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Chopin's Ternary Preludes

ABSTRACT

Background

A favorite form of Chopin's, one he cultivated in many genres, was the ternary form, defined here as a three-part A_I–B–A_{II} design with a tonally closed first part. Yet only three of the twenty-four preludes in Chopin's Op. 28 use this particular form, or a close approximation of it — the Preludes in F-sharp major, B-flat major, and D-flat major. This paper analyzes these three preludes and considers how Chopin's handling of this favorite form may have been influenced by the prelude genre in which he was writing.

In the Prelude in F-sharp major Chopin adopts the unusual procedure in section A_{II} of restating only the end of the consequent phrase that had closed section A_I. Section A_{II} restates only bars 13–20 of section A_I, omitting what had been the first twelve bars of the piece. What might justify such a procedure, other than perhaps a desire for a more concise form? A voice-leading analysis of the prelude reveals one possible reason. Section B has worked out an enlarged form of the primary motive that the twelve omitted bars would have restated, making it unnecessary to recapitulate those bars. In what follows, the eight bars retained in the truncated section A_{II} are then perfectly poised to support a more direct reprise of that primary motive in the covering descant voice. To this procedure accrues the further advantage of drawing together elements from both preceding sections, as Chopin's larger ternary forms often do. If a prelude required compression without sacrificing virtues of larger forms, this would be one way to do it — and an ingenious one at that.

The Prelude in B-flat major modifies the ternary form in a different way. As in the other ternaries Chopin designs section A_I to be harmonically closed; but now the upper-voice melody remains open, allowing for certain continuities with the chromatic middle section that follows. Further continuities emerge when Chopin sets the opening of A_{II} over a six-four. As A_{II} plays itself out, Chopin delays the return of tonic harmony until the end of the section while retaining the melodic openness featured earlier in A_I, thus deferring closure to the coda. From this plan emerges a form that retains the compression desirable in a prelude but that also retains features of the more continuous designs that characterize other preludes in the set, and preludes generally. Indeed, connections of various kinds across the different sections, involving not only voice leading but such factors as register and thematic transformation, seem encouraged by the miniature quality of the form, impressing themselves more readily on the ear than is generally possible in larger ternaries.

The longest of the preludes, in D-flat major, comes closest to the ternaries in other genres, such as the nocturne, with a nearly complete small ternary in section A_I, a middle section with two distinct repeated strains, and a full (if condensed) reprise. If, as

Eigeldinger maintains, one purpose of the Preludes Op. 28 was to offer a 'microcosm of [Chopin's] output, past and future', and if all three preludes discussed in this paper have the quality of punctuating the Op. 28 collection with quasi-nocturnes, it may have served the composer's purpose to present a fuller representative of that spacious and lyrical genre, and one that could readily stand alone as an independent piece. Even here, however, Chopin designs a more continuous form, not only through elements of texture (the famous repeated 'raindrops') but again through register and thematic transformation. Among other features, a dissonant seventh left hanging at the end of A_I finds its resolution, in register, only in A_{II}, a resolution that initiates a concealed reference to the first three notes of the outer sections. In that sense, this prelude, like the others discussed in this paper, fosters voice-leading continuities and a thematic consistency that characterize the other preludes in Op. 28, and preludes generally, while still maintaining the elements of contrast that constitute one of the prime virtues of the ternary form.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The paper aims to show how form and tonal structure interact differently in these three preludes than in many of Chopin's other ternary forms. The handling of closure in section A_I, the rewriting of the reprises, and the design of the codas, bring these preludes closer to other works in Op. 28 than to most of the ternaries in other genres (such as the nocturnes).

Methods

The methodology is Schenkerian, as the analyses consider a full range of musical factors (counterpoint, harmony, rhythm, register, thematic design, and so forth), but it touches on questions of genre not usually associated with a Schenkerian approach.

Implications

Recent trends in the study of musical form (as shown by Hepokoski and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory*) have given special attention to genre but consider tonal structure in only a general way. Schenkerians have studied form and voice leading in depth, but with the exception of a few studies, Schenkerians have tended to place less emphasis on genre. By considering form, genre, and voice leading together, this paper attempts to promote dialogue among these approaches.

Keywords

Chopin, Preludes, Form, Genre, Voice, Leading, Schenker.

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