

SCHERZO OP. 31, NO. 2 BY FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

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SUMMARY. Frédéric Chopin's contribution to the development of the genre of scherzo is unique. The four independent Scherzos composed by Chopin represent the development and the innovation he brought to the traditional scherzo. Chopin's Scherzos share very little of the playful character of the classic scherzo, being considered rather dramatic works. Chopin's different approach to the genre and the names of the genres went along with the stylistic changes of the early 1830s. His approach can be described as renovating, creating a kind of internal order in the permissive world of the pianistic genres of the nineteenth century. Chopin did not choose the genre titles arbitrarily, nor used them without sense. They had thought it was not necessarily conventional, generic meaning. The composer, however, did not ignore the connotative values of the titles. More than that, he has absorbed them and built values based on these titles that he later transformed into new genres. The purpose of this article is to decipher the features of Chopin's scherzo and his style of composition, through the analysis of Scherzo No. 2 and comparing all the scherzos composed by Chopin, which will lead to a better understanding of his musical language.

Keywords: scherzo, trio, tradition, independent genre.

1. Introduction

Before Chopin used the term scherzo, this was a movement of a work, either cyclic, or having more parts, associated particularly with Beethoven's scherzo, who created this tradition. Even Chopin used the scherzo in this way (and in a way that looked great with Beethoven's model) in its mature sonatas.

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Indeed, before Chopin, there were very few independent scherzos and that is why it seems strange that Chopin felt so familiar with this form. Chopin is not a major innovator of the melody, but he knew, like no other, to chisel the melodic-harmonic structures and to combine the means of expression with such mastery, that his music, often laconic, conveys an enthralling expressivity. His rhythms are the result of the fusion between the ordered rhythms of the dance and the meanderings of the Romantic thinking. He seldom uses polyphony, layers of melodies meant to illustrate emotional developments on several levels. Instead, his harmonies, which are often chromatic, play a crucial role in rendering images, inner turmoil or tragic feelings. In the short pieces, his profuse fantasy found and developed expressive musical formulas, shaped in clear architectures. The romantic freedom of expression is compensated by a strong logic of the musical forms. He established the prelude as a genre, he gave poetic meaning to the "études" and the dances: mazurka, polonaise and the waltz. As for the longer pieces, he instituted the scherzo as an independent genre and popularized the ballad.

The contemporary lexicographer describes the scherzo as a literary joke with a $\frac{3}{4}$ metric characteristic, and a lively, but not too fast tempo. Others referred to more specific aspects of the scherzos, like the much-differentiated articulation and the alternating of the ascendant and descendent melodic pattern.²

The tripartite design of the scherzo (with the contrasting trio) is preserved, even if it is developed through complex repetitive structures. The meter shall be kept, together with some of the particular features of Beethoven's scherzo, like the contrasts in the articulation.

Chopin made one of the biggest changes in the tempo, turning it into *Presto (con fuoco)*, in *Scherzo in B minor* and in *Scherzo in C sharp minor* and, in terms of expressive status, by enlarging the scale. Therefore, it remains so little of the 'joke' in the original work.

Indeed, the first three scherzos are characterized by an almost demonic force. But the most crucial aspect of the composer's approach to scherzo as a genre is found in the reinterpretation of the contrasting elements of the middle section. As emphasized by Zofia Chechlinska³, Chopin has built the central formal contrast of the genre in details, foremost through the characterization of the beginning gesture of each of the four scherzos, where fragmented motifs are presented with a calculated discontinuity.

² Samson, Jim. *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

³ Chechlinska, Zofia. *The Scherzo as a genre: selected problems*, 'Second International Musicological Symposium', Warsaw, 1989.

Although it is unusual for Chopin to start a composition with discontinuous gestures, the internal contrasts found at the beginning of the four scherzos are surprising. In the opening of *Scherzo in B minor*, there are contrasting textures, and the dynamic registry and actions are repeated in several points of the work. In the opening of the *Scherzo in D flat major*, the initial contrast is part of the main theme of the work, so the dramatic tension generated is the key characteristic of the whole work. In C sharp minor, the contrast is less obvious, but the manner (unison/chords) is identical to that of the second *Scherzo*. The work in B flat major opens with a sequence of contrasting fragments, in texture and harmony, separated by pauses or by sustained chords.

It seems that Chopin considered the scherzo independently, as a separate genre, clearly different from the scherzo of his sonatas, especially in the contrasting gestures.

2. The analysis of *Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2*

The second scherzo focuses on the integrity of the contrasts (gestures, tonal, rhythmic, thematic and even stylistic), at several structural levels. In this light, this scherzo is closer to the principles of the sonata than the first, although the formal starting point is also a scherzo and trio.

Much of the power of the beginning section resides in the tremendous tension generated between the explosive contrasts and the solid surface and the symmetrical periods and controlled tonal harmonies that keep them in check. This kind of tension, where the components are in opposition yet interdependent is important and it is expressed both laterally and temporally between the foreground and background and between the part and the whole.

From the interpretive perspective, this beginning is extremely important, because it creates the sound pattern of the first section of the work. Musical discourse should be designed through the integration of the two types of sound, the melodic and the harmonic, in a single musical phrase and pauses are considered here expressive breaths generating suspense and unity, thus excluding, in this instance, the principle that a pause marks a disruption.

Chopin raises the musical language to an almost literal level; the indication for the beginning is *sotto voce* – whispering – it is the first indicator of the composer's desire to make a strong connection between the personal and musical language. Contrary to expectations, tension and inner tumult decrease in the first two debut phrases: *sotto voce* – *pp.*, but explode in the middle section with the indication *ff*.

E.g. 1

Fr. Chopin, *Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2*

Although Romanticism is a period of separation from the previous rules of composition, Chopin, however, seeks novelty developed on a stable support of old rules like symmetry and dynamic contrast. *Presto tempo* reveals his character much later in the course of the work, being dominated here by the reduced dynamics.

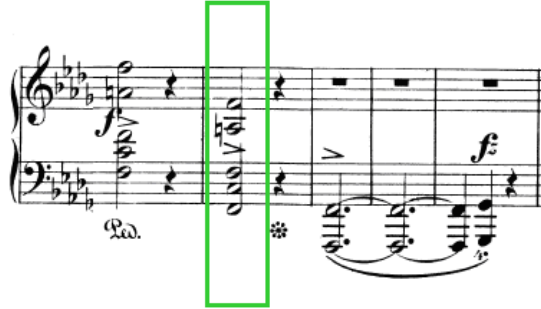
The first note of the piece has an exclusively metric function. Although redundant to the theme, its presence is essential to mark a starting point for the unambiguous proposition of eight measures and it is omitted in the subsequent exposition. The regular measure of the opening sentence is critical, so it may contain the surface contrast of the two phrases, in opposition with texture, rhythm and dynamics, separated by a pause. The tension between foreground and background is present in the second sentence by changing the harmonic direction.⁴

E.g. 2

Fr. Chopin, *Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2*

⁴ Schenker, Heinrich. *Free Composition*, Longman, New York, 1979.

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Fr. Chopin, *Scherzo Op. 31 No.2*

The strictly measured pause is important for the tension structure of the entire opening section, and it is essential for pianists to not allow themselves any freedom in this part. The three sentences form an *aab* structure which is then immediately repeated. The only variable factor is harmony. The harmonic direction of the foreground can be represented as shown below:

E.g. 3

b flat → D flat → (b flat)
 b flat → f → (D flat)

The initial progress to the major relative (1-17) is the mirror of the bigger movement (1-49) and finally of the tonal progression of the whole work. This can be described as a scherzo in D flat Major, identifying the 'f' from measure 49 as the beginning of the fundamental line.⁵

E.g. 4



Fr. Chopin, *Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2*

⁵ Schenker, Heinrich. *Free Composition*, Longman, New York, 1979.

Meanwhile, the middle ground tandem of tonalities, B flat and D flat major, is important both here and later in the scherzo. The highlight of the four phrases is placed in the higher register, and both hands were noted in the Sol key and interpreting chordal blocks:

E.g. 5



Fr. Chopin, Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2

The tonality of D flat major which comes next (measures 49-132) is opposite to the beginning section. There is a contrast in tonalities and design, but the most striking is the musical fluency contrast where, for the first time in the part, the rhythmic continuity is set in accompaniment (a real waltz model), providing stability and affirmation after the opening tensions and questions.

In terms of interpretation, it is necessary in this passage to emphasize the first note, to differentiate the melodic plans. The sounds that appear here refer to what musicologists call the vocality of Chopin's piano music.

E.g. 6

Fr. Chopin, Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2

The true signification of this beginning becomes clear later in the work, but even in its immediate context, it is striking, not only because it is the first pause in a rigid periodization of eight measures.

Irregularities are found in the trio, which forms a part of the remarkable 'negative' response to the events of the scherzo. We find parallels between the ideas of the scherzo and trio sequences, despite the obvious contrasts of character. Again, it is a 'resolution' to stop, the material goes from unstable to stable, sequential in presentation, and the tonal sequence is again a third step to D flat / C sharp. The starting material structure is *ccd, ccd*, producing an echo of the scherzo's *aab, aab*, but instability is now achieved by the diametrical opposite meanings.

The trio begins with a well-defined harmonic writing; the original bass pedal gradually develops, both in terms of the harmonic and the rhythm. Here, due mainly to the harmonic writing, which overlaps the soprano line with a melodic speech having the character of a theme, the performer has a problem facing the melodic phrase, the risk being that it would be discontinued by the wrong metric accents.

The real contrast in this section is not the theme or the harmony but rather the style as the *development* accommodates a *Waltz* in E major: his unmistakable style *moto perpetuo arabesque*. It is the last new material brought into the work and tonal settings that confirms the relational third, which is the base of the entire tonal scheme. The repetition of this sequence is not identical to it, but it brings a marked discourse, of a different, more casual touch, suggested by the *slentando* indication.

Another difficulty is the *arpeggiato* writing, which requires a perfect technique. This moment is extremely expressive; the main melody is highlighted by the left hand.

E.g. 7



Fr. Chopin, Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2

The *arpeggiato* writing is extremely difficult, and this is because of the phrase accents that take the melody in a different direction. Here the literal descriptivism becomes extremely clear and understandable even for an unformed

ear. Although, at first glance, Chopin often uses pauses, the pause has a leading role in highlighting the expressiveness of voices and the melodic line, being rather a connector between notes than an element of fragmentation.

One of the strengths of Chopin's maturity is the ability to create material not only in relation to its intrinsic beauty or immediate contextual functions but also with awareness of later potential. The climax begins with the indication *sempre con fuoco* and has ample construction.

E.g. 8



Fr. Chopin, Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2

As a scherzo material, the trio is repeated in measure 467, and a cadential figuration statement that indicates the scherzo's return still appears:

E.g. 9



Fr. Chopin, Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2

This figuration is completely transformed from a cadence gesture into a leading impulse.

The approach of the Reprise is very successful not only because of the thematic transformation of the beginning motifs but also because the rhythm of recession from measure 544 is skillfully measured to allow the Reprise to return. The keynote is immediately restored, however, as elements of B are transformed into a triumphant coda.



Fr. Chopin, *Scherzo Op. 31 No. 2*

It is a fitting conclusion for a work focused on quality-developing synthesized contrasts that it looks more like the universe of a sonata than like anything we expect from a scherzo.

3. Scherzos no 1 and 4

Two compositional problems are highlighted by the two Scherzos, although they have wider applications in Chopin's music. The outer flanks of *Scherzo in B minor* illustrate well how the functions are 'shaded' by the texture, motifs and harmony, which we often encounter in Chopin's creation of maturity.⁶

The texture of the first section (due to the high independent values of the content-register, density, articulation and dynamics) play a dominant role. The powerful energy of these opening paragraphs is generated by the rhythmic figuration, in a context where the melodic and harmonic information is minimal.

How the energy is dissipated, how the definition of the motifs begins to override the figuration and the subtle transition between the two, is entirely characteristic to Chopin. Then, in the second section, the opening material is transformed so much, that the texture and the motif make room for the melodic theme and harmony.

Typical of Chopin, the boundaries between figuration, melody and harmony are intentionally deleted. The first meaning of texture as a means of determining the compositional modeling and directing the musical phrase is already visible in *Scherzo No. 1*. The work would later become a basic model of style, to the point it sometimes foreshadows the so-called composers of the early twentieth century.⁷

It is enough to point out that in the fourth Scherzo the main thematic substance is determined by a chain of strikingly differing elements in which

⁶ Huneker, James. *Chopin: The Man and His Music*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1900.

⁷ Jonson, G.C. Ashton. *A Handbook to Chopin's works*, William Reeves, London, 1905.

contrasts – in a context of uniform dynamics – have textural character, determined just as much by the shape and articulation as by the harmonies and themes.

A second problem is the compositional sentence structure. In general, in Chopin's music, the eight bars proposition is a standard construction, especially in the dance-inspired works and in the expanded ternary design. In this restriction are still present many ambiguities and subtleties that animate the music and ensure a flexible rhythmic profile. Again, the beginning of *Scherzo in B minor* should be discussed. Here, the opening chords establish the structure of eight bars against which subsequent figuration will be measured. The ellipse of the opening and the conclusion from bars 9 and 11, together with the contraction group (hemiola) in bars 13-15, generate a surplus of energy in relation to metric standards, which require a restorative pause in bar 16. Similarly, the transition to the second group (bars 25-46) involves a calculated 'break' of a double 16-bar sentence that increases the intensity once the second theme appears.

On the other hand, *Scherzo No. 4* is important because that there is less deviation from the norm of eight bars. In the outer sections of the work, the set of eight bars is balanced, as they are each distinct and contrasting but also in correspondence to each other.

In his last Scherzo, Chopin finally allowed himself to recover something of the connotation of the title of this genre, following the tumult shown in the first three scherzos.

4. Scherzos 2 and 3

In relationship with the model established by the first scherzo and confirmed in the fourth, there are some new elements, and the existing ones are developed in *Scherzos 2 and 3*. Interestingly, the introductory tonal opening, the keynote, is not set from the beginning. However, there is a difference between the two scherzos in what the aspect mentioned above is concerned.

The introduction in C # minor is opaque in terms of harmonic standards even for other works of Chopin; however, these elusive ambiguities have the function of a 'harmonic curtain' that rises gradually to reveal the clearly defined c # minor of the main theme.

On the other hand, the second scherzo begins in B flat minor, which is identified only in retrospect as a tonic aspect.

This points out another problem that appears in the foreground of these two scherzos. More than in *Scherzos 1 and 2*, Chopin leads the basic material of *Scherzos 2 and 3* away from their origins 'of scherzo and trio' and closer to the principles of sonata. In *Scherzo No. 3*, this is largely a matter of

thematic integration – a single *mother-cell* (A - G #) that is already involved in the introduction is clearly marked in the main theme of the scherzo and it is used to perform a subtle link with the trio, an “anthem”, reminiscent in some ways of the trio of the *Scherzo in B minor*.⁸ A large portion of the work is derived from the mother-cell. In the *Scherzo in D Major*, the composer’s attention goes beyond the motivic substance to influence a better organization of the work. The trio is a structural parallel of the main material of the scherzo, not only through the sequential ideas (a resolution of stable and unstable material) but also through the tonal relationship of the third. As a whole, the scherzo owes its coherence to this relationship of the third.

As shown in the following example, the integration of all the sections and their whole is very powerful in this work, compensating for the explosive surface contrasts.

E.g. 11



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Fr. Chopin, Scherzo Op. 31, no. 2

A final common issue of these two scherzos is their formal organization. The first that will be discussed is the *Scherzo in C # minor*. Following the second trio in E major/minor, where an increase of the tension which prepares the Reprise of the scherzo is expected, Chopin surprisingly interpolates an almost new sequence. He slows the rhythm of harmonies to prepare an expansive melody which increases in intensity and passion to bar 567, where a non-thematic bravura coda is detected. This method has its origins in *stile brillante*, but here it is transformed into an essential formal

⁸ Samson, Jim. *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

component. The entire sequence is remarkable, changing the way we see the material of the scherzo and the trio.

On the other hand, *Scherzo in D flat Major* goes even further. In this work, Chopin allowed himself to be concerned with the processes of developing and integrating extreme contrasts for the scherzo and trio to be closer to the form of sonata. Here, more than in the other scherzos, he is concerned with the possibility that their material offers the unexpected beginnings of structures where the ideas presented before can gain new interesting directions.

From a formal standpoint, *Scherzo No. 2* is the most ambitious of the four scherzos, encompassing all conflicts of the sonata and synthesizing them into development.⁹

If we look at the four Scherzos as a single generic class, this is the scherzo which (paradoxically) confirms the rules laid down in the other three by an obvious deviation from the norm, clarifying the terms by their temporary forgery.

5. Conclusion

Musicologists have emphasized not only the exciting moments of lyrical beauty of Chopin's Scherzos, but, above all, the intensity and depth of the emotions expressed, sometimes violent, and extremely volatile. The principle of using sharp contrasts, intense suggestiveness of the musical gestures (especially at the beginning of a work), and the climax of the narrative of the coda in an almost expressionistic manner would seem to be the most characteristic features of Chopin's scherzos.

Chopin was an explorer who exceeded the new frontiers and was simultaneously nostalgic, remembering not just a generalized past but also his past time spent in Warsaw.

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⁹ Samson, Jim. *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.