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An Analysis of Chopin's Scherzo No. 1 in B Minor, Opus 20

Chopin, Frédéric (1810-1849) is considered the master of character pieces for piano.

“More than any other leading composer, Chopin devoted himself to the piano, to the virtual exclusion of all other media...” Other than his character pieces, he had only composed two piano concertos and three piano sonatas. He focused on smaller forms of piano music, composing scherzos, ballades, nocturnes, impromptus, preludes, etudes, waltzes, mazurkas, and polonaises. Of these, the scherzo is deemed a larger form of the character piece (Kirby 180-181).

The First Scherzo has poor structure with ill-concealed seams. The recapitulation seems to intrude on the beautiful melody of the Christmas carol rather violently, compared to Chopin's later works (Abraham 53). This piece presents a good argument for Chopin's structural fragility: it is too long and seems to be “pinned together” as the sections do not seam continuously. However, it is an excellent counterexample of Chopin's perceived effeminateness and over-languidness, demonstrating power, masculinity, directness, and tragedy (Weinstock 206).

The Italian term *scherzo* literally translates to “joke” and means to be light and playful, although Chopin's First Scherzo is hardly a laughing matter. The entire movement of Opus 20 is in ternary form (Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo), although all in all there are five total sections: a very short introduction, the expository main scherzo section in B minor, a trio interlude in B major, and then the recapitulation of the scherzo, followed by a lengthy coda (Paderewski 7-24).

The introduction consists of but two chords, each four bars long. The first is a shrill, eerie, half-diminished seventh chord in the high register, and is in second inversion built on C-Sharp, the V of V of the tonic B minor. (It is interesting to note that simply adding a low A to this chord would completely change the tone, turning it into a jazzy VII⁹). The first chord harmonically leads us into the second, a dark V⁷ in first inversion, located at the lower end of the keyboard. The vertical distance between these chords foreshadows our demanding journey across the ivory and ebony throughout the piece. Their dissonance makes the music stand still, “... set[ting] up expectations of violence and action” (Weinstock 205-206) and creates a feeling of suspense right before plunging into the fiery depths of the scherzo.

The scherzo exposition is a furious, rapid section including complex arpeggios and running passages. The overall mood is dark and panicking; almost maniacal. It has two themes organized in ABABA form, both themes not as lyrical as they are motivic. The A theme consists of three subjects, each stated twice except for the third. Subject 1 has ascending notes that quickly run from the bottom to the top of the keyboard. In the first statement of the subject, the notes adhere to the tonic, and to the dominant in the second statement. Subject 2 has the opposite effect: descending scale passages take us back down to the low register. The second statement of this subject is a repetition of the first statement, only darker, busier, and taken down an octave. Subject 3 only has one statement, comprised of full dotted-half note chords and octaves. The melody is in the left hand this time, quarter notes doubled at the octave. The style of playing this subject has been passed down via word of mouth only. Although Chopin explicitly marks his music (specifically, the dynamics *piano – forte – diminuendo – piano*), some scholars (e.g. Johanna Laurecka) suspect that he would have (and perhaps should have) strengthened the

passage with a *crescendo* (Eigeldinger 84). A *ritenuto* is marked on this subject, slowing the tempo and diminishing the dynamics, and ending on an imperfect authentic cadence.

The B theme is not sanctioned off into subjects; rather it is one large form. This theme develops on the motif of the first few notes in the A theme, slowly ascending up the keyboard, gradually becoming louder and more animated, until they finally reach a pinnacle and then descend just as slowly before returning back to the A theme. The B theme introduces the use of pedal for the first time in the piece, creating a more legato style. Since the B theme develops material stated in the A theme, it supports the position that the form of this piece could resemble a typical sonata form (Kirby 182). However, I would say it is in rondo form since the entire “exposition” has the form ABABA, as does the Trio.

At the end of the third and last repetition of the A theme in the exposition, Chopin develops the ending material in subject 3 and modulates into B major, the key of the Trio section. This section is also in rondo form, but for the sake of lucidity I will use CDCDC to distinguish from the scherzo section in ABABA form. The trio is the ‘B’ section of the ternary ABA form of the entire piece, and is an extreme contrast to the ‘A’ scherzo section. It is lyrical, sweet, and in major mode. The tempo and technique are marked *Molto più lento, sotto voce e ben legato*, meaning “much more slowly with a subdued and very smooth voice.” Chopin borrows this ever-so-lovely melody from a famous Polish Christmas folk-tune entitled *Lulajze Jezuniu*, “Lullaby, little Jesus” or “Sleep, baby Jesus” (Brown 72, Abraham 53, and Weinstock 206).

In the C theme, the melody is in the inner voice. Although there are not multiple voices in the written music, it sounds as if there are four: the alto voice with the melody, and the soprano and tenor voices with the countermelody. The bass voice consists of one note per bar. This theme has two statements, the first of which leads to the dominant, and the second leads back to the

tonic. Thus the harmony outline of these statements is I-V-I, which makes the C theme of the Trio section a small simple binary form.

The D theme is parallel to the C theme, but with the first statement starting in the subdominant and leading to the mediant, and the second statement leading to the dominant, giving us the harmony outline IV-III-V. The melody in the D theme is a bit more complex than eighth notes on the beat, as in the C theme. We actually have two parts in the right hand, the melody in the soprano voice and dotted half notes, half notes, and quarter notes in the alto voice giving us the accompanying chords. The left hand texture is the same as in the C theme albeit with the addition of slur marks. With more complex harmony come more adventurous dynamics, articulation, tempo, and ornamentation with the appearance of rubato, appoggiaturas, and mordents (this is the first time we see these elements in the piece). The D theme lands in the dominant, which will prepare us for the return of the tonic back in the C theme.

The last statement of the third and last C theme of the CDCDC form is developed further and the harmonic structure becomes somewhat non-functional. It does not follow the traditional patterns we have heard in previous repetitions, and this is because Chopin is preparing us for the end of the trio section. The *Lulajze Jezuniu* melody continues in the right hand but with unusual harmony in the left hand. In what could be called a codetta, the melody's dying echoes are doomed as they become twisted and warped in the last few measures. They are then "shattered" by the return of the familiar eerie chords from the introduction, a transition that is "very naïve by comparison with ... Chopin's later transitions" (Weinstock 206 and Abraham 53).

The fierce and agitated Scherzo section returns, this time shortened to ABA form. It is clear to see that Chopin literally copied his own material in the recapitulation and provided no development or change whatsoever, except for an added modulation of the last few bars of the

third subject of the last A section, intended for the transition into the coda. The dotted half note and quarter note chords are marked *accelerando* and *crescendo* as they gain speed, volume, and tension with an augmented sixth chord leading to the dominant in the harmony.

Finally the coda arrives. At first the harmony is simple, alternating between i and V. The melody is 1-3-2-5 (scale degrees) and is doubled at the octave in the left hand, one note per bar on the beat. The right hand countermelody is made of eighth notes whose chords provide harmony. This phrase is stated thrice, with each repetition an octave above the previous. Then a series of *fortissimo* iv chords with rapid eighth notes are followed by a V/V chord with a long arpeggio that extends from the high register down to the low register, followed by a four-bar trill on the secondary dominant. This is all in preparation for the F-sharp octave below the bass staff, a seemingly fit ending if it were the tonic. However, Chopin continues the coda with a series of ten *fortississimo* chords in the middle and high registers that truly anticipate the tonic. The tonic is finally released in a passage marked *con brio* (“with vigor”), demonstrating broken chords descending from top to bottom while the left hand plays a hemiola pattern. After our fingers have been up, down, and all over the keyboard, we have one final ascent back to the top: a chromatic scale that lasts eight bars and almost five octaves. The finale of the piece consists of four short accented chords producing two cadences after one another: a perfect authentic cadence followed by a plagal cadence (V-i-iv-i). As if that weren’t a sufficient close, Chopin adds three more bars to the end of the piece: two last chords that reminisce on the first two of the piece, but this time lower, louder, and more forceful (Paderewski 7-24).

Works Cited

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- Paderewski, Ignacy (editor). *Fryderyk Chopin: Complete Works, Vol. V, Scherzos for Piano*. Warsaw: The Frydryk Chopin Institute, Polish Music Publications, 1978. Hardcover print.
- Weinstock, Herbert. *Chopin: The Man and His Music*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1949. Hardcover print.

Form Outline (Paderewski 7-24)

Introduction (m. 1)	Trio Interlude Section (305)
Scherzo Exposition Section (9)	C Theme (305)
A Theme (9)	First Statement (305)
Subject 1 (9)	Second Statement (313)
First Statement (9)	D Theme (321)
Second Statement (17)	First Statement (321)
Subject 2 (25)	Second Statement (329)
First Statement (25)	C Theme (337)
Second Statement (33)	First Statement (337)
Subject 3 (45)	Second Statement (345)
B Theme (69)	D Theme (353)
A Theme (125)	First Statement (353)
Subject 1 (125)	Second Statement (361)
First Statement (125)	C Theme (369)
Second Statement (133)	First Statement (369)
Subject 2 (141)	Second Statement (377)
First Statement (141)	Codetta (385)
Second Statement (149)	Scherzo Recapitulation Section (389)
Subject 3 (161)	A Theme (389)
B Theme (185)	Subject 1 (389)
A Theme (241)	First Statement (389)
Subject 1 (241)	Second Statement (397)
First Statement (241)	Subject 2 (403)
Second Statement (249)	First Statement (403)
Subject 2 (257)	Second Statement (413)
First Statement (257)	Subject 3 (425)
Second Statement (265)	B Theme (449)
Subject 3 (277)	A Theme (505)
	Subject 1 (505)
	First Statement (505)
	Second Statement (513)
	Subject 2 (521)
	First Statement (521)
	Second Statement (529)
	Subject 3 (541)
	Coda (569)