

Chopin's Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major (Op. 61): Creative Characteristics and Performance Research

Yao Jiyuan

Sichuan Conservatory of Music, Chengdu Sichuan, 610021;

Abstract: Chopin's Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61 stands as one of the pivotal masterpieces of his later creative period, elevating the composition of the polonaise genre to its zenith. It surpasses all his early polonaises, and none of his subsequent works match its artistic achievement. As a heroic polonaise in the truest sense, it undoubtedly crowns Chopin's polonaise creations. In terms of formal structure, harmonic language, polyphonic texture and musical connotation, this piece perfectly embodies the creative characteristics and stylistic features of Chopin's later works, boasting invaluable research significance.

This paper explores the creative background, artistic characteristics and emotional expression of this work, with a central focus on Chopin's musical expression and his artistic thoughts in his later years as reflected in the piece. The research aims to, on the one hand, enable a deeper understanding of the musical work for more insightful performance through in-depth literature research; on the other hand, further deepen the comprehension of the emotional expression of national fantasy in Chopin's piano works and grasp the key points of its performance on this basis.

Keywords: Chopin; Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major, Op. 61; emotional expression; performance essentials

DOI: 10.64216/3106-4620.26.01.001

1 Creative Characteristics of Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61

1.1 Formal Characteristics

Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61 is a hybrid form that fuses sonata and variation structures. It is based on a compound ternary form, enriched with a wealth of fantasy elements, features multiple themes and undergoes free development. This is the only and also the last polonaise Chopin composed in his later years. While the piece is more imbued with fantasy than the dance elements inherent to the polonaise, the iconic rhythmic pattern of the polonaise dance runs consistently throughout the entire work.^[1] It is also regarded as the most structurally complex polonaise among all of Chopin's works.^[2]

The work adopts a recapitulative compound ternary form with a synthetic middle section, in A-flat major and 3/4 time, and consists of four distinct themes in total.

The introduction (mm.1-23) is in A-flat major, marked *Allegro Maestoso*. It opens with block chords, and the phrases conclude with ascending arpeggiated broken chords, expressing the composer's profound sighs and murmurs from the heart. The tonal progression features a descending sequence—C-flat major → B-flat major → G major → F-flat major → C major → E major—imbued with a strong tragic sentiment, as if the composer is eager to send his longing back to his homeland of Poland.^[5]

The exposition (mm.24-93) unfolds with Theme A (mm.24-43) in A-flat major, a balanced 4+4 structure with free development. The theme is stated twice, followed by improvisatory development that builds to the climax of this section. Theme A1 (mm.44-65) emerges at m.66, forming a binary structure with Theme A; both themes follow the pattern of thematic statement and subsequent free development leading to a minor climax. Theme B (mm.66-93) is also a binary form, developed through the alternating and overlapping of multiple voices from left to right, creating a conversational effect. The iconic polonaise rhythm is continuously interspersed in the right hand, building a tense atmosphere. The tonality shifts to E major at m.80 before returning to the tonic, and then a flowing scale of ascending eighth-note triplets ushers in the serene and gentle Theme A2.

The middle section is a synthetic one, composed of four movements: Movement A (mm.94-115) is a developmental section, where Theme A2 is varied and developed in B-flat major with a steady triplet accompaniment figure in the left hand, yielding a smooth and flowing melody. Movement B (mm.116-147) is a lyrical section, with Theme C developed in B-flat major and a tonal shift to D major at m.132, featuring dramatic emotional fluctuations. Movement C (mm.148-180) is introduced by a five-measure transition, with Theme D appearing in B major, marked *Piu Lento*. This theme incorporates biblical motifs, presenting an overall tranquil and peaceful mood with a smooth melody, yet interspersed with numerous subtle and pronounced fluctuations that reveal the composer's inner calm tinged with unease. Movement D (mm.181-213) is in G-sharp minor, with Theme E—the most fantastical slow section of the entire work. It has an ambiguous structure and intense emotional swells, laying bare the truest, most vulnerable and repressed side of Chopin's heart, depicting a process of his repeated inner struggle.

The recapitulation (mm.214-267) opens with a restatement of the introductory melody from the beginning of the piece, serving as a bridge to the recapitulation. This is followed by Theme E1 (mm.216-225) in F minor, still steeped in sorrow. A brilliant cadenza-like bridge (mm.226-241) based on sixteenth-note sextuplets with frequent modulations builds to a climax at m.242, where Theme A3 reemerges (mm.242-253) in the tonic A-flat major. This section is resplendent with dense harmonic changes, evoking the sound of a revolutionary bugle call. Theme D1 then reappears (mm.254-267), with the left hand shifting to a flowing bass melodic texture, creating an impassioned mood that culminates in the overall climax of the work.

The coda (mm.268-288) is firmly rooted in A-flat major, propelled by a persistent dotted rhythm. The music gradually slows and diminishes in dynamics. After a prolonged journey of emotional turmoil, the piece lingers in profound reflection, and finally concludes with a

glorious tonic triad.

1.2 Melodic Characteristics

As a late work of Chopin, <Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61> features a complex and diverse structure with an equally intricate melodic line. Its lyrical and singing melody is a stroke of genius in Chopin's polonaise works, and also a major challenge for performers in their understanding and interpretation of the piece. The melody is delicate and flowing, striking a chord deep in the listener's heart, as if engaging in a face-to-face conversation with Chopin himself.^[3]

The melodic expression in the work is both horizontal and vertical: horizontally, the musical phrases clearly convey a sense of undulation and articulation, brimming with a vocal quality; vertically, the harmonies — within the multi-voice texture — enrich the harmonic effect, shaping the musical image, expressing emotions, and heightening the main melody to evoke a stronger resonance in the listener. For example, the four-voice section starting at m.66 features scales in the right and left hands that alternate and interact like a dialogue, with staccato notes and sustained tones of the iconic polonaise rhythm in the inner voice of the right hand. Thus, in performance, performers must clearly delineate the voice layers, maintaining the clarity and independence of the melodic voice and distinguishing it from the inner voices. Each voice must be rendered with a distinct timbre and clear directional flow, without any blurring or blending between voices.^{[4][5]}



1.3 Technical Characteristics

Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61 comprises a variety of distinct themes, which incorporate a wealth of finger techniques commonly found in etudes — including octaves, arpeggios, leaps, flowing double notes, trills, scalar passages, rhythmic displacement, and asymmetrical note groupings (many against few). When practicing this work, performers must prioritize the singing quality of the melody. With its numerous melodious and lyrical sections brimming with fantasy, the piece requires performers to delve into the innermost and most genuine part of Chopin's heart, expressing his silence, murmurs and other emotions through the undulating musical phrases.

2 Performance Research on Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61

2.1 Overall Timbre Control in the Work

2.1.1 Emotional Expression and Performance Essentials of Lyrical Timbre

Chopin's melodies are essentially vocal, and their lyrical singing quality holds a pivotal position. It is these lyrical and touching melodies that have deeply moved the world and forged Chopin's unique musical language. Chopin was a great admirer of Italian bel canto singing of his time, and he required his students to frequently attend performances by leading vocalists, learning how to use their voices with poise, master the breathing and phrasing of musical lines, and thus cultivate a refined sense of musical singing. Chopin regarded the bel canto style as a model for the proper articulation and full tone production on the piano. Vocal art exerted a profound influence on Chopin; he believed that the lyricism of contemporary Italian opera was in perfect harmony with the style of his piano art, and even required his students to take vocal lessons before studying the piano. When playing a singing melody, performers must "sing with their fingers".^[6]



Figure 7 presents the melodic line of Theme A, which is divided into three layers: the upper melodic line, the polonaise dance rhythm accompaniment in the middle voice, and the interval progression in the lower voice. These three layers must be differentiated in touch to achieve a clear expression:

First, the melodic voice must be rendered with a full singing quality. As the upper voice consists of single notes, the performer should use a deeper key touch with a larger contact area, flatten the fingers slightly, and employ weight transfer to guide the finger strength naturally to the next note. Each note must be played deeply and completely, as if pressing to the bottom of the key, allowing the sound to carry far. The wrist should be flexible and free to drive the fingertips in producing a coherent and flowing sound. For wide note spans, the performer should adjust the movement range of the fingers and wrist according to the distance between notes, maintaining a smooth lateral motion. The tempo of the melody may be handled with slight rubato, just as a vocalist sings with heartfelt freedom. In legato playing, the notes should not only be connected but also sustained on the keys; the performer should use the natural weight of the fingers on the keys to produce a variety of timbres.

Second, the dance rhythm in the middle voice must maintain precise note values. Staccato playing should resemble the pizzicato on a string instrument, striking the keys crisply and briefly without any lingering sound. The touch should use a small contact area with a fast and powerful force; the fingertips should grip the keys firmly, with an explosive touch, providing a steady rhythmic foundation for the main melody.

Third, the interval progression in the lower voice also requires a deep touch, with a slight emphasis on the lowest melodic notes in the left hand to echo the upper melodic line in the right hand. The tempo must be steady and deliberate, and weight playing should be used to ensure a firm key stroke for each interval. The performer must control the dynamics to avoid overpowering the main melody, while ensuring that each harmonic change is clearly audible, and create dynamic variations between repeated chords.^[6] The bass melodic line should be delineated to complement the soprano melody in the right hand.^[7]

2.1.2 Emotional Expression and Performance Essentials of Fast, Powerful and Flowing Figurations

Chopin is a great Romantic composer, yet a more nuanced analysis reveals that his musical education and creative development coincided with the transition from the Classical to the Romantic period in music. This transitional era gave rise to a body of musical works characterized by the "brilliant style".

Polish musicologists argue that the proponents of the brilliant style broke the constraints of traditional forms through their superb technical mastery and sentimental expression, creating music that departed drastically from Classical models. Unprecedented virtuosic techniques were incorporated into sonatas, variations, expanded rondo forms, dances and fantasies, transforming the very material of musical composition. The simple, crystal-clear textures, concise themes and distinctive rhythmic vitality of the Classical style were superseded by rich and varied structures and brilliant, ornate figurations. Rhythms became more elaborate and nuanced, and composers began to employ complex metric patterns. Beyond innovations in texture and rhythm, the brilliant style also introduced new expressive possibilities, featuring freer, more colorful and sparkling wit. Audiences began to appreciate increasingly contrasting musical ideas — dazzling flourishes often juxtaposed with sudden, quiet, lyrical singing.

On the first two notes of each beat in every measure, the 4th and 5th fingers must be firmly placed, supported by the arm and spine, with a stable knuckle joint for a strong and decisive key stroke; these notes may be slightly lengthened, with the following two notes played a little faster to compensate, further emphasizing the emotional pathos and indignation. In playing this section, performers must not rush through the sixteenth notes due to the fast and dense tempo; every note must be clearly audible, like forceful and distinct words.

2.2 Key Points of Special Performance Techniques

2.2.1 Passages and Ornamentation

Short, exquisitely crafted passing passages, which are often mere fleeting embellishments with little expressive significance in the works of other composers, frequently become climactic moments in Chopin's music—all musical ideas flow toward them and revolve around them. Performers must not play these passages vaguely or carelessly; every small group of ornaments, appoggiaturas, trills (tr) and other figures should be played with a playful grace, captivating the listener and binding them to the music, while remaining technically precise and flawless. As contemporaries of Chopin remarked, the performer should touch the keys with "velvet-soft fingers" and a wonderful sense of freedom, evoking quiet admiration or barely contained applause from the audience.

In Classical works, ornamentation typically begins on the beat, coinciding with the playing of the other hand. In Chopin's works, however, with the exception of a few pieces written in the Classical style (e.g., the trills in the middle section of the Fantaisie-Impromptu, which should be played in unison with the left hand), ornamentation generally takes time from the preceding beat; otherwise, the sustained mood of the work will be disrupted. Chopin particularly advised his students to learn from eminent Italian vocal masters when playing ornamentation, once again affirming that the delicate ornamental passing passages in his works are an organic part of the unified and complete melody.

2.2.2 Legato and Cantabile Playing

Chopin employed a variety of touch techniques, but he attached the greatest importance to a refined legato and cantabile playing style. Chopin referred to piano playing that failed to connect two notes or produced an overly forceful sound as "barking like a dog". To help students master a gentle touch and legato playing, he had them practice his nocturnes, demonstrating how to play the melodies with fluency, softness and a singing quality.

Today's pianos have undergone significant structural improvements; a forte (f) sound on a modern piano is no longer as harsh and shrill

as it was in Chopin's time. Thus, performers may appropriately adapt their techniques, but there is still no need for overly forceful or reckless playing. Instead, they should fill the dynamic range from pianissimo (pp) to fortissimo (ff) with countless subtle gradations of volume, avoiding affectation in soft playing and heavy-handed key bashing in loud playing that offends the discerning ear.

2.2.3 Rubato

Rubato (Tempo Rubato) is a defining element of Chopin's piano style; without it, his music would lose its unique charm and emotional impact. Of course, excessive use of this device can make the music overly sentimental and even completely distort its original meaning.

It is clear, therefore, that rubato in Chopin's works is not an abrupt change in tempo; the rhythmic framework and relative note values must remain intact. There are naturally places in the musical language that call for a slight acceleration or deceleration, and rubato merely accentuates these moments, heightening the shading of sound and clarifying the distinction between note values. This breathes life into the musical image while always remaining consistent with the musical logic, guided by the intensification or relaxation of the melodic line, harmonic details, textural structure and other elements. A masterful performance of rubato thus requires a natural musical instinct and genuine artistic talent, from which a natural and heartfelt beauty of expression emerges.

3 Conclusion

<Fantasy Polonaise in A-flat Major Op. 61> is an important classic masterpiece left by Chopin in his later years. Endowed with profound national, historical and transcendental connotations, combined with Chopin's superb compositional techniques, the work occupies a special place in the history of Western music. Chopin's intense grief over his homeland's fate, fearless heroism, nostalgia for Poland's former glory and longing for freedom are all deeply embedded in its musical language.

From a performance perspective, while the work does not feature the overly flamboyant techniques of Chopin's earlier works, it still incorporates numerous exquisite technical elements that require constant reflection and refinement from performers. The difficulty of this piece lies not only in its technical demands but more importantly in its spiritual connotation. It requires performers to engage in extensive reading and develop a thorough understanding of Chopin's later musical works and the stylistic characteristics of his era; a superficial understanding of the score is insufficient. As both a researcher and a performer, the author hopes that this study will enable a more accurate and detailed grasp of the work's musical connotation and a more insightful interpretation of the piece, and further explore the rich emotional expression embodied in this masterpiece through this research.

References

- [1] A. Soloptev. Chopin's Creations [M]. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1960.
- [2] Liang Quanbing, Yao Manhua, Liang Di (eds.). Chopin and Polish Musicians [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 2016.
- [3] Liu Xuefeng. The Secret Chopin [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2012.
- [4] Bi Kun. The Revelation of the "Truth" in Musical Works: A Review of The Tragic Chopin: An Interpretation of the Tragic Connotation in Chopin's Music [J]. Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, 2010(01).
- [5] Yu Runyang. The Tragic Chopin [J]. Piano Artistry, 2010(03).
- [6] HuangZhong. On the Development of Piano Touch Techniques [J]. Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music, 2005(01).
- [7] He Kuanzhao. A Cultural and Aesthetic Interpretation of Romantic Harmony [J]. Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music, 2011(01).
- [8] Bernard Gavoty. Chopin: A Biography [M]. Shanghai: People's Publishing House, 2012.
- [9] Tad Szulc. Chopin in Paris: The Life and Times of the Romantic Composer[M]. Beijing: New Star Press, 2006

Biography: Jiyuan Yao (born September 25, 2000) is a female of Han ethnicity from Xiamen, Fujian Province, China. She is a master's degree graduate student specializing in Music Education at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music.