

# What are the essential features of chopin's style

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The two Nocturnes which form Opus 62, written three years before Chopin's death in 1846, were described by Kleczynski as 'evidence of an enfeebled creative power.'<sup>1</sup> This essay will highlight and explain Chopin's essential stylistic features, aim to discover if they are still prevalent in this work and then decide whether the opinion of Kleczynski is valid or not.

One of the most essential features of Chopin's style was 'freedom of melodic line' and this can clearly be seen in both Nocturnes. <sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows the first bar of the second Nocturne's opening theme and how it is varied on its two returns. Chopin's conception of rubato was to 'release the melodic part from all metrical features' and to give his melodies the 'perfect freedom of inflection found in singing.'<sup>3</sup> The melody feels "released" and sings out over the metrical left hand which remains the same in each variation. This certainly doesn't sound enfeebled and the melody although initially simple is enjoyable to listen to. If Chopin were enfeebled then it is doubtful that he would have been conscious to keep 'exact repetition to a minimum' in each return of the melody. <sup>4</sup>

Fig. 1 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 2 Bars 1, 9 and 25

In the first Nocturne of the work the original theme returns with what Fielden calls 'perennial trills' and these do give the music a certain urgency as seen in figure 2 but the listener also feels as if the piano is crying out. <sup>5</sup> In contrast to Kleczynski's view Samson writes: 'because of the earlier simplicity of presentation, this reprise emerges as one of the supreme achievements of Chopin's ornamental melody.'<sup>6</sup> For some listeners,

however, these trills may seem a little overdone and unimaginative and even justify Kleczynski's opinion that Chopin's creativity was lacking at this point.

Fig. 2 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 1 Bars 69 - 71

Despite the possible differences of opinion regarding the melody shown above Chopin's characteristic transplantation of bel canto into his piano writing is apparent in both Nocturnes that form Opus 62. 7 Bel canto is defined as 'a style of singing characterised by beauty of tone rather than dramatic power.'<sup>8</sup> Chopin's melody in figures 1 and 2 isn't dramatic but certainly has beauty. The melodic decoration is described by Eigeldinger as 'small groups of added grace notes, falling like tiny drops of speckled dew over the melodic figure.'<sup>9</sup> This description fits the sound of the music beautifully and can be seen in b. 25 of figure 1 and b. 71 of figure 2. In contrast to Kleczynski's statement, Hedley considers this Nocturne 'remarkable for the profusion of Chopinesque ornamentation... the non plus ultra of pianistic filigree work' - hardly the result of enfeebled creative power.<sup>10</sup>

Despite a characteristic bel canto and his 'abhorrence of massive effects' in his melodies Chopin does insert occasional dramatic moments into his Nocturnes such as the example shown in Figure 3<sup>11</sup>. After the 'strangely haunting passage' of bars 21 to 25, b. 26 comes as something of a surprise.<sup>12</sup> The sudden dynamic change to fortissimo (very loud), a sudden heightening of pitch and the rapid, almost glissando, effect only serve to heighten the emotion in the piece and certainly do not sound in any way enfeebled.

## Fig. 3 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 1 Bars 23 - 26

Chopin uses appoggiaturas (another of the essential features of his style) for dramatic effect in the second Nocturne of Opus 62. Appoggiaturas are notes on a strong beat which create a dissonance and then resolve by step. 13 Figure 4 shows a gradual crescendo coupled with repeated use of appoggiaturas on the first beat of each bar (the strongest) which creates great tension through the dissonance and serves to heighten the emotion meaning the sudden 'dramatic ornamental flourish' at b. 23 doesn't sound out of place. 14 The tension is then peacefully released as another appoggiatura leads back to the original melody at b. 25 (shown in figure 1).

## Fig. 4 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 2 Bars 20 - 24

Chopin also used chromaticism to great effect and it is prevalent in both the Nocturnes of Opus 62. Figure 5 shows a highly chromatic passage which in contrast to Kleczynski's opinion of enfeebled creativity is described in one analysis as having 'harmonic interest.'<sup>15</sup> Hedley says that this passage is 'a new way of returning to the tonic' and Berkeley describes it as 'typical of Chopin's later manner ... an individuality of harmony ... much more chromatic than his earlier music' both of which contradict the opinion that Chopin's composition was lacking at this point. 16 17 This section starts giving the feeling of a slide back to the tonic but with some interesting turns along the way where the listener cannot quite be sure of the direction the piece is taking and a certain feeling of unease is created. When the tonic is reached at b. 81 the listener can feel fulfilled and go on to enjoy the coda.

## Fig. 5 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 no. 1 Bars 76 - 81

Another aspect of chromaticism used in the first Nocturne of Opus 62 is the use of enharmonic slippage. Enharmonic notes are notes which are the same pitch but notated on the staff as accidentals of different notes and the slippage means that the music uses this enharmonic note as the basis for a modulation. Figure 6 shows two examples of this: the D# becomes Eb (the dominant in the new key of Ab major) in the first example and in the second the reverse happens. In the first example the two notes are tied and in the second they continue uninterrupted due to the use of the trill. Not only does this make the transition to and from the contrasting middle section almost seamless but by using the device at the beginning and end of the section Chopin telegraphs the return to the opening (but varied) melody which continues as shown in figure 2. This is again creative of Chopin and further disproves Kleczynski's opinion of him as enfeebled at this time.

## Fig. 6 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 1 Bars 36-7 and 67-8

The second of the Opus 62 Nocturnes also has a contrasting middle section shown in figure 7. As well as using Chopin's characteristic chromaticism (the chromatic passage in contrary motion in the last two beats of bar 48) the section also embodies another of Chopin's essential stylistic features which is his use of counterpoint. Counterpoint is the use of multiple parts with independent rhythms. Chopin uses it in figure 7 to further add to the agitation of this middle section and build up tension before the return to the original melody.

## Fig. 7 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 2 Bars 48 - 51

Chopin also uses polyphony in the first nocturne as shown in figure 8 and it is used as a method of variation. Berkeley writes: 'the original melody continues underneath a new figure that gives fresh impetus to the music.'<sup>19</sup> The listener feels briefly uplifted compared to the more melancholy sound of the opening section and what follows.

## Fig. 8 F. Chopin Nocturne Op. 62 No. 1 Bars 11 - 14

Chopin's essential stylistic features can be summarised as freedom of melodic line and a bel canto style, much use of ornamentation and appoggiaturas, and use of chromaticism and counterpoint. The two Nocturnes which form Opus 62 have all of these features in them as this essay has cited. For Kleczynski to write that Chopin had " enfeebled creative power" at the time of writing these pieces seems ludicrous. He is not alone in his opinions; however, as Neicks claims that they reflect the composer's poor state of health which again, after the analysis of this essay and upon listening to the pieces seems fatuous. <sup>20</sup>

Samson contradicts the statements of Kleczynski and Neicks completely by writing of Opus 62 'these pieces ... represent the pinnacle of Chopin's achievement.'<sup>21</sup> He not only earmarks Chopin as unique but also compares him to other great composers of the time saying that in his own way Chopin has approached the "' developing variation" of Brahms and Schoenberg and the " dissonant counterpoint" of Mahler' and yet these pieces are also typical

of Chopin's 'highly individual stylistic world.'<sup>22</sup> This essay shows that on the whole Kleczynski's opinion of enfeebled creative power is not valid.

It is sad to think that these beautiful pieces, so full of Chopin's essential stylistic features, may have been forgotten had everyone believed Kleczynski or took the advice of Neicks when he said that the Nocturnes of Opus 62 were 'not worth dwelling upon.'<sup>23</sup>