

## Narrative elements in *Piano Sonata no. 1, op. 11*, by Robert Schumann

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**Abstract:** *Robert Schumann was an early and significant advocate of a change in musical narrative techniques. Additionally, he presents an instance that is historically specific, demonstrating the interconnectedness of verbal narrative and narrative aspects in instrumental music that lacks text. He frequently described his preferred music using novelistic language and openly admitted that he derived inspiration for his compositions from the techniques employed by his favorite novelists. The shifts in mood, unexpected harmonic changes, and intricate textures all contribute to a sense of inner narrative, as if the music is expressing an unfolding drama or an introspective journey. Schumann was fond of embedding symbolic meanings and codes within his music.*

Key-words: *Schumann, narrativity, sign, semiotics, musical analysis*

### 1. Introduction

This article aims to highlight the narrative and especially the dramaturgic features of Schumann's music, especially in the *Piano Sonata in F# minor, op. 11 no. 1*.

Narrativity in music pertains to its ability to narrate a tale or communicate a sense of advancement, akin to a literary narrative. Contrary to literature or film, music does not contain explicit words or images (unless it is combined with text in vocal music). Therefore, its ability to tell stories depends on abstract aspects such as melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, and structure.

In the context of narrative music, themes or motifs might be conceptualized as “characters” inside a story. These themes may experience growth, alteration, or opposition, akin to the way characters progress in a story. For instance, in Beethoven's symphonies, a motif may first appear in one manner then thereafter reappear in an altered manifestation, representing a voyage or metamorphosis.

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A musical composition frequently has a structural resemblance to a story arc. The sonata-allegro structure, a classical form, consists of three main sections: the exposition, where themes are introduced; the development, where these ideas are explored and transformed; and the recapitulation, where the original themes are brought back, typically with a resolution. This exhibits the same structure as the setup, conflict, and resolve as seen in traditional storytelling.

Composers often employ leitmotifs in certain musical compositions, particularly in operas or film scores. These leitmotifs are recurrent themes that are linked to specific people, concepts, or circumstances. Wagner's operas are renowned for employing this technique, in which leitmotifs progress in parallel with the narrative, enhancing the storytelling through the medium of music.

Certain types of music possess a higher level of abstraction in their narrative structure, allowing the listener to use their imagination more extensively. The assessment of narrativity in music is frequently subjective, contingent upon the listener's individual experiences, emotions, and imagination. This subjectivity implies that a single piece of music could convey multiple narratives to different individuals.

## 2. Objectives

To comprehend and enhance the presence of narrative characteristics in the work under investigation, it is necessary to provide a concise explanation of the paradigm of the existence of narrativity in music.

Contrary to visual arts, music has a linear quality that is shared with narrative and cinema. This is since Western music repertoires often include narrative titles, which lead listeners to believe that all music has a narrative. Additionally, individuals without formal training in music find it easier to connect with and understand musical works when they are connected to real-life experiences.

Additionally, there is room for growth in the field of musicology's so-called "narratological" research that has emerged throughout the past two decades. Plus, there's new research in cognitive psychology and music neurobiology that focuses on how people might "narrativize" music. However, before we can explore the idea of narrative music, we need to try to pin down just what a literary narrative is.

This taxonomic and hierarchical description of narrativity is not the author's only focus. The reader or listener is constantly on the edge of their seat, wondering, "What happens next?" because of how the story's events build upon one another. The following: If the story ends as we had hoped and provides some kind of resolution, then we will be satisfied. Curiosity animates the reader or listener, who is then shocked by unexpected happenings, held in suspense, and then calmed by the ending.

### 3. Robert Schumann – Between Expression and Narratives

With his masterworks, Robert Schumann brought the Romantic movement to its zenith. The works of Schumann encompass all facets of romanticism. Robert Schumann was a remarkable composer, critic, innovator, and idealist who had a deep spiritual connection to the literature of his day. He was also a great thinker and advocate for new ideas. He nearly totally did away with classical forms in his early compositional works. Among Romantic composers, Robert Schumann was the pioneer who rejected traditional forms. Despite his greatness as a music critic and theorist, he failed to see the point of classical forms in their evolved versions.

Schumann placed a significantly higher value on conveying mood, color, hint, and allusion than on accurately composing *fugues*, *rondos*, and *sonatas*. Always with a touch of the surreal, kaleidoscopic, and emotionally intense, as well as an intensity of self-expression that defies astronomical measurement, his music takes an unexpected turn. In his letters to Clara Schumann, Schumann states: “...*The aesthetic experience is the same in any art, only the material is different*” (Fritsch 1996).

Schumann established a platform in his own magazine, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, to commend excellent music and condemn poor composition. Schumann also founded the *Davidbund*, a group where members may discuss music and publish critiques under pseudonyms, drawing on an idea put forth by writer Jean Paul. Schumann used the pseudonyms *Florestan* (to emphasize his vivacious side) and *Eusebius* (to highlight his introspective side) when writing. Other names included *Raro Master* (a portmanteau of Clara Schumann's last name and Robert's first two initials), *Jonathan*, *Chiara*, and others.

The music of Schumann is replete with symbols. Consider *Carnaval*, Op. 9, which is purely concerned with Schumann's inner thoughts and has zero connection to romantic programmatism. Performers must grasp that the piece is structured around emotive pictures representing the two halves of Schumann's personality (Florestan and Eusebius), within which figures such as Mendelssohn, Chopin, Wieck, Paganini, and Chopin appear. These four notes serve as the foundation for the entire piece: “ASCH” (S = E flat and H = H= B natural) is a combination of four letters from Schumann's name and the name of a town where he had a close friend. In the *Davidbund March against the Philistines*, Schumann's music exemplifies his resolve to defeat the enemy musicians and bring them down. Although these are the primary concepts, there are many more symbols throughout the piece. This is how many of Schumann's compositions came to be.

#### 4. *Piano Sonata, Op. 11, No. 1*

Schumann's Op. 11, the *First Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor*, is a notable composition that demonstrates his early style of composition and his inventive interpretation of the conventional sonata structure. Written from 1833 to 1835, this sonata embodies Schumann's profound emotional fervor and his literary inspirations, making it widely regarded as one of his most fervent and intimate compositions.

For each schumannian work, Hoffman and Richter adjusted the structure and form to suit their unique expression. Sonata form was also utilized by Schumann. Numerous parallels to the traditional sonata form are apparent upon examination of opus 11. The sonata form is characterized by *Allegro vivace*. The ternary form of the aria gives way to the Scherzo form in the third movement. While the second section is in the relative key, the other sections are all in the fundamental key of F# minor. Since its shape is neither a rondo nor a sonata—as one might expect—only the final section stands out. Several motifs and brief sections make up Schumann's last piece, which is structured using binary plus coda.

#### 5. Results

##### 5.1. 1<sup>st</sup> Movement, *Introduzione. Un poco Adagio; Allegro Vivace*

The sonata opens with an exemplary *Introduzione* by Schumann, which follows the ternary pattern established by Beethoven. Both sections contain motifs from this introduction. It is possible to read Schumann's proclamation of love for Clara at the opening of the Introduction as such. Section A's theme has octave-lengthening descending lines and rhythmically repeated motives.



Fig. 1. Robert Schumann, "Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11," mm. 1-5

The melodic consistency in the B section will gradually increase from *crescendo* to *fortissimo*. Schumann, most likely, wanted this intensification to suggest the sadness of missing his beloved one.

After a dramatic introduction, Schumann creates an expressive contrast, introducing a lyrical melody.



Fig. 2. Robert Schumann, "*Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11*," mm. 34-38

The first theme of this movement has two motives, one defines Robert, and one defines Clara. The Robert motif speaks out from his work, called *Fandango*, and the Clara motif comes from one of Clara's works, entitled *Fantastique Scenes*, op. 5, No. 4.

In the following bars, you can subtly see the image of the two dancing. This scene represents Clara's saying yes to the dance invitation, and the two motives appear simultaneously.

In this Sonata, Schumann alludes to various specific dances. The key elements that contribute to Schumann's narrativity in this piece can be identified in the rhythmic components, nuanced harmonies, shifts in vocal ranges, and the orchestral quality of the voices.



Fig. 3. Robert Schumann, "*Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11*," mm. 81-86

The second theme of the first part contrasts with the first theme; it has a polyphonic texture and a rich harmony.



Fig. 4. Robert Schumann, "*Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11*," mm. 146-149

Schumann uses continuous juxtaposition on contrasting sections and short motifs to contrast the long sections. The musical quotations and Clara motif reinforce the *Introduzione* and *Allegro vivace*, also creating a kind of bridge between the first and the second part.

### 5.2. 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, *Aria*

Part II, entitled *Aria*, has a particular lyricism. This part is a transcription of a song in F Major, part of Schumann's cycle of eleven lieder that was never published. This part becomes the focal point of the sonata, where Schumann achieves a rare level of expressivity, evoking feelings of love and nostalgia through a lyrical, almost vocal melody. This contrasting episode of meditative beauty not only provides a moment of calm within the sonata's dramatic context, but also enriches the narrative thread with deep emotional introspection.

The transposition from F Major to A Major was most likely done out of the composer's desire to communicate with Clara.

This movement is written in tripartite form. Although the first melody is extremely lyrical and melancholic, the second one has been moved to the lower register and is reminiscent of a funeral scene. The middle register accompaniment is based on repeated chords that play harmony and creates an ostinato rhythm.



Fig. 5. Robert Schumann, "Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11," 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt., mm. 6-8

Perhaps Schumann would have liked the end of Part II to refer to how much Clara was in his thoughts. Section A returns identically as at the beginning, and the finale again uses the Clara motif.



Fig. 6. Robert Schumann, "Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11," 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt., mm. 41-45

### 5.3. 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, *Scherzo*

The third movement begins abruptly, being in real contrast to the previous movement. This Scherzo presents a striking alteration in all the musical elements, creating an atmosphere full of suspense and dramatism.

Schumann's definition of play is quite like that of comedy. In Schumann's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, he notes: "...The word play is very expressive, since "to play on an instrument" means much the same thing. He who does not play on the instrument, does not play on it..." (Schauffler 1945, 88).

Schumann created his own kind of Scherzo, called *Scherzo e Intermezzo*, symphonic in character. The solo part of this *scherzando* consists of broad chords alternating between *solo* and *tutti*. The chords are also marked with *sforzando*, giving it a full, powerful sound.

The *quasi oboe* section pushes the performer to be able to change the orchestral coloring to one color, the oboe. In this part the performer should take on the role of a comedian, because of all the rhythmic diversity. This part contains numerous hemiolas, syncopations, dotted rhythms (dotted eighths followed by sixteenths), accents on unaccented beats, dance rhythms and imitation.

In this piano sonata the middle section has been replaced by the dramatic *Intermezzo*.

Fig. 7. Robert Schumann, "Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11," 3<sup>rd</sup> mvt., *Intermezzo*, mm. 147-156

Schumann's jokes combine elements of *Intermezzo* and *burlesque* with a *polonaise* rhythm. Schumann's version of polonaise is authentic.

#### 5.4. 4<sup>th</sup> movement, *Allegro un poco maestoso*

In the concluding *Allegro un poco maestoso*, Schumann's use of his imagination is particularly striking. Schumann associates a complicated mosaic of nine themes with the sonata's final section, in contrast to many composers who utilize the rondo or sonata-allegro form. This section is only a basic binary AA' form with a coda, even though many theorists see it as an extended sonata-allegro or rondo. The sole difference between the A and A' parts is the sequence in which the themes are repeated. Partitioning one's work into smaller pieces was popular in the 19th century. *Robert Schumann's Piano Sonata no.1 in F-Sharp Minor, op. 11 - Style and Structure* (Emberley 2013), written by doctorate candidate Stephanie Abigail Emberley, analyzes this section and suggests that the nine motifs chosen by Schumann may reflect this pattern.

Part I	Bars	1	17	25	32	39	43	50	66	74	86	98	114	126	134	142	160	177	
Theme	A	B	C <sup>1</sup>	D	C <sup>1</sup>	C <sup>1</sup>	A	A	B	D	C <sup>1</sup>	C <sup>1</sup>	E	F	G	H	I	bridge	
Key	H/A	a-Eb	Eb	Eb	E	Eb/c	c/Eb	ch-A	A-Ab	H	A	A	A	A	A	Ab	F#	V/H	
		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone (A and Eb majors)		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone	
Part II	Bars	190	206	214	221	228	232	239	255	262	276	288	304	316	324	332	351	368	
Theme	A	B	C <sup>1</sup>	D	C <sup>1</sup>	C <sup>1</sup>	A	A	B	D	C <sup>1</sup>	C <sup>1</sup>	E	F	G	H	I	bridge	
Key	H/A	a-Eb-C	C	C	C	C/A	a/C	Eb	Eb-c	c	-Eb	Eb	Eb	Eb	Eb	-bb	bb	V/eb	
		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone		↑ Tritone	
Coda	Bars	381	397																
Theme	A	new																	
Key	Eb/F#	F#																	

Fig. 8. Robert Schumann, "Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11," 4<sup>th</sup> mvt., structural analysis

Even though Schumann never said who or what inspired this section, the way the nine motifs are juxtaposed makes me think of Richter and Hoffmann. The impression of spontaneity is enhanced by the surprising mosaic of topics. We can prioritize sections A, C, and D based on their frequency of occurrence.

The most important feature of this sonata is the buildup to a coda, or virtuoso finale, that builds in intensity and power. During the following 28 bars, Schumann suggests several *accelerandos* and the *Più Allegro* suggestions for the new material of the coda. The sonata's arpeggiated finale, which features melody and accompaniment in both hands and uses the melody to create hemiolas over the main rhythm, is another aspect that adds suspense to the conclusion.

In the Coda, Schumann ends in the key that bears his name, F# Major, which makes one think of the love he has for Clara and the hope that everything will work out in the end. On their own, these aspects evoke a heroic, victorious atmosphere; however, Schumann reserves this mood for the concluding section.





Fig. 9. Robert Schumann, "*Piano Sonata no. 1 in F# minor, op. 11*," 4<sup>th</sup> mvt., mm. 455-462

## 6. Conclusions

The presence of narrative in Robert Schumann's *Piano Sonata in F# minor no. 1, op. 11* is demonstrated by the composer's ability to weave melodic nuances into a story that is rich in depth and contains a range of feelings. To create a coherent and engaging narrative thread, Schumann makes use of a wide range of musical methods, including thematic variations, dynamic contrasts, and startling modulations, among others. The sonata is composed in such a way that each section adds to the creation of a "musical character", and the interactions between the primary themes mirror interior dialogues, conflicts, and resolutions such as those found in a novel. This approach to narrativity is illustrative of Schumann's Romantic style, which is characterized by the idea that music is not only a formal structure but rather a medium through which the most profound aspects of the human soul are investigated. Not only does Schumann show respect for the classical legacy of the sonata form, but he also transcends it by changing it into a vehicle for the expression of complex ideas and sentiments through the composition of this sonata. As a result, the sonata transforms from merely being a piece of music into a narrative, serving as a demonstration of the power that music possesses to convey narratives and elicit strong mental images and feelings.

*Piano Sonata No. 1 in F# minor, op. 11* is a testament to Schumann's ability to transform the classical sonata into an expressive medium capable of communicating complex inner stories. Through its narrative drama and expressive richness, this work not only transcends the conventional barriers of the form, but stands as a masterpiece of piano literature, reflecting at once the tumult and depth of the Romantic soul.

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