

About Some Texture and Harmonic Processes in the Piano Music of Romantic Composers

After the Example of Chopin's Music

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Abstract—This article investigates the relationship between texture and harmony and their influence on the dramaturgic process in the Prelude by Chopin. Relevance of the article is in the study of these processes. Novelty of the article is in the attracting of the detailed analysis of the relationship between texture and harmony.

Keywords—musical texture; harmony; form; dramaturgic process; piano music of the Romantic era

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is a slightly revised part of a forthcoming monograph on the theory and history of musical textures. The material of the book is based on essays and lectures on the polyphonic texture of Professor Skrebkov S.S., delivered a course at the Moscow Conservatory, the Gnessin Institute and other universities for twenty years. This material is also based on a number of elaborations of Professor Skrebkova-Filatova M.S., which is the scientific editor of the book, covering a layer of music from the XIII to the middle of the XX centuries. Some parts of the monograph have been published in various publications. The present article concerns the interaction between musical texture and harmony in the piano music of the XIXth century.

One of the most important and urgent problems of modern musicology is the study of various aspects of music language in their interactions with such categories as genre, musical drama, historical and individual creative style of the great masters of the world musical culture. What figurative and meaningful role musical texture, harmony, forms play and how these relationships affect the artistic conception of the work?

Among the countless areas of study of this problem we will choose one of the spheres of Chamber European music of the XIX century, focused research within the genre of piano miniatures. Why has this aspect been chosen?

In the history of music the XIX century is one of those heights, which is considered to be the greatest artistic standard. Among the huge achievements of this epoch in the field of musical and expressive means texture is at one of

the most important places. In the XIX century there was a powerful and rapid growth of a wide variety of presentation in symphony, opera and in chamber-instrumental and vocal genres. The piano music occupied a special place.

One of the incentives of this growth was the development of such a relatively young instrument as the piano. Along with the remarkable achievements in the field of orchestral music, piano art vividly and in great diversity reveals its artistic possibilities. The role of the musical texture in creating dramaturgic development, style and genre originality of the piano masterpieces is extremely high.

A great piano became the "king" among musical instruments of the XIX century. Beethoven and Schubert, Chopin and Liszt, Schumann, Brahms, Grieg, Debussy and Ravel in Europe, and in Russia — Scriabin, Rachmaninoff and later Prokofiev had created their own individual styles of piano playing. The nature of the performing of outstanding musicians dramatically affected the uniqueness of the piano presentation of their works: the composers found in the sound of the piano previously unknown, infinitely varied, richest in expressiveness and colors artistic possibilities.

Development of textural means in the music compositions for solo instrument went on in different ways and was closely associated with the artistic intentions of the composers, most of which were brilliant pianists and thoroughly acquainted with the nature of the piano.

II. TEXTURAL AND HARMONIC ASPECTS OF CHOPIN'S PRELUDE

In this article we intend to consider the relationship between harmony and texture and their influence on figurative and dramaturgic process after the example of the piano Prelude c sharp-minor op. 45 by Chopin (1841). This small piece is not included in any cycle and occupies an independent place among the other pieces of this genre.

The figurative basis of the miniature is a widespread philosophical and aesthetic conception of Western European romanticism era — the eagerness for "the ideal" and unattainability of this. However, Chopin, the author of many works in the genre of prelude, found in this piece another

unique dramaturgic decision of the romantic conception, the musical foundation of which is texture and harmonic processes occurring in the piece. Prelude c sharp-minor has been chosen for the study of such processes not only because of its high artistic level, but also due to the extremely interesting processes occurring in the interaction of texture and harmony.

Before turning to the specific analysis it is necessary to determine the analytical method itself, which is required for the accomplishing of the task. It requires a detailed examination of many items in both the texture (kind of presentation, movement of the voices, melody character) and harmony (peculiarity of the tonal plan, chords and so on). Only working out in detail it is possible to reveal specific aspects of the complex relationship between different systems of musical language, and ultimately the figurative and meaning uniqueness of the piece.

In this prelude, which has a sad, nostalgic character, the figurative development goes in the complex and multi-stage way. How is the texture of the prelude developing? The figures of undulating, slowly rising decomposed chords, that create and envelop melodic polyphonic formation, dominate throughout the piece (with the exception of the introduction). Such presentation is quite common both for a great number of works for the piano of the Romantic era, in which the creation of lyrical imagery was typical, and for works of Chopin himself (nocturnes, slow parts of large forms, etc.)”Fig. 1”.



Fig. 1.

Along with such type of movement and melody pattern in the piece there appear three small episodes, set out quite differently. The first one is the strict choral-chord introduction: it is the main artistic "thesis" of the whole piece. The second and third episodes contrast in texture not only with each other and with the first "thesis", but also with the main presentation of the prelude. It is these three episodes which become the determinative dramaturgic points of the work in interactions of textural, tonal and harmonic development.

Tonal and harmonic plan in the piece has a number of unusual features. Which of them are there in the first episode (i.e. "thesis")? Chopin uses in it the well-known means, typical for the realization of the elegiac mood and often met in a variety of compositions, especially in the era of romanticism. Such movement of the melody in the piece goes in four sounds of Phrygian combination (c sharp, h, a,

g sharp), the appearance of intonation of the reduced fourth in minor key and lower notes (d-natural, g-natural). Restrained mono-rhythmical downward movement is associated with of gloomy and even funeral procession, and even with the images typical for the passacaglia “Fig. 2”.



Fig. 2.

The intonations of the complete Phrygian combination and Phrygian mode in the introduction pass several stages of development. Tonal plan of the first sentence (c sharp-minor — H-major, h-minor – A-major) outlines Phrygian scale, but not completely, only in the form of three, not four tonal supports. Subsequent variations in keys of D-major and G-major emphasize elements of Phrygian mode and use the lower degrees that were based in the "thesis".

The second sentence begins in the key of f sharp-minor, and the movement of the sounds of Phrygian combination (f sharp, e, d, c sharp) depicts it in the even more reduced form: it is only two keys of f sharp-minor and E-major (e-minor). Instead of the expected passage in the key-note of D-major the interrupted combination arises: B-major sounds, and then after the second interrupted combination G flat-major sounds. This concludes the first part of the prelude.

III. DRAMATURGIC MEANS. “PHRYGIAN MODE”

What makes dramaturgic sense of this section embodied by the tonal and harmonic means? It lies in the fact that a process of gradual "melting" of Phrygian combination is watched. It leads to the first important turning point in the development of the theme: the depth-minor colors of the sharp sphere are replaced by the bright major colors of the flat sphere. This process begins with the sudden, as if "fraudulent", interrupted combinations. Thus, the tonal harmonic means become the cause of the first dramatic sudden change.

The middle part of the Prelude is filled with bright colors almost of all flat keys (B-major, G flat-major, C flat-major, E flat-major, A flat-major, D flat-major, F-major). The bright, literally impressionistic succession of tonal shifts, the delicate palette of joyful moods and dreams contrast to the previous elegiac part of Prelude. However, the key of F-major emerged after the interrupted combination again dramatically changes the course of events in the piece — the preparation for the reprise begins from here.

This preparation, or transition, is the second episode in which the development of the middle section is interrupted. It is not harmony what causes this turning point, as it was on the verge of parts of the piece, but texture, in which sudden changes occur: after the wide-registered polyphony the monophony unexpectedly appears. Instead of richly polyphonic homophonic melodic layer which so long has led cantilena melodious line, only repetitive tunes of

accompanying character are left. The melody has stopped, the resonance becomes quiet.

The melodies insistently repeat themselves and outline the triad F-major: it is a harmony of the IV reduced degree of the main key of c sharp-minor, and its appearance intensifies the modal tendencies of the "thesis" "Fig. 3".

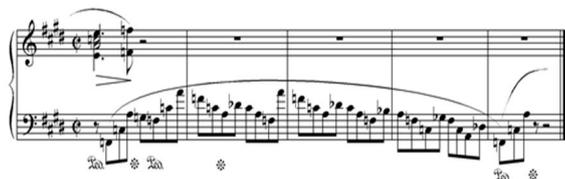


Fig. 3.

The contrast between the colorful sounds of polyphony and suddenly arisen monophony, echoing a theme of the accompaniment, is so great that this creates a psychological effect of a sudden stop after natural flowing movement. The sense of "confusion" might be felt: the imagery of the middle part has been broken. Gradually accumulating waves of polyphony with single sounds in the tune can no longer restore the color of the middle, they only outline the modulation of the original tone of c sharp-minor.

In the beginning of the reprise elegiac character of the music, the type of presentation, the tonal plan of movement on the scale of Phrygian combination has been completely restored. However, this movement is interrupted again, as it has already happened before the second episode. The third, culmination episode, the main dramaturgical part of Prelude is coming. What is the artistic sense of this episode in terms of harmony and texture?

The movement on Phrygian scale covers three mode-harmonic centers (key of c sharp-minor – H-major, h-minor – A-major) and long stays on harmony of dual dominant of the main key with the note "la" in the bass (fifth-sixth chord of DD). This note, the VI degree of the key and the third stage in Phrygian combination, dwells in memory throughout the whole episode, despite the introduction of chromatic virtuosic cadenza.

The long stop at this tone is extremely important in the dramaturgy of the piece. It looks as if the fate of the concept of the whole piece is being settled: whether there will appear the fourth and last element of Phrygian combination – g sharp, which way the further development will go, whether the mournful character of the music, founded in the introduction, will overcome. And how will the relationship between harmony and texture, that defines the artistic sense of the work, be developed?

Chopin, the great composer and musical dramatist, creates effect of expectancy in a culmination zone, making music "balance" on the tone of "la", without giving an answer right away. And only in the end of the third episode, in the most important place of the piece, this fourth tone of Phrygian tetra-chord appears in the bass, and the construction of a complete combination firmly establishes

nostalgic character of imagery. In the code, this character is aggravated by the brief deviation to the key of D-major.

In the tonal-harmonic system of the culmination episode the movement stopped not only within the same key of c sharp-minor, but even on the same harmony of DD, in the texture the abrupt, rapid numerous changes take place. Here both systems - texture and harmony - dramatically change and dramaturgic turning point in Prelude becomes irreversible.

Texture is rapidly changing pattern of the melody. Over just a few bars the brief one-voice phrase of accompanying nature (as in the beginning of the second episode) appears. Further the two-voice accented phrase with pedal (*f*, *ritenuto*) appears against a background of the first one. Then the five-voice chord of DD in arpeggio (with fermata) sounds, and after it there is a pause "Fig. 4". Following this the four-voice chromatic cadenza *a piacere* covers several octaves in undulating way "Fig. 5". Finally the main point comes - in a deep bass the long expected "strike" of the note g sharp can be heard. It is the fourth and last sound of Phrygian combination on the basis of which a cadenza of the forth-sixth chord, marked by the dynamics *f*, is built. The descending one-voice phrase – the most expressive solo of Prelude - leads to a long stop on the triad – the harmony of Dominant seventh chord with the further definition in the code "Fig. 6". This amazing abundance of so many different kinds of figures and textures, outlined the cadenza combination, completes the form of Prelude.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

A small code partially restores homophonic structure of the melody, undulation of the accompaniment and the thawing sounds of the tune. "Farewell" configurations and vertical chords in the end, resembling the statement of the

"thesis" in the beginning of the piece — all these are the final touches in the dramaturgic process of Prelude.

Without sufficient detailed analysis of texture and tonal-harmonic development, as well as the description of interactions between the both systems in Prelude, it would be impossible to disclose the specifics of the artistic conception of this work. The analysis of the smallest elements in the melody of the piece becomes relevant.

IV. SPECIFIC TEXTURE AND HARMONIC LANGUAGE OF PRELUDE

The specific features of Chopin's Prelude are unique and include several aspects. Thus, texture in the main sections of Prelude (exposure, developing, in the beginning of the reprise, in the code) reflects the genre features of nocturnes and practically does not change. It can be insisted that texture of these sections is stable. At the same time the tonal-harmonic development in them is extremely active: more than twenty keys are covered. Harmonic language of Prelude is undoubtedly mobile.

However, the culmination episode in the reprise dramatically alters the balance of power. The tonal development stops for a long time, texture is booming. Harmony becomes stable, texture becomes mobile.

Another aspect specifies the texture development in Prelude. Homophony is the prevailing presentation of the theme. Its melodic layer is filled with supporting voices inside the theme duplicated in octave: these are pedals, delays and so on. Multi-registered accompaniment consists of the decomposed chords, and its undulation becomes the imitations. It is quite individualized and in some way forms polyphonic melody on various themes. Generally the texture of Prelude is a striking example of a polyphonic homophony in the piano music. This type of melody was developed in the XIXth century not only by Chopin, but by many other composers of the Romantic era.

Texture in Chopin's Prelude has a deep dramaturgic value. In the main sections polyphonic homophony connects different types of presentation simultaneously, whereas in the culmination episode the melody is dramatically disrupted, its details replace each other in quick succession. Such features show us the important and final change in the figurative and sense process.

The complex dramaturgic profile of Prelude embodies the idea of moving from the original subject of nostalgic character (the start of the theme, b. 6) to a search of various ways and, as a result — to a breakdown and return to the original melancholic, mournful moods. This way is predetermined already in the introductory "thesis" of Prelude and reflects the concept of circular and cyclical development. Interaction of texture and harmony embodies this concept.

V. CONCLUSION

A detailed study of the interaction between the mode-harmonic and textural processes in the masterpiece by Chopin showed the crucial role of such interaction in the

development of the figurative-dramatic concepts. Misalignment of such development in a variety of genres, styles and musical forms always takes an inimitable look. Realization of the musical-aesthetic idea of unattainability "the ideal", wide-spread in creative work of romantic composers, got a unique interpretation in Chopin's Prelude.

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