

Extended Essay

Subject: Music

Research Question: To what extent was Chopin influenced by Polish folk music characteristics throughout his compositions, specifically in his Mazurkas written for the piano?

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Abstract:

Chopin's music is a staple in any pianist's repertoire, ranging from simple etudes and very technical challenging pieces. With predominantly Romantic influences, being the time era in which his career occurred, he is known to embody many of its stylistic ideals. In that respect, his music is always conveyed as dramatically emotive, reflecting many popular zeitgeists of his time. However, he also has a reputation of being hailed as a national hero by the Polish for the influence of his many contributions to their musical forms during a time of turmoil and national distress.¹ The controversy occurs here, where some sources, such as the acclaimed folk composer Béla Bartók, retorts that Chopin was more influenced by the Westernized, salon-style folk music rather than authentic, rural folk music.² The purpose of this investigation was to question the extent of Polish influences on Chopin's interpretations of Polish forms, with a focus on Chopin's contributions to Mazurkas, being the most plentiful. The methodology was to determine the characteristics that define Polish folk music and Romantic Era Western Music, while comparing them to the musical characteristics exemplified through Chopin's two randomly selected Mazurkas. It was concluded that Chopin's Mazurkas are not a replication or "pure" form of Polish folk music, but rather his perception and illustration of the memories of his homeland. There are still many innate characteristics that are wholly representative of Polish folk music and can be considered Polish folk music. Chopin just added a Romantic stylization.

¹ Libbey, Ted. *The Life and Music of Frederic Chopin* (NPR 2010). Web. Accessed November 21, 2019.

² Béla Bartók, "The Relation of Folk Song to the Development of the Art Music of Our Time" (1921), in Béla Bartók Essays, Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 322–323.

Introduction:

Research Question: To what extent was Chopin influenced by Polish folk music characteristics throughout his compositions, specifically in his Mazurkas written for the piano?

Fryderyk Chopin strongly identified with his Polish roots, despite living most of his adult life away from his homeland. Born and raised for most of his childhood in Poland, he has had many opportunities to be exposed to Polish folk music. Some examples would include the singing of people within the household, school activities, teacher influences, summer trips to rural Poland, ceremonial music for events as well as performance music in public and social settings.³ As aforementioned, there is controversy surrounding which sources he draws more inspiration and influence from, whether it be rural Polish folk music, or the stylized, Western-influenced salon folk music. Despite this uncertainty, his childhood exposure proved to be an impressionable period to which he later expressed many nationalist sentiments in his adulthood and musical career years later.

Although he did write in many Polish forms early on in his career, much of his patriotic passions were also driven by political and social changes. After gaining much popularity in Warsaw and Paris, he embarked on an extended concert tour away from his homeland. Within this time period, Warsaw became occupied by Russian forces.⁴ He expressed much of his devastation in his music due to the inability to return to Poland in its turbulent political and social state. This was exemplary in his various contributions to Polish-based musical forms and styles, including Polonaises, Mazurkas, and Waltzes.

³ Dahlig, Piotr. "On Attempts at Interpreting Chopin's Mazurkas from an Ethnomusicological Perspective." (Warsaw Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2006), 112-113.

⁴ Lopinski, Janet., Ringhofer, Joe., and Peteris Zarins. *A Music History Overview*. (Frederick Harris Music, 2010), 88-89

Notes on Methodology:

To approach the analysis of Polish folk music and its influence on his compositions, I will begin by identifying the defining characteristics of Polish folk music and Western Romantic music that Chopin would have been exposed to. This offers a basis to compare differences and similarities in the way that music is developed within these two influences. I decided to randomly select two of his Mazurkas to assess various elements of music. This includes, but is not confined to tonality, key, rhythm, texture, ornamentation, harmony, melody and thematic development. The two selected pieces are Mazurka in F# minor, Op. 6, No. 1 and Mazurka in A minor, Op. 17, No. 4. They span across his career, preferably creating a more representative illustration of his stylistic influences.

Within this methodology, these elements will be compared to the conventions of both Polish folk music and Western, Romantic music to compare their relative influences on Chopin's embodiments of Polish folk forms. It is also necessary to preface this in-depth analysis with the acknowledgement that Polish folk music and Western Romantic music share certain similarities, so the distinction between these influences within some musical elements may not be pristinely defined.

Background on Polish Folk Music:

With respect to Chopin, he has contributed the most significant quantity of his compositions to the Polish folk music form of the Mazurka,⁵ which is the chosen topic of study. As previously mentioned, various critics point to the vast quantity of sources of which Chopin

⁵ Bielecki, Artur. *Genres: Mazurka*. (The Fryderyk Chopin Institute 2003-2018). Web. Accessed December 12, 2019

may have taken influence from. It would range from rustic folk music that he experienced during his summer trips to rural Poland to the more stylized, enhanced Mazurkas that made its way into the aristocratic level of salon-style music. However, the basic forms, rhythms and musical components remain to be relatively unanimous between all fronts.

Mazurka is the overarching term used for multiple Polish dances and music in triple meter. It originated from the Mazovia region near Warsaw. The most common forms of Mazurka more specifically include the Mazur, Oberek and Kajawiak, originating from various regions of the country. These common folk dances are performed by multiple couples dancing in an improvisatory style. They were earliest accompanied with bagpipes and later on with vocals, violin and double bass. These three styles of dance and music differ drastically, which will be elaborated upon later. However, Chopin manages to intertwine all of these contrasting forms into his Mazurkas, often including up to all three to create an auditory landscape of Poland.

A telltale characteristic of Polish folk music would be its harmonic features. It is typically very simple monophony, where the melody is mainly played by the violin or sung. However, it is neither heterophonic nor polyphonic, where the same melody is played between various instruments, nor are there strong countermelodies and counterpoint. Most frequently, the harmonic development has a preference for major tonalities, where it alternates between tonic and dominant seventh chords. If there is additional instrumentation such as the double bass or bagpipes, sustained tonic and dominant tones in unison and octaves are very common. The melody often follows these harmonic figurations, varying by ornate embellishments.

Although there is little harmonic variation in terms of its general progression, certain folksongs achieve ornamentation and tonal colour through chromaticism in the form of the following series:⁶



It was also common for various modes, especially the Lydian mode, to be a harmonic basis.⁷ Mazurka rhythms are common throughout all three dances, most often characterized by two short notes followed by two long notes. Other variations include groups of three or six notes, a dotted note followed by a shorter valued note.

Mazur:

The Mazur is the oldest folk Mazurka, defined by its capricious accents and tempo. Lying in between the speed of the Oberek and the Kujawiak, it creates energy and flexibility through its complexity and variation in rhythm. Written in either 3/8 or 3/4 time, the accentation is also non-consistent, often changing from strong to weak beats. They typically vary, occurring on all three beats, any one of the three, or the highest note within the phrase, following the natural movements of the violinist. The musical structure usually consists of joining two or four measured phrases, although it may vary. Because of its short melody, it is easily altered in terms of rhythmic variation, but ultimately forming a complete phrase.⁸

⁶ Bakst, James. "Polish National Influences In Chopin's Music." *The Polish Review* 7, no. 4 (1962): 55-68. Accessed February 5, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/25776430.

⁷ Trochimczyk, Maja. "Mazur (Mazurka)." (Polish Music Center, 2019). Web. Accessed March 13, 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

Kujawiak:

The Kujawiak is the dance popularized and named after the Kukawy region. It is a stately dance with a smooth melody. It is often slower than the Mazur, bordering upon a mournful emotion. It is relatively symmetrical in structure and accentation, where accents may fall on any of the three beats, as long as the pattern is sustained. This creates two-bar phrases of similar accentuations, strung together where a larger accent is emphasized every fourth measure of a phrase.

Oberek:

Finally, the Oberek is the style of dance also known as the "small mazur," but there are still characteristics that differentiate this dance from the Mazur. One notable feature would be its tempo, being much faster and livelier than the Mazur. Rhythmically, it is not as varied, but it implements short, repetitive two-bar phrases with alternating accents. It is also frequently accompanied by the tapping of heels.

Defining Characteristics of Western Music:

On the other side of the spectrum for Chopin's musical influence would be heavily Western Romantic. It was representative of the style of music that Chopin would hear within the salons when he later moved to Paris.

With the end of the Classical era also came a definitive end to clear structure, proportion and simplicity. New advancements in technology and social changes brought about many new stylistic characteristics that were relatively unheard of, in comparison to prior eras.

Technological advancements for instruments, predominantly the piano, brought forth new levels of virtuosity and technical standards. With this regard, improvisation was not primarily employed within the era. Certain composers such as Chopin and Liszt did write virtuosic cadenzas and passages that are suggestive of an improvisatory style.⁹

Social and artistic changes allowed for heightened emotionalism and deep personal expression. To increase expression within music, rubato was a representative Romantic stylistic choice. Rubato is a component in which the tempo can be sped up or slowed down. This became an emotive device to interpret music. Along the lines of emotive expression, there was also increased ambiguity in terms of musical structures and forms, allowing sections to flow and blur into each other. This is when cyclic form emerged as a method to reuse the same thematic material throughout a larger-scale work, in between sections or movements. This creates a sense of unanimity of the overall character or mood. Uses of more colour in rhythm, dynamics, harmonies, textures, tonalities, as well as increased chromaticism were also methods to increase stress and tension within the music, emphasizing a deeper sensation of emotions and expression.

Finally, with increased political change and fluidity between countries came an increase in fascination with foreign culture, influencing various elements of music. Composers of this time took advantage of this newfound exoticism to express patriotism for their respective homelands, often taking influence from landscapes, folk music, folklore and national events.¹⁰

⁹ Lopinski, Janet., Ringhofer, Joe., and Peteris Zarins. *A Music History Overview*. (Frederick Harris Music, 2010), 88-89

¹⁰ Ibid.

Analysis:

1. Instrumentation

The most evident difference between traditional Polish folk music and Chopin's interpretative liberties of his Mazurka resides in the instrumentation. Chopin's Mazurkas are rarely composed instruments outside of the piano. However, folk Mazurkas are often played with a lead violin and voice, occasionally including bagpipes, the accordion or the double bass to provide more harmonic background. This creates a rather drastic alteration to the overall timbre of his pieces. Evidently, he would be writing with Polish influence, not with the intention of creating music for the particular context of which Mazurkas occurs. This preference for the piano, a defining instrument of the Western world and the Romantic Era also reflects that he did have an affinity for it. This suggests that he believed that it was sufficient in allowing his representations of folk to ring through, which he achieves.

Within Mazurka in C# Minor more specifically, Chopin manipulates the flexible features of the piano range and note-wise to illustrate characteristics of the Mazurka dances and music. As an example, he suggests string and bagpipe instrumentation with his frequent use of octaves and fifth intervals within the piece's left-hand figures. Most of the left-hand part consists of a bass note followed by two chords on the second and third beat of the measure, as shown.



Using bars 10 and 11 as an example, it exemplifies a simple, repeating figure that reoccurs for most of the Mazurka, as illustrated with the red circle. Chopin evokes simpler harmonic intervals such as octaves and fifths to reminisce of common intervals for stringed instruments, such as violin and double bass, as well as the bagpipes.

With this homophonous texture, it illustrates the meagre harmonic background that is evident in folk music, due to its instrumentation having a stronger emphasis on melody. This would often be played by the violin or sung, and this is reflected within the melody of the right hand. Again, he manipulates the harmony to insinuate the presence of traditional orchestration relative to each other.

Chopin also distinguishes specific differences in the instrumentation of the melody through a specific technique of range and melodic manipulation. Because Mazurkas are characterized by the melody being sung or played by primarily the violin, Chopin also reflects which melody sections are meant for vocals and strings. In general for both mazurkas, Chopin writes the melody where the range is all within vocal and violin capabilities. The lowest melody note is a C#4 in the Mazurka in F# Minor, while the lowest melody note in the Mazurka in A Minor is a C4. The highest notes in both are either a C#6 or a C6 in their respective keys. The next distinction would be the inherent nature of the melodies themselves. If Chopin wanted to evoke an auditory sensation of vocals, he would implement a more lyrical, stepwise melody because it lends the ability for it to be sung. This is exemplified in Theme A, measures 1-3 as pictured below. The notes are all in proximity to each other, with few jumps, the largest one

being a fourth. There is also a long slur overarching the entire passage, emphasizing lyricism.



On the contrasting end, a passage in the Mazurka in A minor is exemplary of what Chopin may have intended to portray as instrumental. As a virtuosic, improvisatory-style passage, a violinist may play many difficult intervals and figurations. This passage, measures 31-32, as shown below is rigorously fast, with many large jumps. From the fifth note to the fourteenth, there are large jumps going up and down, high up in the range of a female voice. This would be unlikely to be sung, but rather simple on a violin, with few string crossings. It is evident that Chopin also takes into consideration the implications of his melodies when portray various forms of traditional instrumentation.



Chopin also employs various forms of embellishments to imitate traditional instrumentation. The most notable would be the use of grace notes and sixteenth notes before a longer valued note. The third theme is a significant representation of Chopin's use of grace notes. They all consistently occur on a G# or a D.



Referring to folk instrumentation, it mimics the grace notes that are most commonly recognized within bagpipe music, with two of the most common grace note pitches being G and D, very likely altered to fit within the key.

Many of these characteristics are also reflected within Mazurka in A minor, including the reflection of instrumentation through specific intervals and the implementation of grace notes.

2. Structure

Analyzing the overall form of Mazurka in C# Minor with a guide from the thematic approach, three main melodies are observed.

The first theme (A) is stated in its complete form (m. 1-15), the first four bars as seen below.

This entire section is terminated by a repeat sign. In terms of lyricism and tempo, this would be consistent with a traditional Kujawiak. It will be identified by that from hereon for ease of reference.

1.

The second piece of 'thematic' material (B) begins at measure 18 and ends in measure 26, contrasting the previous theme with a declarative, irregularly accented passage. It is comparatively shorter than the theme A and immediately followed by theme A. Theme B is rhythmically indicative of a traditional Mazur. During this repeating section, theme B is swiftly followed by another reiteration of theme A. This reiteration of the first theme is identical to when

it was first introduced in the right-hand melody. There is limited variation in the left-hand harmonies and accompaniment.



Following that repeated section is the introduction of the third theme (C). Beginning in measure 43 and ending in measure 59, this lively, quickened theme is evidently an Oberek. Finally, theme A is stated once again in its entirety and the piece is ended.



With the repeats, the structure of the piece is AABABACA. However, the piece condensed without the repeats, only represented by the occurrence of a different theme, is evidently a rondo form of ABACA. This is important to note because this would be a traditionally Western form of music and Chopin manipulated the various folk dance styles to form this, exemplifying that in cases such as form, he does take a larger influence from Western styles, rather than traditional folk.

3. Melodies and Rhythm

Chopin imitates the harmonic restrictions of Mazurka dances, so there is a strong focus on the melodies. With the strong ties of rhythm with melody, his spotlight on the melody is a good platform for which analysis can be made of whether or not he included strong Polish or Western influences. Beginning with theme A of the Mazurka in F# Minor, the melody is very lyrical, and although it is seemingly rhythmically complex, its accents remain very consistent on the third measure of every two measures. Adding these short two-bar phrases together creates a slightly larger, four-bar melodic passage that changes in pitch, tempo or thematic material every time. This is wholly reflective of a Kujawiak melody, with its lyricism and consistent accentuation. The first two-bar phrase is shown in the figure below, where there is an accent explicitly written of the third beat of the bar. This is repeated for the rest of the section.



Observing Theme B, Chopin still remains true to many elements of the Mazur. Two-bar fragments can be observed, where the only difference would be the pitches and rhythms of the latter bar. These pieces together create a cohesive, repeating four-bar phrase. It is also demonstrated that accentuations vary between measures because an anomalous accent occurs on the second beat of the fifth measure, whereas the other repeating measures do not. In the excerpt below, the two-bar fragments are marked with brackets, and the change in accentuation of the repeated two-bar phrase is marked with a circle.



In terms of written accents, there are also multiple staccatissimos given to the high notes, in this case a C#6. This theme is therefore representative of the capricious, irregular accentuation characterized by the Mazur.

Finally, theme C is melodically and rhythmically representative of an Oberek. As marked Scherzo, this is the rhythmically fastest section of the piece, as well as being the most rhythmically active. With the use of many grace notes and an active left-hand, Chopin is able to paint the lively mood and heel-tapping of an Oberek. Again, he uses smaller two-bar fragments to build a larger, four-measure phrase that repeats multiple times within the section. There are accentuations on high notes, as well as the third beat of every measure. To illustrate, the excerpt below will show the separate two-bar fragments in a larger four-bar phrase. The accentuations will be circled in red.



These are again, similar to the characteristics of a Mazur but rhythmically faster, thus being representative of an Oberek.

The ability for a trained listener in the general Polish folk music genres to be able to distinguish between the various dance types that he incorporates is intrinsically indicative of the strong influences of the melodies.

4. Tonality and Harmonies

With regard to harmonies and tonality, Chopin remains rather true to the inherent features of an emphasis on tonic and dominant seventh chords that is characteristic of Mazurkas. However, within the Mazurka in F# Minor, he does take some liberties through brief modulations to its relative major key, of A major. Within these modulations, Chopin still maintains a strong emphasis on the dominant and tonic chord, minimizing the tonal ambiguity of the piece.

5. Expressionism

Within expressionism, it's most notably dynamics and tempo changes that are most significant in distinguishing various stylistic measures between Polish folk influences and a more Romantic approach. With respect to Polish folk music, Mazurkas would often be performed in public venues, accompanied by dancing. Therefore, it would be unrealistic for Mazurkas to be inherently emotive in relation to dynamic changes due to the open acoustics of the setting. It would also be important for performers to maintain a steady dynamic level that can be heard by all the dancers and viewers. Similarly, Chopin's liberal use of rubato and tempo markings, including rallentando, ritenuta would be unrealistic in an authentic Polish folk setting. Because the dancers follow along to the music and rhythm, drastic changes in tempo would be confusing and misleading, especially when partially improvised. Thus, expressionism within Chopin's Mazurkas are relatively dependent on Romantic influences of emotiveness and solo piano performance, rather than the group performance setting of Polish folk.

6. Texture

As aforementioned, Chopin maintains a simplistic texture throughout most of the two Mazurkas, with a one-line melody in the right hand and harmonic intervals, chords and bass notes in the left hand. This rarely changes with the exception of the Mazurka in F# Minor. For both the Mazur theme and the Oberek theme, the left hand has larger variations, incorporating relatively more counterpoint, as well as being more rhythmically active. By straying away from the recurring bass, chord, chord pattern, it reflects the more lively character of these dances in contrast to the Kujawiak.

Conclusion:

Through the in-depth analysis of two Mazurkas, there are various conclusions to be made with regards to Chopin's cultural influences for various stylistic choices within his compositions. Although not entirely representative of all of the music he composed for various Polish genres, Mazurkas do embody three different Polish dances that define various elements of Polish folk music.

Evident through this thorough assessment, Chopin transforms these folk styles into a genre that is wholly his own and an amalgamation of his lyricism, expertise of the piano and his nationality. He bridged upon many of the similarities between Western Romantic music and Polish music to express his patriotism, as well as bring these well-liked styles to a larger audience in a more flexible format.

He did take various liberties, but still maintained the inherent character of Polish folk. Within the scope of incorporating Romantic features, he counterbalanced it by imitating elements of folk music. If he composed for the piano, he would mimic characteristics of the traditional instrumentation. Although written sheet music is unflexible, he incorporated rubato, embellishments and repeats to synthesize an improvisatory style that is similar to Polish folk.

With examples such as these, I believe that Chopin did not sacrifice the inherent nature of Polish folk music for his artistic license, but it is in no means “pure” nor perfectly authentic folk music. He did not draw from any specific sources, nor did he quote folk melodies, but melodically and rhythmically, his Mazurkas were rather accurate to the style of rural Polish folk music. In summary, he took many liberties with incorporating Romantic styles within the elements of structure and expressionism. Other elements, including ornamentation, chromaticism and thematic development are more ambiguous in terms of his influences because of the similarity between musical styles. However, there is no doubt that he applied the zeitgeists of Romantic music in expressionism and nationalism to attain inspiration from Polish folk music and write many forms dedicated to his homeland.

Finally, it is important to note the lasting impact on a nation in junction to various elemental choices that he made to create these Mazurkas. Despite many liberties that he took because of Romantic influences, he still managed to successfully embody many nationalistic Polish elements because listeners were able to identify the core elements of folk music within.

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