The way to the analysis and interpretation of Finale

The complexity of both the form and the content of the Finale has inspired profound reflections from the very beginning. Its mysterious nature remains unsolved even by written sources, namely the composer’s correspondence with relatives and acquaintances. For instance, a Chopin’s letter to J. Fontana tells of his compositional struggle, but sheds no light on the motives behind the creation of the Finale.

[...] Here I am writing a Sonata in B flat minor, containing the march that you know. There is an allegro, then a Scherzo E flat minor, the march and a short finale, perhaps 3 of my pages; the left hand in unison with the right, gossiping after the march [...]… I am correcting the Paris edition of Bach; not only the engraver’s mistakes, but also the mistakes hallowed by those who are supposed to understand Bach (I have no pretensions to understand better, but I do think that sometimes I can guess). ¹

In turn Marcelina Czartoryska’s correspondence with Cecylia Działyńska provides information on an internal process of artistic assimilation, which is above all individual [...] There aren’t, and cannot be, any rules on intonation and stress – one has to enter into Chopin’s atmosphere [...] If a given piece of music has quality, then provided it contains true emotion, it will be combined with external form just like a word combined with a thought [...]²

A letter by Chopin to Delfina Potocka sheds a bit more light on the motives behind the Finale: In an interesting romance it is the last chapter which proves most captivating and provides solution to the protagonists’ fate; likewise, I strive to create finales which are logical solutions to works of music. In many of my compositions the final dozen or so measures are the most significant. The first inspirations must be captured and written down promptly. You know it is not easy, as they may come and go in a flash. And then you must recall them in detail. In a nutshell, I focus on catching even the slightest glimpses of the initial inspiration,

which slip away like rats or fleas.³

Authenticity of Chopin’s correspondence with Potocka has been questioned on numerous occasions, nevertheless his reflections expressed in the quoted letter seem highly probable.

The enigmatic nature of the dubious correspondence provokes speculation of various musicologists. Works of eminent scholars dedicated to Chopin’s personality have inspired an analysis of the Finale which I deem sensible and present in this paper.

In the ongoing discourse on the subject Mieczysław Tomaszewski voices the following opinion: It seems unquestionable that the B flat minor Sonata represents a state of both consciousness and subconsciousness of the composer caught in an “extreme situation” […] ⁴

Antoni Grudziński in his study of the Finale evokes the atmosphere of the piece: A mood of mystery filled with remarkable, explicitly indefinable chill, inspiring diverse associations in listeners […] ⁵

Henryk Opieński’s view is in a similar spirit when he discerns in the Finale a certain desperate tangle of ideas, with train virtually impossible to grasp, reinterpreted in different ways […] which constitutes an ingenious and ultimately individual completion of the Sonata, as a composition of an utterly homogeneous mood.⁶

James Huneker in turn focuses on the awkward emotionality of the piece and claims that this movement is gloomy, its curves whispering too many semi-muffled warnings, its swoosh and superhuman thunder presenting a quality which is an affront to all definition.⁷

Meanwhile, Tadeusz Zieliński believes that the piece alludes to sorrow triggered by loss. The music is truly heartbreaking though strange and unquestionably reveals a very profound sense. What can be more heartbreaking than pain of mourning, what can be found a step further? Only madness or awareness of trespassing all means of comprehension known to men, and an escape into the mist of transcendence, into a different dimension of time and thought. The expression of Chopin’s Finale reveals signs of either quality.⁸

In his comprehensive analysis of the Finale Józef Chomiński points out the role of

⁵ A. Grudziński Fryderyk Chopin. Przewodnik po życiu i twórczości. Kraków Musica Iagellonica 2008, p. 120.
figuration when quoting by way of analogy this means of compositional expression in études: *Chopin’s études convince us that in the composer’s hands figuration never turned into soulless soundplay; quite the contrary, along with other means it fulfilled the function of a powerful means of expression.*

In unravelling the mystery of *Sphinx*, Yuri Kholopov observes that the *Finale* exhibits features of a “small” two-theme rondo. From purely musical point of view, parameters of this fascinating romantic piece such as its motivic and melodic patterns, its themes, harmonics, movement structure and overall form are in no way mysterious or incomprehensible. However, in the opening of his article Kholopov quotes P. Benara’s opinion published in “Musica” 1985, no. 1, wherein the latter claims that “the musical sense” of the *Finale* remains “concealed”.

In his tackling the *Finale*, Alfred Cortot indicates the impression of legato, whose performance gives rise to a continuous tone, which escapes, slips away, covered rather than outspoken.

Indeed, the composition is elusive and falls out of unambiguous definition, even when focusing on its form alone. As Viktor Karpovich Merzhanov observes, *Musical intonations and details in the first three movements of the Sonata are diluted in the stream of the Finale tones. When speaking of Chopin’s music, one may probably refer to its “spiritual programme”.*

I have experienced very similar emotions from my first contact with the B flat minor Sonata. Already then did I write in my copy of the *Finale* score the following remark: *intangible expression*. When returning to the Sonata a few years later, I feel that I finally managed to grasp what was previously intangible. Chopin’s hostile attitude to programme music is a well-known fact. Consequently, following Viktor Merzhanov’s line of thought, I dare claim that Chopin’s works have a spiritual form and the aforementioned spiritual programme manifests itself as part of a different order.

Chopin’s music reflects the spiritual and emotional state of man, subject to both good and evil forces. I believe that he followed a different logic, exemplified by his including in the

---

Sonata cycle the Funeral March, tackling the question of life and death. That is to say, Chopin probes into the deepest structures of human existence with its metaphysics.

A few years ago Viktor Merzhanov spoke of this phenomenon at the NIFC Scientific Conference in Warsaw. Due to the importance of the topic it is worth quoting a lengthy excerpt from his paper. The entire quote is found in his book “Music ought to speak”. In the chapter “Unravelling Chopin’s Sphinx” Merzhanov writes, The appearance of this composition marked one of the most important events in the history of human culture, in human science. Apart from the first three Sonata movements of extraordinary expressive power, articulating good, evil, tragedy and happiness, the cycle is completed by the final movement, deemed mysterious by many musicians. What does it talk about? Life and Death!

There are probably no other words equally meaningful for human existence. The best-known and most popular among performers is the image of the “wind upon grave” put forward by Anton Rubinstein, excellent pianist and renowned performer of the work. The image is logically alluring and at the same time it simplifies the philosophical solution to the question about what happens following man’s death. How can we peep into the <other side>? Is it possible at all? When attempting to analyse the Sonata, in the first movement we find a theme of trepidation of a wavering personality and an episode dedicated to happiness. We come across a fight between various human states and affirmation of life [...]. The second movement, a kind of Mefisto Waltz, constitutes a musical illustration of the pressure exerted on man by evil powers. The said pressure competes with musically-expressed hope for happiness, present in man. In the third movement of the Funeral March music is both shockingly natural and philosophically lofty and calm in its rendition of inevitable demise. It contains an episode different from the tragic pathos typical for the extreme parts of a march. Liszt’s words “A girl bewails the departed” is an exceptionally accurate description of the mood of this episode. Thus Death triumphs! As if everything had ended. Yet, greatness of the music, uniqueness of the solution to this eternal problem is found in the Sonata Finale. Its sound proves Chopin’s superhuman ability to peep into the “other side”.

What is the Finale of the B flat minor Sonata? An insightful musician will behold notes, will hear music composed in quavers (not demisemiquavers), which indicates the right tempo, and consequently will give up the idea of performing the piece for sport. Already in the first few measures of the Finale the performer will decipher intonations of themes from the first movement, i.e. energetic, rising short phrases coinciding with the musical material of
the second movement, and will discover musical consistencies reminiscent of the middle section of the Funeral March. These intonations and musical details, like many others, of the first three movements are diluted in the stream of the tones of the Finale.

The above-quoted description leads us to conclude that the image of the „wind upon grave”, already assimilated by so many musicians, falls short of conveying the meaning completely.

Highly spiritual, philosophical inclination of Chopin’s music calls for another image reflecting the Sonata Finale, an image more consistent with Chopin’s aesthetics, defying all superficiality [...] 13

In order to unravel the mysterious message of the Finale, Viktor Merzhanov invokes motives of ancient Greek mythology. He cites the myth of the river of oblivion called Lethe. According to that legend, souls of the departed plunged into the river and forgot the earthly life. By transferring the image evoked by the legend to Chopin’s Finale, the author of the book claims that musical elements of all other Sonata movements are “diluted” in the stream of tones that constitute a homogenous, continuous musical phrase that flows like a river.

The river metaphor inspired me to search the Finale for intonations in spots previously unexamined. However, despite attentive listening to intonations in the Finale they failed to be better discerned from the fast-flowing stream of tones. Intonations heard in the previous movements seemed in the Finale for a long time nothing more than a recurring scent, intangible and indescribable. I kept playing the movement fully aware that my performance contained something undefined.

In order to legitimize further research, I decided to perform the piece in Professor Merzhanov’s presence and requested him to specify the spots of intonation. I asked the Professor to indicate the concrete spots in the Finale. Merzhanov played in a slow tempo the motives constituting fragments of themes from previous movements, tone by tone. For instance, in measure 22 of the Finale there is musical material quoted from the Scherzo in measures 1 and 3 in the bass line. Measure 11 of the Finale with the upbeat is equivalent to the material from measure 31 in the middle section of the Funeral March. In measure 27 of the Finale there is material from measure 15 of the Funeral March. These tunes were, ARE concealed therein, albeit untraceable in a fast tempo. Professor Merzhanov stressed the minor third motive repeated in the Finale as a form-constructing element of the Themes I and II in

the 1st movement of the Sonata. The spots of intonation indicated by Viktor Merzhanov were completely different from the ones played by me later on.

At that time I only discerned a few of them; in measures 5, 6, 7, 8 of the Finale there are fragments taken from the 1st movement and in measures 69, 70 of the Finale I recognized the opening of Theme I from the 1st movement of the Sonata. In the same measures 69, 70 of the Finale I also discerned a quote from the Funeral March. For a long time the closing part of the Finale seemed to me the opening part of Theme I of the 1st movement, as the melody in measures 9, 10, 11 of the 1st movement is incorporated into the tonal material of the Finale in its closing measures, starting from measure 69 until the last fading octave. The very same material proved to be also incorporated into the first four measures of the Finale, as testified by a later analysis.

Having listened to the intonations suggested by me, Professor Merzhanov stated that every musician would find his/her own individual intonations. For this reason the intonations indicated by me in other parts of the Finale are acceptable. This conclusion encouraged me to make a more detailed specification of the spots of intonation. As a result of my ongoing deliberations I realized that the Sonata Finale is not an independent and separate composition. A deeper plunge into the music of the entire Sonata became for me a kind of projection. As Jung says, a projection is never a permanent feature of human activity; a projection happens.14

Following my intuition, at one point I noticed intonations “emerging” in the Finale. I could say that the intonations happened in my perception in an instant. And then I thought... the impossible is turning into possible.

The intonations from the previous movements became not only more audible to me, but also visible in form of colourful overlapping layers as if painted in watercolours. The process of analysis was carried out in haste, stemming from eluding, though previously perceived entire melodic fragments. I began to worry if I would manage to retain them long enough to be able to express them in a language regulated by logic.

Undoubtedly, themes or melodic threads from the previous three movements, Allegro preceded by the introduction marked Grave, Scherzo and March, overlap and come into being on top of flowing, unconnected tones.

It is however impossible to indicate them simultaneously, as can be done in a fugue.

---

(e.g. Bach’s), because human perception of tones in time does not allow it. In such understanding of analysis however, the *Finale* appears multi-layered in musical, psychological and philosophical respects due to its “concealed” melodies. I presume that Chopin kept hearing in his mind the complete music of the *Finale* before he committed it to paper. He could have been in a state of a man overwhelmed by his thoughts and tossed by violent emotions on the one hand, and on the other he could have been in the remarkable, *explicitly indefinable chill*\(^\text{15}\), showing the composer’s reserve from his work. If he had been overcome by an internal confusion of endless, insistent thoughts, then he must have had incredible reserves of mental power to be able to keep them under control and to note the Sonata *Finale* and the entire sequence of future pieces.

The discussed movement was logically conceived by the composer. Its structure reflects the philosophy of Chopin’s life, his psyche and also his treatment of both worldly and extraterrestrial matters. The Funeral March functions as an exposition of a certain end. It may be the end of biological existence or moral demise. A man dies or something – for instance a certain highly cherished value – dies within a man. Although the same human being goes on living, in a way he is already dead while being alive. If Chopin had placed this movement before the March, perhaps there would be no more questions regarding man. But if anything important takes place after death, or just before it comes, then it is summarized in the *Finale*.

When the B flat minor Sonata was completed in 1839 Chopin had already been through serious, still recurring diseases. Indeed, some illnesses were aggravating, slowly consuming the composer’s health and life. Three movements of the Sonata were composed at the time when Chopin, according to his biographers, was on the verge of dying and resuscitated. “*Staggering like a phantom*, eventually nearly dead Chopin was “*resuscitated*” *in a port by Jacques H. Coste, surgeon of a French war brig*\(^\text{16}\).

Chopin himself hardly mentioned his poor health in his own letters. He endured it with discretion and dignity. When mentioning his weakness, he does not ask for compassion. Only on his deathbed, overcome by unbearable loneliness, he begs his relatives and friends to come in order to say goodbye.

The extent of havoc caused by his illness can be appreciated when studying Chopin’s biography and other sources. Having read Czesław Sielużycki’s *Chopin. A Suffering Genius*, providing meticulous account of successive stages of the illness, its symptoms and severe

\(^{15}\) A. Grudziński *Fryderyk Chopin. Przewodnik po życiu i twórczości*. Kraków Musica Iagellonica 2008, p. 120.
outcomes, one discerns in Chopin’s personality a relation between these stages of illness and his creative activity. Stages marked by pain and suffering penetrate into his music. The enclosed photos of the first death mask made by Clésinger on the day of Chopin’s death show gross distortions, which did not take place posthumously but resulted from long-lasting anguish.

I believe that Chopin’s personal experiences exerted influence on his creativity. Could inspiration, the gushing source of his work, stem from his suffering? I believe it could, at least such thesis seems quite probable. Consequently, Chopin’s existential conditions cannot be neglected. Music constituted for him a harmonious combination of all obstacles and a source of power to live. It was in music that he encoded imperishable, good energy of human emotions. Although suffering and pain rendered him weak, he could find strength to transform the destructive state into positive spiritual energy. Chopin rose above his own suffering. The power of his music is focused on creativity and construction. The sublimation of this energy testifies to the way he perceived himself and defined his place in the world.

At this point it seems relevant to quote Władysław Stróżewski’s precise wording of this aspect by saying that “Time of music, or perhaps more accurately, time-music forms part of existence itself, while perception of music has the most existential character of all emotions inspired by art. In other words, music appeals directly to our perception of existence.”

Viewed from this perspective, the existential character of Chopin’s music proves that he perceived and lived his life profoundly; it is further a signal to emotionality, a record of imperishable, good energy, which increases the dimension of human emotions by lending them permanent values. When we learn the language of music and have influence on its expression, by means of empathy we communicate with the sphere of the emotional richness encoded in music.

Perhaps from the point of view of this formal assumption regarding the Finale and as a result of the complete compositional process, Chopin communicated to us that there is indeed Something concealed and invisible. It seems that Chopin expressed this truth non-verbally, by transferring the message into multi-layered structures. Can the end be in fact the beginning?

When extended as if by means of augmentation, the final measures of the Finale reveal the beginning of the theme taken form the 1st movement of the Sonata. The rests used here function like instances where the music went completely quiet. In the Baroque

symbolism silence translated to death. Juxtaposed with the entire Finale annotated with *sotto voce e legato* indication, the closing *ff* chords appear like the final surge meant to break off with everything past. It is as if the soul was finally parting from the body, which was its home in the earthly time, with the soul now shifted to another dimension of existence, about to live in an eschatological sphere.

In the presented analysis of the Finale the end constitutes the beginning. When performed with a subtle emphasis on the tunes embedded in the *continuum* of tones, one gets the impression that the principle construction of the movement gets shattered. The themes are distorted, abandon their rhythm and expression, thus losing the initial form. And yet, the melodies possible to discern are so much more than just fragmentary material from previous movements. Instead, they are entire themes, employed earlier in constructing the form; themes, which formerly lived, exposed in their antitheses and contexts, thus creating the drama. Right here the perception of time is altered and the Finale “lives” as another being in a multidimensional space. Indeed, one may say that the Funeral March has ended already. Likewise, the existence of a human being has come to an end. And yet, the March represents the inevitability of death for all the living, while the Finale – as I see it – expresses the state of an immortal soul and its entrance into eternity. In my opinion, Chopin’s one flowing, raised musical voice, recalling themes from previous movements, also signals that the most important of all are “living” emotions, capable of moving everyone and experienced in all their shades. I believe that by adopting this specific termination of the Finale, distant from any speculation, Chopin “peeped into”, or more accurately “touched”, some unknown aspects of the so-called life after death. From such perspective the Finale constitutes a certain metaphysical threshold which, when crossed, leads man to a different context of existence. It can also be expressed by referring to categories of memory, which hides music “beings” that had been created *ex nihilo* before, flowing now in an altered rhythm to a different metaphysical order.

Chopin never stops to amaze.

Having viewed the entire musical material exposed in examples, I am intrigued by the fact that each time we hear a melody from the previous movement, simultaneously the very same flow of tones reveals the other element of the melody in a very specific spot and no other. It therefore seems that we are not dealing with accidental connections, but fully intentional operations. Viewed in this light the Finale has an open form for performers.
Following the same train of thought one will arrive at the conclusion that it is impossible to simultaneously reveal all themes or their fragments in one and the same performance, but it is possible to select some, which will take place, and reject others. When playing different variants, the performer can exert influence on the change of tone of the entire movement, while the piece itself remains the same.

It seems that the structure and conception of the Finale have been revealed. On the other hand, since Chopin not only failed to reveal them, but deliberately concealed them, is the whole discussion legitimate? Consequently, can we consider the 4th movement of the Sonata open for the performer? On the one hand, if the conception has been revealed, then by playing the piece as before the performer is far more aware of the matter hidden in between tones and this awareness is more important than the exposition of subsequent themes. On the other hand however, by means of such a structure of the movement Chopin leaves the decision up to the performer. By applying the open form technique, contemporary composers expect from performers a certain flexibility in the way that they hear a given piece, and an initiative in constructing its entire form. Although each time it is performed the composition alters its tone, the piece itself retains its identity despite the multiform nature.

I believe that Chopin intuitively foresaw this direction.

[...] Since art is infinite in its limited means, artistic education ought to be limited to the same means, so as to practice education as infinite [...]18

Exposition of intonation in the Finale does not exhaust further interpretations of the movement. Quite the opposite; new questions and mysteries emerge. Perhaps they will become solvable when placed in the perspective of philosophy, psychology, theology and musicology. Thus, they will supply new knowledge of human sensitivity, revealed in a critical situation.

Bożena Maciejowska

---

18 J. J. Eigeldinger – Szkice do Metody gry fortepianowej Fryderyka Chopina (p. 39, 40 footnote 2).
This opinion is a charming example of transcendence in reflecting Chopin [...]18
In case of education, a teacher equals an artist; this observation was made by Delacroix (Journal, 7 April 1849), to whom the following postulate is attributed:
“One must paint the infinite in the finite”.
At compositional and performative level, Chopin’s dialectics works here, starting with finiteness and infiniteness as well as objectives and means.