Chopin and the G minor Ballade

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Vetenskaplig handledare: Björn Ejdemo
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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to make a general presentation of Chopin, the age in which he lived, his G minor Ballade and selected editions of the Ballade. I will also compare five recordings of the G minor Ballade, and make a presentation and a recording of my own interpretation of the G minor Ballade. This work discusses his life up to the time the Ballade was published, Chopin’s development as a composer, and the period in his life when the Ballade was composed. Background material on the history of the Ballade as a genre and its development is included to give the reader an enhanced contextual understanding. The issue as to whether Chopin had a literary model when composing the G minor Ballade and his relationship with the Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz is discussed. This work considers the issue of form in the G minor Ballade, Chopin’s personality, how Chopin played, his use of the term ‘tempo rubato’, and how he used improvisation and composition. Criticisms made with respect to the different editions of Chopin’s music are reviewed. Five recordings of the G minor Ballade from the years 1926, 1960, 1982, 1985, and 1998 are compared to each other. Described is that one can hear different interpretations of the G minor Ballade. The difference is because the various pianists do not exactly follow the score. Finally my own interpretation and recording of the G minor Ballade is offered.
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Introduction

The first time I heard Chopin’s G minor Ballade, I was immediately and strongly attracted to it and wanted to play it. I also thought about the Ballade and the man who created it. Why did Chopin choose to compose this Ballade? What is the history behind the Ballade? Is there a literary text which Chopin used for inspiration? What kind of person was Chopin? What was his style of playing? During which period was this Ballade composed and what was the spirit of that age? How is the Ballade generally interpreted? What constitutes a quality interpretation of the G minor Ballade? The last question is, for me, very interesting because music academics generally orthodox in their definitions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ interpretations. This can be dangerous in that there is a risk that the musical interpretations will become rigidly intellectualised or lose the essential meaning of the piece in question. Such inflexibility can also hinder creative freedom by causing a musician to falsely believe that their interpretation will not be adequate.

The purpose of this work is to make a general presentation of Chopin, the age in which he lived, Chopin’s G minor Ballade, and the editions of the Ballade. I will also compare five recordings of the G minor Ballade and make a presentation and a recording of my own interpretation of the G minor Ballade.

First, I attempted to obtain material about Chopin and his G minor Ballade to get a better picture of Chopin, the G minor Ballade, and Chopin’s playing. I located ten recordings of Chopin’s G minor Ballade by different pianists and selected five for a more detailed examination. The pianists on the recordings are commonly considered to be skilled pianists and the recordings stretch over a period of over 70 years. The recordings differ widely from each other. The recordings were made in 1926, 1960, 1982, 1985 and 1998. To start my analysis, I listened five recordings one after the other and wrote down my observations of differences and other details. After that I selected six parts of the G minor Ballade for closer study. I then rerecorded these parts onto a compact disc. The result was six groups of recordings each containing the five selections. It was then possible to listen to each part one after the other. This strategy made it much easier to compare the work of the five pianists to each other. Lastly, I made my own interpretation and recording of the G minor Ballade.
History

The general history of Chopin until the G minor ballade was published

In the century preceding his birth, the political situation in Poland was unstable and marked by divisions between different parts of Polish society. Earlier conflicts weakened the monarchy and the traditional political system. Throughout the 18th century Russian, Austrian and Prussian interference in Polish internal affairs grew and encouraged greater internal divisiveness. Political and religious strife during the years 1768-72 created an excuse for Russia, Prussia and Austria to each annex parts of Poland. Reform efforts on the part of the Polish monarchy alarmed the nobility and Poland’s neighbours. Domestic and foreign forces united and helped to bring about a foreign occupation of Poland. Parts were annexed by Russia and Prussia. A general Polish revolt broke out in 1794 and ended with the division between Russia, Prussia and Austria of the remaining part of the country. In 1807 Napoleon I created the French-controlled Duchy of Warsaw out of Prussian territory that had been part of old Poland. This part fell under Russian domination after Napoleon’s unsuccessful war against Russia in 1812. A new insurrection began in 1830 and led to an unsuccessful Polish-Russian war in 1831. Poles spared from deportation to Siberia or from forced conscription into the Russian army chose to emigrate from Poland. (Nationalencyklopedien 1994)

Frédéric Chopin’s father, Nicolas Chopin, was a Frenchman who came to Poland in 1787 when only sixteen years old. One can only speculate as to the reasons that led Nicolas to seek his fortune in Poland at such a young age. He apparently broke completely with his French past and kept his children in ignorance of their French relatives, the last of whom died in 1845. The single extant letter from Nicolas Chopin to his family in Lorraine (15 September 1790) reveals that he was taken to Poland by Jan Adam Weydlich, an administrator at Count Michael Pac’s estate in Marainville, and that he kept away from France to avoid conscription into the revolutionary army. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Nicolas identified completely with his adopted country, mastering its language and developing a patriotism which was a powerful influence on the lives of his children. His first employment was as a clerk in a Warsaw tobacco factory. The Polish revolt of 1794 brought this employment to an end. He subsequently enlisted in the National Guard, rising to the rank of captain. After the revolt ended he earned a living as a French tutor in various households of the nobility. In 1802 he was engaged by the Skarbek family who were living in Zelazowa Wola, a small town located near Warsaw. While in their service he met Tekla-Justyna Krzyzanowska, a well-educated but poor relative of the Skarbeks. He married her in 1806. Frédéric was born in Zelazowa Wola in 1810. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Frédéric Chopin received a sound general education both at home and at the Warsaw Lyceum (1823-26). His parents took care that nothing should interfere with his regular studies and he was an intelligent, industrious pupil. As a child he had extraordinary talents - he was writing verses by the age of six - and his musical gifts soon made it clear that he was a child prodigy. His aptitude for the keyboard was so great that his lessons between 1816 and 1822 with the violinist, pianist and composer Wojcieck Zywny (Adalbert Ziwny) may have been almost superfluous. Zywny’s chief merit as a teacher was that he kept the boy’s exuberant facility within bounds and imposed on it the discipline of Bach and the Viennese classical composers. As a pianist, Chopin was almost self-taught. Contemporary descriptions mention his inventiveness and ingenuity that were uninhibited by professional pedantry. While he was a pupil of Zywny, Chopin was constantly improvising at the piano. (Grove Dictionary 1980)
As a five-year-old he had learned all that his eldest sister could teach him. At sixteen he was the pride of the Warsaw Conservatory’s high school where he had only recently started his attendance. (Schonberg 1987)

From the age of 7 the aristocratic salons of Warsaw became open to Chopin and his performances were talked about and enjoyed. Thus, from an early age he was in contact with the elegance and distinction that his temperament required. In 1817 a march of his (now lost) was performed by Grand Duke Konstantin’s military band. A year later he made his first appearance at a public concert, playing a concerto by Gyrowetz. In 1825 he played for Tsar Alexander I who visiting Warsaw at the time. That he was not spoilt by his successes is shown by his ‘Szafarnia Courier’, a collection of letters in the form of a newspaper which he and his sister Emilia compiled during their holidays in the country. These playful letters also contain the first indications of Chopin’s interest in Polish folk music that he heard first-hand from peasants with whom he had contact. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

While at the high school Chopin continued his musical studies with Jóseph Elsner. The first demonstration of this systematic instruction is apparent in his C minor Rondo Op. 1 (published in 1825). The three-year course with Elsner was thorough and comprehensive with two of the three years being devoted mainly to theory, harmony and counterpoint. It is clear from the kind of pieces written by his classmates (masses, trios, quartets, fugues, sonatas and compositions for chorus and orchestra) that Chopin had the opportunity to learn every branch of composition. It is doubtful however, that he took full advantage of the available instruction for later he turned to Cherubini’s Cours de contrepoint et de la fugue (1835) for guidance and even wrote a fugue himself. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin’s real love was for the piano and all efforts to direct his energies to composition for other instruments or within Classical forms were in vain. Fortunately Elsner recognized that his pupil had exceptional talent (‘musical genius, etc.’ he wrote in his report to the conservatory) and did not attempt to impose his will or his own tastes on his pupil. Elsner privately hoped that Chopin would one day compose the nationally awaited great Polish opera, but there he completely misjudged his pupil. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin’s first contact with the larger musical world came early in 1828 when Hummel visited Warsaw. He was quick to emulate the elegance of Hummel’s style in his concertos and rondos. In 1829 a visit from Paganini was to show him some of the achievements that still lay outside of his reach. Later that year Chopin went to Berlin with a Professor Jarocki who was attending a scientific conference in that city. On this visit he saw Mendelssohn but he dared not approach him. He was able to hear serious music (including Handel’s Ode on St Cecilia’s Day) which he had no chance of hearing in Warsaw where the Italian operas of Rossini and his followers formed the basic repertory. Although he was far from strong physically, he suffered no ill effects from the fatiguing stagecoach journey and there was no sign as yet of the pulmonary weakness that led to his early death. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

According to Jezewska, Chopin was barely sixteen when the doctors first diagnosed his tuberculosis for which there was no known cure. They ordered Chopin to take a rest cure at a spa. It was decided that he would go in the summer of 1826 before starting at the Conservatory. Duszniki, (known at the time as Reinerz) famous for its mineral springs, was the place chosen for him. The stay in Duszniski did a great deal to improve Chopin’s health. Unfortunately the time at Duszniski failed to bring about improvement of the health of Emilia, Chopin’s younger sister. She died of tuberculosis at the age of fifteen. (Jezewska 1985)
After final examinations at the Warsaw Conservatory Chopin wanted to seek experience and, if possible, fortune abroad. He first went to Vienna to arrange for the publications of his better juvenilia and in August 1829 he made a successful debut at the Kärntnertor-Theater. There he played his Variations Op. 2 and his concert Rondo Krakowiak Op. 14. He gave a second concert a week later. The public was impressed by his brilliant performance and even more impressed by his improvisation upon a Polish folksong. After that he returned to Warsaw only briefly before undertaking a lengthy concert tour of Germany and Italy. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

The enthusiastic reception of his compositions that were marked by a frankly Polish character and his meetings with other virtuosos encouraged him to write music that would exploit both a Polish colouring and his own special piano style. Thus, for the rest of his stay in Warsaw he was mainly occupied with his two concertos; the last movement of each is based on a Polish dance form of the kind that had been applauded in Vienna. At the same time his ideas on piano technique began to take shape and the first of his studies date from this period. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin lived in the stimulating society of young Polish poets and artists who were filled with ardent patriotism and revolutionary fervour and who looked upon him as one of their future hopes. In Polish eyes, Chopin was beginning to assume the position of a national composer. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Warsaw was by no means a leading cultural centre in the early nineteenth century – at least until the 1830s insurrection – but like most major European cities it registered something of the major changes then taking place more widely in music and in music-making. That change, reflecting a fundamental reshaping of European society, penetrated into many aspects of the infrastructure of musical life. In essence the musical centre of gravity shifted from court to city, as a politically emergent middle class increasingly took over the role of shaping and directing formal culture. This central transformation carried with it many ancillary transformations – in the professional status of composers and performers, in the social make-up of audiences, in tastes, and in repertoires. That change was associated in particular with the institution of the public concert and with its corollary, the rise of the piano. (Samson 1992)

By the 1820s, Chopin’s formative years, classical keyboard traditions were overshadowed by a repertory of post-classical piano music associated with the flamboyant, cosmopolitan and above all commercial concert life of a newly influential middle-class. This repertory clearly focused on the virtuoso pianist-composer and exulted almost fetishistically in the powers of an instrument now firmly established. Chopin’s early years in Warsaw were geared towards a career as a pianist-composer within this milieu. His major compositions adopted the genres favoured by other virtuoso-composers, notably in the three early works for piano and orchestra – a variation set, potpourri and rondo characteristically based (respectively) on a well-known operatic aria (Variations on Là ci darem la mano), a string of folk melodies (Fantasy on Polish Airs) and so-called ‘national’ dance (Rondo à la Krakowiak). Together with the two piano concertos, these were well suited to the public concert of the day just as the solo piano works, mainly rondos and dance pieces, were appropriate for the soirée and matinée. There were also ‘private’ pieces such as the Sonata Op. 4 and the Piano Trio Op. 8 markedly different in idiom from the concert pieces. And this very distinction between public and private styles was itself entirely in keeping with the normal practise of the virtuoso composer. (Samson 1992)
Chopin’s departure for Vienna was repeatedly postponed by the political troubles which preceded the uprising of 1830. He also hesitated because he was in love with a young singer, Konstancia Gladkowska. After his final concert in Warsaw on 11 October, when he played his E-minor Concerto, he left for Vienna on 2 November. He hoped that in Vienna to begin at last to earn something from his music. After an unhurried journey with stops in Breslau and Prague, he reached Vienna on November 22. He remained there until the following July. This was a period of disappointment and frustration during which he made no headway with the public or publishers. He performed twice but failed completely to repeat his earlier success. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin had scarcely been in Vienna a week when news arrived of the revolt which had broken out in Warsaw on 29 November. Chopin’s letters of this period betray an extraordinary state of mind. To his parents he wrote in a cheerful vein, relating his experiences in the musical and artistic world of Vienna and only touching lightly on the difficulties he was experiencing. On the other hand, in his letters to Jan Matuszyński he unburdened himself in a wild and incoherent manner of all the misery which was oppressing him and which he forcing himself to hide from the outside world. Chopin’s father, fearing that Frédéric would do something foolish, had written urging him to stay where he was and Frédéric could do no more than send to Warsaw letters like the following, written on Christmas Day 1830:

(Parakilas 1992)
Chopin intended to go to Italy but this was not possible due to the general political turmoil at the time. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin then wanted to go to Paris. Since he was legally a Russian subject and travelling with a Russian passport the Russian embassy was not disposed to allow him to join the rest of the Polish exiles and conspirators in Paris. After a great deal of trouble he had to be content with having his passport endorsed ‘To London via Paris.’ (Hedley 1974)

Paris was to be his home for the rest of his life. During a stop in Munich on 28 August 1831 he played his E minor Concerto. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

During this period Chopin was for several weeks without news of his family for the Russians were preparing to storm Warsaw and communication with the city was almost impossible. (Hedley 1974)

He was in Stuttgart when he learnt of the capture of Warsaw by the Russians; this threw him into despair, and he scribbled in his notebook:

> The suburbs have been destroyed, burnt down. Johnnie and William have surely perished on the ramparts. I can see Marcel a prisoner. Sowinski, that good lad, is in the hands of those villains! Paszkiewicz, one of the dogs from Mohilev, seizes the capital of the first monarchs of Europe! Moscow rules the world! Oh God, do You exist? You do, and yet You do not take vengeance. Have You not had enough of these Muscovite crimes or...or, are You Yourself a Russian!!!??...
> Father, Mother where are you? Perhaps corpses... (Hedley 1974 p. 42)

Even if the situation threw Chopin into despair, there is no evidence for the assertion that it was in this mood that he composed the ‘Revolutionary’ Study Op. 10 no. 12. A week later, in mid-September 1831, he arrived in the French capital. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin arrived in Paris in September 1831. He did not abandon the concert platform, but he remained aloof from the commercial concert world of the pianist-composer and his public appearances were few and far between. At the same time Chopin did not seek to establish himself as a composer of major ambition by turning to the prestigious genres of opera, symphony and chamber music. (Samson 1992)

Chopin’s beginning in Paris was uncertain. He felt himself to be something of a provincial and considered taking lessons from Kalkbrenner, one of Paris best pianists at the time. Ultimately, he saw that this would be a waste of time and declared his ambition to create for himself a new world of music even though Kalkbrenner assured him that he could not do so until he had first mastered the ‘old school’. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

After a while Chopin was admitted into the highest social circles and his material security was assured. The success of his first Paris concert on 26 February 1832, firmly established his position. His imaginative playing and the unusual charm of his personality gained him many friends in literary and musical circles. Chopin was now a notable figure in the musical life of Paris. Liszt, Berlioz, Hiller, Bellini and Meyerbeer became his admiring friends. (Grove dictionary 1980)

For virtuosi of every nationality and degree of merit, Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the musical Mecca of Europe. (Cortot 1951)
Paris at this time was also a whirlpool of political, intellectual and artistic activity, the like of which has rarely been seen. The great time of romanticism was rising towards its high-water mark and all the barriers of tradition, convention and respect for established authority were being swept away by the flood of change. In the arts the change of outlook was as fundamental as in the sphere of politics. Brilliant young writers and artists appeared at this critical moment to form the vanguard of the new movement. Victor Hugo, Balzac, Vigny, Lamartine Musset and George Sand, to name only a few, infused new life into literature and drama. Among painters Delacroix, Ingres and Delaroche led the way. (Hedley 1974)

Soon Chopin became the most fashionable piano teacher. The income he derived from giving lessons enabled him to give up the struggle to maintain himself as a public performer, work which he found distasteful (Chopin said: ‘Concerts are never real music; you have to give up the idea of hearing in them the most beautiful things of art.’ [Eigeldinger 1986 p.110]). His quiet tone and his use of the sustaining pedal as a veil were better suited to intimate gatherings than to large concert halls. Hence Chopin’s public performances, infrequent during his first year in Paris, became rarer still when he found that he could acquire fame and money without them. There is no other example in the history of piano playing of such a legendary reputation being built on barely 30 public performances, all that Chopin gave throughout his entire career. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

For intimate companionship in a foreign country Chopin naturally turned to the Polish refugees, who had come to Paris after the disastrous revolt of 1830-31. Chopin became a member of the Polish Literary Society and kept in touch with artistic and political trends in his native country. It is wrong to say that he was totally absorbed in music. He enjoyed the acquaintance of Musset, Balzac, Heine, Delacroix and Mickiewicz and so was at the centre of the romantic movement. Yet while in a leading role he did not necessarily share the same views as the movement’s more radical members. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

In May 1834, Chopin visited a music festival and was welcomed by Hiller and Mendelssohn, and afterwards he made an excursion to Düsseldorf. During the summer of 1835 he saw his parents for the last time; they spent a month together in Carlsbad. After his parents returned to Poland he made his way to Dresden where by chance he renewed his acquaintance with the Wodzinski family whose three sons had boarded with the Chopins while they were schoolboys at the Warsaw high school. Their sister Maria was now an attractive girl of 16 and Chopin immediately fell in love with her. Maria’s parents raised no objections to the young peoples liking each other until the winter when Chopin fell so seriously ill that the Warsaw papers carried announcements of his death. The father and uncle became alarmed and though Maria’s mother was more indulgent (she allowed the couple to meet at Marienbad and in Dresden in the summer of 1836), Chopin’s continually faltering health caused the men of the family to insist that the idea of marriage be quietly dropped the following year. Maria had no voice in the decision. When it was clear that the affair was over Chopin had a period of depression that lasted until he began his relationship with George Sand. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

When did Chopin compose the G minor Ballade Op. 23?

According to Grove Dictionary, Chopin sketched the G minor Ballade and the B-minor Scherzo in Vienna and both were then completed and published after he settled in Paris. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

A different opinion is held by Jim Samson (1992). He says that the first Scherzo and the first Ballade were probably composed during Chopin’s early years in Paris. He believes that the
exact dates of their composition have not been determined reliably and that it is probable that neither work was begun before 1833. Indeed, on stylistic and other evidence it seems likely that they were written not long before their publication in 1835 and 1836 respectively. The autograph and paper type is identical to that of other manuscripts known to have been prepared in 1835–36 (including the autograph of Op. 26). Lengthy gestation periods were not, in any case, characteristic of Chopin and we can assume that he followed his normal practise of beginning a work a year or, at most, two years before its publication. (Samson 1992)

Many leading authorities have claimed that Chopin began the G minor Ballade about the same time as the Scherzo (at the end of his stay in Vienna) and though the little evidence supporting such an early date has recently been discredited, the claim is still widely accepted. There appears to be no way to determinate for sure how long before June 1835 (when it was ready for the printer) Chopin began the work. In any case the Ballade was another experimental work. Like the Scherzo, it was a freestanding instrumental work in a genre that had not previously been used for such works. (Parakilas 1992)

According to Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, the G minor Ballade was published in 1836 in Germany, France and England. (Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart 2000)

The ballad in a historical perspective

Ballad comes from the word *balada*, from the rootword *bala*, which means dance or a dance song. In the beginning the ballad was performed as a dance game with a fore singer and where the people who were dancing sang in the refrain. The connection between the singing part and the dance part disappeared in most cases by the fourteenth century when a ballad generally came to mean a solo song with a narrative text. The term ballad has had different meanings at different times and in different languages. It is common even today to use the French term ballade and the Italian term *ballata* to characterize special types of ballads in music history.

Examples of types of ballads are:
1. The Nordic folk song ballad
2. The French Middle-Age ballad
3. The Italian ballata
4. The romantic ballad
5. The Jazz ballad
6. The popular music ballad

The ballad is also derived from French poetry of the Middle Ages. (Sohlmans musiklexikon 1975)

As a genre of verse the ballad can briefly be described as an anonymous narrative involving legendary or historical events. There is generally a tragic outcome and ballads are frequently associated with violence and the supernatural. (Kirby 1995)

According to Parakilas (1992) it is possible to set forth a general narrative model of the ballad as it is applied to the genre known to Chopin and his audiences. The ballad process typically tells the story of someone who provokes and receives justice. The process centres on one character and that character interacts with others who are necessary to the process. Though a ballad displays human and sometimes supernatural conflicts and cross-purposes, it also has about it the simple, irresistible force of a natural process, the process of nature absorbing a disturbance. The ballad process, as already can be seen, has something in common with the typical processes of tragedy and epic, two genres to which ballads have long been compared.
Thus the ballad contained elements with which the Romantics could readily identify. It enjoyed favour in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: associated with the distant past, as the vestige of ancient poetry, it came to be the northern counterpart of the chivalric epics of France. Leading poets of the time, particularly in Germany, felt stimulated to write new ballads that corresponded to those older ones of folk origin. Many composers set ballads, old as well as new, to music. (Kirby 1995)

**Chopin’s development as a composer**

In the scherzo and the ballade Chopin followed a special path. He drew sustenance from classical and non-classical traditions but remained essentially independent of both - to the point of establishing new genres. Some of the enabling factors were products of Chopin’s unique position within the social world of early nineteenth-century pianism. (Samson 1992)

According to Samson, Chopin’s achievement was to refine and give new substance to the conventions of popular pianism, enriching those conventions by drawing upon elements from other - and weightier - musical worlds. In this way he achieved a unique synthesis of the public and private, the popular and the significant. When it came to extended forms that meant a synthesis of the formal methods of popular concert music - above all the alternation of bravura figuration and melodic paragraphs based on popular genres - and the sonata-based designs and organic tonal structures of the Austro-German tradition. The first Scherzo and the first Ballade were the earliest fruits of that synthesis. (Samson 1992)

In the early 1830s Chopin’s music acquired an intensity, a passion, at times a terrifying power, which can rather easily suggest an inner life whose turmoil was lived out in his music. It was in part this expressive imperative, allied to a sense of the pretension and ambition of the musical work, which transformed a post-classical into a romantic idiom. (Samson 1992)

Chopin was widely counted among the progressives of early nineteenth-century music. At the same time, like many other progressives in an age of growing historical awareness, he took much of his creative inspiration from an earlier age, specifically from Bach and Mozart. The transformation of their inheritance was a further important catalyst upon Chopin’s stylistic maturation that occurred in the early 1830s. (Samson 1992)

According to Charles Rosen the death of Beethoven must had given a sense of freedom to the composers born, as was Chopin, in the first decade of the 19th century. Rosen thinks that it is probable that Beethoven’s death hastened the rapid development of new stylistic tendencies that were already beginning to make themselves felt and which even influenced Beethoven’s own music. (Rosen 1996)

According to Samson the Vienna and early Paris years (1830–32) witnessed a gradual but unmistakable transformation in Chopin’s musical style. No doubt this was closely allied with changes in his personal attitudes and circumstances as he faced up to Vienna’s indifference, to Poland’s developing tragedy - culminating in the suppression of the 1830-31 insurrection - and to his own increasing disenchantment with a career as a composer-pianist. Whatever the cause, the change of tone is apparent in different ways in the Op. 6, an Op. 7 Mazurkas, the Op. 9 Nocturnes and the Op. 10 Etudes. (Samson1992)

Samson also says that there was a further and perhaps more fundamental development of style in Chopin’s music during the Vienna and early Paris years:
Already during his Warsaw period he began to acquire a long-range harmonic vision which enabled him to gain structural control over the materials of the brilliant style, habitually presented in highly sectionised formal designs which alternate lyrical and figurative paragraphs. Characteristically such alternating paragraphs would be relatively self-contained, with clearly-defined harmonic divisions. Chopin’s achievement was to subordinate them to more extended over-arching tonal spans, embracing formal contrasts within a higher tonal synthesis and ensuring a priority of tonal structure over sectionalised formal design. At the same time Chopin did not lose sight of the formal methods of the brilliant style. (Samson 1992 p.6-7)

The achievements of the early Paris years – in melody, figuration and harmony – shaped and vitalised the Scherzo and the Ballade for Chopin. The Ballade rests, according to Samson, solidly on the foundations of the sonata-form design, couching its materials in a through-composed, harmonically directional structure where variation and transformation are seminal functions, integration and synthesis essential goals. Viewed as a whole the Scherzos and the Ballades embody a synthesis of the post-classical brilliant style and the classical brilliant style and the classical sonata-form archetype. In relation to this the first Scherzo (Scherzo B minor, Op. 20) leans towards the brilliant style and the first Ballade (Ballade, G minor, Op. 23) towards the sonata principle. There was of course a major shift in style between the sonata-form elements of Chopin’s Warsaw-period works (especially the Op. 4 Sonata and the Piano Trio) and those of the first Ballade. In the Ballade, sonata-based formal functions have clearly been reinterpreted in the light of particular dramatic and expressive aim, a ‘plot archetype’ shared by other early nineteenth-century works. Above all, the structure is end-weighted with a rising intensity curve culminating in a reprise which is more apotheosis than synthesis. In this context the bravura closing section, marked off from the work by a change of metre as well by its non-thematic character, has an essential and highly specific formal function. Yet even this gesture (including the change of metre) has origins in the brilliant style, notably in the applause seeking finales so characteristic of fantasies and variation sets by pianist-composers. And this is only one of several ways in which elements of post-classical concert music transformed the normative practise of classical sonata form in this work. (Samson 1992)

The themes in the Ballade spell out the work’s continuing links with the world of popular pianism, where thematic materials are commonly grounded in popular genres. The pivotal episode in Eb major at bar 138 is the most obvious point at which a popular genre emerges into the foreground of the Ballade. With its arched ‘moto perpetuo arabesques’ this episode immediately invokes the characteristic phraseology of the Chopin waltz, a phraseology that appeared in Op. 18, the first of the ‘Paris’ waltzes (also in Eb major), and was later be repeated in the Waltzes Op. 34. The affinity is apparent, even in an informal inspection as may be seen in Example 1. This association sheds light in turn on the two main themes of the Ballade. Subsumed by the compound duple metre of its first theme are the basic features of a slow waltz (the two-bar groupings of several of Chopin’s Waltzes even suggest compound duple), while underlyingly the second theme it’s possible to see the hazy outlines of a barcarolle which becomes clearer in the reprise of the theme. The contrasted rhythmic profile of the two main themes (as may be seen in Example 2) is an important dimension of the Ballade. The presentation of themes related to popular genres within a sonata-form framework offer a representative sample of Chopin’s genius as a composer. (Samson 1992)
The development of the ballad

The first Ballade was of course much more than an outcome of Chopin’s refinement and enrichment of the traditions of popular pianism. Simply by using the title ‘ballade’ for a piano piece he invoked a much wider range of reference in both musical and literary contexts. Contemporary dictionaries and music lexicons establish clearly that connotations associated with the title ‘ballade’ were exclusively vocal until the 1840s. When recognising how the word was defined in the public’s mind it is important to observe that early advertisements for the Ballade Op. 23 included the description *ohne Worte* (without words); an immediate association with vocal music. The opening of the work makes this connection explicit through the tonally inductive ‘recitative’ which precedes the G minor ‘aria’. French operas in particular used the
term ‘ballade’ to describe a simple narrative song (usually strophic), and very often this was couched in the same compound duple metre employed by Chopin in Op. 23 and in his later ballades. The title ‘ballade’ also invites comparison with early nineteenth-century song. Here the instrumental ballade might be presumed to stand in the same relation to a ballade as the song without words to a vocal romance. It is notable that ballad settings by Schubert, Loewe and others were frequently presented in ‘narrative’ 6/8 or 6/4 metre, borrowing freely from a convention commonly associated with pastoral music of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The connotations are explicit. Put simply, the lyric poem and its musical setting expressed an emotion, while the ballad and its musical setting told a story. For contemporary audiences this created an inescapable resonance when Chopin used ‘ballade’ in his title. (Samson 1992)

Polish ballads, both folk and literary, belonged to larger European traditions. Regardless of what model Chopin had in mind as he composed, his title invited listeners of different countries to think of the ballads they knew. Scholars who have sought connections between Polish folk music and Chopin’s Ballades have come up with very little. The Polish scholar Zofia Lissa evaluated Chopin’s ‘national style’ through a discriminating, genre-by-genre survey of his compositions. He found that Chopin’s Ballades, while lacking a direct connection to Polish folk traditions, are national in style by virtue of certain general qualities they share with Polish literary Romanticism. Parakilas believes that the nationalism of Chopin’s first Ballade – audible only to those who know Polish poetry – is, in its own way, as filled with hidden meaning as is his first Scherzo (It has been said that the tune of a Polish Christmas Carol ‘Lulazje Jezuniu’ appears very quietly, almost clandestinely in the middle voice of the first Scherzo’s middle section; as if only Polish listeners were intended to understand its meaning). More remarkable about the Ballade, according to Parakilas, is that its nationalism is not secret; every nineteenth-century European would have understood the meaning. The explanation for such recognition lies in the distinctive nature of nationalism in Chopin’s Europe. (Parakilas 1992)

In 1836, when Chopin’s first Ballade appeared in various editions as either ‘Ballade’ or ‘Ballade ohne Worte’ (‘Ballade Without Words’), his title was a novelty for an instrumental work. Gottfried Wilhelm Fink (1783-1846), the editor of the Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, reviewing an edition that used the longer title, greeted the novelty with little surprise, but with no great enthusiasm either: ‘We have songs without words; why shouldn’t we have ballads without words as well? Anyway, the newer music loves to compose stories in sound.’ Stories in sound, ranging from Mendelssohn’s ‘Songs Without Words’ (first published under the unspecific title in 1835) to the Berlioz symphonies (explicitly connected to programs and literary models), were everywhere in the 1830s. (Parakilas 1992)

The novelty of Chopin’s title, then, did not lie in proposing a new kind of piece, but simply in citing a genre that had not previously been chosen as a model for instrumental music. (It is traditional in English to use the French title – ‘ballade’ – for instrumental works, but the native form – ‘ballad’ – for the songs and poems on which they are modelled. Continental languages like French or German have only one form of the term) (Parakilas 1992)

Half a century earlier the ballad had seized the attention of the German public when it appeared simultaneously in several forms: texts of British and other folk ballads translated by Herder; imitations of those texts by such poets as Bürger, Goethe and Schiller; and musical settings of those poems, usually as solo songs with piano accompaniment. In the succeeding decades the ballad continued to be at the forefront of developments in German folklore research, poetry, and song, while international borrowings made Germans aware that the
enthusiasm for the genre was spreading across Europe. The Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz for example, influenced by German and English poetry as well as Slavic folk song, published ballads (in 1822) that were then translated into German and set as songs (published in 1835) by the leading ballad composer of his generation, Carl Loewe (1796-1869). (Parakilas 1992)

Already by 1835, when Chopin almost certainly composed the first Ballade, Berlioz had written instrumental works inspired by Shakespeare, Schumann had established a lifelong creative relationship (some of it concealed from the public) with the prose of Jean Paul and Hoffmann, and Liszt had composed a major piano work inspired by the poetry of Larmatine. In all there was an effort to weave literary ideas into the substance of a musical work, establishing a dialogue between dramatic or poetic themes and the inherited forms and genres of instrumental music. Chopin, on the other hand, avoided such programmatic associations, shunning any attempt to express the world of external reality (as opposed to an inner emotional reality) through his music. By temperament he was anything but the ‘romantic composer’ of popular imagination and he shared little of his fellow ‘composers’ knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, the others arts. (Samson 1992)

The concept of using a ballad as the model for instrumental musical composition was unknown. In trying the idea Chopin entered untested territory. When comparing the models that other composers of ‘the newer music’ were taking for their ‘stories in sound’ it is readily apparent exactly how remarkable was his choice. In the years just before his first Ballade appeared, these composers had modelled ‘stories in sound’ on poems or on programs associated with their own experiences. Works modelled on poems include Mendelssohn’s Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt and Liszt’s 1835 Harmonies poétiques et religieuses. Pieces modelled on personal programs include Schumann’s Carnaval, Mendelssohn’s Hebrides overture, and Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique. Liszt’s Album d´un voyageur and Berlioz’s Harold in Italy use both. In all these works the model is an intimate portrait or history of a hero. The storyline consists of a series of episodes, each presenting an opportunity for the composer to describe something – a mood or an external phenomenon – in sound. (Parakilas 1992)

The ballad could hardly be more different. In contrast to the episodic models chosen for most ‘stories in sound’, the ballad offered ‘action centred on a single situation’. In contrast, most ‘stories in sound’, depend on subjects rich in setting and characterization while the ballad, according to Albert Friedmann, gives little attention to ‘setting’, ‘circumstantial detail’, ‘delineation of characters’, or ‘psychological motivation’. Rather, it is a story focused on the characters’ words and on the actions accomplished through those words. Words themselves are the crucial deeds: in Bürger’s Lenore (Leonor’s curse); in the British folk ballad Edward (Edward’s lies); in Goethe’s Elf-king (The Elf-King’s promises). The ballad is not only different from other models of ‘stories in sound’; it is a far more problematic model. Chopin, according to Parakilas, seems to have gone out of his way to choose the kind of story that would be quite difficult to illustrate in music without words. The ballade’s radical departure from usual forms and the unusual selection make it no small a wonder that Chopin was the first. (Parakilas 1992)

According to Samson, the progressive composers of Chopin’s time were fanatic in their attention to detail and in the accuracy and precision of their planning. For Berlioz, Liszt and Schumann the world of literature was anything but a dilettante’s playground. It was an all-important storehouse of potential ‘subjects’, which might generate directly, often at deep levels of structure, the essential shape of a musical work. There was also a sense, validated by Hegel’s influential aesthetics, that music might be dignified and elevated through its contacts with poetry. This direction of thinking first begin to emerge in the 1830s. The earlier explosion of interest in romantic literature played a catalytic role in the progression to poetry by stimulating
composers directly and in playing some part in promoting (or insinuating) the concept that they should be stimulated and influenced by literature. (Samson 1992)

According to Parakilas, the European nationalism of the 1830s that inspired the Polish Insurrection and revolutions elsewhere was not so successful at freeing nations as it was at redefining Europe. Up to that time the heritage of language, religion, and thought from the ancient world defined and legitimised the common high culture of Europe. This had been the culture that also mattered in the politics of nations. As a result, the political role of culture in Europe had been more to unite nations than to distinguish them; to transcend boundaries rather than to fix them. The nationalism that emerged as a force around 1830 gave ‘special political significance’ to the word ‘nationality’ for the first time and was revolutionary in its rejection of the traditional cultural politics. The new nationalism made the culture of the common people the politically significant culture. Indeed, it made nationality an attribute of popular culture. Paradoxically, there was no conflict between nineteenth-century nationalism and the idea of Europe as a cultural entity. In fact, nationalism was itself a product of European culture as a whole, not an idea developed differently in each nation. It was a uniform nationalism. Each nation needed the same things: its own language, folklore, and music, its own government and institutions, its own flag and anthem. (Parakilas 1992)

Folklorists ‘thinking in European’ made the ballad a European literary and musical genre by 1830. Herder had been thinking in European when he brought together folk poetry, including many ballads, from all over Europe into a single collection that was published in 1778-79. Herder’s translations of British Ballads and James McPherson’s (1736-96) imitation folk poetry of Ossian helped to bring nationalist poet-scholars to think European and to believe they would find songs of the same kind and value sung by peasants in remote regions of their own countries. Beginning with the publication of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* by Arnim and Brentano in 1806-08, these folklorists soon published texts of folk songs, many of which could be called ballads, from nearly every European country. (Parakilas 1992)

By Chopin’s time ballad-collecting was providing material for an anthropology of Europe. Despite active collection, the material was not examined systematically. Not until the twentieth century did scholars begin to divide the genre into regional and national categories, argue about which songs could and could not be called ‘ballads’, or consider the tunes as well as the texts as evidence of a unified European culture. Still, in Chopin’s era, some of the most celebrated ballad texts, along with the term ‘ballad’, had been made known throughout Europe. Europeans of almost every nation were discovering that they possessed a national repertory of ballads, a possession that distinctively expressed their national history and character at the same time that it bound them to a European culture too deep to be touched by political circumstance. (Parakilas 1992)

In the 1830s Chopin was trying through his music to embody his nationalist sentiments and to win the acclaim of a European public indifferent to the fate of Poland and to Polish culture. In this context, the ballad as a medium was likely to be quite attractive to him precisely because it had nationalist significance for nearly every European nation. A piano ballade could derive its inspiration from Polish tradition and still appeal to an international public ignorant of that tradition by evoking the ballad as Europeans generally knew it. (Parakilas 1992)

The Ballad as narrative model for Chopin

What Ballads did Chopin knew or could have known? The answer, according to Parakilas can only be framed in likelihoods. His correspondence and other biographical materials do not
establish what particular ballads he read or heard. It can be taken for granted that he knew the Mickiewicz ballades; hardly any literary event during Chopin’s youth caused a greater stir in Poland than the 1822 publication of *Ballads and Romances*. Other Polish poets of Chopin’s generation wrote ballads and he is hardly less likely to have read those. Chopin could also have read ballads by such foreign poets as Bürger, Goethe, Schiller, Uhland, Heine, Hugo, and Scott before composing his first Ballade. By the time he composed his three later Ballades he knew Mickiewicz, Hugo, and Heine personally.

A second question concerns what ballads Chopin may have known as songs. He could have heard Polish folk ballads sung in Poland when he was young. He may also have seen transcriptions of folk-ballad melodies from Poland or elsewhere even though the collecting of folk-song melodies was just beginning. Chopin surely knew the singer with piano accompaniment literary ballads, by Polish composers including those of his teacher Joseph Elsner (1789-1831), and the pianist Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831). Chopin may also have known some more complex musical settings of literary ballads by German composers like Schubert and Loewe. Because of the dates, it’s doubtful that Chopin heard or read Loewe’s setting of the Mickiewicz ballads (1835) before composing his own first Ballade. Modern scholars recognize the influence of both Slavic folklore and modern Western European poets on Mickiewicz’s ballads. For that matter, Chopin, educated in lively literary surroundings, would have appreciated the international character of ballad-writing in his day and understood that folk ballads in one way or another stood behind the literary ballads of his contemporaries. (Parakilas 1992)

The structure of lines and stanzas in a ballad is unrelated to the ballad process. It is a long structure and not a narrative structure. But like the ballad process there is an element of structural uniformity among all the kinds of ballads Chopin and his audience knew – songs and poems, folk and modern. Furthermore, imitating the line and stanza structure of ballads in the musical phrasing of his Ballades was a way for him to remind listeners of the particular effect made by a story when it unfolds in a strophic song. (Parakilas 1992)

Chopin uses 6/4 or 6/8 meters in all four of his Ballades. It is worth noting that while rhythms with triple division are common in Polish folk songs, there is no standard rhythm for Polish ballads or melodies associated with a single text. (Parakilas 1992)

It would have been difficult for Chopin to evoke ballads at all in wordless music without using some kind of repeating stanza like structure. Because he was not setting words, it would have been unthinkable for him to repeat any musical ‘stanza’ more than once without changing it. For Chopin the whole enterprise of making the idea of the ballad recognizable in wordless music depended heavily on the ‘musical’ techniques of ballad narration. The ballad process was crucial for the overall shape and tone of the work. The idea of the repeating stanza was necessary, but this mechanism did not make ballads more distinct from other kinds of poems and songs. (Parakilas 1992)

It might be imagined that Chopin, finding in poetic and song ballads no uniform poetic model except at the level of the stanza, felt free to devise a different musical form for each of his Ballades. Certain of Chopin’s contemporaries viewed folk-ballad singing as a fluid and improvisatory art. (Parakilas 1992)

Charles Rosen does not think that one should look for a specific literary work even if it has been suggested that Chopin was inspired by a particular piece. Rosen says:
With Chopin, however, we must not look for a specific literary work as a narrative model but for a new tone, a new atmosphere and new structures: the literary influence does not result in a program; the music does not refer beyond itself. Just as poets and painters had attempted to recreate with words and paint the freedom and the abstract power of music, so the generation of musicians born around 1810 tried to capture the originality of form and the exotic atmosphere of the literature and art they had grown up with. (Rosen 1996 p. 79)

Chopin and Mickiewicz

It has been declared that all of Chopin’s four Ballades have been influenced by poems of the Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz. In his review of Chopin Schumann started this speculation. He said that Chopin had told him that he had been ‘inspired to write his Ballades by some poems of Mickiewicz’ (Robert Schumann in Neue Zeitschrift für Musik 15 [1841], p.142, reprinted in Robert Schumann’s gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker, 5th ed., ed. Martin Kreisig [Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1914], vol. 2, p. 32. The whole sentence reads: ‘Er sprach damals auch davon, da? Er zu seinen Balladen durch einige Gedichte von Mickiewicz angeregt worden sei.’). However on that occasion Chopin had played the second Ballade (F-major). It is unlikely that any reference was being made to the third and fourth Ballades. Too, nothing the words suggests a direct connection between any one poem and either of Chopin’s first two Ballades. Additionally, it is hard to imagine that Schumann would have expressed himself so generally if Chopin had spoken of a more precise connection. (Parakilas 1992)

According to Cortot, in the preface of the Cortot edition (Edition Salabert), there are four poems by Mickiewicz that, according to tradition, had inspired Chopin to write the four Ballades. In that description the first Ballade is associated with ‘Konrad Wallenrod’. Briefly, the ballade written in prose is from the last episode of the fourth part of ‘Konrad Wallenrod’, a historic legend after the chronicles of Lithuania and Prussia (1828). In this episode Wallenrod boasts at the end of a feast of Moorish revenge upon Spaniards for unwarranted oppression. The Moors took their revenge by showing the Spaniards a false heartiness that allowed them to get physically close to the Spaniards so as to infect them with self-inflicted plague and leprosy. Konrad then tells the guests at the feast, to their perplexity and horror, that he as a Pole, if necessary would likewise blow death to his oppressors with an ill-fated kiss. (Cortot 1929)

Aside from Schumann’s report of Chopin’s reference to Mickiewicz, the only clue that may be more or less traceable to Chopin is in a letter of 1839 in which an agent for Breitkopf & Härtel, after negotiating with Chopin, asks the publisher what price to offer Chopin for ‘a Ballade of the pilgrims’. Even if, as can be inferred from the letter, Chopin referred to the second Ballade by that title, it is even less specific about source than is Schumann’s remark. The material cited by Kallberg on this subject suggested to Parakilas that the title points not so much to a particular story as it does to a patriotic and religious element that Chopin in the end evidently decided not to make when publishing his music. (Parakilas 1992)

There has been an enormous amount of speculation about the influence of Mickiewicz’s ballads upon Chopin’s ballades. It is indeed possible as Schumann reported that these poems might have played some part in Chopin’s creative process. The title ‘ballade’ signifies no particular programme. It does invite the listener to interpret musical relationships at least partly in the terms of a literary narrative, even if only at the level of metaphor. It is not so much the intrinsic qualities of the musical work which may suggest a narrative, but our predisposition – given the genre title – to construct a narrative from the various ways in which purely musical events are transformed through time. Such a musical narrative would be based on the generic
character and interplay of themes, on the transformation of conventional formal successions, and on the organisation of large-scale tonal relationships. (Samson 1992)

Schumann started speculation with his remarks about Mikiewicz. In due course references to specific poetic ballads (entirely without documentary validation) were sufficiently accepted to enable Hunecker, Cortot and even Bourniquel to cite them as though they had unquestioned authority. Tradition is, at least, stable with the first and the last Ballades, whose reputed links to Konrad Wallenrod (which according to Samson not in itself a ballad) and Trzech budrysów. For these two the connection is never presented in any but the most generalised terms. For the second and the third ballades the associations with Mickiewicz were more specific. Yet considerable confusion about the details exists. The poems Switez and Switezianka have both been assigned to No. 2 while No. 3 has been connected to Undine, even though there is no such poem by Mickiewicz. The most arguable associations are between No.2 and Switez and No.3 and Switezianka. The latter is indeed the tale of an 'undine', in effect a version of the familiar Rusalka legend. Such links with Mickiewicz were a commonplace nineteenth-century criticism and they inevitably encouraged a national perspective on the Ballades, especially in Poland, where Chopin was often viewed as a powerful symbol of national identity. Second only to the Mazurkas and the Polonaises, the Ballades were held to be Chopin’s most ‘Polish’ works. (Samson 1992)

Hedley remarks that a complete program has been attached to each Ballade by tortuously ingenious methods and that there is not a single completely authenticated record of Chopin making a connection. Hedley says that, at a time when the national consciousness of the Poles was being worked upon by Romantic influences in literature and exacerbated by political events, that Chopin could not remain indifferent while the poets assumed the task of strengthening the nation’s morale and keeping alive their own faith in her destiny. Hedley says that Chopin was no conscious propagandist. He supports this by making the observation as to how a Frenchman like Mallefille was made aware of the spirit behind the G minor Ballade: (Hedley 1974)

MY DEAR FRIEND!—Some time ago, in one of those soirées where, surrounded by select and sympathetic hearers, you give full rein to your inspiration, you let us hear that Polish Ballade which we love so much. When you had finished we remained silent and pensive, still hearing the sublime song whose last note vanished into space...What thoughts had the melodious voice of your piano awakened in us? I cannot say; for each one sees in music, as in clouds, different things...The old believer [Mickiewicz], to whose evangelic voice hearkened with respectful admiration, seemed, with closed eyes and clasped hands, to question Dante, his ancestor, on the secrets of heaven and the fate of the world...Accept these lines as a proof of my affection for you and of my sympathy for your heroic country. (Hedley 1974 p.172-73)

After this quotation Hedley asks two questions: Why should Mickiewicz react thus if Chopin were simply illustrating one of his poems? Why did Malfille not learn the story if there was one? (Hedley 1974)

According to Hedley, (1974) Chopin was an ardent student of Polish literature and it was he who introduced George Sand to Polish literature. He even translated the works of Mickiewicz to enable her to write her essay on Goethe, Byron, and Mickiewicz. In December 1840 both Chopin and Sand followed the Polish poet’s course of lectures on Slavonic literature at the Collège de France. (Hedley 1974)

According to Niecks (1973), Chopin kept new publications of Polish books close at hand on his table. In his letters to Fontana Chopin alludes twice to two books of poetry. One by Mickiewicz that was sent to Chopin in Majorca, the other by Witwicki.
According to the source citing the number, the number of songs said to be written by Chopin varies. Niecks (1973) mentions the 17 Polish Songs that are contained in Op. 74 (which he says were written between 1824 and 1844). Niecks goes on to say that Chopin’s friend Stephen Witwicki wrote the words for most with others written by the poets Mickiewicz, Zaleski and Krasinski who he also knew. Parakilas (1992) mentions 18 Polish songs and none in French, a language in which Chopin was also fluent. Volume IX of *The New Oxford History of Music* (1990) mentions 19 known songs and speculates that more were written. All three sources agree that none were published until after Chopin’s death.

Form and design of the G minor Ballade

According to Parakilas (1992), various studies of the musical form used in the Ballades make up a debate as to whether the form in most of the Ballades are adaptations of sonata form or whether each is a unique, unprecedented form. Until the form is considered in the light of programmatic principles, the question, which continues to fascinate musical analysts more than a half-century after it was first posed, cannot be decided. Parakilas maintains that all four of the Ballades can be described in terms of a single formal model. He goes on to state that the Ballades seem to require three musical events: statement of themes, transformation of themes, and resolution. As there is no record of what Chopin was thinking about his construction whether he may or may not have used those three events to organize his Ballades into three-part musical form remains conjecture. However, the possibility that he was thinking along those lines is strong. Folk and literary ballads known to him common used three-part forms. Parakilas says that many ballads, according to David Buchan, have a trinary conceptual organization dominating the entire story. Chopin’s first Ballade, considered without its ‘pre-narrative’ introduction has, according to Parakilas a three-part musical form. That form is manifested by the structure of the narrative voice in the work. The three utterances of the primary theme – each issuing arrestingly at a moment when the piece has lost momentum – announce the start of the three parts, or stages, of the musical form. This is illustrated by Parakilas as may be seen in Example 3.

Example 3

In this illustration of form, Parakilas (1992) depicts the first stage as getting under way with a full utterance of the theme. This establishes the narrative voice and expresses the tension of the tale in the first scene of action. The later two stages, by contrast, do not get under way until they have been ushered in by the primary theme that briefly reasserts its voice and tension over a dominant pedal. The first two stages have thematic ‘scenes’ that are marked off from each other by passagework; the third consists of a single scene dominated by passagework. The first two stages are nearly equal in length (mm. 8-93 and 106-93); the third considerably shorter (mm. 208-64, at a faster speed). The musical progression from statement to transformation to resolution of themes is set out in these three stages, as is the progression in the ballad process.
from the act of defiance to the movement toward reckoning to the reckoning itself. (Parakilas 1992)

Samson has another opinion. He thinks that the G minor Ballade elements of sonata form already are an obvious background to the presentations of the main thematic groups. The exposition may be outlined schematically as shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>Tonality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme I</td>
<td>8-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>44-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme II</td>
<td>67-93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1

Tonal relations here deviate from classical practise, but at the same time they depend upon an awareness of that practise. The introduction is, according to Samson, a recitative, composing out a Neapolitan harmony in preparation for Theme I. This takes place in the tonic key of G minor. As Theme II approaches, the expected key of Bb major is prepared through its dominant in the classical manner and thwarts this only at the last moment by adding the seventh which then directs the music towards Eb major. Initially IV appears therefore in the character of a ‘substitute’ for III. In the reprise Chopin deviates more radically from classical functions as seen in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>Tonality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme II</td>
<td>166-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme I</td>
<td>194-207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing section (Theme IV)</td>
<td>208-64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2

Samson then goes on to say that by presenting a mirror reprise and retaining the same tonal setting as in the exposition for the two themes Chopin establishes an element of symmetry, both thematically and tonally. This is an important dimension in the work’s structure. Theme II is now transformed into an impassioned fortissimo statement and Theme I is presented not in its stable exposition form but in the tension-generating form which opened the development section. Here the theme was started over a dominant pedal and its falling major second was inverted. Figure 3 indicates synoptically these two complementary readings of thematic process. (Samson 1992)

Figure 3

The development section further reinterprets classical function, and helps to focus Chopin’s specifically dramatic or ‘narrative’ view of the ballade as a genre. Much of the interests in the work rest in the destiny of the two principal thematic ideas or characters, their variation, transformation and mutual interaction. The development brings them into direct collision, with transitional material omitted, and the continuity between them is all the greater since they share a single tonality of A minor/ A major, at least on the most immediate ‘foreground’ level.
of tonal organisation. This in turn strengthens their motivic association. The point of contact between them is the more expressive in that Theme I strives heroically to reach the high B with which Theme II starts. The later stages of both themes are transformed in this development section to allow the one to grow naturally out of the other and to maintain a single sweep of tension-building material that reaches its climax at bars 124–26. (Samson 1992)

At this point there is a major structural downbeat, as an extended dominant harmony signals the return of Eb major, and the thematic material gives way to figuration. The dominant harmony is composed out through octatonic figuration (alternating tones and semitones) of a kind somewhat characteristic of Chopin. The regained VI (bar 138) is then celebrated by a waltz episode (Theme III), whose phraseology is unmistakably the ‘moto perpetuo arabesque’ so often found in the independent waltzes. The main section might be summarised then as in Figure 4. (Samson 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>Tonality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme I</td>
<td>94–105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme II</td>
<td>106–25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>126–37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme III</td>
<td>138–65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4

Since the waltz appears after the thematic material has been presented, it functions as a pivot between statement and reprise. The material encourages a symmetrical interpretation of the work’s thematic process where the waltz forms the peak of an extended thematic arch. This is emphasised by the whole-tone steps underlying the figuration that follows Theme III (bars 150–4) and matches the octatonic figuration that precedes it. The foreground tonalities may also be presented as a symmetry, though it is not congruent with the thematic symmetry (see Figure 5). (Samson 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intro.</th>
<th>Exposition</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Reprise</th>
<th>Coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>II′</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G minor</td>
<td>B major</td>
<td>A minor</td>
<td>A major</td>
<td>B major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5

The coda, is according to Rosen, created entirely of material that makes no reference to the main body of the work. In his eyes this is at once innovative and traditional. (Rosen 1996)

Parakilas points out that the new chord in the coda, heard in bar 216 (Ab major), can be derived from the introduction: the Neapolitan-sixth chord with which the Ballade began. (Example 4)

Example 4

(Presto con fuoco)
The music goes on, reworking elements of the opening material, until it descends to a bare, low D octave (bar 242), when a new stage of reckoning begins (Example 5).

Example 5

As may be seen in Figure 5, this low D begins a long cadence, the final cadence of the work, ending on the long G eight measures later. The two notes are connected by an enormous scale that sweeps up and down, a reminder of the passagework that has swept the narration forward all through the Ballade. The coda ends with powerful octaves. (Parakilas 1992)

Chopin’s personality

Chopin was slight and graceful, with fair hair and distinguished features. He was gifted with perfect control of movement that showed itself not only in his piano playing but also in his skill as a caricaturist and in his extraordinary powers of mimicry. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Chopin was, according to Schonberg, a snob and a social butterfly to whom moving in the best circles meant everything. Chopin was fastidious in his toilet. He dressed in the height of fashion (even foppishly so). He kept a carriage (which represented a significant ongoing expense). Contemporary reports note that he had a precise mind and precise manners, could be a witty and that he was ultra-conservative in his aesthetic tastes. He made a good deal of money and spent it lavishly, always complaining that he did not have more. Chopin said: ‘You think I make a fortune? Carriages and white gloves cost more, and without them one would not be in good taste’ (Schonberg 1987 p.144) Chopin always dressed impeccably for his lessons: hair curled, shoes polished, clothes elegant. Good taste meant everything to him. It certainly meant more to him than the romantic movement that was sweeping Europe. That, he avoided as much as he could. He even disliked the word ‘romanticism’. Delacroix was perhaps his closest friend, but he did not understand, or even like, the paintings of Delacroix. (Schonberg 1987)
Chopin’s relations with the musicians of his day did not depend on his regard for their music. He was not enthusiastic about Shumann or Mendelssohn, he did not like Berlioz’s work, yet admired him as a person. His friendship with Liszt was essentially superficial; differences of temperament, and one glaring indiscretion on the part of Liszt, soon turned their early intimacy into a polite acquaintance. (Grove Dictionary 1980)

Some of the few composers who Chopin liked very much were Bach and Mozart (he studied them thoroughly, and their ideals of workmanship figured in his own music and piano playing). He also adored the operas of Bellini. (Schonberg 1987)

Chopin’s moods fluctuated from the depths of despair to gay nonchalance. In more modern times he might have been diagnosed as manic-depressive. Throughout his life he reacted in extremes to events around him. He could be cool, calculating and cynical and a moment later enthusiastic, cheerful and even boisterously vulgar. It is only in his letters written in Polish that we find the real Chopin - he never wrote freely in any other language. What he sometimes wrote in Polish would surprise those who know his character only from the sentimental utterances of his pupils and casual acquaintances. (Hedley 1974)

George Sand described Chopin like this: ‘As he had charmingly polite manners one was apt to take as a friendly courtesy what in him was only frigid disdain, if not a insuperable dislike.’ (Cortot 1951 p.175)

Cortot (1951) speaks of Chopin’s health in these words: ‘The facts indicate human weaknesses and a certain lack of mental balance, which most people at any rate will attribute to his poor state of health...his sudden transitions from a state of depression to one of excitability are the classic symptoms of tuberculosis from which he suffered more and more acutely during the unhappy years of unequal struggle between an enfeebled will to live and the growing threats of physical misery.’ (Cortot 1951 p.148)

Chopin’s pupils agreed on one main point: that Chopin was reserved in discussion. (Letnanová 1991) As described by Cortot (1951), Chopin expressed himself more easily in music than in words.

Musical thinking of Chopin

Chopin had a high and profound concept as to what constituted ideal piano composition. Even in Mozart’s Don Juan, some passages were ‘unpleasant to his ear’. (Letnanová 1991)

Chopin insisted above all on the importance of correct phrasing. To his ear, wrong seemed as if someone were reciting a laboriously memorized speech in an unfamiliar language. Not only merely failing to observe the right quantity of syllables, perhaps even making full stops in the middle of words. (Eigeldinger 1986)

The chief practical direction as to expression that Chopin often told his pupils was: A long note is stronger, as is also a high note. A dissonant is likewise, and equally so a syncopated note. The ending of a phrase, before a comma, or a stop, is always weak. If the melody ascends, one plays crescendo, if it descends, decrescendo. Notice must be taken over natural accents. For instance, in a bar of two, the first note is strong, the second is weak, in a bar of three the first strong and the two others weak. To the smaller parts of the bar the same direction will apply. (Eigeldinger 1986)
Chopin declared: 'We use sounds to make music just as we use words to make a language.' The great vocal school of the 1830s, in which the art of declamation and its dramatic expression in music were harmoniously united, represented for him the ideal and definitive model for interpretation. It was the singing styles of Rubini and Pasta (and other Italian singers who were among some of the very remarkable artists in Paris at the time) that Chopin based his own style of pianistic declamation that was the key to his playing and the touchstone of his teaching. Chopin exhorted his pupils to listen to the great dramatic artists and he even declared: 'you must sing if you wish to play.' (Eigeldinger 1986)

Mikuli points out: 'Under his fingers each musical phrase sounded like song, and with such clarity that each note took the meaning of the syllable, each that of a word, each phrase that of a thought. It was declamation without pathos; but both simple and noble.' (Eigeldinger 1986)

In a slow or moderate tempo the appoggiatura is to be played simultaneously with the bass note that accompanies the ornamented note. In the Dubois score an appoggiatura is frequently linked by a line to the corresponding bass-note. This indicates that it is to be played on the beat. This way of giving the appoggiatura its full worth and, in certain cases, of augmenting the harmonic tension, is related to the aesthetic of bel canto and its instrumental application as in the Baroque era. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Chopin wanted that trills should begin on the upper note. When they are preceded by a small note (as the same pitch as the principal note), that does not mean that this note should be repeated. It simply means that the trill should begin on the principal note and not, as usual, on the upper note. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Trills were to be played not so much rapidly as with great evenness. Making the ending tranquil and not at all precipitate. For the turn and the appoggiatura, Chopin recommended the great Italian singers as models. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Schumann once said of Chopin: '...Doesn’t like his works being discussed.' (Eigeldinger 1986 p. 268)

Chopin was generally quite strict about the exact comprehension and performance of his works. It required no less than the genial personality of the young Filsch to make him admit: ‘We each understand this differently, but go on your own way, do as you feel, it can also be played like that.’ Professional or not, many pupils experienced a feeling of revelation and liberation through Chopin’s teaching; his absolute novelty opened wide to them the doors of all music, not just piano playing. Chopin also said this to one of his pupils:

Forget you’re being listened to, and always listen to yourself...When you’re at the piano, I give you full authority to do whatever you want; follow freely the ideal you’ve set for yourself and which you must feel within you; be bold and confident in your own powers and strength, and whatever you say will always be good. It would give me so much pleasure to hear you play with complete abandon that I’d find the shameless confidence of the “vulgaires” unbearable by comparison. (Eigeldinger 1986 p.13)

Chopin discussed with Delacroix the problems of aesthetics. Chopin’s intentions were to produce a new treatise on music. He discussed his intent with several of his more intimate friends. In the work he dedicated to his glorious rival, Liszt says the following: ‘He had conceived the idea of writing a treatise on music. In this he was going to gather together his ideas on the theory and practice of his art together with his knowledge derived from his experience and the fruits of his long study. Even for so determined a worker as Chopin, a task
of this magnitude demanded redoubled efforts...the work was too abstract, too absorbing. He formed an outline of this subject matter, but, though he mentioned it on several occasions, he could never complete it; only a few pages were sketched in and they were burned with the rest.' (Cortot 1951 p. 36-7)

How Chopin played

There were many different contemporary persons who heard Chopin play. There are some words from the listeners that say a lot about Chopin’s playing. They found that his playing was beautiful, fluent, with great evenness, and that his hands seemed to be acting independent of each other. Each of his fingers seemed to be controlled by an individual will. (Hedley 1974)

Chopin preferred freedom and relaxation of the hands and fingers during play. He tried to remove every sign of stiffness that his pupils exhibited during lessons. (Letnanová 1991)

Heller spoke of Chopin’s slim hands - how they would ‘suddenly expand and cover a third of the keyboard. It was like the opening of the mouth of a serpent about to swallow a rabbit whole.’ (Schonberg 1987)

General opinions about Chopin’s playing did not stabilize until 1900. As soon as Karol Mikuli published Chopin’s works in 1879, intensive research on Chopin began. Mikuli confirms, in his preface 1879 Leipzig edition of Chopin’s works, that Chopin still remained unknown as a pianist. According to Antoni Czartoryska and Karol Mikuli there lived in Warsaw a third Pole who had been a student of Chopin. After a long search, this former student was located. He was 90 years old at that time. To Michalowski’s question on how Chopin played the piano, the 90-year old student made this reply and nothing more: ‘Chopin played beautifully and charmingly.’ (Letnanová 1991)

Descriptions of Chopin’s playing left by his contemporaries are often unsatisfactory and contradictory. All agree that his performance was unique and unforgettable, but few define his characteristics with any precision. Complicating this ambiguity even further was that in his time he was acknowledged as the creator of a new piano style. (Hedley 1974)

One listener describes Chopin’s playing in March 1830 like this:

His music is full of expressive feeling and song, and puts the listener into a state of subtle rapture, bringing back to his memory all the happy moments he has known. (Hedley 1974 p. 28)

Another person describes it like this:

His gayest melodies are tingled with a certain melancholy by the power of which he draws the listener along with him.... (Hedley 1974 p. 28)

Heine describes his playing like this:

Yes, one can admit that Chopin has a genius in the full sense of the word; he is not only a virtuoso, he is also a poet; he can embody for us the poesy which lives within his soul, he is a tone-poet, and nothing can be compared to the pleasure which he gives us when he sits at the piano and improvises. (Niecks 1973 p.100)

Chopin was inspired by John Field, the Irish pianist composer and teacher, known as the inventor of the piano Nocturne. Field, together with Hummel, was universally regarded as a
master of cantabile. Chopin’s contemporaries readily compared him with his playing to Field’s. Or as Kalkbrenner found when he heard Chopin play, that Chopin had the style of Cramer and the touch of Field. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Chopin was according to Hedley physically incapable of consistently achieving the powerful effects that many of his works call for and for that reason had to give up playing them towards the end of his life. But this does not mean that he never produced an emphatic forte or could not play with dramatic fire. Chopin’s own indications on his music, such as fff - con più fuoco possibile, and appassionato - il più forte possibile, must be taken seriously. Chopin’s friend and pupil Georges Mathias, speaking of him at his best declared: (Hedley 1974)

Those who have heard Chopin may say that nothing approaching it has ever been heard. What virtuosity! What power! Yes, what power! But it only lasted for a few bars; and what exaltation and inspiration! The man’s whole being vibrated. The piano was animated by the intesnest life: it sent a thrill trough you. (Hedley 1974 p.119)

According to Chopin’s students, Chopin’s pp was always distinct. (Eigeldinger 1986)

By comparison with some of the ‘hammer/and/tongs’ virtuosi of his day Chopin was indeed a quiet player. He called for pure, round tone, perfect legato and graceful ease. Chopin’s pupil Mikuli points out: (Hedley 1974)

The tone which Chopin drew from the instrument, especially in cantabile passages, was immense... a manly energy gave to appropriate passages an overpowering effect - energy without coarseness; but, on the other hand, he knew how to enchant the listener by delicacy - without affectation. (Hedley 1974 p. 120)

According to Letnanová the first characteristic that distinguished Chopin from other artists was his touch (the attack on a key by a finger). In general his attack were ‘more gentle’ than was ordinarily adopted. He rarely used forte since it produced a harsh and artificial sound. Chopin preferred to play with a pretty ‘delicate attack’ and if a student played ‘rolling the piano’ with excessive force Chopin asked: ‘What’s that? A dog barking?’ Letnanová also says that it does not mean that Chopin did not have a powerful tone and that one should avoid any stronger gradations and accents in the interpretation of Chopin. (Letnanová 1991)

Nevertheless on occasions Chopin had his new works played by his pupils when he felt to weak to do them justice. In 1839 his pupil Gutmann was called upon to play the C# minor Scherzo to Moscheles so that the he might not get a wrong idea of the work. (Hedley 1974)

According to Hedley, Chopin’s style of playing was so personal, so elusive, and so little susceptible to definition that it could not have been handed down to disciples. This would have been the case even if Chopin had been more fortunate, even if he had been more fortunate in his pupils than actually was the case. When he vanished from the scene nothing of his art as a pianist was left; there remained only a legend - and the protests of those who best knew his playing, when they heard Chopin’s music interpreted by others, even by sensitive artists like Tausig and Rubinstein: ‘No no! Not like that!’ (Hedley 1974)

Chopin’s hands though not large, were extraordinary supple and ideally proportioned for piano playing. The widespread chords and arpeggios, which abound in his works, presented no difficulty for him. He overcame these difficulties with such unconcern that one can only compare him, in this respect with Thalberg who played with minimal visible effort. Chopin could execute all of his 27 Studies with absolute perfection. The metronome marks he placed
on the studies are commonly accepted as authentic. They provide guidance as to his own interpretation, in so far as they indicate the speed at which he could perform, in every refinement, shading, and accent. (Hedley 1974)

Chopin did not hesitate to throw overboard the classical rules of fingering whenever they hindered his purpose. His intention was to produce a pure singing tone, a fine legato and carefully moulded phrasing. In order to keep the hand quiet and ‘flow over the difficulty’ he would slide one finger over several adjacent keys (with the thumb or the fifth finger [Letnanová 1991]), or pass his fourth finger over the little finger. He would sometimes play a sequence of notes (legato) with the thumb. Such ‘liberties’ seem nothing to us today, but in Chopin’s time they were regarded as outrageous (Hugo Leichentritt points out that Chopin was, in that particular case, harking back to an old fingering method of the pre-Bach period). (Hedley 1974)

According to Eigeldinger, Chopin often used the same fingers to play two adjoining notes (and this not only when sliding from a black key to a white key) without the slightest noticeable break in the continuity of line. He also changed fingers upon a key as often as an organ-player. For repeated notes in a moderate tempo Chopin could not tolerate the alternation of fingers. He preferred the repeated note to be played with the fingertip, very carefully and without changing fingers. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Chopin often played the same composition in a different manner, changing the tempo, the timbre of sound, and even the nuances. (Letnanová 1991)

If Chopin happened to improvise a fioratura - a rare occurrence - it was always somehow a miracle of good taste. When he played his own compositions Chopin liked to add ornamental variants. He was known to say that he wanted the ornaments to sound as they were improvised. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Mendelssohn described Chopin as ‘One of the very first of all. He produces new effects, like Paganini on his violin, and accomplishes things nobody could formerly have thought practicable’. (Schonberg 1987)

Eigeldinger (1986) commented that Chopin never played his works twice with the same expression. He varied his performances according to the inspiration and mood of the moment. Through his miraculously spontaneity the result was always ideally beautiful. He could have played the same piece twenty times in succession and the listener would still have listened to the twentieth with equal fascination. Samson (1992) described what he believes to be evidence that Chopin’s own tempos in performance, especially in lyrical, cantabile sections, were faster and more fluent than is usual today.

Zal

Zal is a Polish word that Chopin used to describe the depth, breadth, and poignancy of his feelings and emotions about Poland and its music. In his book on Chopin, Niecks (1973, p. 215) describes the impressions of an editor and translator into German of an interesting collection of Polish Folk-songs that was written in 1833. The editor felt that the keynote of Polish songs is melancholy. He went on to say that, ‘Even in playful and naive songs something may be heard which reminds one of the pain of past sorrows; a plaintive sigh, a death-groan, which seems to accuse the creator, curses His existence...’
In the same book, Niecks (1973, p.219) goes on to say that Chopin once wrote in one of his letters: ‘You know how I wish to understand, and how I have in part succeeded in understanding, our national music’. He uses this point to emphasize the depth and extent of feeling that Chopin had for his Polish heritage and its influence upon him. Niecks describes a day when Chopin, Liszt and the Comtesse d’Agoult spent the after-dinner hours together. The Comtesse, being deeply moved by Chopin’s playing, asked him ‘by what name he called the extraordinary feeling which he enclosed in his compositions...’. Chopin answered:

...whatever his moments of cheerfulness might be, he never for all that got rid of a feeling which formed, as it were, the soil of his heart, and for which he found a name only in his mother-tongue, no other possessing an equivalent to the Polish word zal [sadness, pain, sorrow, grief, trouble, repentance &c.]. Indeed he uttered the word repeatedly, as if his ear had been eager for this sound, which for him comprised the whole scale of the feelings which is produced by an intense plaint, from, repentance to hatred, blessed or poisoned fruits from his acrid root. (Niecks 1973 p.214)

The notion of his ‘using his art to only to recount to himself the story of his own tragedy’, a characteristic phrase in the Chopin picture created by Liszt does not hold up under close investigation. According to Hedley, much of the Shumann-Liszt assessment of Chopin’s art has been shown by Paul Egert to be false. Hedley also maintains that Chopin was only one thing - a musician working with musical materials for purely musical ends. That his first concern was the solution of musical, and not sentimental, problems. Whatever may have been the source of his inspiration, in many cases it may have been no more than the feel of the keyboard beneath his hands or the sudden fascination with a newly improvised soundpattern. Hedley point out that even if it is granted that certain ideas came to him in a mood of depression or tense emotion, it is also clear that the ‘morbidity’ of the original impulse was soon lost in the labour of polishing and perfecting. (Hedley 1974)

In 1852 Liszt brought out a biography of Chopin, probably written wholly (and most certainly in parts) by Liszt’s mistress, Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein. Liszt had doubts about its style and organization for he sent the manuscript to Saint-Beuve for comment. Saint-Beuve told Liszt to, as tactfully as possible, that the whole thing was a mess and would have to be rewritten. Liszt did not heed his advice. Schonberg describes the infuriating biography of Chopin that appears under Liszt’s name as a smug, purple-prosed, wretchedly written essay on things like national music. Chopin has a very small part in the overall content. (Schonberg 1987)

The use of tempo rubato

No element in Chopin’s style of playing has aroused more discussion than his celebrated tempo rubato. (Hedley 1974)

Schonberg writes about Chopin’s rubato almost in awe. He says: ‘...his rubato, which nobody in his day could duplicate and which was so misunderstood.’ (Schonberg 1987 p.152)

Tempo rubato is not a device from Chopin exclusively. Certainly it existed, for example, in the Gregorian chants form before A.D. 1000 and preserved the tradition of declamations as chanted by the Greek bards. The sixteenth-century recitatives that appear in operas are actually the Renaissance of the rubato traditions from Greek drama. The style then passed into use in instrumental music. Suggestions of it can be heard in J.S. Bach’s Chromatic Fantasy in D minor or in the last sonatas of Beethoven (for example Adagio Op. 106). (Letnanová 1991)
Although the expression ‘tempo rubato’ first appeared in 1723 in a treatise by Tosi (Bolognese theoretician of bel canto), the musical reality which it reflects can be traced back at least to the beginnings of accompanied monody in Italian humanist circles. The following postulates emerge from Tosi’s writings: ‘for the intelligent use of the singer in particularly expressive passages in various pieces, rubato functions as a system of compensation whereby the value of a note may be prolonged or shortened to the detriment or gain of the succeeding note. This metric ‘larceny’ is best applied to improvised ornaments over the imperturbable movement of the bass. It results from counterpoint between the solo line and the bass line and is characterized, vertically speaking, by moments of metric displacement between the two parts; it is left to the singer’s discretion to use it with moderation, according to the rules of good taste. Here we have the pure tradition of Italian Baroque bel canto, linked with the art of improvisation, suitable ornaments, and deriving from theory of affetti.’ (Eigeldinger 1986)

Bel canto, dominant in Europe at the end of the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, was transposed together with the art of rubato into the domain of instrumental music in its chamber, concertante and solo genres. Thus it came to be codified fairly accurately in the important instrumental treatises of the period: C.P.E Bach for the keyboard, Leopold Mozart for the violin, and Johann Quantz for the traverse flute. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Marcelina Czartoryska, a student in the last couple of years of Chopin’s life, provides some information on the question of his thinking regarding tempo rubato:

Chopin did not ever exaggerate his fantasy, being guided by his outstanding aesthetic instinct. We are delivered from any exaggeration or false pathos by the simplicity of his poetic enthusiasm and moderation. The rubato of Chopin’s rhythm liberated from all school bonds, but never passing into disharmony, nor anarchy...To play Chopin without any rules, without rubato, veiling his accents...we hear not Chopin, but his caricature. Chopin disdained over-sensitivity as false, and a man educated in music of J.S. Bach and Mozart, he could never seek capricious or exaggerated tempi. He would not stand for anything that could destroy the basic outlines of a composition; and, therefore, took care that students should not arbitrarily change tempi. (Letnanová 1991 p.117)

Chopin played as the mood of the moment commanded him, but Chopin did not think of the rubato as a licence for complete freedom. Rather, he thought of the rubato as the expression of living agogics. (Letnanová 1991)

Mikuli talks about Chopin’s rubato like this:

Chopin widely employed rubato in his playing, and he was far from rigorous metrically, accelerating and slowing down this or that motive...But for each rubato Chopin had an unshakeable emotional logic... It interpreted itself by the intensification and slowing down of the melody, by the details of the harmony, by the construction of the figuration. It was fluent, natural, and never fell into exaggeration or affectation. (Letnanová 1991 p.118)

Mikuli also says that Chopin ‘in the right hand, and in the melody, and in the arabesques, allowed for great liberty; but in the left hand, held to the exact tempo.’ It was Mozart who first said, ‘Let our left hand be our leader and let it always hold to the tempo’. Chopin expanded upon that idea with the thought: ‘The left hand, it is the director of the orchestra.’ (Letnanová 1991)

Chopin also said: ‘The left hand is the choirmaster, it mustn’t relent or bent. It’s a clock. Do with the right hand what you want and can.’ This way of playing is very difficult since it requires complete independence of the two hands. (Eigeldinger 1986)
In keeping time Chopin was inexorable, and the metronome never left his piano. He required adherence to the strictest rhythm, hated all lingering and dragging, misplaced rubatos, as well as exaggerated ritardandos. (Eigeldinger 1986)

It has also been said that Chopin’s rubato took two different forms which were by no means mutually exclusive. The first type of rubato, descend from the Italian Baroque tradition, occurs principally in works with broad cantilenas. The second, a more common type that consists of fleeting changes of pace relative to the basic tempo; these agogic modifications may affect a whole section, period or phrase, slowing down or accelerating the flow depending on the direction of the music. This rubato is applied not arbitrarily but as a function of the musical texture and the basic laws of declamation. These agogic variations are called rubato by extension only since they affect the musical structure from top to bottom and not merely the melodic line. It is not unusual for these nuances of tempo to be specified in Chopin’s music.

The sections of Waltz Op. 64 No. 2 are differentiated by the indications tempo giusto - più mosso - più lento- più mosso - tempo I - più mosso. Within a section, the tempo is also to be progressively accelerated, then slowed down, by the indications agitato - sempre più mosso – calando – smorzando - riten. (Ballade Op. 23, bars 40-67) - similarly within a musical period by the complementary coupled indications stretto - riten. or poco riten. - accel. (Eigeldinger 1986)

The use of pedal

Chopin carefully made clear in his manuscript drafts his intentions regarding pedalling. Unfortunately his publishers were not so particular. In many cases the engraver took no notice of what was written and instead applied his own rule of thumb in sprinkling pedal marks over the printed page. Even in those cases where we can be quite sure that the pedal marks are authentic, the problem of correct pedalling is necessarily any easier for the modern interpreter of Chopin. The pianos of his time had far less sustaining power than those of today. Chopin could, without prejudice of clarity, hold down the pedal in longish passages which, if played thus on a modern instrument, would be hopelessly blurred. When Chopin was playing it was often observed that his foot seemed literally to vibrate as he rapidly pedalled certain passages. (Hedley 1974)

According to Kleczynski, Chopin passed often unnoticed from the forte pedal to the left pedal, mainly in enharmonic modulations. (Letnanová 1991)

Chopin used the pedals with marvellous discretion. He often coupled them to obtain a soft and veiled sonority. Even more frequently he would use them separately for brilliant passages, for sustained harmonies, for deep bass notes, and for loud ringing chords. Or he would use the soft pedal alone for light murmurations. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Chopin said about the use of pedal: ‘The correct employment of it remains a study for life.’ (Eigeldinger 1986)

Pleyel pianos

Niecks (1973) maintains that Chopin, during his first years in Paris, used an Erard piano. Then, after his friend Camille Pleyel made a present of one of his splendid instruments, he avoided playing on any other maker’s instrument. As also described by Hedley (1974) Chopin generally used Pleyel pianos, preferring their light touch and silvery tone. Camille Pleyel did his best to
construct an instrument that matched well with Chopin’s style and philosophy. Chopin responded by encouraging his pupils to use Pleyel’s instruments.

Chopin found it dangerous to work much on an instrument with a beautiful ready-made sound like the Erard. He thought that the Erards would spoil one’s touch. ‘When I feel out of sorts,’ Chopin would say, ‘I play on an Erard piano where I easily find a ready-made tone. But when I feel in good form and strong enough to find my own individual sound, then I need a Pleyel piano.’ (Eigeldinger 1986)

Chopin liked to play Erard’s pianos, but preferred to compose on Pleyel’s because of their more darkened, obscure sound. (Letnanová 1991)

Chopin also liked Broadwood pianos. Especially Broadwood’s Boudoir Cottage pianos dated 1848. (Eigeldinger 1986)

The French pianos of the first half of the nineteenth century need to be taken in account. At this time, the construction of the instrument was at the beginning stages of its evolution into its present form. The French pianos were small and slim. They were noted for their facile action and delicate sound. Forte, as we conceive of it, sounded very harsh. Pianos of today, for instance Steinway and Bösendorfer, have a round and sonorous forte tone. Chopin’s tone nevertheless, was not an orchestral tone in today’s understanding of the term. (Letnanova 1991)

The timbre produced by the pedals on Pleyel pianos made at the time of Chopin has a perfect sonority and the dampers work with a precision very useful for chromatic and modulating passages. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Modern pianos, with their vast sonority, are equally different in their touch from the pianos of Chopin’s time. The large heavy hammers and the depth of touch, almost double that of the pianos of 1845, demand a totally different strength, suppleness and training. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Composition and Improvisation

From his earliest youth, according to Fontana, the richness of Chopin’s improvisation was astonishing. The few persons who were lucky enough have heard him improvising for hours on end, in the most wonderful manner reported that he never lifting a single phrase from any other composer and never even touched on any of his own compositions. Those persons tended to agree that Chopin’s most beautiful finished compositions were merely reflections and echoes of his improvisations. When Delacroix was discussing this with Grzymala, Grzymala said that Chopin’s improvisations were far bolder than his finished compositions. It was somewhat like comparing the sketch of a painting to the finished product. (Eigeldinger 1986)

Like many pianist-composers, Chopin allowed his first thoughts about a work to take shape at the piano. George Sand described the process vividly – and in a way that emphasises links with improvisation – when she commented that ‘invention came to his piano, sudden, complete, sublime’. As a result of this particular way of approaching composition, the larger structure and much of the detailed working of a piece would usually be in place and held in intellectu before Chopin even put pen to paper. When he finally did so, it might be to sketch some of the basic ideas as a preliminary to making a fair copy. Even such a rough draft was often by-passed. Important to note here is that there are no extant sketches for any of the Ballades. Manuscript sources so described in the literature have been incorrectly classified. (Samson 1992)
Publication and Editions

Chopin would prepare a fair copy, which usually functioned as a Stichforlage or engraver’s manuscript. These are often ‘dirty’, with changes made either at the time of writing or later (sometimes with a different pen), involving heavy tessellations and revisions on the third staff above or below the main text. In some instances Chopin abandoned the manuscript to begin again. Such ‘rejected public manuscripts’ are often valuable documents. There is one such abandoned manuscript for the fourth Ballade. The other main autograph sources for the Ballades served as the Stichforlage for at least one of the original editions. (Samson 1992)

Chopin’s music – from 1834 onwards – was published ‘simultaneously’ (or nearly so) in France, Germany and England, a practice (common enough at the time) designed to avoid piracy due to the variation in copyright laws in different countries. In most cases, the French publisher was Maurice Schlesinger, the German Breitkopf & Härtel and the English Wessel. Chopin usually gave his fair copy directly to Schlesinger, proof-reading himself in early and late periods and (often but not always) relying on others to do so in the intervening period of 1835-41. Occasionally a copy, notably by his childhood friend Julian Fontana, would be sent instead. With Breitkopf & Härtel, proof sheets were sent from the French edition until 1835, after which manuscripts were sent. Until 1842 (when Fontana left for America) these were often copies. Although Chopin took great care to ensure that a correct text was sent to Leipzig, he had no further control over the German edition once it left his hands. This was also true of the English editions. Until 1843 proofs, copies and autographs were variously sent, after which autograph manuscripts seem to have been the norm. (Samson1992)

Due to these various publishing options there are numerous textual differences between the three editions. Moreover Chopin annotated certain of the (mainly French) first editions belonging to pupils. There are several collections containing such glosses, including Ludwika Jedrzejewicz’s three-volume collection, Camille O’Meara Duboi’s three-volume collection and – most importantly – Jane Stirling’s seven-volume collection. The status of these glosses – a stage in the source-chain which post-date the first editions – is deeply problematical, though there are relatively few such annotations on the Ballades. (Samson 1992)

Jan Ekier writes in the preface of the Wiener Urtext Edition (1986) that Chopin showed a considerable aversion to proof-reading. He did not correct all the copies, or all the editions, or all the works; he often did it in a great hurry and let mistakes remain. Sometimes he handed the proof-reading to Fontana. Where there were several printer’s models, Chopin did not check to see whether they were exactly the same, and even during the process of engraving he made changes – usually in the French editions. When we also bear in mind that Chopin was in the habit of writing further variants into his pupils’ copies, its possible to develop some idea of the difficulties involved in discovering the composer’s ultimate intentions. (Ekier 1986)

As usual with Chopin’s Stichforlagen there are numerous corrections, mainly minor mistakes, but occasionally revisions of detail in the first Ballade. The fioratura of bar 33, for instance, seems to have been less rhythmically fluid in Chopin’s first draft, with the semiquaver groupings continuing into the second half of the bar. The voicing of the left hand at 40 was originally as in 36; the bass note at 45 and 47 was apparently F#; and the phrasing at 69 had longer spans. Pedalling, expression marks and dynamics were added later in close detail, though Chopin neglected to add pedalling for the second theme on its first appearance. The French edition was prepared from this autograph in July 1836. There are numerous minor differences between the Stichforlage and the first edition, including changes to dynamics (added in bars 25
and 30, removed in bar 238); to phrasing (left hand at 36 et seq., 45-8 and 55-6); to notes values in the inner voices (lengthened in 49, 51 and 111-12); and to expression and tempo marks (an added ritardando at 66 and a tempo at 94; an omitted più vivo at 136 and scherzando at 138). It is very likely that several of these changes represent proof corrections by Chopin himself, but in some cases they are clearly publisher’s errors. (Samson 1992)

The first German edition of the first Ballade (Breitkopf & Härtel plate no. 5706) was prepared in June 1836. Jan Ekier’s stemma for the work suggests that it was based on proofs of the Schlesinger edition, to which Chopin had made further corrections. This supposition is, according to Samson, incorrect. Krystyna Kobyłanska quotes a Breitkopf letter citing the presence of a manuscript of the Ballade then (1878) in their collection. This may have been a copy rather than an autograph, but it indicates that Chopin sent a manuscript (rather than proofs) to Leipzig, as he was to do for most subsequent works. The German edition differs from the French in two major and several minor respects. The major changes are the Lento rather than Largo marking for the introduction and a D rather than Eb in the chord at bar 7. It should be remembered that Chopin had no control over any editorial changes made (often matters of ‘house style’) in Leipzig. The D here, repeated in many later editions, was probably the work of the publisher. The first English edition was prepared by Wessel in August 1836, probably from the Schlesinger proofs, and it was published as ‘La Favorite’. Chopin almost certainly had no hand in its preparation. (Samson 1992)

The first Ballade was published in subsequent editions by Brandus and Breitkopf & Härtel using the same plate numbers as the original editions but in some cases with revised texts. The three main publishers also brought out collected editions of Chopin’s music after his death – Ashdown and Parry (successors of Wessel) in 1860-82, Brandus (who incorporated Schlesinger) in 1859-78 and Breitkopf in 1878-80. The Breitkopf is of special interest as it was part of a major project of complete editions of mainly German composers. It was prepared by a six-man editorial committee, including Liszt and Brahms using original manuscripts and the first German edition. This version restores Eb in bar 7 in the G minor Ballade. It has become familiar to later students as the basis for the Lea Pocket Scores edition that was published in New York between 1955 and 1962. (Samson 1992)

Other collected editions included work published posthumously (Meissonier, Paris; Adolf Martin Schlesinger, Berlin) by Julian Fontana in 1855 and 1859 in close consultation with the composer’s family. Many of Chopin’s pupils were also directly involved in the preparation of these editions. The earliest were the two French editions of 1860, one (Schonenberger) edited by Fétis and the other (Richault) by Chopin’s Norwegian pupil Thomas Tellefsen. Already there were significant differences of orientation between these two early editions. This was even though both were based on the same source – the first French editions. Where the Schonenberger edition set out to achieve a satisfactory text in the judgement of the editor, the Richault edition tried to reconstruct the composer’s intentions. In the Richault, problems arise from the attempt to recapture Chopin’s performing and teaching methods. The edition relies on the annotated first editions of Jane Stirling and on the editor’s memories of versions played by Chopin and by his pupils. The Ballades are less problematic than some pieces, but even with the Ballades Tellefsen compounds Schlesinger’s errors with his. For example, in the first theme of the first ballade, although base in the French edition, the chord at bar 7 has D; the left hand slur at 2-7 does not extend to the G; slurs are omitted in the right hand (37-39) and left hand (43); at 45-6 and 47-8 the slur does not extend to the D; the phrasing of 54-6 follows the first French edition by breaking halfway through 56; and the right hand note at the beginning of 45 and 47 is F# rather than F. (Samson 1992)
The very different editorial philosophies that underlie the Schonenberger and Richault editions have continued to influence and confound later nineteenth and early twentieth-century editions. Tending towards the first approach are the two heavily edited Russian editions, one (Stellowsky) of 1861, whose phrasing in particular bears little relation to Chopin’s, and the other (Jurgenson) of 1873–6. This latter, edited (heavily, and with liberal additions to Chopin’s expression and tempo markings) by the Liszt pupil Karl Klingworth, was well travelled and much used. It was later reprinted by Bote & Bock (Berlin, 1880–5) and is best known today as the ‘Augener’ edition (London 1892). (Samson 1992)

Among the editions which tried to maintain a living link with Chopin were Gebthner & Wolff of Warsaw (1863), authorised by the composer’s family and based on German first editions, and Heugel of Paris (1867), edited by and based on German first editions, edited by Marmontel and based on French first editions. Of special significance was the Kirstner edition (Leipzig 1879) produced by the Chopin pupil Karl Mikuli and which was based on annotated French and German first editions supplemented by copious notes he made at his own lessons and the notes of other pupils. This edition was later reprinted by Bessel (Moscow, 1889) and Schirmer (New York, 1949). Although it has been frequently criticised, there are distinguished pianists today who continue to use Mikuli’s text in preference to more recent editions. Mikuli’s reliance on Chopin’s glosses on first editions is also found in the Peters edition (Leipzig, 1879), compiled by Hermann Scholtz using autographs and the annotated printed editions belonging to the Chopin pupils Mlle R. De Konneritz and George Mathias. And the whole approach is spelt out in the subtitle of an edition prepared by Jan Kleczynski for Gebthner and Wolff (Warsaw 1882). Kleczynski refers specifically to ‘variants supplied both by the author himself and passed on by his most celebrated pupils’. Kleczynski’s, edition, like those of Tellefsen, Mikuli and Scholtz, has considerable documentary value. As Zofia Chechlinska put it, these texts ‘are to a certain extent an expression of the editors’ personal reaction to a living Chopin tradition. (Samson 1992)

The Oxford Original Edition (London, 1932) is based almost entirely on the seven-volume annotated collection of Jane Stirling. The Stirling scores have as special significance as a complete corpus of music (including posthumous publications) and one almost certainly compiled and corrected under Chopin’s direct supervision. Since it is probable that he intended these scores to form the basis of a collected edition that might supersede the first French editions, they have arguably a special authority. This is supported by Chopin’s participation in the final index of incipits. The status of the Stirling scores in relation to an authentic edition will no doubt remain controversial, but an edition that was faithful to them would certainly have great merit. Since the Stirling originals have become available it is now clear that the Oxford Original Edition did them very much less than full justice. Not all the variants appear, and of those that are included, not all are correct. (Samson 1992)

Other early twentieth-century collected editions include Pugno for Universal Edition (Vienna 1901), Friedman for Breitkopf & Härtel (Leipzig, 1913), Saur for Schott (Mainz, 1917–20), Brugnoli for Ricordi (Milan, 1923–37) and Cortot for Salabert (Paris, 1915–16). The Cortot edition includes detailed commentaries, instructions and exercises. There is also a broadly faithful edition prepared by Debussy for Durand (Paris, 1915–16). Unlike many nineteenth-century editions, most of these (Pugno, Brugoli, Cortot, Debussy) include no variants in the main text, working from the assumption that the edition should be based exclusively on the composer’s final version as far as can be identified. And the same is true of an even more ambitious scholarly edition that appeared in Poland following World War II (Warsaw, 1949–61). Ostensibly based on the editorial work of Ignacy Paderewski, Ludwik Bronarski, and Josef Tuczynski, it was produced in the main by Bronarski (Paderewski died before the project was
properly under way). The Polish complete edition was in many ways a pioneering venture, referring to the widest possible range of manuscripts and printed sources in an attempt to produce a ‘definitive’ text. While it remains to this day an enormously popular edition, its realisation was deeply flawed. Among other things, Bronarski’s practise was to select freely from different sources, arriving at a ‘new’ version that permissively combines material from autographs, copies (some of which were mistaken for autographs) and all three first editions. In many cases autography and phrasing are based not on any legitimate source and rather on unidentified recent editions and occasionally on personal judgements made in the light of particular harmonic theories. (Samson 1992)

Other so-called ‘source’ editions that have been initiated in recent years are the Henle Verlag, Wiener Urtext, and Polish national editions. The only one as yet nearing completion is, according to Samson, the Henle Verlag version that is edited mainly by Ewald Zimmerman (Duisburg 1956) and accompanied by a detailed commentary. Again this is flawed, despite its declared intention to work from a uniform basis of sources to select a ‘best’ source. As Zofia Chechlinska points out, there are in practice numerous importations from other versions and also many inaccuracies. A single example from the first ballade will suffice. The phrasing in bars 44-6 finds does not correspond with either the autograph or the first editions, despite the claims of Zimmerman’s commentary. (Samson 1992)

After many years of gestation the Polish National Edition (Warsaw 1967), under Jan Ekier, seems at last to be making some headway, with the remarkably detailed commentaries that accompanied the first volume, the Ballades. This, according to Samson (1992), is likely to become the standard Chopin. Inevitably it has its shortcomings, as the commentary to the Ballades illustrates. Ekier’s stemmatic analyses, ingenious though their reasoning often appears, are at times inaccurate or incomplete. Nor can its elaborately scientific commentary conceal a subjective element in the selection of variants between, for example, autographs and first editions, given the uncertainties about Chopin’s participation in the correction of proofs. Ekier’s claim to give ‘the most thorough presentation of the authentic, unadulterated musical text of Chopin’s works as the composer intended it’ still hinges by and large on the privilege of final thoughts (by no means axiomatic in the editing of Chopin’s music). At the same time he recognises that to identify a single ‘final text’ in Chopin is not always possible, and his incorporation of variants is an explicit acknowledgement that one should rather speak of ‘final texts’. The Polish National Edition of the Ballades may have its inadequacies, yet according to Samson, it can be recommended to performers on two important counts. First it is an edition based largely on a single (‘best’) source that is clearly identified, rather than a conflation of several sources. This is by no means always an infallible modus, but it is by far the most sensible approach to Chopin editing. Secondly it indicates, in an admirably detailed separate commentary, the most important existing variants, enabling the performer (rather than the editor) to make the decision as to which is appropriate. (Samson 1992)

According to Samson the complexity of the manuscript tradition means that there can be no edition of Chopin which will be satisfactory in every respect. (Samson 1992)

The interpretations of Chopin’s music after his death

Samson says that Chopin playing Chopin was, in short, quite different from anyone else playing Chopin. And that included Liszt’s overtly expressive and flamboyant interpretations as well as the more restrained and studied – even intellectual – readings of Clara Schumann and Hans von Bülow (so far as these can be re-created from contemporary accounts). Samson, when writing in the second half of the 20th century recognized that style and outlook is
moving yet further from Chopin’s own classically rooted playing. While first-hand data is inadequate, written-down verbal descriptions and evidence of different editions (many of them made by leading Chopin exponents) make it apparent that Chopin’s music has been increasingly reinterpreted from the standpoint of late-romantic aesthetics, a perspective essentially alien from that espoused by Chopin. (Samson 1992)

The most influential Chopin pupils were, according to Samson, Mikuli (who taught Michalowski, Rosenthal and Koczalski) and Mathias (who taught Philipp, Pugno and Carreño). The next generation would include Neuhaus, Sofronitsky and Rosen in the Mikuli line; Magaloff and Novae in the Mathias line. These lines might then be compared with Liszt pupils such as Tausig, Sauer and von Bülow, and above all with Leschetizky pupils, who included Friedman, Paderewski, Moisiewitsch and Slwinski. Yet given the range of influences to which any artist is susceptible, not to mention the singular personalities of the great performers, it is difficult to establish any very clear causality in these genealogies. (Samson 1992)

A second framework considers national schools as a determinant of performing styles. Here too, the ground is anything but firm, though some characteristics do emerge. There is a case for identifying certain peculiar Russian traits, deriving in some measure from the playing and teaching of Anton Rubinstein, who more than anyone accommodated Chopin’s music to the concert hall rather than the salon. ‘It is clever but not Chopinesque’, commented Hallé. The Polish pianist, Joseph Hofmann, was among Rubinstein’s many pupils. Elements of a Russian ‘school’ might also be detected in the playing of Rachmaninov and the Safonov pupil Joseph Lhevinne. It is also common to identify a French ‘Chopin’, affected by specific conservatory traditions – the Chopin of Planté, Cortot, Casadesus and Long, and, in later generation, of Perlemuter and Francois. (Samson 1992)

Samson (1992) also writes about the different technical traditions stemming from Lebert-Stark, Deppe, Leschetitzky, Breithaupt and Mattay. The likelihood is that Chopin playing was influenced more by the changing fashions of successive generations than by teacher-pupil relations, nationality or technical ‘schools’.

The earliest recording of a Chopin Ballade is, according to Samson, a performance of the third Ballade recorded in 1912 by Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933) who was second only to Paderewski as a Chopin specialist of the day. Only the second half of the work (from bar 116) has survived. For today’s audience the rubato introduces an immediate difficulty, notably in the ‘waltz’ episode at bar 124 and the reprise of Theme I at bar 213. Samson recounts that Pachmann’s rubato extends to the relation between larger sections of the work, and that this is a feature which has survived into the performance practice of our time, albeit in less extreme form. (Samson 1992)

Samson believes that it is clear that in comparison with the early recordings and the more recent recordings, the individual characterisation of material now takes place within a much narrower range of possibilities. For example, as may be heard in Joseph Hofmann’s recording of the first Ballade. Sometimes he changed the note values, sometimes he ignored, and in some cases reversed Chopin’s markings. (Samson 1992)
My general thoughts of the recordings after listening to them

Alfred Cortot (1926): Cortot plays with very much rubato and dreamy, with many lingerings and hesitations, but there is always a feeling of motion, it never stops. I have a feeling that Cortot is very free, and that he does what he feels at the moment, probably not always as was written in the scores he was following. In the highpoint in the $fff$ passage in the middle of the piece, I get the impression that it goes very quick and that it is over very fast. The coda ending is here too, like Horowitz, very capricious through the whole ending.

Vladimir Horowitz (1982): My impression of this recording is that Horowitz plays with rubato, although he has a quite steady rhythm. Sometimes the recording has a dreamy character, sometimes it has a terrifying feeling, almost a struggle for life. In the $f$ or $ff$ passages Horowitz plays with very marcatored octaves, sometimes almost raw. The $fff$ highpoint in the middle of the piece is very tumultuous and sounds almost improvisatory. The ending coda is almost capricious in the beginning but ends with a tumultuous terrifying power.

Svjatoslav Richter (1960): Richter begins very soft and slow, with a slight rubato, but generally with a very steady rhythm. Richter successively builds up to a climax, which here also is very fast. The coda ending is more of a Con fuoco than Horowitz and Cortot. Richter plays generally with a very clear sonorous tone.

Emanuel Ax (1985): Ax plays with rubato. Maybe more than Richter but not as much as Horowitz. But I get the impression that the rubato gets lesser and lesser through the piece. The longer the piece goes the rhythm gets steadier and the rubato is less than the beginning. I can feel ‘revolutionary thoughts’ tendencies in Ax’s playing, and the $fff$ high point passage he really brings out the high point and take the time he needs. In the ending coda I can feel a little of the Con fuoco feeling, but not as much as when I hear Richter.

Evgeny Kissin (1998): My impression of Kissin’s playing is that he begins in a very slow tempo, sometimes it is almost like moments of standing still although he plays in a sort of rubato poetic style. I also think that Kissin makes almost the same articulation of the first theme through the whole piece. In the more intimate parts he plays very soft and gently. Instead of the slow beginning Kissin successively advances in tempo, and finally he reaches a very fast tempo. Anyway he makes a clear high point in the $fff$ passage in the middle of the piece. I finally think that he plays the ending in quite a con fuoco manner.

My comparison of the recording parts of the G minor Ballade

Part one (bars 1-20):
In the first C-octaves, in the Largo in the beginning, Cortot, Horowitz, and Ax begin with what I think is a pesante character. Horowitz is the heaviest of the three and he also uses a lot of pedal. Richter begins with very soft C-octaves and plays the whole Largo very soft, and does not do as is usually written in the scores of the G minor Ballade. Kissin also begins quite soft (but not as soft as Richter), but not in the manner I would say is pesante. After the octaves, Kissin plays very soft and makes a crescendo up to the high C in bar three, and successively comes into a pesante character. The arpeggio in bar seven, every pianist interprets it differently. In the moderato section, Cortot plays with a lot of rubato (more than the other pianists). Horowitz also plays with a lot of rubato but the rhythm is generally more steady than Cortot.
Horowitz in this section sometimes also uses an offphrasing technique where the offphrased note is very weak, which speaks to me as a sort of sobbing character or a very tender character. Richter has a sort of more rhythmically strict figures than Cortot and Horowitz, although Richter has some sort of rubato between the figures. Ax also has almost the same style as Richter in this part, rhythmically strict but with a slight rubato. Kissin plays with rubato and does almost exactly the same shaping in the figures.

The metronome values which I have tried to measure was very difficult to capture precisely because of the changing tempi. The values that I have chosen must be considered as most general.

Metronome tempo: Largo

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<th>M.M. $\theta$ = about</th>
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<th>M.M. $\eta$. = about</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortot:</td>
<td>70-85</td>
<td>Horowitz:</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richter:</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>Ax:</td>
<td>70-75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kissin:</td>
<td>50-80</td>
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Metronome tempo: Moderato

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<th></th>
<th>M.M. $\eta$. = about</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortot:</td>
<td>40-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horowitz:</td>
<td>40-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richter:</td>
<td>40-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ax:</td>
<td>40-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissin:</td>
<td>under 40 up to 40</td>
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Part two (bars 36-45):
Cortot plays this part very fast already in the beginning and almost like a scherzando. I do not really feel an agitato character from bar 40 in his work. Horowitz plays this part quite slow. In the beginning he brings out the left hand voices and the right hand is very soft almost like pearls. In bar 40 he plays very dramatic and the right hand octaves are very marcatoed and it is sounding like war signals, or if a terrifying thing just is to be introduced for the listener. Richter brings out the octaves already in bar 36 and onwards. This does not feel as dramatic as Horowitz’s. Ax brings out the right hand melody and makes a sort of stop after every bass-note generally until bar 40. After that it successively gets in a more steady rhythmic movement. Kissin mixes and brings out both the right and the left hand in the beginning. From bar 40 he brings out the upper octave in the right hand and the lower does not almost sound at all. Successively he also uses the lower voice in the octaves as it gets more and more dramatic.

Metronome tempo: Moderato – agitato

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M.M. $\eta$. = about</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortot:</td>
<td>65 up to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horowitz:</td>
<td>40 up to 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richter:</td>
<td>45 up to 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ax:</td>
<td>40 up to 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissin:</td>
<td>50 up to 95</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Part three (bars 67-82):
Cortot plays with considerable rubato and indeed with rhytmical freedom. He does not always play the correct note values. Cortot plays very poetically, and also uses hesitations and lingerings in his playing. I get the feeling of ‘youthful impatience’ and ‘excitement’ when
Cortot plays this part. Horowitz plays it a little bit slower than Cortot, but it is with rubato and poetic, and dreamy, although his phrasing is a bit uncommon at times. Richter plays in a poetic manner like Horowitz, but I don’t feel it is as dreamy as Horowitz’s playing. Richter feels a little bit more steady in the tempo than Horowitz. Ax’s and Richter’s and Kissin’s playing seem generally very similar. Richter is the one who has the brightest melody, and I feel that Kissin is very aware of the bass line and that he finds a melodic line inside the bass line.

Metronome tempo: meno mosso

Cortot:  M.M. η. = about 60-70  
Horowitz: M.M. η. = about 55-60
Richter: M.M. η. = about 55-60  
Ax: M.M. η. = about 45-50
Kissin: M.M. η. = about 50-60

Part four (bars 106-126):
Cortot has quite a fast tempo. I would also say, compared to Horowitz, that Cortot plays almost like ‘a feeling of joy’. There is a big difference between Cortot and Horowitz. Horowitz plays with a very hard attack, and especially in the bass octaves in every new bar, with a raw and almost terrifying power. In the climax part in bar 124-25, Horowitz makes something extraordinary. I do not know if he does not know what he is doing, if he is playing the wrong notes, or maybe adding some quasi-improvisation. It sounds very tumultuous and odd, but not without some sort of effect. Richter plays with big sonority and very bright melody. Richter is very firm but he is not so raw as Horowitz’s octaves in the left hand and is also more fluent than Horowitz. I feel that Ax’s interpretation is the one that sounds most ‘revolutionary’ when compared to the other pianists’ interpretations. Kissin’s interpretation is very similar to Ax’s interpretation, but it is a little bit faster, and therefore does not have the same weight as does Ax’s interpretation. Kissin, in bar 110, plays a little bit different than is generally written in the editions of the G minor Ballade.

Metronome tempo: a tempo

Cortot:  M.M. η. = about 70-80  
Horowitz: M.M. η. = about 55-85
Richter: M.M. η. = about 55-85  
Ax: M.M. η. = about 55-65
Kissin: M.M. η. = about 65-90

Part five (bars 138-146):
Cortot plays in a sort of gallop style. Horowitz plays slower than Cortot and I think without pedal. Sometimes Horowitz brings out some voices very clear. Richter plays this part quite fluently and uses more pedal than Cortot and Richter. It sounds to me that he changes pedal at every new bass note. Ax plays very fluently, with relaxation and without stress. Ax is also very economical in his use of the pedal. Kissin plays this part fluently and I think he uses the pedal as is generally written in the score. Kissin also uses some kind of hesitation effect in one of the quaver figurations in the right hand.

Metronome tempo: più animato

Cortot:  M.M. η. = about 100-110  
Horowitz: M.M. η. = about 85-95
Richter: M.M. η. = about 90-105  
Ax: M.M. η. = about 90-100
Part six (bars 206-225):
I think Cortot plays this part very capriciously and this also in a type of ‘gallop style’. I do not get the feeling that it has a con fuoco character. Horowitz begins with terrifying feeling in his interpretation, at least until on the first beat in bar 208. Bass octaves sound almost like a bomb. After that I think he is not playing in a con fuoco character either. I do not think he uses any pedal at all. Not until bar 228, when he again hits with one of his bombs, there I can feel that it is a con fuoco character. Here Horowitz also begins to use more pedal. Richter begins with, for me, a very convincing appassionato character in bar 206. I also think he has got more of a con fuoco character from bar 208 and onwards than Horowitz and Cortot. I think that Ax plays in quite a con fuoco manner, but not as much as Richter and Kissin. Maybe Richter has a more fluent interpretation than Ax. Kissin begins the Presto con fuoco part with, I think, the fastest tempo of the five pianists. I feel that he looses the intensity by going down in tempo and almost looses the con fuoco character by his rubatos onwards.

Metronome tempo: Presto con fuoco
Cortot: M.M. θ = about 130-140
Horowitz: M.M. θ = about 130-150
Richter: M.M. θ = about 135-150
Ax: M.M. θ = about 135-150
Kissin: M.M. θ = about 130-150

My own interpretation of the score in the G minor Ballade

The beginning of the G minor Ballade indicates for me something of great seriousness, and makes the listener ready for what to come. The beginning which is marked pesante, causes the first Largo section to have a sort of fundamentally heavy and gigantic seriousness which can not be denied in the moment it appears. I get the feeling that the history, which soon is to be narrated in a comprehensive perspective, can be represented as having ‘dark overtones’. The beginning then collects itself to present the first theme. Bar 7 I associate with the feel of a ‘painful memory’ in the arpeggiated chord up to the E flat in the left hand. Afterwards the story begins taking shape in the waltz-like character which has started. From bar 21 and onwards octaves are introduced which indicate that something soon is to happen. A bass line is introduced in bar 24 and the tension becomes thicker. In bar 36 a feeling of worry is introduced, and in bar 40 and onwards war signals are evident. I feel a frightening feeling, and also a feeling of some kind of struggle that in bar 54 goes down to a murmur. Soon a horn-call is identified in the left hand in bar 64, which then becomes weaker and weaker. A new theme grows up, out from the horn-call in the meno mosso section. The theme is very intimate in the character, almost like two persons in love whispering to each other, or like the ties between a mother and her child. I also can feel some kind of longing character in this part. The piece gets more fluent from bar 82 and onwards. From bar 94 we hear again the first theme which this time has more tension, mainly because of the E bass. The tension gets higher and higher, and culminates in bar 106 when the second theme is again introduced. This time very different from the first time it was introduced. Now I can feel a vibrating happiness, a feeling of victory, or maybe a feeling of revolutionary revenge. The section proceeds into total exhaustion in bar 124. In bar 126 and onwards a restless element is in the right hand and the listener does not know what is to come. The whole thing culminates in something unexpected in bar 138 when a sort of scherzo character is introduced, or maybe a feeling of ‘simulating heartiness’ in anticipation of what is next to come. From bar 146, again a restless feeling is introduced and
tension builds up until bar 154 where terrifying left hand chords pump like war signals. The whole mood calms in bar 158 for a moment. Soon the second theme is again introduced, this time together with very expressive second voice in the right hand. The piece then proceeds with a feeling of motion. Soon the first theme is again introduced, now for the last time. The tension builds up and culminates in the *appassionato* section with a terrifying feeling in bar 206 and onwards. In bar 208 a struggle between life and death begins. To me, the whole coda section feels like a fighting character, and you do not know who is going to win. Bar 258 and onwards is almost like an evil laughter which ends with a tumultuous death.

**Discussion**

**Thoughts on Chopin’s history and the Ballade**

The Grove dictionary writes that Chopin’s father kept his family in total ignorance of his French relatives. Though breaking with his family, Chopin’s father did not have to keep Chopin in total ignorance of the French language, a language Chopin could speak fluently. It seems almost unbelievable that Chopin did not know anything of his father’s past. At least, it is probable that Chopin must have recognized that his surname sounded French rather than Polish. Chopin was also given the French name Frédéric. Too, Chopin’s father was a French instructor. It is possible that Chopin’s father refused to talk of his past, or perhaps he just did not mention anything of the relatives which were left in France. The reason or reasons for this break with the French past were uncertain in the references reviewed. In surviving letters and other autobiographical material, Chopin does not clearly address the subject.

Chopin was writing verses at the age of six. This indicates the value poetry had for Chopin. He undoubtedly was influenced and affected by some kind of poetry in his childhood, this appears to have influenced his life in multiple directions.

Chopin’s inventiveness and ingenuity was never inhibited by professional pedantry. Maybe we who love Chopin’s music ought to thank Chopin’s teacher Wojciek Zywny for not destroying Chopin’s creativity as a child. Maybe it was the future key for the power of Chopin’s compositions and his ability to create a new piano style. This maybe is something for piano teachers today to think of when teaching young pupils. Jóseph Elsner, Chopin’s later teacher, also did not attempt to impose his will or his own tastes on Chopin. Maybe we also owe a vote of thanks to Jóseph Elsner.

Chopin was from his childhood in contact with the high social circles in Poland. Therefore it is not strange that when he had money to spend that he had high tastes in fashion and that his own vanity was a part of his later life.

That Chopin had the opportunity to hear different kinds of music and musicians when he was young, both in Warsaw, Berlin, and Vienna, affected his musical development. The opportunity to live in Paris, a city which was a whirlpool of political, intellectual and artistic activity had a tremendous influence on his adult years. He could hear, meet great artists, and get all the intellectual stimulation he might have needed. If Chopin would not have had the opportunity to be so influenced, I think that his music would have taken a quite different and less majestic direction. It is also possible that the developing tragedy of Poland, as Samson repeatedly points out, significantly contributed to Chopin’s personal and musical maturity.
While the Grove dictionary maintains that Chopin had no signs of tuberculosis during his youth, Jezewska writes that Chopin had signs of tuberculosis during his youth. He notes that Chopin was ordered to take cure at a spa in 1826. I must say that I have found things in Jezewska’s book that are contrary to the words of most other scholars. Anyway, it would be interesting if someone could more definitively answer the question whether Chopin was in his youth already showing signs of tuberculosis. It would not be surprising if Jezewska has the right answer. We know that Chopin’s sister died of tuberculosis, and therefore it is not impossible that Chopin also could have got the disease from his sister, during the same period. Contemporary public health documents note that tuberculosis was not uncommon in Central Europe at that time. Modern medical literature describes tuberculosis before the development of modern medicine and comments that lingering, low-level infections lasting decades were possible (Williams 1973).

That Chopin’s father was a man who enrolled the National Guard suggests that Chopin the son must have been very conscious about the struggle of the Polish people and that his father fought for his country. Chopin also lived in Warsaw in the stimulating society of young Polish poets and artists, all filled with ardent patriotism and revolutionary fervour. He must have been vividly aware of thoughts of revolution prevalent among Poles of the time. It is probable that Chopin, already in the bloom of his youth, was in contact with for instance, Mickiewicz books that were full of revolutionary thoughts urging a Polish national struggle. Perhaps Chopin was even conscious of what he could do to strengthen the morale of the Polish people. Some of whom might have already saw Chopin as one of Poland’s future hopes.

It must have been very frustrating for Chopin when he was in Vienna during the Polish insurrection. Whether he sketched the G minor Ballade in Vienna or not, the whole situation must have been nerve-wracking for him. To be in an alien country, belonging to a people who were quite unpopular surely did not make it easier. Worst of all must have been that he did not know what was happening to his family. His knowing that if something happened he could do nothing. It was also hard for him to leave Poland in the first place because of the restrictive Russian bureaucracy. Of course, Chopin’s playing and his compositions, both during his time in Vienna and throughout his life must have been influenced by these experiences. He undoubtedly was reminded that life is fragile and uncertain. Anyway, I wonder how unpopular the Poles in Vienna were at that critical time? At least Chopin must not have been hated in Vienna. He was invited to different evening parties despite his being Polish. At least, Chopin thought that it was hard to defend Polish music in Vienna during this period. A time when audiences had no interest in hearing Polish texts. Hedley points out that Chopin composed songs in Vienna, all with Polish texts. These songs were probably not performed in Vienna during that time.

Later Chopin travelled from Vienna to Paris at a time when the Russians were prepared to storm Warsaw. It was impossible to communicate with his family and he must have been very worried. He probably felt anger, sadness, despair, and maybe hatred of the Russians. In some way I feel that this must have affected Chopin in one way or another for the remainder of his life.

According to Samson, Chopin had an unproductive nine-month stay in Vienna. But I wonder what he means with unproductive? According to different dictionaries Chopin composed the Grand Polonaise brillante in Eb, Mazurkas Op. 6 and 7, and different songs while in Vienna. It seems that it is very hard to say if and how much Chopin composed in Vienna. Scholars have different opinions in this matter. Samson maintains that the Vienna and early Paris years witnessed a gradual but unmistakable transformation in Chopin’s music. We do not know for
certain when the G minor Ballade was composed. Some sources say that it was sketched in
Vienna, and some say that it was composed during the early Paris years. According to the
paper type of the Stichforlage, stylistic and other evidence, I think it is possible that Chopin
could have sketched the G minor Ballade in Vienna. Too, the development of Chopin’s style
not yet had reached the right maturity. It is also possible that Chopin could have made all sorts
of changes during the early Paris years until he was satisfied and ready to have it published.
Concerning the paper type, I think it is hard to take as absolute evidence that the G minor
Ballade had the same paper type as other compositions made at the time it was published.
Chopin could have rewritten it many times before publishing. We do not even know when
Chopin thought of giving the piece the title ‘Ballade’. Records currently available do not make
it possible to know exactly when or during which years it was composed.

Was the G minor Ballade printed in 1835 or 36? Parakilas (1992) says that it was ready for the
printer in 1835, while for example the German dictionary Die Musik in Geschichte und
Gegenwart says it was printed in 1836.

It is clear that Chopin loved the piano. At the conservatory in Warsaw he had the opportunity
to learn all the branches of composition but he did not write much for other instruments. The
major part of Chopin’s compositions is composed for the piano. I have been thinking as to
why Chopin did not compose operas, which he loved, or why he did not compose much
symphony and chamber music. Maybe he did not feel that writing for orchestra was his natural
talent, or he felt that the piano was all that he needed for his musical thoughts. Perhaps Hedley
(1974) is right when he points out that Chopin not was a conscious propagandist. If Chopin
had wanted to, he could have used the great operas and concert houses in Europe if he wanted
to influence people about Poland and the Polish people. It is possible that he gave up all such
thoughts when he was in Vienna, when it was about Poland among the Viennese. Maybe he
just wrote his music so that only Poles could understand the message in and full meaning of his
compositions. In the first Scherzo which, according to Parakilas (1992) has a Polish Christmas
Carol in the middle voice, it is possible that he wanted to encourage the Polish people with
whom he identified. Chopin could also have more broadly been influenced by the nationalistic
romantic movement in Europe. In that case it could be argued that he contributed a piece that
would be appreciated among the European people., According to Parakilas, every European
would have understood the nationalism in Chopin’s Ballade. That it was no secret nationalism
because of the European political nature of that time. There were no conflict between
nineteenth-century nationalism and the idea of Europe as a cultural entity. For example
Herder had been thinking European when making the ballad a literary and musical genre by
1830 in his collection of folk poetry and ballads from all over Europe.

Chopin must have been conscious of what the term ‘ballad’ meant to him and other
Europeans. If he did not know what a ballad was, I do not think that he would have chosen
the title ‘Ballade’.

It is not strange that Chopin’s Ballade was published in the mid 1830s. Mendelssohn had
published ‘Songs Without Words’, and Berlioz, Liszt and Schumann wrote music that was
connected to programs and literary models. Carl Loewe was the leading ballad composer of his
generation. Maybe this is the connection that inspired Chopin to write the Ballade and to
choose the title ‘Ballade’ (for an instrumental work) for the first time in the recorded history of
composition. Or, Chopin improvised on the piano as he was want to do and then came to the
conclusion: This sounds like a ballad. In any case, it is interesting to note that while other
composers during the 1830s were declaring programmatic associations with their music
Chopin typically avoided such programmatic associations. Maybe it has something to do with
Chopin’s high and profound conception of piano playing, maybe in a conservative way. He adored Bach and Mozart. Chopin may not have liked the word ‘romanticism’, but I do not think that Chopin was unaffected by the romantic movement.

Chopin said: ‘Concerts are never real music; you have to give up the idea of hearing in them the most beautiful things of art.’ I think Chopin liked concerts and that he meant that his music and his playing was not suitable for the large concert halls. Chopin also played with a quieter tone that other pianists at that time. His music and his playing was probably of such an intimate character that it was necessary to sit closely to hear all the different nuances and the effects which he produced. The instruments at this time were also smaller than today’s instruments. Perhaps that is why Chopin only gave barely 30 public performances during his lifetime. Another consideration is that when Chopin lived in Paris he no longer needed to give concerts to earn a living. He could instead afford to play in more intimate gatherings in higher social circles.

Chopin was never totally absorbed by his life in Paris. He was still interested in the artistic and political trends in Poland. He had contact with Polish refugees and was a member of the Polish literary society which demonstrates that he still cared for his native land and its people.

It is worth mentioning that Chopin fell in love with Maria Wodziński in 1835 during the same period when the G minor Ballade was composed and published.

Kirby (1995) notes that a ballad can be described as a narrative which involves events generally with a tragic outcome and with violence. Each of Chopin’s four Ballades have dramatic parts and I get the feeling that it would not be unrealistic to associate the Ballades with violence or some kind of ‘fighting character’.

The issue of form and design of the G minor Ballade is not obvious. I think that both Samson’s (1992) and Parakilas’s (1992) models of form can describe what is happening in the Ballade’s structures. I think it is useless to decide what is the right answer to this question. All I can absolutely say is that Chopin used a composition technique which is a good one. It is interesting that Chopin uses thematic material grounded in popular genres. For example, his use of such material in bar 138 of the G minor Ballade. Here he uses a kind of phraseology which I think can be described as a ‘fingerprint’ of Chopin.

I wonder how much the death of Beethoven hastened the rapid development of new stylistic tendencies in the 1830s. Beethoven himself was not unaffected by the romantic movement and he was also a part of the development of the romantic movement which was to come. I rather think that Beethoven partly was a catalyst to the other young composers whom were to come and who had not yet grown up. His passing when the movement was emerging meant that his absence removed a major shaping influence.

The issue of Chopin and Mickiewicz

I think that Chopin must have been influenced by Mickiewicz in one or another direction. He knew him personally, read his books and translated them, composed songs with text of Mickiewicz, and followed Mickiewicz course of lectures at the Collège de France. I also believe that it is possible that Chopin was inspired by Mickiewicz’s poems when he wrote the Ballades. But I think it is hard to believe that it was just specific poems that shaped the four Ballades. It could have been the general spirit of Mickiewicz’s poems and books that he wrote, and not single poems, which inspired Chopin to compose the Ballades. I do not think that
Schumann would be deceitful about this matter and later print the same misinformation in a magazine. I do not see any reason why Schumann would have come up with such a ‘lie sentence’ or what he would have to gain from it. It rather, would have ended his friendship with Chopin. The story of ‘Konrad Wallenrod’ is a fantastic story, which says something of Mickiewicz’s writing, and if I were Chopin I would at least have been fascinated by that story. Mickiewicz could also have influenced Chopin in other compositions, not just the Ballades. In any case, I think it is non-productive to search for a specific story for the Ballades without clarifying autobiographical material. Chopin avoided programmatic associations and it is readily apparent to me that Chopin’s music can be interpreted in many different ways. Interpretation only becomes more complicated when it is tied to a specific story. The music becomes overly constrained and stops speaking for itself and the performer is no longer at liberty to associate.

Samson (1992) says that ‘Konrad Wallenrod’ is not itself a ballad. This I do find confusing as the work closely matches the commonly recognised definition of a ballad.

I wonder why such men as Hunecker, Cortot and Bourniquel could cite the Mickiewicz stories as though they had unquestioned authority. Probably they simply brought up what they had learnt about the tradition of the Ballades and did not attempt to question the accuracy. True or not, even if it was a tradition, it must have been exciting to speculate as to what Chopin could have been influenced with when composing the Ballade. It is still today in many pianists’ interests to speculate on this matter. I was myself interested in this when I first heard about the different explanations. Cortot and the others had no reason to keep these speculations secret from the rest of the world for to do so would have been impossible. It is also possible that misunderstandings and other errors somewhere could have been ‘born’, and then the thing was hard to stop, and to know what was true or not. A bit like the old children’s game where a description is whispered from person to person in a circle, becoming a bit more distorted with each retelling.

There are different statements about how many songs Chopin actually wrote, if there were seventeen or more than nineteen. All I can say is that at least two of them were inspired by texts of Mickiewicz.

The personality

The fact that Chopin had extraordinary powers of mimicry and was a good caricaturist may also be used to say something about his ability to ‘catch’ the essential part of a ‘style’ of music and compositions. He must have been very good at taking in new ‘styles’ and then transforming them into his own playing and his compositions.

The fact that Chopin was very careful about his external appearance may indicate that he really liked to be seen as ‘looking good’. Or maybe he was afraid that in high social circles he could lose his reputation and status and then be excluded from the high social circles in Paris or even lose his fame.

According to witnesses Chopin had periods of depression. His pupils also agreed that Chopin was reserved in discussion, even if he also could be a very entertaining person with an excellent sense of humour. Schumann also said that Chopin did not want his works being discussed. Chopin’s fluctuations in mood could also have been affected by his tuberculosis that robbed him of the strength to be always happy. His changes in mood also have depended on the reality that he was a very sensitive person, sensitive of every mood which he felt ‘in the air’. There is also a possibility that George Sand’s statements about Chopin could have been
exaggerated. Chopin and George Sand were no longer very good friends in the 1840s. Cortot may have summed matter best when he pointed out that Chopin expressed himself more easily in music than in words.

Chopin’s musical thinking

The majority of material reviewed for this paper generally agrees that the ideal and the connection between the art of singing and playing an instrument, was for Chopin something very important. He also linked phrasing with the fact that we use words to make a language. Chopin’s thoughts about phrasing are very similar to today’s thoughts on correct phrasing. His strong bonds with the contemporary opera singers must have played a great part in his thinking when he played and when he composed. I also think it is important when playing the piano to be aware of the strong connection between the instrument and the voice.

It is interesting that Chopin wanted the trill to begin generally on the upper note. I think this shows how close Chopin was to the Baroque and classical tradition. But I do not think one must take it as a rule to always begin on the upper note. I think you must listen to the sound too, and not always trust in your knowledge of what is right or wrong. Chopin wanted the trills to be played with great evenness; and who among musicians does not? It is also interesting that Chopin wanted the trill, with the ending, to be played tranquilly and not at all precipitously.

Too, it is very interesting that Chopin is known to have said that every person understands a piece differently, and that every person just can express what is inside their mind. I think it is a problem when pupils are forced to play as their teachers desire. The pupil can become insecure, and stop trusting in themselves. I think it is a problem in the academic music world that something is supposed to be played in one or another way. It is also interesting that Chopin was aware of problems associated with the aesthetics of interpretation. It is a question that continues to provoke intense debate among those affected.

While there were many who heard Chopin play, there is no recording of Chopin’s playing. Now, over 150 years after his death no one who heard him is still living. I think that these factors make it difficult to create a true picture of, or say how Chopin actually played. The general opinion also did not stabilize until 1900, more than fifty years after Chopin’s death. The description of Chopin’s playing is also from different years. One can imagine how different the descriptions may have been, if you compare Chopin’s playing with the periods of illness and his periods of better health. Anyway, if Chopin was known as an extremely quiet player there are some things that you can say. He must have been a very good improviser and his piano technique must have been excellent. It is generally agreed that he could execute all of his studies with absolute perfection. I also have the impression that he could play with dramatic fire if he wanted to. It also seems that Chopin always could play cantabile, both in ff and pp passages. What I think is most interesting is that it seems that Chopin never played the same composition twice with the same expression. Rather, he played according to the inspiration and the mood of the moment. He could change the tempo, timbre of sound and even nuances, and he also sometimes improvised ornaments.

It is interesting that the key-word for Polish songs, according to Niecks (1973), is melancholy. Whether or not Chopin ever used the word Zal, I think there is in his music an association with this Polish word. Chopin must sometimes have been dreaming of his past in Poland and felt melancholy about family, friends, people, and even the land itself. It is, of course, a possibility that Liszt created an exaggerated picture of Chopin’s melancholy. Still, given all that
has been said on the topic, I think in some way that one must take the word Zal with seriousness. Accepting Zal is being present in some way and to some degree even if Hedley says that Chopin had musical and not sentimental problems, that the ‘morbidity’ of the original impulse must have soon been lost in the labour of polishing and perfecting. In thought of that, Chopin was a very good improviser and therefore must have been playing whatever the mood inspired him to. His compositions were also connected to his improvising and therefore, I think it is not impossible that his compositions could have contained elements of ‘Zal’ despite polishing and perfecting. The composition could anyway contain the essential ‘thought’ which came from the beginning. But I think it would be too much to say that Zal is the key word to Chopin’s compositions.

I am a little bit curious as to what in the Schumann-Liszt assessment of Chopin’s art is demonstrated as false by Paul Egert. One dominant question comes to my mind: What can you really believe when you are reading about Chopin? Our picture of Chopin is maybe very general. Imagine if Chopin lived and could say what is true or false. Maybe we all would be surprised by his answers.

Do we actually know exactly how Chopin used his celebrated tempo rubato? Schonberg says that nobody could duplicate Chopin’s rubato in his day. Of course no one could duplicate Chopin’s rubato; it was Chopin’s own style of playing. But there must have been some, not just Chopin, who knew what the term ‘tempo rubato’ meant. Therefore, there must have been persons who really could play with tempo rubato; but in their own way. We are all individuals with our individual style of playing. No one can actually say how Chopin played, but what we can say is that we today have a general picture of what tempo rubato is. I think it is interesting that tempo rubato was derived from the Greek bards, and that it was used by musicians many centuries before Chopin. C.P.E. Bach and Mozart seem to have known what the term meant. What one can definitively say of Chopin’s rubato is that he did not play metrically, at least not in the right hand. This does not imply that Chopin not could play in time. The left hand was, according to Mikuli, in strict tempo. But I wonder how strict Chopin’s left hand actually was? I think this must be taken as a general rule. Chopin’s playing anyway was known as without exaggeration. Can we really tell what exaggeration meant in Chopin’s time, and what exaggeration means in our time? I think the answer can be very different, even in our time, when asking the question of different people.

How shall one use the pedal in Chopin’s music? Chopin wrote how he wanted the pedal in his music but not always. There are also differences between the different editions which are available for the modern interpreter of Chopin. How did Chopin himself use the pedal? Chopin used the pedal for different kind of effects, and because he never interpreted the same piece the same way, he must have been using the pedal differently from time to time. I think that one should look at Chopin’s pedalling as a general indicator as to what Chopin thought was one good way to use the pedal. We have also the problem today with the fact that the modern piano is different from Chopin’s pianos. Therefore the modern interpreter must use his/her ear and maybe fantasy when using the pedal in Chopin’s music. I do not think there can be only one correct way of using the pedal. I feel that Chopin’s opinion about the use of pedal says something very important: ‘The correct employment of it remains a study for life.’

I have not heard a Pleyel or an Erard piano. It is a bit confusing for me when one writer says that the Pleyels had a light and silvery tone and another says that the Pleyels had a dark and obscure sound. What is the right answer? The pianos of Chopin’s time sounded very harsh when playing strong. Maybe that is why he did not play as loud as the other pianists. Maybe he did not like when the piano was not singing anymore. I think it would be interesting to see
how Chopin would react if he could play on today’s instruments. Would he then treat one as he treated his contemporary instruments?

Regarding the thought that composition and improvisation are linked with each other, it is then not strange that Chopin, when playing his compositions, maintained his link with improvisation. Music was, for Chopin, not static and therefore he felt free to add ornamental variants and to never repeat his interpretation of his compositions.

Thoughts about the publication and the Editions

All the different editions, the manuscripts and the annotations in Chopin’s pupils’ scores show that Chopin could think in different ways when interpreting his own music. Chopin also did not like proof-reading and he did it in a great hurry. My question then is: Should one even attempt to search for a final text of Chopin’s music? I think it is useless, first of all because it is impossible to locate what everyone will agree is a final text, second because Chopin never played his compositions the same way twice. In my opinion all sources are a valuable resource for the modern interpreter. Then one can get many suggestions and from them build a personal interpretation. The Wiener Urtext edition provides detailed information on many of the differences which are to be found in Chopin’s editions.

I wonder how close the pianists after Chopin’s death were to Chopin’s own style? When Chopin’s pupils heard pianists like Rubinstein play they did not think it sounded like Chopin. There were so many different personalities, generations and schools after Chopins death, so it is unrealistic to say who is closest to the style of Chopin. Samson (1992) writes that interpretations of Chopin’s playing has been influenced more by the changing fashions of successive generations than by teacher-pupil relations, nationality or technical schools. It is also a problem that the earliest recording of a Chopin Ballade is from 1912. We can only compare today’s recordings with the early twentieth-century recordings. When comparing today’s recordings with the early ones, one can notice that the pianists on the early recordings have more freedom in their interpretations than today.

Comparing the recordings

Like Samson (1992), I think also that the earliest recordings have the most freedom. Cortot is the one who generally plays with the most rubato, and you seldom hear such an interpretation today. The other four recordings sound characteristic of today’s styles.

In the first part (Largo), one can see that it is interpreted in different ways. Despite that pesante is written in the score Richter and Kissin begin with a soft character. It is interesting that they take such freedom in their interpretations.

Further, in the moderato section, I really like the way Horowitz makes his weak off-phrasings. What I like with Richter is that he always has a singing sonorous tone. Kissin’s shaping of the quavers in the moderato section is always the same, and I think it is a pity that he is repetitive. It is then too easy for the listener just to start listening to that thing and get a little bored. It is however, interesting that the pianists have different tempi in the different parts.

I think it is clear how different the characters are and can be and also how much one can do, for instance, with the voices - which one the interpretation will bring out. You can also find that the pianists not always play as is generally written in the scores. The use of pedal is also a
mature of own taste in these examples. I wonder then, what can you do or cannot do in an interpretation of Chopin’s G minor Ballade?

Thoughts about my own recording

I feel that my general thoughts about the G minor Ballade and my own interpretation is coloured by the recordings to which I have been listening. I think it impossible to be unaffected by a recording and all the things in a recording that one feels is good. Maybe it is a danger that every pianist has the possibility to choose a model from a recording and then to transfer it to their own playing. I think it is a danger that the pianist then no longer uses their imagination to create something individual and ceases trusting in their self and starts to feel more secure in imitating the recording. I also feel that I have been affected by all the literature I have read about Chopin and by the story of ‘Konrad Wallenrod’. Last of all, I would say that it is interesting that Chopin never played in the same way twice. In knowing that I think it is inspiring to use my imagination to try to create fresh interpretation Chopin’s music.

Conclusion

What liberties can you actually take in playing Chopin’s music? Maybe Chopin would have allowed the modern interpreter the same freedom as he allowed himself when playing his own compositions. Some would say that you must play Chopin, or other composers, as close as originally intended. But how can you play as close as Chopin intended? Can you really know what Chopin intended when you also know that he never played his compositions the same twice and did not like his compositions being discussed? Even if he always played the same way, how can one know that they are close to Chopin’s intentions? The interpreter can only express what is inside them. There cannot be only one ‘correct’ interpretation. I think there must be endless interpretations for a piece of music. It is just our imagination as interpreters that ultimately limits us. I would say that if your imagination is great enough then no interpretation would be ‘strange’ to your ear, at most you might be the only person who understands it. A major problem as a pupil studying at a musical institution is that one learns a lot of conventions and how every composer should ‘sound’. It is good in one way. You learn a lot of phrasing, articulation, technique, theory, a lot of music etc., which the interpreter needs to have as tools for interpretation – even if I think that these ‘tools’ have the danger of becoming overly restrictive. Every interpreter who does not play as the conventions becomes odd, and some even think they are an academic threat. I find it good to learn the conventions; at least it can provides ideas for solving of musical dilemmas. Here I quote Beethoven who said: ‘I just want to learn the rules, to know how to break them’. Conventions have also been different through the ages and no one can say that what he or she is playing is absolute ‘correct’, because there is no interpretation that can truly be called absolute correct. So what can you do then when playing Chopin? I say, use your imagination. I do not mean that one should take one composer’s music and then play it in a way that insults the composer or his music.

I think that it is unhealthy for the musical world that everybody thinks similarly as to what are good or bad interpretations. Many interpreters become nervous that they’ll play wrong notes or play the wrong interpretation. Chopin tried to solve the problems of aesthetics, but failed, and even today no one can say what is aesthetically ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. It is a matter of personal ‘taste’.

In the end I would like to say: both the musician and the listener need to rethink. The audience must listen to a piece of music as if it was the first time they heard it, and the
musicians play it as if it was the first time they played it. Maybe the musical world then can become more exciting than it is today.
Bibliography


Discography


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