

ROMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS REFLECTED IN THE WORKS OF FRYDERYK CHOPIN

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SUMMARY. Romanticism has a series of defining characteristics which differentiate it from other movements of musical history. All these traits can be found in the works of the renowned pianist and composer Fryderyk Chopin. In the present paper we will present the musical genres approached by him as well as the Romantic aspects reflected by every genre, alone and as a whole, in all his works.

Keywords: Chopin, Romantic, traits, characteristic, works, piano, miniatures, composer.

Romanticism, as a movement¹ manifesting itself in 19th century music, generates a series of characteristics and specific aspects reflected in the works of representative composers of this period, Fryderyk Chopin being one of them. Among these characteristics we mention the historical aspect as a source of inspiration in order to value the culture of every country, folklore as a particular element with national character of regeneration of musical creation, the satire, present in various forms, the lyrical aspect as a reflection of the composer's emotions, nature, which is personified in the form of the feminine poetic principle, the nocturnal as a descriptive scenery, filled with mystery, as well as the fantastic, relinquishing the classical balance of the means of expression, using all instrumental registers, developing and differentiating the elements of dynamics and the agogic.

Among the musical attributes characteristic for this period we can speak of certain interpretative liberties, innovations in the art of interpretation due to the development and improvement of instruments, contrasts on various levels, innovations in musical form and genres. We find an affluence of all these in the works of Chopin.

Usually, the history of music presents two important facets of Chopin's personality: that of a virtuoso piano player and that of a brilliant Romantic composer. His work, besides encompassing a considerable number of pieces

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¹ Drimba, Ovidiu, *Istoria literaturii universale (The History of Universal Literature)*, vol. 2, Editura Vestala, Bucharest, 1997, p. 127.

dedicated almost exclusively to the piano², brings freshness in this area by the exquisite art of the miniature. It encloses small pieces, which can either be included in cycles or be single standing works. They do not fit a traditional form, presenting a rather free development, determined by the composer's fantasy and the programme written at the beginning of the work. Characteristic for Romanticism, due to Chopin, new miniature genres appear in instrumental music: the nocturne, the serenade, the ballad, the mazurka and the polonaise, the waltz, the study (*étude*) a. o. Most of them intended for drawing room representations, like musical precious stones, they formed a specific category of Romanticism, called the *miniature*.

Chopin's entire work is the expression of a victorious battle against schematics and pseudo-classical music from the period of the feudal riot following the French revolution. In this battle, where he appears as an ally of Romantic composers of genius such as: Berlioz, Schumann, Paganini or Liszt, his contribution was extremely important, as he created this miniature genre.

Turning European music towards the roots of the folk melody, Chopin created the mazurkas and the polonaises, works filled with specific national elements. Not only did he revolutionize the harmonic language, but also the architectonic forms of art. Therefore, he enriched music with new forms, renewing the existent ones and creating new types of Romantic improvisation in his scherzi, impromptus and fantasies.

The improvement of instruments during that period implicitly led to the development of pianistic technique, giving birth to a more evolved composition style, imposing from the beginning a more demanding and more expressive interpretation.

All these works contain aspects constituting basic traits of musical Romanticism: the melodic organization of the sonorous material, the sonorous effect produced by the combination of sounds on different levels, the construction and the specific chordic sequences (modulations). The rhythm (as well as the melody) of Chopin's music arises from the creative assimilation of Polish folk music; it is either flexible, fluent, reflecting the winding lines of fantasy, or thrilling, precise, energetic and reminding of the vigour of folk dances.

The *rubato* which is so characteristic for Chopin as an interpreter, as well as for other Romantic composers, together with the refinement of downbeats, give mobility to the musical discourse and, sometimes, an improvisation-like aspect.

Reflecting a vast diversity of feelings, Chopin's work includes a variety of independent works belonging to instrumental miniatures in which he excels. His first original works were *Rondo à la Mazur* and *Rondo à la Krakowiak* for

² Bălan, Theodor, *Chopin, poetul pianului (Chopin, the Poet of the Piano)*, Editura Tineretului, 1968, p. 216.

*piano and orchestra*³, already announcing his future creations in which he would use Polish folk resources.

The *mazurkas* are generally created based on the tradition of folk dances. Initially, the dance was danced at countryside balls, in alternation with other two dances, *oberek* and *kujawiak*, with contrasting characters. Later, after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the mazurka becomes the ballroom dance of Polish aristocracy. Chopin made his mazurkas real national poems, without borrowing anything from folk music, but translating its essence. The characteristics of the mazurka are rhythmic diversity, grace and expressivity of gestures and the unpredictable changes of tempo. In some mazurkas the cheerful, bright colours, the energetic dynamics, evoking rustic images predominate (*Mazurka in f sharp minor*). Others, with more brightness, are therefore also called *ballroom mazurkas*, and can be distinguished from the first ones by their character (*Mazurka in b flat major*). In mazurkas, we often notice the indication *tempo rubato*, but this *rubato* has to be in accordance with their specific rhythm. In most mazurkas, the longing for one's country prevails. Chopin's work began with the *polonaise* and ended with the *mazurka*. His final composition – in some authors' opinion – is a mazurka written on his deathbed: *Mazurka op. postum 68 no. 4* with the following note: "This mazurka is the final work of the maestro written not long before his death; he was not able to play it on the piano as he was feeling too weak"⁴.

His 14 waltzes are as varied as the mazurkas. They are dreamy, sad (*waltz in a minor*), melancholic (*waltz in c sharp minor*), sentimental (*waltz in e minor*) or filled with virtuosity (*waltz in d flat major*). Each one of these waltzes brings with itself a special, fresh image. Chopin's waltz is made as a dance piece. With his vast emotional richness, Chopin manages to make waltzes poetic, always accompanying its circular and flowing movement with a certain emotion, pervading over the initial characteristic of the genre.

Chopin's waltzes are divided into two large groups: the first ones, mostly named by Chopin, are the so-called *valse brillantes* – bright, brilliant waltzes, while the others are *valse nobles* – noble, slow, sentimental waltzes. This is where the contrasting element between the two categories appears, as a characteristic trait of Romanticism. Although the waltz is present in the works of other composers also, Chopin's waltzes have known a very large circulation due to their accessibility.

As a musical genre, the *nocturne* is a creation of Romantic art belonging to the first decades of the 19th century. *The nocturne* is the discovery and the symbol of Romantic lyric. The vision of the nightly scenery, under the moonlight,

³ Coman, Lavinia, *Frédéric Chopin*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, Bucharest, 2009, p. 85.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

animates imagination, directing it towards a world of mystery and fantasy, typically Romantic. In his 20 nocturnes, Chopin is neither monotonous nor unilateral. In this musical genre which first appeared in the work of John Field, Chopin brings, besides tenderness and nostalgia, contrast (*nocturne in b major*), drama (*nocturne in c minor*) and even the tragic passion and despair (*Nocturnes in f minor and in e flat major*). Among Chopin's works, we can consider the nocturnes to be the most representative from the point of view of their confession-like character.

The 24 *Preludes* are written in all major and minor tonalities and, unlike Bach's preludes for clavichord (the source of inspiration of the Polish composer), they represent an independent cycle. Each one of these preludes, regardless of its tonality or length, has a distinct individuality, expressing a certain emotion, idea, image, which determines numerous programmatic interpretations. The preludes have great emotional variety by their poetic content, perfect style and splendour of pianistic writing, being considered small masterpieces.

All Chopin's vigour bursts in his four *scherzi*, especially in the one in b minor entitled *Song of Rebellion and Sadness*, or in the dramatic *Scherzo in C Sharp Minor*. The first scherzo, written in b minor, raises difficulties of advanced pianistic. The second scherzo is in b flat minor and is probably the most well-known. From the point of view of form, it has the form of a sonata where a trio-intermezzo was interposed. The scherzo in c sharp minor is also in the form of a sonata, this time without the trio-intermezzo. The effects obtained with the help of the pedal foretell the sound of French Impressionism. The final scherzo, in e major, is also in a sonata form and is typically Romantic, by the murmur of nature.

The three impromptus (in e flat, in f sharp and in g flat major) offer admirable figurative developments.

In the *Ballades*, Chopin establishes a new genre, whose novelty does not only reside in its form, but especially in the general atmosphere and its force of expression. The new genre of instrumental ballad sealed by Chopin's genius was introduced in practice at that time by being adopted by Liszt, Grieg, Brahms and other composers also, but neither of them has reached the perfection attributed to Chopin. The principles of several musical forms can be found in the ballads: the sonata, the rondo, the free variation and the lied. The way in which Chopin coagulated them represents his undeniable contribution to the development of this new genre, superior to the previous ballad. His four ballads are inspired by the lyrics of Adam Mickiewicz, who uses the basic characteristic elements of Polish poetry⁵ and represent the peak of his creation (*Ballad in g minor, no. 1; Ballad in f major, no. 2; Ballad in a flat major, no. 3; Ballad in f minor, no. 4*).

⁵ Bălan, Theodor, *Chopin, poetul pianului (Chopin, the Poet of the Piano)*, Editura Tineretului, Bucharest, 1968, p. 220.

The proportion taken by the virtuoso instrumental technique will implicitly cause the enrichment of Romantic musical language, but also of musical genres, leading to the emergence of the *étude* as practice for virtuosity, or as a valuable concert piece. Chopin also composed 27 *Études*, written in his youth, before the age of 30, and they are considered some of his most important masterpieces. Although, as a genre, they approach different problems of instrumental technique, they have first a clear musical character and an artistic beauty, which can be highlighted before any aspect of virtuosity. Far from being mere practice exercises for virtuosity, the *études* have a musical value equal to his other pianistic works. From the point of view of form, we can state that all the *études* are constructed on the pattern of the lied: A - B - A. *Étude in c minor op. 10, no. 12*, also called *Revolutionary étude*, expresses the pain and turmoil of the patriot artist; from a technical point of view, it is characterized by ascending and descending passages of the left hand, which raises and falls very rapidly, while the right hand executes, in a dotted rhythm, chords suggesting true pathetic callings. The technical purpose of this *étude* is clear: to train the left hand for rapid passages. This connotation serves in creating the expression, which becomes here a heroic and shattering appeal, a tumultuous outburst of the pain of an entire people.

The *polonaises* are the court dances of Chopin's home land, with melodic and rhythmic characteristics specific to the Polish folklore, rendering various patriotic feelings, and these 15 pieces represent for their composer the great heroic poem of a nation. *The military polonaise in a major* evokes images of heroic grandeur, being a magnificent fresco of the greatness of Poland. *The polonaise in e flat minor*, also called *Siberian* describes the people's rising against the regime of the tsar, the hate and pain of the defeated. *The polonaise in c minor* is of a sad nobility, evoking the decline of Poland, while the *Polonaise in a flat major*, so complex and diverse, renders both the melancholy and the hope in the future of the country, being considered a possible culmination of Chopin's creation in this genre.

Granting so much attention and abnegation to these drawing room pieces, he managed to transform them into musical poems which enjoyed well deserved appreciation.

All the characteristics of Chopin's work, the poetic essence, the drama arising from the turmoil of his life and the originality of language also materialize in his piano sonatas: *Sonata in b flat major and Sonata in b flat minor*, a lyrical and philosophical poem⁶. The first sonata is one of the most shattering and impressive compositions in piano literature. Some even compared it to Beethoven's *Appassionata*. It is a true instrumental epic about the life and

⁶ Bălan, George, *O istorie a muzicii europene (A History of the European Music)*, Editura Albatros, Bucharest, 1975, p. 221.

death of a national hero. The funeral march stands as a dramatic core of the sonata; it is unique in its genre and clearly represents the procession of an entire people who, shattered by pain, moves forward while bells ring.

From among the concert genres, we can mention the two concertos for piano and orchestra. They are both pieces written in his early years, where the pianistic manner of the composer proved to be fully elaborate. The entire instrumental part of the *Concerto in e minor* raises very difficult pianistic problems. This approach is specific to Romanticism and it does not only regard virtuosity, but it is also due to the development and evolution of the instrument during this period. The *Concerto in f minor* is much more dramatic, both concertos remaining in the pattern of form of the concerto for piano and orchestra.

Relinquishing the patterns of classical music, Romanticism subordinates musical form to content by enlarging traditional patterns, which tend to adapt to various poetic ideas, giving birth to new genres, such as the ballad and the rhapsody.

Chopin can be considered one of the most important innovators in music by his contribution to the enrichment of universal heritage with the various works belonging to the miniature. Suffice it to mention the names of certain miniatures such as: *mazurka*, *prelude*, *polonaise*, *nocturne*, *ballad*, that we immediately associate them with Chopin's name. We can rightly consider that he achieved perfection in the miniature art, as these works define a unique musical universe⁷. The innovative contribution can be found especially in the use of the connection between genres. The various genres of Chopin's work are not isolated, they intermingle freely (in the *polonaise in f sharp minor* we find a *mazurka*; in the *prelude in a major* we also find allusions to the rhythm of the *mazurka* and the *prelude in c minor* is a funeral march). An excellent connoisseur of music, Chopin merely tried an enlarging and displacement of the borders representing formal limits, in order for the entire expressive content to find adequate outlines. The evolution of his work established itself on a road combining tradition and innovation.

Chopin's contribution to the development of Romantic music remains considerable by maintaining the fundamental dispositions of early Romantic lyric such as: sadness, melancholy, dreaminess, pessimism and by the objective amplification of these emotions in connection with the destiny of an entire nation. Therefore, the Romantic Chopin remains the most brilliant representative of the National Polish School. All his compositions wear the seal of his genius who has found the way to immortality, playing like a poet who has not searched poetry in verse, but created it in music, as he is the lyrical poet of instrumental music - "the poet of the piano" (see bibliography). The Romantic ideal of merging

⁷ Manea, Carmen, *Eternul Chopin (The Eternal Chopin)*, Editura U.N.M.B., Bucharest, 2008, p. 330.

music and poetry in one art has found its accomplishment in the work of this great composer and virtuoso. Chopin's originality manifested itself in all aspects, beginning with that of the exclusive use of the piano as a translator of poetic emotions and ending with technical innovations, in musical and harmonic forms. The essential Romantic element in Chopin's work derives from the deep national character of his music, where his boundless love for the country he had left at the age of 20 never to see again vibrates. He is himself the Romantic hero of his music, the artist who, after having left his country, has yearned for the natal land which he dreamt and played, transmitting thus to his people, in his own musical language, messages of battle and courage while suffering for the nation's defeats as for his own.

Fryderyk Chopin remains in art history as one of the greatest virtuosos of all times, as well as a wonderful Romantic artist and composer.

(Translated by Roxana Huza)

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