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Evaluating the Harmonic Innovation in Chopin's Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23

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Abstract

The perfection of Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and his exclusive piano music with its unique personal stamp make his work highly original. His musical style is exceptionally individualistic, so distinct that some elements are quickly recognized as belonging to him. Two elements that Chopin revolutionized in his compositions include a redefinition of many traditional concepts associated with dance music with character piece; and the of writing harmonic sense that was quite original for that time, which brought such critics from his contemporaries complaining about those features that are regarded as strikingly original today – the equilibrium point of chromaticism and diatonicism. The purpose of this article is to analyse and evaluate the harmonic innovation in Chopin's Ballade no. 1 in G minor, Op. 23, as Chopin successfully blended diatonicism and chromaticism to the point of being equal in use, resulting in early study of tonal expansion; this musical language had such enormous influence to the later composers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Chopin, Harmonic Innovation, Equilibrium, Chromaticism, Diatonicism

Background

The history of musical periods through centuries is pretty much defined by the changes of the styles, where there are some kind of transformations or revolutions in the fundamental musical elements. Composers during nineteenth century essentially followed the "classical" tradition regarding musical forms, harmonic language, as well as textural writing; what they were trying to add was the use of various means to experiment with and challenge the commonly accepted boundaries of tonality, which purpose was to add greater contrast among sections for more dramatic musical context. The harmony chances gradually to tonal language which is using major

and minor scales in Baroque until 19th Century era even today. Meanwhile, the use of tonal language chances from period to period, especially in the romantic era when the composers started to explore more on the harmonic language on their works. The development and the use of tonal language where Classical period's composers use the same rules by using the harmony of I-IV-V, the chromaticism also arose and used as the embellishments of the melody so called non chord tones. And it also developed to the tonicization, while the harmony modulates shortly using the chromatic harmony. These chromatics approach weaken the tonality itself. That means all the chromaticism has to be resolved to its tonality.

According to William Thomson (Thomson, 1983), *"Ambiguity enters the music scene when the collection of events at once hierarchic level produce the next broader level that bears more than one potential meaning"*, that means music develop rapidly on its structure. Along with the late 18th Century and early 19th Century, composers started to explore more on the harmonic language by using more chromaticism and also dissonance. The chromaticism and dissonance produce the harmony ambiguity because it doesn't stand in one strong key, but to many keys. Such as Arnold Schoenberg refers the harmony ambiguity with "floating" and "suspended" whereas the harmony alternate from one key to another with rapid alteration (Noden-Skinner, 1984). Schoenberg was one of the composers who established the most radical harmonic language in Western music history by erasing the traditional tonal system; however, there were earlier composers who had experimented and innovated with expanding tonal system, Chopin, who escalated the chromatic writing into particular phenomenon in the nineteenth century. This particular force of harmonic change in the nineteenth century - the heightening of chromaticism – eventually obscured traditional tonal functions, which led to Schoenberg stating,

> "The overwhelming multitude of dissonances could not be counterbalanced any more by occasional returns to such tonic triad as represent a key."
> (Samson, 1975).

Interestingly, the topic of chromaticism has not been the focus of much attention in the research on Chopin's harmony despite having been considered to be a particularly important phenomenon in the nineteenth century. It is important to note that regardless the heavy writing of chromaticism, nevertheless, diatonicism remained the foundation of overall musical structure chromatic elements elaborated and tended to function as expressive or decorative enrichments, or as temporary deviation. It offers alternative to diatonic progressions, establishing equilibrium of chromatic and diatonic materials, as stated by Jim Samson:

> "There are, of course, no firm dividing lines, but already in some works by Chopin chromatic harmony has been developed as a more thoroughgoing alternative to diatonic progression, establishing an equilibrium of chromatic and diatonic material which anticipates procedures in Wagner and other late-Romantic composer. (Samson, 1955).

In general, the chromaticism texture of Chopin's music is still completely under the framework of diatonicism, although consequently ambiguous tonalities, as part of this expressive chromaticism, frequently appear especially in the beginning of his music as Schoenberg called it as suspended tonalities; such ambiguous harmony and chromaticism are still under the framework of diatonicism, and they are not designed to interrupt the overall tonality. Often Chopin begins the composition away from the tonal centre, but it does not influence the tonality of a piece as a whole since its primary function is to give colour to the melody. In this journal, we will explore more especially the tonal ambiguity on Chopin's Ballade by exploring more on the harmony language and its form. The form itself has its own characteristic based on the theme and its key (Berger, 1996).

Characteristic of Tonal Harmony

Tonal harmony is associated with triadic system, where there is relation between interval three, such as major, minor or augmented and diminished. In tonal harmony we will figure the clear home key where the harmony relation between tonic, subdominant, and dominant. The role of the triadic itself will produce the clear harmony from the beginning, where tonal harmony usually will start with clear tonic at the beginning and end with clear cadence dominant to tonic at the end of the piece. Tonal harmony is also associated with diatonicism, it serves mainly as the overall harmonic framework, whereas chromaticism provides coloristic purpose to increase the music's dramatic tension. In the tonal harmony or tonal language, the use of chromaticism is not too broad, even though there is some part tonicization where the harmony modulates for a while

then immediately back to its origin key. And that tonicization used somewhat chromaticism notes or key and resolve in the proper way.

Chopin and Tonal Expansion

Chopin has its own characteristic in composing his work, discussing on the harmony itself, Chopin elaborate more on the chromatic harmonic language, where the tonal itself disrupted by its highly chromaticism and this make the tonality decline. There are some ways that Chopin did to prove the tonality decline and harmony ambiguity; the first way is the parallel voice leading that could result hollow in harmonic function, second is start away from the home key and suspend the tonality, third is delaying the resolution of the dissonance, fourth is direct modulation, fifth is floating tonality that produce somehow the tonal or the root position of the key never arrived until the end of the bar, sixth is double tonic complex or the progressive tonality that somehow it sounds like there are two strong keys in the entire song, and seventh is using the series of extended chord.

The Origin of Ballad

When we hear the word ballad, we will think of a dance form that based on poet and ballad itself has its own long history and complicated evolution before the Romantic era including in music ad literature. The term of "ballad" is used in the 14th Century, where the Golden age of Medieval Era, referred to *Ars Nova* (New Art), where the composers invented may new ideas in music including musical form ballad for secular vocal music, other than the two other musical form; *rondeau* and *virelai*. This form Ballad is one of the fixed form in Medieval era, however Chopin did not refer his ballad back in the medieval era's ideas but his own characteristic ballads in the 18th Century and early 18th Century (Lee-Thai & Delong, 2017). The definition of Ballad itself especially in this Chopin's ballade apply such as persistence narrative content and extramusical program (Rink, 1994). Chopin composed this ballad in G minor project the characteristic of sorrowful main theme and final with the devastating coda (Chopin, Ballade No.1 in G Minor, Op. 23, n.d.).

Ballad was originally from a combination of song, dance, and folk song in European tradition, which is included as a dancing song and oftentimes Ballad is associated with written poem, that is why ballad usually tell some narrative story such as histories, legend, fairy tales, jokes, loves, crimes, and any other stories. Back in the Medieval Era, Ballad was sung by the travelling performances with its main topic of courtly love, and many of them are usually slow and

emotionally evocative. Even though the term Ballad was used in the 14th Century in Medieval Era, the earliest predecessor of ballad can be found in the vocal music of troubadours, which in Oxford dictionary, it means "The French medieval lyric and poet musician active especially with themes of courtly love."

When we look at the historical of Ballad form throughout the era, the term and use of ballad form were developed. In the tenth to thirteenth century Monophonic Ballad, the earliest predecessor of ballad can be found in the vocal music of *troubadors* and *trouvère*, in the fourteenth to century of polyphonic ballad begins with Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377) the leading of French poet and composer of the 14th Century. The genre considered as the most expressive musical form other than two previous form *rondeau* and *virelai,* the composer in this era used it to express the loftiest emotion, especially in declaring the love in the highest style. During fifteenth Century, the ballad was out of use, however one specific composer excelled in writing a few numbers – Guillaume Dufay (1397-1424). During sixteenth and eighteenth Century, the form gradually disappeared among the poets and only reappeared sporadically, however the English composers held this genre prominent, including the famous ballad opera which focused on the popular English folk song and lower-class character.

In the early nineteenth Century, ballad regained prominence especially in Germany since poets imitated or translated the traditional English ballad, that later became the important sources for the development of the lied, with tragic tone and feeling. The German poets at that time included Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862), and Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), whose works were set to music by composers including Johann Rudolf Zumsteeg (1760-1802), Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752-1814), and Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832); the three composers strongly influenced Schubert (1797-1828) and Johann Loewe (1796-1869), who would have been inspirations toward later ballade composers:

1. Schumann with his cantatas, based on ballad texts by Johann Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862).
2. Liszt with his symphonic poem, Mazeppa, after Victor Hugo (1802-85).
3. Wagner with his *Der Fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman), after Heinrich Heine.
4. Chopin with his four ballades, after Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855).

Entering the twentieth Century, the term is associated with slow to mid-tempo love song that can be found in popular music marketplace. It is disseminated throughout Western regions, especially important in the United States, among many others:

1. American ballad especially associated with the blues ballad.
2. American ballad by Stephen Foster.
3. American ballad by composers of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway.
4. American ballad by traditional pop and rock composers, including Frank Sinatra and Elton John respectively.

Inspiration of Chopin Ballade no. 1

Ballad itself formed with the form ABAB along with the fixed form, while in this Ballade, Chopin used a form of Sonata form in his piece, and he created the term ballad for piano work. Even though the term ballad derived from the 14th Century from French poetry and The French *Ars Nova* of dance form, Chopin's ballade had no relations with this form, however Chopin aware of the developing of ballad in the late 18th Century from German poets. Some composers were inspired from Chopin's Ballad, Schumann thought of Chopin's Ballad as *"one of Chopin's wildest and most unusual composition."* (Rink, 1994). Chopin's ballade was also the early romantic ballad poetry, Schubert's ballad has its similar meter as Chopin's which often set in 6/8 and 6/4 meter, in the 19th century the term ballad is used to describe a simple narrative song in the French grand opera. Some of connection was compatriot Adam Mickiewicz that associated with Chopin's ballad traditionally (Rothstein, 1994).

Chopin's ballade was not a programmatic music, however it has closest point of program music hence it has no word or titles. In narrative quality, the title is only to signify the aspects of literary inspiration in general. The four Chopin's ballad gave inspiration to Liszt and Brahms and among others, it also to remembered that Chopin credited the invention of ballad as a form in the previous era of musical form.

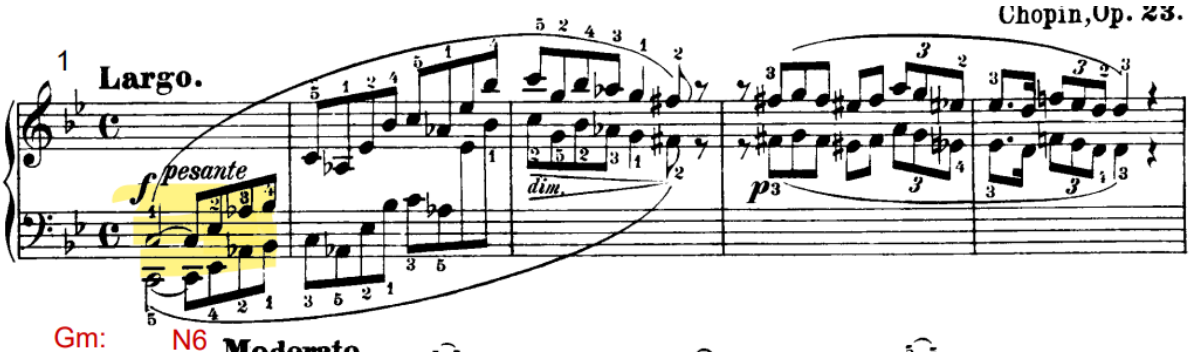
1. Ballade no. 1 in G minor, Op. 23 was written during 1835-6, inspired by the Lithuanian hero, Conrad Wallenrod.
2. Ballade no. 2 in F Major, Op. 38 was written in 1839, inspired by the Switez (Lake of the Willis).
3. Ballade no. 3 in A- flat Major, Op. 47 was written in 1840 in Nohant, inspired by the poem Undine.

4. Ballade no. 4 in F minor, Op. 52 was written in 1842 in Paris, inspired by the Poem The Three Brothers Budrys.
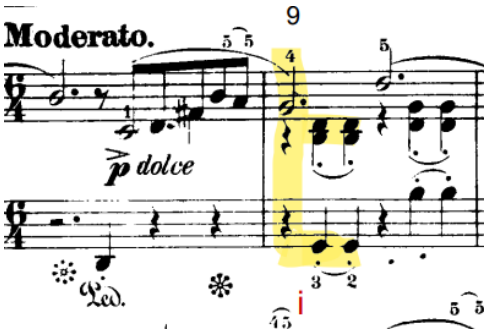
All these Chopin's Ballades are in Sonata form that has two differences than his other sonatas; in structure build the crescendo intensity and grow throughout the ballade that makes this ballad end-weighted, it has highly thematic that use variation and transformation techniques to describe and explain more on the two themes.

Harmony innovation of Chopin Ballade no. 1 in G minor, Op. 23

When we discuss about structure in music, that means we will look on its form, melody, harmony, texture, and rhythm of the piece. Chopin Ballade no. 1 op. 23 has its own characteristic and it shown that he weakened the tonality and proved of the harmony ambiguity by using Neapolitan sixth in unison right and left hands in the mm.1-5. This piece shown with two flats which is in the G minor tonic but then the G Minor suspend until mm. 9, shows the suspended tonality. Below is to show how the harmony ambiguity started:
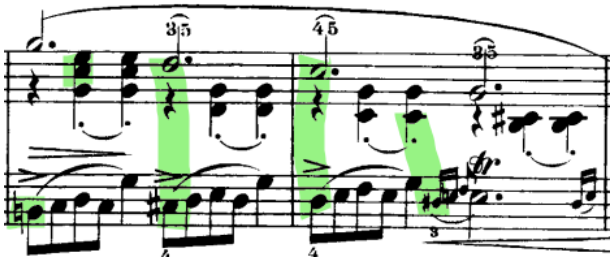


Picture 1. N6 and Unison



Picture 2. Suspended tonality and G minor arrived in mm.9

This first Ballade in mm. 1-36 somehow also shows how Chopin composed it with recitative like rather than theme itself on the voice leading (Rothstein, 1994). The harmony ambiguity also shown

in mm. 24-25 whereas dissonance on the downbeat that weakened the tonality and produce the ambiguous sound even though the tonality is clear on the right hands, shown below:



Picture 3. Chopin Ballade mm. 24-25

This Ballade has its multi complex form, it could be shown as binary form, extended binary, ritornello or even sonata because it has two contrasting themes and close with coda. It shown in table below for each theme and its analytical description on its melody, harmony, texture, and form:

T1 (1-65)	T2 (66-93)	T1 (94-105)	T2 (106-137)	T1 (138-165)	T2 (166-193)	T1 (194-207)	Coda (208-264)
Ambiguity Intro: Begin with N6 Unison Highly chromatic Unresolved diss. Suspended tonal	Ambiguity entrance: Suspended tonal Stagnant Quartal/quintal	Ambiguity entrance: Circle of third modulation forming extended chord (Eflat-G-Bflat-D)	Ambiguity: 1-bar suspended Parallel Quartal LH	Ambiguity: Suspended tonal Textural variation on 2-note slur	Ambiguity: Suspended tonal	Ambiguity: Suspended tonal	Ambiguity: Suspended tonal
Elements: Classic 2+2 Strong i-V-i Pedal point Strong bass underneath highly chromatic melody; Constant oscillation Gm and B-flatM; 36 – textural variation, based on the 2-note slur; Harmono-polyphonic	Elements: Classic 4+4 Strong i-V-i Pedal point Strong bass underneath highly chromatic melody; Constant oscillation E-flatM and B-flatM; 82 – textural variation, based on melodic retrograde from 70-71 Harmono-polyphonic	Elements: 2+2 Unidentified key due to LONG pedal point presumably Am; Am is never clearly expressed; Rather short Heterephony	Elements: 4+4 Well-established AM Harmono-polyphony; Sequences; 126-138: highly chromatic RH with clear LH tonal; the only episode in the whole piece	Elements: 4+4 Highly polyphonic 2-note slur with invertible counterpoint Sequences	Elements: Very strong I-V bass Sequence Long tonic pedal point	Elements: Unidentified key due to LONG pedal point; heterophony	Elements: Interval 9 RH; The N6 returns; 4+4; The unison returns; All ambiguity presented in the introduction, returns

Table 1. Chopin Ballade no. 1, Op. 23

Each themes have constant oscillation between first and second theme, which both are represents the suspended tonality:

- Theme 1 (mm.1-6)

  The harmony ambiguity shows by begin the intro with N6 and suspended to Gm, it also has unresolved dissonance but the harmony oscillation between G minor and B-Flat Major.

- Theme 2 (mm. 66-93)

  It has the ambiguity entrance with again suspended tonal with highly chromatic on the melody and constant oscillation between E-Flat Major and B-Flat Major.

- Theme 1 (mm. 94-105)

  It has the ambiguity entrance by using circle of third forming the extended chord and the long pedal of Am created the sense of diatonic, but it never clearly expressed.

- Theme 2 (mm. 106-137)

  The tonality suspends in one bar then arrived and stable in A Major. In mm. 130-133 the melody or right hands shows the highly chromatic while the left hand stable in diatonic of B- Flat Major.

- Theme 1 (mm. 138-165)

  Back to the suspended tonality with the textural variation on two notes slur in mm. 138-141 and continuously with highly chromatic.

- Theme 2 (mm. 166-193)

  Harmonically ambiguity with suspended tonality of E-Flat Major, chromaticism with strong diatonic pedal of I and V on the bass line.

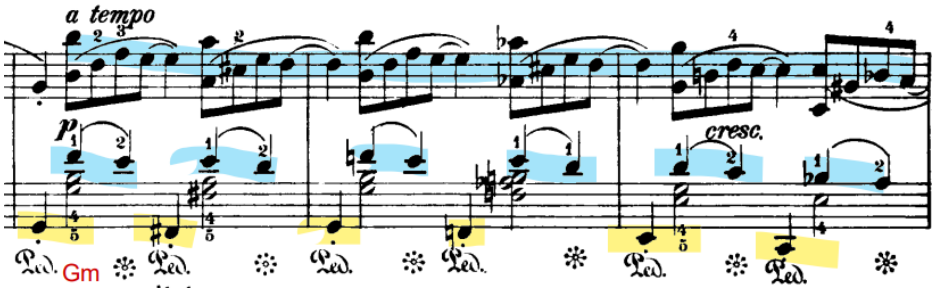
- Theme 1 (mm. 194-207)

  Suspended tonality with long pedal of D that bring sense of arriving in G but at the same time it also brings unidentified key due to that long pedal.

- Coda (mm. 208-264)

  Even in the coda it seems having another suspended tonality since all the ambiguity of the introduction returned included the unison part.

Along with the harmony, melody and form, Chopin shows the ambiguity through the texture that shows in the mm. 36-39 with the two notes slur that represents the texture ambiguity between right and left hands, and at the same time if we look on the left hands or bass line is strongly tonal, shows below:



Picture 4. Textural ambiguity

In this entire Ballade no. 1, Chopin used the equilibrium on diatonic and chromatic, shows that Chopin is not totally away from the diatonic but yet at the same time he explores more on the chromaticism, it's proved in one of the measures in mm. 48-52 where the right hand is highly chromatic while the left hands stand in diatonic of V and i.

Conclusion

Chopin recall the poetry and song, where the melody creates the vocal line with the symmetrical phrases, using repetition, antecedent and consequents, beginning rhyme and ending rhyme (Rothstein, 1994). In conclusion, Chopin didn't leave the legacy of ballad itself behind but then proved it in different way by exploring on the harmony ambiguity, melody, texture, and form. Look back on the themes, both themes have constant harmonic oscillation, written in harmono-polyphonic texture, and it written by using Baroque texture with sequence and invertible counterpoint. Although Chopin was not the first composer to experiment with expanding tonal function, however, his works become important topics associated with it. All this revolutionary tonal language with its expressive chromaticism becomes so vital that melody and harmony blend into one integrated new texture that Chopin demonstrates his abilities to expand form and sound palette, along with the decreasing of major structural dependence of tonality in his works. By doing so, Chopin composed his music with some textural revolutions that create highly expressive chromaticism that create tonal deviation, at least for a moment. This new harmonic language has become part of the whole integrated architectural plan as it has impacts on later composers during the course of nineteenth century.

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