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# Dramatic Contrasts and Opposing Forces in Chopin's Music

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School Number:

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“The Piano bard, the piano rhapsodist, the piano mind, the piano soul is Chopin. Tragic, romantic, lyric, heroic, dramatic, fantastic, soulful, sweet, dreamy, brilliant, grand, simple, all possible expressions are found in his compositions and all are sung by him upon his instrument.”<sup>1</sup>

As Rubenstein suggests above, Chopin’s music covers the full range of expressive styles. Often, within the same piece, Chopin employs quite dramatically, opposing elements in terms of style, dynamics and expressive techniques, texture, tonality and duration. These elements can take the listener by surprise. It is this characteristic of Chopin’s music that is to be described here with the reference to a broad selection of his works: Ballade Op.52, Nocturne Op.42 no.1, polonaise Op 53, Etude Op. 10 no.3, Etude Op.10 no.12 and Impromptu Op.66. These pieces will not only be analyzed in terms of the concepts of music, but also in terms of the context of Chopin’s life. For, in the course of this study, it has become apparent that some of the opposing elements in Chopin’s music may in part be attributed to opposing forces in his life. Both Chopin’s life and music are full of opposing elements- the Polish and the French influences being one of them.

Chopin left Poland to live in Paris, and while the lifestyle in France was well suited to his tastes and personality, he never ceased to love or to be anguished by the misfortunes of Poland, which is reflected in much of the subject matter and tone of his music. Similarly, while Chopin was influenced by the music that was popular in France at the time (nocturnes, preludes, and etudes), he still continued to write in the Polish traditional style (e.g. mazurkas, and polonaises), thus combining the two genres to create a sense of conflict within his works.

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Rubinstein, Anton      cit. Huneker, James; *Chopin- the Man and His Music*. United Kingdom: J.M Dent and Sons LTD, 1957      p.53

100 Another opposing element within his life and works was his public life as a performer contrasting with his private life. While the music that was popular in Paris may have influenced his lyrical works, this contrasted with the more dramatic music that Chopin composed in the privacy of his home.

Thus, the opposing elements that will be examined in this study, with a discussion of their musical implications, are: the contrast between the sophisticated French elegance and Polish traditional form in Chopin's work; the contrast between lyrical and dramatic elements in Chopin's work; the contrast between simplicity and virtuosity within his works; The contrast between the public and private man; the performer and the composer; the tonal duality, which is such a characteristic of Chopin's musical language.

The dual influence in Chopin's heritage began in Zelazowa Wola, Poland, in 1810, for his father, Nicolas Chopin, was French, while his mother was Polish. Both of Chopin's parents were talented musicians, and he was encouraged from an early age to pursue his obvious love for music. His early piano lessons were based on the music of Bach and Mozart, which was to have a profound influence on his later works.

Chopin gave three concerts before leaving Poland, and then, after spending some time in Vienna, he settled in Paris. Chopin's earlier works were mainly polonaises and mazurkas, and were often products of improvisations at the piano<sup>2</sup>. Chopin's approach to composition changed dramatically during 1830, when new forms and styles that were popular in France at the time surrounded him. These styles include nocturnes, waltzes, and etudes. The forces of duality and contrast made themselves instantly apparent within his compositions, as he grafted elegant French styles onto Polish traditional forms. This is exemplified within

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<sup>2</sup> Sampson, Jim      The Music of Chopin.      Routledge and Keagan, 1985      pp. 34 -36

(100) the fourth Ballade, Op. 52, where Chopin contrasts a slow, melancholy theme with an episode that is suggestive of a mazurka (a traditional dance of Poland in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time

The theme is first stated in the tonic (F minor) before it is repeated in the relative major. This theme is slow, elegant and lyrical which is characteristic of the French style. It feels quite lyrical with its chromatic movement around C, the dominant.

Fig.1 (Audio one)

The image shows the first system of the musical score for the Ballade Op. 52. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The key signature is F minor (three flats). The first system includes markings for 'ritenuto', 'p', and 'in tempo'. A handwritten note 'F minor theme' points to the first system.

(100) The mood changes at bar 47 where there is a 'dance episode', similar to a mazurka. Here the movement of the episode is much faster and is in Ab major key with a cycle of fifths in the harmony adding momentum to the music.

Fig. 2 (Audio two)

The image shows the second system of the musical score for the Ballade Op. 52. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The key signature is Ab major (one flat). The second system includes markings for 'mezza voce' and 'cresc.'. A handwritten note 'cycle of 5ths' points to the harmonic progression.

$B^b$   $E^b$   $A^b$   $D^b$   $G^b$

A duality in styles (traditional Polish v French elegance) can also be seen in the Etude in E major (Op.10 No.3). The Etude is in ternary form, with the A sections being quite simple and naïve in terms of texture and harmony. This contrasts to the B section, which features a sophisticated use of harmony as well as the pianistic skills required to play the study with the movement and technical precision that was intended.

The A section is suggestive of a Polish folk tune. This homophonic theme is very simple harmonically. It uses only chords I and V, with simple root notes in the left hand. This gentle and slow theme was said to have been one of Chopin's favorite melodies. He had told a friend that he had never in his life written such a melody, and once on hearing it raised his arms and cried, 'Oh ma patrie' ('oh my country').<sup>3</sup>

Fig. 3 (Audio three)

The change in harmonic language occurs in the B. section where Chopin modulates to B major. Here the tempo is marked *poco piu animato* again the composer uses a dance-like melody to precede a virtuosic display of chromatic, parallel tritone chords and arpeggios.

This section contrasts dramatically in that it is extremely fast, loud and contains complex chromatic sequences. This display shows an exceptional use of chromatic harmony and is

remindful of the virtuosity that was popularized in France by performers such as Liszt and Paganini who were thought to have been the main influences in the complexity of Chopin's etudes.

Fig 4 (Audio four)



(100) Another example of the contrasts between the Polish and French elements is the Polonaise in Ab Major Op.53. While the work displays the rhythmic and harmonic elements one would expect to find in a traditional polonaise, Chopin has composed a short episode that contrasts dramatically with the other sections of the composition. A lengthy introduction in Eb major of ascending, chromatic sequences of Major  $6_3$  chords precede the main theme. This theme contrasts to the introduction in that it is light, and carefree, with a bold and heroic melody.

<sup>3</sup> Ekeirt, J *Heart of Genius* 1999 p.4

Fig. 5 (Audio five)

b.17 (main theme)

This theme is divided into two sections. The first (bar 17), resembles the rhythm of a mazurka,  $\uparrow$  and is full of repetitions such as the imitation of the first statement in Bb major at bar 21. The second part of the theme features trills and like the first half of the theme is also repetitious. The theme, in its entirety, is rhythmic and features accented major thirds and dramatic octaves in the left hand that enhance the spirited and vigorous texture of this theme. In contrast Chopin, in section C, composed an episode that is French in quality with its lyrical, graceful melody. This episode is in F minor and begins somewhat abruptly after an episode that has similar qualities to the main theme (full chordal textures, dramatic octaves, and exciting use of rhythm). The melody is very chromatic and this creates a feeling of improvisation.

Fig. 6 (Audio six)

*lyrical chromatic melody*

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, consisting of two systems of staves. The top system features a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with accompaniment. The melody is marked with a handwritten note 'lyrical chromatic melody' and an arrow pointing to it. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'sf' and 'p', and performance instructions like 'Ped.' and 'poco cresc.'. The bottom system continues the piece, with similar notation and markings. The score is written in a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature.

Unlike the first section, the melody is not doubled and this adds to its lyrical quality. The accompaniment is also less complex rhythmically, which allows the melody to be heard. This section also features chromatic notes in the bass. The episode concludes with the two hands playing in unison with a dramatic ritardando before the main theme in Ab major is restated for the final time. Here we can see the combination of the lyrical French style with the dramatic, traditional rhythms that are characteristic of the Polish style in the one work.

In all the instances described above, single pieces display strong contrasts. The Polish and French influences that are apparent in Chopin's life are juxtaposed in this work creating a sense of duality in terms of dynamics, texture, pitch (harmony and tonality) and duration

Chopin's lyricism, for which he is so popular, may be influenced by a number of events and people within his life. These include, traditional Polish melodies for the flute and violin, the influence of Bellini's operas, John Field's nocturnes, Mozart's works which Chopin played in his studies with Josef Elsner as well as the music that was prevalent in the salons of Paris.



Chopin's preference for ternary form, particularly in his smaller works, allowed him to juxtapose two different styles of themes. This is demonstrated in 'Fantasie' impromptu, where the first section (marked Allegro agitato) contrasts greatly with the mellifluous section B (marked Moderato cantabile).

(100) After a dramatic lingering on the dominant (G#), the left hand continues with arpeggios in C# minor before the first theme begins at bar five. There are two sections to this theme. There are two sections to this theme. The first, displays highly decorated semi-quaver passages that ascend in dramatic waves of sound. This creates a feeling of tension and aggression. In the second part of the first theme the melody is concealed in the accompaniment, which is now played in both hands with each beat accented in order to highlight the melody.

Fig.7 (Audio seven)

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is labeled '11' and the second '13'. Both systems are in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first system features a highly decorated melody in the right hand with many accidentals and slurs, while the left hand plays a steady arpeggiated accompaniment. The second system shows the melody in the right hand becoming more rhythmic and accented, with the left hand continuing the arpeggiated accompaniment. A handwritten note in cursive, 'accents highlight the melody of the theme', with an arrow pointing to the first system, indicates that the accents in the second system are used to bring the melody back to the foreground.

(100) The second theme, in Db major begins at bar 24, with a short introduction of arpeggios in the tonic. This theme is highly ornamented with acciaccaturas, and trills and the simplicity of the melody together with the use of arpeggios in the left, allow the melody to be heard clearly and therefore increase the theme's lyrical style.

Fig. 8 (Audio eight)

The musical score for measures 41-44 is written for piano. The key signature is G-flat major (three flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The right hand (treble clef) contains the melody, which begins with a *ff* dynamic and a *piu lento* tempo marking. The melody is characterized by long, sweeping phrases with slurs. The left hand (bass clef) provides a complex accompaniment with rapid sixteenth-note patterns and chords. Performance markings include *dim.* (diminuendo) and *sostenuto* (sustained). The piece concludes with a *tr* (trill) in the right hand and a *con anima* (with spirit) marking. There are also some dynamic markings like *p* and *f* and some asterisks in the left hand.

The theme then modulates to Ab major before returning to Db major. Finally the torrid theme from section A is stated for the final time.

This contrast between simplicity and virtuosity is also exemplified within the Ballade in F minor. The work is comprised of many sections, all of which contrast dramatically with the previous one. At bar 58, Chopin has transformed the first theme in F minor, with the accompaniment being played in both hands. This excessively ornate variation of the theme is concluded with a short episode of dramatic diminished seventh chords and a descending sequence of semi quavers.

Fig. 9 (Audio nine)

*diminished 7ths*

*in tempo*  
*f*  
*dimin. ed accel.*  
*Ped.* \* *Ped.* \* *Ped.* \* *Ped.* \*

This passage contrasts dramatically with the second theme of the work in Bb major, which occurs immediately after this episode. This theme has similar qualities to a hymn with its unison block chords, and lyrical melody.

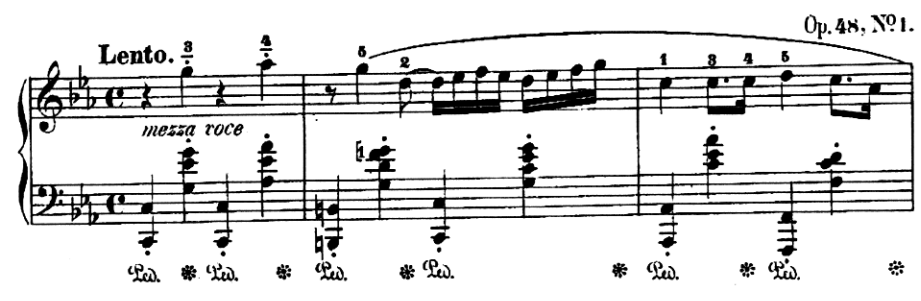
Fig. 10 (Audio ten)

*second theme*

*a tempo*  
*ritenuto*  
*dolce*  
*Ped.* \* *Ped.* \*

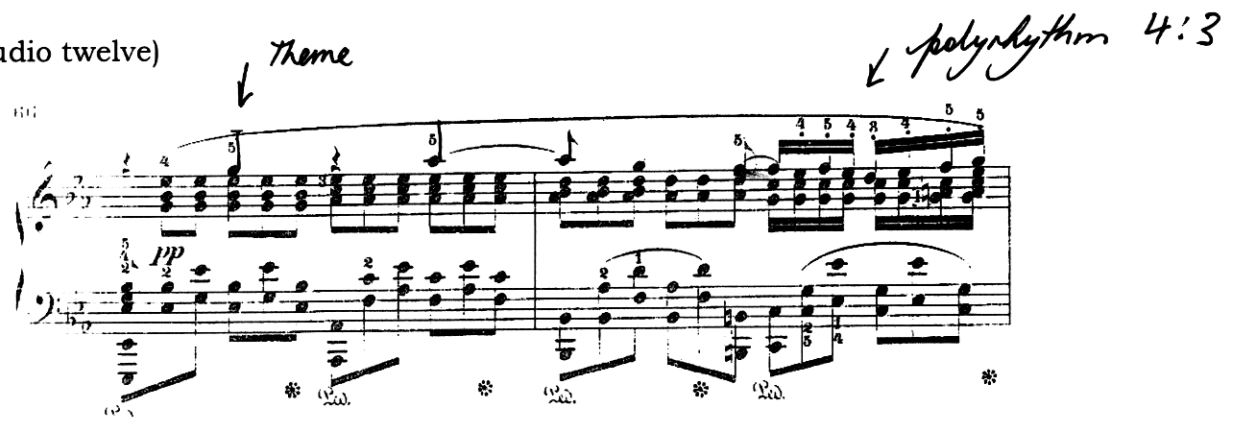
(100) In the same way that Chopin transformed the first theme of the Ballade, he also changes the main theme from the Nocturne in C minor. The first statement of the theme features a simple left hand accompaniment, consisting of the root note followed by the chord.

Fig. 11 (Audio eleven)



This differs to the final statement of the theme where Chopin has composed an accompaniment to the theme that complex in terms of texture as well as duration. Here Chopin has used both hands to take part in the accompaniment, where there are arpeggios in the left hand with block chords under the melody in the right. This statement is suddenly more complex in terms of duration: firstly, it is very fast (*doppio movimento agitato*); and secondly, with fast, extended passages featuring polyrhythm (4:3) between the hands.

Fig. 12 (Audio twelve)



The dramatic contrasts that have been explored here, not only reflect the cultural opposition of Polish and French influences, they may also be attributed to a public and private duality: the performer and composer. The music Chopin composed in the privacy of his home was a direct outcome of events that surrounded him<sup>4</sup>. These pieces are often far from the crowd-pleasing waltzes and improvised musical portraits, as many feature aggressive introductions and dramatic contrasts. In a letter he wrote to a friend, Chopin declared, *"In a salon I pretend to be cool headed, but when I return home I bang the keys of my piano."* It is this disposition that may have influenced compositions such as the *"Revolutionary" Etude* - *"Sometimes I can only groan and suffer, and pour out my despair at the piano!"* Here the fury that can be heard expresses solely his frame of mind rather than an incident, as many would believe.<sup>5</sup> The incident usually associated <sup>with</sup> ~~to~~ this piece, is the invasion of Poland by the Russians, which occurred during September in 1831. When Chopin learnt of the capture he was thrown into despair, and shortly after, he composed the Etude.

It has been suggested that Chopin was one of the greatest innovators in harmony during the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. Often within his works, Chopin creates tonal arguments and conflicts-contrasting and resolving them. The following excerpts exemplify some of the dramatic contrasts in term of tonality that occur in Chopin's music.

In compositions such as the Nocturne, Op 48 No.1, the changing tonal centres of the piece define the structure of the work as each section contains a different key. This nocturne is in C minor and the main theme is stated at the opening in the tonic. This section modulates to

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<sup>4</sup> Ekeirt, J *Heart of Genius* 1999, p.3

<sup>5</sup> Sadie, S *The New Grove- Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Macmillan Publishers, London. 1980 p. 294

<sup>6</sup> Sadie, S *The New Grove- Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Macmillan Publishers, London. 1980 p. 302

(06)

many keys, such as the statement of the main theme at bar five. Almost immediately it restates the same theme but, this time, in Eb Major, setting up a contrast and duality between the minor tonic and its relative major.

Fig. 13 (Audio thirteen)

*Tonic minor*

DWORKINIANA 17.  
1841

Lento  
mezza voce

*Relative major*

4 4 2 3 3 54

The section concludes in C minor with a short ascending bar of minor thirds. The key of the first section is contrasted dramatically with the opening of section B. Here the key changes to C major the tonic major key.

Fig. 14 (Audio fourteen)

The theme for this section has similar qualities to a hymn with its unison block chords. This theme undergoes a thematic transformation with pianist playing unison chromatic octaves in between the noble melody.

(100) After a virtuosic flourish of chromatic octaves, section A. returns at bar 49. Here Chopin has again transformed the theme, and composed in the key of C minor. In this nocturne, one can also hear the contrasts in moods, as each section has been developed to differ from the previous one. For example the first section of the nocturne features a very clear homophonic texture with the melody clearly stated in the right hand. The last section of the piece however, does not display the same clarity as the first as the melody accompaniment is played in both hands. This accompaniment features broken chords in the left hand, with thick block chords in the right.

Chopin's innovative use of chromatic harmony can be seen at bb. 71-74. at bar 71 chord V (which should go to chord I, C minor), instead has a Neapolitan bII (Db major chord), which

then goes to V before it then goes to C. however, there is also an applied dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord to the already chromatic bII. This Ab chord is quite surprising.

Fig. 15 (Audio fifteen)

The image shows a musical score for two systems, measures 71-73. The top system (measures 71-72) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a harmonic accompaniment. Annotations include 'ten.' above the treble staff, 'ff ritenuto' in the bass staff, and Roman numerals V and V<sup>b</sup> below the bass staff. The bottom system (measures 73) continues the piece, with 'dim. - rall.' written above the treble staff and Roman numerals V and I below the bass staff. A handwritten note in the right margin reads 'applied chords to Neapolitan 6/3' with an arrow pointing to a chord in measure 72.

The closing passages or codas in many of Chopin's works often comprise of dramatic contrasts in terms of tonality. This can be seen in the famous 'Revolutionary' Etude, Op 10 no.12. The work, is in C minor, and is full of aggression. The opening features loud block chords followed by a descending sequence of semi quavers.



Fig. 16 (Audio sixteen)

**Allegro con fuoco. ♩. 160** F. CHOPIN, Op. 10, No. 12.

In the coda the mood changes as Chopin composes in e C major (a contrast in itself), and suddenly the aggressive semi quavers are stated again to conclude the piece.

Fig. 17 (Audio seventeen)

*poco rallent*

*C major*

Chopin's interesting use of harmony is also exemplified in 'Fantasie' impromptu. The work, (as mentioned before), is in ternary form, with the first in C# minor and the second section in Db major. Again the tonic minor and major are contrasted. In the final section of the impromptu, Chopin resolves the two keys by modulating to C# major. In the coda, Chopin

combines the rapid semi-quavers in the right hand that characterize the first and final sections, with the lyrical Db major theme in the left and finally cadences in C# major.

Fig. 18 (Audio eighteen)

129  
*sotto voce*

131

133

135  
*rall.*

91

*Db major theme.*

The contrasts in tonality can also be seen in the Ballade in F minor, when Chopin contrasts an aggressive section that is entirely unison (in the key of F minor) with a short postlude in C major. Not only do these sections contrast in terms of pitch they also contrast dramatically in terms of texture.

Fig. 19 (Audio nineteen)

*Aggressive F minor section*

The image shows a handwritten musical score for piano, consisting of three systems of music. The first system is marked 'stretto' and 'f', featuring a dense, rhythmic texture in F minor. The second system begins with a 'ritard' (ritardando) and 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamic, then transitions to 'a tempo' and 'sostenuto' (sustained) dynamics in C major, labeled as a 'C major postlude'. The third system is labeled 'CODA' and features a more active, rhythmic texture in F minor, ending with a 'f' dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Immediately after this dramatically contrasting section, an aggressive coda begins in the tonic, also contrasting with the previous section of the work.

(100) In conclusion, after examining selections of Chopin's music and the contexts in which they were written, it becomes apparent that one of the strongest elements in his compositional style is one of contrast – opposing influences that create dramatic contrasts in terms of style, tonality, duration, and texture. These contrasts, as shown, are evident in a broad selection of his works. On the most basic level, this duality is manifested in a number of ways: the grafting of French elegance onto native Polish traditional forms, adding sophistication to one and power and intensity to the other. A strong nationalist feeling is evident in compositions such as the polonaise in Ab major, with the form being of Polish

(100) origin. Less obvious however, is the way in which Chopin incorporated these two contrasting styles, (the lyrical, delicate tunes which are characteristic of the French style, and the simplicity of the mazurka and the nobility of the polonaise) into the one work.

This duality extends further than simply Chopin's Polish and French background. The dramatic contrasts that are apparent in his works are also heard in the ever-changing tonal centres of his music. Indeed, Chopin was perhaps one of the greatest composers whose opus is informed by dramatic contrasts. Seen in the context of his life, it is clear that the opposing influences in his music reflect, to some extent, the opposing influences in his life.

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<http://basicmusic.net/musicians/c/chopin/>

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Mathé, C. (piano) *Chopin- The Masterpiece Collection piano.*

Redx Entertainment. 2000. Track: 4

*“The Chopin Experience- Chopin the Dramatist/ le dramatique”- Vladimir Ashkenazy, piano.*

Track: 3

1994, the Decca Record Company.

*“The Chopin Experience- Chopin the virtuoso/ le virtuose”*

*Vladimir Ashkenazy, piano*

Tracks: 1, 3, and 18

1994, the Decca Record Company



# **MUSIC EXTENSION – Musicology Elective**

## **Low Band 4**

Annotation – Sample 2

### **Title: Dramatic Contrasts and Opposing Forces in Chopin's Music**

A broad topic which maintains its focus and cohesion throughout. A detailed level of critical analysis demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the concepts of music. A number of musical observations presented although some ideas could have been explored and developed further and a number of small inaccuracies are evident. Score and audio examples are used well and there is evidence of extensive listening.