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EXPLORING CHOPIN'S 'POLISH BALLADE'

Abstract: Each stage of the source chain of Chopin's Op. 38 is described. Theories of genre are discussed. Late nineteenth-century descriptions are related to intertextual associations to produce a hermeneutical reading of the work.

Key words: Source chain; genre; topos; narrative; intertext; extramusical

Preamble

It was in Majorca - on 14 December 1839 - that Chopin wrote to Julian Fontana, 'I expect to send you my Preludes and Ballade shortly', referring here to the Second Ballade.[1] He had already composed the main outlines of the ballade prior to Majorca (Félicien Mallefille referred to it, interestingly enough, as the 'Polish ballade' in a letter that pre-dated the excursion), but he refined it and completed it during the Majorcan adventure. Indeed it is entirely possible that it was on Majorca that he wrote what Schumann called the 'impassioned episodes', referring of course to the figurations, since he had already performed the opening section by itself on several occasions. My intention here is to comment briefly on salient aspects of the text of the ballade with reference to its extant sources. Following that, I will say something of an interpretative nature about the work, focusing on questions of intertextuality.

Texts

Unusually for Chopin, virtually every stage of an archetypal source chain is represented for this work. The manuscript and early printed sources are as follows:

A¹   There is an autograph fragment (bars 11-12) in the Album of Ivar Hallstrom (currently held in the Music History Museum in Stockholm). This is not a sketch, but may rather have been a 'presentation' fragment written for an unknown person and subsequently acquired by Hallstrom. Hallstrom's album leaf also contains autograph signatures by Meyerbeer, Halévy and Spohr.

A²   The fair copy autograph for the work (the Stichvorlage for the first French edition) is well-known, as it was discussed by Saint-Saëns in what amounted to a pioneering source study of compositional

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[1] Arthur Hedley (ed. and trans.), *Selected correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin,* London, 1962, p. 165.

process.[2] It is currently housed in the Bibliotèque nationale, Paris [F-Pn: Mus. 107]. Rather than analyse this manuscript I will simply draw attention to a few points of interest, several of them not discussed by Saint-Saëns. The removal of two extra notes at the very beginning of the work is of telling significance, as it allows the flowering of the melody at bar 4 to occur at an unexpected moment metrically (i.e., on what the innocent ear takes to be a structurally weak beat), necessitating a retrospective adjustment to the metre on the part of the listener. Chopin's phrasing of this opening melody should also be noted, as it differs from the phrasing of the first editions (see later); in the autograph the first right-hand phrase ends on the A^1 of bar 6. Two further points from the very end of the work may be mentioned. The several stages in the genesis of the final chords have often been noted; in essence Chopin drops the left hand by an octave in his later versions. However, it is also worth drawing attention to the left-hand in the final chord of bar 196. There is an illegible correction on the autograph here, which suggests that the original version may have had a bass note B- natural rather than B-flat. The significance of this will become clear later.

C^{Gut} There is a scribal copy prepared by Adolf Gutmann, currently in Stolkholm [S: Smf]. This was the Stichvorlage for the first German edition. Unfortunately the copy is unreliable in several particulars. We may note that Gutmann miscopies Chopin's slur at the opening, closing (and this makes no musical sense whatever) on the last right-hand note B-flat^1 rather than on Chopin's A^1. The final chords faithfully copy Chopin's final version from the autograph (the lower version), but it should be noted that in an autograph gloss on the copy Chopin changed the chords back to his original (higher) version.

FP   There is a proof copy of the first French edition (registered October 1840 and prepared from the autograph) in the Bibliotèque nationale, Paris [F-Pn: Ac.p.2686]. It was clearly uncorrected as it contains obvious textual errors such as C^1 for D^1 in the right hand of the penultimate chord. The most striking feature here is the change to the phrasing of the opening section. The opening right-hand slur is unbroken at bar 6 and continues through to the opening note of bar 10.

F^1 The first French edition of 1840 [Troupenas, Paris, plate No. T.925] preserves the phrasing of **FP**, inviting speculation about Chopin's intentions. There are several possibilities. 1. Chopin made the change himself and communicated it to the French editor. 2. The French editor made the change, and it was approved by Chopin. 3. The French editor made the change and it was not noticed by Chopin at proof stage. There is no easy way to resolve this question, and it poses teasing problems for the present-day editor. Predictably, the final chords are presented in their higher version, based on the corrected form given in the autograph.

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[2] Translated as 'A Chopin ms: the F major ballade in the making', in: Camille Saint-Saëns, *Outspoken essays on music*, trans. F. Rothwell, London, 1922, repr. 1970

G   The first German edition of 1840 [Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, plate No. 6330] has Gutmann's illogical phrasing at the opening, i.e. ending the first slur on the last right-hand note B-flat^1 rather than on Chopin's A^1. The final chords are in the lower version, following Chopin's correction to the Gutmann copy.

E   The first English edition was registered on 1 October 1840 [Wessel, London, plate No. 3182]. It has several features in common with **A²** and **FP** which were changed in **F¹**, suggesting that **FP** may have been corrected by two different editors. However, it is also possible that the editors of **E** had access to **A²**, as several features of the autograph are found in **E** but not in **F¹** (in a very few cases **E** is the only printed source to follow **A²**). There are two features of particular interest. The right-hand slurring remains unbroken from bar 1 to the first note of bar 38. This suggests that the slur functions rather more as a *legato* indication (as in some eighteenth-century notational practice) than as phrasing. The left-hand final chord in bar 196 has a bass note B-natural rather than B-flat. This is interesting in relation to the illegible correction on **A²** (see above) and to the version found on the later impression of the first French edition (see below).

F²   This is a later impression of **F¹,** dating from *c.* 1841 [Troupenas, Paris, plate No. T. 925]. It is identical to **F¹** in every particular except one: the left-hand final chord in bar 196 has a bass note B-natural rather than B-flat. It is possible that this change was instigated by Chopin himself, though the matter can only be speculative.

In addition to these sources, there are scores of the first French edition with autograph glosses (fingerings and section markers) that belonged to Ludwika Jędrzejewicz [P-TIFC: M/176], Jane Stirling [F-Pn: Vma. 241 (V, 38)] and Camille Dubois [F-Pn: Rés, F.980]

Intertexts

I would like here to propose intertextual links with three earlier works by Chopin as an aid to interpretation. Before doing so it will be worth exploring questions of genre in Chopin. Elsewhere I have argued that Chopin made two major contributions to our understanding of genre in the nineteenth century.[3] In the first place we may note that his abandonment of the conventional genres of 1820s concert music led to the establishment of new controlling genres, which reject earlier meanings of the genre title but which retain many of the connotative values of that title. This applies to the polonaise (from Op. 26

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[3] Jim Samson, 'Chopin and genre', *Music analysis,* 1989, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 213-31.

onwards), the scherzo,[4] the impromptu,[5] and of course the ballade. I have elaborated on this question elsewhere and will not develop it further here. But we should note (and this is Chopin's second contribution) that these redefinitions involve the importation of generic fragments as *topoi*, so that we have 'host' genres and 'guest' genres, allowing an interplay of genres with different levels of meanings. Thus we may find, for example, the chorale in the nocturnes, the funeral marche in the prelude; the waltz and barcarolle in the ballade; and so on. It is worth noting that these 'guest' genres are popular genres, and as such they are grounded in social functions---dance, worship, mourning, procession---and often refer to rather specific affective states; indeed their role can be partly to socialise the more extreme affective states. They create in other words a referential code that enabled nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics to arrive at the descriptive and even programmatic interpretations of Chopin's music which we tend to dismiss today.

It is partly due to this referential code that commentators such as Jan Kleczyński could refer to our experience of the Second Ballade as akin to 'following a hidden story'.[6] There are many such references. Henry Chorley remarks: 'We can never listen to these works without their story as clearly impressed on our minds as if it had been told in words'.[7] Louis Ehlert argues that 'Chopin narrates a story, but one that has never taken place, except as an odyssey of the spirit'.[8] Moritz Karasowski refers to the ballades as 'poetical stories'.[9] The list could be extended almost indefinitely. Perhaps one of the nicest is Edward Dannreuther's remark: 'One longs for a clue to the mysterious tale which the music unfolds'.[101]

Now there are of course two types of contrasted material in the second Ballade. Generically they may be described as a Siciliano in F major and an Etude in the mediant minor, and their alternation (expressive of a dual impulse of display and sentiment, translated as bravura figuration and popular melody) is somewhat in the manner of popular pianism of the 1820s. An anonymous reviewer in the English press at the time described them thus: 'The beginning is peaceful. Suddenly another element mixes with the first. There is a dashing and a roaring of the whirlwind, and the fantastic terrors continue to grow until out of a thundering *tutti* appears a spectre, wierd and gaunt'. This description already touches on the prevailing metaphors used to describe these materials in subsequent literature, and it should be noted that there is a remarkable consistency in the range of images used. Characteristically there are two, either presented separately, or in some cases brought into association. I refer here to a cluster of well-known studies.[11] The first image presents a pastoral scene (Barbedette), often

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[4] See Zofia Chechlińska, 'Scherzo as a genre: selected problems', in: *Chopin studies 5,* Warsaw, 1995, pp. 165-73.

[5] See Jim Samson, 'Chopin's F-sharp Impromptu: notes on genre, style and structure', in: *Chopin studies 3,* Warsaw, 1990, pp. 297-304.

[6] Jan Kleczyński, *Chopin's greater works*, trans. Natalie Janota, London, 1896; (orig. Polish edn., 1886), p. 66.

[7] In *The Athenaeum*, 15 March, 1834.

[8] Louis Ehlert, *Aus der Tonwelt,* Berlin, 1877, p. 298.

[9] Moritz Karasowski, *Frederic Chopin, his life, letters and works*, trans. E. Hill, New York, 1878; (orig, German edn., 1877), p. 402.

[10] 'The romantic period', *Oxford history of music*, vol. 6 (Oxford, 1905), p. 257

[11] These are H. Barbedette, *Chopin. Essai de critique musicale,* Paris, 1869; A. Rubinstein, *Conversations on music,*

particularized as a flower (Rubinstein), interrupted by a storm (Ashton Jonson, Rubinstein, Jachimecki). The flower struggles with the wind, with the 'rolling thunder' (Ashton Jonson). The second image is of an innocent maiden (Barbedette, Jachimecki) besieged by soldiers (Rubinstein, Bourniquel). In some cases (e.g. Bourniquel) the reference to the maidens, the lake and the soldiers refer explicitly to Mickiewicz. The narrative of innocence under threat is underscored, incidentally, by an explicit link with the 'ballade' from Act I of Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* (well known to Chopin), where an innocent Norman princess is threatened by the warrior Robert.

Against this background of extramusical imagery it is interesting to explore intertextual associations. I will first propose a link between the opening melody and the second theme of the Nocturne Op.37 No. 2 in G major.

Ex. 1a. F. Chopin, *Ballade* Op. 38, bars 1-6

Ex. 1b. F. Chopin, *Nocturne* Op. 37 No. 2, bars 28-36

trans. J. P. Morgan, New York, 1886; G. C. Ashton Jonson, *A handbook to Chopin's works,* London, 1905; Z. Jachimecki, *Chopin. Rys życia i twórczosci,* Warsaw, 1911; C. Bourniquel, *Chopin,* Paris, 1957; C. Willeby, *Frédéric François Chopin: a biography,* London, 1892; Frederick Niecks, *Chopin as a man and musician,* 2 vols, London, 1888, (repr. New York, 1973); M. Karasowski, *Frederic Chopin, his life, letters and works*, trans. E. Hill, New York, 1878, (orig, German edn., 1877); J. G. Huneker, *Chopin: the man and his music,* New York, 1900, (repr., 1966).

This was composed in Majorca (i.e. at around the same time as the ballade), and the melody has become famous through association with the 'helmsman song' in George Sand's account of the crossing to Majorca (Willeby described it as 'simplicity itself', while Niecks referred to the 'beautiful sensuousness [---] of this Capua which bewitches and unmans'. For Karasowski it was 'the most beautiful melody Chopin ever wrote'). It is worth looking at the generic and formal context of this 'siciliano'. It alternates with a contrasted barcarolle in double notes, and this gives an even more convincing rationale to the association with the ballade. In the final bars of the two pieces the material returns as a final whispered reference in a gesture of tonal accommodation (i.e. in the key of the contrasted material). In other words the intertextuality concerns the placement and function of the material as well as its character.

Ex. 1c. F. Chopin, *Ballade* Op. 38, bars 197-204

Ex. 1d. F. Chopin, *Nocturne* Op. 37 No. 2, bars 132-139

I will now propose a link between the figuration of the ballade (Schumann's 'impassioned bits') and the eleventh of the Op. 25 Etudes, the so-called 'Winter Wind' study. This etude belongs to a heroic *topos* which links it explicitly (though with an inversion of the function of the two hands) with Op.10 No. 12, the so-called 'Revolutionary' study. There are associations here with Beethoven and Weber, with Liszt (*Wilde Jagd* and the *Scherzo and March*), and even with Berlioz. Karasowski, writing of the 'Revolutionary' refers to a 'mad tempestuous storm [---] Zeus hurling thunderbolts at the world', while Niecks has Chopin 'fuming with rage', and Huneker detects a 'tornadic passion'. Of the 'Winter Wind', Huneker again refers to 'storm music', and Bourniquel to an 'irresistible unleashing of power'. Again it is significant that the intertextuality extends to the function of the material as well as to its character.

Ex. 2a. F. Chopin, *Ballade* Op. 38, bars 46-48

Ex. 2b. F. Chopin, *Etude* Op. 25 No. 11, bars 3-5

At this point I would like to consider the formal device of dialectic or contrast that underlies the Second Ballade, and then to propose a further intertextual association in relation to this. It is usual to refer to a sonata-form archetype underlying the ballades, and this is a genuinely helpful background. However the opposition of materials and genres found in Op.38 extends beyond the frame of a sonata-form movement, and is actually more like an extension of a ternary ABA form, of a kind found relatively rarely in Chopin.

I say 'rarely', because many so-called ternary designs in Chopin are rather misnamed in that the middle section is in reality an intensification of the material of the opening section rather than a genuinely contrasted episode. At the very least we need to identify two different classes of ABA form. It seems to me rather unusual to find an ABA in Chopin motivated by the genuine contrast demanded by the semiotics of the labeling (of the etudes, perhaps only Op.25 No.5 in E minor really qualifies). However, there is one very good example of a clear differentiation of A and B in one of Chopin's early pieces, the F-major Nocturne, Op.15 No.1. This provides my third intertextual link with the Second Ballade.

It may be helpful to consider the special significance of the Op.15 nocturnes. Having essentially defined the nocturne as a genre through the three nocturnes of his Op.9 set, Chopin confirmed the genre in Op.15 No.2 and (paradoxically) strengthened its definition through purposeful deviations from the archetype in Op.15 Nos.1 and 3. These latter two nocturnes invite 'readings' based on their juxtaposition of generic topics. Thus we have mazurka and chorale in No.3; pastorale and etude in No.1. The opening material of Op.15 No.1 is in pastoral mode (the key is F major; the marking 'semplice et tranquillo'), and it 'intercuts' with the etude, exactly as in Op.38, though in the tonic rather than the mediant minor.

Ex. 3. F. Chopin, Nocturne Op. 15 No. 1, bars 1-34

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The double notes of the 'etude' might be compared to Op.10 No.7, but they also establish links with the contrasted barcarolle material of Op. 37 No.2, making our web of intertextuality yet tighter.

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Ex. 4a. F. Chopin, *Nocturne* Op. 15 No. 1, bars 25-26

Ex. 4b. F. Chopin, *Etude* Op. 10 No. 7, bars 1-2

Ex. 4c. F. Chopin, *Nocturne* Op. 37 No. 2, bars 23-25

The 'interruption' and even the false reprise in Op. 15 No.1 establish a further commonality of gesture with the Second Ballade, and again the etude (the 'storm') subsides onto the opening pastoral material. Barbedette, writing of the nocturne, refers to 'a calm and beautiful lake, ruffled by a sudden storm, and becoming calm again'. Theodore Kullak describes a maiden sleeping in the sun, awakening amidst a storm, with red lightning and trees shaking their heads to the wind, before looking back with joy on this day in the sun. Once more the imagery is consistent with that for Op.38. The narrative of 'innocence under threat' unfolds through confrontation and mediation.

Simply by using the title 'ballade' for a piano piece Chopin invoked a wide range of references in both musical and literary contexts. Although he avoided programmatic associations, it would be misleading to suggest that his use of the title excluded its obvious literary associations. In the early nineteenth century the medieval genre had been effectively reinvented for romantic literature and its connotative values were specific and widely recognized. By describing these works as 'ballades' Chopin inevitably made a gesture in this direction, and in doing so he established some point of contact with the literary preoccupations of his contemporaries. But it is entirely characteristic that literary inspiration should have been channeled into a piano piece with a deliberately generalized, rather than an explicitly programmatic, title. This has a bearing on the endless speculation about the influence of Mickiewicz's ballads on the Chopin ballades. It is indeed distinctly possible that these poems may have played some part in Chopin's creative process. The vernacular connotations of the title would have been unmistakable to contemporary audiences, and it is telling that a reviewer in the 1840s could state without elaboration that 'the concluding piece was also national, the ballade'.[12] Indeed there is some circumstantial evidence that the Second Ballade, at least, had some such programme; aside from Mallefille's 'Polish ballade', there is a reference by Henryk Probst to a 'pilgrim's ballade'.[13] The problem with such readings is that they allow connotative values to congeal into fixed meanings. I am really suggesting in this paper that, given the music's referential code, its generic topics, and its range of intertextual associations, we have no need of a Mickiewicz poem to read the narrative of the Second Ballade.

Summary

The article presents two very different perspectives on Chopin's Second Ballade; the first, an examination of its texts, the second, its intertexts. Manuscript and early printed sources for Chopin's Second Ballade comprise virtually every stage of an archetypal source chain, from fragment to late impressions (*tirages*) of the first editions, French, German and English. In the first part of the article all these stages are described.

In Part 2 of the article, the author explores intertexts with several other works by Chopin, and relates these to (mainly nineteenth-century) criticism. This twin-pronged approach, combined with reflections on musical genre, enables a hermeneutic approach to the associative meanings of this music, including those meanings that derive from putative links with the ballads of Adam Mickiewicz.

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[12] *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 7 October, 1848.
[13] This is reported by Jeffrey Kallberg, *The Chopin sources: variants and versions in later manuscripts,* unpubl. diss., University of Chicago, 1982.