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## **An Analysis of the Thematic Structure of Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie, Opus 61**

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEMATIC STRUCTURE OF CHOPIN'S  
POLONAISE-FANTASIE, OPUS 61

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
the Graduate Faculty  
Central Washington College of Education

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Education

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by  
Thomas Walter Bull  
August 1961

THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING  
THE PLAN 2 REQUIREMENT FOR THE  
COMPLETION OF A RESEARCH PAPER.

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Mary Elizabeth Whitner FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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## FOREWORD

This analysis of Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie was prompted by a reluctance to accept the generally held opinion that most of Chopin's music is loosely structured. Since no published analysis of this particular work could be found, either in the Central Washington College Library or through inter-library loan, it seemed to offer a fertile field for original exploration. In addition, this study supplies the kind of understanding necessary for the performance of the music.

Only through careful and detailed analysis can one get at the musical elements and style characteristics which illuminate performance. Any study, then, which develops skill in musical analysis and thereby increases musical comprehension is of direct value to anyone working with music, whether he be a professional soloist or a music educator.

The writer is especially indebted to Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Whitner for help and guidance in the preparation of this paper.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Frederic Chopin, 1810-49, is unique among composers of recognized stature in that he wrote (for all practical purposes) exclusively for one medium--the piano. The universal popularity his music still enjoys extends to nearly everything he wrote. Generally this popularity is attributed to Chopin's "romantic lyricism," most "authorities" suggesting that the music survives in spite rather than because of its structure.

#### The Problem

The analysis of the Polonaise-Fantaisie was undertaken to ascertain, insofar as can be done through the analysis of one work, whether or not Chopin's music is loosely structured and unpolyphonic as some of his critics have maintained.

#### Definitions of Terms Used

All musical terms used in this paper carry the meaning given them in any standard music dictionary. However, the term "thematic structure," not defined in any standard source, shall be interpreted as meaning the evolution of one musical idea from another.

It is applied to themes whose evolution can be traced to the same musical substance rather than to musical ideas that have only a vague affinity.

### About the Composer

Frederic Chopin, Poland's greatest composer, was born February 22, 1810, in a small village near Warsaw. His mother was Polish; his father, of French birth, was a school master. Chopin spent the first twenty years of his life in Poland, but it was in France that he wrote nearly all the music for which he is remembered.

Passionately patriotic and deeply affected by the misfortunes of his native Poland, Chopin expressed in much of his music a strongly national character tinged with melancholy. The inspiration from national idioms, his chromaticism, his ever changing melodic and harmonic coloring, and his disregard for formal limitations combine to make Chopin's music the very embodiment of romanticism as well as a source of later romantic developments.

### About the Polonaise-Fantaisie

Chopin's last major work, Polonaise-Fantaisie, Opus 61, was written in 1845-6 during the composer's annual sojourn at the Nohant estate of novelist George Sand. Possibly Chopin's most advanced work, it has not attained the popularity of his other great compositions.



Wier (43:140) ranks it among the greatest piano pieces of all time and offers the following reasons why it is seldom played.

It is one of his least appreciated works, due to the tremendous task of grasping its formal outlines and conveying them to the listener. There are few who can give it adequate interpretation, and it has accordingly been condemned by those who are unable to understand it.

Many critics have not spoken so kindly of the Polonaise-Fantaisie or its composer. Liszt, for example, described the work as "a product of deranged nerves and impoverished talent" (25:85). Sir W. H. Hadow criticized the composer unmercifully: "In structure he is a child, playing with a few simple types, and almost helpless as soon as he advances beyond them" (15:169). Edward Dannreuther is almost as devastating (8:251):

He strove so hard to attain refinement of harmony that in a few of his latest pieces, such, for instance as, the Polonaise-Fantaisie, the Violoncello Sonata, and the last set of Mazurkas, he appears to have spun his progressions into useless niceties.

That many present day critics hold similar if more moderate views is shown by Gerald Abraham's description of Chopin's formal procedure as "stringing together instead of organic form" (1:13), and Curt Sachs' statement: "He was entirely unpolyphonic and concentrated on melody . . ." (35:281). Donald Ferguson sees the Polonaise-Fantaisie as "artificial and cold" (11:230).

Not all critics, however, agree with these harsh opinions. Among the dissenters are Kathleen Dale, Rudolph Reti, and especially Sir Donald Francis Tovey, whose writings and essays on musical analysis have provided the inspiration and starting point for so many who have followed where he leads. In fact, this writer was encouraged to refute the charges against Chopin's music by Tovey's statement concerning the "reconciliation of technique with Art" (40:157-8):

Intimately connected with this is an aspect of Chopin very remote from that of the "elegant salon-writer" still commonly held; the aspect of him as a hard-headed student of classical music--a musical scholar whose work in certain directions may be no less fitly characterized as erudite than as romantic.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ANALYSIS

#### Method Used in the Study

Rudolph Reti, in The Thematic Process in Music, has supplied the method by which the structural unity in the Polonaise-Fantaisie might be established or disproved. While the analysis will also include an outline of the form and an examination of harmonic, melodic, and textural characteristics, a detailed study of the work's thematic structure will comprise the core of this paper. The analysis will show that thematic homogeneity exists between sections because all the themes are variations or transformations of one basic musical idea.

References to the musical score will be made by section and by measure numbers. When required for clarity, music excerpts will be included in the body of the text. In the copy of the music included as an appendix to the study, the first measure of each line is numbered. Also included are letter markings identifying each section according to the outline, as given by Abraham(1:110).

Formal Outline

	Introduction:	23 bars	(1-23)
	A:	42 bars	(24-65)
Allegro	B:	26 bars	(66-91)
maestoso	A:	24 bars	(92-115)
	C:	32 bars	(116-147)
	D:	33 bars	(148-180)
Poco più	E:	34 bars	(181-213)
lento	Introduction:	2 bars	(214-215)
	E:	10 bars	(216-225)
	Transition:	16 bars	(226-241)
Tempo I	A:	12 bars	(242-253)
	D:	35 bars	(254-288)

This outline of the Polonaise-Fantaisie's formal dimensions clearly shows that it cannot be fitted into any "standard" pattern. It contains at least five themes and appears to be loosely thrown together.

If, however, one considers form as an outgrowth of the musical material rather than an inflexible mold into which the musical material is poured, an entirely different evaluation of the organic unity will result. Sir Donald Tovey, pointing out that Beethoven attained his strictest form in his late works (those in which the form is popularly supposed to have broken down), makes this statement (38:8):

The strictest form is not that which is most like some average deduced from many Classical examples, but that which, when adequately described, will account most nearly for every note in the work.

The evidence of structural integrity and cohesion, then, can only be found through a detailed, bar-to-bar analysis.

### Harmony

The Polonaise-Fantaisie is filled with intimations of the future, particularly in the area of tonality, where traditional relationships seem weakened and undermined. Leichtentritt (24:210) calls Chopin the "real father of impressionistic music" and "the creator of the magnificent romantic harmony in all its varying aspects."

It is too little known that Wagner's and Liszt's sensational chromatic harmony is a daughter of Chopin's harmony, that Chopin was the discoverer of this new land of luminous shadows, of transitions from brighter to darker levels of sound, of genuine scales of musical color. For Chopin tonality is no longer, as in classical music, a constructive feature but in the main a coloristic value. . . .

If traditional tonal relationships are the very basis of the traditional forms, as Leichtentritt suggests, then the further implication is that one must look beyond them, in Chopin's work, to find the basis for continuity and formal structure.

From the opening chord on the tonic minor to the end of the introduction, Chopin never lets any real feeling of key emerge. After an extended, contrapuntal preview in various keys, the main theme is presented firmly in the tonic A flat major (bars 24-31). Following the

sequential repetition of the theme, the tonality is obscured (bars 50-51) with a diminished seventh over a dominant pedal extended by a virtuoso "play" on the triplet motive to bar 56.

After four bars of insistence on the dominant, the B section opens (bar 66), re-affirming the tonic A flat in a decorative passage that has identity but hardly assumes the importance of a theme. After a repetition of this passage in C major and E major, a modulation by means of an extended diminished seventh and an enharmonic change (bar 79) is effected. Then follows a second repetition of theme B in the new key with the tonality again becoming unclear.

In the remainder of the work, each section is presented with a clear tonal feeling, rapidly becoming obscured as the section progresses to the next. This reciprocation between clearly defined and obscured tonality provides not only a variety of mood but also an emotional rhythmic movement from serenity to agitation.

At one point (bars 199-205), Chopin suggests bitonality by the simultaneous sounding of tonic and dominant triads. The dominant ( $F\sharp-A\sharp-C\sharp$ ) triad in the bass is held by the pedal while the trill sounds the third of the tonic, ( $D\sharp$ ) then the root and fifth ( $B-F\sharp$ ).

At no point in this rather long composition does the movement ever come to a complete halt. Chopin accomplishes this continued flow

through a wide use of interrupted cadences and unexpected resolutions. An example of this occurs in bars 250-251. The F sharp major chord (dominant seventh of B major) resolves to G major, a third lower than B.

Following the brilliant climax (bars 254-267), a coda prepares for the final cadence. With measure 267, the harmony alternates from dominant to tonic, landing, in measure 281, on a tonic seventh (V<sub>7</sub> of iv) for the final, repeated cadence--a plagal cadence except for the insertion of the dominant on the unaccented third beat (bars 282-286).

### Texture

With his late compositions, Chopin's use of polyphony increased. After 1841, he studied thoroughly Cherubini's Cours de Contrepoint et de la Fugue, a new and authoritative treatise on counterpoint in Chopin's day. He always had a high regard for Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, generally believed to have been the inspiration for his own Etudes.

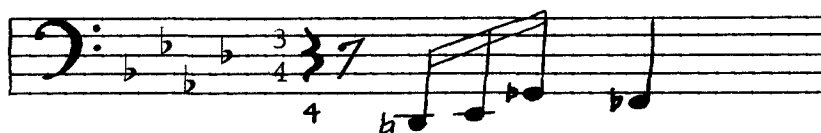
The Polonaise-Fantaisie gives ample evidence of Chopin's ability to handle contrapuntal thematic treatment, although the counterpoint is free and suggests rather than imitates.

In measure four, the treble motive (Ex. 1) is answered in a different rhythm by the bass.

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



This is repeated and expanded (bars 10-22) to a complete contrapuntal statement of the main polonaise theme.

The opening statement of the A theme (bars 24-31) is accompanied by a counter melody woven into a bass that otherwise sounds chordal (Ex. 6). The B section includes a slow alto melody of quarter and eighth notes overshadowed by the predominant, rising series of sixteenth notes (Ex. 7). In the accompaniment to the first repetition of the A section (bars 92-115), the highest note of each triplet figure suggests the treble melody (Ex. 9). In measure 102 this bass melody actually becomes an imitation of the theme.

The Poco più lento (bars 148-213) is almost entirely polyphonic in texture. The alternately rising and falling bass line beginning measure 152 commands nearly equal stature with the lyric treble melody. This bass pattern is to provide later the concluding theme of the work.



The final recurrence of sections A and E (bars 242-267) consists, almost completely, of two independent melodic lines in combination.

### Thematic Structure

As has already been pointed out, Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie does not adhere to a traditional formal pattern. Its schematic unity must therefore be shown through an analysis of the thematic material, its treatment and development. The following pages will be concerned with this kind of analysis.

Introduction, bars 1-23. The work opens with a three-note motive, built upon a descending fourth, followed by a cadenza-like arpeggio encompassing over five octaves. Here are the thematic kernels from which nearly all the ensuing themes evolve.

Ex. 3

This pregnant measure is heard six times in the composition, four in the introduction and two shortly before the final return to the A theme. Note that the descending small second marked in Ex. 3 gives contour to the arpeggio and is heard four times. The held half notes in the four introductory statements outline the same important motive both harmonically and melodically.

Ex. 4

The musical notation for Ex. 4 is as follows:

- Staff: Treble clef, key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb).
- Notes: A sequence of notes with fingerings 3, 4, 1, 2, 7, 8. The notes are connected by a descending line.
- Chords: Eb (bIII), Db (bII), Bb (VII), and Ab (VI).

This figure, also used in bars 3-4, returns (bar 9) in the treble, is answered, varied rhythmically in the bass, repeated, altered and expanded, and finally evolves at the close of the introduction as the A theme presented in the tonic minor (bars 13-21).

A section, bars 24-66. The main theme, having been constructed in the introduction, makes its appearance here punctuated by the characteristic polonaise rhythm. Stripped of embellishments, the thematic contour proves to be a simple repetition of two notes a second apart, closing with a descending fourth.



## Ex. 7



The obvious melodic interest of this section is a rising scale figure flowing from the bass into a five note treble pattern. Note again the descending perfect fourth.

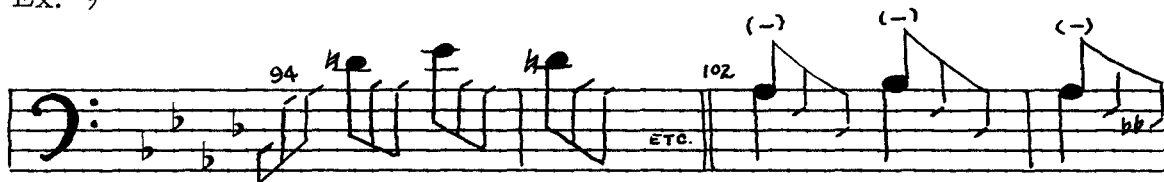
## Ex. 8



As in the previous section, the transitions of bars 76-79 and 88-91 contain the descending seconds. The variant of theme A (Ex. 7) is heard in bars 80-87, this time in E major.

First return to A section, bars 92-115. This section is a return and development of the original polonaise theme. Opening with a two-measure introduction, it combines the rising scale pattern of the previous section with the accompaniment, in triplets, to be used throughout this section. In bars 94-95 the high notes of the accompanying triplets suggest the A theme, and at measure 102 actually become a contrapuntal imitation of the treble melody.

Ex. 9



C section, bars 116-146. Bars 116-128 contain a transformation of motives from preceding sections--bars 116-117 from measure 4, 118-119 from 14.

Ex. 10



This treatment is a typical Chopin cantabile, offering variety and relief from the agitato of the previous section. The serenity is short lived as the movement steadily quickens and expands to a climax at measure 136, gradually subsiding to the close of the section. The cascading sixteenth notes are built upon the familiar descending seconds, maintaining the integrity and unity of the composition.

Poco più lento: D section, bars 148-180. This section offers a clear example of Chopin's skill in the polyphonic development of thematic material, thus refuting the critics who declare that he is unpolyphonic.



14 (itself a development of the descending fourth of bar 1) in a different rhythm. The section closes with a series of seventh chords and an imperfect cadence (bars 177-180).

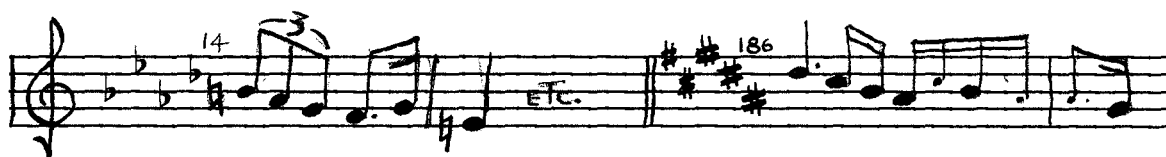
E section, bars 181-213. The next 26 measures provide the first opportunity for the accompaniment of the Poco più lento to stand by itself. The segment, Ex. 11, first heard in bar 1 of the introduction, is transformed and developed into an important thematic entity--the last new theme to be presented.

Ex. 13



Bars 186-187 are a transformation of the triplet figure of measure 14.

Ex. 14



The section closes with the extended trill (bars 199-205) already discussed under the heading of harmony. An interesting aspect of the trill is its evolution from single notes into a trill of simultaneous thirds, then sixths, thus illustrating, in miniature, the evolution by

development and expansion which characterizes the entire composition.

Bars 206-213 conclude the Poco più lento with an extended cadence built upon the D theme. By an extension of the bass melody (bars 212-213), Chopin maintains movement to the final section.

Return of the Introduction and E theme. This "recapitulation" prepares the way for the climax to follow. The reiteration of the E theme in F minor (bars 216-221) briefly prolongs the tranquility to Tempo I (bar 226).

Transition, bars 226-241. This transitional passage is the most controversial section of the work. Of it Weinstock remarks (42:282):

It is in the 16-measure transition and what immediately follows it that the structure of the Polonaise-Fantaisie begins to sound fragmentary, loosely tied together.

A close examination of the transition fails to uncover any loosening of the strict structural unity evidenced so far. While it is definitely a transitory passage, steadily rising in pitch, excitement, and tempo in preparation for the triumphant finale, it is derived from thematic material common to the entire work. The quarter notes of bars 226-228 and 230-232 reiterate part of the D theme.



## Ex. 15



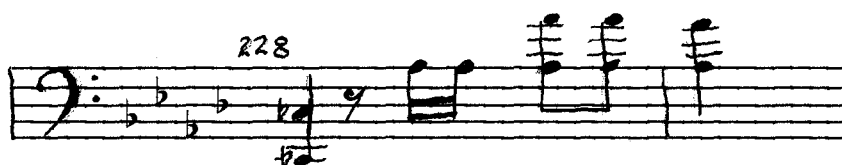
The remaining measures contain, in both treble and bass, the familiar descending seconds in a rising sequence.

## Ex. 16



Two final reminders of the polonaise rhythm appear in bars 228 and 232 with this pattern in the left hand.

## Ex. 17



Final return of theme A, bars 242-253. In its final hearing this most prominent theme, still in its original form, has a new accompaniment. Retaining the triplet figure of the first return, the accompaniment is now filled out with octaves in the bass and the remaining chordal notes in the treble. The increased density of texture intensifies the theme. Five measures of transition lead to the climactic return of the D theme.

Final return of D theme and coda, bars 254-288. It is typical of Chopin that the contrastingly slow and lyric Poco più lento theme should provide the dramatic climax of this unusual work. He accomplishes this change of mood by putting the melody into a higher register, filling in the harmonies with chords in triplet rhythm in the treble, and by changing the rhythm of the bass.

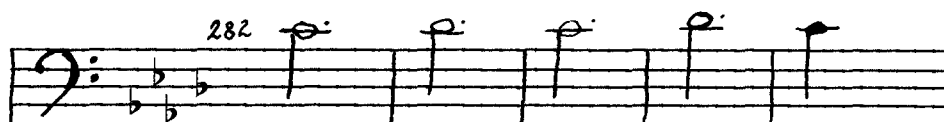
Ex. 18



At measure 268, this bass melody takes over and, gradually subsiding, brings the composition to a close.

The dotted half notes in the final, extended cadence give a last utterance to the theme that has appeared so many times, in such varied guises, throughout the composition.

Ex. 19



### Conclusion

This study has pointed out only the most obvious examples of

thematic homogeneity and polyphonic writing in Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie. Much more evidence could be found, if time and space permitted, to prove that this composition is neither loosely structured nor unpolyphonic. Even though Chopin did not write within the formal boundaries of traditional tonal relationships, his formal organization is nevertheless disciplined and recognizable.

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## APPENDIX

Please note: The appendix consists of piano sheet music of Polonaise - Fantaisie (Op. 61) by Frédéric Chopin. It was not scanned due to copyright concerns. Public domain versions can be found here: [https://imslp.org/wiki/Polonaise-fantaisie,\\_Op.61\\_\(Chopin,\\_Frédéric\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Polonaise-fantaisie,_Op.61_(Chopin,_Frédéric))