

Chopin Nocturne in E minor Op.72 No.1

1 Composer Background

Chopin is known primarily as a composer for the piano, justifiably so since all his music involves the instrument. He mostly wrote solo piano music, although he also composed works for piano and orchestra, such as his two piano concertos and some works based on Polish themes, as well as a small amount of chamber music and some songs.

Chopin was born in 1810 and grew up in Warsaw, Poland, where he learned to play the piano. Although Warsaw's musical scene was very active, attracting some of Europe's most famous performers, it could not compete musically with cities such as Vienna, Paris and London. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Chopin had become a highly proficient pianist in his late teenage years he set his sights on touring and in 1829 he gave some concerts in Vienna before returning to Poland. Shortly afterwards, in late 1830, he left Poland again, spending eight months in Vienna, during which news of the Polish uprising reached him. After that he moved on to Munich and Stuttgart on his way to Paris, where he arrived at the beginning of autumn 1831.

By 1831 Paris had become the piano capital of the world. Many of the most famous piano makers of the time – among them Erard and Pleyel – had factories there and with its vibrant concert environment the city attracted the most famous pianists. Liszt had been living there for a few years and many other well-known pianists either took up residence or visited the city in order to give concerts. This was an era where public spectacle involving the piano was much in vogue so that the famous 'duel' between Liszt and his rival Thalberg took place before an audience. Liszt's performances were full of theatre: not only would he play the instrument, but he descended into the audience during the course of the programme and fainted on stage as a result of his intense performing efforts.

Chopin was not well-suited to the kind of exaggerated antics that the public so much enjoyed in Liszt's performances. He only rarely appeared in public concerts and found himself more at home in the more intimate salons that were so much part of the cultural life of the Parisian elite. Here, his quiet style of playing was appreciated and the works he wrote and performed was the sort of music he taught to his large following of wealthy pupils.

Aside from summer trips to the South of France, the rest of Chopin's life was lived in Paris, where he died in 1849. He never revisited Poland, although he enjoyed a select circle of Polish friends, kept in touch with news from his homeland and wrote music in Polish dance styles, such as his polonaises and mazurkas.

Activity

Research the history of the piano by looking at instruments and their descriptions in some of the world's most significant collections of historical pianos:

<https://www.cobbcollection.co.uk/> (including two pianos owned by Chopin)

<https://www.chrismaene.be/nl/pianomuseum/>

<https://emuseum.nmmusd.org/collections/18389/pianos/objects/images?page=1>

Learn more about Chopin's life and the sources of his music here:

<https://chopin.nifc.pl/en>

<http://www.chopinonline.ac.uk/ocve/>

Liszt's performances (including pictures) are described here:

<http://www.danceshistoricalmiscellany.com/lisztomania-franz-liszt-sex-celebrity/>

2 Genre

Nocturnes of various types exist from the eighteenth century onwards. The term suggests an association with night-time and many works in the genre are quiet and reflective. But that is not true of all pieces with the title. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there are nocturnes in several movements for groups of instruments that were played at evening functions.

The piano nocturne came to prominence in the works of John Field, whose first Nocturne was published in 1812 in Russia. Many of Field's nocturnes exploited the sonorities of the developing piano, especially the possibilities afforded by the sustaining pedal to spread the left-hand accompaniment over an interval of around two octaves. Spreading the accompaniment in this way, along with a slow harmonic rhythm, provided the dreamy framework above which a melody could unfold. The melody itself often began with long notes but was decorated in the course of the piece.

It is important to realise that not all nocturnes used this texture: many of Field's are quite different. Another feature of these early works by Field is that the title 'Nocturne' was by no means fixed, his works appearing as romances, pastorals, or other titles.

Chopin wrote 21 nocturnes, most of which were published in the 1830s and 1840s. Chopin's nocturnes inherited the main features of Field's style described above, although Chopin saw the need to inject contrast and dynamism into the style: beginning with the Nocturne in B major, Op.9 No.3, many of his nocturnes have faster-moving, dramatic middle sections that often introduce a darker, more dramatic element into these otherwise dreamy pieces.

Activity

Get to know Field's nocturnes in Liszt's edition (with Liszt's preface):

<https://ks4.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/e/e4/IMSLP39683-SIBLEY1802.7840.0fba-39087012760098piano.pdf>

Explore the different versions of Chopin's nocturnes. The composer continued to revise his music after it was published, and changes to works are found especially in the copies owned by his pupils. You can find some of these on the Chopin Variorum website (<http://www.chopinonline.ac.uk/ocve/>). The Nocturne in E-flat, Op.9 No.2 has a particularly large number of variant readings. On the Chopin Variorum website you will find over 20 different sources of the work. Some of the most interesting versions of the piece will be found in the copies owned by his pupils. The Chopin Variorum Edition enables you to compare different sources for particular bars. So, for example, if you click on bar 4 or

bar 34 of the Nocturne Op.9 No.2 (links below) you will find examples of Chopin's pencilled amendments to the published score. These amendments illustrate the fact that Chopin never had a particularly 'fixed' view of the musical text of his works.

<http://www.chopinonline.ac.uk/ocve/browse/barview?workid=6394&pageimageid=70935&barid=4>

<http://www.chopinonline.ac.uk/ocve/browse/barview?workid=6394&pageimageid=70936&barid=34>

3 Analysis

The Nocturne in E minor, Op.72 No.1 was Chopin's first work in the genre. It was composed in 1827 but not published until 1855, when it appeared in both Paris and Berlin along with a Funeral March and 3 Ecossaies. In common with Chopin's Op.9 Nos. 1 and 2 the E minor Nocturne has no contrasting middle section but comprising a series of long phrases or periods.

Stylistically the E minor Nocturne follows Field's first nocturnes very closely. The left-hand part is harmonically slow moving, mostly with one harmony every two beats (though sometimes even more slow moving, with one harmony per bar, as in bars 1 and 2). As in Field's works, the left-hand part is typically spread over two octaves or so, with the spread-out harmony sustained by the pedal. The opening melody returns a number of times, on each appearance decorated or altered in some other way and, like Field, there is a long coda at the end.

Bars 1-5	Following an introductory bar in which the left-hand accompaniment pattern that pervades the whole Nocturne is set, the main melody A is introduced in bar 2. As with many of Field's and Chopin's nocturnes the melody is initially slow moving. The whole five-bar period is in E minor, cadencing on the dominant in bar 5.
Bars 6-9	Following a swift movement to G major at the beginning of bar 6 the music settles in the dominant, B minor, in bar 7 and remains there until the music begins to move back towards E minor through the dominant, B major, in bar 9. The right-hand part for these bars has a less characteristic melodic line than bars 2-5: it largely outlines the harmony.
Bars 10-13	The left-hand part and harmony are identical with bars 2-5. In the right hand melody A reappears in octaves, but as it progresses it differs substantially from its earlier statement in bars 2-5 while still following the same harmonic structure.
Bars 14-22	While maintaining the same left-hand accompaniment pattern this section is much more active harmonically than previous sections, passing through C major and D minor before beginning to settle in B minor and then on B major, as the dominant of E minor. The right hand explores a new motif characterised by repeated quaver patterns (from the second half of bar 15) with occasional reminders of melodic patterns heard earlier in the piece (see the first half of bar 15).
Bars 23-30	These bars take place over a pedal B in the left hand with frequent references to B major in the harmony above. The passage serves as a central dominant preparation for melody A that recurs in bar 31.

Bars 31-34	The left-hand part is more-or-less identical to bars 2-5, as is the harmonic structure. The right hand decorates melody A extravagantly and the dynamic is forte, in contrast to bars 2-5.
Bars 35-38	The left-hand part is identical to bars 6-9, as is the harmonic structure. The right hand continues its extravagant decoration, this time of bars 6-9.
Bars 39-42	These bars are a more forceful version of bars 10-13
Bars 43-45	These bars take us to a final cadence in E major with the right hand doing little more than outlining the harmony.
Bars 47-57	These bars take place over a pedal E in the left hand and form a coda to the whole piece. The right-hand part contains elements of the previous central pedal-point section (compare bars 47-50 with bars 23-26 and bar 53 with bar 29).

A larger-scale, overall structure can be identified, as follows:

Bars 1-13	A opening period in E minor in which melody A is introduced and varied
Bars 14-22	A section that contrasts with what has gone before in which the harmony is less stable
Bars 23-30	A section that takes place over a pedal B which prepares for the return of melody A
Bars 31-46	An extended version of bars 1-13 with further decoration and variation of melody A
Bars 47-57	A coda over a pedal E that shares many similarities with bars 23-30

4 Related repertoire

Field's and Chopin's nocturnes are core to the repertoire. Between them they number c.40 pieces in the genre. Although many more nineteenth century composers wrote nocturnes (for example, Liszt, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Grieg) none composed examples in the sorts of numbers written by Field and Chopin. But there is one further composer who is particularly known for his nocturnes – Fauré. The nocturne was particularly popular in France and Fauré contributed 13 to the genre.

Aside from other composers' nocturnes there is a wealth of what may generally be termed 'domestic music' for the piano. During the nineteenth century the piano grew to become the domestic instrument of choice, owned by ever-increasing numbers first in the affluent classes, but towards the end of the century among those classes who had previously had little surplus income for leisure activities. Amateur pianists of varying standards wanted short pieces to play within their technical capabilities and works such as nocturnes, rondos, bagatelles, dances of various sorts and many other short pieces were turned out by all of the major composers of the time. The social and economic factors that gave rise to the move away from traditional forms such as sonatas, and fed a rapidly-expanding publishing industry, are factors that lie behind the production of much nineteenth-century piano repertoire.

5 Teaching points

An important point in the development of the nocturne is that its style is linked to two major phenomena of the nineteenth century; the rise of the piano in social life and the development of the instrument itself. The style exemplified in nocturnes represented the domestic element of nineteenth century piano repertoire, in sharp contrast to the virtuosic features so strongly evidenced in Liszt's compositions and performances, and the use of the sustaining pedal to produce a characteristic texture was something essentially new to piano music.

Questions for consideration or research

- How had the piano developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in order to enable the stylistic features of nocturnes to be realised on the instrument?
- What was the role of improvisation in Chopin's performances of his own music, especially the nocturnes?

6 Curriculum links

Nineteenth-century history

Nineteenth-century literature and poetry

7 Bibliography/further reading

Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: pianist and teacher: as seen by his pupils*, translated by Naomi Shohet with Krysia Osostowicz and Roy Howat ; edited by Roy Howat (Cambridge, CUP, 1998)

David Rowland (ed), *The Cambridge companion to the piano* (Cambridge, CUP, 1998)

Jim Samson, *Chopin* (Oxford, OUP, 1996)

Jim Samson (ed), *The Cambridge companion to Chopin* (Cambridge, CUP, 1992), especially Chapter 2 (David Rowland, 'The nocturne: development of a new style')