

Chopin's Ballade No.1 in G Minor: Aspects of Form and Narrative

By

Richard Lee-Thai (30024611)

Dr. Kenneth DeLong
MUSI 311: Classic and Romantic Music
29 November 2017

Frédéric Chopin composed four works for solo piano between 1831 and 1842 called ballades. Although Chopin's music is essentially Romantic due to its rich harmonic palette and highly expressive melodies, one of the unique trademarks is the development of new genres for the piano, such as mazurkas, polonaises, waltzes and ballades.¹ This analytical essay will explore aspects of form and narrative in Chopin's ballades, specifically his Ballade No.1 in G minor, Op. 23 completed in 1835.

In order to understand Chopin's invention of the piano ballade, the historical background of the terms "ballad" and "ballade" will first be examined. The term "ballad" comes from the Latin *ballare* which means "to dance" and originally referred to dance-songs such as the French *carole*.² By the 14th century, it had lost its association with dance and had become a distinctive song type with a narrative character. On the other hand, the term "ballade" originally referred to one of the Medieval *formes fixes* that dominated French song and poetry in the 14th and 15th centuries.³ However, it is the case that Chopin did not draw from this Medieval poetic form and his ballades are more closely related to the ballads found during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.⁴ For example, the ballad was a form cultivated by German poets in the late 18th century, in imitation the folk ballads of England and Scotland. It is a type of story-driven poetry that might alternate narrative and dialogue and usually dealt with romantic or supernatural themes, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Erlkönig*.⁵ It is notable that musical settings of ballads by composers like Franz Schubert and Carl Loewe were often in a 'narrative' 6/8 or 6/4 metre, borrowing from a convention commonly associated with pastoral music of the 18th and

¹ Michałowski, Kornel and Jim Samson, "Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek," in *Grove Music Online*.

² James Porter, et al., "Ballad," in *Grove Music Online*.

³ Nigel Wilkins, "Ballade (i)," in *Grove Music Online*.

⁴ Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 200.

⁵ Peter Burkholder, Donald Grout and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 8th edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 607.

early 19th centuries.⁶ All of Chopin's ballades are in a compound duple metre, with his First Ballade being in a 6/4 metre. Furthermore, early advertisements for the First Ballade included the description *ohne Worte* (without words), which unequivocally establishes a connection with the tradition of the vocal ballad, but also demonstrates that he is taking an individualistic approach.

Although it has been suggested by Robert Schumann that Chopin's ballades were inspired by Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's *Ballads and Romances*, there is no explicit evidence to be found.⁷ While it is possible that he did draw inspiration from Mickiewicz's ballads, it is not as clear-cut as Chopin's contemporaries who explicitly incorporated literary ideas into their pieces.⁸ An example of this is Franz Liszt's *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* for solo piano, S. 154, composed in 1834. This is the same title as a collection of poems by Alphonse de Lamartine and is the literary basis for this piano piece.⁹ In contrast, the central point about Chopin's choice to use the title "ballade" for a piano piece is that it would evoke literary and musical connotations, but the term is generalized enough so that it does not have a specific programmatic association. As a listener, the lack of words within the ballade would mean that narrative elements would be derived purely from how the listener interprets the ongoing musical events. Therefore, the musical narrative would be based on the character of the piece, the interplay of the themes, and the large-scale formal structure. It is these aspects that will serve as a theoretical framework for how the First Ballade will be analyzed.

First, there will be a precis analysis of the overall form and sections. Subsequently, the nature of the thematic material and how this material interacts with one another will be discussed. Throughout this discussion will be a comparison to the conventions of sonata form.

⁶ Jim Samson, *Chopin: The Four Ballades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

⁷ Maurice Brown, "Ballade (ii)," in *Grove Music Online*.

⁸ Samson, *The Four Ballades*, 13.

⁹ Alan Walker, et al., "Liszt, Franz," in *Grove Music Online*.

Example 1: Precip Analysis of Chopin's Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 23

Section/Subsection	Measures	Comments
Introduction	1-7	Largo and in 4/4 metre. Neapolitan-sixth harmony expressed as an embellished arpeggiation of an Ab major chord (m.1-3). Introduces motivic ideas of appoggiaturas and intervallic relationships (m.3 & 7) that serve as basis for thematic material.
Exposition	8-93	In 6/4 metre until coda.
Key Area I: Theme I - G minor	8-36	Moderato. Principal theme (P) in cantabile style and can be divided into two units. P ¹ consists of an ascending arpeggiation followed by a stepwise descent. P ² follows P ¹ and consists of dotted half notes. P ¹ and P ² are repeated 7 times (m. 8-21) with the last iteration acting as a continuation of P ² until a PAC in m. 36.
Transition	36-67	Section one (m.36-43) uses modification of P ¹ and waltz-like accompaniment with increasing momentum and agitation. Section two (m.44-55) further increases intensity using the vii ^{o7} chord, rapid arpeggiation and denser texture. Section three (m.56-67) thins texture and gradually relaxes until only the tolling pitches of F and C are heard (m.64-67).
Key Area II: Theme II - Eb major	67-81	Meno mosso and sotto voce. Lyrical secondary theme (S) in 15-measure antecedent-consequent construction ending with a PAC in m.81.
Transition	81-94	Diminution of P ¹ in right hand. Bass line ascends by thirds (m.90-93) and acts as transition into the pedal E in m.94.
Development	94-165	Direct collision of P and S with transitional material omitted. Continuity through single tonality of A minor/A major. Introduction of Theme III.
Theme I – A minor	94-105	Transposition of P into the key of A minor, but is over the dominant pedal (E) which creates a sense of foreboding. P is repeated 4 times (m.94-101) with the last iteration using P ² in a chromatic ascent towards a high B. This acts as a direct link to S.
Theme II – A major	106-25	Point of furthest removed. Grandiose statement of S with full chords and octave scales. Thematic material gives way to figuration (m.124-125).
Transition	126-37	Dominant prolongation (Bb dom. 7) in preparation of Theme III in Eb major. Right hand uses octatonic figuration.
Theme III – Eb major	138-65	Waltz theme in <i>scherzando</i> style. Left-hand similar to the accompaniment in m.36-43 and in other Chopin waltzes. Acts as the peak of the thematic arch. Latter half of this section (m.150-165) features rapidly leaping intervals and scales.
Recapitulation	166-207	Reprisal of themes in reverse order of a typical sonata.
Key Area II: Theme II – Eb major	166-193	Third statement of S, this time with a more flowing accompaniment. Still powerful and with force, but not as grandiose as its statement in the development section.
Transition	180-193	Similar to transition section in the exposition (m.81-94).

Key Area I: Theme I – G minor	194-207	Return of P heralded by falling minor 9 th . Similar to statement of P in the development section, P is in the tonic key, but is over the dominant pedal (D), creating an atmosphere of tension and need for release. Appassionato continuation of P ² leading into coda (m.202-207).
Coda	208-264	2/2 metre and presto con fuoco. Virtuoso culmination and integration of previous material, such as the Neapolitan harmony from the introduction, P ¹ and falling minor 9ths. G melodic minor scalar flourishes (m.251 and m.255) and a descending chromatic scale to the tonic (m.258-261) creates sense of resolution and finality. Chromatic scale in quarter triplet rhythm recalls the 6/4 metre predominant in the piece.

Example 1 analyzes the First Ballade in the context of sonata form, and even though there are some notable deviations from conventional sonata form, it is still a valid analytical perspective. This is because the ballade possesses many defining aspects of sonata form. At the broadest level, there are sections with expository, developmental and reprisal functions. More specifically, the exposition presents a first theme in the tonic key of G minor and is connected with a transitional passage to a second theme in the contrasting key of Eb major. The development section modulates to a tonal centre of A minor/A major and combines both themes. The recapitulation restates the two themes from the exposition, but with the notable difference that it is in reverse order. The ballade is bookended by an introduction and a coda, which was not out of the norm for a sonata.

Having said all of this, the heart of the First Ballade lies within how Chopin draws from an awareness of sonata form and how he adjusts its elements to fit with his purpose. Sonata form is malleable and in the music of the Romantic period, composers constantly experimented with the form in order to achieve what they wanted to express.¹⁰ In this case, it can be argued that creating a narrative in the First Ballade is one of Chopin's central purposes.

¹⁰ Michael Griffel, "The Sonata Design in Chopin's Ballades," *Current Musicology* 36 (1983), 125.

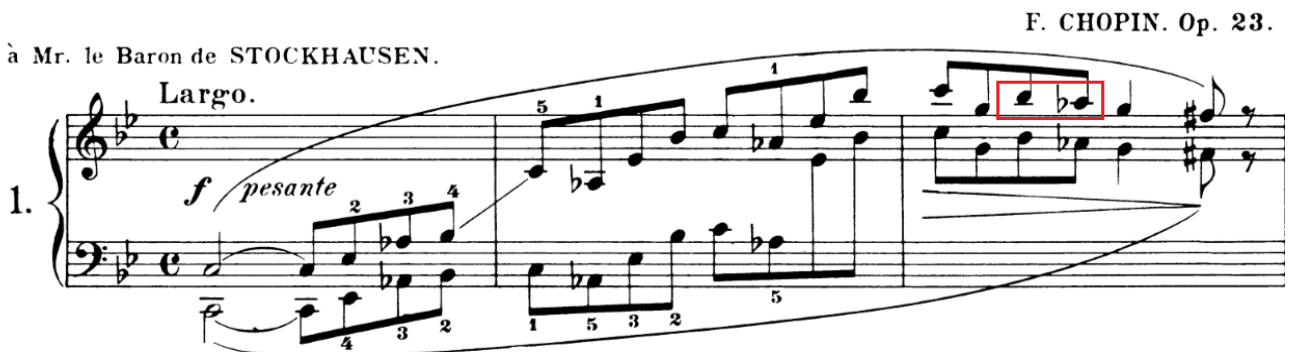
The introduction of the First Ballade acts as the musical seed from which later thematic material grows out of. This idea of organic growth is reflected in the works of other Romantic composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven. In Example 2, the characteristic opening motive is immediately developed through a transposition in m.3-4. It is this motive that serves as the basis of the whole first movement and reappears in the other three movements of the symphony. The transformation of this motive creates a large-scale narrative and a teleological work that culminates in the coda of the final movement.

Example 2: Beethoven, Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Movement 1 (m.1-4)



These comparisons to Beethoven also apply to Chopin's First Ballade, but the transformation of the introductory material is more subtle. In Example 3, the red box indicates an important appoggiatura figure that reappears throughout the piece. In relation to the bass note (C), this appoggiatura is an interval of a 7th resolving to a 6th. This characteristic resolution will be henceforth be referred to as a 7-6 resolution.

Example 3: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.1-3)



Example 4: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.4-7)



Within the introduction section, the usage of both Ab and A later have harmonic implications within the coda. Moreover, the Eb that sounds over a cadential 6-4 chord in m.7 creates the interval of a minor 9th between the bass note. Throughout the piece, the interval of a minor 9th plays a key role in heralding the return of the principal theme (P) and as a recurrent interval within the coda. On the other hand, the Eb can be thought of as an appoggiatura like the one in m.3, but with a 9-8 resolution.

Example 5: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.8-9)



Example 5 shows P with the red box highlighting the 7-6 resolution found in the introduction. Furthermore, there is an implied 9-8 resolution of the Eb⁴ from m.4 to the D⁴ in beat 5 of m.8. However, this resolution does not appear explicitly until later in the piece.

In essence, the introduction presents melodic shapes, as well as harmonic and intervallic relationships that act as musical seeds for later growth. Both Beethoven and Chopin, in their respective eras, used the most fragmentable of melodic lines as sources for rich thematic

development.¹¹ According to music scholar James Parakilas, it is this tightly connected motivic interrelationship that establishes the narrative continuity in the Ballade: a story about one character is suggestively equivalent to a motive threaded throughout the music.¹² For example, this thread can be seen in Example 6, where the orange box highlights the explicit 9-8 resolution of the Eb to D that was implied in m.7-8. Furthermore, the red boxes highlights the 7-6 resolutions. Note that the left hand quarter notes are an augmentation of the right hand appoggiatura.

Example 6: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.34-37)



While the appoggiatura figure is seemingly absent from the secondary theme (S), it does appear in the transitional sections that follow S during the exposition and recapitulation.

Example 7 highlights these figures. They are in a similar contour to P¹, but the rhythm has undergone diminution.

Example 7: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.82-83 and m.183)



¹¹ Michael Griffel, "The Sonata Design in Chopin's Ballades," 127.

¹² James Parakilas, *Ballads without Words: Chopin and the Tradition of the Instrumental Ballade*, (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992), 19.

Even when a new theme is introduced during the development section, Chopin further develops the motives that govern the piece. In Example 8, the red boxes in the accompaniment show 7-6 resolutions, but also resolutions upwards from a diminished octave to a 7th. The red boxes in the right hand part are the exact same 5 notes from m.3 of the introduction (see Example 3).

Example 8: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.138-140)

10

As previously mentioned, the minor 9th heralds the return of P. Example 9 shows the leap of a minor 9th down to signal the return of P. The example provided below is during the recapitulation, but this also occurs during the statement of P in the development (m.93-94). This idea is further developed when there is a profusion of downward minor 9th leaps in the coda.

Example 9: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.193-194)

Before the coda is discussed, it is important to look at the overall formal structure again. Omitting the coda, the First Ballade can be viewed as having an arch-like symmetrical form. Example 10 shows the relative positions of the themes and their tonalities.

Example 10: Themes and Tonalities within Chopin’s Ballade No. 1 in G Minor

Exposition		Development			Recapitulation	
Theme I (P)	Theme II (S)	Theme I (P)	Theme II (S)	Theme III	Theme II (S)	Theme I (P)
G minor	Eb major	A minor	A major	Eb major	Eb major	G minor

Theme III can be seen as the peak of a thematic arch. This is because it is framed by P and S in the development, and then the two themes in reverse order during the recapitulation. This creates a symmetrical form. However, in terms of tonality, S in the development section is the most distant from the tonic key of G minor. Thus, it can be considered the point of furthest removed and the material that follows is a gradual gravitation back towards the tonic. Viewed in terms of tonalities, this also creates a symmetrical form (G – Eb – A – Eb – G), but it is not congruent with the thematic arch. Moreover, there is the issue that the statement of P in the recapitulation is presented in the tension-generating form which opened the development, not in its stable exposition form.¹³ Therefore, there is the need to keep driving forward towards the coda.

Similar to the final movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5, the coda is the grand climax of the piece. This creates a piece that is goal-directed towards the coda. The same case can be made for Chopin’s First Ballade. The coda is the blossoming of the melodic shapes, as well as harmonic and intervallic relationships that were first planted during the introduction. Considering the intensity curve of the overall work, there is a major peak during the statement of S in the development and a subsidiary peak during the reprise of S. However, the maximum intensity point of the piece is the coda.

¹³ Samson, *The Four Ballades*, 46-47.

Example 11: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.208-209)



The metrical shift into cut time and the marking “Presto con fuoco” gives the coda an atmosphere of dramatic and restless energy. The red boxes in Example 11 highlight the minor 9th leaps that have been a recurring feature within the piece. It is notable that the accents fall on the weak beats of two and four. As the coda goes on, these accents shift to landing on either beats one and three or one and four. As Example 12 shows, this culminates with accents on every beat during the cadential measures.

Example 12: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.235-238)



Harmonically speaking, the coda draws from P in the exposition and from the introduction. The statement of P in the exposition (m.9-11) goes through the following progression: $i-i^6-ii^{\phi7}-V^7-i$. This is reflected during the coda (m.208-216) where it follows the same progression. Furthermore, the coda integrates the Neapolitan harmony from the introduction. The appearance of both A^b and A natural from the introduction have harmonic

implications through the alternation of ii^{o7} and N^6 in the coda. In Example 13, m.214-217 shows the progression: $ii^{o7}-V^7-i-N^6-V^7-i$ and a repetition of the Neapolitan progression in m.218-219. As with the integration of the minor 9th leap, the coda synthesizes past material and reinterprets them with new technical demands.

Example 13: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.214-219)

Example 14: Chopin, Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (m.250-257)

Both the 7-6 and 9-8 resolutions that were first hinted at in the introduction make a return through the P¹ motive within the coda. This is highlighted in the red boxes in Example 14. It seems appropriate that this material reappears since the appoggiatura has been a such an important and recurring device within the First Ballade. In the final 15 measures of the piece, there are now markings for *ritenutos*, an immediate reduction of tempo, and *accelerandos*, a gradual increase of tempo. As opposed to the unrelenting momentum of most of the coda, the quasi-improvisatory nature of the final 15 measures acts like an epilogue that reflects on the events of the piece. This forms a symmetry with the introduction which also sounds quasi-improvisatory before the principal thematic material gradually emerges. Thus, the narrative of the First Ballade has come full circle.

Since there are no words within the First Ballade, the musical narrative would be based on the character of the piece, the interplay of the themes, and the large-scale formal structure. However, the construction of a narrative is still primarily a subjective experience based on a listener's interpretation. There are a number of pivotal moments such as the transformation of the secondary theme from being soft and lyrical, to being loud and impassioned, or the transformation of the principal theme from being stable to unstable. Moreover, there is the introduction of a third theme and a culminating coda section. While principles of sonata form are used, there is a level of ambiguity because arch-like symmetries and goal-oriented momentum are both present in the First Ballade. Lastly, there is the subtle, but continual transformation of musical motives that is analogous to a main character gradually developing over the course of a story arc. As a whole, it is clear that the First Ballade is rich in its complexity and is a significant composition in the Romantic repertory.

Bibliography

- Brown, Maurice. "Ballade (ii)." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/01885> (accessed November 8, 2017).
- Burkholder, Peter, Donald Grout and Claude Palisca. *A History of Western Music*, 8th edition. New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Griffel, Michael. "The Sonata Design in Chopin's Ballades." *Current Musicology* 36 (1983), 125-135.
- Michałowski, Kornel and Jim Samson. "Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek." *Grove Music Online*. Available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/5109> (accessed November 6, 2017).
- Parakilas, James. *Ballads without Words: Chopin and the Tradition of the Instrumental Ballade*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992.
- Plantinga, Leon. *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984.
- Porter, James, et al. "Ballad." *Grove Music Online*. Available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/01879> (accessed November 8, 2017).
- Samson, Jim. *Chopin: The Four Ballades*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Walker, Alan, et al. "Liszt, Franz." *Grove Music Online*. Available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/48265> (accessed November 12, 2017).
- Wilkins, Nigel. "Ballade (i)." *Grove Music Online*. Available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/01884> (accessed November 10, 2017).