A prolific composer with a world-wide following and an enviable sheaf of screen credits is having a moment—almost 170 years after his death.

The music of Frédéric Chopin, the 19th-century Polish pianist whose sonatas, waltzes and other works defined the Romantic era, has popped up in television shows like “Westworld” and “Mozart in the Jungle” ahead of several other projects devoted to him.

Paramount Pictures is developing a biopic about the pianist and Chopin specialist Byron Janis. In August, W.W. Norton & Co. is publishing Paul Kildea’s wide-ranging narrative “Chopin’s Piano: In Search of the Instrument That Transformed Music,” in the U.S. Two months later, Farrar, Straus and Giroux will bring out Alan Walker’s biography, “Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times.”

Born in 1810, Chopin grew up in Warsaw and began studying piano with his mother when he was around 4 years old. He started writing music a few years later.

As he grew older, despite fragile health stemming from a teenage bout of tuberculosis, he performed, composed and taught, ending up in his father’s native country, France. There, he became involved with Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin, a maverick writer with the pen name George Sand.

During almost a decade with Sand—who nicknamed him “Chip-Chip”—Chopin composed some of his best-loved works. He died at 39 in Paris, where he is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery. At his request, his heart was preserved in alcohol and brought back to Poland, where it remains at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw.

Chopin’s poetic sensibility, technical prowess and pioneering use of Polish dances such as the polonaise and the mazurka set him apart, said David Dubal, host of a radio program devoted to piano performance and the author of “Reflections From the Keyboard,” a collection of interviews with famous pianists. “Everyone wants to play Chopin because the melodic genius is so extraordinary.”

His music has also proved to be catnip for directors. In the finale of the first season of HBO’s sci-fi thriller, “Westworld,” Dr. Ford, the Svengali of the titular theme park, listens to Chopin’s moody “Nocturne in E flat major.”

In the Amazon series “Mozart in the Jungle,” about life in a New York orchestra, a wunderkind
conductor picks out Chopin’s gentle “Prelude in A major” on the piano while visiting his girlfriend’s parents. And in Amazon’s “Transparent,” about a family whose patriarch becomes a woman, Chopin’s “Military Polonaise” thunders through a pageant in a drag club.

In the 2003 comedy, “Bad Santa,” the opening sequence unfolds to the strains of Chopin’s “Nocturne in E flat major.” The camera moves inside a bar where Billy Bob Thornton, playing a dissipated Father Christmas, drinks alone.

“I definitely had a mood (melancholy) and a pace in mind,” Terry Zwigoff, the director of “Bad Santa,” recalled in an email.
“I discovered the Chopin with the help of my editor, Robert Hoffman, once we were in the editing room,” Mr. Zwigo added. “I thought it was perfect.”

Things almost took a different turn. After he screened his cut of “Bad Santa” for the film’s producers, they hated the Chopin music, Mr. Zwigo wrote, “and wanted to replace it with ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ by Alvin and the Chipmunks.”

Mr. Janis, 90, the subject of the Paramount project, is a lifelong fan of the composer. He met Sand’s granddaughter, Aurore, in France in 1955 and played “Nocturne in D flat major” for her. His 2010 memoir, written with his wife, Maria Cooper Janis, is titled “Chopin and Beyond: My Extraordinary Life in Music and the Paranormal.”

According to Ron Losby, chief executive of Steinway Musical Instruments, Chopin’s music resonates on an emotional level with listeners.

“Whether it’s the very happy ‘Butterfly Etude’—that is just a little wisp of a song—or if it’s something that is far deeper, like one of his sonatas that’s more melancholy and more of an inner emotional journey,” Mr. Losby said. “It connects with people across all cultures and across all generations.”

For Mr. Dubal, the radio host, Chopin is just as much a star of the 1970 movie “Five Easy Pieces” as Jack Nicholson. In one scene, Mr. Nicholson’s character, a former piano prodigy, leaps out of his car during a traffic jam. He climbs aboard the back of a nearby truck that is hauling furniture and starts hammering out Chopin’s “Fantasie in F Minor” on an upright piano.

Pianist Ruth Slenczynska, who just wrapped up a tour of Japan and Taiwan, allows that the piece has its challenging stretches. “Your hands are always in very awkward positions,” Ms. Slenczynska said, such as a passage where “the right hand has to play legato”—where notes follow smoothly—“and the left hand has to play staccato”—where each note sounds short and...
discrete.

That is a Chopin hallmark, she said, remembering a teacher warning her that when playing Chopin: “You must never let the right hand know what the left hand is doing!”

Now 93, Ms. Slenczynska is contemplating an all-Chopin program for her return to Asia next year.

“It has such a particular sound that even the least musical person is brought into it,” she said. “It touches them.”

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