

Zeitschrift: Publikationen der Schweizerischen Musikforschenden Gesellschaft. Serie 2 = Publications de la Société Suisse de Musicologie. Série 2
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Musikforschende Gesellschaft
Band: 54 (2016)

Artikel: Late style, last style, and Chopin's Waltz in A flat major, op. 64 no.3
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858655>

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Late Style, Last Style, and Chopin's Waltz in A flat Major, op. 64 no. 3

Jeffrey Kallberg

The concept of style in music can neutrally chronicle compositional techniques. But when style intersects with notions of time, it inescapably shoulders cultural and historical burdens. If the composer's own time is in question, style – early, middle, late – takes on attributes of bodily existence: technique filters through the human condition. The same array of techniques – the propensity to blend genres, to take an example from Chopin – appears differently freighted in his early works as compared to his late works. Because style for Chopin likely functioned innately, an attribute a composer of talent simply possessed, the concept resonates more keenly for his listeners and critics: it inheres as a mode of reception. And if the flow of time over the decades and centuries is in question, “style” itself can lose its innateness. By the end of the nineteenth century, composers could and did select and change styles consciously. Style articulated a cultural stance, a particular view of history.¹

The most overdetermined conjunction of style and time is undoubtedly late style. That the wisdom of age should yield artworks of profound insight is such a well-established critical trope as to function almost as a cliché. The critical understanding of iconic artists like Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Beethoven could hardly be imagined without reference to dearly held beliefs about the coincidence of older age and technical mastery and discovery. But thanks to the work of Theodor Adorno, and more recently to that of Edward Said, another vision of late style has emerged, one that reckons final creative works as forms of exile, as modes of struggle against prevailing conceits, as concluding moments of irresolution.² In both of these models of late style, though, the concept depends on the image of the declining body (and perhaps mind) of the artist.

1 I have elsewhere discussed at greater length the arguments in this paragraph. On the mixture of genres at different times in Chopin's life, see “Chopin's Last Style,” in my *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 263; on the consciousness of style, see “Finnish Modern: Love, Sex, and Style in Sibelius's Songs,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius*, ed. Daniel M. Grimley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 134–136. And, in shorter form, I have touched on some of these ideas in a booklet essay for the pianist Stephen Hough's compact disc recording *Chopin: Late Masterpieces* (Hyperion CDA67764, issued in 2010).

2 See “Late Style in Beethoven,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, with new translations by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 564–568, and Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

This is an image we know well in Chopin, and why the concept of late style maintains currency despite the composer dying at a young age. Thus, when we evoke the concept, we do so starting with works Chopin composed around the age of 31, a seemingly preposterous start for any “late style”: preposterous, that is, until we consider Chopin’s awareness of his fragile health. In a further wrinkle that builds on this trope of lateness, I have proposed that we can also talk about a “last style,” the final bursts of stylistic innovation during moments when Chopin grappled with failing health, a ruptured personal relationship, the collapse of his daily routines, and political upheaval in his adopted country.³ In such works as the Polonaise-Fantasy, op. 61, and the sketch for a Mazurka in F minor, Chopin experimented (not always successfully) with new means of musical continuity, new conceptions of genres, new approaches to form. The music may transport, but the memory of the crises he faced inevitably tinges our experience of it with poignancy, and in the extreme instances of the last style, even tragedy.

So, at least, claims the quasi-standard narrative about Chopin’s late and last style, a narrative, I hasten to add, for which my own writings bear major responsibility. But I am acutely aware that this story ignores some pieces that seem not to bear on its essence. Chief among these are the Waltzes, op. 64. The first and last numbers of the opus seem at odds with any account that might have to do with poignancy and tragedy. Indeed, they project the very image of merry urbanity and sociability. Although these Waltzes date from a most difficult period in Chopin’s life, their apparent simplicity in style and their clear formal boundaries would appear to belie the relevance of any late or last style. The Waltzes, op. 64, in other words, constitute a lacuna in our understanding of the late and last styles. We might begin to fill this gap by considering the last of the op. 64 Waltzes, the A flat major.

If the story of Chopin’s last style is as much biographical as musical, we would be wise with the A flat major Waltz to begin with one place where the two realms overlap, namely the process of composition. Like the majority of the works Chopin composed and published between 1845 and 1848, the extant autograph sources for the Waltz include both a sketch and a *Stichvorlage*. The sketch resides in the Paris Bibliothèque de l’Opéra; the *Stichvorlage* (for the Brandus edition), privately owned by a family in Basle, is currently on deposit in the Paul-Sacher-Stiftung.⁴

3 Kallberg, “Chopin’s Last Style,” passim (see note 1). See also the reflections of Mieczysław Tomaszewski, “Late Chopin. Last Chopin,” in *Chopin’s Musical Worlds: The 1840s*, ed. Artur Szklener (Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2008), pp. 317–328.

4 In the notes to his Breitkopf & Härtel Gesamtausgabe from 1879, Ernst Rudorff attested to a “flüchtiger Entwurf” of the work once owned by Princess Marcelina Czartoryska. (On Rudorff’s discussion of the putative Czartoryska manuscript, see Jan Bogdan Drath, *Waltzes of Fryderyk Chopin: Sources. Volume 1: Waltzes Published During Chopin’s Lifetime* [Kingsville, Texas: Texas A & I University Publications, 1979], p. 274.) But Rudorff’s description of a melodic variant in pencil in measure 49 approaches what one finds in the Paris sketch. The heirs of Princess Chimay transferred this sketch to the Bibliothèque de l’Opéra in 1940; Chimay and Czartoryska moving in the same circles in the later nineteenth century, it is likely that Chimay obtained the manuscript from Czartoryska. The Drath volume includes a facsimile of the sketch (pp. 275–276) as well as a (somewhat inaccurate) diplomatic transcription of the Brandus *Stichvorlage* (pp. 277–282).

Chopin's sketch displays many remarkable features, including a highly unusual, significant layer of entries in pencil, to which I will return. It also contains, in the reprise, the remnants of an earlier harmonic conception of an important passage. Chopin's notation around this passage is ambiguous – this was after all a private document, and what the composer wrote down needed to make sense only to him – but he left enough clues for us plausibly to reconstruct the order of events, and the shape of the work that he sketched. The sketch fills the outer sides of an intact bifolio. The reprise begins on the third system of the second page; in his customary fashion (Chopin never being one to write out something unnecessarily), he notated the first measure in ink, and then marked off to the end of the system eleven blank measures, his customary abbreviation for “these measures are the same as in an earlier parallel passage.” Chopin cannot have meant this notation literally: a musical link is not feasible between the twelfth measure of the reprised opening section (counting the measure he notated fully) and any music that follows on the systems below. Rather it seems we are to interpret the abbreviation as “repeat the appropriate number of measures” from the parallel passage, and the appropriate number of measures in this instance is twenty-four. We know this because of three notations he made in the corresponding measures of the opening section. The first of these is a double bar after measure 16, an abbreviation that signals that the preceding measures (here mm. 1–16) should be repeated immediately. The second notation occurs above the same measure 16, the inked abbreviation “2gi,” short for “drugi” in Polish, meaning “[the] second [time],” and attached to a melodic variant that should be played in measure 32. The third indication is the penciled word “ostatni,” (meaning “[the] last [time]”) above a penciled melodic variant to measure 8. That Chopin did not write “2gi” next to this variant must mean that it is to be used in a third – and last – sounding of this passage, and that can only occur if the reprise of the opening theme lasts twenty-four measures. And indeed, looking at the Brandus *Stichvorlage* that Chopin prepared on the basis of this sketch, we can see that he originally notated the “ostatni” variant in the twenty-fourth measure of the reprise, before eventually changing the reading so that it agreed with every other parallel statement of this passage. Finally, that the harmony in this measure allows a sensible connection with the twenty-fifth measure of the reprise confirms the argument.

Chopin squeezed the remainder of the reprise into the bottom six staves of the second page, the compressed notation contributing to the story of the evolution of the reprise. On the first page, Chopin established the pattern of leaving empty staves above and below the first three systems of notated music, and fitting the remaining two systems on the bottom four staves of the sheet. He intended to follow this scheme on the second page, and did so, until at some point (perhaps even after completing the writing of the rest of sketch) something made him stop, go back, and draft an eight-measure passage he meant to replace measures 25 to 32 of the reprise.

How did Chopin initially conceive this portion of the reprise, and why did he change it? The original version moved sequentially from D^b to E^b (in a modification,

Chopin altered the harmony of the first two measures to F minor); the revision moves from E to F#. In the original version, the applied dominant of F that ends the “ostatni” variant of the reprise resolves properly on the downbeat to F harmony (even though this F quickly reorients itself as the third of D flat major). The revision plays up the disjunction between the applied dominant of F and its quirky resolution to E major harmony. Or said another way, Chopin’s change introduces the element of harmonic surprise, further emphasizing the sense of witty play that characterizes the principal section of the Waltz.

The element of playfulness looms large in attempting to reckon the A flat major Waltz against the paired concepts of late style/last style. This property of light-heartedness is doubly interesting, both as a relatively rare element in Chopin’s published music, and in its putative role in a late or last style. While we celebrate Chopin’s music for its wide expressive range, wit would seem not to figure very often into our responses to it. Certainly wittiness is an element in some of the early mazurkas: two examples are the ending of the early Mazurka in A flat major, op. 7 no. 4, with the sudden intrusion of a slow chorale in A major into the otherwise madcap ending, and the following C major Mazurka, with its delightful concluding instruction “dal Segno senza Fine.” But in the middle years, playfulness is rare, and when present at all, more covert than overt. (Examples of this covert playfulness are found in the portions of the Nocturne in G major, op. 37 no. 2, and the Nocturne in F sharp minor, op. 48 no. 2, both of which evoke the “scherzando nocturne” trope.⁵) Even in the scherzos, whose name would seem to demand wit, we are hard pressed to find more than fleeting passages of musical humor, or even play. Strikingly, though, the quality does re-emerge in some of his later works, in pieces like the E major Scherzo, op. 54 and the Mazurka in B major, op. 63 no. 1, and to that extent, needs to factor into an understanding of what we might mean by “late/last style”. A closer look at how Chopin pursued playfulness in the Waltz will help us grasp its importance to our understanding of his special compositional concerns toward the end of his creative life.

The Waltz is a study in variants. It dilates obsessively on a few melodic and rhythmic motives, ingeniously (in the case of the melodic motives) scrambling their intervallic orderings, and unfolding them over different harmonic backgrounds. Barbara Zuber explored the scope of these subtle manipulations in an interesting essay published in 1985.⁶ Zuber describes Chopin’s thematic process as a “monomotivische Fortspinnungstechnik,” a term that obviously means to evoke comparisons with Baroque procedures. Indeed, Zuber perceives similarities between Chopin’s motivic unfoldings and contrapuntal norms of the sort found in Bach’s Two-Part Inventions. (And although Zuber does not make this

5 See Jeffrey Kallberg, “On the *Scherzando* Nocturne,” in *Variations on the Canon: Essays on Music from Bach to Boulez in Honor of Charles Rosen on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Robert Curry, David Gable, and Robert L. Marshall (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008), pp. 172–184.

6 Barbara Zuber, “Syndrom des Salon und Autonomie: Über Chopins Walzer,” *Musik-Konzepte*, vol. 45 (September 1985), pp. 17–51, see especially pp. 34–45.

connection, the technique in the Waltz also bears comparison with the monomotivic procedures of Chopin's Preludes.) Chopin's motives show at once a high degree of consistency in the intervallic content, and variability in the ordering of the intervals; occasionally they unfold in ways that suggest near mirror-symmetry, or cancrizans motion. The insistent turning and returning of the subtle variants creates a kaleidoscopic effect that contributes much to the playful quality of the Waltz. It is intellectual play, to be sure – Chopin evoking Bach over a waltz accompaniment – but it is play nonetheless.

Framing the Waltz as a study in variants helps in three ways to focus our understanding of the piece as participating in Chopin's late or last style. First, it reminds us of the significance Chopin appears to have assigned to the formal device of obsessive repetition as his stylistic precepts evolved after 1841. We think of such hallmarks of repetition as the accompaniment to the Berceuse, the circular melodic structures in the principal thematic section of the F minor Ballade and the opening of the F minor Nocturne (op. 55 no. 1), and the ostinato octaves in the central section of the A flat major Polonaise. Equally important are those passages where Chopin's purpose seems to be to provide as many different harmonizations as possible of the same (or nearly the same) melodic phrase. The best example here occurs in the sketch of the F minor Mazurka, in what Chopin intended as the central section of the work (and which Fontana failed to include in the version he published.)⁷ These passages create the impression of a composer wringing every last bit of expression out of a given motive, or of a phrase or idea reaching a moment of exhaustion.

Second, and returning to the realm of compositional process, it relates the idea of variants to the general situation of the late works, in which complex source relationships abound, as do multitudes of text-critical variants. In the case of opus 64, Christophe Grabowski has shown that the network of relevant sources counts among the most complicated of any work by Chopin.⁸ In demonstrating the full range of extant sources (and the differences among the German and English prints issued during Chopin's lifetime), and in establishing a definitive stemmata for the extant sources, Grabowski allows us to grasp the way that patterns of variants established in the sketch continue on to the last printed source. There is an essential continuity of conception between the thinking that produced the different versions of the sketch for measures 39–40, and the various chromatically inflected variants that one finds in the printed sources (measures 49 and 143 provide good examples). And continuity, too (as Silvain Guignard

7 The measure numbers will vary according to which edition of this sketch one consults. In Kingsley Day's excellent new edition, the section occupies mm. 63–94; see Chopin, *Mazurka in F Minor Opus Posthumous*, reconstructed and edited by Kingsley Day (New York: G. Schirmer, 2012), pp. 13–14.

8 Christophe Grabowski, "Publication des Valses op. 64 dans un contexte historique et documentaire," in *Frédéric Chopin: Interprétations*, ed. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger and Jacqueline Waerber (Genève: Droz, 2005), pp. 53–68. See also Fryderyk Chopin, *Waltzes*, ed. Christophe Grabowski (London: Edition Peters, 2006), p. 133.

has noted), with the way that we hear Chopin playing with the idea of “wrong notes” throughout the principal section of the Waltz (the downbeat *b* natural in the melody of measure 8 provides an excellent example).⁹ All of this seems the logical effect of a work premised on the idea of the play of variants.

Third, and following naturally from the second point, Chopin’s creative procedures remind us that the composer himself drew attention to the wider resonances of the term “variantes” in his initial title for what became the Berceuse. As I have discussed elsewhere, “variantes” in Chopin’s day connoted scientific and philosophical forms more than musical ones: his handling of the successive, obsessive phrases in opus 57 tell us something about how he understood the idea of variants in his music.¹⁰ In some ways, the Waltz – in its outer sections, at least – represents the logical consequence of the Berceuse, articulating his philosophy of variants in the context of a “normal” (not radically constricted) harmonic underpinning.

The Waltz plays out its stunningly complex array of variants over the simplest of harmonic accompaniments. It is the bass pattern, of course, that grounds the identity of the genre. As Zuber observes, few listeners, hearing the melody alone, would identify the genre as a waltz.¹¹ In this disparity between the generic signals projected by the right and left hands, another hallmark of the late style emerges, namely the idea of the fusion or blurring of genres. Unlike, say, the Polonaise-Fantasy, the blurring of genre is simultaneous in the Waltz, not successive, and so therefore the effect is different. The accompaniment forces us to hear the work as a Waltz, even as the quasi-Baroque thematic play of the melody seems to signal some more serious kind of generic statement.

What then of the middle section, where both Silvain Guignard and Marie-Paule Rambeau note the abandonment of the expected rhythms of the waltz?¹² Does this constitute further evidence of the kind of blending of genres that we expect from the late or last style? For Rambeau, the answer is yes, for she senses Chopin alluding to the mazurka in this section. But I am not entirely persuaded that we are meant to hear a mazurka here. While the familiar accompanimental rhythm of the waltz does fade away, that the oscillating-fourth motive around which the middle section is built emerges from the end of the opening section in the context of a clear waltz accompaniment (compare mm. 67–68 or mm. 71–72 with the opening of the middle section, mm. 73–76) means that the memory of this standard accompaniment is still very much part of the sonic identity of the section. If the middle section does undermine expectations of the genre, it does so in ways made familiar from other Waltzes by Chopin: it shares some of its

9 Silvain Guignard, *Frédéric Chopins Walzer: Eine text- und stilkritische Studie* (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 1986), p. 122.

10 Jeffrey Kallberg, “Chopin’s Music Box,” in *Chopin’s Musical Worlds: the 1840s* (Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2007), pp. 189–202.

11 Zuber, “Syndrom des Salon und Autonomie,” p. 40 (see note 6).

12 Guignard, *Frédéric Chopins Walzer*, p. 92 (see note 9); Marie-Paule Rambeau, *Chopin: L’enchanteur autoritaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005), p. 778.

rhythmic qualities with the Waltz in D flat major, op. 64 no. 1, and (obviously) its cello-like, bass-melody timbre with the Waltz in A minor, op. 34 no. 2.

The middle section emerges almost spontaneously out of the play of the oscillating fourth at the end of the opening section, as if the middle section were a sudden inspiration arrived at on the spur of the moment. Chopin in effect mimes the act of improvisation at this moment, and of course another way of thinking about what I have been insistently describing as the “play of variants” in the principal sections of the Waltz would be to call them improvisational moments.¹³ The simple accompaniment, the fixation on a small fund of motives, varied minutely but perceptibly on successive statements: all this suggests a composer manipulating a certain kind of affective response from both pianist and listener. Here is where we might recall the significant layer of pencil in the sketch of the piece, pencil for Chopin representing the evanescence of performance, the medium through which he often tried to convey, to his students and himself, some of the instantaneous inspirations at the keyboard.¹⁴

Improvisation represents a drastic state with respect to form. In the moment-by-moment unfolding of the work, we remain suspended in formal uncertainty, even as we suspect, retroactively, a strong grounding in convention. The detailed variants somehow confound time: they at once seem to return to the past and move forward to the future. Hence the cumulative quality of transformation in the expressive parameters of the Waltz: a playful move from banality to Bach, we might say.

With this understanding of the improvisatory qualities of the Waltz, we can finally locate its place in the narratives about the late and last styles. It offers another vision of unsettled continuity, achieved less through rupture (as in the Polonaise-Fantasy) than through playful wit. I once wrote “for all of its musical and cultural significance, the last style seems overwhelmingly poignant.”¹⁵ Perhaps so. But perhaps, too, we need to make room in the last style for Chopin's wry smile.

13 John Rink has written extensively on the connections between Chopin's well-documented extemporaneous performances and aspects of his composition style. A brief article that summarizes many of his main findings is John Rink, “The Legacy of Improvisation in Chopin,” *Muzyka w kontekście kultury: Studia dedykowane Profesorowi Mieczysławowi Tomaszewskiemu w osiemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, ed. Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz, Teresa Malecka, and Krzysztof Szwałgier (Cracow: Akademia Muzyczna, 2001), pp. 79–89.

14 I examine the valences of Chopin's use of pencil in a forthcoming essay, “Chopin's Pencil,” *Proceedings of the Third International Chopin Congress* (Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, in press).

15 Kallberg, “Chopin's Last Style,” p. 134 (see note 1).

