

A study of J.S. Bach's Partita in C Minor BWV 826; L. Van Beethoven's Sonata Op.78; F. Chopin's Scherzo Op.20; M. Ravel's Miroirs: II, IV, V; Historical, theoretical and stylistic implications

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Abstract

This report is a study of Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita in C minor, BWV 826; Ludwig van Beethoven's Sonata in F-sharp major, Op.78; Fryderyk Chopin's Scherzo in B Minor, Op.20; M. Ravel's "Miroirs": II. *Oiseaux tristes*, IV. *Alborada del gracioso*, V. *Vallee de cloches*; These compositions are part of the author's Master's Piano Recital given on April 12, 2017. The study mainly discusses from historical, theoretical and stylistic perspectives.

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Chapter 1 - Bach's Partita in C minor BWV 826

In the Baroque period, the partita was a multi-movement instrumental work. It contained several relatively short movements. The majority of them were dances. A partita was similar to a suite, which usually followed a certain typical layout. A suite usually began with an allemande, followed by a courante, then a sarabande and a gigue. Movements such as a menuet, or a bourree were sometimes included. Generally, a partita had a less strict layout than most suites. Johann Sebastian Bach composed six partitas (BWV 825-830) for keyboard. Among them he used five different types of opening: prelude, sinfonia, fantasia, overture and toccata. Bach's partitas were published separately from 1726 to 1730 as "Clavier-Übung," which means "Keyboard Practice" in English.

Bach composed his 2nd partita in 1726. The work belongs to Bach's late compositional period. The Second Partita is often believed to be in a numerical sequence with other partitas. Starting from the first Partita in B-flat major, the keys of his six partitas (B-flat major, C minor, A minor, D major, G major, E minor) form a sequence of intervals, which create a row of numbers from 2 to 6. As seen in the table below, the distance from B-flat to C is a major second up. From C to A is a third down. From A to D is a fourth up. From D to G is a fifth down and from G to E is a sixth up.

Partita No.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Keys	B-flat	C	A	D	G	E
Interval changes		2	3	4	5	6

Table 1 Bach Partitas.

Especially, Partita No. 2 begins with a *sinfonia*. “Sinfonia” is the Italian word for symphony, from the Latin word *symphonia*. Here, Bach simply wanted to experiment with the idea of orchestration, in an attempt to try it out on a keyboard instrument. However, the term “sinfonia” <Don’t capitalize.> is often a source of a debate about the nature of Bach’s intentions. Many researchers consider the opening movement a French overture, mainly because of the dotted rhythm in the opening *Grave adagio*, which is followed by a lively fugal section, a structure clearly resembling the French Overture form. Other researchers suggest that Bach wanted to begin with a more flexible form - the beautiful *Andante* section in this partita doesn’t really fit into the French Overture. The *sinfonia* is divided into three sections. The first one is marked *Grave adagio* and the second is *Andante*. In the final fugal section, the time signature changes from $4/4$ to $3/4$. *Adagio*, in Italian, it means “leisurely” or “at your ease”. The term *Andante* means “at a walking speed.” These markings not only indicate the tempos, but also give performers a clue about different characters of each section. The *adagio* section begins with dramatic chords and clearly sounds like a French overture. Likely, a harpsichordist would possibly change registration at the dividing points of the *sinfonia*. However, pianists can make a similar effect simply by using different levels of dynamics. The *Grave Adagio* section should be played *forte* while the *Andante* section *mezzo piano* at a slightly faster tempo. The beginning of the fugal section will sound light and energetic if played *piano*.

Bach named his partitas “keyboard practice.” Historically, this seems to be an experiment Bach tried out on a keyboard instrument. Later, the idea of orchestration in piano texture was of great importance to Beethoven. This was nearly half a century after Bach’s time. However, it is feasible that already in his partitas Bach was thinking along similar lines. It can be clearly imagined that in the *Andante*, the right hand imitates a violin and the left hand represents a cello.

In order to determine the proper articulation, the key for a pianist is to play as if he was playing various instruments in an orchestra. In his 1989 book, Fernando Valenti discusses the kind of articulation which is suitable for the left hand in the *Andante* section in the *Sinfonia*:

The staccato misconception persists in a great deal of Bach piano playing. Such detachments on seeing a clearly designed continuo part in the left hand are mindless and should be ruthlessly discouraged, almost without exception. They betray a complete lack of understanding of what might be called the continuo mentality. No cellist, real or imaginary, can be asked to play spiccato throughout an entire movement- he is not paid that much! A constant staccato precludes both the necessity and the possibility of phrasing- an almost inevitable result of detachment that isolates every note from every other. Some players harbor the notion that these quaint effects provide a touch of antiquity. This nonsense also deserves to be stamped out. ¹

As a result, some performers insist that the crispy sound of a harpsichord should be imitated. On the assumption that Bach wanted to make his keyboard sound like an orchestra, the modern piano has more potential to do so by not playing staccato. Last but not least, the score just looks like what a cellist would play in an orchestra. However, when it comes to the fugue, all eighth notes are usually played staccato, while 16th notes are more legato, because it helps in creating a lively character. There are other details that need to be mentioned because of their importance for the interpretation. In the opening *Adagio* section, many pianists play the chords in arpeggiated fashion, in order to imitate the harpsichord. While doing this, they should be careful not to let the top melodic notes get overshadowed by the lower notes. Throughout the *Adagio* part, the performer should make sure that the rests are perfectly counted. The rests should be as important as the notes themselves. In baroque compositions, the strict pulse, with the exception of improvisational sections, is an essential element of the style. The final measures of the

¹ Fernando Valenti, *A Performer's Guide to the Keyboard Partitas of J.S. Bach*, Yale University Press. p.30

Andante can be regarded as a short coda because of the pedal point D in the bass. The coda seems improvisational in character and should be played more freely. Many pianists play *ritardando* in the last measure to prepare the fast fugue.



Figure 1-1 J. S. Bach, Partita in C minor BWV826, meas.29

Allemande

The second movement of Partita No. 2 is an allemande. The French word “allemande” means “German” and it is a slow German dance in 4/4. This one is in a typical binary form and has a heavy polyphonic texture. Unlike the dramatic and serious first movement, the Allemande brings out the sad characteristic of the key of c minor. According to the dance historian Louis Horst, “the beauty of the Allemande lay in its rather slow and flowing grace, especially of the arms, and in its outstanding peculiarity that requires the partners’ hands remaining joined throughout all the ‘turns and evolutions of the dance’”². The music of this particular allemande is melancholy, lyrical and tender. In this allemande, the sense of sentiment and gentleness is

² Louis Horst, *Pre-Classical Dance Forms*, The Dance Observer, New York. 1937. pp. 28

created by a sequential texture and the imitational counterpoint. The imitated voice enters on an interval of octave in the first full measure. It also creates a series of intervals of 6th between two voices.



Similar passage happens in the beginning of the B section.



Figure 1-2 J.S. Bach, Partita in C minor BWV 826, Allemande, mm1-2, mm.17-18

Courante

Following the usual order of dances in a suite, the courante follows the allemande. A courante is a lively baroque dance in triple meter. The initial form of the *courante* was called *corrente*. The root of the name come from the Latin word *currere*, which means “to run.” Indeed, the dance contains many running passages. In this partita, the time signature is 3/2, in order to convey the idea of a fast tempo. It is in a binary form. The main motive consists of four 16th notes preceding four jumping 8th notes in order to enhance the sense of flowing and running.



Figure 1-3 J. S. Bach, Partita in C minor BWV826, Courante, mm 1-2

Sarabande and Rondeaux

A sarabande follows the courante. A sarabande is a slow dance in triple meter. It originated in Spain and was introduced at the French court by the end of the 16th century. Gradually, it was adopted as the third movement of the Baroque Suite, naturally after the fast courante. The Sarabande in Bach's No.2 partita has a beautiful top voice and many sequential passages. It has a typical layout of a sarabande, which has an A-section with eight bars and a B-section with sixteen measures. The A section conveys a feeling of sadness in the key of C minor. The B section begins in a brighter key of B-flat major and ventures into complex chromaticism.

As for the choice of articulation, the idea in the andante part of the sinfonia can be followed, in which the right hand basically plays the role of a violin and left hand imitates a cello.

After the Sarabande there is a movement called “Rondeaux.” It has its origin in French poetry and was taken up by musicians. However, it is debatable whether *rondeau* is related to the musical form called “rondo,” which is much more common in the later classical period. It can be speculated that the two forms are somehow related. As we know, some possible patterns of the rondo form in classical period include “A-B-A-C-A” or “A-B-A-C-A-B-A.” In this rondeau, the form can be summarized as “A-B-A-C-A-D.” In the rondeau, between the A section and the B section there is no tonal shift. Usually in a classical rondo form, there is a clear tonal change from A section to B section. In the baroque period, the word “rondeau” properly refers only to the repeated statement. In the musical areas, it is also called couplets. There is an important point to be mentioned. The ornament on the third right-hand eighth note has always been controversial.



Figure 1-4 J. S. Bach, Partita in C minor BWV 826, Rondeaux, mm. 1

As it is labelled, it appears that it is simply a trill with a prefix from below. However, if it is played from the lower note from D, the prefix of the ornament, which is the C, has been heard before. If played from D itself, the trill will go to E flat, which is the quarter note in the next

measure. Both ways of performing it make a real challenge for this passage to sound clearly. Also, the ornaments make the counting more difficult. Throughout years there have been many solutions made in order to adjust this ornament mark. Many well-known pianists have opted for the simplest way out of the problem: they skip this ornament.

Capriccio

The partita ends with a Capriccio. A capriccio is usually fast, intense and virtuosic in a fairly free form. In this partita the Capriccio is like a concerto for two violins. In a typical suite set, a Gigue is normally the next movement following the rondeau. In this case, Bach used a capriccio as the last movement of this partita. It is the only case when the gigue is omitted in Bach's major suite collections (all the French and English Suites), as well as his partitas. The effect is described by Valenti:

“Moreover, your distress at the omission of a final gigue here should be mitigated by the degree to which the Capriccio succeeds as a substitute. For example, the Capriccio benefits from fugal treatment of dazzling ingenuity a cherished ingredient in some of Bach's best giges. It also conducts itself formally very much as a fugal gigue would, establishing the tonality of the dominant at mid part and driving homeward to the tonic during the second half.”³

The somewhat fugal sounding subject of the Capriccio is shown below. In the beginning of the piece, the subject is in the tonic, C minor.

³ Fernando Valenti, *A Performer's Guide to the Keyboard Partitas of J.S. Bach*, Yale University Press. P.43

The A section ends in G-major, which is the same key as the next subject. However, in the B section the subject is inverted.



Figure 1-7 J. S. Bach Partita in C minor BWV826, Capriccio, inverted subject, mm. 49-51

In measure 52, the inverted subject moves to the key of C major. The key of the inverted subject moves again, this time to the key of G major in measure 60. The next place where the inverted subject appears will be in measure 77. It is still in the key of G major. In measure 79, the inverted subject is presented in the original key of C minor. The subject's final entry is in measure 87, ten measures before the end of the piece. The Capriccio (and the entire Partita) has a strong, virtuosic, and almost triumphant ending.

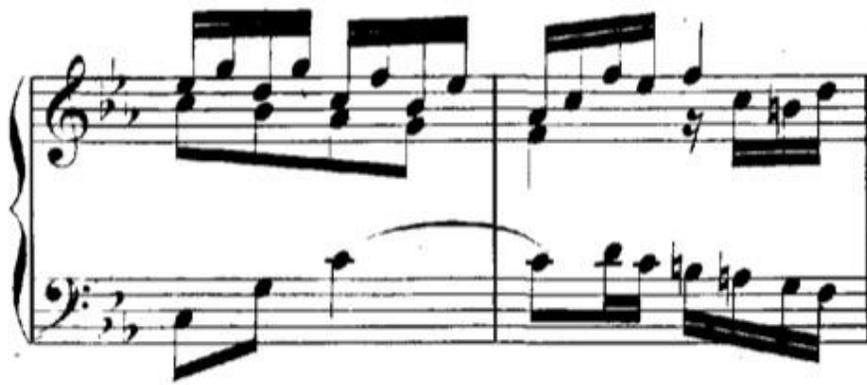


Figure 1-8 J. S. Bach Partita in C minor BWV826, Capriccio, final entry, mm.87

Chapter 2 - Ludwig van Beethoven's Sonata Op.78

Beethoven composed his “Sonata Op.78 in F-sharp major” in 1809, four years after the “Appassionata” sonata, one of his most well-known sonatas. During that time, Beethoven suffered more and more from his deafness. The year before, he finished his fifth symphony. The “Sonata Op. 78” is very different from the “Appassionata.” It masterfully shows the rare sides of Beethoven, such as lyricism and tenderness. The piece was given a nickname “A Thérèse” because it was dedicated to Countess Therese von Brunsvik, who was speculatively known as Beethoven’s “Immortal Beloved.”

In an unusual key of F sharp minor, the sonata has a rather atypical beginning. Marked *Adagio cantabile*, the piece begins with a beautiful theme, which is just four measures long. Not until the *Allegro ma non troppo*, where the real exposition of this sonata starts, one realizes that the previous sections served as an introduction. Even though the theme of the introduction will not appear again throughout the rest of this movement, it is related to the main theme and some transitional motives. With a pedal point of f-sharp, the slow introduction is like a declaration of love. The particular pitches of this theme, F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, followed by A-sharp, B, C-sharp, represent important elements that can be later heard throughout this movement.



Figure 2-1 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, Adagio cantabile, mm. 1-4

For example, the main theme started with a dotted A-sharp, B, and C-sharp. Moreover, at measure 12, those three notes in the top voice of the transitional theme are the same ones in the introduction Adagio cantabile.



Figure 2-2 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, start of the main theme, mm.5



Figure 2-3 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, transitional theme, mm. 12

Following the transitional theme, the connecting episode consists of mostly 16th notes. They smoothly move the key to the c-sharp major, which is the key of the 2nd theme.



Figure 2-4 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, second theme, mm. 28-30

As lyrical as the main theme, the 2nd theme is written in triplets in a contrapuntal manner.

Triplets do not appear here for the first time. They were used in the transitional material before:



Figure 2-5 L. van Beethoven sonata Op.78, mm.10-11

Unlike many other of Beethoven's large scale piano works, this sonata is not dramatic. The development section is very short; it lasts for only 17 measures. It seems that Beethoven wanted his beautiful theme back as soon as possible. What's more unusual is that the development, altogether, sounds like a transitional section. The material of the development

section consists of the same rhythmic pattern used at the beginning of the main from the main theme.



Figure 2-6 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, development, part of mm.48-50

The recapitulation section arrived very soon. Everything in the recapitulation is similar to the exposition, except that the 2nd theme is presented in the home key. How does Beethoven shift keys around gently? He manages to do so by adding two sequential passages from measure 65 to measure 66. The comparison of similar sections in the exposition and the recapitulation can be seen below:



Figure 2-7 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, mm.8-10



Figure 2-8 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, mm.63-66

This sequential passage brings the piece to the key of E major. The following section continues ambiguously between the keys of E and F-sharp major and minor until a F-sharp dominant chord brings out a B major chord.



Figure 2-9 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, recapitulation, mm. 70-77

The remaining sections of the recapitulation do not introduce any ideas not previously heard in the exposition. The coda is short.

While this sonata possibly belongs to one of Beethoven's most melodious pieces, the composer yet again showed his great power of creating musical unities in terms of motives, rhythm and harmony.

The second movement of this sonata has a completely different mood. It is fast, humorous and lively. It begins with an Italian augmented sixth chord.



Figure 2-10 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, mvt.2, opening motive

The form of this movement is not so straightforward. The analytic chart is showed below:

Themes	Keys	Measure number
A	Home key	1-11
B	Home key	12-21
A	Home key	32-42
B	Home key	43-50
C	D-sharp (major & minor)	57-74
A'	B major	89-99
B'	B major	100-110
C'	F-sharp (major & minor)	116-133
A	Home key	150-159
Coda	Home key	160-end

Table 2 Beethoven's Sonata Op.78, mvt.2 Formal display.

The movement can be regarded as a combination of sonata form and rondo form. There are several transitional sections between themes. They are formed by short 16th notes in groups of two, just like B themes. And the motive, which is simply formed by two chromatic notes, is from the top voice within the opening theme. This is another example showing how skillfully Beethoven combines motives and themes.



Figure 2-11 L. van Beethoven Sonata Op.78, mvt.2, transitional subject. Mm.22-23

Chapter 3 - Ravel Miroirs, Mvt.2, 4 and 5

Ravel: Personality and musicianship

The French composer, pianist and conductor Maurice Ravel was born on March 7, 1875. In the 1920s, Ravel became one of the most celebrated composers in Europe, as well as one of the most favored composers by the public. He enjoyed explaining his music or artistic thoughts to the public. He told a journalist in 1927, before his tour to America: “In my childhood I had a great interest in mechanical things. Machines fascinated me. As a small boy I often visited factories with my brother, very often. It was these machines, their clanking and roaring, and the Spanish folk songs sung by my mother in the evenings to rock me to sleep, which formed my first musical education.” Ravel did so, in order to satisfy American public’s eager for anecdote, which helped people understand his music better.⁴ Ravel preferred his music to be played exactly the way he notated it. Paul Roberts recounts:

“He famously refused to acknowledge Toscanini’s public salute after a performance of *Bolero* that had incensed him because the maestro had taken the piece too fast; and he was annoyed with Ricardo Vines when he refused to take ‘Le gibet’ at the slow tempo indicated because, Vines told him, ‘it would bore the public’.” Ravel shared his thoughts about the performance of his music that he wanted: “I don’t ask for my music to be interpreted, only to be played.”⁵

Ravel was a devotee of Claude Debussy’s. Around 1900, the young Maurice Ravel joined a group of innovative young artists, poets, critics, and musicians referred to as *Les Apaches* or

⁴ Paul Roberts, *Reflections The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, 2012, p.11

⁵ Paul Roberts, 2012, p.14

"hooligans," a term made up by Ricardo Vines to refer to his band of "artistic outcasts." All of the members of that group were devoted fans of Debussy. Debussy, himself thirteen years older than Ravel, was the leading composer of the avant-garde. The Apaches, according to Leon-Paul Fargue, one of the group's founders, did not miss a single performance of Debussy's opera during its first run of twenty-nine performances.⁶ Later, Ravel was often associated with the term Impressionism, along with Debussy.

Miroirs

The "Miroirs" is a collection of five pieces for piano. It was first performed in 1906 by Ricardo Vines, one of Ravel's closest friends. The first piece, *Noctuelles*, which means "Night Moths," is a highly chromatic work. The second one, *Oiseaux tristes*, means "Sorrowful Birds." Third, *Une barque sur l'océan*, means "A Boat on the Ocean." The fourth one, *Alborada del gracioso*, means "Morning Song of the Jester." The last one, *La vallée des cloches*, means "The Valley of Bells." The third piece and fourth pieces were later orchestrated by Ravel himself. Each of the pieces in the Miroirs was dedicated to a fellow member of the "Les Apaches." The first of the pieces, *Noctuelles*, was dedicated to the French poet Leon-Paul Fargue. *Oiseaux tristes* was dedicated to Ricardo Viñes, a close friend of Ravel's, a Spanish pianist and a leading interpreter of Ravel's, Debussy's and other leading French composers' music of that time. *Une barque sur l'Océan* was dedicated to Paul Sordes, a French painter. *Alborada del gracioso* was dedicated to Michel D. Calvocoressi, a music critic who was an admirer of Ravel's music, and *La Vallée des Cloches* was dedicated to the composer Maurice Delage. It seems that Miroirs

⁶ Paul Roberts, *Reflections The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, 2012, p.37

represents a stage in Ravel's development of artistic maturity. It is deeply grounded in Ravel's own understanding of the piano:

“Miroirs, begun in the autumn of 1904, represents this deliberate departure, an ambitious set of five pieces that he intended would offer a far wider range of pianistic possibilities and a canvas on which he could explore a new harmonic idiom. He always drew musical inspiration from the piano, whether composing at it or writing directly for it. Manuel Rosenthal, a pupil and close friend of Ravel's after the First World War, noted: Like Debussy, to whom he often referred, he claimed that ‘the piano is the composer's harmonic treatise. It's there one finds everything.’⁷

‘Oiseaux tristes’

At the end of his life Ravel spoke of the derivation of ‘Oiseaux tristes’ specifically in terms of ‘birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer.’⁸ It is often suggested that the direct inspiration came from the famous forest of Fontainebleau, located southeast of Paris, where Ravel used to spend weekends.

This piece is distinguished by its improvisational nature. It is rather self-explanatory that if the pianist is planning to imitate birds, that the rhythmic aspect of the piece should not be interpreted in a way that is too measured and steady. Regarding the opening of the piece, Ravel wrote some

⁷ Paul Roberts, *Reflections The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, 2012, p.40

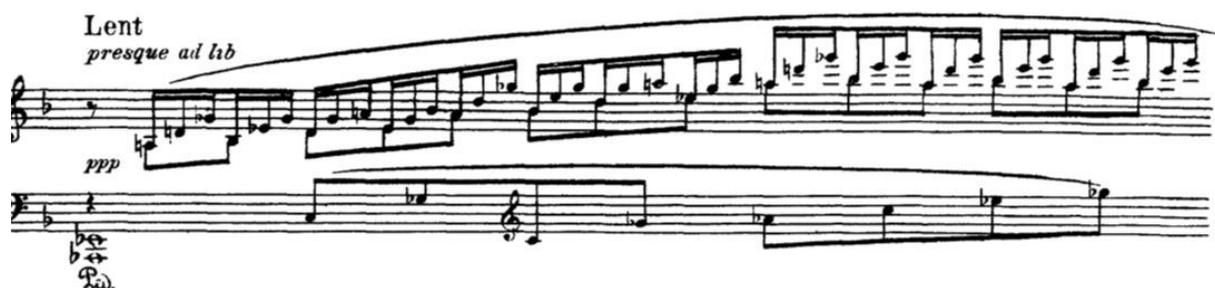
⁸ Paul Roberts, 2012, p.56

notes in the pianist's Vlado Perlemuter's score where he said that "the arabesques must not be played strictly in time, but quicker. If you play strictly what's written, it loses character."⁹



Figure 3-1 Ravel's Mirrors, Sorrowful birds, "Bird song", mm.1-3

In the cadenza, Ravel used half-size notation as a sign for decoration and improvisation, as shown below.



⁹ Paul Roberts, *Reflections The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, 2012, p.153



Figure 3-2 Ravel’s Mirrors, Sorrowful Birds, coda, mm. 30 & mm. 32

Alborada del Gracioso

This work is inspired by Spanish music. The imitation of a guitar can be heard in its first measures. It is important to execute the accents well in order to establish the somewhat dancing rhythmic pattern.



Figure 3-3 Ravel’s Mirrors, Alborada del Gracioso, opening, mm1-2

From measure 6 to measure 8, there is a melodic line formed by the G and D in the right hand and all the notes in bass. It is important to bring out this little scale.



Figure 3-4 Ravel's *Mirrors*, *Alborada del Gracioso*, mm. 5-8

In measure 14, the interval of the fifth G-D in the left hand could be a mistake Ravel made. It's impossible to hold those two notes while playing other notes. The sostenuto pedal would make the staccato notes longer than desired. A proper solution could be playing the G-D as an accent. Loud notes simply last longer. Moreover, the staccato B in the right hand could be accommodated as a longer note with the bass.

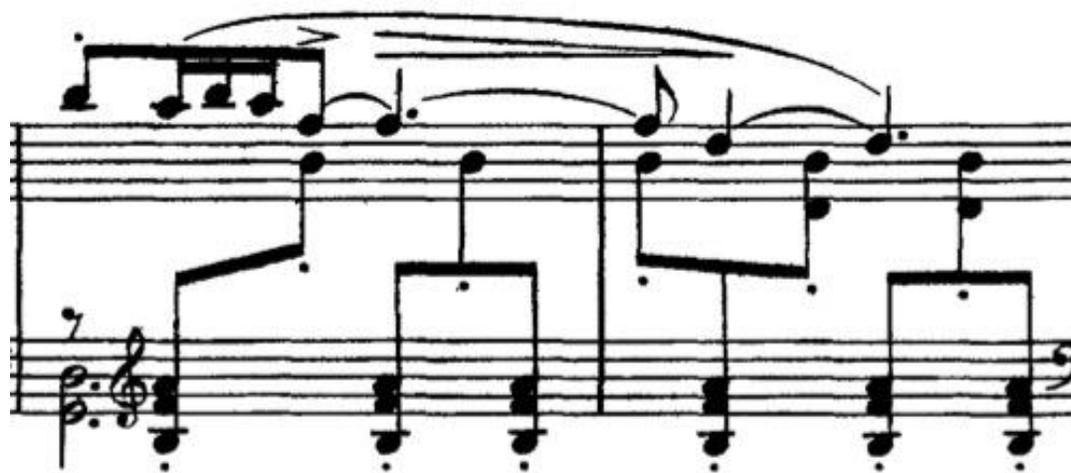


Figure 3-5 Ravel's *Mirrors*, *Alborada del Gracioso*, mm. 14

About the famous repeated-note passages in this piece, Ravel told Faure:

“In those places, it’s not necessary to get obsessed by the precision and clarity of the repeated notes. That would only result in a slackening of tempo. I use the figuration in my pieces as a sort of pretext: it stands for a kind of vibration, but articulated within the initial tempo, and in ‘Alborada’ it must not be allowed to compromise the rhythm of the leaping left-hand chords.”¹⁰

As Ravel himself noticed, it is almost impossible to play all of those repeated notes clearly and in strict tempo. For many performers, what they do in this section is push down half weight of the key and rotate fingers as fast as they can. Meanwhile, they let the left hand bring out the rhythm.



Figure 3-6 Ravel’s Mirrors, Alborada del Gracioso, repeated notes, mm. 48-49

¹⁰ Paul Roberts, *Reflections The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, Amadeus Press. 2012, p. 156

The middle section of the piece opens with a lyrical and improvised song, also known as the *Cante jondo*, or ‘deep song.’ The *Cante jondo* originated in the Spanish Gypsy Andalusian and later flamenco vocal tradition. Ravel marks it on the score: *expressif en recit* - expressive and eloquent as a recitative. This allows for a lot of interpretative freedom.



Figure 3-7 Ravel’s Mirrors, Alborada del Gracioso, “Deep Song”, mm. 72-75

La Vallée des cloches

As stated in the title, this piece is all about sounds of bells through the valley. The challenge of this piece is to show multiple levels of dynamics and different registers, for

example, every bell should have its own color. The mood of the whole piece remains calm, smooth and gentle.

In the opening section, the 16th notes in the right hand should be regarded as a blank canvas. They play a role in establishing a sense of metric continuity, but there should not be too clear of an awareness of any meter. Ravel marked this section *très doux et sans accentuation* (very tender/soft and without any accents) and he grouped the notes randomly in order to convey the idea.



Figure 3-8 Ravel's Mirrors, La Vallée des cloches, Opening, mm. 3

In the middle section, Ravel introduces a beautiful chant, a sort of a Ravelian “unending melody.” <Punctuation inside quotes.> The melody, in the middle register, is written in parallel octave motion. The musical effect is magical and mysterious.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The music features a melodic line in the upper voice and a rhythmic accompaniment in the lower voices. Performance markings include *m.g.* (mezzo-giochi), *m.d.* (mezzo-dolce), *p* (piano), and *p express.* (piano, expressive). The score is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines.

Figure 3-9 Ravel's Mirrors, La Vallée des cloches, Middle section theme, mm.21-23

Chapter 4 - Chopin Scherzo op.20

Chopin was born on March 1, 1810, in a small village named Zelazowa Wola near Warsaw. Growing up in a middle-class family, Chopin was introduced to music education and piano playing at an early age. By the age of six, he was able to play the piano skillfully and to compose. His father published Chopin's first composition when Chopin was seven years old. Later in Chopin's childhood, the family moved to Warsaw and the parents enrolled young Chopin in the Warsaw Conservatory of Music, where he studied for three years under the famous Polish composer Josef Elsner.

During his teenage years, the young and ambitious Chopin undertook a visit to Vienna to study and to show his special talent. He made his performance debut in 1829, which received high recognition by the Viennese audience. Meanwhile, the political situation in the Russian-controlled Poland was tense. As a result, the concert on October 11, 1830, that Chopin gave in Warsaw became the last concert he played in his country. One week after his second arrival in Vienna, the insurrection against Russia began in Warsaw. During that time, separated from his family, Chopin remained in Vienna. The first Scherzo, later published as op.20, was begun in Vienna in 1830 in these highly dramatic circumstances.

Not only as a composer, but also as a pianist himself, Chopin occupies a unique place in music history. In this period of time, the history of music came to a point when more and more composers desired publicity through composing works in larger scales and in many different styles. In the piano world, Franz Liszt was a superstar who invented the piano solo recital and started to play without looking at a score. Many composers started to expand their compositional ideas by using larger orchestration in their symphonies. Chopin was different. He mainly focused on relatively smaller compositions for the piano. He enjoyed playing at aristocratic salons for

smaller audiences rather than public recitals for large audiences. In his book *The Chopin Companion*, Arthur Hedley wrote:

“During his lifetime Chopin came before the world as a somewhat enigmatic figure, an artist known to and heard by comparatively few people, and those few not well fitted to transmit a faithful record of his personality, so that sentimental anecdote and inaccurate generalizations took the place of fact. The ‘romantic’ circumstances of his short life conspired to falsify the picture. As a French-Pole, exile from a martyred country whose cause awoke a sympathetic response throughout western Europe, he could not fail to be an object of interest.”¹¹

The basic form of a scherzo is derived from a minuet and trio, in which the trio used to be a second minuet introduced in a contrasting way before the first one is repeated. The more expanded the piece is the more contrast between sections is needed. Chopin’s first Scherzo Op. 20 in B minor is a perfect example how Chopin developed the traditional understanding of a scherzo. The work can be seen as a ternary form with a coda, in which the B section is very different from the outer sections. Some historical background is mentioned in *Chopin Companion* by Alan Rawsthorne:

“He was on his second visit to the Austrian Capital, and the visit was not proving very successful- a disappointment, in fact, after his decided if moderate triumphs of the previous year. Though he was received socially with some enthusiasm and seems to have wandered about in the grand salons of the day he was professionally at a standstill, and no one seemed anxious to help. Then came the Polish rising in November 1830 against the Russians, and Chopin was naturally tormented by the fears for his family, his Constantia, and his compatriots in general. . . . It has been claimed that this Scherzo is a reflection of his mental state during this period.”¹²

¹¹ Arthur Hedley, “Chopin: The Man”, *The Chopin Companion*, The Norton Library, pp.2

¹² Alan Rawsthorne, “Ballades, Fantasy and Scherzos”, *The Chopin Companion*, The Norton Library, p.62

The Scherzo in B minor op.20 opens with two large chords. The tempo is labeled *Presto con fuoco*. And Chopin also indicated that it is counted by one dotted half note per beat, suggesting the extremely fast tempo.



Figure 4-1 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, opening chords, mm. 1-8

It begins with a diminished seventh chord, followed by a dominant seventh chord. The most prominent sound in these two chords would be B and F-sharp. They appear again after the fast section. They seem to be the more important notes and they are indeed marked with accents. Actually, B and F-sharp are essentially important in terms of establishing the tonality even though melodies are hard to be captured within this piece, which is full with fast passages and loud chords.



Figure 4-2 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, mm.46-49

The opening section consists mainly of broken chords with accents and fast passages in the right hand part, which end with accented B, D, G and E. These notes underline the harmonic progression, while other notes function as passing notes. The right hand is re-arranged by Chopin, as seen below:



Figure 4-3 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, mm.12-16

Similar compositional technique was often used in Classical period. Chopin placed the pitches in different order and as a result created two voices. The first voice consists of E-D-G-F-C-B-E-D-B, while the second one of C-sharp-B-C-D-E-sharp-F-A-sharp-B. In a such fast tempo, this is intended to sounds like turbulent disorder, which matches Chopin's mental state when he composed the piece. This is followed by two long 8-bar phrases which consist of two 4-bar sub-phrases in a contrasting style. The change in articulation from staccato to legato in the left-hand part makes for a powerful contrasting effect.



Figure 4-4 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, mm. 25-28

Above is the first 4-bar sub-phrase and below is the second 4-bar sub-phrase.



Figure 4-5 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, mm. 29-33

Except the comparison of the staccatos and legatos in the left hand, the changing of dynamics and registers also distinguishes the phrases and makes them sound like a question and answer.

The next long 8-bar phrase is extended as a preparation for three big chords to end the section. The remaining part of the *Presto con fuoco* section is a calming down. However, the opening material occurs again, as a reminder to us of what the piece is all about overall.

The *Agitato* part begins with a “*sotto voce*” sound, like a whisper, and shows some developmental ideas. There is not much melodic material here, except for the accented D, E and F, as shown below:



Figure 4-6 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, Agitato, mm.72-73

However, they are just on the first beat in three different measures. A virtuoso section follows, in which Chopin displayed his innovative skills of creating exquisite piano colors.

Musical score for Chopin's Scherzo Op. 20, mm. 84-121. The score is arranged in two systems of two staves each. The first system (mm. 84-93) features a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes markings for *poco* and *cresc.*. The second system (mm. 94-121) shows a dynamic increase to fortissimo (*ff*) and includes markings for *sempre più animato* and *più cresc.*. The score contains various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and fingerings.

Figure 4-7 Chopin Scherzo Op.20 mm. 84-121

The middle section is based on a theme which is an old Polish Christmas carol “Lulajze Jezuniu” (“Sleep, Sweet Baby Jesus”).



Figure 4-8 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, middle section, the melody

Chopin arranged this peaceful traditional Christmas song in the key of B major. The melody is in the alto voice and Chopin used a repeated F-sharp pedal point above it, which resembles a bell or echo in a church. With typical 8-bar phrases and 4-bar sub-phrases for the whole section, the middle section is written in a rounded binary form (A-B-A-B-A), even though the B-theme doesn't stay on the dominant of the A-theme. The A-theme and B-theme repeat and afterward the A-theme returns for the last time. The A theme proceeds downwards step by step. The diminished seventh chord from the very beginning of the piece appears suddenly as a disruption of the ongoing, but almost dead singing voice. After the second chord occurs, the beautiful carol comes to an end with a pianissimo and a *smorzando*.



Figure 4-9 Chopin Scherzo Op.20, ending of middle section.

The two fortissimo chords, previously heard at the very beginning of the piece, signal the return of the A section. This section is almost exactly the same as before. The A section represents the difficult period of time for Chopin in Vienna in November 1830, while the beautiful B section, the Christmas Carol, corresponds to the memory of his youth in Poland. However, the middle section is comparatively short but beautiful. The fact that it is suddenly interrupted by the fierce chords might indicate his state of mind at the time. The piece ends with a virtuoso coda which utilizes material in the right hand from the A section.

molto e sempre più animato

f *sempre cresc.*

con brio *cresc.* *ff*

Figure 4-10 Chopin Scherzo Op.20. coda

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