is with this kind of impression that the undersigned went to the Music Society evening performance, whose entire program was filled by the 82-year-old Anton de Kontski – but after merely a few bars he humbly bowed his head before the star of the Polish concert scene, overwhelmed by the greatness of talent of this “old youngster ” (Rzepko, 1899)

De Kontski was well aware of how unique he was. He emphasised with undisguised pride: “Thus, at the age of 80 [...] I am still an active musician, whereas neither Liszt nor Rubinstein could perform at the age of 60 due to their ailing fingers! I thank God that I am still strong and healthy, and ready for another 80 years of work”(Al. R., 1900, p. 17).

## Repertoire

An analysis of all the available sources lead to the conclusion that Anton de Kontski as a pianist preferred Classical and Early Romantic pieces. Poniatowska claims that his finger technique was best suited to the interpretation of such a repertoire. During his concerts, the artist most often played compositions by Haydn, Beethoven, Field, Hummel, Weber, Moscheles, Thalberg and his own compositions (1999). A compilation of Anton de Kontski's concert programme listed by Agnieszka Tołoczynska in *Działalność koncertowa Antoniego Kątskiego* indicates that his repertoire evolved over the years (Toloczynska, 2013, pp. 144-148).

In the beginning of his global career, Anton favoured music pieces with a touch of virtuosity, which included variations and fantasies in the *brillante* style by various composers, as well as the first movements or finales of piano concertos by Hummel, Moscheles or Ries. During the next phase (his Parisian years), he almost exclusively played his own compositions. In the 1850s and 1860s, he introduced works by Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelsohn, Weber and Chopin into the repertoire, while in the last years of his life he also performed compositions by Bach, Handel, Brahms and Schubert (pp.148-149).

It should be noted that de Kontski was particularly fond of *Concerto in B minor*, Op. 89 by J. N. Hummel. He played it regularly for 28 years, and instructed piano students to study *Method* of that composer. Therefore, it can be concluded that de Kontski respected Hummel's work and considered him to be a role model. After one of the performances of this piano concerto, Jozef Sikorski wrote:

This was probably [de Kontski's] way of showing what music he valued the most and where the purest of essence should be sought; he surely wanted to pay homage to a man who was ahead of his peers in his time, and of showing what he himself wanted to become, and finally – showing how to embrace the spirit before demonstrating how insane his fingers were (1853, pp. 132-133)

Since, apart from his of compositions, de Kontski also performed pieces by old masters, his repertoire was even sometimes called “archeologically coloured” (Poniatowska, 1999):

The distant era, its tastes and ideals are most accurately reflected in de Kontski's performances and works, at the same time making them extremely interesting and instructive – because of this very archaeological colouring (M. M. B., 1899, p. 128)

Poniatowska believes that Anton de Kontski as an artist, pianist and composer “became anachronistic already in his lifetime, since he remained faithful to his ideals of style, repertoire, and the aesthetics of piano playing for the 76 years he spent on the stages of the world (1999, p. 105).

As for de Kontski's style of playing, Stanisław Dybowski, in his Dictionary of Polish pianists cites the opinion of Michał Marian Biernacki published in the 1899 edition of *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralnei Artystyczne*: Although he apparently was never closed off from what was going on around him, K. remained faithful to his era (...) it is a case of an *antico modo* style of playing, which was even more unusual because of the spirit of de Kontski's compositions that clearly lingered above the spirit and style of that era (M. M. B., 1899).

## Next step

The fragments of publications from the nineteenth-century press presented by the author (including reviews) prove that Antoni was extremely gifted pianist. He also composed over 400 opuses - almost all of which are compositions for piano. Despite of his formidable skills and great contribution to the development of 19th-century music, has fallen into total oblivion both in Poland and around the world. Our task is to restore Anton his rightful place in the history of music. Unfortunately, any attempt to analyse, describe and catalogue the entire compositional output of Anton de Kontski would exceed the scope of a single academic publication. The author hopes that her publication will contribute to further research on the life and work of Anton de Kontski.

## Conclusion

Anton de Kontski was not only a versatile artist and musician. His innate curiosity about the world, his ease in learning languages and winning over people, and his managerial skills made him known around the world. He was a traveller and a cosmopolitan who set and pursued lifelong goals for himself. He had the courage to reach for success, crossing many boundaries (both national and personal) and travelling hundreds of thousands of kilometres.



According to Toloczynska's calculations, during his concert tours, de Kontski travelled 164,000 kilometres, which is equal to circling the equator four times (Toloczynska, 2013, p. 143). As a pianist de Kontski was a true lion of the stage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On account of his long-term presence on the international scene, Kątski deserves a place in the pantheon of Polish and European music of the Romantic era.

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