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Chopin's Semitonal Modulations in Formal Design

ABSTRACT

Background

This paper examines Chopin's use of semitonal modulations as distinctive compositional techniques of formal designs. Whereas Chopin's chromatic harmony leading to modulations to remote tonal regions has been widely admired as prominent features of his style, semitonal relationships specifically have not been as fully examined so far. Rather, semitonal relationships primarily accounts for late nineteenth-century composers, such as Wagner and Wolf.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

I claim that, in the music of Chopin, the semitonal modulations not only raise tonal issues, but also have formal functions involving cadential progressions or boundaries of formal division. First, semitonal modulations may dramatize cadential progressions. In the *Waltz in A-flat major Op. 42* and the *Fantasy Op. 49*, Chopin creates a strong sense of arriving at the home key by digressing momentarily to a key a semitone apart before the concluding cadence. That is, they expand the last cadence and emphasize the resolution of tension. In the *A-flat major Waltz*, Chopin diverges to the A major to extend and intensify the cadential progression in A-flat major. Chopin's skillful use of this technique is proved by the fact that he employs the technique in another piece in a very similar way to the last section of the *Waltz*. In the *Fantasy Op. 49*, the A major passage appears with a similar function to prepare the close of the piece, but in a very different kind of piece, one that involves directional tonality beginning in F minor and ending in A-flat major. On the other hand, in the first movement of the *B-flat minor Sonata Op. 35*, Chopin uses the same technique, also related to the last cadence, in a different musical context. In this case, the semitonal modulation weakens the sense of the closure, since it shows the failed attempt to return to the original key.

Second, semitonal modulation may blur the boundary between two sections. The *Mazurka in D major Op. 33 No. 2* and the *Mazurka in C minor Op. 56 No. 3* are such examples where Chopin disguises a formal division of the two sections and give individuality to the pieces using the transformation between the semitone-related keys. In the *D major Mazurka*, the second period of the section attains a key a half step down, D-flat major, from the key of the reprise, and it results in the next eight transitory measures to effect the real return of the home key. In other words, the music takes a detour to return to the home key rather than moving directly from B-flat major to D major. Another example demonstrating semitonal modulation at a juncture of formal division is the *Mazurka in C minor Op. 56 No. 3*. In this mazurka, I focus on Chopin's technique right before the music proceeds to the second section in B-flat major. Although the transitional passage arrives at the

perfect authentic cadence of B-flat major, the expectation of the music heading to a new section in the key is frustrated when the tonic in B-flat major transforms to a leading tone of B major. Confusion might arise as to whether the B major passage continues the transition or starts a new section. The sectional demarcation does not become clear even after B-flat major key returns, since Chopin not only creates a semitonal shift before the new section, but does not synchronize the return of the key with the thematic materials in this mazurka.

A similar but more extended case occurs at the end of the developing episode in the *Ballade in F minor Op. 52*. Among the many striking features of the *Fourth Ballade*, I focus on the unusual tonal structure of the *Ballade*, specifically a semitonal modulation in the middle section of the piece. In the middle of the A-flat major section, the music moves to an E major chord, which leads the music to the key area of A major. The tonal organization of the section is skillfully planned over a long span, and the semitonal modulation fits perfectly into the last stage of the middle section after the successive modulations. The moment of semitonal modulation is striking because it coincides with the return of the introduction. Thus, this is the moment where this *Ballade* is divided into two parts, but it is disguised by being located in the middle of the modulatory process.

Methods

This paper analyses several works by Chopin to examine how an abrupt semitonal modulation affects an individual formal construction. In particular, I argue that employing a semitonal modulation dramatizes a cadence of the work and that it effects an obscuring of the formal divisions.

After defining the technique of semitonal modulation in the music of Chopin, I will explore how semitonal modulations play a crucial role in formal designs in two ways. First, semitonal modulations may intensify or weaken the cadential progression. Second, semitonal modulation may blur the boundary between two sections.

Implications

The formal and expressive techniques bound up with semitonal modulation discussed in this paper allow for further research of Chopin's innovations in composition, since Chopin's use of semitonal relationships radiates into other elements of music. It thus offers analysts a new perspective to interpret motive and large-scale pitch structuring as well. I expect this study to contribute to enriching Chopin scholarship and deepening our understanding of Chopin's distinctive compositional style, for a greater sensitivity to the uses of semitonal relations can be a useful addition to the analysis of many of Chopin's most celebrated passages. Furthermore, the paper will help to connect Chopin's techniques to those of later composers.

Keywords

Semitonal Modulation, Chopin, Form, Chromaticism.

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