

Development of the Sonata genre in Frederic Chopin's creation

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Abstract: *The paper herein highlights those aspects of Chopin's sonata that demonstrate the strong connection with the classical-type sonata, as well as the fact that the piano poet took inspiration from some German composers' themes, which he afterwards developed and transformed into genuine chefs-d'oeuvre – Sonata op 4, Sonata op 35, Sonata op 58 and Sonata for cello and piano op. 65.*

By analyzing piano sonatas composed by Frederic Chopin, one can notice how the composer perceived the sonata form, the compositional procedures resorted to and the level wherefrom the sonata form in Chopin's conception began to evolve.

Key-words: *sonata, Romanticism, musical-form innovation, classical tradition.*

1. Introduction

Chopin is part of early Romanticism (beside Schubert, Weber, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Schumann), forming the first stylistic stage after the Viennese Classicism, uniquely differing from them and bringing new expressive artistic ideas. Concentrating on the inner self, on exquisite lyricism and on a deeply expressive personal tone, Chopin finds a structure proper to his musical forms. In these conditions, Chopin undoubtedly exceeds his contemporaries (Weber, Field, Rossini).

Interweaving the Romantic elements with the ones of the Polish folklore, salon music and German classical tradition, through particular mastery and subtleness, Frederic Chopin's creation blossomed. Unlike Mozart or Beethoven, in whose case almost everything they composed for one or two musical instruments was shaped into sonata, the new generation of Romantic composers no longer considered this form to hold such importance. Mendelssohn confined himself to 13 sonatas, Schumann stopped at 8 (including *Fantasia in C Major*); Chopin made his first attempt at 18 years old, thereafter he created two more sonatas of great

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significance for the pianistic literature and at the end of his life he added the *Sonata for Cello and Piano*. One cannot however state that Romantics lost interest in the sonata genre. It still was the most prestigious instrumental genre, an obsession for many composers who endeavoured to demonstrate they could cope with such complex structures. This respect for the sonata genre may be compared to the one for the fugue during the Classical period.

Three factors played an essential role in the process of his musical creation: classical-form tradition (including Elsner's school), general musical tendencies of the post-Classical epoch and his own artistic personality.

The varied combinations of the structural contrasts (development of the theme, modulation, big structures), are underlain by three basic categories of the forms with various qualities: a) form of song (with the metric-stanza coda)- in Chopin's case-*Waltz in C Sharp Minor, Nocturne in E Flat Major op 9, Studies in C Major and C*; b) form of rondo (where the stanza forms of the initial themes interact with the modulating sequences), for instance *Finale op 35, Concert in E Minor, Rondo op 1 and op 5* etc (likewise, small rondos in *Nocturne in F Sharp Major op 15* or in *Study in C Sharp Minor op 25*); c) form of sonata (in which the main preoccupation is exploiting thoughts, the progress on the entire form) – for instance the concerts for piano and orchestra and the sonatas.

To these three categories, the free forms and the individualized forms add, obviously known in the classical theory; however, in Chopin's case, they are slightly different in terms of originality and importance.

2. Objectives

The present study eschews an appraisal of Chopin's sonatas from the perspective of an academic model of the sonata-form. The compositions are treated as individual solutions to the range of problems posed by the genre itself. In considering the question of changes in the sonata-genre in Chopin's music, the author strives first and foremost to reveal the relationships and tensions which arise between a repertoire of norms inherited from the past and the modification and extension of such old principles. The article reveals that Chopin used structures, well-known classical forms (such as sonata, strophic structures, song or rondo), bringing for each one a personal contribution, resulting in original and individualized structures (such as the reprise of elliptical sonata, broad strophic structures, of rondo - *op. 35* or *op. 58*).

3. Material and methods

Comprehending Chopin's music not only supposes analyzing the great composer's works and biography, but also those special aspects which influenced, modelled and changed him into one of Romanticism's greatest composers.

As one can notice in Chopin's sonatas, the changes brought to the sonata form will improve the decade-long one, so as to make it more spontaneous and less predictable.

The most important aspects of these three piano sonatas will be discussed precisely for highlighting their influences.

3.1. Sonata op.4

Chopin's first sonata is an ample-sized work and pre-eminently has school character, emphasizing the composer's effort to develop his composing fantasy within the rigorous limits of a classical-tradition genre. The form unit may be overall noticed to have been achieved with the numerous motives exposed and intensely processed along each section, even if this phenomenon affected the equilibrium of the whole. The motive-treatment coverage outlines the composer's minuteness and his talent to completely enhance the entire developing potential of a musical idea, in multiple and diverse hypostasis, transformations, returns. Some musicologists consider that this sonata lacks Chopin-specific lyricism, the generous and delicate melody already proven in his first creations. Beyond all these aspects, Chopin managed to assert himself ever since the dawn of his musical brilliance with a complex work, rich in artistic and technical ideas, a genuine Chopin's creation laboratory.

Being a school work, only two of the most important aspects of this sonata will be submitted, namely the main theme of the first part, underlain by a theme inspired from Johann Sebastian Bach's *Invention in Two Voices No. 2 in C Minor* as well as by the theme of the chorus of the 4th part, which is inspired by the *Schubert's Fantasia Wanderer op 15 (Wandererphantasie)*.

In the example below, J.S. Bach's invention theme is rendered, in parallel with Chopin's sonata theme, in order to clearly observe its source and the form it acquired within the Romantic work.



Fig. 1. J.S.Bach – Invention in Two Voices no 2, in C Minor, measures 1-2



Fig. 2. Fr. Chopin – Sonata no 1 op 4 in C Minor, part I, measures 1-4

The theme of the *Fantasy Wanderer op. 15* strongly impressed young Chopin, who created, in the 4th part of his first sonata a genuine processing, starting from the rhythmical-melodic profile of the cyclical idea in Schubert's *Phantasy*.

In the examples below, the first measures of the mentioned works are rendered, in order to concretely demonstrate the similitude between them:



Fig. 3. Fr. Chopin – Sonata no 1 op 4 in C Minor, part IV, measures 1-5



Fig. 4. Fr. Schubert – Fantasy Wanderer in C Major, part I, measures 1-3

One may note that these two works share the two motives: the first one has an accord-type profile and mostly asserts itself from rhythmical standpoint through the succession second-two fourths, respectively fourth-two eights, which confers to the musical text a vigorous, volatile character (as martial signals created by the octave C-C); the second motive is present, in Schubert's case, only in the first part of the fantasy and is upwardly represented in the development of the arpeggio.

Although framed within the category of the 'school' works, Chopin's *Sonata no 1 op 4 in C Minor* anticipatively bears the stylistic features of his later creations: variety and rhythmical strikeness, harmonic and polyphonic finesse, richness and unpredictability of the modulations, originality of the piano figures, constant preoccupation to innovate the musical forms.

3.2. Sonata op. 35

Romantic composers continued the evolution line of the sonata, one of the most important results being the interweaving among varietated forms and characters as sonata; Chopin's experience with this form is obvious in *Sonata no 2 op 35*.

He also uses the variation principles of the sonata themes and form in the first movement, he resorts to a form developed on three layers in Scherzo, to a slow Funeral March in the third part, instead of the second (the second part traditionally being a slow part in the sonata) and the musical track ends in a very slow two-themed rondo.

As Haydn and Beethoven replaced the minuet with scherzo and introduced the fugue in their sonatas (*Beethoven, op 106*) and in the quartet (*Haydn, op 20*), Chopin similarly used its forms in his own sonata. As Jozef Chominski noticed, Chopin used the four-part form as a context wherein he could include cantilenas of his nocturnes, figurative models of the studies and preludes, and the periodicity of the dance musical tracks. The sonata is practically written round the Funeral March, composed two years before and testifying for Chopin as master of a new musical-thinking line. The choice of a *Funeral March* as gravitational centre is not mere chance.

Although he only composed a single such musical track, (*Funeral March in C Minor*), he infiltrated dead-march elements in other works. Both the *Prelude C Minor* from the *Preludes op 28* as well as the slow introduction from *Fantasia in F Minor op 49* are obvious funeral marches.

Nocturnes op 37 no 1, op 48 nr 1 and *op 55 no 1* are clearly marked by the funeral march.

Different motives may be found to explain why the *Funeral March*-slow part of the sonata, is subsequent to the *Scherzo in B flat minor* (second part of the

sonata); the natural order being exactly the reverse. The simplest and most pertinent answer is that the plan of the *Sonata op 35* is subsequent to the one of the *Sonata op 26* by L. Van Beethoven. This sonata, which also contains a funeral march, was preferred by Chopin. He played, analyzed and taught it to his students, more often than other musicians with Beethoven's sonatas [2].

As the first part of *op 26* is relatively slow, it was a logical gesture for a composer to insert a scherzo before the funeral march, so as to achieve the contrasting character among the movements of the sonata. On the other hand, part I of Chopin's sonata is rapid and, unlike the variations of *op 26*, it is a sonata (more or less). The non similar tempos between the parts of the sonatas pertaining to Beethoven and Chopin did not stop the latter to follow the plan of Beethoven's sonata, the form not being so different after all.

Although the unity of this sonata had long been targeted by criticism, subsequently, through analyses and studies, the parts of the *Sonata op 35* were proven to be strongly interconnected and this work has sonata form. The omission of the main section in the reprise determined Leiken to make an interesting analogy as regards the first sonata part. He associates the first theme to the hero and the second, to the heroine. In the classical-type sonata, the two are separated in the exposition, to be reunited in the reprise. In the case of the *Sonata op 35*, nevertheless, the conflict is not solved, because of the lack of first theme in the tonality B flat minor, from the beginning of the reprise. This way, the hero and the heroine cannot be reunited as the hero dies. The *Funeral March* reveals this.

Omitting the main section in the reprise rather stands for restoring the binary-sonata form. We encounter, for instance, this procedure, in Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas.

The partial re-exposition in *Sonata op 35* (but also in *op 58* and *op 65*) clearly inspires from the pre-Classical model and illustrates Chopin's inspiration from Baroque.

As regards Scherzo, Samson notes that Beethoven's muscular and rhythmical energy is required, emphasizing thereby a Beethovenian influence on the *Sonata op 35*. Moreover, Leiken interprets the furious insistence of the octave repetition from Scherzo as similar to the Beethovenian style, strong and explosively rhythmical.

Likewise, Walker highlights the role of the small third-a force that yields unity to the sonata. At the end of the Scherzo, in the measures 78-80, the same cadence appears at the tonic. Such 'cadences' are common in the movements of the binary dances from the Baroque.

As follows, a few important aspects from *Finale op 35* will be submitted. One cannot say that to sing in parallel octaves at both hands is rare-*Prelude in E Flat*

Minor op 28 being a proof, its monophonic line forming a melody with accompaniment, while the sonata end consists in a single line, specific to the Baroque. This scoring type is not usual for piano, but rather for a violoncello track. Resembling the timber to an accompaniment-lacking violoncello and the Baroque-similar structure of the melodic line demonstrates that Chopin inspired from the Bach's *Suite in D Major for Soloist Violoncello*.

Specifically, the *Prelude in Suite D Major* is a perpetual motion with four triolets per measure and one of the more repeated motives, bringing us a striking similitude with the main theme of the first part from Chopin's *Sonata op 35*.

To conclude, *Sonata in B Flat Minor, op 35* may be deemed one of the works having transformed and developed the classical sonata and the proof for the evolution and adaptation to the new composition techniques and styles.

3.3. Sonata op.58

Chopin's next sonata, *in B minor, op 58* was composed after 5 years. Part I, *Allegro maestoso* of *Sonata op 58* much resembles a mosaic of motives. The first part of *op 58* contains more imitative passages than any of his works. Great part of the texture is rather an interweaving of the counter-punctual lines than an accompaniment melody. Moreover, the musical-thinking modality is here polyphonic.

Allegro maestoso was often criticized as too barren – with the melodious exception of the secondary theme.

The first part of this work is in many ways the opposite of the one in *Sonata op 35*. Chopin's efforts with this sonata were not directed towards new experiments of the form. He seemed satisfied with the design of the sonata he had already created; the first parts of the *Sonata op 58* and *op 65* are constructed according to the same principles. This time, the area of the experiments is found in polyphony.

Chopin had been interested in this aspect even before composing *Sonata op 58*. His veneration for Bach reached its apogee, after having studied the counterpoint treaties of Cherubini and Kastner, the result of his work being this way incontestable.

As compared to *Sonata op 35*, the beginning of the first part of the *Sonata op 58* is much closer to the German tradition and this is confirmed by the other three parts of the sonata. This sonata seems less Chopin-like, suggesting a new character, as one can see in the central section in B major. *Allegro maestoso* further offers proofs that the reprise shortening has little to do with the material used in development.

Although the last part in the development may be found in the subordinated theme, the re-exposition begins nevertheless with a preparation of the same theme in D major, the omission of the first group in the re-exposition does not have the tragic predictions in *Sonata op 35*.

Generalizing, we may say that in part I, the North-German lyricism may be found, which is much similar to Brahms's style than to Field's.

German reminiscences are also found in the slow parts, more as regards the accompaniment than the melodic line. The arpeggios in chain or the slow-waltz, so familiar to Chopin, are replaced by clear, measured subjects, whose rhythm offers slow propulsion, and seemingly melody brims of the slow parts from Beethoven or Schubert.

As in *op 35*, *Scherzo* from *op 58* appears as the second part of the cycle, but instead of the tonality of the sub-dominant, Chopin resorts to E flat major, mono-tertiary major sub-dominant.

As in part I, the polyphony is the main interest and *Trio* presents a rare picture of the counterpoint depth.

The last part of the sonata is the proof of a bravery composition, one of Chopin's most beautiful creations. One may state that this sonata part, as theme development, as purpose, as performing issue and as sonorities, stands for one of post-Beethoven greatest achievements. These aspects place Chopin beside the greatest masters of imagination and form. The end really leaves the model of the *Sonata op 35* – another end similarly written to the one in *op 35* is unimaginable.

The form *Presto ma non tanto* is a sonata-rondo - a rarity in Chopin's music.

Maybe this explains why, for the first time, in this part, Chopin experiments the forms, moving the interest centre beyond polyphony.

4. Results

Many theorists believe that Frédéric Chopin's first sonata cannot be framed among his valuable creations. Nevertheless, we adhere to the standpoint that this musical work stands for a stage in the composer's evolution, for an initiation moment within the rigorousness required by the sonata genre. Without this artist's first step on the yet inexperienced realm of a classical genre, his subsequent evolution and the emergence of other works of indisputable value would not have been possible (*Sonatas No. 2 in B flat Minor* and *No. 3 in B Minor*).

Sonata in b flat minor, op. 35 is unique, and because the most original feature of this cycle is that part I represents the culmination of the action, after which the intensity of the progression gradually decreases. The realism of the

images in this Sonata expresses, like most of Chopin's great works, the same ideas related to the national tragedy that the composer felt so acute.

Compared to *Sonata op. 35*, the beginning of the first part of *Sonata op. 58* is closer to the German tradition, and this aspect is confirmed by the other three parts. This *Sonata* seems less Chopinian, suggesting a new character, a surprising element, in the central section, in Si major tonality.

Chopin's efforts in this work were not directed to new experiments of the form. This time, the area of experiments is found in polyphony. Chopin was interested in this aspect even before the composition of the *Sonata op. 58*. James Huneker states that "the end of the first part is not that of a sonata, but of a lyrical love."

As in *Sonata in b flat minor, op. 35*, in this work, Chopin places *Scherzo* in the second part and not in the third one, thus creating a contrast and a structural tension. According to Murray Perahia, the rhythm is the main idea of the connection between part II and III of the *Sonata*. Part III, *Largo*, has the form ABA. From the point of view of the character, it takes us to the Chopin's *Nocturnes*, and through the style, to the Italian melody. It contains one of his most beautiful songs: "... the central part is the most graceful of Chopin's works [1]". Part IV, *Presto ma non tanto*, besides the technical difficulty, also resembles the shape of a rondo.

Criticized in the 19th century for not observing the German traditional classical model, Chopin's sonatas have proved over time to have been composed after a classical pattern, the composer's veneration for the great titans of classical music and at the same time the evolution of the Romantic sonata being enhanced.

5. Conclusions

Chopin's three piano sonatas are among the most precious examples of a rare musical species – the Romantic sonata. It is wonderful to see how the traditional underestimates of these works gradually gave rise to a deep understanding as regards their structure and aesthetics.

Beside Berlioz and Liszt, Chopin constitutes the Romantic trinity. He remains in music history as one of the greatest musicians with inexhaustible creative inventiveness. His perennial cantilenas alternate with dramatic recitatives or with melisms detached from the opera, embroidered on a flexible rhythm and fascinating harmonies, whose chromaticisms break the diatonic harmonic, foreshadowing the subtleties of the impressionist harmony.

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