

Analyzing the Artistic Style and Performance Technique of Chopin's Narrative in G Minor

Kun Wang, Yiwen Song *

College of Music, Qingdao University, Qingdao, Shandong, 266071, China

* Corresponding author: Yiwen Song (Email: songyiwen08@163.com)

Abstract: This paper analyzes the artistic style and performance techniques in Chopin's "Narrative No. 1 in G Minor." It explores how Chopin's compositional methods reflect his unique stylistic elements and the influence of his cultural and historical context. By examining the structural and thematic development of the piece, the paper highlights the intricate balance between technical skill and emotional expression necessary for an authentic performance. This analysis also delves into Chopin's use of melodic lines, chordal extensions, rhythmic patterns, and dynamic variations, providing insights into the complexities of performing his work. Through a combination of theoretical research and practical performance perspectives, this study aims to enhance the understanding and interpretation of Chopin's music, offering valuable guidance for musicians and scholars alike.

Keywords: Chopin; Artistic Style; Performance Techniques.

1. Introduction

The piano, originating in Europe, has evolved significantly over three centuries to become the modern instrument we recognize today. Each composer brings unique stylistic elements and distinctive imagery to their piano compositions, resulting in varied interpretations by different performers, each infusing their own emotions into the music. In examining Chopin's works, such as "Narrative No. 1 in G Minor," we can analyze his compositional style and the technical skills demonstrated in each section. By dissecting the development and structure of the piece, we can extract characteristic fragments to study the consistency of Chopin's compositional and performance methods, thereby enhancing our understanding of his works.

To fully grasp the emotion and meaning conveyed in a composition, it is essential to delve beyond its musical form. Performers must understand the background of the work, the composer's biography, and the cultural context in which it was created. This comprehensive approach allows for a more accurate interpretation of the piece. Through an in-depth analysis of Chopin's "Narrative No. 1 in G Minor," we can gain insights into the work's creation, the social context of the time, and Chopin's creative thought process, leading to a more profound performance.

Research on Chopin is extensive, encompassing epistles, manuscript scores, biographical works, and thematic studies published by various scholars. Tuchowski examines Chopin's thematic metamorphoses and associations, including his Narrative in G minor, reflecting narrative-literary connections and transformations. The study highlights how lyrical themes are transformed into heroic or ecstatic forms, which is essential for understanding the structural and expressive qualities of Chopin's works [1]. Barnhar discusses the technical challenges in Chopin's preludes, emphasizing voicing, passagework, and various pianistic techniques, which are essential for mastering Chopin's works. This can provide insights into the technical aspects of performing Chopin's works [2]. Klein explores the narrative voice in Chopin's Narrative in G minor, considering the musical narrative's instability and expressive potential. This analysis

is essential for understanding the narrative elements in Chopin's work [3]. Bin (2009) provides a detailed analysis of Chopin's Narrative No.1 in G minor, discussing its composition, performance characteristics, and historical significance [4].

Chopin composed "Narrative No. 1 in G Minor" between 1831 and 1835, inspired by Polish patriotic poet Mickiewicz. This piece reflects Chopin's patriotic style and Polish musical elements, expressing his grief and complex emotions following the fall of Poland in the Warsaw Uprising. The work embodies a robust heroic spirit and tragic undertones, with two colliding emotions creating a powerful patriotic sentiment. This paper aims to analyze the musical style and performance techniques of "Narrative No. 1 in G Minor," providing a deeper understanding of its creative characteristics.

2. Performance Style

2.1. Melodic Line and Breath Marking

As a composer in the Romantic period, Chopin greatly emphasized subjective emotion in his creations. When he performed his works, an obvious characteristic was their lyricism. Additionally, during that period, the Italian bel canto singing method influenced Chopin's piano compositions, resulting in melodies rich in lyrical and vocal qualities, featuring numerous melodic lines and breaths. In this section, the author will analyze the performance style of the piece through the stylistic features embodied in the different melodic lines and the breathing between each pair of melodic lines.

First of all, in the opening section of "Narrative in G Minor," the melody starts with a broken chord in A-flat major, indicating the tragic color of the piece. The melody unfolds smoothly with an even left- and right-handed upward progression of wavy octaves in unison in the introductory part of the piece. This section, marked *Largo*, should be played slowly and in a controlled manner. Starting from the note C, the melody ascends with intervals of a minor third, a perfect fourth, a major second, and another major second, then descends with a major third. The general direction is a

meandering and ascending melodic feature. (See Figure 1, which uses the Polish National Edition of Chopin's "Narrative" as an example of the score.)



Figure 1. Opening melody in A-flat major broken chord, indicating tragic tone, with steady octaves in Largo.

Considering this melody as a person's line of sight, it pulls the gaze from near to far away. The heavy bass sets off the darkness of the melodic tone. The parabolic melodic line stops at the ascending F of the second group of notes and then gradually descends as if the line of sight is being drawn back to the suburbs. Thus, the introductory part concludes.

The main part begins, starting with the chord from the introductory part, which serves as the harmonic resolution. Beginning softly (*p*), the first phrase resembles a round dance, with a right-hand diatonic soprano melody that is fluent, coherent, and very singable. The soprano part, resembling a sigh, combines into a small phrase. These four sighs form a single long phrase, each concluding with a final ending. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2. Main section melody starting from dominant chord, soft (*p*) dynamics, smooth and lyrical.

The middle voice is smooth, giving the feeling of a heartbeat. It accompanies the melody, setting off the high voice while echoing the low voice, making the three voices—high, middle, and low—even and harmonious, thus promoting the development of the melody.

The same or similar melody appears three times throughout the piece: in the exposition, the development, and the recapitulation, with each occurrence expressing a different mood.

2.2. The Combination of Chordal Extensions and Melody

Chopin excelled in using chordal embellishments in his compositions, often applying them to different parts of the piece. This is one of his unique characteristics.

Take bars 74-81 of the exposition as an example. Although the key is written as B-flat major on the score, the abundance of A-flat notes, the direction of the harmony, and the ending notes indicate that this section modulates to E-flat major.

Chopin's careful melody arrangement allows the left hand to add the chordal outro of A-flat. Using his unique resolution of seventh interval relationships, the melody becomes more prominent, the left hand more fluid, and the two merge into a distinctive melody. (See Figure 3)



Figure 3. Measures 74-81, transitioning from B-flat major to E-flat major with non-chord tones and seventh intervals.

2.3. Rhythm

Chopin's "Narrative in G Minor" has distinct rhythmic characteristics that fully embody the essence of dance, perfectly integrating the characteristics of Polish dance rhythms. The 6/4 meter is maintained throughout the main theme, which is mostly composed of three-beat phrases. The accent is not on the first beat but rather on the second and third beats, a distinctive feature of the Mazurka style. The piece widely uses syncopated rhythms in six beats, enhancing its Polish national style. (See Figure 4)



Figure 4. Polish dance rhythm in 6/4 meter, emphasizing beats on the second and third beats, Mazurka style.

In "Narrative in G Minor," particularly in bars 180-187, Chopin designed a rhythm of continuous triplets. Despite the appearance of rests in this melody, the triplets should be played coherently, smoothly, and evenly. This rhythmic pattern highlights the integration of the melody with the rhythm, adding a strong sense of rhythm and making the narrative characteristics more pronounced. (See Figure 5)



Figure 5. Measures 180-187, continuous triplets rhythm with rests, emphasizing rhythmic intensity.

Rubato, or elastic tempo, refers to a "free tempo" in performance and is often used in various piano works. Its significance is even more pronounced in narrative pieces due

to the particular performance style.

It is a kind of tempo notation that represents the characteristics of the Romantic style. Performers must maintain a clear concept of the basic tempo while allowing for variations in the speed of individual beats. For example, suppose a note is played with rubato to speed up slightly. In that case, the following note should be adjusted to ensure the overall rhythm remains consistent, prolonging other notes as necessary. This can be interpreted as stretching the tempo rather than playing randomly, ensuring the overall basic rhythm remains unchanged.

For example, from bars 250 to 264, the tempo changes from slow to fast notation, and the alternation of ritenuto (rit.) and accelerando (accel.) can be seen as Chopin's rubato rhythm. (See Figure 6)



Figure 6. Measures 250-264, rubato rhythm with tempo changes while maintaining overall tempo.

3. Method of Playing

Chopin's melodies are characterized by a unique "Chopin" style, featuring lyrical and fluent lines with excellent stability, akin to art songs. Singability is, therefore, a prominent feature of Chopin's melodies.

3.1. The Melodic Voice

The right-hand melodic voice can be treated in two ways when playing here. For example, in bars 8, 9, and 10, the melody can be seen as a long-phrase divided into two smaller phrases, with a breath in the middle as the focal point.

Treatment 1: Emphasize the first half of the long phrase more strongly, making the initial section more prominent, while the latter is less emphasized.

Treatment 2: Conversely, emphasize the smaller phrases in the second half more prominently. (See Figure 7)



Figure 7. Measures 8-10, right-hand melody divided into two smaller phrases with breathing marks.

As this section of the melody is constantly repeated, a

mechanical rhythmic beat can easily cause the listener to feel fatigued and perceive the music as too mechanical. Some players handle this section too heavily, adhering too strictly to the rhythm, making the piece overly repetitive. Therefore, I suggest incorporating different lyrics before performing each section to assist in conveying the theme. This approach can simplify and brighten the melody, adding a distinctive color to the performance.

We can play the latter parts of the melody more lightly, allowing the melody to flow more smoothly.

When playing, our wrists should be relaxed and move toward the melody. We should turn our wrists upward, allowing them to drive our fingers instead of relying solely on finger strength.

3.2. Accompaniment

However, it is worth noting that the tone of the last two beats only changes in dynamics. The second beat should not be slowed down to indicate its weakness; the timing of both beats should be kept the same.

Secondly, when dealing with the middle accompaniment, treating all tones as weak is unnecessary. For example, in measures 13 and 14, the middle accompaniment becomes part of the harmony, so it should be played a little stronger here to support the harmony, thus highlighting the intertwining of the melody even more. (See Figure 8)



Figure 8. Measures 13-14, accompaniment emphasizing strong-weak pattern in six beats, supporting harmony

In the exposition part of the work, bars 8-21, the melody is mainly composed of CDFBG notes and other notes to form a very simple melody, repeated seven times before leading to the next section. The left-hand acts as an accompaniment, playing together with the right hand, interspersed with breathing. The left hand should produce a "thumping" heartbeat feeling, which is also the difficulty of this part.

The left hand should play this part with a heartbeat "thumping" feeling, which is challenging because of the need to control the dynamics. Often, performers play this part too heavily, overshadowing the right-hand melody. Conversely, to avoid over-emphasizing the right-hand melody, some play the left hand too weakly, resulting in an imbalanced performance.



Figure 9. Measures 8-21, interaction between right-hand melody and left-hand accompaniment, "heartbeat" feeling.

3.3. Pedals and Rests

3.3.1. Aftertone Pedal

The pedal is one of the most commonly used tools in piano playing, and in "Narrative in G Minor," it is used extensively to make the melody flow smoothly and naturally amidst constantly changing harmonies. This is especially evident in the long, continuous melodies, where the harmony changes frequently in the left or right hand. Using the pedal in this way ensures the consistency of the music and produces a clear, clean acoustic effect, avoiding any muddy sound.

The pedaling method is as follows: after playing a note (single, double, or chord) with the hand, the right pedal is immediately pressed down by the foot, forming a syncopated rhythm between the hand and foot. This technique is generally known as the syncopated pedal.



Figure 10. Use of aftersound pedal in the first bass note of the left hand for smooth harmonic transitions.

The first bass note in the left hand is played with the pedal pressed immediately after the note, ensuring smooth harmonic transitions. This technique keeps each note clear and clean during chord changes. Dividing the phrases into smaller segments helps maintain the integrity of the larger phrases.

3.3.2. Rhythm Pedal

Rhythm pedals are common in most compositions but are rare in this work. They are mainly used in the coda, from bars 208 to 215, where the left hand is accented. The pedals used during this section are rhythm pedals, applied in conjunction with the left-hand accents.



Figure 11. Measures 208-215, use of rhythm pedal with left-hand accents and aligned right-left hand rhythms



Figure 12. Measure 33, use of soft pedal to make sound softer and brighter.

At the same time, in the following 216 bars, the right-hand melody and the left-hand melody align rhythmically. During this section, the tone line and breath marks are divided based on the measure. Using the rhythmic pedal here can better reflect the mood of restlessness, excitement, and decisiveness, ensuring the musical expression is not dragged.

3.3.3. The Weak Pedal

Although the use of the left pedal is not marked in the notation, video recordings of different performers show that many include it in their performances. For example, in measure 33, beats 2 and 3, performers often use the left pedal to give the third beat a softer and brighter tone. (See Figure 13)



Figure 13. Measures 94-105, dynamic changes in A minor with sustained dominant notes, emphasizing emotional expression.

However, it is worth noting that weak notes should still be played and practiced using the strength of the fingers. The left pedal is just the icing on the cake, enhancing the tone's variety, and should not be relied on too much.

3.4. Change of Strength

Chopin's piano music exudes a strong flavor of Romanticism, bright and enthusiastic, yet also revealing a faint sadness of sentimentalism. This "lyrical" character is closely related to his music's varied intensity and colorful timbre.



Figure 14. A noticeable change in intensity in bar 100

Take bars 94-105 as an example. Here, the first theme of the development section is used, transforming the material from the exposition's first theme into the key of A minor. The dominant note of A minor is sustained to express a feeling of being at a loss. These sustained notes should be played with fingertip touches, ensuring they do not interfere with the main melodic tone.

It should be noted that in bar 100, the change in intensity is significant. First, a rapid crescendo reaches *ff*, followed by an immediate shift to *pp* without any preparation. In this part of the performance, the player needs to focus on controlling the strength of the fingertips, adjusting the intensity as needed. However, the intensity changes should always serve the emotional expression, not overpower it. (See Figure 14)

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the "Narrative in G Minor" from the perspectives of performance and ontology, comparing different approaches by various performers. The work is also interpreted through theoretical research in conjunction with the score.

In terms of theory and score, this paper begins with the historical background of the composer and his previous creative styles, selecting representative features for analysis to understand the melodic movement of the piece. It then examines the treatment of key and difficult points in the piece.

Chopin, as a composer "specially made for piano," has left us with many classic piano works that are first-class in both content and musical expression. Chopin's works offer us beautiful melodies and his interpretations of the country, the

people, and his own life.

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