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The role of narrative in performing Schumann and Chopin’s music

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The Role of Narrative in Performing Schumann and Chopin’s Music
Yu-Wen Chen

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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Abstract

Recognizing how to present a narrative while performing the music of Schumann and Chopin helps the performer to transmit the spirit of the music and convey expression in the music. In the music-making process, what we cannot discount is that the performer plays a crucial role in conveying musical expression to the listeners, which tremendously affects the quality of the entire musical experience. In this document, I argue that there is a qualitative difference between the ways in which performers should express the central story conveyed in the music of Robert Schumann compared with the story conveyed in the music of Frédéric Chopin, two composers whose music has often been the subject of narrative analyses. In performing Schumann’s music, the performer experiences the narrative from a first-person perspective while playing the music. In Chopin, by contrast, the performer is more distanced from the story, acting as a kind of narrator in the position of telling a story within a narrative frame, something akin to a third-person perspective. In this document, I discuss these two perspectives in the piano music of Schumann and Chopin. I begin with an overview of musical narrative, followed by an exploration of the elements of narrative in these composers’ music. I then proceed to provide analyses of their piano music in terms of form and structure. In the last chapter, I suggest some performance interpretations for the pianist that reinforce the different narratological perspectives I identify in the music of both Schumann and Chopin. I conclude by arguing how the result of my analysis can benefit a pianist’s interpretation, and how that interpretation in turn can affect the audience’s musical experience.
Chapter 1: Defining Musical Narrative

Introduction

Many philosophers have discussed the relationship between music and emotion. Some scholars have insisted that music is simply pure sound structure and its beauty has no reference to an extra meaning beyond itself; others have opposed this view and believe music is capable of expressing the deep thoughts and profound emotions of the human experience.¹ The arguments and attitudes of the musical meaning have been discussed and debated as early as Plato and Aristotle.² In fact, music has been an essential part of humankind’s social activities since ancient times and associated with specific activities, such as religious ceremonies, as well as marking any number of specific occasions. In other words, how music has developed has been strongly associated with our everyday lives. Therefore, music is not only just sound or sound structure; its expressions are significantly connected to human emotions and feelings in that “sound” or “sound structure” can carry extra-musical meanings. Edward T. Cone states, “Music communicates, it makes statements, it conveys messages, it expresses emotions. It has its own syntax, its own rhetoric, even its own semantics.”³ Cone’s viewpoint corresponds with Mendelssohn’s interpretation of music. For Mendelssohn, the thoughts expressed by the music he

²Donald Jay Grout, J. Peter Burkholder, and Claude V. Palisca, A History of Western Music (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 7-8. Plato described how music directly imitates the passions or states of the soul and recognized that music can communicate human emotion and contains the power of shaping the character.
loved “are not too imprecise to be framed in words, but too precise.” Both explain a similar idea that music itself is also considered a communicating medium of thoughts and emotions.

Some of the ideals of Romanticism go against the social and political norms of the time. Owing to the breakdown of the patronage system, composers became more independent. Thus, in the Romantic era, the freedom to express human emotion was emphasized, the quality of individuality was highlighted, the mystery of the human soul was explored, and the majestic power of nature was glorified. These manifestations became an essential part of the spirit of Romanticism. Artists’ inspiration often comes from emotions; in addition, their passion is also aroused through various media, such as the visual arts, literature, and music. In fact, the inspiration of literature has become one of the important and central thoughts of the Romantic composers. We find Friedrich Schiller’s spirit in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Wilhelm Müller’s sentiments in Schubert’s Winterreise, Jean Paul’s novel in Schumann’s Papillons, and Dante’s influence in Liszt’s musical works; these have shown the close relevance between music and literature in the Romantic era.

In attempting to understand the relationship between the music and literature, musicians have also sought other ways to transcend the capacity of words to express the emotional complexity of the human experience. In fact, because words could not satisfy some writers, music became a consolation for their soul. E. T. A. Hoffman said, “Music is the most Romantic of all the arts, as its subject is only the infinite, the secret Sanskrit of Nature expressed in tones which fill the human heart with endless longing, and only in music does one understand the songs of the trees, flowers,

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4Christina D. Eckerty and Hali Annette Fieldman, Narrative Strategies in Robert Schumann’s Davidsbündlertänze and Dichterliebe, PhD diss., 2008, 3.
The works of Schumann and Chopin were created in the midst of this intellectual and artistic movement. Although both are representatives of Romanticism, their respective aesthetic content is qualitatively different. Schumann’s unique musical language features contrasting characters and dramatic shifts of expression; his music is structured in a fragmented and disjunct way. A number of factors may explain this quality of his music: literary influences, his split personality, and his tumultuous relationship with Clara. The fragmented, disjunct, and angular quality of Schumann’s music encourages performers to embody the music’s narrative frame; this kind of disjunct writing results in a feeling of unexpected musical and emotional events; a feeling of spontaneity as if to thrust the performer into the story to participate as a character. By contrast, Chopin’s music is characterized by a more linear progression and lines whose goals can be anticipated; the climax and conclusion are led by a continuous direction which forms a musical story line. Therefore, the intensity of musical and emotional expression needs to be structured hierarchically. The performer’s perspective may be taken from a third-person position to perform Chopin’s music as telling a story; the well-planned musical structure provides a great tension in its development and invites the performer to play the role of a narrator who can anticipate how the structure and story unfold.

This document begins with an overview of musical narrative. Next, I summarize the kinds of literary influences that likely impacted Schumann and Chopin. An investigation of narrative structure in music by both composers leads to the performance suggestions discussed presented in the final chapter.

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An Overview of Musical Narrative

Scholars have discussed the concept of narrative from a time as early as that of Aristotle, who believed narratives must always consist of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Many critics, including Roland Barthes and Edward Branigan, agree with this perspective and considered a series of events as the essential elements in literary narrative. Branigan, responding to Aristotle, writes,

some person, object, or situation undergoes a particular type of change and this change is measured by a sequence of attributions which apply to the thing at different times. Narrative is a way of experiencing a group of sentences or pictures (or gestures or dance movements, etc.) which together attribute a beginning, middle, and end to something.6

Therefore, narrative consists of a series of events that unfold in succession and form a hierarchical structure.

Although literature is the medium most commonly, and perhaps most obviously, associated with narrative, other kinds of human activities also engage narrative: speech, music, film, and theater, for example, all invoke narrative. Barthes explained that narrative is presented in various genres, forms, and media and in all times, places, and societies; he even considered life itself as a type of literal presentation of narrative.7 Since music is a temporal art form, it is only natural to apply narrative principles in an attempt to interpret its content. As Jean-Jacques Nattiez has argued in his discussion of narrativity in music, “the concept of narrative was born with literature, oral and written, and because there is a clear ontological difference between literary narrative and musical ‘narrative’, we cannot tackle the question of narrative in music without taking literary narrative as a point of reference.”8 In other words, Nattiez believes that when we apply the concept of

8Jean-Jacques Nattiez, “Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?” Journal of the Royal
narrative to music, the essence of narrative that originated in literature cannot be neglected.

Is it possible to apply concepts from literary narrative to the analysis of music? Many music theorists have noticed that musical structure contains elements similar to those found in literature. Fred Everett Maus mentions that Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in 1928, is an important early contribution to modern work on narrative syntax: “Literary theory attempts to generalize about narrative by identifying recurring elements within plots and stating rules for combining them.” Anthony Newcomb also found Propp’s Russian folktales provide “the best point of departure for the exploration of his [Newcomb’s] analogy.” He states, “One finds a relatively large number of recurrences of the same structural relations, in which ‘the basic unit of the tale is not the character but his function,’ and ‘the sequence of these functions is always the same.’” This explanation is based on Newcomb’s observation that literature and music share a similar feature: the narrative can be recognized by a series of functional events that are displayed in succession. Therefore, musical structures, such as sonata, rounded binary, ritornello, and so on, can be interpreted through a narrative frame. When these functional events are arranged in order, Newcomb calls it a “paradigmatic plot.” He explains that the paradigmatic plot is not necessarily established by the certain recurring sections or characters; a series of unfolding events can be recognized by the relationships or

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12Newcomb, 165.
connections between the musical elements, such as motives, rhythms or harmonic progressions.13

Some may question the ability of music to express a narrative since it is arguably less specific in its connections to a given meaning than its linguistic counterparts. By virtue of the differences between literature and music, some issues of compatibility naturally exist. Byron Almén, in comparing musical narrative to literary narrative, argues that we should not consider literary narrative to be the “parent” of all narrative because such a hierarchy unnecessarily values literary narrative above all other forms. He argues that “music’s lack of semantic specificity can be viewed as a positive characteristic, in that music can display narrative activity without being limited to specific characters and settings.”14 Matthew McDonald believes that the narrative concept in music should be interpreted with a broader approach, instead of applying all criteria of literary narrative to music; the narrative elements can be recognized as a “conceptual source for aspects of the music.”15 McDonald explains that if we regard common practice tonality and sonata form as genuine elements of a sonata movement in the eighteenth century, narrative elements are genuine elements of the music.16 That is to say that the narrative concepts of music are enlightened by the literary sources, notwithstanding all the criteria.

The function of a narrative analysis of music is to explain the connections between events and actions, something that may allow one to develop a kind of story. In other words, successions of musical events can be understood as unfolding in the context of a narrative. Almén states, “musical narrative is a psychologically and

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13Ibid., 165.
16Ibid., 266.
However, some researchers have argued with the existence of narrative in music. Carolyn Abbate’s statement “Music seems not to have a past tense” is one of the most representative arguments. Abbate questions how one might demonstrate narrative function in music without a narrator’s diegesis (telling), which always happens in the past tense. Researchers like Abbate have asserted that, without a narrator, music cannot properly exhibit narrative properties. Paul Cobley expresses a similar view to Abbate’s; he defines “narratives as the ‘showing or telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place.’” Cobley argues that narrative is created and implicated by a narrator who is telling or showing some events in any medium. In other words, lacking a narrator, narrative in music would be a failure.

Nattiez argues that the functional events can be recognized in music; however, because they cannot tell us exactly what happens and why, he opposes the argument that narrative exhibits in the music and believes the narrative resides in the listener’s imagination. That is, events in music, such as expectation, returns, and resolutions, are formed as a plot through the listener's interpretation, not through music itself.

Nevertheless, numerous scholars have defended the reasonability of narrative in music. Leo Treitler challenges Abbate’s statement by arguing that the past tense can be implied by musical unfoldings through memory; he uses the first movement of Mozart’s G minor Symphony as an example and explains that the recurring motives of

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17Almén, 27.
21Nattiez, 249.
the first theme in the coda refer to an event or a thought in the distant past.\textsuperscript{22} He also believes that “the tense cannot be counted on as a criterion for deciding what is and is not narrative.”\textsuperscript{23} In order to demonstrate the implication between narrative and temporality, Michael Klein, in his article “Chopin’s Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative,” illustrates the association of the past and present tense with key relationships (motion to dominant and subdominant) and narrative(action)/lyrical(evocation) time (see Figure 1.1: Klein adopts Raymond Monelle’s argument of paradigm that indicates \textit{Gang} as time rested, \textit{Satz} as time passing). In Chopin’s Fourth Ballade, the key in the introductory section (mm. 1-7) is represented as C major; the cadence in measure 3 affirms the harmonic function of V\textsubscript{7}/IV and signifies the F as a subdominant in measure 2. The plagal close in mm. 6-7 indicates the role of F as subdominant until the first theme arrives in measure 8, where the tonal focus is shifted to F minor. Klein interprets this opening lyrical section as being in the present because the motion of F directly moves to dominant in measure 3. He explains that the tonal center is so clearly C major in the introductory section that it may lead us to hear the key motion to measure 8 as subdominant rather than from dominant to tonic. Therefore, the first theme suggests the past (Example 1.1). In the opening of Chopin’s Fourth Ballade, the narrative is in present tense and reverses to the past when the first theme enters. Both the introduction and the first theme are lyrical; the narrative strategy and tense are demonstrated by the tonal relationships.\textsuperscript{24} From Klein’s observation, it is reasonable to say that narrative in music can suggest the past tense. Klein states, “In Chopin’s music action is often suspended so that the narrator may

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{24}Klein, 40.
indulge in the poetry of evocation and also contemplate a scene from the past." In this point of view, we can say music can provide a sense of time (present and past) and spatial frame in a broader concept.

**Figure 1.1.** Klein’s Temporary in narrative forms in Chopin’s Fourth Ballade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Narrative Time (Action)</th>
<th>Lyric Time (Evocation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>motion to dominant</td>
<td>Time passes in the present</td>
<td>Time stops in the present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Narrative Time (Action)</th>
<th>Lyric Time (Evocation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>motion to subdominant</td>
<td>Time passes in the past</td>
<td>Time stops in the past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example 1.1.** Chopin’s Fourth Ballade, mm. 1-3 & 7-9

On the other hand, Maus explores the analogy between music and drama. He describes music as being like a stage play; therefore, whatever properties of narrative exist in stage play can be exhibited in music. He argues, “[u]se of the past tense is a common, but dispensable, marker of the distinction between events and their

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25 Ibid., 39.
26 Ibid., 40.
27 Example adopted from Klein, 42.
descriptions or depictions.” He suggests that music performance is like an event taking place in the present; a story can unfold in real time.

In comparing music to drama and literature, one of the major differences is the existence of the narrator. Edward T. Cone proposes the concept of the persona, which refers to an abstract form or a speaking voice that experiences the emotional states in music. In Schubert’s “Erlkönig,” Cone explains that the persona in the vocal line takes on the role of a character, while the accompaniment plays the role of the narrator who tells the story of “Erlkönig.” In instrumental music, the persona might be difficult to recognize. However, Cone explains that a performer is an actor who portrays characters in performance; the performer should be inspired by the persona, and his or her job is to present and awaken it. Cone’s explanation suggests that the identification of a performer is much like a narrator or storyteller in the literary sense.

Several authors have discussed how characters arise in music. Since Altman argues that characters are just as essential as actions and events, the presence of characters may contribute to the listener’s or performer’s desire to hear a passage narratively. Newcomb explains that “character,” in a narrative sense, can refer to representative or expressive elements; we can find these musical attributes of character in features such as tempo, texture, rhythmic motive, or harmonic support. He believes that instrumental music has voice in the metaphorical sense, even though it is not capable of producing the voice in the literal sense as a living being. Therefore, narrative in music can be constituted by the elements of music and seen through the sense of metaphors without linguistic utterance. Cone expresses the idea of the gestural aspect of utterance in music and suggested that narrative in music can

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28 Maus, 22.
29 Cone, 106.
31 Ibid., 133.
be recognized as a gesture. He writes,

If music is a language, it is a language of gesture: of direct actions, of pause, of startings and stoppings, of rise and falls, of tenseness and slackness, of accentuations. These gestures are symbolized by musical motifs and progressions, and they are given structure by musical rhythm and meter, under the control of musical tempo.  

The successive events in music are considered characters, actions or gestures that form a musical story. These musical elements create a narrative that shapes the listeners’ or performers’ appreciation.

Musical events consist of various characters with actions; the narrated events form a story and narrative is a way of presenting a story. In other words, a story can be expressed in different ways depending on the narrative approach. Whether the composer writes music in a narrative way, the performer interprets music from a narrative perspective, the listener imagines a narrative in music, or music itself is provided with the narrative essence, the narrative nature indeed exists in the process of experiencing music. I believe that characters, events, thoughts, and actions are formed by the gestures and elements of music. When these components are represented in a form of musical successions, the piece itself suggests narrative. However, which narrative point of view, perspective, or voice is spoken in the story is not only related to the representation of a composer’s thoughts and sentiments, but it is also defined by the understanding, interpretation, expression, and imagination of a performer and an audience’s experiences.

The soul of Romanticism emphasizes individuality and expressing apparent emotions; therefore, musicians communicate their ideas and emotions in the most direct way through their music. As Newcomb states, “many 19th century musicians invented stories—patterns of external and internal human actions—to go with many

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32Cone, 164.
of the pieces they valued most, including their own.”

Undoubtedly, Robert Schumann and Frédéric Chopin both occupied significant positions as Romantic composers; however, their musical esthetics and languages were expressed in distinct ways. In the following chapters, I discuss the nature of narrative in Schumann’s and Chopin’s respective music from their background, personality, and influences.

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33 Newcomb, 132.
Chapter 2: The Nature of Narrative in the Music of Schumann and Chopin

As the son of a bookseller, publisher, and novelist, Schumann was enthralled by the literature of German Romanticism. There is no doubt that the spirit and aesthetic of Schumann’s music were deeply influenced by giant figures of Romantic literature such as Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Jean Paul Richter, and E. T. A. Hoffman, among others. His passion for literature was so great that he even led a literary study group on German literature from 1825 to 1828. As John Daverio notes, Schumann claimed that “he ‘learned more counterpoint from Jean Paul than from his music teacher’ . . .” Later in life he transitioned from reader to writer when he began publishing musical criticism in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (*New Journal for Music*), first published in Leipzig in 1834. Though Schumann believed words held a certain kind of power, he also believed that music could transcend words, that it could express his feelings more directly than any other art form. He considered music a language with a spiritual quality. In a letter to his mother in 1832, Schumann stated, “I still consider that music is the ideal language of the soul.” Nevertheless, Schumann believed that words and music were intimately connected, something he often demonstrated when he wrote about music. For instance, in a diary entry from 1828, Schumann wrote: “When I hear music by Beethoven, it is as if someone were reading to me a work of Jean Paul; Schubert reminds me of Novalis.” Particularly for Schumann, as Larry Todd mentions:

Jean Paul and Beethoven were frequently compared in the early nineteenth century. This seemed appropriate, particularly for Schumann, since Beethoven’s ambitions regarding the playing and hearing of music paralleled

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Jean Paul’s ideas about writing and reading. In his notations concerning the ‘Pastoral’ Symphony, Beethoven distinguished between description and illustration, and the expressive realization through music of the impact of nature, people, and events—items of real experience.38

Growing up in the literary family, Schumann had a great passion for literature and was profoundly influenced by German writers in his youth. These factors nurtured his creativity and imagination significantly in musical writing. Schumann realized his ineffable feelings and spirit could be expressed through musical notes in his later years; however, the power of literature continued to be strongly connected to his musical experience.

Many of Schumann’s compositions for piano were inspired by literary works:

*Papillons*, Op. 2 by Jean Paul’s novel *Die Flegeljahre; Kreisleriana*; Op. 16 by E. T. A. Hoffman’s collection of essays *Kreisleriana* and by his novel *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Makulaturblättern* (The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr with a fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler). Two of Hoffman’s works happen to share not only the same title as Schumann’s *Kreisleriana* but also the interrelations of characters, structures, and philosophical thinking. One of the central characters in Hoffman’s novel is the eccentric conductor named “Johannes Kreisler,” for whom the novel is named. From his musical background and his vision of the musical world, Hoffman manifested himself as the portrait of Kreisler who struggles between the divine values of art and the philistinism of a smug, uncultured public.39 Schumann took inspiration from Hoffman’s words and endeavored to defend the cause of contemporary music against its detractors who were Philistines. For Schumann, Philistines were symbolized as

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people who held the notions of backward-looking and obsolete ideas. He even created the music society called “Davidsbündler” (League of David) for his ideal which resulted in his remarkable Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6 and Carnival, Op. 9. Though the fictitious organization only exists in Schumann’s writings, its membership consisted of both real and imagined people. Schumann defended the musical society in reality through an imaginary group that represented his inner voice. This explains how Kreisler’s duality of artistic personality, ranging from indignation to hopefulness between the real and the inner worlds of Hoffman’s writing, inspired Schumann’s reflection of himself as living between idealism and reality.\(^\text{40}\) In particular, creating the contrasting figures of “Florestan” and “Eusebius” in Davidsbündler allowed Schumann to present stark, contrasting personalities and viewpoints in his music. Mitsuko Uchida said, “He [Schuman] has such fantasy, such imagination, unique imagination; and he had invented some way of composing. As some people in 20th century, now in 21st century, certain numbers of young composers discovering the very peculiar process of Schumann and the inspiration.”\(^\text{41}\) The fantasy world in literature enriched Schumann’s imagination and creativity in both musical criticism and composition, and composing allowed him to express these thoughts in ways that musical criticism did not. In addition, Schumann’s musical writing style was influenced by the Romantic writers such as Hoffman and Jean Paul. Julian Johnson discovers that in Hoffman’s story, the narrative was shaped by the correspondence of the reality and fantasy worlds, and the bridges between the two in Hoffman’s writing are not structured in gradual progressions but in abrupt shifts; this style is equally seen in Schumann’s structural device.\(^\text{42}\) Newcomb suggests that Schumann’s

\(^\text{40}\)Tseng, 25.


\(^\text{42}\)Julian Johnson, “Narrative Strategies in ETA Hoffmann and Robert Schumann,”
compositional style seems to share a similar quality with Jean Paul’s digressive style.\textsuperscript{43} The emotional changes in Schumann’s music are so abrupt that his music often sounds fragmented, discontinued and disjunctive.

Schumann’s mental depression and delusions could also have been one of the factors that affected his personality and compositions. Simon Rattle describes, “When he did finally compose, everything was within a very short time, and he composed in a kind of fever, because he could only compose when he was in his manic state.”\textsuperscript{44} His \textit{Kreisleriana} was written in only four days in April 1838. In a letter to Clara dated 11 March 1839, Schumann said, “All week I’ve been sitting at the piano and composing and writing and laughing and crying, all at the same time. You can find this beautifully illustrated in my opus 20, the great \textit{Humoreske} . . . twelve sheets composed in a week.”\textsuperscript{45} In 1833 at age 23, his severe depression was exacerbated by the deaths of his brother Julius and his sister-in-law Rosalie, and signs of mental disorder were revealed from the time. In 1839, he had a premonition of his older brother Eduard’s death and a hallucination of the funeral procession. Under this stressful circumstance, he intended to call his new composition \textit{Corpse Fantasia} (titled “\textit{Nachtstücke}” later). Schumann’s symptoms increased in severity, and in 1854 led to an attempted suicide by throwing himself into the Rhine River; he subsequently voluntarily took to an asylum until his death in 1856. For almost half of Schumann’s life, he coexisted with his mental illness. Close to the end of his life, the angelic and demonic visions were even alternating in his mind, possibly reflecting an extreme version of his dualistic personality. Regarding the association between madness and

\textsuperscript{43}Newcomb, “Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies,” 168–169.
\textsuperscript{45}Peter F. Ostwald, \textit{Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius} (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2010), 146.
artistic creation, Charles Rosen states, “Madness, for the Romantic artists, was more than the breakdown of rational thought; it was an alternative which promised not only different insights but also a different logic.”\(^{46}\) Therefore, recognizing Schumann’s mental challenges provides invaluable context for understanding his music.

In fact, not only did Schumann suffer from several bouts of depression, but he had also struggled in a significant way with his relationship with Clara. The main obstacle came from the opposition of Clara’s father, Frederick Wieck, who perhaps had been aware of Schumann’s mental instability. However, the forced separation from Clara did not stop Schumann’s ambition; on the contrary, the forbidden relationship not only reinforced his desire for Clara, but at the same time it stimulated his musical creativity. A number of his great piano works were composed during their separation. In his letter in September 1839, Schumann wrote, “I dare say the struggles I have endured about Clara are to a certain extent reflected in my music... The concerto, the sonata, Davidsbündlertänze, Kreisleriana, and Novelletten were almost entirely inspired by her.”\(^{47}\) All the Novelletten Op. 21, Schumann wrote, “contain ‘images of you in every possible setting and harmony, and in other ways in which you are irresistible!’”\(^{48}\) Clara was also mentioned in his remarkable Phantasie, Carnaval, and Humoreske. These references to Clara explain the significant role she played in Schumann’s music. His affection for Clara was so genuine and truthful that it rendered the color of his music more dramatic and vivid than it might otherwise have been.

From the background of German literature, the effect of mental illness to his love for Clara, Schumann’s music contains abundant influences. These aspects

\(^{48}\)Ibid., 213.
informed his musical structure and developed into essential components in the narrative frame. His musical structure stresses the qualities of incoherence and discontinuity; and the narrative in his music unfolds by the contrasting characters and the parallelism between real and fictional world. The dramatic emotional expression is enriched by his love of Clara; the wealth of creativity is stimulated by his psyche.

Unlike Schumann (along with Berlioz and Liszt), Chopin is not generally seen as a radical Romantic composer. Nevertheless, Chopin is unique with respect to the association between his music and the literature of his time. Essential to the spirit of Romanticism is the emphasis on the intense expression of individual emotions from one’s inner world. In this sense, Chopin’s music is an exemplar of Romanticism. Rosen remarks, “The fusion of narrative and lyric in the Ballades is perhaps Chopin’s greatest achievement: he realized in music one of the major ambitions of the Romantic poets and novelists.”

He explains that the narrative technique Chopin employed in the ballades is that the intensity was increased through a series of formal periods and refrains; in that, the formal divisions were softened to form a sense of story. Chopin integrated the sectional materials as a continuity and this musical flow was imbued with narrative properties.

Chopin’s Polish heritage and French background surely informed his musical expression and character. From the day he traveled to Paris when he was twenty, Chopin never returned to Poland. However, he maintained the strong connection to his homeland until his death. While the Polish spirit and heroic vitality were deeply rooted in his music, his refined manner allowed him to socialize in the circle of Parisian nobility. Konrad Wolff states: “If one were to investigate Chopin’s music just

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49Rosen et al., 322.
50Ibid., 323.
from the viewpoint of national origin, one would probably conclude that in the finesse of his intellectual approach Chopin was largely French, but that the character and feelings for his music is predominately Polish.”\textsuperscript{52}

Chopin participated in aristocracy in Paris, but did not consider himself a public performer. This bashful personality kept him an enigmatic figure to some extent. Moreover, his attentive quality was not only revealed by his impeccable dress but also by his compositional process that involved extensive revision. He seemed to struggle as much as Beethoven did with his manuscripts, even though his music speaks to us so naturally and is so accessible. In fact, Chopin’s expressive nature is heard in every note on each page. A. Redgrave Cripps states:

> In the whole of his music—in the whole, that is, of his mature writing—there is hardly an instance of a passage dragged in merely for the sake of display, or to fill up, or for the sake of some special effect; every passage exists only for the sake of its relation to the whole, and apart from that whole would have no meaning.\textsuperscript{53}

During his lifetime, Chopin dealt with over twenty publishers and modified his manuscript to send to different ones. These revisions reflected his attentiveness to every detail in his music and led to the controversy over various editions that continues today. As a result, Chopin’s emotional expression in music is relatively refined. The carefully planned, basic structural frame of his compositions tends to follow classical archetypes, while the complexity of his emotions is expressed by the twisted melody and colorfully dissonant and elaborated textures in his music. Not much different from Schumann, Chopin’s emotion for his beloved is passionate; however, instead of intuition, his sentiment is sung and represented in a well-composed story.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., 188.

\textsuperscript{53}A. Redgrave Cripps, “Chopin as a Master of Form,” \textit{The Musical Times} 55, no. 858 (1914): 517.
To convey the appropriate musical expression and to present the story of the music in the most convincing way, I believe performers should consider the narrative point of view when they perform the music of Schumann and Chopin. “Florestan” and “Eusebius” are the two contrasting figures Schumann often used in his writing and criticism to reflect two different points of view. Florestan was passionate, impetuous and impulsive; by contrast, Eusebius was sensitive, introspective, and a dreamer. In fact, these two fictional characters are regarded as a reflection of Schumann’s dual personalities. Both active and passive natures were truly living inside of him. The contrasting figures coexist in Schumann’s music and they can be switched even without any preparation. Therefore, standing in the first-person narrative point of view allows a performer to “experience” Schumann’s music in the most effective way through the process of performing. In other words, performing Schumann’s music is like experiencing a work of fiction taking place in the moment while the music is happening. A performer is both narrator and character, thus allowing him or her to get into the core of the spirit and emotional states in the fictional world. One who narrates from a first-person perspective typically lives in the perceptual present, and is unaware of the future path the story will take. The fragmented and interrupted quality of Schumann’s music provides a similar sense of both immediacy and uncertainty about the progression of a phrase, section, or piece.

Chopin’s unique artistic temperament is depicted in his extraordinary harmonic design, contrapuntal texture, and melodic ornamentations. The aesthetics of piano music have been brought to a new vision through his creativity and innovation while retaining a deep love for older masters, especially Bach and Mozart. The delicate and refined qualities are not only in Chopin’s personality but in his musical language and performing style as well. Ferdinand Hiller describes: “What in the hands
of others was elegant embellishment, in his [Chopin’s] hands became a colourful wreath of flowers.”

Emile Gaillard states: “His [Chopin’s] right hand would seem casually to unfold a magnificent lacework of sound. Virtuosity disappeared behind the emotion; one was less dazzled than moved.”

One of the essential elements in Chopin’s compositional style is improvisation; however, his manner of improvisation does not suggest intuitive rambling. Nicholas Temperley explains Chopin’s approach: “Improvisation is designed for an audience, and its starting-point is that audience’s expectations, which include the current conventions of musical form.”

Chopin’s compositions provided a broader scope and overall structure. A performer is omniscient and can view all of the characters, actions, and events that will appear or take place in a work; he needs to associate the passages with their relationships and causality. This is close to Cone’s interpretation of a performer’s position that she needs to know what has happened before and what is happening now, and anticipates what is coming next. This is not to say that a performer is less attached to the music; he should go with the musical flow, express the delays and detours along the way, and be fulfilled by the final completion. This role is much like a storyteller or narrator from the third-person narrative point of view, which allows a performer to comprehend the articulation and relationship of the narrative frame. Therefore, the music is interpreted through a third-person perspective by a performer who sees the outside world, conveys the character’s thoughts, and connects the events.

In the next chapter, I analyze Schumann and Chopin’s music from a narrative

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55 Ibid., 154.
57 Cone, 127.
standpoint to demonstrate how the two narrative perspectives—first-person in Schumann and third-person in Chopin—arise in their respective compositions.
Chapter 3: Form and Structure

Structure provides the framework of a story and determines how the narrative is presented. Narrative structure refers to the form employed in telling a story and relates to the experience of a reader’s, a listener’s or a performer’s interpretation of a story or plot, which includes the development of characters, actions, and events, among others. The different interpretive perspectives of the music of Schumann and Chopin are concerned with their approaches to narrative structure. Schumann’s reinvention of the classical model in music allowed his imagination and thoughts to be expressed without boundaries. Chopin was another figure who sought freedom of expression; he employed the classical archetype but endowed it with a new connotation. Both composers uniquely treated compositional structure, resulting in different narrative interpretations of their music.

Schumann

The way Schumann presented musical criticism often included various narrative forms, such as dialogue, prose, letter, and story.\textsuperscript{58} He employed Florestan and Eusebius as voices to express his opinions, and both often exchanged their thoughts about music through a narrative form of dialogue, in which the scenes involved conversations or arguments. This style of writing enlivens the characters.

Schumann found the opposing personalities of Vult and Walt from Jean Paul’s novel “\textit{Flegeljahre}.” These personalities corresponded to the characters of Florestan and Eusebius in his \textit{Papillons}, Op. 2. These two characters entered Schumann’s diary in 1831 for the first time, the same year he composed his \textit{Papillons}. Since then, Schumann employed this double nature and dualistic narrative style in his piano music. The form of dance suites and the imaginary figures were continued to form his

\textsuperscript{58}Tseng, 56.
Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6 and Carnaval, Op. 9. Tseng describes Schumann’s writing style in musical criticism: “As one interrupts the other, the tone switches between Florestan’s impetuosity and Eusebius’ composure, creating discontinuity and shifts in mood, much as in Schumann’s music.” Schumann’s Davidsbündlertänze, consisting of sixteen small pieces, is representative of the two characters in music. The initial “F,” “E,” and “F and E” marked in each piece of the first edition indicate the mood and characters of Florestan, Eusebius, or both. The two characters interact through dialogue in many settings in this work. For instance, Davidsbündlertänze, No. 1 is preceded by the letters “F and E,” indicating that both Florestan and Eusebius appear in the piece. The characters are identified by differences of dynamic, tempo, and key change in measures 14-17 (Example 3.1). The dynamic “forte” and the key in G major signify the energetic and strong tone of Florestan in measures 14-15; the tonal focus shifts to G minor with a soft voice, and reduced tempo (ritardando) in measures 16-17 portray the passive and introverted characteristics of Eusebius.

![Example 3.1. Schumann's Davidsbündlertänze Op. 6, No. 1, mm. 14-17.](image)

Later, in measure 34, Florestan appears with an agitated attitude which is depicted by the strong dynamic and hemiola effect. Florestan is followed by Eusebius’s response in a delicate voice which is indicated by the regular rhythmic design (measure 40),

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59Ibid., abstract in 56-57.
more legato articulation and quiet dynamic (Example 3.2).

Example 3.2. Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6, No. 1, mm. 34-41

*Davidsbündlertänze* No. 16, marked “Mit gutem Humor,” demonstrates argumentative conversations between Florestan and Eusebius in a humorous way. The staccato chords evoke Eusebius’ timid voice because of the soft dynamics and light articulation (Example 3.3). The following interrupted octaves with strong dynamics symbolize Florestan’s impulsiveness and impatience. Several argumentative behaviors are presented in this piece. For example, a disruption happens in measure 4; the chords and repeated octaves alternate, interact, and interrupt each other in measures 24-37, forming an argumentative quality (Example 3.4). At the end of this piece (measures 39-41), the value of the notes lengthens from eighth- to quarter-note and the dynamic is softened to pianissimo; it is as if a reconciliation takes place in measures 39-41. Moreover, Florestan interrupts with repeated octaves (Fs) in measures 35 and 37 and becomes a repeated single-note in the end; this change might be interpreted as Florestan finally accepting the compromise with a relaxed tone. These musical thoughts are so unexpected and bizarre that it is like hearing the interactions themselves from the characters’ voices, with the event happening in real
time.

**Example 3.3.** Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6, No. 16, mm. 1-4

When the contrasting characters expand into a larger portion, they become sections within a piece. A number of Schumann’s small pieces were written in simple binary, ternary or rondo form, demonstrating the alternation between the contrasting characters. For instance, his *Kreisleriana* consists of eight pieces and most of them are written in ternary and rondo form (Figure 3.1).
The large-scale form of Schumann’s small pieces typically follows Classical models, but the transitions between sections are typically abrupt. The jarring quality sparks the listeners’ curiosity. Its impulsive, instinctive, and spontaneous nature creates the impression that the performer and listener are directly experiencing the emotions and thoughts of the character in real time. The stormy and impetuous character is introduced at the outset. The upbeat sixteenth-note gesture and metrical dissonance create a sense of beginning “in medias res” (a beginning that opens in the middle of the action) (Example 3.5).

Example 3.5. Schumann’s Kreisleriana, No. 1, mm. 1-5

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60 Tseng, 73-74.
The turbulence and intensity of emotion are characteristic of the entire A section. The B section interrupts in measure 25 with an opposing character. In addition, the contours are presented in opposite directions: The A section is illustrated as an ascending gesture, while the B section is descending. The discontinuity is not only demonstrated by the difference of texture and dynamic, but also the shift of key from D minor to distant B-flat major without modulation (Example 3.6). Such sudden shifts are characteristic of Schumann’s music and appear in such other works as Novelletten, Op. 21, Nos. 2 and 7, for example.

![Example 3.6. Schumann’s Kreisleriana, No. 1, mm. 21-28](image)

This seemly incoherent quality may create a challenge for the performers and listeners in comprehending Schumann’s compositional thought process. Newcomb states, “Most characteristically, Schumann, like Jean Paul, avoids clear linear narrative through a stress on interruption, embedding, digression, and willful reinterpretation of the apparent function of an event (what one might call functional punning). He does so in such a way as to keep us wondering where we are in what sort of pattern—in such a way as to stress the process of narrative interpretation.”\(^6^1\) Schumann’s music encourages a narrative understanding for the performer and

\(^6^1\) Newcomb, “Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies,” 169.
listener because the discontinuities invite a listener to question how the music is unified. The small pieces within a large work are represented as individual scenes. Although they seem to be disconnected on the surface, the unifying elements are buried in the music as threads that bind each scene together.

Many of his piano works were based on this unconventional form, which we might call a “piano cycle.” The term “cycle” implies that “some sense of unity flows from a coherent tonal and formal organization.”62 The cyclic structure in Schumann’s piano works reveals emergent unifying elements, including such factors as literary references, character poetries, musical cryptograms, images of Clara, and structural frames, which play the role of underlying principles to frame the narrative. The literary reference is referred in Papillons; Davidsbündlertänze is unified by the character properties; musical cryptograms are adopted in Carnaval. These unifying elements are illustrated in the following discussion.

Papillons, Op. 2 is inspired by Jean Paul's novel Flegeljahre and refers to a masked ballroom. Schumann sent the first edition of Papillons to his mother for presentation to his three sisters-in-law; his words in his cover letter were as follows: “Please ask all of them to be so kind as to read the final scene of Jean Paul’s Flegeljahre as soon as possible, for the Papillons are actually meant to transform this masked ball into notes.”63 From the introduction revealing the opening of the ball to the six accented notes (As) representing the striking of a clock that implied the ending of the ball in the last piece, the narrative in Papillons unfolds with each piece portraying a sense of the ball. Davidsbündlertänze is comprised of eighteen pieces that use the characters of “Florestan and Eusebius” as organizing forces. Schumann’s

“Davidsbündler” not only inspired *Davidsbündlertänze*, but it also shaped his remarkable *Carnaval*. The pieces that comprise *Carnaval* are interconnected by the letters “ASCH,” which are derived from the name of the town where Ernestine von Fricken (Schumann’s fiancée for a time) was born. A circular rearrangement results in “SCHA,” which refers to Schumann’s own name (Figure 3.2). For instance, the musical cryptogram “ASCH” is implied in “Pierrot,” “Arlequin,” and “Florestan” (Example 3.7); moreover, “As-C-H” can be recognized in the opening of “Estrella,” “Reconnaissance,” and “Valse allemande” (Example 3.8). 64 These recurring mottoes are significant thematic materials throughout the cycle.

**Figure 3.2.** Musical cryptograms in Schumann’s *Carnival*, Op. 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>A, E-flat, C, B</th>
<th>A-flat, C, B</th>
<th>E-Flat, C, B, A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rendered in German</td>
<td>A-S-C-H</td>
<td>As-C-H</td>
<td>S-C-H-A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Pierrot, mm. 1-2

Arlequin, mm. 1-6

Florestan, mm. 1-6

Estrella, mm. 1-4

Reconnaissance, mm. 1-4

Valse allemande, mm. 1-4

From the performer’s perspective, one way to interpret Schumann’s music is to make the characters in his fictional world come alive, portraying the fantasy on the piano. To project the musical ideas, performers are encouraged to experience the piece “in the moment” and to place themselves in the role of actors in the music. In other words, “experiencing” the narrative flow as participants in a story provides a more convincing interpretation than might otherwise have been available.
Chopin

Chopin’s music provides a goal-driven momentum and constructs a plot filled by the characters and actions as stories. The narrative sense is implicit and developed through a Romantic spirit and expression. From a pianist’s perspective, performing Chopin’s music is like “telling” a story as a narrator. It is important for performers to identify the characteristics of the themes, know how the themes develop and the story ends, and control the tension and denouement of the story accordingly. In other words, drawing the listeners’ attention requires an intellectual comprehension of the musical content in coordination with a spontaneity of expression in interpretation to perform Chopin’s music.

Chopin’s small pieces are typically constructed in simple forms: binary, ternary or compound ternary. For instance, the majority of his etudes consists of one idea in ternary form; numerous two-character pieces are founded in other genres, such as his Waltzes, Op. 64, Nos. 1 and 3; Fantaisie-Impromptu, Op. 66; Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 1; Op. 15, No. 1; and Op. 27, No. 1. In his sectional designs, Chopin used common motivic materials, voice-leading connections or transitional materials to cohere the contrasting elements and smooth over formal divisions.65 Sections are more connected than in Schumann’s music, and the sense of trajectory Chopin achieved creates a kind of narrative frame. In other words, Chopin shaped a narrative frame through the successions of events and transformations. Conflicts, character transformations, and reconciliation are created to achieve a directional intensity; stories are constructed to lead a reader through the narrative of the works by continuously driving toward a goal. This approach is applied in both large- and

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small-scale works. Chopin’s Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1 in C minor is an example of this kind of compositional strategy. The piece is a ternary form with a short coda. Each section is proportionally balanced. The character is introduced in the A section (Example 3.9). The rhythmic stream of the melodic line ranges from quarter to sixteenth note, and it is supported by consistent duple groupings in the bass. Along with the forward momentum, the rhythm of melodic line becomes more subdivided. The chromatic voice-leading smooths the boundary between the A section and the B section as the modulation from C minor to C major in measure 23-24. The hymn-like melody of the central section, marked “poco più lento” (a little slower), presents a peaceful and calm expression in the first four measures. This singing chorale melody can be heard again with a richer texture and broader register in the following four measure (Example 3.10).

Example 3.9. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1, mm. 1-4

Example 3.10. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1, mm. 23-29
Soon the tranquility is disturbed in the middle of the second restatement by a new rhythmic pattern (sixteenth-note triplets) in measure 39 (Example 3.11). This change devastates the chorale’s melodic and rhythmic flow, continuing to interrupt the chorale’s intentions of completion. This new rhythmic force seems similar to the sudden interruption in Schumann’s writing; however, Chopin’s approach is not to shift to a new character, but to create a conflict between the sixteenth patterns and the continuation of the chorale.

![Example 3.11. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1, mm. 37-39](image)

The sixteenth-note patterns expand over time. The conflict between the chorale and the sixteenth-note pattern continues until the climax moment in measure 46 of this section (Example 3.12). The sixteenth-note rhythmic pattern changes into obstinate eighth-note triplets that continue and oppose the melody that recurs in A’ section. The eighth-note triplets against four sixteenth notes create a hemiola. This enhances the tempestuous character and increases the intensity of the section (Example 3.13).

![Example 3.12. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1, m. 46](image)
Example 3.13. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1: A’ section, mm. 49-50

The transformation of the A’ section is the result of the developmental material from the B section. The textural, dynamic, and rhythmic intensity have consistently accumulated and gathered momentum to achieve the culmination occurring in the first beat of measure 72 (Example 3.14). Eventually, the conflict resolution is a result of the decrease of the density in tempo, texture, and dynamic in the coda. The musical characters and emotional states are developed through transformations over time; a narrative interpretation is encouraged by the unfolding events. The A’ section is no longer a simple return of the material from the A section like the classical notion; it is a continuous development of the infusion of the A and B sections.66


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In Chopin’s larger works, the narrative context is commonly associated with his ballades, which already invoke literary associations given the origins of the genre. Instead of abandoning the classical model, Chopin maintained the classical archetype and shaped the form through a narrative interpretation. His four ballades can be considered to be somewhat variant sonata form, based on the interaction of two contrasting themes; they also contain the developmental section of the themes and a series of transitional passagework. These elements shape Chopin’s ballads with the quality of sonata form. However, Chopin took the classical model of sonata form and transformed it into an unconventional new vision. Jim Samson describes, “arch-like character of the work’s formal and tonal organization is counterpointed against a strongly directional momentum more in the spirit of the sonata-form archetype.”

Deviating from the functions of development and return in classical sonata, two thematic groups in his ballades presented in contrasting tonalities are developed through progressive stages, and themes return each time with a greater intensity. The culmination is achieved close to the end and concluded with a virtuosic coda. “The purpose of Chopin’s form is to bring back some of the main themes with a magnified aura of brilliance, complexity, tension, violence, and pathos.” Rosen describes Chopin’s third ballade in the following words: “The music gathers momentum slowly, like a story that takes its time getting under way. Until the great swell of excitement and intensity in the last third of the Ballade, there are only fluctuations of intensity, waves of lyric passion that break up and come together again.” In fact, this feature is applied to Chopin’s other ballades and the majority of

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67 Chen Chen, Narrative in the Ballades of Fryderyk Chopin: Rhythm as a Reflection of Adam Mickiewicz’s Poetic Ballads (Saarbrücken: VDM, Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009), 80.
69 Rosen et al., 335.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 322.
his larger works, such as his two fantasies (Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49 and Polonaise Fantasies, Op. 61). In his first ballade, the transitional sections before each return of the first and second themes are where tension accumulates. In order to create a dramatic and powerful excitement in the coda, Chopin reduced the dynamic level in the last return of the first theme with “sempre sotto voce” (always soft) and right before the coda, he increased it to “il più forte possibile” (the strongest possible); the tension is even more powerful by manipulating the tempo to attain the explosive point in the coda (Meno mosso- poco ritenuto—Presto con fuoco) (Figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.3.** Chopin Ballade, No. 1, mm. 194-208

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure No.</th>
<th>194-198</th>
<th>199-205</th>
<th>206</th>
<th>207</th>
<th>208 (Coda)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tempo</td>
<td>Meno mosso</td>
<td></td>
<td>appassionato</td>
<td>poco ritenuto</td>
<td>Presto con fuoco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic</td>
<td><em>pp, sempre sotto voce</em></td>
<td>Cresc.</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>il più forte possibile</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The role of a performer to interpret the narrative in Chopin’s music is much like that of a narrator who comprehends all aspects of the music. A performer from the third-person perspective integrates the materials of the score with his or her imagination, creativity, personal experience, and concept of the music to make the music meaningful.

Narrative in the music of Schumann and Chopin is shaped by their musical language and use of form. From small pieces to larger works, the difference in terms of narrative expression is dependent on the performer’s interpretation. In the following chapter, I discuss some suggestions for performance interpretation based on the narrative structure in the music of Schumann and Chopin.
Chapter 4: Performance Suggestions

A musical experience involves a relationship between the composer, the performer, and the listener. The process of music making is considered to be a collaboration among the three. The performer engages with the music while communicating with the listeners. His or her interpretation involves an understanding of the music as well as creative potential and personal experience; these factors shape the listeners’ responses to the music. The role of the performer is to present a story in the music and act as a storyteller or narrator. Identifying the role of narrative in music enables the performer to convey this musical quality and spirit. In this chapter, I illustrate some musical examples and discuss possible interpretations depending on the narrative approach in the music of Schumann and Chopin.

Schumann

German literature not only nurtured Schumann to be an outstanding musical critic, but also enriched his creativity in musical writing. Schumann found parallels between himself and the character Kreisler in Hoffman’s fiction; they both lived in real and fantastical worlds. Florestan and Eusebius allowed Schumann to express himself through musical criticism, and he conveyed his emotional expressions through musical composition. As a performer, one way to become intimate with Schumann’s music is to “live” in his world of fantasy. First, it is important for the performer to recognize the characters in the scores and make them come to life. Florestan is usually characterized by metrical dissonant and stronger dynamics, mimicking his impulsive and extroverted personality. Eusebius, on the other hand, tends to be expressed by more legato articulation and softer dynamics. For example, in the dialogic passage from Davidsbündlertänze, No. 1, I recommend that the pianist expresses the characteristic of Florestan by anticipating the descending gesture with a
strong dynamic, carefully voicing the notes with accents to feature the hemiola (Example 4.1). Doing so brings out the characteristic of impatience in Florestan. If we anticipate the note B by making its entrance slightly rushed, there is no issue with keeping in time because then we can apply an *agogic* accent to even out the tempo. In other words, Schumann’s accent on B can be interpreted as an *agogic* accent to adjust the tempo. When Eusebius arrives in measure 39, a softer dynamic and legato articulation are required, and I would encourage a flexible sense of time to portray Eusebius’s calmness. The pianist should experience the conversation while he is performing, giving the impression that both characters have come alive. In order to do this, the performer needs to unfold the scene by immersing himself or herself in the story.

![Example 4.1. Schumann’s Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6, No. 1, mm. 34-41](image)

The performer can take a similar approach in the Trio from *Davidsbündlertänze*, No. 16 (Example 4.2). The passage marked *pp* with staccato notes from measures 24-27 evokes the character of Eusebius. It should be played with a light touch and pedal. Then, in measure 29, the voice becomes more legato and warmer with a *ritardando*; the gesture implies that Eusebius keeps trying to find a compromise from
the continuous interruptions in octaves. Here, the pianist should take time only on the notes marked *rit.* and play with pedal in order to achieve a more legato sound. The octave figuration in the left hand indicates Florestan speaking with a strong voice. One might slightly anticipate it each time it appears. The pianist might imagine the obstinate attitude of Florestan and play with *forte* consistently. This argumentative section is achieved via the alternation of contrasting patterns, and the pianist is encouraged to place himself or herself in the moment, as if talking with his or her voice through the piano.

![Example 4.2. Schumann’s Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6, No. 16, mm. 24-34](image)

The narrative in Schumann’s larger works (piano cycles) is neither presented through a linear progression nor based on a fundamental structure consisting of beginning, middle, and end. It is constructed by discontinuous fragments and the juxtaposition between contrasting themes. As such, one might imagine that the pieces within a cycle are fragmentary scenes. Instead of concluding with a strong ending, many of Schumann’s piano works, such as *Davidsbündlertänze,* and *Kreisleriana,* end softly. This gives the impression that the closing of the last scene does not always
imply the ending of the story. In this way, Schumann leaves space for imagination; the story goes on and on. Schumann sometimes employed this kind of approach at the beginning of works as well. For example, as I noted earlier, *Kreisleriana* opens with a passionate and stormy atmosphere right away; the abrupt gesture and continuous rapid sixteenth note with strong dynamic imply the effect of “*in medias res*” (a beginning that opens in the middle of the action). It feels as if the work is the continuation of a story already in progress. Even though the pianist can feel the silence of the room, she might begin this piece first by imagining hearing the violent storm happening in the mind’s ear; next, the pianist may place his or her hands on the keyboard as close as possible to prepare for a sudden, explosive, energized sound: the opening sixteenth notes in the right hand should be played without any hesitation. Curved fingers and good support of the right hand are required to produce the strong tone; the fingers need to be in contact with the keyboards so the strong dynamic and articulation of each sixteenth note can be controlled consistently. This combination of physical movements between fingers and hand can provide an unceasing energy and intense texture.

Sudden shifts between contrasting themes are another key challenge for the performer in *Kreisleriana*. The tempestuous character of Florestan continues from the opening to measure 24 and ends on the note high D (D7) with a *sf*. Eusebius joins in right away with a soft dynamic and a lyrical line. It is essential to shift between the contrasting characters from one to the other without a break. The performer should mentally prepare to apply an appropriate amount of arm weight: on reaching the high D7, the pianist should release the tension right away and naturally use the free arm weight to produce a singing tone in the following section. One way to achieve this abrupt shift is to allow oneself to experience both characters in this piece and freely
alternate between them (Example 4.3).

Example 4.3. Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, No. 1, mm. 21-28

Schumann’s music not only stimulates the performer’s creative imagination, but it also allows him or her to experience the fictional world that Schumann creates. Menahem Pressler describes a beautiful interpretation of Schumann’s music by Murray Perahia: “The ideas just tumble out with Schumann. His texture changes and his whimsical approach, I would say his lack of mastery.”\(^{72}\) When he taught “Valse Allemande” from *Carnaval* to a student, he said, “You must be in a ball in Vienna, and you must be dancing cheek to cheek with your lover.”\(^{73}\) Pressler means that experiencing the narrative in Schumann’s music allows the performer to become immersed in the scenarios, make the characters come to life, and delight the listener’s imagination. In other words, interpreting Schumann’s music is an experience of discovering the spirit of Schumann’s imagination and immersing in his fantasy world.


\(^{73}\)Ibid., 83.
Chopin

Interpreting Chopin’s works requires both intellectual understanding of the music and profound expression. The development of a storyline in Chopin’s music is expressed by increasing the intensity. The performer takes the role of a storyteller from the third-person perspective to present the narrative in Chopin’s music; in this manner, the performer controls the intensity all the way through and the climax is achieved by a gradual progression. Therefore, it takes logical planning for the performer to comprehend the musical content. I use Chopin’s Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1 in C minor and Ballade No. 1 in G minor as examples to discuss possible performance interpretations, depending on the narrative flow of these works.

This Nocturne is constructed in ternary form. Section A can be regarded as a ternary form (a-b-a’) within a ternary structure. The first phrase of the theme (mm. 1-4) appears three times in the A section; the restatements of the theme happen in measure 5 and measure 17 and develop both harmonically and structurally. To emphasize thematic development, the performer should consider changes of interval and melodic contour. The opening theme needs to be produced with an elegant and singing tone. To achieve the delicate singing quality, I suggest the pianist play the first two notes using the right hand with the third finger, so one can find the most balanced and natural position of the hand and arm. In measures 5-8, the theme is embellished when it repeats in the consequent period in comparison to the antecedent one. The key modulates to G minor in a short moment at the end of the phrase, larger intervals become more prominent, and the range increases. In order to achieve this feeling of openness, the pianist might employ more flexibility in controlling the tempo of the melody to express the expansion of the sonority (Example 4.4).
Example 4.4. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1, mm. 1-8

The theme develops again from measure 17 and continues until measure 24 where the emotional state reaches the highest level in the A section. The intensity is increased by the expanded phrase and forward-moving rhythmic pattern. The initial theme is formed as four measures with a perfect cadence; however, the prolongation of the dominant chord of the cadence expands the phrase. Moreover, the presence of a descending fifths sequence creates forward drive (Example 4.5). Therefore, the level of dynamic should be the strongest in this section, and the pianist should play with a forward motion toward the climax.
The beginning of the B section describes a peaceful mood. The chorale with a simple rhythmic design should be played with a warm sound. Even though the texture gets thicker from measure 29, the dynamic should be kept soft and avoid destroying the calmness. The restatement of the chorale in measure 37 should be quieter for greater dramatic effect. To gather the momentum to the climax, the disturbing force in chromatic octaves should be played successively louder from measures 39-46. The pedal is suggested here to create a sense of waving motion. The pianist should play
the chorale restatement with a definite and strong tone in order to contend with the waving force (Example 4.6).

Example 4.6. Chopin Nocturne, Op. 48, No. 1, mm. 37-41

The theme from the A section recurs in measure 49, this time in an agitated state caused by the triplet eighth notes. The intensity of this A’ section is generated naturally from the rhythmic tension, increasing tempo, and dense texture. The pianist should plan the dynamic level gradually. The continuous triplet stream should be controlled consistently in tempo; therefore, the melodic line will be also straightforward without much flexibility in tempo. In this way, the intensity will continue to accumulate and lead to the climax in measure 72. The coda provides a sense of denouement. The ascending gesture in measure 72 shows the last struggle; the strong dynamic should be maintained. Then, the reducing tempo, texture, and dynamic level portray the character disappearing from the scene gradually (Example 4.7).
In Chopin’s larger works, narrative structure often consists of multiple development and transformation; the intensity is increased by a series of exquisitely intricate transitions. Chopin’s first ballade, for instance, consists of an introduction, two themes and coda alternating with several developmental passages (Figure 4.1). I next discuss performance suggestions for Themes 1 and 2 that are intended to emphasize a narrative interpretation.

**Figure 4.1. Structure of Chopin Ballade, No. 1 in G minor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 1-7</td>
<td>8-35</td>
<td>36-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g minor</td>
<td>E-flat Major</td>
<td>a minor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The work opens with a narrative tone expressed by a Neapolitan-sixth chord unfolding in unisons, leading to a cadential six-four chord with an expressive E-flat. This unstable setting implies a sense of hesitation; the question is not resolved, until the first theme is introduced in measure 8 (Example 4.8).
Example 4.8. Chopin Ballade No. 1, mm. 1-10

The first theme is written as a waltz in G minor; the first appearance is melancholy and elegant. The tempo marking “Moderato” indicates the graceful waltz quality. This theme will develop in a different key and through various characters as the piece progresses; therefore, I would suggest that the pianist interpret the initial statement with a simplicity by keeping the level of dynamic soft and controlling the steadiness of tempo. A new theme is introduced in measure 68 after a section of brilliant passagework (Example 4.9.) This lyrical second theme may be portrayed as a love duet in E-flat major. The fingerings and hand position should be considered to produce the quality of singing tone and avoid breaking the melodic line. Besides using the pedal to produce the legato effect, the combination between the alternation of fingerings and the technique of hand rotation can assist in creating the quality of singing tone. For example, the fingering of the E in measure 69 can be switched from 3 to 1 on the note, so the next E an octave higher will be connected by the hand without breaking the line; moreover, the rotation technique can be applied as well to allow the hand to reach the higher E in the most natural hand position. After a fluid
transition, the first theme returns in measure 94, this time in A minor. The repeated bass E makes the recurring theme more intense (Example 4.10).

Example 4.9. Chopin Ballade No. 1 mm. 67-75

Example 4.10. Chopin Ballade No. 1, mm. 92-107
The first theme leads to a climax, at which point the second theme comes back with a passionate and heroic character in a more expansive register and denser texture (measure 106). The performer should therefore plan to increase the tension gradually in order to achieve greater emotional intensity. The dynamic plan is essential: the performer should physically imitate the eighth rests from measures 100-104 as short breaths. The tempo should not be pushed forward too forcefully because it should lead to a broader register so that the chords can be fully sustained to create more power in measure 105 (Example 4.10).

Through a scherzo-like section with virtuosic passagework, we hear the second theme again in measure 166 with a generous and expressive voice (Example 4.11). Compared to the first appearance, this recurring second theme in E-flat major is provided with a strong dynamic (ff; the first time is pp), richer texture of the melodic line, and greater range, all of which result in a sense of positivity. However, this emotion continues until measure 190 where G minor is reestablished, causing a sense of uncertainty (Example 4.12). This sudden modulation results in an unsettling feeling, and the first theme recurs in this environment.

Example 4.11. Chopin Ballade No. 1, mm. 166-171
Example 4.12. Chopin Ballade No. 1, mm. 187-194

In measure 194, the first theme returns for the last time in G minor and leads to a dramatic culmination of the whole work. To build intensity, the performer should maintain a very soft dynamic at the beginning of the first theme, then gradually increase the dynamic and tempo. To gather the momentum and increase the tension, the tempo should be pulled back in measures 206-207 to prepare for the coda in measure 208 (Example 4.13). The virtuosic coda is full of ambivalence and struggle. The changes of contrasting dynamics, alternation of tempo, recitative-like expression, and chromatic gesture bring to the ending a sense of dramatic tragedy. The complexity of the musical components in this ballade cannot be questioned; certainly, it requires the performer’s creative imagination and intellectual plan.

Example 4.13. Chopin Ballade No. 1, mm. 206-207
Chopin often associated the piano sound with the human voice in his teaching; he encouraged his students to play piano as singing. He also declared that “we use sounds to make music just as we use words to make a language.” According to Chopin, it is reasonable to suggest that performing his music is considered a form of storytelling. An understanding of the musical content and its expressive interpretation allows the performer to present the narrative flow, enriching his or her imagination through Chopin’s music. Interpreting Chopin’s music requires a comprehension of musical knowledge and a logical plan. Because the performer is telling a story, he needs to know how the story unfolds in order to tell it effectively. This is not to say performing Chopin’s music results in a lack of spontaneity and intuition. A story can be told in many different ways, and it depends on an interpreter’s creativity, imagination, and sense of self. Chopin’s music is often like a journey searching for a conclusion. The listener’s musical experience is dependent on the performer’s interpretation of the narrative in the music.

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Conclusion

Anthony Newcomb states that “music . . . lie[s] in transformational successions of events in sound, transformational successions of sounding events designed by a human being. In this view, music . . . is a presentation and reenactment of a complex pattern of intentional human action.”75 The individualities of Schumann and Chopin are derived from various influences. Schumann’s creative imagination was enriched by German literature; the dramatic emotional expression came from his love for Clara. The distinguishing features of intuition, irrationality, conflict, and contradistinction corresponded to his psyche. Rosen says, “Madness can be seen as a source of creative energy.”76 These factors resulted in Schumann’s unconventional approach to musical structures and, as a result, a unique kind of narrative interpretation. By contrast, the distinctive features of Chopin’s music came from the use of musical form and profound expression. His musical language constructed music as a story; the narrative was shaped by development and transformation in a linear fashion.

Performing is considered a process of communication. What is conveyed through the musical experience is not only pure sound but emotional content. The perspective of the performer is crucial in affecting the listeners’ understanding and musical experience. Schumann’s piano cycles might be regarded as collections of incoherent scenes; as he described the pieces of his Novelletten in a letter to Clara in 1838, “pranks, Egmontian tales, family scenes with fathers, a wedding, in short, extremely engaging things.”77 He also called these pieces in the piano cycle “stories” or “tales of adventure.” The performer is invited to experience the moments of

76Rosen et al., 647.
Schumann’s fantasy world and embody the narrative in his music while she is performing. Through a first-person perspective, the characters come alive for the performer and the scenes are made more vivid. The contrasting styles, abrupt shifts, and disjunctions in Schumann’s music brings a fragmented sense, which seems to lack a leaner progression of narrative structure. However, the unifying elements, such as musical cryptograms in *Carnaval*, are devices used to frame the narrative and allow us to interpret the narrative as a larger whole. This quality of fragmentation is to evoke the listeners’ curiosity and delight their inexhaustible imagination.

Narrative in Chopin’s music is evoked through a process of development that forms a story via its logical succession of musical events. Krystian Zimerman believes, “This [Chopin’s] music is readable by anyone in the world.” In Zimerman’s words, it is reasonable to suggest that Chopin’s music is like a story or novel; performing Chopin’s music is like telling a story provided by the continuity of the plot. In other words, the performer’s viewpoint of interpreting the narrative in Chopin’s music is as a third-person narrator telling the story. The performer’s intellectual power and creative imagination are crucial; his or her narrative interpretation and understanding of the music help listeners to experience the intensity of the musical and emotional expression. By interpreting the piano music of Schumann and Chopin from the narrative point of view, performers can contribute a new vision of musical understanding and bring listeners to a different level of musical experience.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1vYu56xY9w

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“Chopin Insight on BBC Podcast 2009.” YouTube Video, 25:35. Posted [March 2013]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQqqd0NkFeA


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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIIXWrPNaAM