

Nocturne: The Life and Music of Chopin

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Preface

Chopin's Nocturnes are some of the most heartfelt, passionate, and emotional pieces to have ever been composed for the piano. These works portray his personality and mindset in the most intimate of ways. In this essay, I have chosen to explore how his nocturnes varied over the two decades in which he composed them, and how the different events in his life affected his compositional styles. I have also defined the nocturne as a genre in itself and explored the various ways in which Chopin was able to popularize and expand on it to make it one of today's most well known piano genres. Finally, I have chosen three nocturnes to analyze in great detail, in order to provide a solid understanding of these issues.

Introduction

“Chopin’s music is spontaneous, miraculous.... He found it without seeking it, without previous imitation of it. It came upon his piano sudden, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to hear it himself with the help of the instrument.”¹

In this quote, the renowned novelist George Sand perfectly encapsulates both the personality and the piano works of Chopin, one of the most imaginative and virtuosic pianists to have ever lived. Although he had never really seen himself as much of a performer, his compositional output and understanding of pianistic techniques have made him one of the leading composers for solo piano music that the world has ever seen. He established entirely new genres of piano works, including his mazurkas, polonaises, and waltzes, deriving his writing from the capabilities of the piano itself as well as the physical properties of the two hands. He became inspired by the nocturnes of John Field when he was just nineteen years old, captivated by the aria-like melodies supported by a widespread broken-chord accompaniment that characterized the works. Facilitated by the recent development of the sustain pedal, Chopin composed nineteen of his own nocturnes, through which he effectively established and formalized the genre.

The nocturne is most typically defined by its texture. Expressive melodies are played in the right hand, similar to the cantilena of Italian opera.² These melodies are usually highly ornamented with trills and appoggiaturas and commonly approached or left by chromatic

¹ Anh Tran, “Quotes by Chopin,” *Our Chopin*, <<http://www.ourchopin.com/quotes.html>> (June 7, 2015).

² Nicholas Temperley, “John Field and the First Nocturne,” *Music and Letters* 56, nos. 3-4 (Jul.-Oct., 1975): 335-40.

passages upon the return of the opening theme. Meanwhile, the left hand functions as the rhythmically stable accompaniment, playing low pedal tones in the bass and filling in the rest of the harmony in the middle register. This promotes continuity in the piece while filling in the gaps in the melody, carrying it along when it takes off in its ornamental flights. Importantly, the accompaniment usually plays a more interactive role in the piece rather than a supportive one. By setting the harmonies with the pedal tones, the accompaniment plays a crucial role in determining the overall tone of the piece. The extended arpeggiations up into the middle register help to emphasize the idea that the “Chopin melody” present in his nocturnes—as well as many of his other works—is more of a texture, rather than a single line. Other prolific composers such as Haydn, Clementi, and Mozart rarely spread their broken-chord accompaniments beyond the stretch of the hand, so this new technique that Chopin used was monumental to the world of piano compositions.³

Chopin derived his piano writing from the instrument itself as well as the physical properties of the two hands. His technique was governed by the principles that each finger was of a different strength and that that strength diminishes in the following order: thumb, little finger, first finger, second finger, and third finger.⁴ For the main notes of the melody to be brought out above the rest, he usually notated to use a strong finger. Upon analyzing his music, one can tell that he really understood the instrument and how to place melodies and harmonies in a non-awkward way to facilitate smooth playing. Supple lateral movement of the fingers is required in order to play the fast legato scales and arpeggios, and the pianist must keep his or her

³ Nicholas Temperley, “John Field and the First Nocturne,” *Music and Letters* 56, nos. 3-4 (Jul.-Oct., 1975): 335-40.

⁴ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 21.

fingers close to the white and black keys. Chopin had an advantage because his hands were extremely flexible, or as Sand called them, his “velvet fingers.” He could stretch over a third of the keyboard with both of his hands, which gave him the ability to keep his music full of fresh possibilities of tonal combination.⁵

⁵ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 30.

The Life of Chopin

Fryderyk Franciszek (Frédéric François) Chopin was born on March 1, 1810, in Zelazowla Wola, a small village in Poland. For the first six months of his life, he lived in the home of Countess Justyna Skarbek with his parents, Mikolaj Chopin and Tekla Justyna Krzyzanowska, who both were employed by the countess. Mikolaj was then offered a position at the Lyceum in the Saxon Palace as a French professor, which he accepted. The family moved to Warsaw shortly thereafter and lived in the right wing of the Palace for the next six years together with Chopin's other three siblings. They were a well respected, middle-class family with good social connections, committed to a strong sense of morality and self-improvement. Their parents worked to foster a sound education for their children, dedicated especially to literary and musical interests. For an extensive summary of Chopin's life, please refer to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.⁶

Chopin began taking music lessons in Warsaw when he was six years old. He studied the music of Bach as well as Viennese classicism under his teacher, Wojciech (Adalbert) Zwiny, for the next four years, until the Lyceum was moved to the Kazimierzowski Palace, next to the newly established University of Warsaw. These next few years allowed Chopin to mingle with a mixture of professional academic scholars, middle-class gentry, and a handful of wealthy aristocrats. His father, part of a circle of Warsaw intelligentsia, had several contacts that later enabled Chopin to travel outside of Warsaw for the first time. In 1823, Chopin entered the Lyceum himself and began to take private music lessons with the rector of the High School of

⁶ *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. "Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek," by Korel Michalowski and Jim Samson, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/51099?q=chopin&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#S51099.11.

Music, Josef Elsner. Chopin's musical interests broadened over these next few years as he studied piano and music theory with Elsner and took organ lessons from Willhelm Wurfel, another member of the High School staff. He also studied folk music during the summers he spent in the country with his friend Dominik Dziewanosky and often incorporated nationalistic elements from these visits into his works. He entered the High School of Music when he was sixteen years old and began rigorous training in composition.

Tragedy struck Chopin's family in 1827, when his 14-year-old sister Emily died of tuberculosis on April 10. His close friend Jan Bialoblocki died shortly thereafter from the same illness, and these events were two shattering blows for Chopin. It was a welcome distraction for the family when the Warsaw University expanded the same year, forcing the family to vacate their home and move across the street. They converted the small attic into a study for Chopin and moved in a small secondhand piano and a desk, which allowed him the privacy to compose without the constant distractions of the other boarders that shared their new home. His new studio had a beautiful view of the Vistula River and the meadows beyond it, and he spent this time constantly trying out new musical patterns.⁷ He graduated from the High School of Music in 1829 and began to try to get funding so that he could continue his studies abroad. His application for funding was turned down by the Education Ministry, so he turned next to his father's prestigious friends. It was with their financial support that he was finally able to embark on his first journey outside of Warsaw, and he chose Vienna as his destination. During his stay, he managed to perform at two big public concerts, which were well received. After he returned home a few months later, however, he became increasingly moody. Warsaw began to make him

⁷ Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1978), 55.

feel constrained and agitated, as he realized that his homeland had very little to offer him compared to the rest of the world. His indecisiveness about whether he should leave his home and explore other options made him so nervous that it almost drove him to the point of collapse, especially because his aspirations to grow musically were so strong.⁸ Coupled with the pressure to perform a big public concert in Poland, Chopin constantly sought new outlets for his frustration. It was during this time that he was constantly trying out new musical ideas and forms, and it was during this time in his last year in Warsaw that he composed his first Nocturne (in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1). He finally gave in to performing for the public of Warsaw, playing two concerts in May and October of 1830 in front of 900 people. Chopin had never been keen to the idea of performing, however, and he found the publicity from these concerts to be very distasteful, probably furthering this conviction.

Starting in 1830 when Chopin was twenty years old, he began to explore the nocturne more as a genre and compose more works within it. Two years later his Nocturnes, Op. 9 (B-Flat Minor, E-Flat Major, and B Major) were published in Leipzig, and again in Paris and London in 1833. His London publisher, Wessel, announced these works under the made-up title “Les Murmures de la Seine,” to which Chopin protested that these were “stupid titles.”⁹ It was this set of nocturnes that effectively formalized the nocturne as a genre in classical piano music. Chopin continued to explore this tradition during the following years, composing and publishing his Nocturnes Op. 15, Nos. 1-2 (F Major and F-Sharp Major) and his Nocturne in G Minor, Op. 15, No. 3 only a year later, and dedicated them to his fellow musician Ferdinand Hiller.

⁸ Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1978), 77.

⁹ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 69.

It was during this time that Chopin finally made the decision to leave Warsaw and see what other musical opportunities the world had to offer him. On November 1, 1830, he left Poland, not knowing for the first time when he would be able to return to his home country. Accompanied by his best friend, Tytus Woyciechowski, they first headed for Vienna, intending to embark on a full European tour. However, only one week later they heard news of the Warsaw Uprising, sparked by an attempt to assassinate the Grand Duke Constantin. Tytus immediately returned home to Warsaw, but Chopin remained in Austria, figuring that he would be able to contribute to the Polish cause in other ways without leaving the country. He experienced great difficulty arranging concerts to make a living, as he and other Poles commonly experienced harsh racism. He eventually gave up after eight months and traveled to Munich for a month. The next two weeks he spent in Stuttgart and were some of the darkest of his life, as it was during this time that he learned about the failure of the uprising. He agonized constantly over whether he should keep trying to establish a reputation beyond Warsaw, or to return back to his homeland and forever be limited in his aspirations.

Chopin's luck changed when he arrived in Paris in August of 1831. The concert season was just beginning, and a swarm of new pianists (including many other Polish emigres, like himself) started to appear alongside him in the musical community. He began studying with Friedrich Kalkbrenner, a famous pianist, and with his help arranged his first Parisian concert six months later, in Salle Pleyel. His performance was an enormous success, and he began to be in constant demand socially as he gained the growing acceptance of Hiller, Liszt, Berlioz, and other famous composers. Despite his virtuosic talents at playing the piano, he never saw himself as much of a performer and tended to largely avoid doing so. He instead began building a

reputation as an exceptional music teacher, charging exorbitant fees for lessons. He also spent a lot of time working on his compositions, turning away from the genres of the concert hall and focusing more on solo works such as his nocturnes, mazurkas, and etudes. In 1833, he sold his publishing rights to Maurice Schlesinger, and his music began to appear all over France, Germany, and England. Chopin was becoming famous.

By 1834, Chopin had settled into a stable routine of composing, teaching, and occasionally performing in the salons. This was the first of five immensely productive years during which Chopin produced much of his music that was so clearly evident of the “Chopinistic” style, such as his Nocturne in C-Sharp Minor (Op. 72, No. 1), and the D-Flat Major (Op. 27, No. 1). He spent the summer of that year in Karlsbad with his parents, and on his return home he met the family of Felix Wodzinski, one of his father’s tenants. He was so greatly taken with his daughter Maria that he spent the next summer with their family at Marienbad. The following September, he proposed to Maria and was told that her mother would give him an answer soon. He spent a year waiting and finally received a letter with a response in July of 1837. The letter, however, revealed bad news: her mother rejected the marriage proposal. Chopin was devastated and spent the rest of the summer immersed in his work, during which he composed his Nocturnes Op. 32, in B and A-Flat Major.

In October of 1836, Chopin had attended a soirée at the Liszt salon and met the renowned novelist George Sand, who was staying at the Hôtel de France with Liszt and his mistress Marie d’Agoult. He met her again in April, 1838, and the two connected instantly as they had both recently come out of difficult periods involving a sense of loss. Chopin was still devastated from the recent rejection from Maria, while Sand was coming out of a divorce with her former

husband. The couple, however, quickly fell in love and planned to spend the winter together in Majorca with Sand's two children. The trip, however, did not go as well as planned. They stayed there for four months, in terrible weather, during which Chopin fell seriously ill, and his health deteriorated rapidly. The Majorcan doctors diagnosed him with consumption, or tuberculosis, and Sand watched over him constantly with the utmost care and attention. Despite his distressing physical health and low spirits, this winter was still a productive time for Chopin. He put out some of his most famous masterpieces, including his Nocturne in G Minor, Op. 37, No. 1.¹⁰ They were forced to leave Majorca in January when his health reached a shocking state, and Sand decided to place him under the care of Dr. Cauvières. This new doctor, however, insisted that Chopin had no major illness. Regardless of the cause, Chopin was much healthier by May, and by the beginning of June he was well enough to travel to Nohant Manor in Berry, France, with Sand and her children. That summer was the first of many that Chopin spent focusing almost solely on his compositions, continuing the creative spurt he began in Majorca.¹¹ He would then travel to Paris for the winters, where he would teach as well as occasionally perform in salons. This new schedule gave Chopin the first sense of stability in his life since his time in Warsaw and was a time during which Chopin composed some of his most enchanting works, such as his Nocturne in G Major, Op. 37, No 2.

Despite the close bond that Chopin and Sand shared, their relationship always had some degree of tension to it. In the winter of 1838, Chopin returned to Paris and stayed there for the next year and a half. This allowed them to maintain some degree of independence in their lives.

¹⁰ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 69.

¹¹ Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1978), 172.

During this time, Chopin's critical standing as a composer grew, but his output was less than ideal. He instead spent this time engaging in a major re-examination of his artistic aims. These became evident when he returned to Nohant in June of 1841. As they were reunited after spending quite some time apart, that summer gave Chopin and Sand the social and working conditions they had sought in Majorca several years earlier. During this time, he composed his Nocturnes, Op. 48, in C Minor and F-Sharp Minor, as well as his Nocturnes, Op. 55, in F Minor and E-Flat Major.

After Sand returned with him to Paris in 1842, Chopin began to focus more on making his income from teaching. As his health deteriorated, he wanted to give as many lessons as his health would allow, aiming to have enough to make their annual trips to Nohant Manor. His relationship with Sand deteriorated along with his health, leaving Chopin in low spirits, and he felt that he was unable to recapture his early fluency in composition. After his father died the next year, he began to reach out to his family telling them of his disinclination for work, writing "I am not made for life in the country, but fresh air does me good. I don't play much, because this piano is out of tune, and I write even less."¹² He did, however, compose his Nocturnes, Op. 55, in F Minor and E-Flat Major, during this time, and then his Nocturnes Op. 62, in B and E Major, three years later.

Tensions in Chopin and Sand's relationship finally reached a breaking point in 1846. That year, Sand began publishing installments of *Lucrezia Floriani*, a blatantly autobiographical novel that portrayed an idealized version of herself and her tormented lover turned tormenter. These unflattering references by no doubt referred to Chopin and have been considered by many

¹² Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 70.

as her diplomatic way of telling Chopin to go out of her life. Around the same time, Sand kicked her daughter Solange out of the house, and Chopin's refusal to disown her was viewed as betrayal by Sand, which she referred to as a "strange conclusion to nine years of exclusive friendship."¹³ Chopin never really recovered from this, and it was during this time that he composed his Nocturne in C Minor, Op. IVB/8, his last nocturne. His health was sinking fast, he was making very little money, and he felt pressured by the constant social obligations he faced. He found himself once again homesick for Warsaw, often thinking about his old life and childhood friends. He finally managed one final concert for the Friends of Poland, before his doctors recommended that he return to Paris. It was there that he spent his last final months, often visited by his friends and family, before he died on October 17, 1849.

¹³ *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. "Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek," by Korel Michalowski and Jim Samson, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/51099?q=chopin&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#S51099.11

3 Nocturnes

Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1

Chopin composed his first nocturne during his Warsaw years, shortly after graduating from the High School of Music in 1829. After his father's wealthy friends organized and financed his first trip to Vienna where he performed in two large-scale public concerts, he began to realize that his native town had little left to offer him. He began to consider moving away to a big city with more opportunities but struggled with the idea of leaving the life he had always known. He began to feel increasingly moody, and the pressure that he was under to perform in grand concerts agitated him as well. It was also during this time that he engaged in a radical reworking of his musical forms, seeking inspiration from the earlier masters, particularly Mozart and Hummel. He began to compose more music solely for the piano, as opposed to the large-scale, symphonic works of the great composers before him. He had a fairly clear idea of his musical goals and what he wanted to accomplish, but he was so indecisive about whether or not to act on it that he was almost driven to a point of emotional collapse. It was during this time that he composed his Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1.

This nocturne, like many of his other compositions from this period, shows evidence of the "brilliant" style of piano pieces associated with composers such as Hummel, Weber, and Kalkbrenner. These types of pieces are known for their cadenza-like passages which require great skill and spirit in the performer, especially when the opening theme returns in the latter half of the piece. The bravura figuration matches the flowing, ornamental melodies in the upper voice, building tension as they interact with each other throughout the piece. These are some of

the essential aspects of post-Classicism and the starting point for Chopin's musical thought process.

He was also heavily influenced by the works of John Field, and his first nocturne perfectly represents the defining aspects of the genre. The most central idea is that it features a beautiful ornamental aria in the upper voice alternating with a sequentially developing, tension-building theme. Having been educated in Italian and French opera as well as Polish folk music from a very young age, Chopin saw a significant link between the piano's capacity to express great lyricism and the *bel canto* style of the arias he had studied. The melody he uses in this nocturne shows some evidence of these ideas, featuring an assortment of portamentos, cadenzas, and *fioriture*, or the improvised embellishment of a melody. Chopin usually seemed to favor the decoration and elaboration of these melodic "arias" rather than exploring the development and integration of complex themes throughout the piece. He also had a tendency to sweeten these melodies with parallel thirds and sixths, keeping true to operatic duet textures. It was with this nocturne and the five others that he composed during his time in Warsaw that established the genre, and it was consolidated later on in his Vienna and early Paris years.¹⁴ The aspects of this piece that most clearly define it within the genre are the overall sound, melodies, harmonies, and rhythm.

The overall sound created by the melodies, harmonies, and dynamics of this piece clearly reflect the "night" for which the genre is named. The homophonic texture features expressive, lyrical melodies in the upper voice supported by a widely-spaced, broken-chord accompaniment.

¹⁴ *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. "Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek," by Korel Michalowski and Jim Samson, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/51099?q=chopin&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#S51099.11.

The left hand begins each new harmony with a pedal tone in the bass and arpeggiates the other notes in the middle register until the next harmony begins, typically a measure later. Meanwhile, the melody sings out above it, beginning slowly and smoothly and pausing after every measure or two as if to take a breath. Note that it is characteristic for these bravura-style pieces to sound virtuosic and even improvised, so the slow melody often pauses as if to stop and consider what it is about to say next. Tension builds as the B section approaches, and the melody becomes more hurried in mm. 17-21 as the phrases become shorter. The light, floaty B section is introduced in m. 23, marked *aspiratamente*. This section sounds less improvised, and the major mode is almost a sigh of relief after the building tension before it. The return of the A section in m. 31 repeats the opening theme of the piece, this time sounding more confident and heartfelt. The now highly ornamented melody is marked with trills and appoggiaturas and fast chromatic passages that approach and leave some of the more important notes. The image of the “night” is also reflected in the dynamics, which range from a *pianissimo* to a *forte*, and are meticulously marked throughout the score to shape each phrase. Beginning on a soft *p*, the left hand should generally be played quietly while the right hand melody is brought out above it. As tension grows in the melody, the overall dynamics grow louder, landing with a triumphant *forte* indicated at the return of the A section and later ending the piece with a very soft *pianissimo*.

One of the most central ideas that help to define the nocturne as a genre is the use of *tempo rubato* to make the melody seem more improvised and expressive. In the returning A section, the arpeggiated accompaniment must follow along with a variety of 8-, 10-, and 11-against-3 lines in the melody, slowing down enough to accommodate for them while keeping the overall beat. Taking the extra time to do so makes the piece seem to flow more freely, as the

left hand does not have to rush or keep a rigid beat. Despite the newfound intensity in this section, the performer must not speed up in order to keep accordance to the *a tempo* marking in m. 31. The overall rhythm should instead be kept steady throughout, slowing down only when approaching the B section and at the *callando* indication in the last few measures.

This nocturne is different from Chopin's later pieces most obviously because it is more simple. The overall texture is lighter, featuring a single-line melody supported by a single-line accompaniment. The phrases are shorter and more clearly defined as well; they don't begin to unravel until the return of the opening theme, and when they do it is on a smaller scale than Chopin's later nocturnes. The harmonies in this nocturne are less complex, changing on the first and third beats of most measures and ending phrases on consonant cadences or resolving them on the first beat of the next. Chopin may have chosen to add complexity on a smaller scale, however. For example, the left hand in the first measure of the piece starts out by playing an arpeggiated E-minor chord in the accompaniment. However, instead of making the highest note a consonant *B*, he instead writes a *C*, adding the slightest dissonance to make the harmony more intriguing. Chopin provides a variety of basic, diminished, and augmented chords throughout the piece to make the harmonies more complex and intricate, and he had such a talent for doing so that it made him one of the most talented and virtuosic composers and pianists of his time.

Nocturne in G Major, Op. 37, No. 2

After leaving Majorca with George Sand and spending a few months under the care of Dr. Cauvières, Chopin was feeling much healthier and stronger. He began a new routine of spending his summers composing in Nohant, and his winters in Paris, teaching and even performing on some occasions. The summers he spent in Nohant gave him his first sense of a stable home life since his time in Warsaw, as the quiet countryside away from the distractions of the city gave him the peace and time he needed to shape his inspiration.¹⁵ He worked more slowly during these years, possibly a measure of his growing self-doubt. He became increasingly self-critical in his approach to composition, but as a result he began to put out much of his most celebrated music during these years. In 1839, Chopin wrote a letter to his publisher, Juljan Fontana, expressing, “I have a new nocturne, G Major, which will go together with the G Minor, if you remember.”¹⁶

Some consider this pair of pieces to be the finest of all of Chopin’s nocturnes. The G-Major nocturne sounds almost like a cradle song, embodying the sweet tenderness of his musical approach.¹⁷ The piece shows substantive evidence of the quiet countryside in which he spent his summers. Nohant Manor was a beautiful source of inspiration for him, with its rustic stone architecture, high ceilings, and a small church right next door. The melodies in his G-Major nocturne constantly flow up and down, as if to imitate the rolling hills that surrounded the house. Now in a major key, this piece is a beautiful example of the serenity which one often

¹⁵ Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1978), 172.

¹⁶ Frédéric Chopin to Juljan Fontana, August 1839, *Chopin’s Letters*, ed. Henryk Opieński (New York: Vienna House, 1971), 204-5.

¹⁷ Bartolomé Ferrá, *Chopin and George Sand in Majorca*, ed. trans. James Webb (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1974), 45.

finds in his works and embodies the happiness and stability that comforted him so much during the summers that he spent there.

Despite the *andantino* tempo marking, this is the most lively of the three nocturnes. The performer is indicated to play *dolce* in the beginning, and the aria-like melody in which the piece begins is less ornamental but flows in quick successions of sixteenth notes while the left hand arpeggiates the harmony below. This time, the melodic line consists of two-note chords instead of a single line. The ascending melodies tend to move up in thirds, and the descending chords tend to be 6ths, 3rds, 4ths, 5ths, or 7ths. Because of this, the density of this section is a bit thicker than that of the Nocturne in E Minor, although the overall tone is lighter. The melody begins somewhat abruptly and flows in very short phrases, resting a bit longer on the last notes and pausing before the next phrase begins. It seems like almost every other chord in the melodies is chromatic, but they move so quickly while staying true to the major and minor harmonies in the accompaniment that the overall sound is still consonant. One important aspect about the melody in this piece is that it is marked by only a few ornamentations. Other than a few appoggiaturas and one rolled chord, the *tempo rubato* in this piece is kept to a minimum, with very little “improvisatory,” rhythmic juxtapositions, such as triplets in one hand opposing 7- or 8-note groupings in the other hand—a compositional trend that Chopin employs in his later nocturnes.

The B section (more similar to a march) is much different than the A section, however. The sound is softer, and the overall texture is lighter, now consisting of both hands playing block chords on the first beat of every measure, while the right hand fills in the rest of the melody. The left hand accompanies, now with long, octave pedal tones that imitate the melody an octave below it. This section is still in G Major but now is much slower and more stately, similar to the

beginning of the Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 42, No. 1. After m. 43, the key shifts to D Minor, and the harmonies become more complex and chromatic (but still tonal), before landing lightly in m. 51 on an F-Major chord, then reverting back to the A section, now indicated *forte*.

Significantly, this nocturne uses alternation form A-B-A-B-A (rather than ternary form, like the other two). This keeps the returning A and B sections from building up in intensity as much, but rather juxtaposes the two completely different parts together to create a different impression on the listener. Chopin may have used this form to limit growth (and possibly even a climax) in the piece so that listeners would be drawn to focus on other important elements, such as the complex melodies or the dynamic shaping. The fingering in this nocturne is tricky and takes great skill and dexterity to master, and the main melodies are virtuosic in themselves. Perhaps he composed this nocturne with a more etude-like purpose in mind, drawing upon the technical properties of the piano and the ability of the hands.

Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 48, No. 1

After the summer of 1839, Chopin returned to Paris, this time without Sand to accompany him. This allowed them to maintain some degree of independence from each other, as they often experienced a lot of tension in their relationship. Despite the fact that his critical standing as a composer was growing steadily, this was not a productive time for Chopin. He published few of his works during this time, but focused more on engaging himself in a major re-examination of his compositional goals.¹⁸ These changes became evident when he and Sand revisited Nohant in June of 1841. This summer gave Chopin the same working conditions as he had experienced with Sand in Majorca several years earlier. They had few distractions and found comfort and company in their close friends and in each other. He was even gifted a brand new Pleyel piano, a remarkable upgrade from the old, beaten-up piano he had been using previously.¹⁹ Despite all of this, Chopin still felt dissatisfied with himself and his output. He confessed this in a letter to Fontana, saying that the weather was good but the music was bad.²⁰ At any rate, it was out of this “bad music” that came his inspiration for his Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 48 No. 1.

This nocturne is much different than the other two because it starts out as a march, indicated to be played *lento*. This time, the left hand accompanies by playing block chords, holding down pedal tones in the bass, and filling in the rest of the harmony an octave above. The right hand takes the melody, which slowly begins on the second beat of the measure and pauses after every beat or two as if to take a breath and contemplate what to say next. This melody is

¹⁸ *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. “Chopin, Fryderyk Franciszek,” by Korel Michalowski and Jim Samson, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/51099?q=chopin&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#S51099.11.

¹⁹ Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1978), 186-87.

²⁰ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 67.

probably the most disjunct of the three nocturnes, making small leaps to liven up the melody as well as leaping up or down to start new phrases. The most important parts of the phrases are the “improvised” sixteenth notes in the melody, not only because they are the most active parts of the phrases but also because they create complex harmonies. The phrases in the A section of the piece are clearly defined and grow in complexity as the B section approaches. The B section is a bit different because it consists entirely of block chords, marked “sotto voce” (as if speaking in a quiet voice, as if not to be heard). This section begins in a beautifully consonant C Major, and the chords flow freely from one to the next. The march theme still continues but later evolves into something different. This is where we finally see the use of some “skyscraper” chords. Most of these chords have to be rolled, spanning one to two octaves in each hand. Here it is important for the left-hand to first roll the chord and the right hand to catch the rest of the harmony while projecting the melody, and to not do this too fast and speed up. The left hand thumb must pass under the fingers without affecting the perfect evenness of the tone.²¹ The melody presented in mm. 25-36 is varied immediately thereafter, only to be interrupted by a flurry of octave chords in both hands, starting lower and moving up and down before landing on the next chord in the melody. These seemingly improvisational interruptions continue for the rest of the section, growing longer and more elaborate in order to foreshadow the next chord and to dramaticize the melody even more.

In the return of the A section we finally see an arpeggiating accompaniment in the left hand, characteristic of the nocturne genre. This is similar to the accompaniment in the other nocturnes but this time consists of 2- or 3-note chords rather than a single-note line. The right

²¹ Alfred Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, ed. trans. Cyril and Rena Clarke (New York: Abelard Press, 1952), 29.

hand also plays triplet chords along with the accompaniment, while projecting the melody above it. The return of the A section brings a sudden interruption of C Major, which may seem so calm and solemn at first. The key yields quickly to minor, however, and requires the triplet rhythms in the left hand to be presented with perfect regularity. The main melody has once again been reconquered, this time to be performed with the triumph of the spiritual element over the elements unleashed at the beginning.²² The melody from the A section once again reappears here, this time marked *doppio movimento*. The *agitato* marking is the perfect way to describe this section, as both hands consistently bang out dissonant chords on the keyboard with a sense of frustration and almost anger. We see 4-, 6-, and 7-against-3 chords here as the melody repeats from the beginning, requiring great skill of the performer to articulate each as it was in the beginning of the piece.

As a result of all of these chords, this nocturne is the most texturally dense of the three. The first A section has a light, homophonic texture, thickened only slightly by the fast sixteenth-note melodies. The B section could seem to have a light texture at first as well because the voices mimic each other. It gradually thickens as more chords have to be rolled to catch all the notes. Some of the chords are notated to be rolled (for example, the 11-note chord in m. 31) and are strategically indicated as such to emphasize them within the melody. The fast, “improvised” chords thicken the texture as they interrupt the melody because they are played so quickly. The returning A section is the most dense, seeming to consist of three separate parts: the left hand pedal tones; the upper left hand and lower right hand triplets; and then the melody projected above.

²² André Gide, *Notes on Chopin*, ed. trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc. 1949), 97.

In Conclusion

Chopin did not have the easiest life; although he was a famed pianist, teacher, and composer, he constantly struggled with illness and only lived to be thirty-eight years old. The grief from the deaths of his sister, father, and friends, as well as tensions in his relationship with Sand, caused him to suffer from depression for most of his life. Music was the only consistent outlet that he had, and he embraced it to the fullest extent that he could. Of all of the genres in which Chopin composed his works, his nocturnes seem to reflect his emotional state the most. The usually slow, *legato* melodies depict a peaceful scene, darkened slightly by the low pedal tones in the bass. The complex harmonic progressions often relax on consonant cadences, but every so often we come across an intriguing, almost haunting dissonance. There were certainly moments of peace in Chopin's life, but they were always somewhat underscored by his illness and depression. The most revealing way that Chopin's mental state is reflected is in the return of the A sections in his nocturnes, now more heavily ornamented. The melody is now emphasized by arpeggios, chromatic scales, or triplet rhythms, more powerful than ever. George Sand perfectly described his nocturnes in her novel, *Histoire de ma vie*, "Chopin's music is emotionally the richest and most profound that ever existed. He made one single instrument speak the language of the infinite. In ten simple lines, which even a child could play he often created poems of immense sublimity, dramas of incomparable force.... He has preserved individuality more exquisite than Bach's, more powerful than Beethoven's, more dramatic than Weber's. He is all three put together, yet he is himself, more subtle in his taste, more austere in his grandeur, more heart-rending in his anguish."²³

²³ Ruth Jordan, *Nocturne: A Life of Chopin* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1978), 262.

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