

Mälzel and the Machine

Following the death of Kempelen, the Turk remained unexhibited until 1805 when Kempelen's son decided to sell it to Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, a Bavarian musician with an interest in various machines and devices. Mälzel, whose successes included patenting a form of metronome, had tried to purchase the Turk once before, before Kempelen's death. The original attempt had failed, owing to Kempelen's asking price of 20,000 francs; Kempelen's son sold the machine to Mälzel for half this sum.

Upon acquiring the Turk, Mälzel had to learn its secrets and make some repairs to get it back in working order. His stated goal was to make explaining the Turk a greater challenge. While the completion of this goal took ten years, the Turk still made appearances, most notably with Napoleon Bonaparte.

In 1809, Napoleon I of France arrived at Schönbrunn Palace to play the Turk. According to an eyewitness report, Mälzel took responsibility for the construction of the machine while preparing the game, and the Turk (Johann Baptist Allgaier) saluted Napoleon before the start of the match. The details of the match have been published over the years in numerous accounts, many of them contradictory. According to Bradley Ewart, it is believed that the Turk sat at its cabinet, and Napoleon sat at a separate chess table. Napoleon's table was in a roped-off area and he was not allowed to cross into the Turk's area, with Mälzel crossing back and forth to make each player's move and allowing a clear view for the spectators. In a surprise move, Napoleon took the first turn instead of allowing the Turk to make the first move, as was usual; but Mälzel allowed the game to continue. Shortly thereafter, Napoleon attempted an illegal move. Upon noticing the move, the Turk returned the piece to its original spot and continued the game. Napoleon attempted the illegal move a second time, and the Turk responded by removing the piece from the board entirely and taking its turn. Napoleon then attempted the move a third time, the Turk responding with a sweep of its arm, knocking all the pieces off the board. Napoleon was reportedly amused, and then played a real game with the machine, completing nineteen moves before tipping over his king in surrender. Alternate versions of the story include Napoleon being unhappy about losing to the machine, playing the machine at a later time, playing one match with a magnet on the board, and playing a match with a shawl around the head and body of the Turk in an attempt to obscure its vision.

In 1811, Mälzel brought the Turk to Milan for a performance with Eugène de Beauharnais, the Prince of Venice and Viceroy of Italy. Beauharnais enjoyed the machine so much that he offered to purchase it from Mälzel. After some serious bargaining, Beauharnais acquired the Turk for 30,000 francs – three times what Mälzel had paid – and kept it for four years. In 1815, Mälzel returned to Beauharnais in Munich and asked to buy the Turk back. Two versions of how much he had to pay exist, eventually working out an agreement. One version appeared in the France Letter Palamede. The complete story does not make a lot of sense since Mälzel visited Paris again, and he also could import his "Conflagration of Moscow".

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Turk