

The national specific at Frédéric Chopin and Edvard Grieg – a parallel

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to identify and analyse the common influences in the works of the two great Romantic composers – Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and Edvard Grieg (1843-1907). The juxtaposition of the two composers reveals the parallelism of their musical trajectory, and points out the folkloric musical elements, specific to their natal birth place that they managed to integrate not only in the history of the European arts and music, but also in the history of universal music. This article will underline similarities of style in the works of the two composers, as: the dominance of the minor, short forms with repetitions, harmonic aspects, and folkloric influences.*

Key-words: *national specific elements, music of eastern and northern Europe, harmonic aspects, modal elements.*

1. Introduction

Frédéric Chopin and Edvard Grieg – “the Chopin of the North” were considerably influenced by the musical idiom of their birth places. Although there have been 172, and respectively, 114 years since their death, their contribution had been hard to match until today. Chopin is regarded as the main representative of the Polish musical culture, while the name of Grieg is inseparable from the name of Norway. Although these aspects contribute to the placement of the two composers on a pedestal, the elements pertaining to the national specific in the composition style of Frédéric Chopin and Edvard Grieg are difficult to demonstrate.

Both Chopin and Grieg had been deeply influenced by the musical tradition of the country they were born in. Folkloric elements, that are important features of their cultural inheritance, are present in the creation of both the composers; they integrated those elements in their own compositional “book of idioms” and transformed them into original styles, where the innovative aspects transformed them into fresh music, preferred by a larger, European, audience.

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2. Objectives

The idea for this article appeared when I discovered the concert of the piano player Jeffrey Siegel from 25th of October, 2015, at George Mason University's Centre for the Performing Arts, titled "Chopin and Grieg: A Musical Friendship." The closeness of the two names and the original idea to interpret and emphasize the similarities in the creation of the two composers generated the need for further documentation on the subject, and so I came across studies like that of the musicologists Carl Dalhaus (Dalhaus 1980, 31-32); Tomasz Baranowski (Baranowski 2008, 101-110), Vladimir Block (Block 1993, 54), and others. Their opinions on the creation of the two composers, regarding aspects like: the national specific, the similarities at the harmonic level, the frequent use of minor tonalities, the predilection for small forms with repetition, connected Frédéric Chopin and Edvard Grieg in a fresh perspective, and shed a new light on the national Polish and Norwegian music.

3. Material and Methods

The interest in the folkloric elements of the music composed in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe has been present ever since the eighth century. In Poland, Henryk Oskar Kolberg (1814-1890) collected authentic folklore music even since 1839. In Russia, there are several volumes of Russian songs, collected by V. Trutovskij or by N. L'vov and I. Prác, published starting with 1776, respectively 1790 (Redepenning 1994, 303). In Norway, L. M. Lindemann published a volume of traditional music in 1840. In Denmark, similar collections existed since 1812, while in Sweden they appeared between 1814 and 1817. The use of folklore inspiration led to the development of genuine musical dialects and thus to the introduction of the national idiom, innovating the European aesthetics. Folklore, regardless of the label of authenticity or artificiality applied in the present, became the starting point for the European tendency to integrate new cultural dimensions in the musical art.

Russia has Glinka as the representative of the national music, but he does not rise to the height Chopin conquered in the world of music. Smetana, the representative of Bohemia's cultural area, or Gade – a Danish composer – were also surpassed by Dvorak and Grieg, who were, in turn, contemporaries of the generation of composers such as Borodin, Mussorgski, Tschaikowski or Rimski-Korsakow.

As for the two composers, Chopin and Grieg, some formal principles which they both used are closely related to the context of their time and have been regarded as some of the central tendencies of the 19th century, thus integrating in their national specific idiom.

4. Results and Discussions

For a better understanding of the similarities between the two composers, a presentation of the influences Chopin and Grieg encountered during their life follows, and after that, an analyse of the dominance of the minor tonalities, of the short forms with repetitions, as well as of the harmonic aspects in their works is exposed.

4.1. The National Influence in Frédéric Chopin and Edvard Grieg's Work

In the case of Edvard Grieg, the situation in his country had a great impact on him (Herresthal 1998, 87). He was also interested in the traditional music of his country, and this influenced him to compose music which was Norwegian in character. In the case of Chopin, he was introduced to traditional Polish music at an early age. His participation in the Festival of Obrowo was a source of inspiration for Chopin. While Grieg discovered traditional music at the age of 21, the 14 years old Chopin had already come across the central native dance, the mazurka, which, apart from the polonaise, was to become one of the most important genres in his folk music. Compositions as *Sonata in B-Flat Minor* can also be included among the works that highlight the national character. Apart from the polonaises Chopin composed, his 57 mazurkas for the piano had become the quintessence of the national Polish music. Their originality has much to do with the composer's familiarity with the traditional mazurka of the folk music, characterized by rubato and modal keys. In the same time, Chopin avoided using quotation, but, instead, he made use of an array of clever stylistic devices and a forward-looking harmony, within the narrow formal framework (Baranowski 1998, 64).

Grieg composed a many pieces and dances having certain folklore influence, collected in volumes such as *Lyric Pieces*, as well as in those suggestively titled *Norwegian Dances*, *Pictures from Folk Life*, and others. More than that, folkloric elements are also present in pieces where the title does not indicate it, as, for instance, in *The Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, *String Quartet*, and others.

4.2. The dominance of the minor

The preference for the minor tonality combined with modal elements characterizes in the same amount both the Norwegian and Polish traditional music. For this reason, there is necessary to analyse in what measure is the minor tonality used in the works of Chopin and Grieg.

The dominance of the major tonality, specific to the classical music in general, is replaced by the strong influence of the minor in Beethoven's works (in his last *Quartets* or in *Symphony No. 9*). The minor's influence gradually grows during the early Romanticism (Weber, Berlioz, Schubert). In what Chopin is concerned, he makes use of the minor tonality more than his contemporaries. This aspect sets him apart from Mendelssohn (1809-1847) or Schumann (1810-1856), although the minor also plays a remarkable part (for instance, in *Symphonies*, *Overtures* or *Solo Concerts*). In the table below, the relationship between the minor and major tonalities in Chopin's compositions is exposed.

	Genres	Minor Tonality	Major Tonality
Section 1	Piano Sonatas	3	-
	Piano concertos	2	-
	Piano Trio	1	-
	Sonata for Cello & Piano	1	-
Section 2	Scherzos	3	1
	Rondeaus	1	2
	Mazurkas	26	23
	Polonaises	6	4
Section 3	Etudes	13	20
	Preludes	12	12
	Ballades	2	2
	Nocturnes	8	11
	Waltzes	4	10
	Impromptus	1	3

Table 1. *The relationship between the minor and major tonalities in Frédéric Chopin's works*

The first section is dominated by the preference for the form of sonata (only in minor tonalities), followed by the forms of scherzo and rondo (in both major and minor tonalities). The second section (where the minor tonalities are also dominant) contains the Polish dances Chopin introduced to the piano literature (mazurka and polonaise), while the third section is composed of *Etudes* and *Preludes*, where the ratio between major and minor is balanced.

To conclude, the dominance of the minor – which is a distinctive feature of the Polish folk music – is a fundamental principle of Chopin's aesthetics.

Similar with the first section of the table above, Grieg's compositions that adopt the pattern of the sonata, adjusted from the classical form, are written in minor tonalities (*Symphony in C minor*, *The Piano Sonata in E minor*, *Op.7*,

The String Quartet in G minor Op.27, The Ballade in G minor, Op. 24, The Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.16, and others). Even the cycles that include in their title the word "Norwegian" are preponderantly composed in minor tonalities, as, for example *Norwegian Dances and Folk Songs Op.17* (fourteen times minor, eleven times major) and *19 Norwegian Folk Songs, Op.66* (fourteen times minor, five times major).

4.3. Short forms with repetitions

The fact that Grieg's compositions are moderately long and characterized by repetitions of the same or some different tonalities (for instance, *Lyric Pieces, Character Pieces*) is well known. Many of Chopin's creations are based on repetitions as well, even in the most simple forms (ABAO), using both identic, as well as modified repetitions. Examples can be found among the mazurkas, waltzes, scherzos and rondos composed by him.

The re-adaptation of parts is a standard in some of the works and a central stylistic device both in Chopin, as well as Grieg's creations. Both composers created opposite examples and had two completely different formal tendencies in the nineteenth century. On one hand, the variation principle gained importance starting with *Fugue, in B-flat major Op.133*, continuing with Schubert, Schumann, Liszt and Brahms and culminating with Schönberg's developing variation. On the other hand, the repetition principle was still in use, as, for instance, in Schubert's *Impromptus* and *Moments musicaux (Musical moments)*, in Schumann's compositions, in Brahms and Dvorák's dances and in piano song (if it has a stanza structure). It is obvious that the repetitions category, as opposed to the principle of reshaping by means of variations, was borrowed from the folklore, where this formal pattern is often present in the songs and dances.

The short dimension of some of the pieces is another important aspect – a tendency of early Romanticism, continued by Chopin and Grieg, which would finally lead to Webern's aphorisms. Schumann's creation also contains short pieces, as, for instance, *Papillons, Op.2* (1830-1831), *Scenes of childhood, Op.15* (1838) and *Album for the Young, Op.68* (1848), which are often one page long, or even less (as *Op.68, No.3-5*). In this context, the repetitions acquire a very important status. Some similarities can be found in Chopin's works. *Préludes, Op.28* mostly contain short pieces, as, for example, *Piece No.7*, composed of a unit of 8 bars and its modified repetition. Within his *Mazurkas, No.4, Op.6*, there are four with only 24 bars, and *No.9, Op.7*, five with 20 composed bars are at the opening. Grieg also has very short compositions, among which can be included *Norwegian Dances, Op.17*, with *Pieces No. 2, 4, 8, 19* and *22*. Very short pieces can also be found in *Norwegian Folk Songs, Op.66*.

4.4. Harmonic aspects

The importance of harmony concerning the creation of a new style related to folklore was pointed out by Grieg several times. Chopin also stressed the immense importance of innovative harmony, which can be especially seen in his mazurkas.

The sequence of the harmonic basis, from A to C, which is linked with the first theme of the first movement in Grieg's *Piano Concerto*, is well known. This sequence of rising thirds, projected here into the tonic minor and its parallels, which also recurs in the theme of the first movement of the *String Quartet*, is one of the innovations of the early Romantic era. It can be found in the theme of Mendelssohn, *The Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave) Op.26* (1832), with the sequence h-D-Fis (Kreft 1995, 42-44). Apart from other stylistic peculiarities, which include models of different base with a chromatic structure, pedal points and bass at 5th, this harmonic model already appeared in Chopin's first mazurka published with an opus number (*Op.6, No.1* from 1830).

Looking, for instance, at Chopin's *Rondeau, Op. 1*, in the parts from bar 41 to 47 there are eight major 6ths, the chords following in-Beethoven-dominants on a falling whole tone basis. The whole tone basis was sometimes used by Weber, Schubert and Schumann, and after Chopin, it was also used by Liszt (*Dante-Sonate*) and Grieg (Kreft 1996, 55-63). The bars from 47 to 59 are filled with a model based on falling major thirds (C-A-Flat-E), which is one of the most innovative of the early Romanticism and can also be found in Schubert's *String Quartet G major, D 887* (1826), and in the major third cadence of Liszt's first *Piano Concerto*.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Chopin's *Rondeau, Op. 1*. The first system, labeled 'Op.1.', shows bars 4-6. The second system shows bars 7-12. The music is in 3/4 time and features a complex harmonic structure with falling major thirds and whole tones. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various ornaments and fingerings.

Fig. 1. Frederic Chopin – *Rondeau, Op.1*, bars 4-12

The image shows a musical score for Frédéric Chopin's *Rondeau*, Op. 1, bars 12-28. The score is written in 3/4 time and features a rising major third harmonic foundation. It includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *cresc.*, and *dim.* The score is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff.

Fig. 2. Frederic Chopin –Rondeau, Op.1, bars 12-28

The *Rondeau's* harmonic foundation of the part is the rising major third. This scheme was developed by Chopin and later used by Schumann in his *Novelette F*, Op.21, No.1 (1838), and it is shown in the following table:

Bars	1-60	C minor
Bars	61-129	E major
Bars	130-157	A flat major
Bars	157 ff.	C minor

Table2. Harmonic foundation of *The Rondeau*

5. Conclusions

Both Chopin and Grieg have a proclivity for the minor tonalities, transforming this aspect into an important feature of the folklore of their countries that recurs in their music. The dominant use of the minor, growing since the second part of the twentieth century, that eventually led to the end of the era of the major tonalities and the apparition of atonality originates, consequently, in folklore.

Chopin and Grieg are similar in so far as both create new harmonic phrases which can be encountered in the group of their compositions influenced by folklore,

but are also found in other pieces. Both of them took the advantage of introducing novelties into the European Art of Music, often regarded as rooted into folklore, even if they corresponded to the general tendencies of their time.

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