

# An Analysis of the Composing Elements of the First Movement of Schubert's "Piano Sonata in C Minor" D958

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## ABSTRACT

Franz Schubert composed twenty one piano sonatas in his thirty-one years of life. In 1828, the last year of his life, Schubert composed three large piano sonatas: D958, D959 and D960. This paper focuses on the work "Piano Sonata in C Minor" D958 among these three pieces, which is the largest, most profound and most representative classic of the three. In his piano sonata creation, while retaining the format of composition of piano sonata in the classical period, Schubert integrated the creation style of the romantic period. The artistic style and artistic form of these piano sonatas in Schubert's late creation reached its peak. This paper focuses on the analysis of the creative elements of the first movement of "Piano Sonata in C Minor" from the aspects of melody, variation, rest, continuant and semitone.

**Keywords:** D958, rest, melody, variation, continuant

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Life of the composer

Franz Schubert (1797-1828), known as the "king of songs", was one of the greatest European composers of the 19th century. Born in Austria, he is a representative of the early romantic trend, leaving an inexhaustible musical and cultural heritage for later generations. His works reflect the inheritance of the classical and its connection with romantic. At the age of just 31, he wrote more than 600 art songs in his lifetime, and continued for the last days of his life. Listening to Schubert's music always makes one fall into a reverie and feel like being in nature. His music is rarely loud, but it is always stimulating and imaginative. He inherited the structural framework of classical music, and added his own characteristics, with more fluency and varied writing techniques.

When speaking of Schubert, people tend to have the art song works like "Winterreise", "Der Lindenbaum", "Die schöne Müllerin" and "Heidenröslein" etc. come to mind. However, Schubert also contributed 21 piano sonatas in his piano works shining with brilliant light and have unique artistic charm, which is often neglected by people. As a link between classicism and romanticism, Schubert's art works not only inherited the tradition of classicism, but also created the romantic style, which has its own unique style. In this regard, compared with art songs, his 21 piano sonatas can

better reflect the transition and connection between the two styles of the period, and also show Schubert's in-depth research on the creation techniques of his predecessors, so as to innovate his own unique style. Schubert's piano sonatas are full of charming melodies, lyricism and fantasy, which also reflect the emotional characteristics of the romantic period in the 19th century. These characteristics are fully displayed in his works.

### B. The creation background of "Piano Sonata in C Minor" D958

"Piano Sonata in C Minor" is the largest and most representative of the three piano sonatas composed by him in 1828. At that time, Schubert was suffering from illness, yet he decided to prove his strength to the world and prove that he could become a composer like Beethoven. At the meantime, Schubert felt uneasy for life, having been receiving help from friends because of poverty. In 1812, due to the different pursuits between friends, they fell apart, making Schubert emotionally painful and conflicted. Later, the death of Beethoven, who had been the power that inspires him to go on the road of creation all the time, was also a great blow to him. Under this double pressure, Schubert created the work in 1828. The emotional ups and downs in the works are a way for the composer to vent his feelings. While reflecting the composer's anxious feelings, the works was a tribute to Beethoven. In the creation, the musical elements in Beethoven's works was used and

developed into their own characteristics. In the later stage of creation, the works are more standardized in form and more poised in the expression of feelings. In a word, "Piano Sonata in C Minor" D958 is a relatively standard and complete work of Schubert's piano sonata in terms of form structure and artistic creation.

## II. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CREATIVE ELEMENTS IN THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF SCHUBERT'S "PIANO SONATA IN C MINOR"

### A. Melody

Schubert, who is famous for his artistic song creation, also gave full play to the characteristics of long line melody writing in art songs when he wrote the sonata form. The single melodic contour is showed in the complex texture of harmony by use of methods like direct expansion, voice part transformation and variation, etc., so as to achieve the effect of a multilevel change like polyphony.

It is very dramatic when the main theme appears. For example, in Excerpt 1 ("Fig. 1"), the tonic column chord and syncopated rhythm of *f* in *c* minor are

selected, and the use of rest is in sharp contrast to the ascending scale of 46 rhythms in the third bar; the combination of rarefaction and density promoted the progress of five or six bars of continuous ascending sequence. The main thematic melody line (C-D-E-F-F sharp-G-A flat) of the ascending scale is formed at each bar in the remade position. And in the Excerpt 2 ("Fig. 2"), at the junction the accompaniment texture of the octave is changed into the broken chord form of the forty-sixth rhythm, the same main theme is changed from a monophonic line to a dynamic and static combination of a quarter note and a sixteenth note, and the strength of *p-pp* is used to change the theme again. In the process of the two melody lines, the composer used the attached eight-point rests for many times. The combination of rests and two-degree ascending adds tension to the music, while giving a strong impetus to the music's mood to the highest point of the melody. But the two melody lines bring totally different feeling in terms of the accompaniment texture and strength changes. The former is the low air pressure before the storm, and the latter is the patter of rain after the storm. From his using the same melody to write different sound effects, we can see Schubert's emphasis on accompaniment.



Fig. 1. Excerpt 1: 1-12 bars in the first movement of D958.



Fig. 2. Excerpt 2: 21-27 bars in the first movement of D958.

In Excerpt 3 ("Fig. 3"), the secondary theme appears for the first time, and the melody appears in the loudest part outside the right hand at bar 40, and the medium part of the right hand becomes the theme melody at the bar 45. In Excerpt 4 ("Fig. 4"), in the central part of the development section, the melody line begins in the

large part of the low voice (bars 119-121), then moves to the small part of the treble (bars 122-124), then to the later octave (bars 134-136), and the transition of the parts of the region and the interval from the single tone to the octave form a multi-part polyphonic texture with hierarchical contrast.



Fig. 3. Excerpt 3: 36-49 bars in the first movement of D958.



Fig. 4. Excerpt 4: The first movement of D958.

In the first movement, there are many phrases that rise in a straight line and then fall rapidly, such as the splitting of octaves in bars 17-20 and the ascending splitting of chords in bars 79-80, like a roller coaster. This dynamic highlights the dramatic color of the music.

### B. Variation

Variation technique is one of the important techniques in the development of musical thinking. In the subtheme part of the exposition part and the recapitulation part, the composer used variation technique to develop the subtheme twice in succession

and expand the texture. In Excerpt 5 ("Fig. 5"), the first occurrence of the secondary theme is the treble (E flat-D-E flat-F-G) on the outside of the right hand in bar 40, which is stated in the texture carried out by intervals. Section 54 is variation 1, which transforms the texture into the accompaniment of right hand octave and left hand triplet, where the association of activity and inertia sets off the beauty of the melody. Section 68 is variation 2, where the previous lyrical flow of melody lines mutates in style. The dominant notes with melodic and e flat minor are arranged in a 46 rhythm pattern to create a slight tension, with dramatic changes in contrast to the previous ones.



Fig. 5. Excerpt 5: The first movement of D958.

### C. Rest

A rest is a symbolic mark used in the writing of musical notation to indicate a temporary pause or length of pause between sounds. In Schubert's writing the rest took on a new meaning and was used to divide the structure of the movement. There are three uses of this method in the first movement of work D958, such as in Excerpt 6 ("Fig. 6"), the connection between the connecting part and the secondary part in the main part (bars 38-39), the division between the introduction and the central part in the developing part (bars 117-118), and the division between the recapitulation part and the epilogue (bars 247-249). In these three parts rests are used to divide the structure.

Bars 36-41



Bars 117-120



Bars 242-254



Fig. 6. Excerpt 6: The first movement of D958.

#### D. Continuant

In the work D958, the composer used the writing technique of continuant in many places, including the main continuant and the dominant continuant. In this work, there are three forms of monophonic continuant, octave or fifth continuant and chord continuant, which play their respective roles in the music.

The presence of tonic in the dominant continuant gives it the role of main function. The stable position of tonic I level can have the function of consolidating the tone and stabilizing the tonal, under repeated action. In Excerpt 7 ("Fig. 7"), in the beginning of the composer's composition (bars 1-6), the tonic of c minor is used in the lower part of the melody, and the rhythm combination of the length of octaves and the intensity of f are used to emphasize the stable melody; at the end of the epilogue (bars 271-274), the main chord in c minor is used in both the high and low parts at the same time, and the long note is added to the air beat under the strength of pp to achieve the same effect.



Bars 1-6



Bars 268-274



Fig. 7. Excerpt 7: The first movement of D958.

The dominant continuant, is given dominant function due to its V degree, and thus has an open and unstable effect. And its solution to the main continuant makes it prone to the dominant function. For example in Excerpt 8 ("Fig. 8"), at the sub-theme of the exposition part (bars 39-43), tonality is advanced into E flat major in relation to the main theme when

Bars 36-49



Fig. 8. Excerpt 8: The first movement of D958.

The ending of the exposition part of the presentation section (bars 94-98) also adopts the technique of a dominant continuant. In Excerpt 9 ("Fig. 9"), in the bar 92, after a short stay on the incomplete termination from the dominant to the main continuant in  $\flat$  E major, the continuous transformation from the dominant to the main continuant in the form of a minor connection keeps the common V-level dominant continuant B flat in the medium part. The alternate use of the fifth and upper octave in a low voice is used here, providing an unstable thrust for the emergence and development of new thoughts in the development department after the presentation department. The

connecting the sections, and the sub-theme is entered from E flat major. Tonal dominant B flat has been alternating back and forth between the inner part and the low part in the form of a monophonic dominant continuant, on the basis of which the secondary theme develops unsteadily.

major chord in E flat major (E-G- B flat) in the bar 98 acts as the mediating chord. The major chord in A flat major (A-C- E flat) in E flat major (A-C- E flat) in the developing part is resolved in E flat major, and the new A-flat major begins a new development with the strength of the main chord FFZ

The prepared reproduction part of the development part, as in Excerpt 10 (bars 152-159), goes back to the major c minor. In the lower part, the dominant G is accompanied by the upper and lower chromatic scale in the upper and lower chords in the form of a single note and a chord, which paves the way for the recurrence of the theme in the recapitulation part and at the same time

strengthens the tone of the dominant part. The solution of the harmonic function from the main part to the

dominant part begins the re-emergence of the main part ("Fig. 10").

Bars 92-98



Fig. 9. Excerpt 9: The first movement of D958.

Bars 152-161



Fig. 10. Excerpt 10: The first movement of D958.

### E. Tonality

Drama is also fully demonstrated in the use of tonality. There are many tonal changes in the content of the secondary part of the exposition part. The secondary theme and the first variation of the theme (bars 40-67) are transferred from E flat major to downward second D flat major and then back to E flat major. In the second variation of the secondary theme, it is transferred to the minor of the same name, E flat minor, and then to the G flat major of the ascending third degree. Finally, it is transferred back to the main chord in e flat major, ending the secondary content. The development part is stated in A flat major, the bar 106 synchronizes the melody and tonality with upper second modulations, and bars 110-113 move into upper third D flat major after three consecutive upper third modulations.

In the tonality transfer of the upper and lower second degree or the continuous upward second degree and then the third degree, the tension created in the second degree is relatively relaxed when the third degree is connected, and then the same melody and texture are molded, thus creating a double dramatic effect.

### III. CONCLUSION

The "Sonata in C Minor", which is one of his last three sonatas, takes their nutrients from classical and romanticism, and combines traditional sonata structures with the creative style of romanticism. It is because of its uniqueness that makes this work a classic of the Schubert piano sonata.

Through the understanding of Schubert's life and the background of his creation, this paper focuses on the analysis of five elements in the content creation.

- In terms of the technique of melody creation, the composer shows the same melody in different textures or in different sound areas, and to connect the beats to melody lines or to switch back and forth between different parts, so as to form a layered and distinct multi-part texture effect. The straight ascending or descending scale gives a strong impetus to the progress of the music;
- Schubert invented a new use of rest, which is not only to indicate a temporary pause or length of pause, but also to divide parts in a musical structure.
- Variation technique is an important writing technique in the development of musical thought, especially in the secondary part. It extends the structure of the secondary part theme with variation twice in a row while forming a contrast with the previous one.
- The main continuant and the dominant continuant are used many times, and in various forms, they play their respective roles under their functions.
- The continuous use of tonality of the second and third degrees in the secondary part and the developing part creates a slight relaxation effect in the tension, which becomes the element of the drama in this work.

Through the analysis of the first movement of piano sonata in c minor, it is found that the dramatic and lyrical emotions in the work blend with each other, and a traditional musical structure is injected into a new creative style in a new period. While inheriting, Schubert made innovations and integrated the characteristics of the art songs he was good at into his piano works. He applied the technique of piano accompaniment in art songs to the creation of sonatas, and the characteristics of melody singing in the vocal part of art songs to the writing of sonatas' theme melody, so that the instrumental works could be as lyrical as vocal works. Schubert played an important role in the inheritance of classicism and the development of romanticism, building a bridge between the two periods and making a great contribution to the piano sonata in the romantic period.

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