

How To Play Chopin?

Part 4: Chopin's Polonaises

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THE PIANO POLONAISE is a musical form represented, in the case of Chopin, by a comparatively large number of pieces (17). Chopin composed polonaises nearly all his life, beginning in 1817 when he wrote Polonaise in G minor (the first piece ever by the then seven-year-old composer) and ending in 1846 with Polonaise-Fantasia in A flat major Op. 61. Following the evolution of the Chopin Polonaise we can also watch the maturing of the composer's technique in perspective and greater detail.

Within the A B A three-part form, which in the polonaise is sometimes preceded by an Introduction and finished with a more or less developed Coda, Chopin applied over the years many interesting and astonishing transformations. While some of them were of a formal nature (development of the themes and bridges, tendency to transform the middle part), others affected the texture (polyphony). There was also the growing harmonic richness (colors) and the increasingly profound personal expression. Chopin's mature work and his youthful compositions are planets apart, separated by his steady artistic and spiritual refinement. The sentimentality of his first Polonaises, their stereotyped melancholy and drawing-room balance gradually turned into a profoundly meaningful truth of lyrical expression, into a drama that deeply moves the listener, or even a touching tragedy. The conventional form and content of Chopin's youthful Polonaises (modeled on the popular polonaises by Michal Kleofas Oginski) [1] gradually evolved, first aiming at the *brillante* style virtuosity. Soon, however, by means of formal and textural transformations, enriching the expressive quality of these pieces, Chopin achieved a shockingly moving expression, contained within the structure of a "hidden" Sonata – the Polonaise-Fantasia. [2]

The first two Polonaises, G minor and B flat major (which are identical in form), already have in the Introductions a rhythmic formula characteristic of the polonaise (the beginning bar – the so called polonaise rhythm, an eighth and two sixteenths). This formula allows the listener to unmistakably tell the polonaise from other dance compositions in three-four time. The commonly used and, in principle, desirable interpretive "mannerism," which means extending (with a slight emphasis) the first eighth and accelerating the two sixteenths, originated in the choreography of this dance – the first (in the bar) step of the polonaise is slightly longer. Similarly, in the accompaniment of the eighths, which are equal in length within the bar, the first may be extended. However, this rhythmic "deformity" should be used sparingly.

In most of Chopin's Polonaises, at the end of their individual parts, there is a repeat mark recommending to play the same text once again. Performing both themes and parts in the Trio requires interpretive ingenuity (dynamics, color, the use of agogic means, even changes in articulation). The Pre-Romantic style which Chopin chose for his Polonaises confines the contemporary piano to rather short if singsong tones and recommends a careful use of the pedals. The next Polonaises chronologically (which still have no opus numbers) are the A flat major and G sharp minor pieces, with their numerous ornaments (especially the G sharp Polonaise which delights listeners with its spectacular figuration, trills and the technique of crossing the lines of the right and left hand), are examples of the *brillante* style in Chopin's work, which reaches its peak in the E flat major Polonaise Op. 22. They also mark the composer's gradual departure from the conventional form of the polonaise. The unlimited formal development of the individual parts of the polonaise (its both themes and the middle part, Trio), the independent bridges, the much-widened dynamic scale of the already fuller tones, a freer use of agogics, spontaneous emotionality, even some manifestations of the increasingly profound expression (*cf* the reflexive farewell Polonaise "Adieu" in B flat minor – 1826) or some themes from the Opus 22 Trio) all point to the shaping of the composer's individual style.

Chronologically, in the next [3] cycle of Opus 71 Polonaises (D minor – 1827, B flat major – 1828, F minor – 1829) Chopin did not give up the effects produced by the virtuoso elements (trills, runs, harmonically refined figurations). Instead he developed the form of these pieces, and enriched their texture. The rewritten theme repetitions were only partly identical. Well-developed and largely independent bridges require the performer to emphasize the importance of the theme. The middle part (Trio) with its reprise-based structure, extensively rich in Polonaise in B flat major Op. 71, may even have been intended to be regarded as the development of the sonata. The symphonic quality of these pieces is striking, as are their rich tone colors, which are identified with the sound of the specified instruments in the orchestra.

We also have (especially in the D minor and B flat major Polonaises) many examples of polyphony, and also a dialogue and multipart kind of playing on the basis of a homophonic texture. [4]

The profound expression of the Opus 71 pieces (the dramatic quality of the Introductions in the Polonaises D minor and B flat major, not only with a Sarmatian readiness to fight or argue as well as sincere lyricism, but also a mysterious murkiness of some fragments) allows us to perceive them as the first sign of the later, heroic Polonaises. First were two Opuses, 26 and 40, with the former (Polonaises C sharp minor no. 1 and E flat minor no. 2) revealing the discontinuation of the process of form development in order to make the expressive elements more distinct. [5] In neither of these Opuses does Chopin actually depart too far from the conventional form, but uses a means of expression which gradually lends these pieces some characteristics of individual declaration. For instance, the Introductions and opening themes are in sharp contrast to the middle parts (the Trios). In the Trio of the chivalrous C sharp minor Polonaise we can hear a beautiful, canzona-style cantilena; in the elegiac and tragic Polonaise E flat minor, in the middle part, a kind of whispering (*sotto voce*) dialogue takes place, as between conspirators. In addition, both Trios are distinguished by refined harmonic structures (the chromatic character in Polonaise no. 1, modulations in Polonaise no. 2). What we have in the second part of the Polonaise no. 1 Trio is a fine example of Chopin's "polymelodics" (independent melodic lines).

In Opus 40, while continuing the chivalrous tone of expression, Chopin also emphasizes the elements of piano virtuosity. They include spectacular repetitions of the chords, the lustrous and powerful tones of both themes, the fanfare-like Trio and – imitating the faint roll of the orchestra's drum – the trills in the tie (bars 41-49) in the A major Polonaise no. 1, as opposed to the peculiar "contrapuntal virtuosity" (bars 71-81) and the fascinating dialogue and multi-part playing in the second theme (bars 19-40) and in the Trio of the elegiac Polonaise in C minor no. 2. [6]

It is obvious from the above statements that the features of Chopin's virtuosity undergo change in the Opus 40 Polonaises, as some elements of a profoundly artistic expression are added to their ornamentation.

The evolution of Chopin's Polonaises undoubtedly reaches its zenith in the series referred to as "heroic," in the true meaning of the term. The series includes Polonaises in F sharp minor Op. 44 (1840-41), A flat major Op. 53 (1842) and the Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat major Op. 61 (1845-46). The free and uniquely individual form of each of the above pieces does not allow me to make any far-reaching generalization on their characteristic features, nor to discuss them in detail (the latter would in fact require a separate article). For this very reason I will have to select the problems which, in my opinion, are the most essential.

The question of the tempo of Chopin's Polonaises, not discussed before, calls for a clear statement: the polonaise is a stately dance. The direction, maestoso, in the score of Polonaise A flat major Op. 53 refers, in principle, to all of Chopin's Polonaises. The virtuoso fragments of his great (heroic) Polonaises should not prompt performers to show off, as their playing should not interrupt the continuity of the narration but form an integral whole with it. Sudden changes of the tempo (e.g., the octave ostinato in the Trio of Polonaise in A flat major Op. 53 or the figurative fragments of the bridges in the Polonaise-Fantaisie (bars 127-144) and the polyphonic fragment of a bridge (bars 66-88 in the same polonaise)

have no logical justification. The majestic quality of the polonaise is determined not only by the rules of choreography of this dance, but also the weight of its expressive essence for which Chopin chose this musical form. Historical and patriotic references as well as personal and transcendent allusions, in which Chopin's last Polonaises abound, lend them a special status. In the history of Polish culture, Chopin's Polonaises, due to the significance of the message they convey, rank with the finest paintings by Jan Matejko [7] and the greatest poems by Adam Mickiewicz, [8] earning their Creator the reputation as a national visionary composer.

Chopin developed every element constituting his heroic Polonaises. These elements include the Introduction, dual themes, the bridges, and the Coda. The Introduction, especially in Polonaise A flat major Op. 53 and Polonaise-Fantaisie A flat major Op. 61, is quite long and has a refined construction (the chromatic progression of the successive fourths in the Opus 53 Polonaise, the emergence of the first theme in Polonaise Op. 61, as if appearing from a mysterious mist of the impressionist passages). [9] The emotional element of these Introductions should also be noted. Its intensity is the same as in the thematic parts. [10]

In all three Polonaises the exposition (part A) is very extensive, a result of the first theme being repeated (twice in Opus 53, three times in Opus 44 and four times in Opus 61). Each repetition has a different texture (the main melody is played with either octaves or chords, an additional melodic line is introduced and the variation technique is used). In performance all this is reflected in the gradation of dynamics or the use of other means of expression (e.g., *agitato*, bar 108, Polonaise-Fantaisie). The extensive nature of the Polonaise exposition is also a consequence of the development of the second theme (along similar lines as the first theme) and the bridges which, especially in Polonaise-Fantaisie, assume the form of a "quasi-theme". This quasi theme is melodically, harmonically and texture-wise very attractive (e.g. bars 66-92; 116-144; 182-214). Performers who are unaware of this phenomenon and believe that the above bridges are "autonomous" may find that their interpretive concept is ill-devised.

A separate and complex issue, relevant to the form of Chopin's great Polonaises, is their middle part, i.e., the Trio, which has a different, individual construction: sequential (Opus 53) or a compound, consisting of an *ostinato* reprise and a long Mazurka (Opus 44). [11] In the case of Polonaise-Fantaisie, given its very free and asymmetric structure of the sonata allegro, [12] instead of the Trio we can talk only about a very short development, noting that the B major fragment (bars 148-180), frequently regarded as the so-called middle part, is nothing but the second theme of the Polonaise (sonata). This delightful theme, with a polyphonic texture, represents one of the most captivating examples of Chopin's poetry. The Coda, which very distinctly "prepares" the conclusion of the piece, often surprises us, in all heroic Polonaises, with an exquisite example of his composing mastery (e.g., Opus 44 bars 314 – the soprano part cites the Mazurka theme; Opus 61 bars 282, 286 – the notation offers a range of options concerning the right hand playing of the part).

Chopin's Polonaises, just like his Mazurkas, inspire special respect in performers. The reason is that the interpretation of these two national dances, despite the performer's excellent piano technique and knowledge of the epoch, may end in artistic failure. This failure may be a consequence of the performer's inadequate knowledge of the Polish national spirit, which in these very pieces is particularly evident. Intuition is required to penetrate this mystery, and this rarely happens. What is left for most performers to do is to empirically learn the culture, customs, history, and psychology of the nation of which Chopin was a famous son.

English Translation: Jerzy Ossowski

[1] Count Michal Kleofas Oginski (1765-1833), Polish composer of extremely popular polonaises and other pieces.

[2] Lev Mazel, About Some Composing Features in Chopin's Free Forms (in): Frédéric Chopin, a collective work edited by Georgiy Edielman. Moscow 1960. Polish translation: Jerzy Popiel, Studia chopinowskie [Chopin Studies]. Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne. Cracow 1965.

[3] "Next" refers to the cycle following the Polonaises: A flat major of 1821, G sharp minor of 1822, B flat minor of 1826. The E flat major Polonaise was written in 1830-31.

[4] Polonaise in D minor Op. 71 no. 1: bars 13-17: dialogue playing; bars 18-22, 28, 29, 56-68: two independent melodic lines – the right hand; bars 42, with a pick-up note, to 44 – "polymelodics"; bars 48-58: polyphonic texture with an interesting left hand ostinato.

Polonaise in B flat major Op. 71 no. 2: the middle part (Trio), basically homophonic, is interspersed with polyphonic fragments: bars 73, 74 & 77, 78; bars 83-89; bars 59, 60; bars 95, 96: imitation.

The homophonic first theme of the Polonaise should be played in three color-dynamic parts (soprano, bass, tenor) and the dialogue fragments (bar 28, with a pick-up note, to 37) should be "instrumented" in a contrasting manner: orchestral "tutti" and a solo part.

[5] Opus 26 marks the beginning of the series of Chopin's heroic Polonaises (A flat major Op. 53, F sharp minor Op. 44, Polonaise-Fantaisie Op. 61).

[6] Chopin's contrapuntal virtuosity (bars 95-105 – *ostinato*) was already discussed in part 2, "The features of the technique of Chopin's music interpretation."

[7] Jan Matejko (1838-1893), the greatest Polish painter of patriotic historical scenes which he produced on vast canvases.

[8] Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), the greatest Romantic poet of Poland, his works contain national and patriotic themes.

[9] Polonaise-Fantaisie, a piece of exceptional beauty and transcendent contents, deserves attention also because of Chopin's innovatory (heralding Impressionism) approach to tone colors (e.g. bars 1-9).

[10] The tempo of the Introduction, with the exception of Opuses 22 & 61, should be exactly the same as the pace of the first theme of the Polonaise.

[11] Combining a Polonaise and a Mazurka within one musical composition is the uppermost expression of Chopin's national sentiment.

[12] Lew Mazel, About Some Composing Features in Chopin's Free Forms...