

CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE SONATA FORM IN FREDERIC CHOPIN'S VISION

S. DRĂGULIN¹ L. POPA²

Abstract: *Unlike Mozart or Beethoven, in whose case almost everything they composed for one or two musical instruments was shaped into sonata, the new generation of Romantic composers no longer considered this form to hold such importance. Mendelssohn confined himself to 13 sonatas, Schumann stopped at 8 (including Fantasia in C Major); Chopin made his first attempt at 18 years old, thereafter he created two more sonatas of great significance for the pianistic literature and at the end of his life he added the Sonata for Cello and Piano. One cannot however state that Romantics lost interest in the sonata genre. It still was the most prestigious instrumental genre, an obsession for many composers who endeavoured to demonstrate they could cope with such complex structures. This respect for the sonata genre may be compared to the one for the fugue during the Classical period.*

Key words: *sonata, Romanticism, classical tradition.*

1. Introduction

It is well known that Chopin's music took on new dimensions after having left Poland. This aspect is admitted not only by the pianists or concert organizers who avoided much of the music written at a time when Chopin was still living in Warsaw.

This is rather a pity since, as argued by John Rink [1], there are musical works of great value dating back in Chopin's early years, which should be enhanced. Biographical factors certainly existed behind the stylistic maturation – a radical change from the admiration that Warsaw nurtured for the composer, to the indifference of Vienna and a growing disillusion with respect to the career

proposed by the composer-pianist. Regardless of the causes having brought about the change, the results reflected themselves not only in Chopin's musical style, but also in his manner of approaching a composition, rather investing in his compositional activity than in the one of piano performance. It is not very difficult to determine the nature of the stylistic changes, at least in general. An essential starting point is the recognition that Chopin's musical style has crystallized less after the Viennese classical model as compared to the post-Classical repertoire of the concert music, sometimes described as the *brilliant style*-that Chopin took over and remodelled in his musical creations.

¹ Faculty of Music, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

² University of Arts George Enescu, Iaşi.

This article will highlight how Chopin developed his compositional technique in terms of sonata form. This way, by analyzing the first piano sonata composed by Frederic Chopin, one can notice how the composer perceived the sonata form, the compositional procedures resorted to and the level wherefrom the sonata form in Chopin's conception began to evolve.

2. Sonata Op 4 No 1 in C Minor

Frédéric Chopin's first sonata is a work of large dimensions and it mainly has school character, highlighting the composer's effort to unfold his compositional fantasy within the rigorous limits of a classical-tradition genre. The sonata was written in 1828 and dedicated to his composition professor Josef Elsner. The young composer was only 18 years old at the time, being interested in creating extensive opuses (such as the concertos for piano *Sonata* No.1, *Scherzo* No.1, *Rondo à la mazur*), of an ardent Romantic essence, whereby he might express the age-specific momentum, the desire for perfection, manifested at structural level (both macro-formally and at the level of language microelements) and textural level (through dense, rich piano scores, interweaving miscellaneous types of syntax: homophony, polyphony, accompanied melody) [2]. Although Chopin remained notorious in music history for the pianistic miniature art, these early works should not be neglected, their content having constituted for the contemporaries a genuine compositional revelation. In his first sonata, Chopin gives the impression of special attention paid to the architectural structure, construction details, out of desire to exercise his compositional technique, observing as faithfully as possible the norms and exigencies imposed by the sonata genre [3].

His vast approach of the motives highlights the composer's thoroughness and his talent to enhance until exhaustion all developing potential of a musical idea, in multifarious hypostases, transformations, returns. Some musicologists reckon that this sonata lacks the chopinian-specific lyricism, generous and delicate melody, already proven in his first creations [4].

3. First Part

The first part, with the indication *Allegro maestoso*, is an ample section, deemed by some musicologists a form of bi-thematic sonata and by other theorists as mono-thematic sonata, generating tacit polemics around this musical work. Written in *alla breve* measure, this sonata is underlain by a theme inspired from *Two-Voice Invention No.2 in C Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Starting from this theme, Chopin effectuated a few modifications at rhythmical level, arranged the sonorous material in equal eighth values, elaborating thereafter a complex processing scaffolding, harmonically and polyphonically wrapping the theme, interweaving the conception of rigour with the liberty of fantasy in dealing with the initial musical idea.

The sonata begins with presenting the theme in the medium register of the keyboard, at a single voice (ms.1), which is added two other bass voices that imitate the former previously exposed motive, moving in parallel at interval of third, in ascending direction and with chromatic trajectory [5].

In the following example, we rendered the theme in its full format of 8 measures, highlighting the imitative character of the debut voices, the reversed counterpoint aspect between the first and second phrase of the theme, given by taking over the theme with the left hand in the inferior plan. The theme ends, according to the classical norms, with a perfect authentic cadence on the accord of the tonic.

Ex. 1. Fr. Chopin – *Sonata No. 1 op. 4 in C Minor*, part I, ms. 1-8

The bridge follows, developed in two phases, the former in the framework of C Minor, ending with a half-cadence on the accord of the dominant, and the latter gaining momentum in melody and accompaniment, and preparing the apparition of the secondary thematic group. Note that in the development of the musical discourse, the composer insistently processes the chromatic motive from the second measure and not the diatonic motive from the first measure. The bridge genuinely develops this motive, bringing it on various steps and in different harmonic contexts.

contrast, refreshing after the previous tension. We note that the basic tonality is kept, C Minor, and that the first sounds of this new idea coincide with those of the principal theme (C-natural B-C-D), which aspect determined some musicologists to consider this sonata as monothematic.

Ex. 2. Fr. Chopin – *Sonata No. 1 Op. 4 in C Minor*, part I, ms. 16-24

In the austere atmosphere created by the first musical idea, a new theme appears, in measure 25, which brings a new expressive

Ex. 3. Fr. Chopin – *Sonata No. 1 Op. 4 in C Minor*, part I, ms. 25-32

We called this theme B1 and we will also find it in measures 39-43, slightly modified to allow the cadence on step I. Starting with measure 43, a cell of the main theme is processed, namely the four sixteenths on the second beat from measure 1, in reversed aspect [6].



Ex.4. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, part I, ms. 42-52

We called this new stage B2, considering it as integrant part of the secondary thematic group. Symmetrically structured in 8+8 measures, this delimitation highlights the preoccupation for dimension equilibrium, the composer searching for every sub-section, an interior form as coherent as possible, with a sense as autonomous as possible.

The conclusion falls into the same artistic conception, the former not being treated as mere cadence of the secondary theme, but as genuine, independent section, with attentively constructed interior evolution, graduated towards the

end of the exposition. Along the 30 measures, the composer continuously generates numerous variants of the chromatic motive from the main theme, being equally preoccupied with introducing new modulating inflections and with diversifying the pianistic score through the insertion of unprecedented figures (similar to those in *Studies Op.10*, that he was to compose a few years later) [1]. The passage towards exposition is briefly, suddenly made through a single accord with function of dominant for the new tonality of the development – A flat major.



Ex. 5. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, ms. 58-62
(first ms. of the conclusion)



Ex. 6. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, ms. 83-89
(ending of the exhibition)

In the previous example, we highlighted the transitive accord towards the development from the II-nd volta, the exposition being shaped as in the Classical sonatas, delimited from the development through repetition bar with voltas.

The development indicates Chopin's interest in achieving a modulating trajectory as sinuous as possible,

constituting a veritable laboratory of the compositional fantasy in the sphere of the modulation [7]. This way, along the about 90 measures, numerous inflections occur, towards B flat major, C major, A flat major, F minor, E flat minor, G minor, A flat minor etc, eventually reaching to the sphere of B flat minor.

The image shows a musical score for three measures. The first measure is labeled 'La b major', the second 'Si b major', and the third 'Do major'. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various notes and rests.

Ex.7. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*,
part I, ms. 90-94

The reprise highlights the originality of the compositional conception, due to the surprising apparition of the main theme in

B flat minor, instead of the initial tonality, C minor.

The image shows a musical score for two systems. The first system is labeled 'si b minor' and includes dynamic markings like 'f', 'f', 'f', 'p'. The second system is marked 'Punte' and includes a 'ten.' (tension) marking. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various notes and rests.

Ex.8 – Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*,
part I, ms. 179-186

The theme is re-exposed after the same scheme of the entries from the exposition, keeping the polyphonic-imitative aspect and the doubling in parallelisms of thirds.

The bridge observes the same structure as in the reprise, modulating in the first phase towards D major, and in the second phase towards G minor.

Ex.9. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C minor*, part I, ms. 185-203

B cumulates this time the two themes exposed in the secondary thematic group from the exhibition, in a single structural unit, exposed in G minor and modulating towards A flat major. Near the conclusion, the tonal trajectory moves towards the scope of C minor, returning thereby to the initial basic tonality.

The conclusion contains elements from the exposition and is followed by a *coda*, marked by the indication *con forza*, having a character of virtuosity, bravery, through brilliant technical passages, in parallel thirds and octaves, which require an alternative execution of *legato* – *staccato* for greater buoyancy of the overall pianistic apparatus.

Ex.10. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, part I, ms. 235-248

4. Second part

After this large, complex and tense *Allegro*, the composer chose a contrasting movement; however not according to the classical model, but to his own musical conception and intuition. Thus, instead of writing a slow movement, he oriented himself towards a part with light, relaxing, dancing character – a *Minuet* reduced in size and with accessible melody, without extensive processing.

From formal standpoint, the traditionally imposed pattern of the minuet genre is observed, the second part representing a large three-verse (ABA), wherein A is in its turn a small three-verse and B a small two-verse. From stylistic standpoint, we can make a few connections with the similar movements of Mozart's sonatas or with Schubert's pianistic miniatures, due to the melody and accessible expression of the musical ideas.

The first section, *Minuetto – Allegretto*, starts with a playable theme, constructed on the sounds of the arpeggio from the accord of the tonic, exposed through a polyphonic *stretto* between the external voices. Initially exposed at the bass, the theme is afterwards taken over through a

four-measure canon by the higher voice and harmonically wrapped with the other internal voices. On harmonic level, we noticed a modulating inflection towards the tonality of the minor relative, but immediately turned towards the dominant of E flat major.



Ex. 11. Fr. Chopin – *Sonata No. 1 Op. 4 in C Minor*, II-nd part, ms. 1-8

Overall, the composer realizes a less conspicuous contrast between the periods A and B; however, it must be mentioned, with a view to highlighting the manifestation area of the composer's harmonic inventiveness within the B, the only section where he can achieve modulating inflections, chromatic slides,

start off and back games in the sphere of the initial tonality. Technically, in the middle period, motives in parallel thirds are used, exposed by register variation and taken over by imitations on small structural units, all these conferring a playful, casual, humoristic character on the musical discourse.



Ex. 12. Fr. Chopin – *Sonata No. 1 Op. 4 in C Minor*, II-rd part, ms. 17-23

A plays the part of chorus and it is therefore built on a simple harmonic structure and with an accessible melody, returning at the end of the minuet in the same hypostasis, but with a small dynamization in the plan of the sonorous spatialization through doubling in parallel octaves the theme of the bass.

The *trio* is elaborated in the homonymous tonality E flat minor, being characterized by special expressiveness with lyrical and melancholic accents. Structurally, the *trio* consists of two

subsections B and B1, differing in terms of musical material. The former has symmetrical structure, represented by the two periods of eight measures, imagined as question and answer, antecedent and consequent, due to the half-cadence on the dominant in measure no. 56 and to the perfect authentic cadence in measure 64. The theme is again exposed through the polyphonic procedure of the imitation in *stretto*, two voices being assigned to each hand.

Ex.13. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, II-nd part, ms. 49-64

The second section in the *trio*, called by us B1, brilliantly starts off in G flat major, having the character of a mazurka full of grace, sensitivity and with slight nostalgic iridescence given by the return to E flat minor.

Ex.14. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, II-nd part, ms. 63-73

After the closing of the *trio*, the minuet *da capo al fine* will be resumed, according to the norms preset by artistic tradition and imposed in practicing this dance.

Joining the two musical sections in the framework of this part was for Chopin a good time to enhance features of the Polish folklore and to combine them with elements of the academic music.

5. Third part

Only entitled with the rhythmical-change indication *Larghetto*, the III-rd part stands for a section of calm, of serene meditation,

wherein concentration and tensional support in a slow tempo are required from the performer, as suggested by the terms *con molto espressione*.

The measure of 5/4 is not felt in this section through the asymmetrical structure or specific interior accents, as the composer annihilates any tendency towards melody rupture, any metric accent, constructing a perpetual, fluent and unitary melodic thread.

In the following example, we highlighted the indices of metric interior organisation in the first nine measures.

Ex.15. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, III-rd part, ms. 1-9

From formal standpoint, the delimitation is difficult, the fluency of the melody impeding the tentative towards fragmentation and rupture of the sonorous flow. Searching beyond this continuity, we discovered however motives and themes that are reiterated several times along the movement, outlining a three-verse form, with variation elements. We notice therefore that three form principles intertwine: the one of verse, the one of variation and the one of freedom to structure treatment (manifested by the asymmetry of the phrases consisting in unequal number of measures).

The first period, A, starts with a homophonic moment, of four measures, wherein the generating harmonic structure is actually exposed. During the following nine measures, in the higher plane, a suave,

playable melody delicately looms, accompanied by the bass voice with broken arpeggios and by the internal voices that complete the harmony.

The second period is marked by the resumption of the musical idea from the introduction in measure no. 14, where we notice the same accords as at the beginning of the part, transposed up an octave and accompanied with arpeggios. This period consists of three asymmetrical phrases, having 7 + 6 + 5 measures. Starting with measure 21 (delimitation moment between the first and second phrase), a new cantilena looms, more richly adorned, of variational aspect with respect to the theme exposed in the first period. In the examples below, we rendered the initial theme, followed by its hypostasis enriched with arabesques in the higher register.

Ex.16 – Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, III-rd part, ms. 5-8Ex.17. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, III-rd part, ms. 21-24

The third phrase from Av1 has intensely modulating character, orienting the tonal trajectory towards D flat major, C flat major, E flat minor, and in measures 30-

31, through a transitive, enharmonic and chromatic passage, it returns to the initial tonality, A flat major.



Ex.18. Fr.Chopin – Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor, III-rd part, ms. 27-31

The last period, Av2, is another variant of the initial theme, brought back, this time, more richly ornamented, polyphonically written for each hand, on

two sonorous planes, rhythmically diversified through the insertion of the quintets and triplets overlapping the binary formulas in the accompaniment [1].



Ex.19. Fr.Chopin – Sonata Nr.1 Op.4 in C Minor, III-rd part, ms. 31-35

The nocturne atmosphere is maintained in the end of the part, through role change between the two hands, the right becoming the accompaniment plane and the left acquiring the function to take over and

conduct the melodic line to the end. The typical chopinian ornamentation is also present in these last measures, in the grave register, enriching the melodic line destined to the left hand.



Ex.20. Fr.Chopin – Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor, III-rd part, ms. 36-42

6. Fourth part

The last part, entitled *Finale*, is a movement of instrumental bravery, unfolding in a tempo *Presto*, also marked through the very rapid metronomic indication. The pianistic score is characterized by great virtuosity, the composer prioritizing the technique “*éclatante*”, through the difficult passages of scales, arpeggios, distributed on the entire keyboard for both hands. Some pianistic formulas are recognizable in some studies of the cycle op. 10 (for instance, the chromatic passages in *Studies no.4* and *no.12*, the arpeggios in *Study no.8*, or the mixed alternations of thirds and sixths from *Study no.7*) [8].

Structurally, the IV-th part is organized as three-penta-verse rondo (AB Develop. ABA), with tendencies towards rondo-sonata, due to the long transitions, ample developing passages, which go beyond the strict functions of the sections from a mere rondo. The chorus is repeated three times, and the couplet is unique, brought twice among the three hypostases of the chorus.

For some compositional reasons, the last part of the sonata is deemed by

theoreticians not representative for the chopinian pianistic genius, not having the spontaneity of imagination and the melody specific to the Polish composer. Furthermore, similitude was discovered in elaborating the theme of the chorus, with a famous musical idea from the fantasy “*Wanderer*” op.15 („*Wandererphantasie*”). The theme of this work left a strong impression on young Chopin, who created in the IV-th part of his first sonata a genuine processing starting from the rhythmical-melodic profile of the cyclical idea from Schubert’s fantasy.

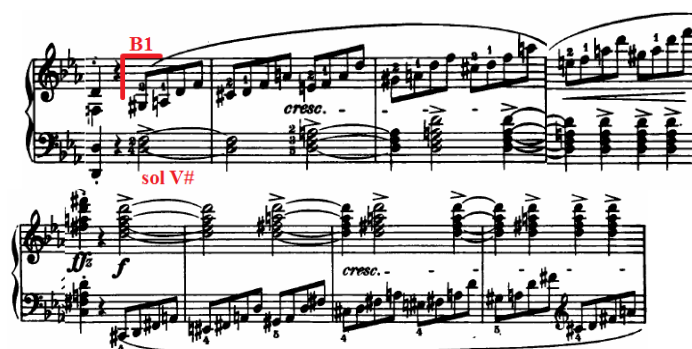
Returning to *Sonata No.1* by Chopin, we noticed features particularizing the theme of the chorus, even if the musical idea is inspired by another work. We refer to the dramaturgic force imposed ever since the beginning by the melody of wide spatial development, even if the form seems to constrain the fantasy of music through the quadrature of the phrases. The harmony is simple, based on authentic classical-type interlacement, wherein the ferment of drama consists of the ample arpeggios, accords disposed in large position, of the constitutive chromatics that render the sequence of accords more tense.

Ex.21. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, IV-th part, ms. 1-8

Ex.22. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C minor*, IV-th part, ms. 264-268

The bridge is structured in two phases: phase I, of 16 (8+8) measures, is maintained in the sphere of C minor, the first component phrase having the half-cadence on the dominant, and the second on the accord of the tonic. The II-nd phase, according to the classical rigors, is modulating, leading the tonal trajectory towards G minor and cadencing on the

dominant of this new tonality. The secondary thematic group consists of two musical ideas, both of them exposed in G minor. The former, B1, has similar aspect to the previous bridge, keeping the voluble character given by the succession of the arpeggios exposed through a score of great pianistic virtuosity.



Ex.23. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, IV-th part, ms. 40-48

The two secondary themes are connected through a brief transitory passage (ms. 72-83), characterized through an intensely chromaticized score, shaped as an ascending

chromatic scale, harmonically supported by the accords of the accompaniment plane constructed on the fundamental of the V-th step from G minor.



Ex.24. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*, IV-th part, ms. 72-77

The other secondary theme, put down as B2, has much stronger, more pronounced personality. Unlike B1, which unfolds more on the dominant of G minor, always creating the sensation of tonal instability and urge to solution, B2 starts with an expression of certainty, stability and interiorized vigour. It has the character of a bachian choral, due to the homophonic

syntax; and it structurally consists of three asymmetrical phrases, whereof the first has a moment of modulating inflection towards the dominant, as follows:

The first 8 measures are in G minor, and the following 4 are in D major; thereafter, in the second phrase, one returns to G minor, with the variation of B2.

Ex.25. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*,
IV-th part, ms. 83-97

In the measure 116, an ample thematic development begins, starting from micro-units of the previously exposed themes. It cannot be divided into stages, as the sonorous discourse unfolds as a perpetual flow of tensional accumulation, interlacing moments wherein motives are processed in uninterrupted flow.

The return to A is preceded by 8 pedal measures on the dominant of the basic tonality C minor; afterwards the chorus is identically resumed, starting with measure 184.

The bridge consists this time of two phrases, the former having identical course to the one in the exposition, opposed to the final and to the passage towards the second phase, where it modulates towards the relative tonality E flat major. The second phase is ampler, it has a more sinuous modulating trajectory, passing through C flat major and F major.

The secondary thematic group begins with the same musical idea exposed in arpeggios and with character of pianistic virtuosity in F major, immediately gliding

towards the homonymous F minor. Then, the tonal trajectory oscillates between the new reached tonality and the basic one, as noticed in the formal scheme. The same transitory passage realizes the connection between B1 and B2.

The other secondary theme appears with variational aspect, being accompanied by the inferior plane with a linear-type sonorous development, and not homophonous, as in the exposition. The formal structure is maintained, as well as the modulating course (the first 8 measures of B2 are in F minor, the following 4 in C major, returning afterwards to F minor).

The last apparition of the chorus is preceded by a vast developing section (measures 325-366).

The last reprise also has the function of coda, bringing back the main theme A in an amplified form in terms of sonority, accords, arpeggios, with a view to enhancing its expressivity and conferring greater power of auditory impact on it. The character of virtuosity is maintained until the last accords of measure 399.



Ex.26. Fr.Chopin – *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor*,
IV-th part, ms. 389-399

7. Conclusions

Many theorists believe that Frédéric Chopin's first sonata cannot be framed among his valuable creations. Nevertheless, we adhere to the standpoint that this musical work stands for a stage in the composer's evolution, for an initiation moment within the rigorousness required by the sonata genre. Without this artist's first step on the yet inexperienced realm of a classical genre, his subsequent evolution and the emergence of other works of indisputable value would not have been possible (*Sonatas No. 2 in B flat Minor* and *No. 3 in B Minor*) [9].

Despite falling into the category of the "school" works, Chopin's *Sonata No.1 Op.4 in C Minor* anticipatively bears the stylistic features of his later creations: rhythmic variety and conspicuousness, harmonic and polyphonic refinement, richness and unpredictability of the modulations, originality of the pianistic figures, constant concern for innovating musical forms.

References

1. Samson, J.: *The Music of Chopin*, London. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

2. Abraham, G.: *Chopin's Musical Style*. London. Oxford University Press, 1939.
3. Gould, P.: *Concertos and Sonatas*, in *Frédéric Chopin: Profiles of the Man and the Musician*, Walker, A. (ed.) London. Barrie & Rockcliff, 1966.
4. Chechlinska, Z.: *Chopin Reception in Nineteenth-century Poland*, in *The Cambridge*
5. Leiken, A.: *The Sonatas, The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, Samson, J. (ed.). Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
6. Dammier-Kirpal, U.: *Der Sonatensatz bei Frederic Chopin*. Wiesbaden. Breitkopf & Härtel, 1973.
7. Walker, A.: *Chopin and Musical Structure: an Analytical Approach*, *Frédéric Chopin: Profiles of The Man and The Musician* ed. Walker, A., London. Barrie and Rockcliff, 1966.
8. Huneker, J.: *Chopin: The Man and His Music*. New York. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900 and Jonson, G.C. Ashton. *A Handbook to Chopin's works*. London: William Reeves, 1905.
9. Kaiser, J.: *Chopin und die Sonate*, in *Musik-Konzepte* 45, 1985, pp. 3-16.