Zeitschrift: Publikationen der Schweizerischen Musikforschenden Gesellschaft. Serie 2 = Publications de la Société Suisse de Musicologie. Série 2

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Musikforschende Gesellschaft

Band: 45 (2006)

Artikel: Chopin in transition

Autor: Rink, John

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858779

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 09.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

JOHN RINK

Chopin in Transition

Transition in Chopin

This essay, like much of the work that inspired it, broaches three key issues[1] : how composers conceive their music ; how performers create it anew ; and how music proceeds in sound – from moment to moment, from beginning to end. One lesson to be drawn from the history of interpretation is that debates about these matters will never be exhausted, nor those about the meaning of music, which can be heard in infinitely different ways. An awareness of provisionality and a commitment to conjecture rather than the determination of fact remain as important for the musicologist as they do for the musician, even as they seek their elusive ideals in quite different ways.

In that light the uncompromising sense of conviction conveyed by certain authors – among them the theorist Heinrich Schenker – seems remarkable and worthy of attention. For instance in his 1926 essay « On Organicism in Sonata Form » Schenker makes the following arresting claims :

- « only creativity based on improvisation can vouchsafe the unity of the compositional process » ;
- « *the whole [form] must be created by improvisation*, if it is not to be a mere assemblage of individual parts and motives in accordance with a set of rules » ;

1 One of the main inspirations behind this essay is of course the research of Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. It also draws upon my own previous work, having originally been conceived as my Professorial Inaugural Lecture (in fact, a lecture-recital) on 6 March 2003 at Royal Holloway, University of London, at which Professor Eigeldinger was present. On that occasion I performed the various music examples throughout the chapter, including the sketch transcriptions reproduced in Example 9. This essay is offered in gratitude to Professor Eigeldinger not only for his presence at that lecture but also for all of his invaluable contributions and support over the years.

– « unity cannot be explained except by the miracle of improvisation, which makes the whole into a single shape ! »[2]

The ostensible derivation of compositional unity from « improvisatory impulse » seems a contradiction in terms, even if one understands Schenker's notion of improvisation « not as composition on the spur of the moment, but rather in the sense of a piece being created according to internalized principles of musical structure as opposed to a series of ‹ rules › », as one author has argued[3]. Though insightful, that explanation fails to account for Schenker's earlier claim that the works of the great masters are not « pieced together but rather, in the manner of the free fantasy, sketched out spontaneously and brought up from a concealed *Urgrund* »[4]. Schenker's last treatise – *Der freie Satz* from 1935 – similarly posits that « in very extended works, only the greatest composers have been able to envision the form as a totality », and that improvisation strengthened the « memory » of these masters in that regard[5]. The accent once again is on the moment of a holistic conception, in support of which Schenker cites C. P. E. Bach (« One must have a vision of the whole piece » – a comment, incidentally, referring not to composition but to extemporaneous variation in performance), Beethoven (« in my instrumental music I always have the whole before my eyes ») and Brahms (« More from the whole ! »), as well as a statement attributed to Mozart[6].

One wonders what Chopin, if asked, might have said about the conception of his music and the extent to which he envisioned it as a totality. There is little trace of his innermost thoughts on the subject, given his reluctance and perhaps inability to express them, and his intensely private, circumscribed world view[7]. The most revealing accounts

2 Heinrich Schenker, « On Organicism in Sonata Form », *The Masterwork in Music : A Yearbook : Volume 2 (1926)*, trans. and ed. W. Drabkin (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, [1926] 1996), pp. 23, 27 (italics in original).

3 William Drabkin, in *ibid.*, p. 23 n. 2.

4 Heinrich Schenker, « The Art of Improvisation », *The Masterwork in Music : A Yearbook : Volume 1 (1925)*, ed. W. Drabkin, trans. R. Kramer (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, [1925] 1994), p. 19.

5 Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition (Der freie Satz)*, trans. and ed. Ernst Oster (New York and London : Longman, [1935] 1979), p. 128.

6 Quoted from *ibid.*, pp. 128-129. Regarding C. P. E. Bach's statement see « Vom Vortrage », *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu Spielen*, 2 vols. (Berlin : C. P. E. Bach, 1753), Erster Teil, §31, p. 133.

7 See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, « Placing Chopin : Reflections on a Compositional Aesthetic », *Chopin Studies 2*, ed. J. Rink and J. Samson (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 139.

come from those around him – especially his companion George Sand, who wrote that Chopin's « creation was spontaneous and miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without forseeing it. It came on his piano suddenly, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to play it to himself »[8]. This passage and others reveal that Chopin's compositions took shape at the piano, the music typically being worked out under his fingers before he put pen to paper. Lengthy sketches from late in his career do survive[9], however, and these and the manifold sketch fragments from earlier compositions offer a notational legacy of ideas in passing. But what seems to have guided Chopin in composing at the keyboard was a sense, if not a conscious awareness, of form and other organisational properties to which he would notionally refer while creating the music[10]. Such a process would have been mastered during his apprenticeship in 1820s Warsaw under the tutelage of Józef Elsner, who instilled in his brilliant pupil a command of classical (Mozartian) form and phraseology, and who fostered or at least oversaw his assimilation of post-classical keyboard virtuosity, Polish folk traditions and operatic idioms, as well as the legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach[11].

Very little of the Warsaw-period repertoire is played by today's pianists, and comparison with Chopin's later masterpieces reveals why. But whatever its weaknesses one cannot deny its often astonishing originality and appeal. The Rondo in C minor was one of Chopin's first commercial publications, brought out in Warsaw in 1825 though designated « Op. 1 » only when published in Paris, Leipzig and London in 1836, long after he had established himself as a composer of significance[12]. It consists of independent themes joined by transitional sections, whose contrived nature led Józef Chomiński to speculate that Chopin composed them after first

8 George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*. In *Œuvres autobiographiques*, ed. G. Lubin, 2 vols (Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971), vol. ii, p. 446.

9 Abundant sketch material exists for the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* op. 61 (discussed later) and the Cello Sonata op. 65 (see Ferdinand Gajewski, « The Worksheets to Chopin's Violoncello Sonata » [PhD diss., Harvard University, 1980]).

10 See Jim Samson, « The Composition-Draft of the Polonaise-Fantasy », *Chopin Studies*, ed. J. Samson (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 58. See also John Rink, « The Evolution of Chopin's ‹ Structural Style › and its Relation to Improvisation » (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1989) and John Rink, « Tonal Architecture in the Early Music », *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, ed. J. Samson (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 78-97 and 305-308.

11 For discussion see Rink, « The Evolution of Chopin's ‹ Structural Style › ».

12 See Christophe Grabowski and John Rink, *Annotated Catalogue of Chopin's First Editions* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2007).

working out the main themes[13]. Such an assessment challenges any attempt to view Chopin's early works as compositionally « unified » in the Schenkerian sense : indeed, op. 1 can readily be seen (paraphrasing Schenker) as an « assemblage of individual parts and motives » modelled on a rondo-form paradigm. Efforts to demonstrate unity in this music may be as misguided as futile – yet there is merit in focusing on the music's unique features as opposed to their largely formulaic disposition.

Not only is it worth questioning the musical viability of schemata such as « rondo form » which mask idiosyncratic manifestations of musical ideas, but certain descriptive terms like « transition », as in « transition section », also warrant reconsideration. Countless examples could be adduced from the literature where seminal passages are labelled at face value instead of being uniquely appreciated in context. Rarely adequate in itself, the term « transition » potentially confers inferior status on material of possible significance within the musical argument, thus thwarting deeper understanding of its role both within the piece and in broader contexts[14]. Superficial classification of this sort is particularly inappropriate in Chopin's case, for the so-called « transition section » increasingly became assimilated within and essential to his mature compositions just as his transitions in the more general sense – that is, the progression from idea to idea – gained the sense of freedom and spontaneity acclaimed by Schenker as deriving from « improvisatory impulse », irrespective of the music's actual genesis. The survey that follows will demonstrate these developments by tracing the transition of transition from op. 1 to op. 64.

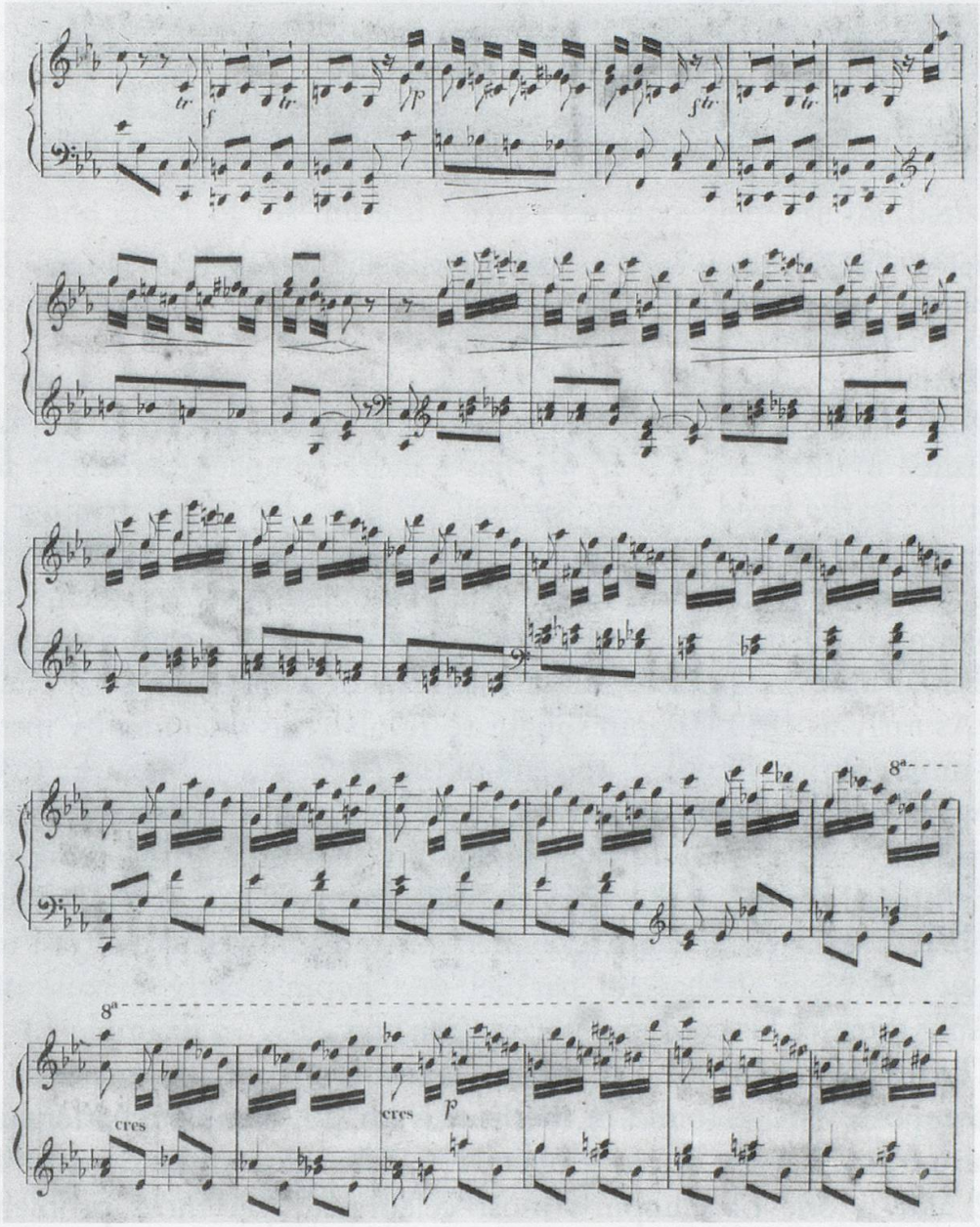
Now the transition sections in the C minor Rondo are precisely that, and Chomiński's judgement gains credibility upon examining even a brief excerpt. The first eighty bars contain an introduction, a first theme and a transition section modulating from C minor to a second theme in E major. Based on two simple patterns developed in succession, the transition (bars 29-65 – see Example 1)[15] culminates in a final burst of activity

13 Józef Chomiński, *Fryderyk Chopin*, trans. B. Schweinitz (Leipzig : VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1984, 2nd ed.), p. 42.

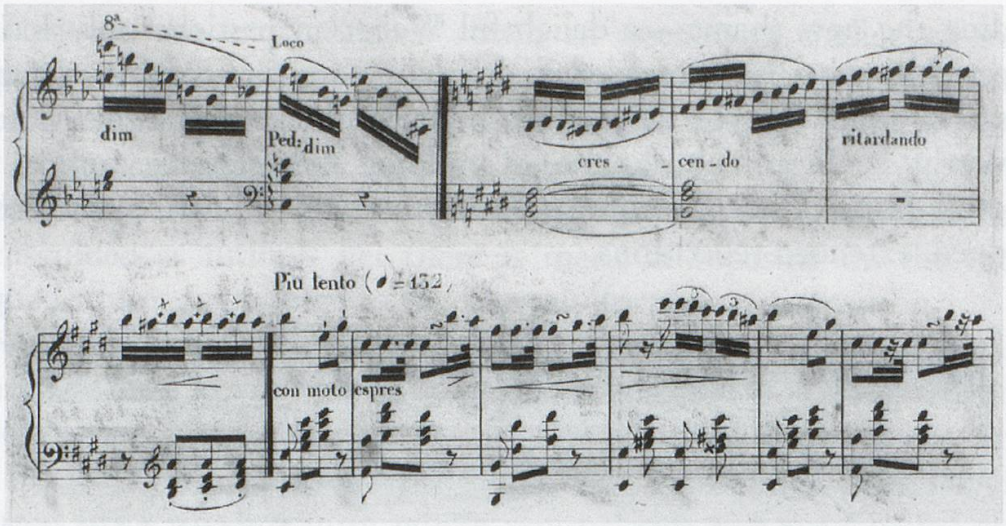
14 The *New Grove Dictionary* defines a transition as « any passage in a piece or movement which, rather than having a particular thematic identity of its own, seems to lead from one well-defined section to another [...] [The term] is usually applied to passages in which a modulation from one key to another is systematically worked out [...] » James Webster, TRANSITION, *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (accessed 4 August 2004 ; ‹ http://www.grovemusic.com ›).

15 Examples 1-8, 11b and 11c, and 12-13 are taken from the Chopin Early Editions website ‹ http://chopin.lib.uchicago.edu ›, a resource of the University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center. I am grateful to the University of

heralding the new theme – a delightful Weberian pastiche only loosely connected to what has preceded it. Its deliberate, self-conscious quality serves as a useful foil for the rest of the examples in this essay ; equally noteworthy is Chopin's technique of building and releasing musical tension even from rather humble musical materials, in part by means of developed, extended repetitions.



Chicago Library for granting permission to reproduce these images here. The codes given in the captions to these examples – e.g. « 1–1-Sm » in Example 1 – are drawn from Grabowski and Rink, *Annotated Catalogue*, where a full explanation of their meaning is provided. (In the case of « 1–1-Sm », the first number indicates op. 1 ; the second, the first impression of the first edition ; and « Sm » the publisher Maurice Schlesinger).



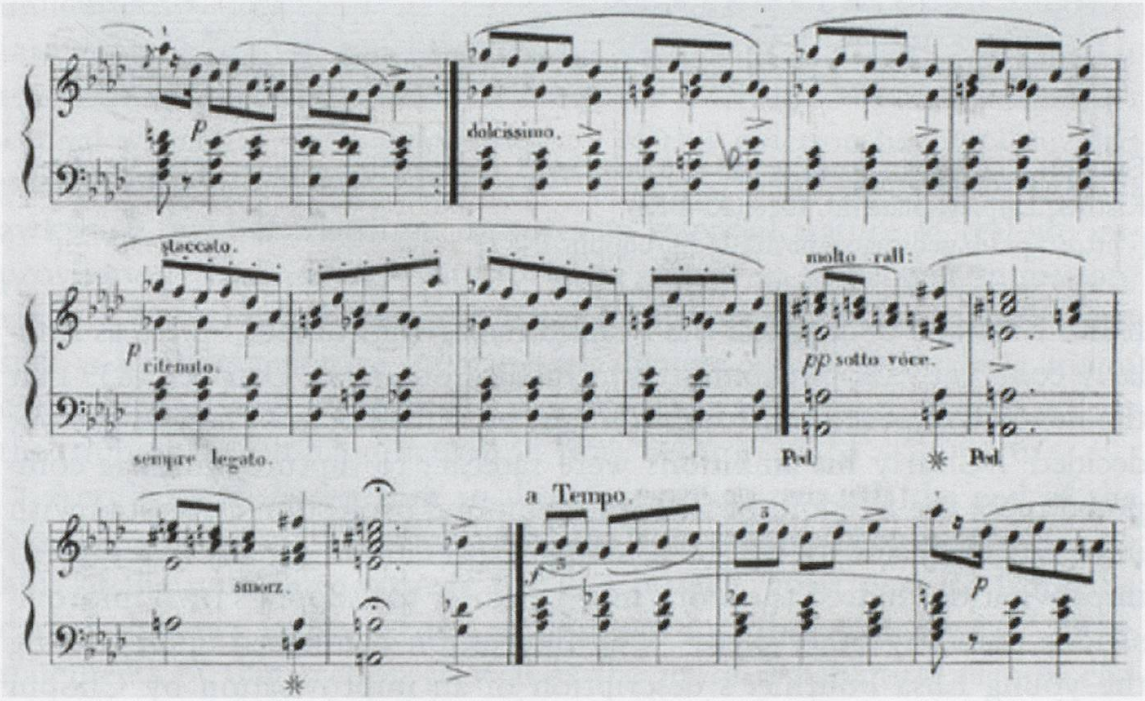
Example 1 : Chopin, Rondo op. 1, bars 28-70. French first edition, 1836 : Maurice Schlesinger, Paris, plate no. M. S. 1986 (1-1-Sm)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/122 ›]

A work from some five years later – the Mazurka in A-flat major, published in 1832 as op. 7 n° 4 – has a more compact, three-part form. Chopin clearly faced a compositional problem here and in other contemporary pieces inspired by the dance : namely, the manifold repetitions dictated by the form resulted in the opening section being heard verbatim up to six times, and other sections as many as four times. The result was both predictable and, at the level of form, somewhat stultefying. As early as 1830 Chopin sought to resolve this dilemma by introducing minor variants towards the end of the A-flat major Mazurka to close off what might otherwise have seemed yet another repeat within the formal succession[16]. Of further interest is the innovative, expressively subtle transition from the Trio to the return of the opening section, which at once offers a seamless connection and a powerful contrast to the rest of the piece. It has no parallel in Chopin's early mazurkas and possibly those of his contemporaries. (See bars 29-37 in Example 2.)

The greatest evidence of Chopin's transition from apprentice to master composer can be found in the Etudes op. 10, completed after his departure from Warsaw in November 1830. The third in the set dates from 1832 and is one of Chopin's most celebrated, yet most problematic

16 For discussion see Rink, « Tonal Architecture », p. 90. See also Jeffrey Kallberg, « The Problem of Repetition and Return in Chopin's Mazurkas », *Chopin Studies*, ed. J. Samson, pp. 1-23.

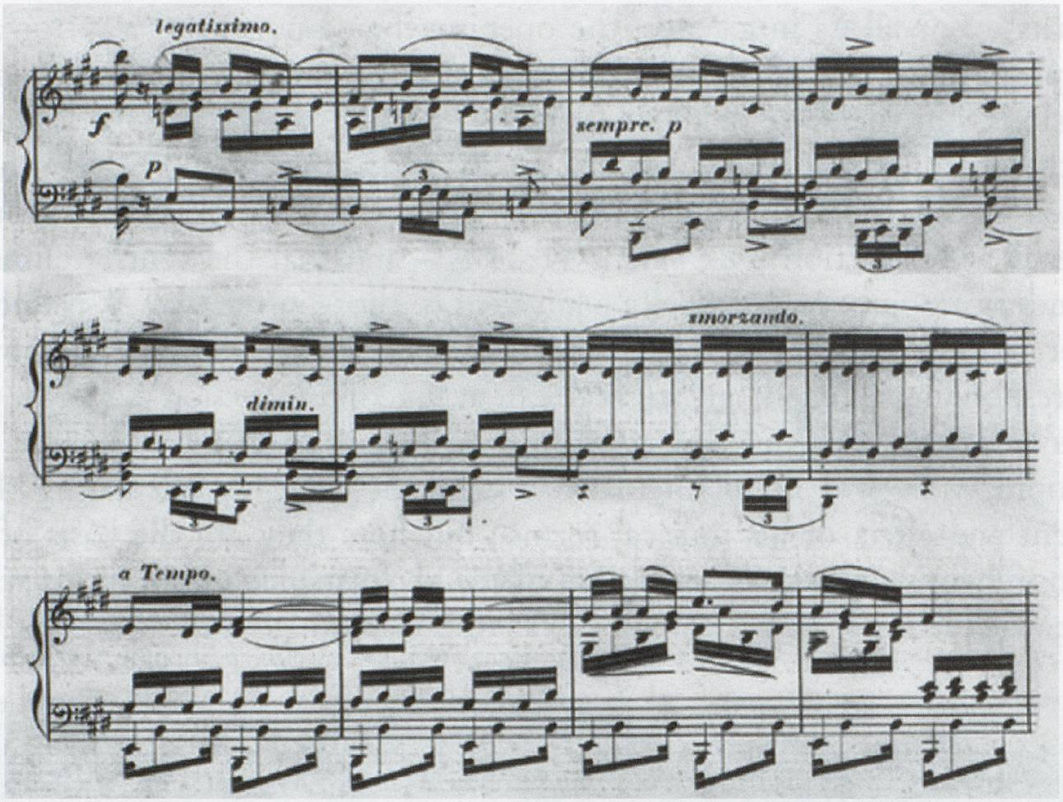
works[17]. For all its innocence, the opening theme paves the way for an eruption in the middle which seems almost uncontainable, so great are its tensions, but these are gradually defused in a transitional passage leading to the opening theme's return in bar 62 (see Example 3). Jim Samson has observed that the second section of the ABA form is exactly twice as long as each outer section – 82 versus 41 beats – and that the central climax comes at a point proportionally equivalent to those in the two A sections, after 66 beats versus 33, with the transitional passage referred to above corresponding in length and to some extent function to section A's last four bars[18]. These intriguing relationships are not altogether typical of Chopin, who was no mathematician when it came to calculating the extent and effect of his musical forms ; but here they are the basis of a comprehensive musical conception whose performance implications will be gauged later.



Example 2 : Chopin, Mazurka op. 7 n° 4, bars 23-39. French first edition, 1833 : Maurice Schlesinger, Paris, plate no. M. S. 1342 (7–1-Sm)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/174 ›]

17 See the extended discussion of this piece in John Rink, « Analyzing Rhythmic Shape in Chopin's ‹ E major Etude › », *Analytical Perspectives on the Music of Chopin*, ed. A. Szklener (Warsaw : Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2003), pp. 125-138.

18 Jim Samson, *The Music of Chopin* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 65.



Example 3 : Chopin, Etude op. 10 n° 3, bars 54-65. German first edition, 1833 : Friedrich Kistner, Leipzig, plate no. 1018 (10–1-KI)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/047 ›]

It is difficult to understand the F-sharp major Impromptu op. 36 as similarly coherent. Chopin confessed to Julian Fontana in October 1839 that the newly composed Impromptu might be « mediocre » ; he had not yet decided[19]. Clearly his ambitions were radical : to capture within a composed piece the freedom of flow and temporal projection associated with improvisation, and to create listening expectations equally relevant to improvisation. Indeed the work may be closer to Chopin's own improvisations than any other piece[20] – an impression confirmed upon reading the young Elisa Fournier's description of an improvisation by Chopin one evening in July 1846 :

19 Letter from Nohant to Julian Fontana in Paris, [8 October 1839] : « [...] nie rachując 7-go *Impromptu*, które może kiepskie : jeszcze sam nie wiem, bo za świerze ». *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina*, ed. B. E. Sydow, 2 vols (Warsaw : Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1955), vol. i, p. 365.

20 The Prelude Op. 45 also has a remarkably improvisatory character. See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, « Chopin and ‹ La Note Bleue › : An Interpretation of the Prelude Op. 45 », *Music & Letters*, 78 (1997), pp. 233-253, and John Rink, « The Legacy of Improvisation in Chopin », *Muzyka w kontekście kultury*, ed. M. Janicka-Słysz, T. Malecka and K. Szwajgier (Cracow : Akademia Muzyczna, 2001), pp. 79-89.

> he played to us a parody of a Bellini opera till we doubled up [...] ; then a prayer of the Polish people in distress, which made us cry ; then a rendition of a tolling bell, which gave us shivers ; then a funeral march [...] grave, [...] sombre, [...] sad [...] Finally [...] a bourrée [...] [and] a *tour de force* the likes of which I could never have imagined. He imitated on the piano a little music box. His sparkling touch, finesse and dexterity [...] [were] without equal. Then suddenly a cadenza, endless and so faint one could hardly hear it [...][21]

Though not all of these genres feature in the Impromptu op. 36, a « prayer », a march and a rapid passage requiring finesse and dexterity do appear in turn. The links between the successive, seemingly incompatible sections are of interest : one is quite unexpected, fundamentally altering the direction of the piece, while another could not be more blatant. In principle the opening might have proceeded to a conclusive tonic chord in bar 39, without the sudden change I have described, but of course the piece could not end so soon after beginning. What does happen is equally unlikely, however : instead of resolving predictably, the music launches into a march in stark contrast to the devotional passage just before, and it too ends unexpectedly, in a brief transition referred to by one author as a « tonal wrench », the « awkwardness » of this junction having « puzzled pianists and commentators alike ».[22] It is my belief that the ostensibly awkward two-bar transition captures an essential feature of real-life improvisation : the fingers « play for time », as if in suspended animation, while a way forward is sought by the improviser. In this case the next step is a rather tentative thematic restatement which gradually gains in confidence, arising from an inner triplet that almost parodically echoes the triumphant left-hand figuration from before.

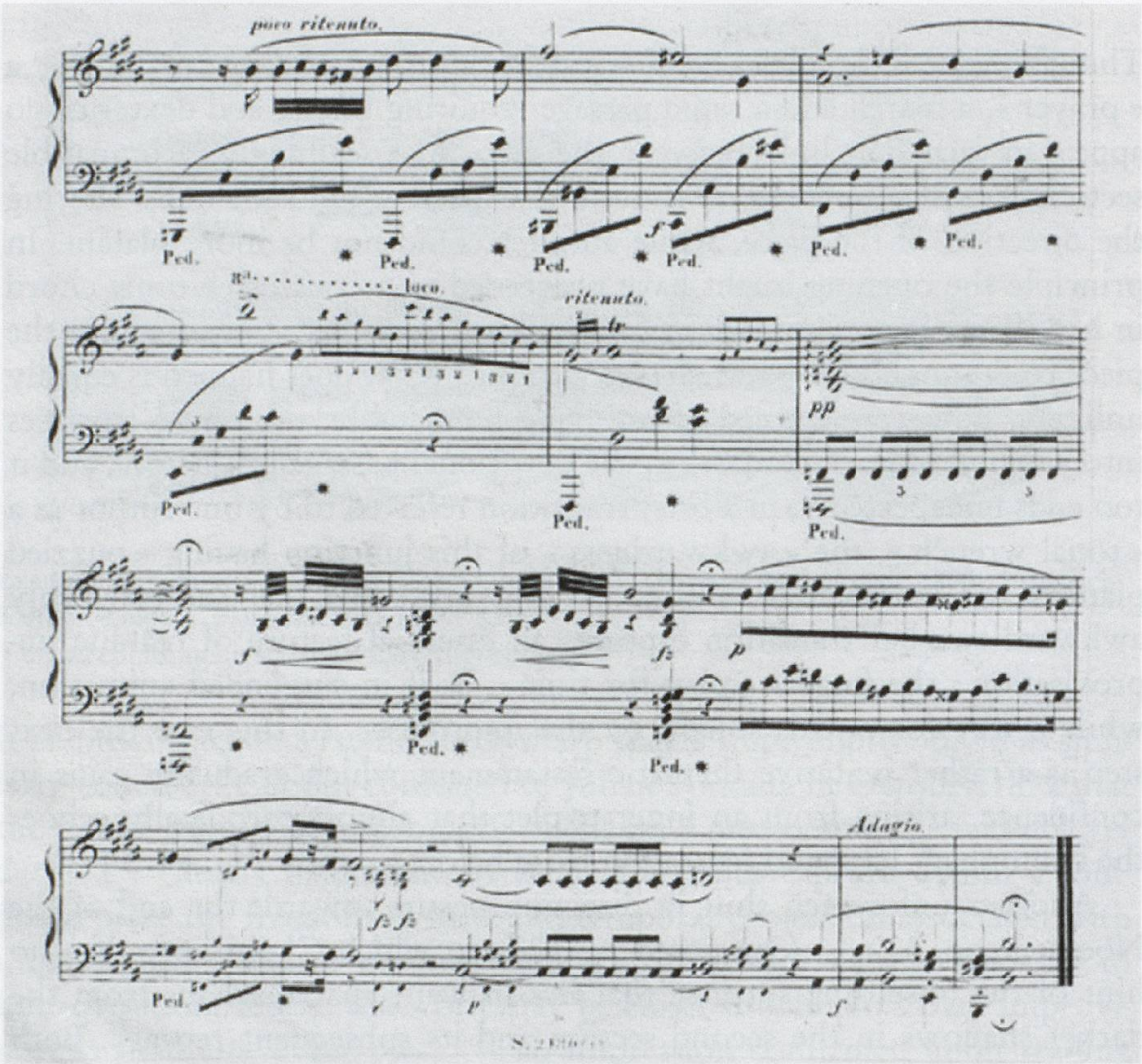
Another unforeseen shift in direction occurs towards the end of the Nocturne op. 32 n° 1 (composed in 1837), in which Chopin provides no hint of the unsettling surprise that lies in wait, apart perhaps from the darker shadows in the second section and its subsequent repeat[23]. Both statements of that section as well as the more radiant first section end with a cadential idea heard four times in all, the final, extended statement of which seems poised to resolve to a benedictory coda recapturing the contained calm of the opening. But once again Chopin dashes expectations : just as a march interrupts the Impromptu's devotional music, re-

21 Letter from Elisa Fournier to her mother, 9-10 July 1846 ; my translation. Original in the Archives de la Charente-Maritime, Dossier 4J1509 ; cited in Georges Lubin, *George Sand en Berry* (Paris : Hachette, 1967), pp. 28-29.

22 Jim Samson, « Chopin's F sharp Impromptu – Notes on Genre, Style and Structure », *Chopin Studies*, 3 (1990), pp. 302, 303.

23 See especially bars 25-35 and 46-56.

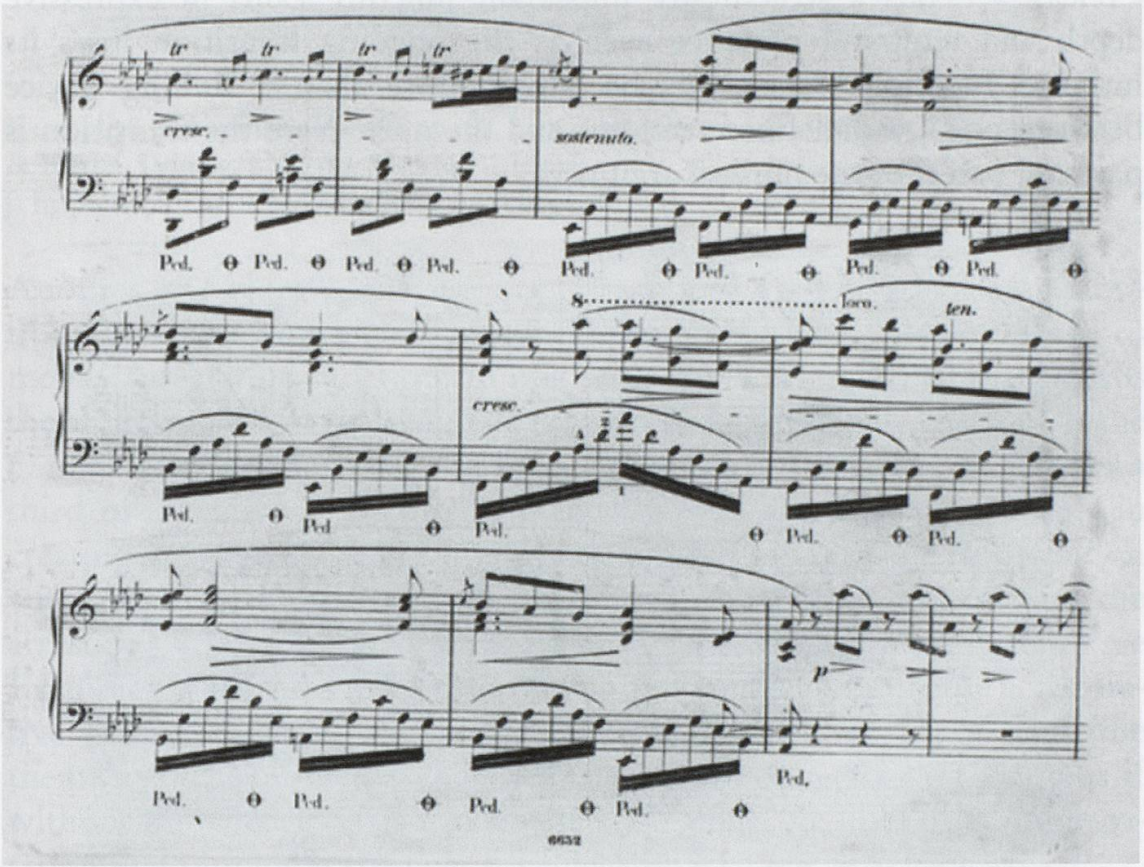
peated notes in the bass puncture the mood like distant drumbeats (see Example 4). The enveloping warmth dissipates and a recitative-like passage marked by violent instrumental interjections commences, followed by one of Chopin's bleakest endings. It is hard to fathom this dramatic change of voice and its possible signification.



Example 4 : Chopin, Nocturne op. 32 n° 1, bars 57-66. Reprint of second German edition, [date unknown] : A. M. Schlesinger, Berlin, plate no. S. 2180 (1) (32/1–2b-Sam) [‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/094 ›]

Chopin had no interest in musical « story-telling », believing, as George Sand wrote, that music « should not attempt » to specify the causes of any thought or emotion it might convey ; its greatness lies in its very inability « to speak in prose », and any attempt to pin the music down through mere imitation was, for Chopin, mere « silliness ». Nevertheless, he believed that

« music is a human impression and human manifestation. It is a human mind that thinks, it is a human voice that expresses itself »[24]. In listening to the Nocturne one inevitably tries to infer its putative message – a message we seek to understand in our own language of thought and feeling, communicating to us as if to no one else. Yet we can never succeed : its meaning remains elusive, incomprehensible, beyond grasp. That is possibly why Chopin's music retains its hold on listeners to this day : it has the capacity to speak to each of us uniquely, though indistinctly.

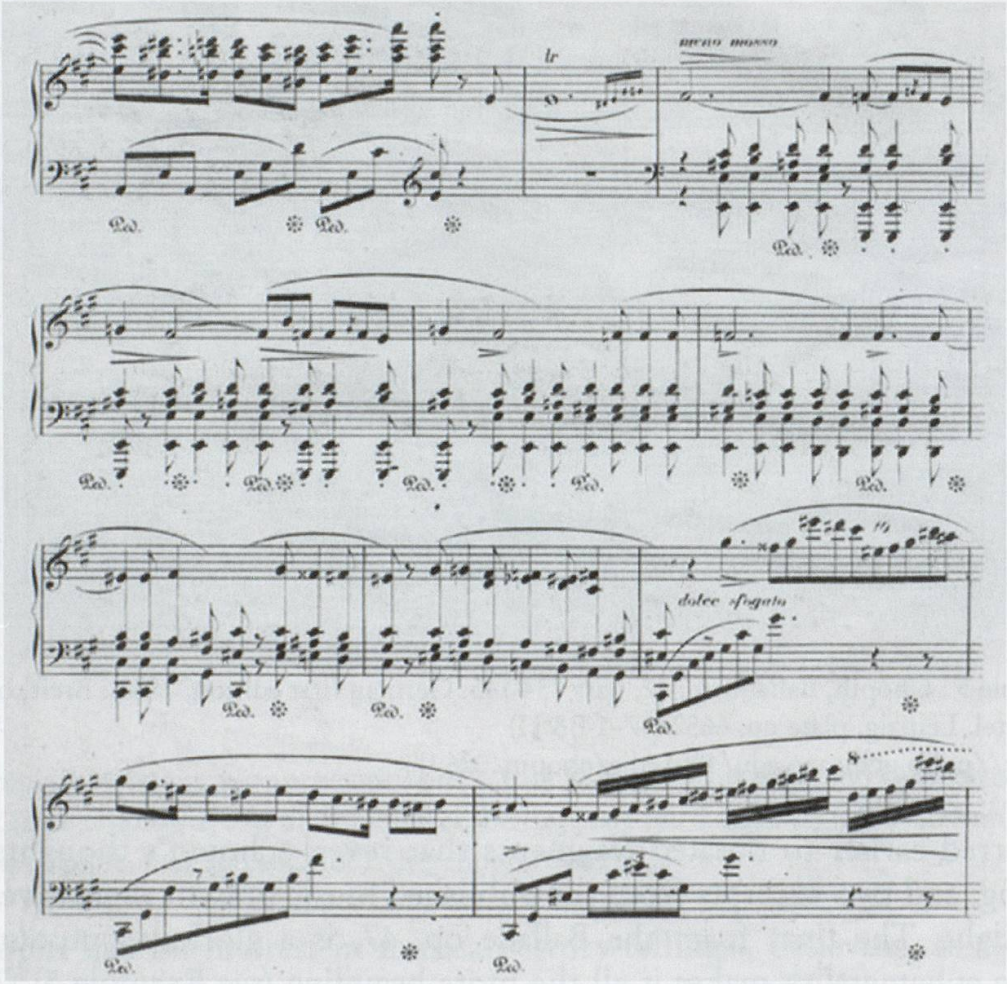


Example 5 : Chopin, Ballade op. 47, bars 134-145. German first edition, 1842 : Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, plate no. 6652 (47–1-B&H)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/026 ›]

I referred earlier to notated fragments that reveal Chopin's thoughts in passing, and two excerpts from the published music present themselves in that light. The first, from the Ballade op. 47, is a glorious outpouring whose ephemerality makes it all the more beguiling (see Example 5). The

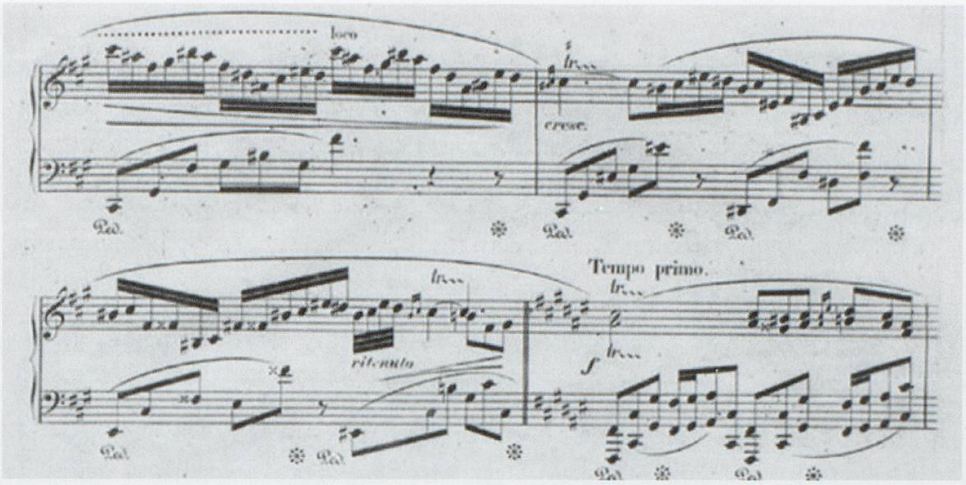
24 George Sand, *Impressions et souvenirs*, quoted from Karol Berger, « Chopin's Ballade Op. 23 and the Revolution of the Intellectuals », *Chopin Studies 2*, ed. J. Rink and J. Samson, p. 76.

second excerpt also begins with a trill, found on the sole surviving sketch sheet for the Barcarolle op. 60[25]. It follows an unexpected truncation of the most barcarolle-like theme, which gives rise to a modulatory transition towards the home key (see Example 6). Upon arriving at the harmonic goal, C-sharp major, Chopin could have proceeded directly to the recapitulation (or rather, the bars just before it)[26], but instead his imagination takes flight in an inspired improvisation – a brief hiatus in which the music draws breath or perhaps lets it out. Indeed the marking « *sfogato* » – an indication found nowhere else in Chopin – means to « give vent », to « release ». Thus a structurally important juncture gains in expressive depth and temporal presence even as the ongoing transition loses its hitherto functional character, becoming more than a linking device between one « well-defined section » and the next. Here the transition is part and parcel of the musical argument.



25 See the facsimile in Krystyna Kobylańska, *Rękopisy utworów Chopina. Katalog*, 2 vols (Cracow : Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne), vol. ii, p. 105.

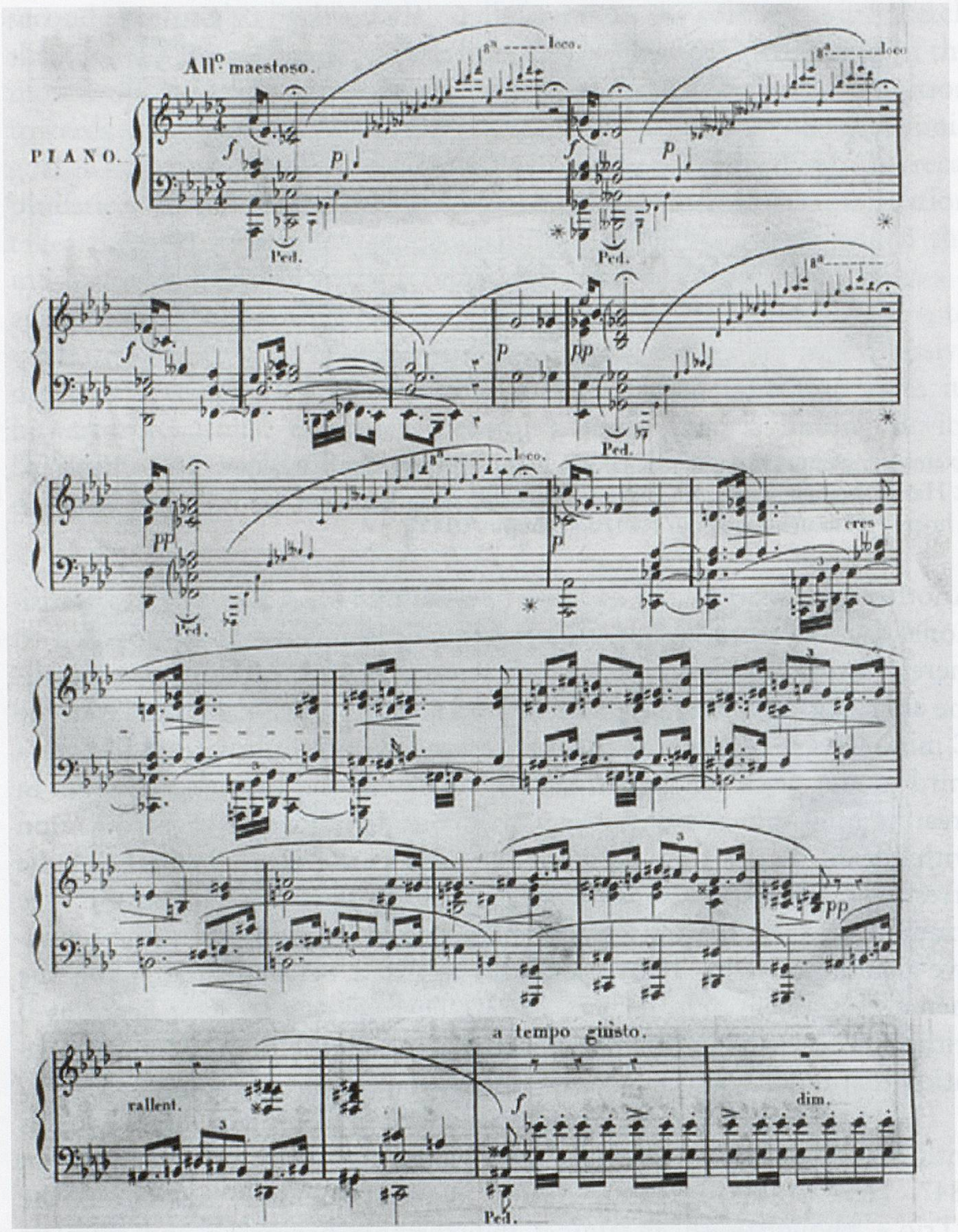
26 In other words, the music could have proceeded from the end of bar 77 directly to bar 82, requiring only minor adjustments for it to flow smoothly.



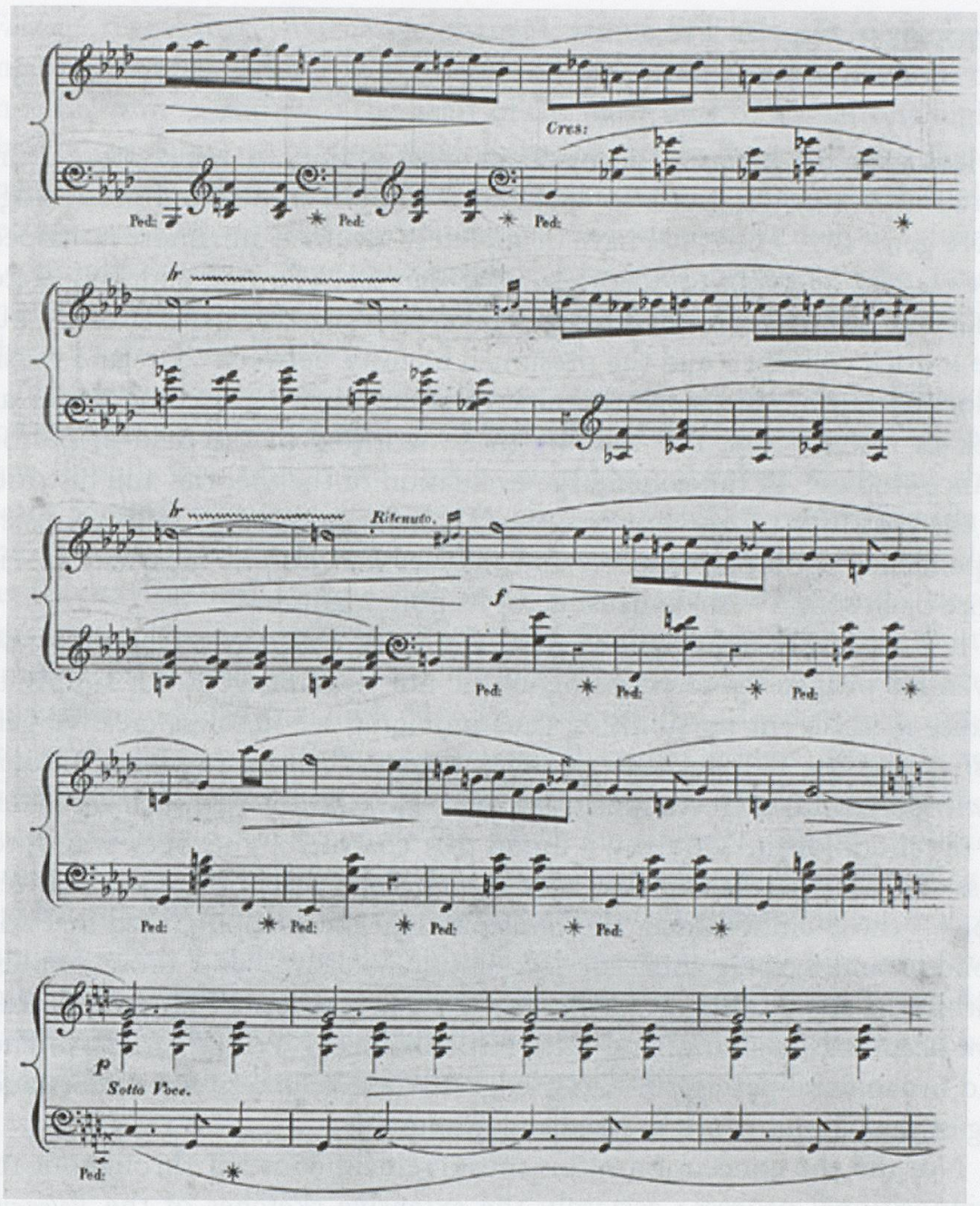
Example 6 : Chopin, Barcarolle op. 60, bars 70-84. German first edition, 1846 : Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, plate no. 7545 (60–1-B&H)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/034 ›]

Another late work – the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* op. 61 – also elevates transitional material to a higher plane, assigning it an integral as opposed to merely integrating function. In one sense the work's formal plan recalls the alternation between thematic material and transitional episodes in the C minor Rondo. But in op. 61 the « episodes » not only stretch to over a third of the piece but participate equally with the thematic passages in creating inner momentum. It is worth considering the long introduction with regard to the flow of ideas as much as the ideas themselves : the arresting chords and resonant arpeggios at the start (bars 1-8 passim ; see Example 7), the first hints of the main theme emerging from the figurative penumbra (bars 14-21), and the repeated octaves announcing the theme's imminent arrival (bars 22-23). These events are best heard as if without knowledge of their ultimate goal, along the lines of an improvisation that unfolds as the pianist's fingers make their way forward.

Having begun with op. 1, this survey of transition in Chopin ends with his last published work for solo piano, the Waltz op. 64 n° 3 from 1847. Here a linking passage joins the first thematic section to the « Trio », though with an almost indiscernible beginning and seamless connection (see Example 8). One of Chopin's most integral transitions within the waltz genre, the passage leads to a central, contrasting section in which the characteristic waltz rhythm almost disappears, hovering in the background as the melody shifts to the left hand while the right hand follows its lead.



Example 7 : Chopin, *Polonaise-Fantaisie* op. 61, bars 1-23. French first edition, 1846 : Brandus, Paris, plate no. B. et Cie 4610 (61–1-BR)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/248 ›]



Example 8 : Chopin, Waltz op. 64 n° 3, bars 55-76. English first edition, 1848 : Wessel, London, plate no. W & C° N° 6323 (64/3–1-W)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/314 ›]

Chopin in flux

A less seamless juncture occurs here with a shift in focus away from « transition » in the music to changes in Chopin studies and musicology more generally. Thus far I have deliberately assumed an almost retrospective stance, referring to « works » as if they exist in one enduring state. That has in fact been musicology's take on music for generations – but the « work concept » and the presumed identity between score and music valorised during and since the nineteenth century have come under attack in recent years, not least by those working in the field of performance studies[27]. A fundamental re-evaluation of the theories and histories of the past fifty to one hundred years is now required to reflect music's dependence upon performance and the fact that no one incarnation – in score or in sound – can exhaust all of its potentialities.

It is especially important to resist the work concept in Chopin's case, given his propensity to revise his music not to improve it but simply to realise its different possibilities, thus indulging a boundless creative genius. According to one contemporary listener, Alfred Hipkins, Chopin « *never* played his own compositions twice alike, but varied each according to the mood of the moment, a mood that charmed by its very waywardness »[28]. That partly explains why his music survives in numerous versions – those embodied in the multiple first editions published in Paris, London and Leipzig more or less simultaneously[29], and those implicit within the copies of his students and associates, where he entered alternative pedallings, slurrings and other articulation as well as variant pitches and ornamental passages[30]. Knowledge of these counters any understanding of the Chopin work as fixed and immutable.

Nor did the conception of his music remain constant throughout the compositional process : certainly the extensive sketches of the *Polonaise-*

27 For discussion see Nicholas Cook, « Music as Performance », *The Cultural Study of Music*, ed. M. Clayton et al. (New York : Routledge, 2003), pp. 204-214 ; see also *The Musical Work : Reality or Invention*, ed. Michael Talbot (Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2000).

28 Quoted from Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin : Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils*, Eng. trans. N. Shohet with K. Osostowicz and R. Howat, ed. R. Howat (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 55.

29 For discussion see Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries : Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 161-214 ; see also Grabowski and Rink, *Annotated Catalogue*.

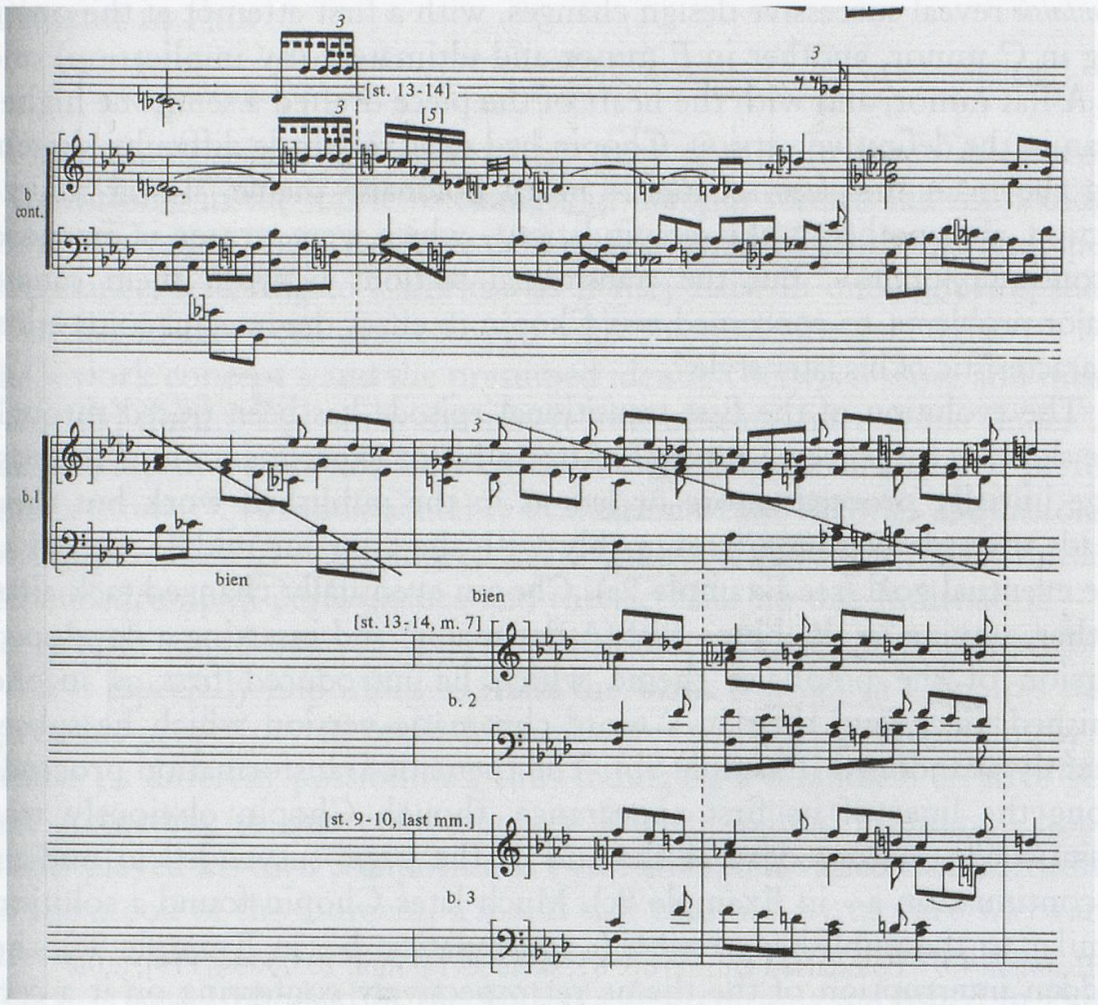
30 The copies of Chopin's students and associates are discussed in detail in Eigeldinger, *Chopin : Pianist and Teacher*.

Fantaisie reveal successive design changes, with a first attempt at the opening in C minor, another in F minor and ultimately (by implication) one in A-flat minor, and with the heart of the piece drafted a semitone higher than in the definitive version. Chopin had relatively little difficulty sketching the main thematic sections – initial polonaise theme, slower middle section, and apotheosis-like recapitulation – which were written in extended « continuity-drafts ». But the transitional sections between them caused major problems, so concerned was Chopin to effect the integral connection characteristic of his later style[31].

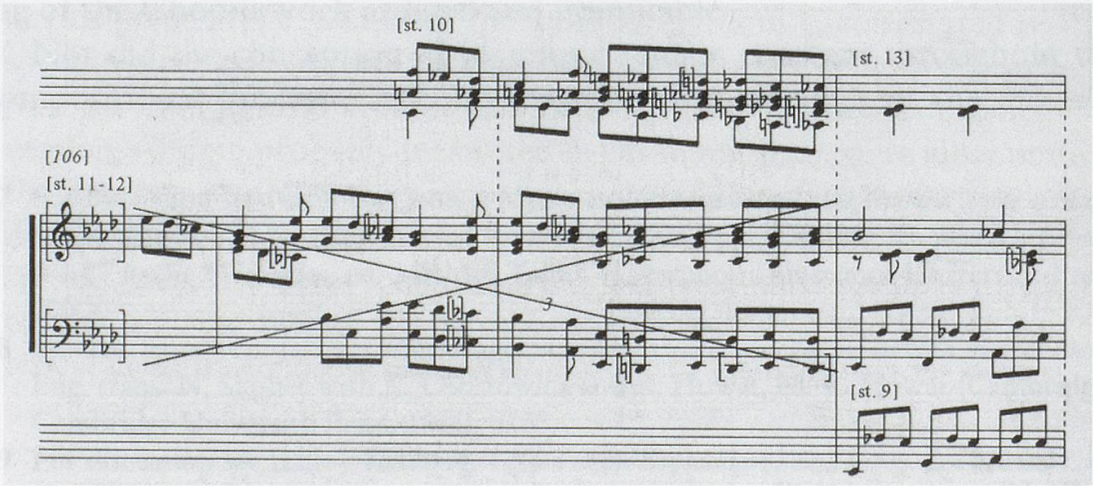
The evolution of the first transitional episode has been traced through the sketches by Jeffrey Kallberg[32]. After a bit of experimentation, the passage initially proceeds more or less as in the published work but then heads towards C minor, presumably with the C major middle section as the eventual goal (see Example 9a). Chopin eventually changed tack altogether, staying in the home key (A-flat major) and inserting a developed version of the polonaise theme which he introduced first as in the finished piece, and then in a more chromatic version which he subsequently abandoned (Example 9b). The thematic transformation proceeds along the lines of its first appearance, though Chopin obviously was dissatisfied : it stops dead at the end of the page, suspended in mid-air (« continuation a » in Example 9c). Much later Chopin found a solution similar to the published version (« continuation b » in Example 9c), the sudden interruption of the theme retrospectively conferring on it a certain transitional status as the episode unexpectedly continues with radically new material that challenges the sense of continuity in no less « awkward » a way than the transition in the F-sharp major Impromptu – and perhaps with a similarly improvisatory effect in mind.

31 For discussion see Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries*, pp. 98-117 ; Samson, « The Composition-Draft » ; and John Rink, « Schenker and Improvisation », *Journal of Music Theory*, 37 (1993), pp. 26-41.

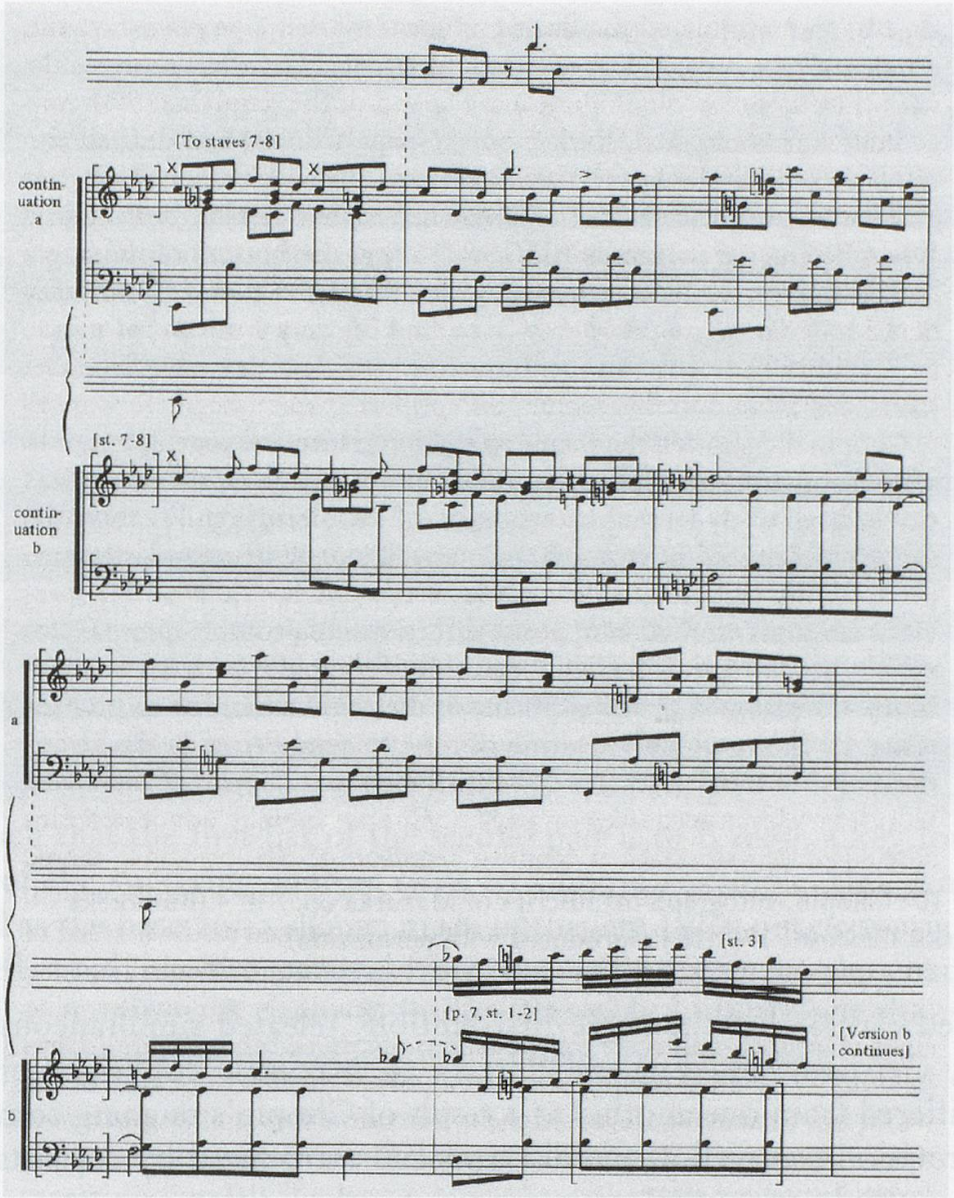
32 See Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries*, pp. 98-117.



Example 9 : Chopin, *Polonaise-Fantaisie* op. 61 : transcriptions of sketch material from Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries* (reproduced with permission of Harvard University Press)
9a) bars 101-[108] (from Kallberg's Example 4.5)



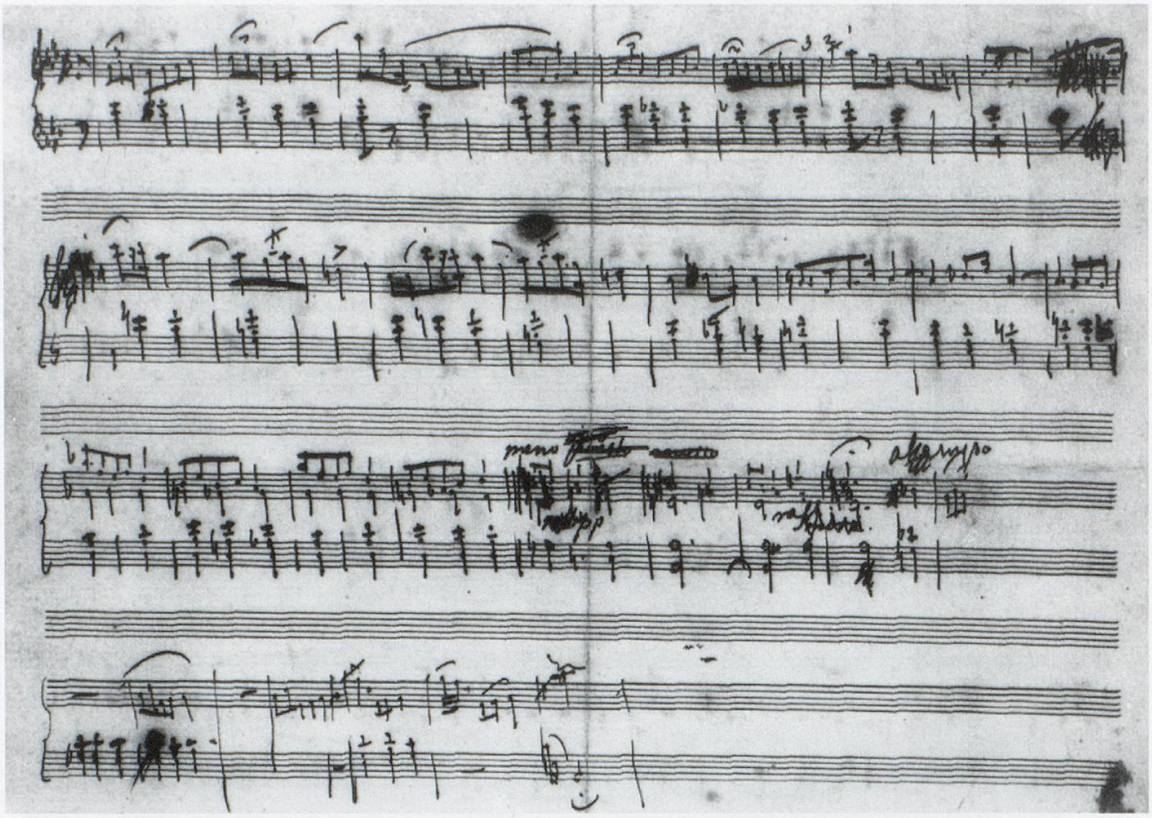
9b) bars [105]–108 (from Kallberg's Example 4.6)



9c) bars 114-[118] (from Kallberg's Example 4.6)

Major conceptual changes occurred during the genesis of other pieces as well ; they include Chopin's late addition of the devotional passage when sketching the F-sharp major Impromptu[33], and a coda to the A-flat major Mazurka which Chopin eventually abandoned in favour of the simpler published version. Languishing in a manuscript now held by the Biblioteka Jagiellońska in Cracow, the rejected coda rounds off the piece more effectively than the variants within the published version, thanks in part to the different overall proportions that result. (See Example 10).

33 In the earliest surviving version it appeared neither before the march (i.e. in bars 31-38) nor at the end of the piece (bars 101-109) ; for discussion see Samson, « Chopin's F sharp Impromptu », pp. 303-304.



Example 10 : Chopin, autograph manuscript of Mazurka op. 7 n° 4 (Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Cracow : 1961:16 ; reproduced with permission)

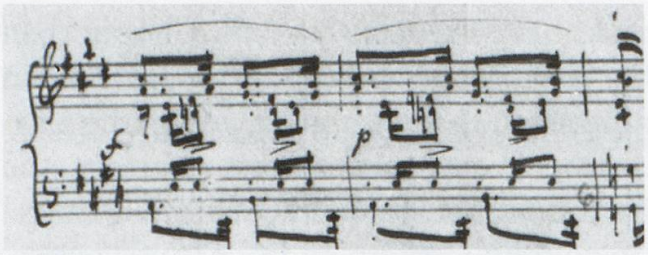
I implied earlier that the three first editions released simultaneously in France, Germany and England (largely to maximise copyright protection) differed from one another as a result of Chopin's ongoing compositional revisions, as well as the discrepancies introduced by copyists preparing multiple engravers' manuscripts. Further differences arose from the interventions of house editors in successive impressions which until recently have been assumed to be identical – an error of judgement undermining Chopin scholarship to date[34]. One particularly interesting example of the successive alterations concerns the E major Etude. In the middle section, Chopin changed his mind several times about four bars arranged in two pairs. In his working manuscript from August 1832, bar

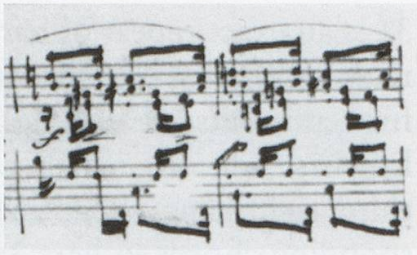
34 A systematic investigation of the Chopin first editions held by some fifty European and American libraries was conducted from 1998 to 2001 with funding provided by the Leverhulme Trust ; the c. 5,000 copies that were inventoried are detailed in Grabowski and Rink, *Annotated Catalogue*. See « http://www.cfeo.org.uk » concerning another research project, Chopin's First Editions Online (CFEO), which will create a complete virtual collection of the first impressions of these editions.

31 is an exact repeat of bar 30, just as bar 35 repeats bar 34[35]. Chopin then made changes which also appear in the intended *Stichvorlage* for the French first edition (see Example 11a) and thus in that edition as well as the English first edition, which was based on French proofsheets : namely, the third right-hand chord in bar 31 contains an F-natural, while the corresponding chords in bars 34 and 35 contain G-sharp and G-natural respectively, thus producing a similar « major–minor » progression (although the key of the first pair of bars remains A major, and the second pair B minor). However, in a second impression of the French first edition published after 1833, the first bar of the second pair has been altered, with a G-natural in the third right-hand chord here as in bar 34, although its counterpart bar 30 does not change (Example 11b). Chopin pencilled a further change into the later impression of the French first edition used by his student Camille Dubois, such that bar 31 introduces A minor (he adds a natural sign to the c^2 on the downbeat but not to the c^1 in the following chord, though clearly intended it)[36]. Meanwhile, the German first edition, published in August 1833, contains a significant difference almost certainly attributable to a house editor acting without Chopin's authority, such that the first bar of the second pair is in B *major*, a key found in none of the surviving sources close to Chopin (Example 11c). And that served as the basis for a change made in the late 1870s once copyright had expired, applying the pattern from the second pair to the first – so, A major–A minor, B major–B minor (Example 11d). This is the version played by most pianists, yet it is not Chopin's as far as we know.

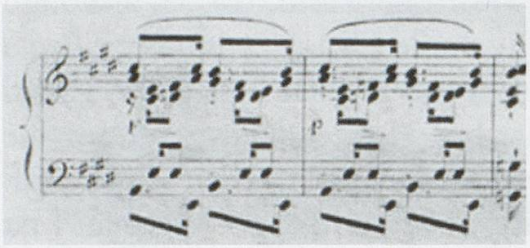
35 Chopin uses his habitual « repeat » sign – a diagonal stroke with (or sometimes without) dots on other side. See the transcriptions in the Source Commentary of the Wydanie Narodowe (*Etiudy*, ed. Jan Ekier and Paweł Kamiński (Warsaw, 2000), pp. 9-10), which offers a somewhat different interpretation of the sources from the one advanced here.

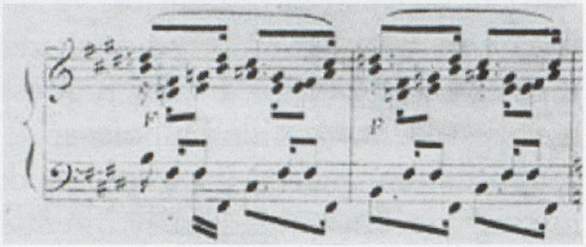
36 Note the radical cuts and resultant simplification in the copy used by Chopin's pupil Jane Stirling, who clearly found the middle section too difficult. See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger and Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Frédéric Chopin : Œuvres pour piano. Fac-similé de l'exemplaire de Jane W. Stirling avec annotations et corrections de l'auteur* (Paris : Bibliothèque nationale, 1982), pp. 33-36.



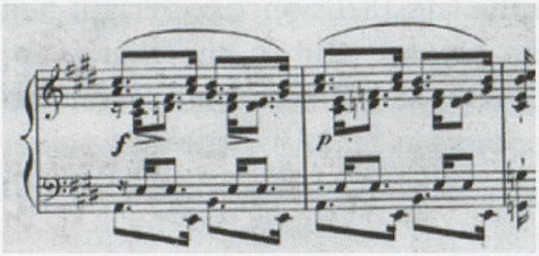


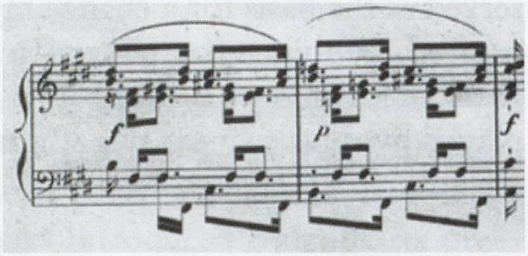
Example 11 : Chopin, Etude op. 10 n° 3, bars 30–31 and 34–35 : variant readings
11a) intended *Stichvorlage* (Towarzystwo im. Fryderyka Chopina, Warsaw : M/192 ; reproduced with permission)



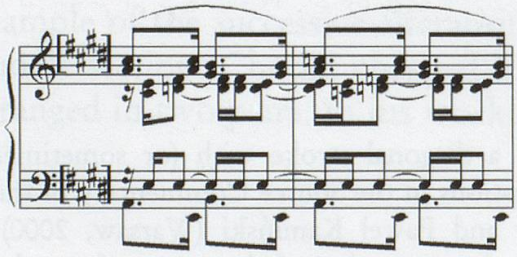


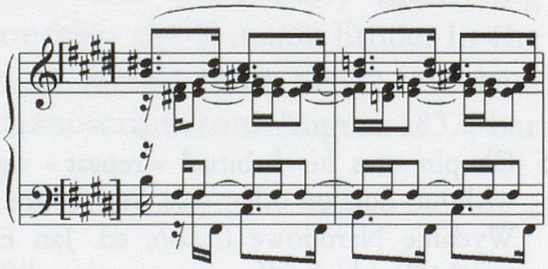
11b) corrected reprint of French first edition, c. 1833 ? : Maurice Schlesinger, Paris, plate no. M. S. 1399 (10–1a-Sm)
[‹http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/048›]





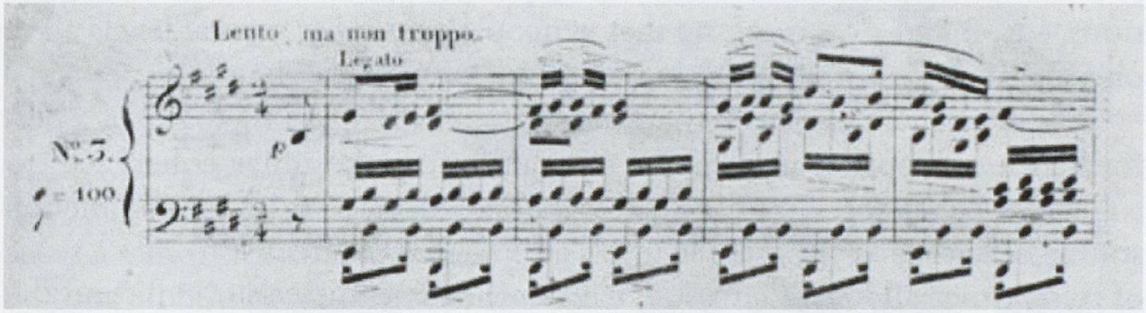
11c) German first edition, 1833 : Friedrich Kistner, Leipzig, plate no. 1018 (10–1-KI)
[‹http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/047›]





11d) version found in most modern editions

Nor can we attribute to him the innumerable other changes found in later editions. Indeed, the music's content evolved almost beyond recognition in the hands of successive editors – which is not to deny their editorial prerogatives, just their right to say the result is Chopin. That even applies to some Urtext editions, which claim fidelity to the original sources though they inevitably reflect the decisions of their editors. Furthermore, they typically present a version of the music permissively drawn from a range of sources to produce a conflated text that Chopin again might not have authorised. Or, conversely, they may produce a version close to one notionally « best source » while failing to present all of the variant readings emanating from Chopin himself, which may well not fit onto the printed page. The result, once more, is an ossification at odds with the composer's ongoing creativity, and that is one reason why no conventional edition of Chopin could ever be fully adequate[37]. Another is the impossible dilemma faced by the Chopin editor : whether to impose one's view on often incomprehensible original notation but risk distorting its intended meaning, or alternatively to present the notation precisely as in the original but produce a version pianists cannot understand. Whatever edition is used, the decision-making ultimately lies with the performer on any given occasion – and nowhere is the Chopin work more in flux than in performance.



Example 12 : Chopin, Etude Op. 10 n° 3, bars 1-4. Corrected reprint of French first edition, c. 1833 ? : Maurice Schlesinger, Paris, plate no. M. S. 1399 (10–1a-Sm) [‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/048 ›]

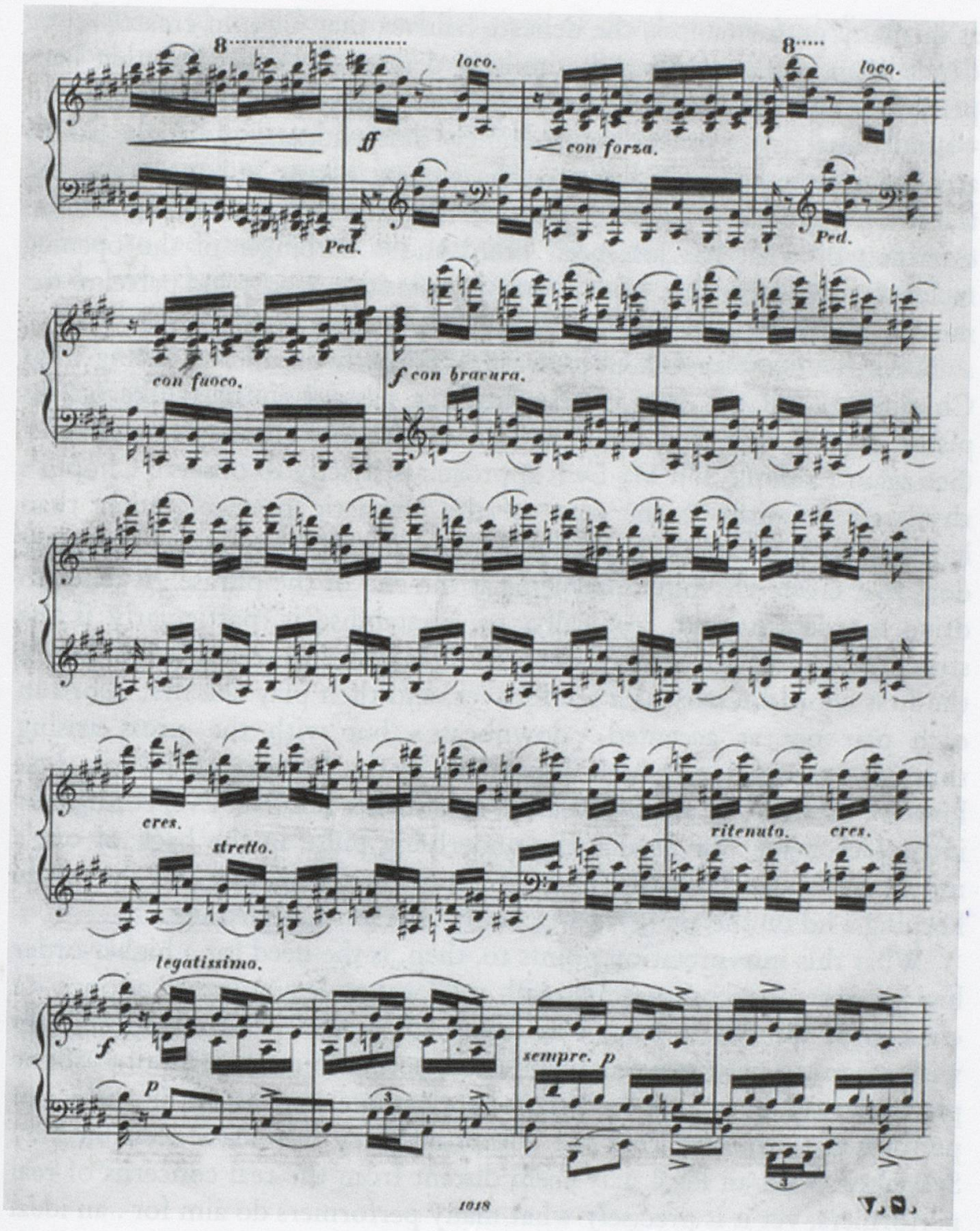
37 These problems may be mitigated by a research project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation which will create an Online Chopin Variorum Edition (OCVE) – the first of its kind for any composer. For discussion see John Rink, « The Final Score ? », *BBC Music Magazine* (May 2004), pp. 30-33 ; see also « http://www.ocve.org.uk ».

It is to performance issues that I turn in a final discussion of the E major Etude. Note first of all how the opening bars are constructed – with a melody in the top line, a murmuring middle part, a slow foundation outlining the harmony, and another left-hand part which runs virtually throughout the first section, energising the music through syncopation. (See Example 12.) Chopin marks the syncopated notes – in each case a quaver lasting twice as long as the semiquavers on either side – with an accent sign, telling the pianist to favour them slightly. Chopin's accents vary considerably in meaning according to context[38], and here he uses the sign to highlight one of the most important elements in the A section : the very syncopations I have referred to. Indeed, I see this third Etude as a study not in *legato* melody (as some have suggested[39]) but in controlling syncopation from the level of detail to the level of form. What I mean is that the piece as a whole is a massive expansion of the very properties contained within the first three notes of the left-hand part. Not only does each outer section last precisely half as long as the middle one, just as each semiquaver in the first left-hand beat lasts half as long as the accented quaver in the middle (in both cases in a 1 : 2 : 1 ratio), but the eruptive middle section is itself a massive syncopation at the level of form, proportionally corresponding in rhythmic and expressive function to the accented, syncopated quaver in beat 1 of the piece. The same pattern of surge and retraction also operates *within* the constituent sections – A, B and A' – meaning that syncopation shapes several levels all at once : as it were, foreground, middleground and background.

It is my belief that this remarkable parallelism offers the basis of a performance conception in addition to manifesting the inner coherence extolled by Schenker. Grasping the syncopated pattern as a fundamental source of energy at these three levels also allows the pianist to make sense of two potentially problematic features : the climax in the middle and the transition that follows. Though marked *con bravura* (see bar 46 in Example 13), the climax is usually played so virtuosically – which is to say loud and driven – that it practically comes unhinged, losing its *raison d'être* within a musical argument that must somehow reconcile it with the lyrical melody at the opening. By way of comparison, consider how absurd it would sound if a pianist pounded the accented second note in each left-hand group at the beginning, that is, in a manner disproportionate to its contextual function. Now imagine the same degree of excess at the level of form. When the climactic section is as loud and driven

38 See John Rink, « Les *Concertos* de Chopin et la notation de l'exécution », *Frédéric Chopin, interprétations*, ed. J.-J. Eigeldinger (Geneva : Droz, 2005), pp. 69-88.

39 For example see Samson, *The Music of Chopin*, p. 63.



Example 13 : Chopin, Etude op. 10 n° 3, bars 41-57. German first edition, 1833 : Friedrich Kistner, Leipzig, plate no. 1018 (10–1-KI)
[‹ http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/dig/chopin/047 ›]

as in many performances, the delicate balance that Chopin creates *or that Chopin allows the pianist to create* is similarly destroyed. And when that happens, the transition that follows is relegated to the status of *mere* transition – a functional device to link two seemingly independent sections, the climax and the recapitulation. If however the climax is kept in proportion, the transition can grow out of it, its own rhythmic play sounding like an extension of what has just been heard and a harbinger of the opening melody's eventual return. In that way the transition is part and parcel of the musical argument – integral, rather than simply integrating.

A further key to coherent performance may lie in understanding what Chopin's *forte* at the start of the climactic passage sounded like on his piano in 1832, and also the temporal implications of the *forte* dynamic. (See again Example 13). My own approach is strictly to observe Chopin's rhythmic notation at the start of the climactic passage, rather than lengthening the first chord in the manner one typically hears. Not only does that create rhythmic problems at the end of the phrase : it tends to drive the descent and, ironically, to *over*stabilise it, particularly if the structural chords are heavily accented. It is better to treat the rhythm of the first chord literally as a semiquaver, and then play the first chord in each pair not as accented « downbeats » but with the stress arising through syncopation, which destabilises at the foreground level but allows for stability, or at least balance, at a further remove. Everything falls into place when one retains the underlying pulse in the back of one's mind, no matter how distant it becomes on the surface, all the while keeping a lid on the energy, particularly in terms of dynamics.

What this interpretation points to, then, is the need for a higher-order logic, a control encompassing small- and large-scale gestures all at once – a « vision of the whole piece » as described by C. P. E. Bach specifically with regard to performance, manifested, perhaps, in the form of a « basic plan » devised over time but realised spontaneously, *uniquely*, in the act of performance, by means of the « improvisatory impulse » acclaimed by Schenker. Such an ideal may seem distant from the real concerns of real performers, yet it is precisely what many performers do aim for : an ideal – not « the » ideal (a notion too wedded to the work concept and all its associated problems), but *an* ideal, however individual performers may successively define it for themselves. That is why this essay is entitled « Chopin in Transition » as opposed, say, to « Chopin in Flux ».

Each and every instantiation of the work in performance has the potential to be the performer's most inspired and fulfilling with regard to the music as he or she understands it at that time. All that one has experienced until that point – the years of practice, of study and con-

templation, of experiment and decision, of development and discovery – lies behind each performance act, culminating in the music's recreation on that one occasion as if everything else has led to it in a state of transition. Of course a definitive ideal will never be reached, in that the next performance might be even better. But that does not stop one from *believing* that a given interpretation might be definitive even if it is bound to be provisional at one and the same time. Aiming at new ideals, whether or not one attains them, is, for the performer and the musicologist alike, a fact of life, a matter of uncompromising conviction – a conviction which guides and enables from moment to moment, from beginning to end.