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Background

Social history

The First Scherzo and First Ballade were composed during Chopin's early years in Paris. The exact dates of their composition have not been determined reliably, but it is probable that neither work was begun before 1833. Indeed on stylistic and other evidence it seems likely that they were drafted not long before their publication in 1835 and 1836 respectively.¹ Whatever their precise dates of composition, the Scherzo and Ballade have special significance within Chopin's output. They were the first of his extended compositions to turn aside from the genres of post-classical popular concert music (variation sets, rondos and 'brilliant' concertos) as well as those of so-called 'Viennese' Classicism (multi-movement sonatas and chamber works).² In the Scherzo and Ballade Chopin followed a special path. He drew sustenance from classical and post-classical traditions, but remained essentially independent of both – to the point of establishing new genres. There is of course a stylistic background to Chopin's achievement in these two works, a range of early influences that left their trace even as they were transcended. But there is also a wider social background. Some of the enabling factors were products of Chopin's unique position within the social world of early nineteenth-century pianism. Here too he followed a special path.

Born in 1810, his early development as a composer took place in Warsaw during the 1820s. Warsaw was by no means a leading cultural centre in the early nineteenth century, but – at least until the 1830 insurrection – it registered something of the major change then taking place more widely in music and music-making. That change, reflecting a fundamental reshaping of European society, penetrated into many aspects of the infrastructure of musical life, and only some of its manifestations may be outlined here. In essence the musical centre of gravity shifted from court to city, as a politically emergent middle class increasingly shaped and directed formal culture. This

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central transformation carried with it many ancillary transformations – in the professional status of composers and performers, in the social make-up of audiences, in tastes and in repertoires. The change was associated in particular with the institution of the public concert and with its corollary, the rise of the piano.

Already by the 1820s – Chopin's formative years – classical keyboard traditions were overshadowed by a repertoire of post-classical piano music associated with the flamboyant, cosmopolitan and above all commercial concert life of a newly influential middle class. This repertoire, clearly focused on the virtuoso pianist-composer, exulted almost fetishistically in the powers of an instrument now firmly established. The virtuoso played mainly his own works, performing them at benefit concerts (his own and those of other artists), *matinées* and *soirées*, and tailoring his programmes and his compositional style to the needs of an audience seeking above all novelty and display. The pianist-composer was inevitably an entrepreneur, closely meshed into a promotional network which included publishers, critics and piano manufacturers. The piano became a powerful symbol of the commodity character increasingly attached to music in a post-paternal age. And this was reinforced by its growing domestic role within bourgeois society, eliciting a repertoire of *Trivialmusik* which formed the mainstay of the publisher's income.

Chopin's early years in Warsaw were geared towards a career as pianist-composer within this milieu. His major compositions adopted the genres favoured by other virtuoso-composers, notably in the three early works for piano and orchestra – a variation set, potpourri and rondo, characteristically based (respectively) on a well-known operatic aria (*Variations on *Là ci darem la mano**), a string of folk melodies (*Fantasy on Polish Airs*) and a so-called 'national' dance (*Rondo à la Krakoviak*). Together with the two piano concertos, these were well suited to the public concert of the day, just as the solo piano works, mainly rondos and dance pieces, were appropriate to the *soirée* and *matinée*. There were also 'private' works such as the Sonata Op. 4 and the Piano Trio Op. 8, markedly different in idiom from the concert pieces. And this very distinction between public and private styles was itself entirely in keeping with the normal practice of the virtuoso composer.

When Chopin arrived in Paris in September 1831, following an unproductive nine-month stay in Vienna, this orientation towards conventional public pianism had already been rejected. He did not abandon the concert platform, but he remained aloof from the commercial concert world of the pianist-composer and his public appearances were few and far between.³ At the same time he did not seek to establish himself as a composer of major ambition by

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turning to the prestigious genres of opera, symphony or chamber music. Despite his avoidance of the concert platform, he remained committed to ‘pianists’ music’⁴ and was invariably judged as a pianist-composer, playing almost exclusively his own music when he graced the salons.⁵ That it was a special path was well recognised at the time. A reviewer of the newly published *Waltzes Op. 64* remarked that where other pianists would promote their music by ‘announc[ing] a concert or see[ing] company at Erard’s or Broadwood’s ... M. Chopin ... quietly publishes 2 [*sic*] *Waltzes*’.⁶

It is worth expanding a little on this special path, since it had major implications for musical style in the mature works, including the ballades. Chopin did not, like Hummel, divide his creative activities cleanly between public display works for the piano and more serious private compositions in classical genres. Nor did he, like Liszt, ‘progress’ from the career of virtuoso-composer to the dual career of modernist composer and classical recitalist. Rather he accepted the stylistic framework of public virtuosity and salon music but went on to elevate their traditions to unprecedented levels of artistic excellence. His achievement was to refine and give new substance to the conventions of popular pianism, enriching those conventions by drawing upon elements from other – and weightier – musical worlds. In this way he achieved a unique synthesis of the public and private, the popular and the significant. When it came to extended forms, that meant a synthesis of the formal methods of popular concert music – above all the alternation of bravura figuration and melodic paragraphs based on popular genres – and the sonata-based designs and organic tonal structures of the Austro-German tradition. The *First Scherzo* and *First Ballade* were the earliest fruits of that synthesis.

When Chopin wrote these works in the mid-1830s, further changes were taking place in piano music and in public concerts. The world of popular pianism, centred on the benefit concert and salon, was already fading around this time. And as it did so two different, polemically related, strands of music-making emerged, their profiles well defined against the background of a commercial concert life. Together they represented a further stage in the consolidation of a middle-class culture. On the one hand there were ‘modern’ works flamed by the spirit of Romanticism – by an expressive aesthetic of which the piano proved an ideal advocate, in both heroic and intimate modes. At its most ambitious this repertory amounted to an incipient avant-garde. On the other hand there were prestigious classical concerts centred on what was gradually becoming a standard repertory, a constructed tradition which served to validate a newly emerging middle-class establishment. Underlying this contrast between an emerging modernism and a strengthening classicism was

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a shared sense of the dignity of the musical work in marked contrast to the ephemeral status assigned to music within a commercial concert life.

Chopin's mature music, firmly grounded in the post-classical concert music of the 1820s, was influenced by both these developments in the 1830s and 1840s. His response to a romantic aesthetic undoubtedly contributed to the qualitative change in his musical style in the early Paris years, to the new 'tone' of works like the First Scherzo and First Ballade. Admittedly Chopin had little interest in the surface manifestations of Romanticism in music. He shared none of the contemporary enthusiasm for the descriptive, denotative powers of music, remaining committed to so-called absolute music in an age dominated by programmes and descriptive titles. Yet he did register the romantic climate at the deeper level of an expressive aesthetic, where the musical work might become a 'fragment of autobiography'.⁷ In the early 1830s Chopin's music acquired an intensity, a passion, at times a terrifying power, which can rather easily suggest an inner life whose turmoils were lived out in music. It was in part this expressive imperative, allied to a sense of the pretension and ambition of the musical work, which transformed a post-classical into a romantic idiom.

Chopin was widely counted among the progressives of early nineteenth-century music. At the same time, like many other progressives in an age of growing historical awareness, he took much of his creative inspiration from an earlier age, specifically from Bach and Mozart. The transformation of their inheritance was a further important catalyst of his stylistic maturity in the early 1830s. Yet for all his classical sympathies Chopin played little part in the establishment of those 'historical concerts' and recitals which promoted a classical repertory in the 1830s and 1840s, gradually transforming concert life into a structure recognisably similar to our own. While he continued to play his own music, pianist-composers such as Liszt and Moscheles increasingly programmed 'standard' works by other composers.⁸ Bach and Beethoven were especially favoured.

In due course Chopin's music itself permeated this steadily expanding standard repertory. Indeed it was already beginning to do so during his lifetime, partly through the persuasive advocacy of Liszt, who regularly programmed the études and mazurkas. The major extended works took longer to establish themselves as seminal items in the classical canon. But already by the early 1840s they were beginning to take their place in the programmes of benefits by other pianists, notably pupils and associates such as Charles Hallé and the young Carl Filtsch. Both gave concerts in London in the summer of 1843 and their Chopin playing was highly praised. Of Filtsch, who included

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the First Ballade in at least one of his programmes, *The Athenaeum* remarked 'we have had no pleasure greater than hearing him in Chopin's music ... [which] is fast advancing in popularity in London'. Hallé played the First Scherzo, and his reading of it was described as 'fanciful, elegant, capricious, sentimental, without a trace of that sickliness to which the music would invite the half cultivated'.⁹ It is to such concerts and such reviews that we can trace the beginning of a long tradition of Chopin interpretation and criticism which has continued until our own time.

Stylistic history

The music of Chopin's Warsaw years, composed between 1817 and 1830, may be related rather closely to the popular 'pianists' music' of the early nineteenth century. This repertory was the foundation upon which his mature music was built, and its conventions were never entirely rejected, even in the most ambitious works. The early polonaises, variations and rondos are in the brilliant manner,¹⁰ with specific debts to Hummel and Weber in the exuberant ornamentation of the polonaises and the bravura figuration of the rondos. The practices of contemporary improvisation, an essential part of the pianist-composer's armoury, left a clear mark on much of this music. The Sonata Op. 4 and Piano Trio Op. 8, on the other hand, employ the classical idiom commonly associated with the 'private' works of pianist-composers, and it is worth noting that the Trio was composed for private aristocratic performance at Antonin.¹¹ The simpler dance pieces – mazurkas and waltzes – form another group, avoiding virtuosic embellishment and bravura figuration, and lending themselves well to domestic music-making. Finally there is the E minor Nocturne, which registers clearly the lyrical pianism of John Field and already hints at ways of developing beyond it.

The Vienna and early Paris years (1830–32) witnessed a gradual but unmistakable transformation of Chopin's musical style. No doubt this was closely allied to changes in his personal attitudes and circumstances, as he faced up to Vienna's indifference, to Poland's developing tragedy – culminating in the suppression of the 1830 insurrection – and to his own increasing disenchantment with the proposed career of a composer-pianist. Whatever the cause, the change of tone is apparent in different ways in the Op. 6 and Op. 7 Mazurkas, the Op. 9 Nocturnes and the Op. 10 Etudes.

The nocturnes and études in particular marked an important advance in technique and expression. It was above all in these pieces that the conventions and materials of post-classical concert music were refashioned and tran-

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scended. In the second of the Op. 9 Nocturnes the vocally inspired ornamental devices employed by Field and others were refined and ultimately absorbed into melodic substance. Far from a virtuosic embellishment of melody, as in the brilliant style, ornamentation here plays an evolutionary, even developmental, role. It is at once an expressive enhancement of the original, a tension-building strategy and a means of highlighting the main structural elements of the music. The resulting fusion of ornament and melody into a single continuously unfolding, chromatically curving line easily transcended the conventional practice of early nineteenth-century pianism, while at the same time *recovering* something of the characteristic melodic style of a Mozart slow movement. Forged here in the early nocturnes, Chopin's ornamental melody would come to full fruition in the major works of his later years, not least in the reprise of the Fourth Ballade.

In the Op. 10 Etudes Chopin looked again at the conventional figuration of early nineteenth-century pianism, allowing well-established patterns to take on fresh meaning. And if there was a single factor which helped it to do so it was the influence of Bach. In conversation with Eugène Delacroix, Chopin maintained that counterpoint should lie right at the heart of stable musical structures.¹² In some ways his own contrapuntal style achieved for the piano what Bach had achieved for earlier keyboard instruments, reinterpreting traditional techniques in terms of the unique qualities of the instrument. Chopin's counterpoint takes its starting-point from the capacity of the piano to layer voices through shaded dynamics, allowing lines to emerge and recede imperceptibly from the texture. Characteristically a figuration will embrace tiny linear motives on a foreground level while outlining larger linear progressions (usually by means of an organic chromaticism) on a middle-ground level. In both respects there is a contrapuntal enrichment of conventional patterns which is very much in the spirit, and often in the manner, of Bach. Here, in the Op. 10 Etudes, Chopin's characteristic figuration reached maturity. It would become an important component of all four ballades, and it achieved thematic status in No. 2.

There was a further, and perhaps more fundamental, development of style in Chopin's music of the Vienna and early Paris years. Already during his Warsaw period he began to acquire a long-range harmonic vision which enabled him to gain structural control over the materials of the brilliant style, habitually presented in highly sectionalised formal designs which alternate lyrical and figurative paragraphs. Characteristically such alternating paragraphs would be relatively self-contained, with clearly-defined harmonic divisions. Chopin's achievement was to subordinate them to more extended

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over-arching tonal spans, embracing formal contrast within a higher tonal synthesis and ensuring a priority of tonal structure over sectionalised formal design.¹³ At the same time he did not entirely lose sight of the formal methods of the brilliant style. The starting-point for even his most sophisticated later works often remained an alternation of melody and figuration, as both style-critical and genetic analysis indicates.¹⁴ The formal process of post-classical concert music may indeed have been transcended, but it was also remembered.

These stylistic transformations registered a fundamental change in Chopin's whole approach to composition, a change which might be summarised crudely as an investment in the musical work rather than the musical performance. As we have noted, it was a change for which there was a wider context in the musical climate of the 1830s, yet its realisation in Chopin's music remained in the end triumphantly specific. Other composers, notably Liszt in some works, attempted to turn the forms and conventions of the popular repertory to ambitious account,¹⁵ but it is difficult to find any real parallel to the project of renovation upon which Chopin embarked in his early Paris years. It amounted to nothing less than a thorough-going reworking of the popular repertory – its materials, its forms and ultimately its genres.

It is conspicuous that after 1832 Chopin largely abandoned the genres most favoured within post-classical concert music. Following the Rondo Op. 16 and the *Variations brillantes* Op. 12 his inclination was to employ genre titles that had clear associations within popular pianism, but whose conventional meanings were either narrowly circumscribed or loosely defined. His own music then invested weight and significance to these genre titles, even to the point of establishing new genres. In this respect the music of the early Paris years gave substance to the dance piece of functional entertainment (the waltz as much as the Polish dances) as well as to the étude, the chief vehicle for didactic music. At the same time it gave sharper definition to genre titles such as 'nocturne' and 'impromptu', retaining conventional associations with vocal transcription and imitation (the nocturne) and with improvisation (the impromptu), but subordinating these associations to the establishment and consolidation of clearly-defined genres.¹⁶ And it is against this background of generic renovation that Chopin's approach to single-movement extended structures in the First Scherzo and First Ballade needs to be considered.

Ballade No. 1

The achievements of the early Paris years – in melody, figuration and harmony – informed and enabled the Scherzo and Ballade. Yet the two works

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established very different ways of building upon those achievements. Of the two, the Scherzo is the closer to the formal methods of the brilliant style, characteristically enclosing a popular melody (possibly based on a Polish carol) within a figuration, and aligning this basic contrast to a conventional formal pattern (schema). At the same time the dynamic energy and sheer power of the figuration (qualitatively different from anything Chopin composed during his Warsaw years) and the subtlety with which it yields first to motive and then to harmony leave us in no doubt that the brilliant style has been transcended, and that the genre title 'scherzo' has been entirely rethought.¹⁷

The Ballade followed a different course, albeit proceeding from a similar stylistic base. Unlike the Scherzo, it rests solidly on the foundations of a sonata-form design, couching its materials in a through-composed, harmonically directional structure where variation and transformation are seminal functions, integration and synthesis essential goals. It may be helpful to present the position baldly, if a little over-simply. Viewed as a whole the scherzos and ballades embody a synthesis of the post-classical brilliant style and the classical sonata-form archetype. In relation to this the First Scherzo leans towards the brilliant style and the First Ballade towards the sonata principle. Later pieces in both genres allow for some interpenetration of schemata, but they preserve the basic difference in orientation established in the two pioneering works.

There was of course a major shift in style between the sonata-form elements of Chopin's Warsaw-period works (especially the Op. 4 Sonata and the Piano Trio) and those of the First Ballade. In the Ballade, sonata-based formal functions have clearly been reinterpreted in the light of a particular dramatic and expressive aim, a 'plot archetype' shared by other early nineteenth-century works.¹⁸ Above all the structure is end-weighted, with a rising intensity curve culminating in a reprise which is more apotheosis than synthesis. In this context the bravura closing section, marked off from the work by a change of metre as well as by its non-thematic character, has an essential and highly specific formal function. Yet even this gesture (including the change of metre) has origins in the brilliant style, notably in the applause-seeking finales so characteristic of fantasies and variation sets by pianist-composers. And this is only one of several ways in which elements of post-classical concert music transformed the normative practice of classical sonata form in this work.

Another instance of transformation concerns thematic characterisation. The genre of the classical sonata is defined by thematic character as well as by formal function, and in this respect Chopin's early piano sonata is conformant.

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 Excerpt
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Background

Example 1

(i)

(i) First Ballade bars 138–9

(ii)

(ii) Three Waltzes Op. 34: No. 1 bars 33–6

So, in less obvious ways, are his three mature sonatas. In contrast, the themes in the Ballade spell out the work's continuing links with the world of popular pianism, where thematic material was commonly grounded in popular genres. The pivotal episode in E major at bar 138 is the most obvious point at which a popular genre emerges into the foreground of the Ballade. With its arch-shaped *moto perpetuo* arabesques this episode immediately invokes the characteristic phraseology of the Chopin waltz, a phraseology which had been defined in Op. 18, the first of the 'Paris' waltzes (also in E major), and would later be confirmed in the Three Waltzes Op. 34. The affinity is obvious even in an informal inspection (Ex. 1). And this explicit association sheds light in turn on the two main themes of the Ballade. Subsumed by the compound duple metre of its first theme are the basic features of a slow waltz (the two-bar groupings of several of Chopin's waltzes often suggest compound duple), while underlying the second theme we may already detect the hazy outlines of a barcarolle, clearer still in the reprise of the theme. The contrasted rhythmic profile of the two main themes (Ex. 2) is an important dimension of the Ballade.

The presentation of themes related to popular genres within a sonata-form

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Example 2

(i)

(i) First Ballade bars 8–10

(ii)

meno mosso
sotto voce

(ii) First Ballade bars 67–71

framework is perfectly symptomatic of Chopin's larger achievement as a composer. By elevating popular traditions to a higher level of creativity he demonstrated that even in an age intent on prising apart the accessible and the sophisticated there need be no contradiction between them. And precisely because of its more ambitious context the popular genre took on an additional layer of meaning in Chopin, quite unlike anything in the brilliant style. In the widest sense of the term an ironic mode was introduced.¹⁹

The First Ballade was of course much more than an outcome of Chopin's refinement and enrichment of the traditions of popular pianism. Simply by using the title 'ballade' for a piano piece he invoked a very much wider range of reference in both musical and literary contexts. Contemporary dictionaries and music lexicons establish clearly that the connotations of the title 'ballade' were exclusively vocal until the 1840s.²⁰ And in this connection it is significant that early advertisements for Op. 23 included the description *ohne Worte* (without words),²¹ establishing immediately a connection with vocal music. The opening of the work makes this connection explicit through the tonally inductive 'recitative' which precedes the G minor 'aria'. And there are telling associations to be made more generally with the repertory of early nineteenth-century opera.²² French operas in particular used the term 'ballade' to describe