Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4

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Through the analysis of Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4, the composer’s compositional techniques characteristic of the Romantic era is revealed. Techniques such as blurring of harmonies, chromaticism, directed motion, mode mixture, increased use of dissonance, and rhythmic offsetting are some key components of the Romantic era that are incorporated into Chopin’s work. Chopin used a variety of traditional compositional materials in a non-traditional manner.

In order to draw these conclusions, the analyst is required to scan the music horizontally instead of vertically. Traditional Roman numeral analysis does not apply to this work, and the analyst is obligated to look at the larger work as a whole. The purpose of this analysis is to achieve insight into the cognitive workings of composers attributable to the Romantic era. Through examining Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No.4, this can be accomplished. As the techniques applied to Chopin works are observed, one gains a greater understanding of the composition’s musical core and the cohesive factors that are present in the work.

The Romantic Era was a period of significant change in the history of Western European art music. Composers before the late-eighteenth century composed in a somewhat internationalist style or manner for five to seven decades, a “lingua franca” of compositional practice. The particular stylistic trends of this of music depended upon strict conditions involving rigid, expected harmonic patterns. Typically, tonic harmony (a sonority based on the keynote, or first scale degree of the key of the composition) was preceded by dominant harmony (a sonority based on the fifth scale degree). Sometimes this pattern was replaced by a sonority based on the seventh scale degree of the key. Ordinarily, dominant harmony was preceded by a chord of dominant preparation, a sonority based upon either the second or fourth scale degree. Naturally, as in any artistic endeavor, exceptions to these practices occur. However, in common practice composition, predominant-dominant-tonic chord progressions prevailed. In addition, dissonance prior to the Romantic Era was rigidly controlled, and limited to specific formula. Tones that occurred outside of the prevailing background harmony were employed only for very specific and controlled reasons. In time, composers gradually exhausted this strict style of composing and searched for new, innovative, and more personalized means of compositional expression. Composers began to focus less upon the specific structure of a piece, and more on conveying a particular idea, image, or emotion. An example of this approach to composing may be observed by analyzing Frederic Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4 (score and analytical reduction appended). In the analysis, techniques such as chromaticism, tonal “blurring,” and the use of traditional materials in a non-traditional manner, bear witness to Chopin’s movement away from the former, formulaic manner of composing.

This progressive style of composing was foreshadowed or adumbrated throughout the latter eighteenth and nineteenth century as composers became increasingly interested in incorporating multi-tone scales into their writing (Jones 258). These multi-tone sets may involve up to the 12 different pitches of the duodecuple scale instead of the traditional seven tone scale typically used in
common practice tonal music. This highly chromatically-charged approach to composing, (generally called chromaticism), is also called directed motion by theorists. Directed motion uses chromatic motion to replace and subsume the function of traditional harmonic patterns. This modification is effective because it employs many tones that are outside of the parent key and scale, effectively blurring requisite expectations in tonal harmony. Frequently non-harmonic tones (tones outside of the prevailing background harmony) are found in successive layers of moving half steps. Other times, these dissonances are absorbed into the background harmony becoming fully functional chord tones, creating new, independent sonorities. These sonorities are called Upper Dominant Discords and Non-Dominant Upper Extensions, and Altered Chords. Labeled ninth chords, eleventh chords, and thirteenth chords, these labels derived from the distance of the absorbed dissonance above the root of the chord. These added tones add perceived emotional qualities and tension to the music, and can provide added extra musical affectation to a given composition. Additionally these absorbed dissonances and chromatic alterations yield new types of sonorities that share these same affective qualities.

Chromaticism is used to change tonal focus, or to shift from one key to another key, called modulation. Examples of the varying applications of chromaticism are found in Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4. In measure 16 there is a descending line that steps chromatically down from F natural to C. The F natural functions as a neighboring tone, while the C is an accented passing tone. This motion repeats in measure 18. A Neighboring Tone is a non-harmonic tone that is approached and left, by conjunct motion, in opposite directions, while an Accented Passing Tone is a non-harmonic tone that is approached and left, by conjunct motion, in the same direction, and placed on a strong beat (Jones 171).

This is an example of how Chopin uses tones outside of the background tonic chord. Additional uses of passing tones and accented passing tones are found in measure 132 where there is a line that moves chromatically up from D #5 to F #5. In this instance, non-harmonic tones are used to project the melody, which takes precedence over the chord sonorities. A non-harmonic tone that is approached by skip and left by a step to a chord tone is called an Appoggiatura (Jones 171). An Appoggiatura is found in measure 137, where its purpose again is to accommodate the melody, the most important element of the composition.

An example of chromaticism used to affect a modulation is found in measure 131, where the piece shifts from the key of b minor to B major (called parallel major minor by theorists). While still in b minor, Chopin uses a repeated F # and C # to gradually shift and acclimate the ear to hear the major instead of minor mode.

Tonal (or harmonic) “blurring” is another inventive aspect of compositional technique that emerges in nineteenth-century music. As previously stated, both chromaticism and directed motion are means of making obumbrate the background harmonies, yet other means exist as well. The use of upper dominant discords and mode mixture are two additional aspects of tonal blurring. When the dissonance is absorbed directly into the background chord, rhythmically becoming a chord tone, it is not labeled as a non-harmonic tone. Instead it is called an upper-dominant discord, and labeled either a ninth, an eleventh, or a thirteenth chord. First used as dissonances, these elements are directly absorbed into the chord and are now treated as fully functional chord members. This adds a unique quality to the sonorities, intensifying their effect as harmonies and they affect the music’s emotional appeal for the listeners.

Romantic Era composers further blurred the tonality using mode mixture, defined as minor key elements transferred
into major keys, or vice versa. This procedure blurs the distinction between major and minor harmony. The result of tonal blurring is the erosion of traditional, functional sonorities. Harmony will leach or fade into the next, especially between dominant and tonic harmony. Consequently, Roman Numeral Analysis becomes increasingly impractical to apply.

Versions of upper dominant discords and mode mixture are discovered in Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33, No. 4. In measure 74, Chopin replaces a simple dominant triad with a dominant ninth chord. He uses this ninth chord to prepare tonic harmony, instead of using a simple Dominant triad. In measure 9, Chopin removes the third scale degree of the supertonic chord, and adds in the seventh scale degree to replace it. Chopin continually uses a major-minor seventh chord to prepare tonic harmony, instead of using a dominant triad, as in measures 16-21.

Another example of mode mixture is found in measure 94. Chopin places a minor tonic triad in the major key. This not only occludes the distinction between major and minor harmonies, but emphasizes and reinforces the chromatic bass line. Rhythmic “displacement” is another tactic Romantic composers used in order to effectively distort the background harmony. Often, the consonant chord tones (or consonances) are placed on the weak beat, while the dissonances are placed on the strong beat. While this is common practice throughout Western musical practice, composers elongate the dissonances and resolve to the chord tone only at the last possible moment. In effect, the dissonance becomes the consonance and the consonance becomes the dissonance. This is an example of how consonances are perceived as dissonances and dissonances are perceived as consonances.

Syncopation is employed to a high degree. In contrast to traditional usage, non-chord tones are held until the last moment, then must resolve to a chord-tone. This is used for heightened tension resulting in a more intensive emotional effect. This creates greater dramatic power, generating a much more fulfilling resolution.

Examples of rhythmic displacement are employed in the Mazurka in measure 173. In this piece two double neighboring tones are placed on the strong portion of the beat, while the chord tones are placed on the weak portion of the beat. Neighboring tones are fairly rare as they are static, and do not advance the individual line. It is rather unusual to see them paired together and placed on the strong portion of the beat. Chopin uses them here as an expressive gesture. They project the melody, which is more important than aligning the harmonies on the beat.

Another innovative technique employed by latter eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers is the use of traditional materials in a non-traditional way. Many of the previous examples of blurring tonal harmony can be included in this category. The compositional techniques used prior to the romantic period were not entirely discarded in favor of new techniques. Instead, these techniques were altered, elaborated, and changed in some fashion to seem new and refreshed, yielding a highly individualized compositional syntax. They are used to defeat the listeners’ expectation.

In Chopin’s composition the most common method of using traditional materials in non-traditional ways employs dissonance over a traditional chord progression. Instead of simply using a supertonic triad, followed by a dominant triad, followed by a tonic triad, Chopin adds sevenths to the supertonic and dominant chord. In measures 9 through 16, the progression goes from a supertonic seventh chord, passing through a tonic chord (acting as a neutral connector) to a dominant seventh chord, on its way to a tonic triad. Dissonances are now considered to be just another resource available to the composer to create the desired effect.
Other uses of dissonant elements support this. In measure 174 an appoggiatura is placed on the strong beat. This appoggiatura is paired with an accented passing tone. The use of non-harmonic tones results in a ninth chord built on the Dominant. By taking the traditional dissonances and placing them on the strong beats of the measure, Chopin has created a new non-traditional harmony.

Through careful analysis of Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4, one can view typical Romantic Era compositional techniques used by composers of the day. The many methods of blurring tonal harmony include chromaticism, directed motion, use of dissonances, mode mixture, rhythmic offsetting, and traditional materials used in a non-traditional way. This method of composition should not be viewed as a departure, or rejection of previous methods of composing, but more as a renovation of previous techniques. Typical chord progressions are present, but the use of chromaticism, and the absorption of dissonances result in atypical sonorities. Often, the consonance will be delayed or left out in favor of a dissonance to accommodate the melody or motive, or for its use as an emotional device or gesture. Eventually, the traditional forms of analysis such as assigning Roman numerals to chords, becomes insignificant and one is forced to look at a much larger picture. In order to fully understand the music of Chopin and other composers during his time, one must scan the music horizontally, and not concentrate solely on lining up chords vertically.

Works Cited

Figure 01: Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4
Figure 02: Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4 continued
Figure 03: Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4 continued
Figure 04: Chopin’s Mazurka Op. 33 No. 4 continued