

# The Piano and the Pen



George Sand's Manor in Nohant, France, photo by the George Sand Museum in Nohant

**Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka** (*Austin, Texas*)

When, in the mid-1990s, I became the Polish press officer for the Chopin Festival in Nohant, I could never have imagined what a long and extraordinary adventure my encounter with Fryderyk Chopin and George Sand would become.

It was a warm summer. The whole region of Berry was in bloom, its meadows spread across rolling hills. From time to time, the view was crossed by a stream and, beside it, a mill surrounded by a tangle of wild grapevines climbing the stone walls, with the mill wheel turning in rhythm with the falling water. A pond or a lake added shades of blue to the green-yellow-red palette of the landscape. Tiny houses with picturesque shutters and tiled roofs, nestled in lush greenery in small hamlets, were a constant feature of the area—just like the numerous, still fairly well-preserved medieval castles scattered throughout the region.

I stayed with a very kind French family in a house typical of Berry—charming, full of atmosphere, and steeped in tradition passed down from generation to generation. Every morning I was served fresh rolls “à la George Sand” for breakfast, and each day I was made to feel that, as a compatriot of Chopin, I was a special guest.

The George Sand estate is a small hamlet with a unique character. The country manor, built in the Louis XV style and surrounded by a wild park, was rather neglected at the time.

Although open to visitors and listed as a national historic monument—thus under state protection—it did not have the air of a museum. It felt more like a slightly disordered home that its inhabitants had hurriedly left after a “storm,” taking only what was necessary. Yet within its walls and furnishings lingered the warmth of a refuge, memories of happy moments, and traces of the many visits and lively gatherings of remarkable guests.

\*\*\*

**George Sand** was born in Paris on July 1, 1804 — six years before Chopin — as Aurora, the daughter of a Napoleonic officer named Dupin. He died when Aurora was only four years old, thrown from his horse near their home. On her father’s side, she was the great-granddaughter of Maurice de Saxe, a French marshal and the illegitimate son of Augustus II the Strong, King of Poland. On her mother’s side, she was a distant cousin of Louis XVI. Her mother, the child of a socially unequal marriage, did not continue the royal traditions. As the daughter of a bird seller on the banks of the Seine in Paris, she became a minor actress. When Aurora was born, her mother already had a daughter from a previous relationship.



J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka inside George Sand's manor in Nohant





J. Sokołowska-Gwizdka inside George Sand's manor in Nohant

\*

Aurora Dupin (later known as George Sand) was raised first in a convent and later in her paternal grandmother's home — in an

atmosphere of freedom, unrestrained by convention or social constraints. At the age of sixteen, according to her grandmother's will, she became the owner of the country estate in Nohant and inherited a substantial sum of money. This made her wealthy and gave her independence and a sense of self-determination.

At eighteen, she married Baron Dudevant of Gascony — a young, educated man but, reportedly, a terrible spendthrift who had been deprived of his inheritance by his stepmother. The marriage was ill-matched from the start — physically, emotionally, and intellectually. The baron soon transformed from a former officer into a rustic reveler. He drank daily, disappeared without a word, slept with the servants, dozed off over books, and could not stand music.

The young baroness therefore sought emotional and spiritual fulfillment elsewhere — suddenly leaving home without explanation and riding aimlessly through the countryside. The couple's children, Maurice and Solange, were deprived of affection and raised by servants, creating in their imagination myths that gave them the love and security they lacked.

This situation lasted eight years until Aurora, after yet another quarrel with her husband, announced that she was leaving for Paris. Her mother had urged her before the wedding to sign a

prenuptial agreement, but Aurora, proud of her independence, refused — to her later regret. The laws of the time discriminated against women: an unfaithful wife could be imprisoned, and all property belonged to her husband. This injustice deeply angered the future writer and led to her later adoption of a masculine image — both in appearance and in the choice of a male pseudonym.

Through her strong will, she eventually secured a divorce on her own terms and retained ownership of Nohant. Throughout her life, she sought love and intense emotional experiences. Her numerous informal relationships — with prominent figures of Parisian bohemia, artists, titled individuals, as well as with lesser-known men such as her household doctor or a shy law student — were widely discussed in Paris, keeping George Sand constantly in the public eye.

\*\*\*



Interior of George Sand's manor in Nohant, photo by the George Sand Museum in Nohant

There are many rooms in Nohant, but only a few reflect the vivid and exuberant imagination of its former inhabitants. These are the rooms of Chopin and George Sand. The others—such as those of Solange and Maurice—are quiet and submissive, coated with the patina of time, powerless in the face of their mother's strong individuality.

The legend of Chopin and George Sand has never left this place. Chopin's stay in Nohant and the eccentric personality of the



estate's owner have ennobled the surrounding community. The locals feel themselves heirs to their genius and thus, generation after generation, they preserve the traditions of this place and keep the memories alive. One has the impression of speaking to people who truly knew them. In a small antique shop in nearby La Châtre, I once admired an old carafe. When I picked it up, the owner told me its story: it had supposedly been found in the park beneath George Sand's window, thrown out in anger by the mistress of the house after a stormy quarrel with Chopin. Whether this story is true or merely a local legend created for convenience, no one knows. Yet the people of the region have preserved in their memory the storms and passions of that relationship.

Chopin's first years in Nohant passed in harmony. The creative freedom, artistic atmosphere, and George Sand's flamboyance deeply impressed him. At last, he found the refuge he had long sought. Nohant became a substitute for the family home he so greatly missed. When Chopin met George Sand, he was still engaged to Maria Wodzińska. The failed engagement—broken by Maria's parents due to Chopin's poor health—caused a spiritual crisis and deepened his depression born of the unfulfilled dream of a real home. His relationship with George Sand offered him a home, artistic inspiration, and the fulfillment of his most intimate desires.

During their first summer in Nohant in 1839, Chopin and George Sand spent most of their time in the bedroom, upholstered in blue fabric, under a lace canopy, pausing only for horseback rides through the countryside. They visited nearby medieval castles and climbed hills to admire the landscape from above. After returning from their rides, they would again retreat beneath the canopy, exhausted, while the servants brought their meals to the room. At that time, their apartments were connected.

Gradually, however, things began to change. Conflicts appeared. Chopin and George Sand spent the winters in Paris, returning to Nohant in spring and remaining there until autumn. Chopin's room was on the first floor, with windows overlooking the garden. From his room one entered the guest salon with the piano. George Sand's room was nearby, with a charming writing desk full of secret compartments, drawers, and boxes locked with tiny keys, and a delicate, feminine dressing table with an oval mirror. Only Chopin's room had special soundproof shutters and thickly padded doors.

George Sand worked mainly at night and slept during the day. Chopin was the opposite—he slept at night and worked in the daylight. The residents of Nohant remembered him as a deeply complex man. Seemingly gentle, quiet, and withdrawn into his imagination, he could suddenly erupt in bursts of anger and

nervous tension. Everything disturbed him. He would shut himself in his room, close the shutters, block out all light, and remain that way for weeks.

Chopin was convinced that he was far from a genius. A perfectionist, he strove endlessly to be the best. He would spend hours at the piano, bent over his scores, trying to capture his thoughts. He often fell into fits of despair—throwing himself on the floor, shouting, tearing up his music, pounding the keys, claiming that he was talentless and would never compose anything worthwhile, that he was just another mediocrity in the world. His self-doubt and constant revisions exhausted his publishers, as engraved plates often had to be redone.

George Sand said that Chopin composed in a burst of emotion, then spent months at the keyboard crossing out and rewriting, only to return, after much toil, to his first version. For the household, his fits of rage were exhausting, hence his room remained an isolated fortress—with soundproofed doors and windows.

The paths of the two artists gradually diverged. It is said that George Sand found a new partner, while her children—deprived of a father and of the love of a mother absorbed in herself—were growing up. Maurice tried to attract her attention, but his attempts at painting evoked little enthusiasm from her. Feeling

wronged and rejected, he directed his resentment toward Chopin, whom he saw as the man who had taken his mother away.



Dining room in George Sand's manor in Nohant, photo by the George Sand Museum in Nohant

A different kind of bond developed between Chopin and Solange. During the seven years of Chopin's relationship with George Sand, Solange grew from an eleven-year-old girl into an eighteen-year-old young woman, and she projected her first romantic feelings onto Fryderyk. To her, he was a prince from a



fairy tale—someone who partly filled the void left by the absence of parental love. Chopin, accustomed to the little girl running around the house, one day suddenly realized that she had become a woman. George Sand was often away, their relationship was nearing its end, and under the same roof, a young and innocent affection began to bloom. No one knew when they fell in love. One day, George Sand returned from Paris earlier than expected and found Chopin with her daughter. Feeling humiliated and rejected, burdened by her age, she flew into a rage.

George Sand's room looked as if someone might return to it at any moment; Chopin's, however, was in ruins—devastated by a storm of hatred and jealousy. George Sand took cruel revenge on them both. She threw Chopin out of the house. To erase all memories of him, she ordered his room to be destroyed. All the furniture was burned in the courtyard, the wallpaper torn down to the plaster, even the floorboards ripped out. Only the soundproof shutters and doors—remnants of the hours the great Fryderyk spent composing—remained to remind of its former occupant.

Solange was married off to a coarse sculptor, Auguste Clésinger, much older than she, who had once been her mother's lover. She received an estate as her dowry, and George Sand never wanted to see her again.

That, at least, is what people say—but historical sources seem to contradict this version. Surviving letters suggest that Solange was already married to Clésinger when she quarreled with her mother. Since Chopin tried to mediate between them, and in 1847 wrote a letter to George on Solange's behalf, George was enraged by what she saw as his open siding with "the enemy camp" and broke off their relationship. She destroyed his letters and declared that she had long been weary of him.