

Frédéric Chopin *Genre, Style and Performance – Ballades and Nocturnes*

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Key Ideas

Chopin was a true composer-pianist, pianist-composer. If you see a cast of his hand, and as has become rather fashionable, compare with the hand of that powerhouse of 19th century piano playing and composition, Franz Liszt, there is an almost tangible connection to be made with how the piano music of Chopin fits under the hands at the keyboard. He is of course known as a composer for the piano, with his entire output incorporating the instrument, either solo, with orchestra, in chamber music and song.

As a 'technician' at the piano Chopin is understood to be a performer who played in intimate spaces, the 'salon' and there are many discussions around his 'identity' as a Pole, and a type of nostalgia in his music. He arrived in Paris in 1831 after a stay in Vienna, one of any number of artists moving westwards from Russia at the time. He got to know many Polish émigrés and a younger generation of composers including Liszt and Berlioz.

Chopin published 18 Nocturnes during his lifetime, the title translating as 'night music' and credited to John Field, the Irish composer who lived out his years in Moscow. Chopin was evidently much influenced by Field, his piano playing and his Nocturnes. Nocturnes are not particularly lengthy pieces.

By contrast the Ballades are longer works. Chopin composed four ballades between 1831 and 1842 and these might be the most perfect examples of his sense of shape and architecture. In these works you can see his 'technique' as worked out in the Études plus the lyrical concentration in the Preludes and Nocturnes and the larger form of the Sonatas really coming together. 'Ballade' as a title is a bit less tangible in that it is the kind of piece that a performer (or listener) can, with the encouragement that it is indeed a 'ballad', can super impose a narrative of one's own, a drama, a play, a plot of events rather than necessarily characters.



Liszt's hand (top), Chopin's hand (bottom), source Bibliothèque nationale de France.

When thinking about 'form' in particular the Ballades are built around a 'narrative' which is based on the interaction of two contrasting themes. In the Fourth Ballade there is a kind of tension and release where the second theme is a 'resolution of the tension generated by the first.....the reprise functions as an apotheosis of the two themes' to quote Jim Samson.

Samson further describes processes in the *Cambridge Companion* as:

'...using variation and transformation techniques to describe the adventures of two contrasting themes. This thematic 'narrative' is further enhanced through explicit association (chiefly of rhythm and metre) with vocal music and also with popular genres, whose origin in specific social functions gives them unique referential value. The ballades, in short, have their own very particular kind of musical material, utterly different in kind from that of the sonatas, despite obvious formal parallels'.

For example the time signature at the outset of Ballade No. 2 and No. 4 is 6/8, with potential for a lilting, or dancing or flowing feel, as can be heard in the approach of Chopin.

Considering these three works we get an immediate sense of Chopin's trajectory and narrative through a work.



Chopin's piano (Charlotte-Jaxa, Creative Commons)

Considerations: Technology and Technique

Technology

What is of mind-blowing relevance to us listening to, playing and studying this music is the role of technology.

- Through the technology of recording, we can listen to performances by pianists closely connected to the composer
- The piano as an instrument had undergone changes and continued to develop; Chopin was playing 'state of the art' Erard/Pleyel pianos – what significance did the 'mechanisms' of those pianos have on his own composition and 'writing for the piano'?
- Use of the sustaining pedal in these pianos, and how Chopin uses it
- As artists and listeners (or both) how do we relate to 'old' recordings? See below in Further Resources referring to recordings by Alfred Cortot

Technique

Chopin's approach to piano technique – The perspective of hand shape, where it pivots, working with the whole arm from the shoulder down and not ONLY finger articulation. Weight and, from a vocal inspiration perspective, 'Bel Canto', that endless spinning of a vocal line.

Hand Shape - If you take your right hand and place it with your thumb on E and your little finger on B, or left hand little finger on E and thumb on B, you can already feel this natural sense of 'weight' or 'balance' under the hand. Chopin works 'with' this rather than 'against' in his writing. That is not to say that it suddenly becomes easier but there is a tangible connection between the physiology of a body and the keyboard under the hand.

Fingering – Chopin liberated the thumb (you only need to refer to the 'Black Keys Study' which certainly doesn't require you NOT to put your thumb on a black key) and certainly explored ways to make fingering work with the instrument and the desired expression and sound (in terms of repeated notes, trills, and so on).

Things to Listen For

Ballade No. 2

Remarkably this is dedicated to Robert Schumann. The *Cambridge Companion* takes the discussion of the two themes to the following extent:

'The Second and Third Ballades extend these treatments, but in very different directions. The Second (in F major/A minor) markedly sharpens the differentiation between its two themes, affording a highly charged contrast between the innocent siciliano of the First in F major and the brutal figuration of the Second in A minor, barely a theme in any conventional sense. The alternation of theme and figuration here is in part a residue of the brilliant style. Much of the dynamic of the piece flows from this initial opposition which needs to be mediated and eventually synthesised. In the middle section the mediation takes place in two stages. Initially the second theme is allowed to subside gradually and imperceptibly on to the first. Then the first theme is built to such a peak of intensity that it can lead naturally into the second. In the closing bars of the work there is a gesture of synthesis in the whispered reference to the first theme again, now accommodated to the tonal region of A minor'.

And interestingly asks us to think about the following:

'A style-historical (rather than analytical) approach to the Ballade would find the two-key scheme less problematical. Such an approach.....might seek to view the two-key scheme in relation to Chopin's response to aspects of a Romantic esthetic, referring to the role of popular genres in his music and also to the possible influence of extra-musical designates'.

Ballade No. 4

There are so many things to make note of. From a pianist's perspective 'voicing' is always a primary concern e.g. where is the tune; where or what is the orchestration; do the hands really have to go down together i.e. left hand bass. But that is so much part of the writing of Chopin, the constant orchestral shifts of texture, the small changes of harmony in the middle parts that are so essential to the colour of the music and its emotional impact.

And the stormy coda of this ballade is a technical and emotional tour de force.

Other Resources

It is fascinating to listen to recordings (not only on vinyl or potentially remastered) and getting beyond the questions of authenticity, what you can or cannot learn from it, how truly connected can you be with teaching or performance from 50 years prior to the invention of recording and so on. But Alfred Cortot is certainly a pianist to listen to for Chopin performances. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Émile Decombes who was a student of Chopin's. With our 'modern' ears, conditioned to polished studio recordings of music and highly produced recordings in all genres, it is incredibly refreshing to listen to recordings of these Ballades where the delivery of the music is searingly felt as the driving goal of the performance. It's not about all the right notes mechanically delivered but it is about the voicing, the tone, the rubato, the drama and the absolute feeling of 'liveness' that one can hear in these recordings. Cortot recorded these works more than once, in 1929 and 1933.



Alfred Cortot

Jena-Jacques Eigeldinger, 1986. *Chopin pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils* (Cambridge University Press)

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