

Chopinian particularities in Piano's Sonata Op. 58

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Abstract: *The paper herein highlights those aspects of Chopin's Piano Sonata Op.58 that demonstrate the strong connection with the classical-type sonata, its significance and the evolution of expression. Chopin's Third Piano Sonata, Op.58 is the largest solo work of his late period. Chopin's successful combination of the Classical and the Romantic aesthetic, results in an effective balancing of structural integrity and emotional fulfilment. Every moment of Op.58 possesses qualities of movements in a traditional sonata cycle; however, the tendency to blend structural elements, the expansion of thematic material and the postponement of climaxes contribute to Chopin's distinctive treatment of the sonata genre style include blurring of genres, complex use of chromaticism, intricacy of counterpoint, textural and thematic variety.*

Key-words: *sonata, evolution, polyphony, expression, Romanticism.*

1. Introduction

From a historical perspective, Chopin's extraordinary echo for posterity - pianist and composer- is inseparable. This may seem surprising, given that the choice of piano in relation to the orchestra and the choice of miniature forms instead of the ample ones (opera, symphony, etc.) do not seem to be a premise of this celebrity. The attraction of the public and the pianists for Chopin's creation has remained constant at all times, regardless of the evolution of the musical language and the public's taste.

In the research of Chopin's creation, a constant peculiarity can be noticed from the beginning, that of being dedicated almost exclusively to the piano. The composer's thinking is detached from a certain emotional climate - the Polish one, from a certain artistic epoch - the romantic one and from the sound universe revealed by a single instrument - the piano.

Chopin identified with the sounds of the piano, interweaving the forms of

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the old tradition (prelude, variation, rondo, sonata, concerto) with those that began their immortality (ballad, waltz, scherzo) and adding new ones (Polish, mazurka), whose melodic-rhythmic color refreshed the whole piano creation of the time. The genre of the sonata was an essential part of Chopin's oeuvre. Although he composed only three sonatas for piano solo, the two mature piano sonatas represent not only the peak of Chopin's stylistic development, but can also be seen as an expression of nationalism (Op.35) or grief and consolation after the loss of his father (Op.58). Chopin's relationship with the sonata began during his earlier years in Warsaw. Goldberg (Goldberg 2008, 123) suggests that, while studying at the Warsaw Conservatory, Chopin was familiarized with the multi-movement genres of the Classical tradition through performing and attending private and public concerts.

Chopin's First Piano Sonata, composed in 1828 during his studies with Jozef Elsner, reveals a young composer's lack of experience, but it also foreshadows Chopin's later sonatas in its polyphonic writing and order of movements. The Second Piano Sonata, Op.35 (1839), is a culminating point of his mature style of the Paris years. Extreme range of expressive qualities and a special treatment of the form (slow movement as a funeral march and the final movement written throughout in unison) testify to Chopin's creative and progressive thinking of the genre.

The Third Sonata, Op.58, composed in the summer of 1844 has been described by Jozef Chominski (Chominski 1960, 175) as "the most remarkable work of Chopin's late style". The last, Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op.65 (1846), represents the only duo sonata in Chopin's oeuvre. Looking at and listening to all of the sonatas, one cannot help but notice a great evolution of Chopin's approach to the sonata's structure, dramatic potential and expressive powers. As for the musical language that the composer's creation reveals, this is one specific to romanticism. Chopin combines elegance and simplicity, the exaltation of feelings with restraint and harmony of expression, tradition with innovation.

It is very difficult to delimit the two aspects of Chopin's personality and activity - that of the composer and that of the pianist - because they influence each other and each is, in turn, cause and effect. The Chopinian piano style implicitly left its mark on the piano writing and the musical language, to the same extent that the latter came to life, filtered by the personality of the performer.

2. Objectives

The present study explains the transformation in the sonata's genre, the opinions and criticism written about Chopin's third Piano Sonata, Op.58 and highlights the significance of this Sonata.

Kholopov (Kholopov 1999, 328) has been suggested that the sonata was not an important genre for Chopin and that it was not his natural musical language. Rosen (Rosen 1995, 142). went further, believing that Chopin never learnt the sonata form during his studies in Warsaw. Those opinion, however subjective, have become quite popular, often creating an incomplete view of Chopin's compositional craft and ability to work with larger genres, particularly the sonata.

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.

Chopin's sonatas were drawn on the classical model with four-movement structures and traditional division of the first movement (exposition, development, recapitulation) and the functions of all movements remained within the classical model (first movement as sonata form, contrasts of characters between the movements). However, Chopin's internal movement structure gradually departed from the traditional models. This can be seen starting with Op.4, where Chopin exchanges the order of the movements, placing the slow movement third and the *Minuetto* second. Zofia Lissa (Lissa 1970, 185) argues that Chopin's evolution of the sonata cycle manifests itself through the process of liberation of the cycles's movements, such as rondo and scherzo, which become independent genres.

3.1. Chopin's model of the sonata cycle

Chopin's model of the sonata cycle represents the result of an earlier, thought-out structural plan that allowed the expressivity and drama of Chopin's style to shine throughout.

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.

Even though his style progressed significantly from his university years

until the end of his life, the sonata model established in 1828 remained mostly unchanged (except for the second movement *Minuetto* of the Piano Sonata, no.1 – in later sonatas it was replaced by Scherzo). The evolution of the sonata form, though, was very significant. Leiken (Leiken 1992, 272) focuses on the development of blending of formal elements and structures (primary thematic materials, bridges, secondary thematic materials, epilogues, as well as expositions, developments and recapitulations) which diffuse the identity of the sonata form. Helman (Helman 1993, 65) focuses on the progressive expansion of Chopin's thematic material (avoiding cadences and expanding the flow of music) and the binary structure of the first movements of Op. 35, 58 and 65. She believes that, in each of the sonatas, a lengthy exposition is counterbalanced by the development and recapitulation together. The development works as a continuum of the presented tensions while the recapitulation's goal is to resolve them. Rosen (Rosen 1995, 336) disagrees with this view of the recapitulation. He is convinced Chopin's purpose in sonata form is to bring back some of the main themes with a magnified aura of brilliance, complexity, tension and pathos. Development for Chopin, consequently, does not prepare for resolution but for further excitement; it plays a role similar to *stretto* and is often associated with *stretto*.

3.2. Reception and criticism of the Third Piano Sonata Op.58

There have been many and mixed opinions written about Chopin's third Piano Sonata, op 58. Chominski (Chominski 1960, 176) discovers a great level of compositional discipline in the creation of Op. 58. He praises Chopin for searching for new expressive tools within the traditional setting of the genre. Tadeusz Zielinski (Zielinski 1993, 35) describes Chopin's Op. 58 as a realization of Chopin's ideal of the new sonata, reaching the greatness of its time – large, vast, enlightened by the brilliance of the modern harmonic and pianistic sonorities.

The influence of the worked-out sonata models of Czerny and Marx was so significant, that many nineteenth – and twentieth-century researchers found it difficult to cope with the unorthodox inter- movement structure of Op. 58. In fact, most of the criticism of Op. 58 resulted from lack of understanding of Chopin's artistic process. As Newman (Newman 1963, 492) observes, although one of its first main reviews, in 1846, called Op. 58 a distinctly superior work, citing especially its mastery of form and rich figuration, it also questioned some harmonic details of voice-leading and spelling. Newman (Newman 1963, 492) finds another early review of Op. 58 in which the reviewer, describing the sonata as being one of the most significant publications of the present, focused more on Chopin than on the work, asserting that no composer was entirely free of problems.

Most modern critiques present more specific arguments. Peter Gould (Gould, 1966, 161) sees lack of clarity in the overall structure of the first movement. Herbert Weinstock (1949, 76) criticizes the structure of the slow movement of Op.58, sensing an imbalance in the timing of the flow of the thematic material, which destabilizes not only the movement, but the entire sonata. Donald Ferguson (Ferguson 1970, 244) expresses dissatisfaction with the “diffused” structure of the first movement. He acknowledges the pianistic difficulties of the work; however, the impression they make “is hardly one of spiritual satisfaction. Beethoven might have been able to strike developmental fire out of the principal subject. Chopin can only manipulate it”.

Criticism of Op. 58 originated from an inadequate approach and insufficient understanding of Chopin’s compositional principle of the sonata cycle, which materialized the essence of the Romantic idiom of individualism in expression and continuous process and expansion of the established genres. Furthermore, intricate incorporation of the late style elements to the sonata design greatly complicated any traditionally oriented attempts to comprehend the formal structure of Op.58. Czerny’s and Marx’s generated sonata model does not fully apply to Chopin’s one. It might have been a starting point, but, like many composers, Chopin never ceased to evolve and push the boundaries of convention. A more complete understanding of the work can be achieved only by keeping in mind Chopin’s Romantic aesthetic of genre evolution and analysis of his stylistic features.

Although the voices of the critics result from the application of an overly prescriptive theory, they cannot be dismissed without consideration. In the case of Op.58, there is plenty of evidence that Chopin’s compositional inventions produced a number of structural ambiguities, which arose through the use of techniques developed before and during his late style period.

4. Results

Many modern scholars make attempts to explain or clarify these previous opinions. A strong voice in defence of Chopin came from Goldberg (Goldberg 2008, 123), who challenged Rosen’s (Rosen 1988, 492) conviction in her study of Chopin’s musical education in Warsaw, providing evidence of Chopin’s knowledge of the customary harmonic plan of traditional genres, including the sonata. Other researchers defend Chopin’s sonata by redefining analytical approaches to his sonata model. Helman (1993, 65) proposes a new method based on the individuality of formal structure. Leikin (1992, 272) suggests a new analytical approach of the structurally diffusing elements present in Chopin’s mature sonatas (Op. 35, 58, 65).

The strongest defence of Chopin's sonatas can be drawn from the works themselves. The mature piano sonatas and the cello sonata provide examples of the most refined dramatic and expressive qualities encountered in Chopin's music. Ground breaking treatment of the sonata form (presented already in Op.35), and incorporation of late style elements in Op.58 (chromaticism, variety of textural display, crossing genres, dandyism and new expressive qualities) suggest not the weakness but the progress of Chopin's concept. Chopin evolves constantly, always looking for the new means of expression not only through new sonorities but also through new structure.

Before writing his mature sonatas, Chopin experimented with sonata form in a variety of other settings. Both Leikin (Leikin 1992, 273) and Samson (Samson 1994, 112) notice strong influence of the sonata form in Ballades, while Leikin goes further to investigate Chopin's Scherzo op 31, Barcarolle, op.60, Polonaise-Fantasy, op 61 and Waltz op 70 No.2, observing elements of sonata form in them as well. The presence of the sonata form in many of Chopin's works outlines the evolution of the formal design, which culminated in Chopin's mature sonatas. This can be seen by examining the chronology of Chopin's Works. It is not accidental that the sonatas (except for Op.4) are composed during the mature stages of his stylistic periods (1839, 1844 and 1846). Chopin uses the experience gained in other genres and applies it to his sonata model.

It is difficult to speculate what the sonata genre meant to Chopin. It is highly probable that the genre's connotations with tradition and its prestige were as clear to Chopin as they are to us. Achievements of the Classical masters, especially Beethoven, created very high standards of compositional excellence, which all the prospective composers had to cope with. Chopin's answer to that was adaptation of the classical outline of the sonata cycle (clear structural division of the movements) with his own stylistic twist. Although the element of tradition in Chopin's sonatas is based on the incorporation of the Classical model, it is not limited to it. In his sonatas, Chopin conveys a deeper, more personal aspect of tradition. It is the tradition of his homeland, of Poland and his experience and vision of it.

It is commonly acknowledged that Chopin expressed his nationalism through the creation of Ballades and through Polonaises, Mazurkas, Fantasy op.49 and his songs. All these works have been inspired, in a variety of ways, by Polish dances, poetry of Chopin's memories of family, friends and traditional elements of Polish culture. In a similar fashion it can be assumed that his sonatas are also an expression of those memories and traditions that he felt nostalgic about. The connection between the two traditions in a sonata setting – musical and personal, has not been sufficiently explored among scholars (especially in the case of Op.58),

most likely due to the association of the sonata genre with the German musical tradition and the rejection of the idea that it could serve as a tool for expression of Chopin's Polish identity. Another reason is a belief that Chopin created a musical genre of Ballade as a means of expression for his nationalistic feelings. Although there is no direct evidence that would point to the nationalistic element in his sonatas, there are traces of it in them. The most obvious hint is concealed in Op.35. the presence of a funeral march, the volatile finale and the extreme drama of the first and second movements create a narrative, the one of a heroic journey ending in death and a memory of it carried by the wind. It is possible that Chopin could be telling a story of any of the countless Polish soldiers, who fought and died for freedom of Poland during the November Uprising of 1830. In the case of Op.58, the aspect of nationalism takes on another meaning. Heroism is only presented in the opening of the first movement and throughout the finale, while the rest of the sonata represents a deeply personal side of Chopin's emotional life, less palpable and more introverted, involving the passing of his father, Mikolaj, on 3 May, 1844.

The terrible loss of a father and inability to grieve with his family aggravated Chopin's ongoing internal struggle. Ideologically he could not return to Poland as it would signify acceptance of the Russian regime. On the other hand, although surrounded by many friends, he was alone, without his family. In this emotional state he left for Nohant where would only compose the Third Piano Sonata Op. 58 and finish working on Berceuse, Op. 57.

The ethereal and hypnotic qualities of the Berceuse might portray a design of a mechanical music box, but they could also serve as a tool for frieving and loss. The choice to write a piano sonata, instead of any other genre, during such a painful time suggests a strong connection to the genre and its expressive powers. Abundance of the thematic material, incomparable beauty of all melodic lines, metaphysical quality – those are the elements that reflect many aspects of Chopin's personality: memories, struggle, healing, longing; they can be heard in every movement of Op. 58.

5. Conclusions

While Classical influence remained strong throughout his life, Chopin followed the new Romantic ideology of nationalism, transformation, expansion and individualisation, which resulted in an organic fluidity of his works. Chopin's succesful combination of two aesthetic ideals resulted in equilibrium of structural integrity and emotional fulfilment.

Although the cultural reforms initiated in Paris in the 1830's provided a new market for "serious" music, there was no space for the piano music in the public concert setting. In spite of its growing popularity, the piano remained mostly an accompanying tool for chamber music.

Rare performances of piano solo sonatas resulted from the inadequateness of the piano as a solo instrument; lack of sufficient tone color; loss of interest in the genres of the past; loss of the sonata's normative pattern due to the evolution of the genre; lack of place for individualism in concert settings; presence of gender inequity in Parisian society, which disallowed women (who constituted majority of piano players) any soloistic display.

Theories regarding the sonata genre have been mostly concerned with sonata form, due to its decisive influence on the rest of the cycle. The first major treatises describing sonata form were written in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Based on observations of sonata forms of the Classical era, Reicha, Max and Czerny created sonata form models and compositional principles. Those included: specific harmonic and structural outlines; importance of the opening thematic material; idea of the thematic sections as subordinates to the unity of the work; a specific complementary structure of the secondary thematic material.

Some of the modern approaches to sonata form were inspired by the absence of studies of the Romantic sonatas. Newman (Newman 1963, 492) notices trends of exaggeration, fulfilment of the sonata form and dichotomy between the absolute and programmatic approach. Rosen (1988, 492) suggests rethinking of the traditional method of formal analysis, by viewing textural interruptions as pivotal points in structural identification. Leiken (1992, 272) observes an evolution of the formal design and blending of the structural elements, causing functional ambiguities.

Chopin adapts the Classical outline in his sonatas. Although the order of the second and third movements is exchanged, all the movements possess the qualities expected from the traditional model.

Chopin's evolution of the sonata cycle manifests itself through individualisation of the design, employment of variation procedures and liberation of the cycle's elements, expansion of thematic material and postponement of climaxes.

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