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The Concrete and the Illusive

This program places concrete genres — dance suites of JS Bach (1685—1750) and F Chopin (1810—1849) — alongside introspective works of M Ravel (1875—1937) and F Schubert (1797—1828). The dance suites prioritize recognizable rhythms and instrumental components of various social dances. Bach uses standard Baroque forms in *English Suite in A Minor BWV 807*. In *Mazurkas Op. 30* and *Op. 41*, Chopin recalls his youth in Warsaw salons and the Szafarnian countryside. The fourth work is the program's climacteric: Ravel's *Une Barque sur l'océan (A Boat on the Ocean)* transports us through the unpredictable forces of nature. Schubert's *Piano Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960* elegantly soliloquizes the search for personal identity. The program begins with music of community socializing and journeys into music of introverted, poetic utterance.

—JS Bach: *English Suite in A Minor, BWV 807 (c. 1717-22)*

The adjective “English” is considered a sobriquet based on JS Bach's affinity for the keyboard suites of the London-based composer Charles Dieupart (d. 1740, London). After acquiring Dieupart's *Six Suites de clavessin* (c. 1701), JS Bach hand-copied and studied them. Bach ordered the movements in his own suites as Dieupart ordered his: overture or *prélude*, *allemande*, *courante*, *sarabande*, shorter dances (*gavotte*, *bourrée*, *passepied*), and *gigue*.

English Suite in A Minor contains six dances after the orchestral *Prelude*. The sections of the *Prelude* represent *ripieno* (orchestra) and *concertino* (soloist) playing together or separately, an alternation common in concertos. Abraham Veinus notes that Bach's “gift for musical engineering” is the basis for Bach's keyboard transcriptions of ensemble music.¹ Bach punctuates changes between soloist and ensemble using thicker textures (*ripieno*), cadenzas (*concertino*), and cadences (structural changes).

¹ Veinus, Abraham. *The Concerto* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co, 1944), 59.

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Concreteness is also found in the *Suite*'s harmonic structure: all dances are in the same key (A Minor). While individual dances vary in tempo and rhythmic structure, the *Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Bourrée I* and *Gigue* emphasize the seriousness of the key. Only the *Bourrée II* is in another key (A Major). The *Gigue* is a thrilling *molto perpetuo*. Bach's "engineering" of each dance does not exclude invention. Under his pen, the graceful *Allemande*, rapid *Courante*, emotive *Sarabande*, light *Bourrée* and energetic *Gigue* are enriched by counterpoint, imitation, rhetorical figures, and ornaments. Bach's forms are so precise that the performer may decorate individual melodies without losing contact with the distinct elements of each dance.

—F Chopin: *Four Mazurkas Op. 30 (1837) and Four Mazurkas Op. 41 (1839)*

JS Bach was among the first composers that Fryderyk Chopin studied with his childhood teacher, Wojciech Żywny (1756—1842). Like Bach, Chopin wrote dance suites (sets), which he titled *Mazurkas*. Chopin's *Mazurka* sets contain three dance types: *Mazurek, Kujawiak*, and *Oberek*. The *Kujawiak* is slower than the bolder *Mazurek* and vivacious *Oberek*. Chopin's usual order for his mazurkas is:

I. *Kujawiak*

II. *Oberek*

III. *Mazurek*

IV. *Dance Poem (combination of Kujawiak, Oberek, and Mazurek)*

Mazurkas Op. 30 and *Op. 41* are cyclical. Some dances finish on the same note that begins the next (eg. *Op. 41 Nr. 1* and *Nr. 2*). In other cases, Chopin connects key signatures using common tones shared by each work's key (*Op. 30 Nr. 3* and *4*: D-flat/C-sharp). Listening to the end of one work and the beginning of another elucidates these connections.

Though individual dances vary in length and mood, each is rooted in Chopin's contact with Polish folk dancing and music-making. The first theme is usually the melody of a *kujawiak* (gentle swaying dance with emphasis on second or third beat). Next is usually an *oberek* (noun for the Polish verb "obracać się", meaning "to spin"). *Oberek* dancing is exciting to watch: couples whirl and acrobatically lift one another in circular formations.

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Chopin translates these complex choreographies into the piano using quick fire eighths and triplets. The works in *Mazurkas Op. 30* follow Chopin's usual order and feature the standard rhythms of each dance in plain form: they are textbook Chopin miniatures.

In *Op. 41*, Chopin is more personal. The first dance is a melancholic *kujawiak* followed by a second theme containing thirty repetitions of the same D-sharp. It closes mournfully in E Minor. Chopin uses the final E of *Op. 41 nr. 1* to introduce *Op. 41 nr. 2*, an *oberek* in B Major. Chopin cleverly uses the piano's highest range in *fortissimo* octaves to create a pianistic version of a signature *oberek* element: guttural, celebratory screeching (*skrzeczenie*). The third dance, a *Mazurek* in A-Flat Major, lilts its way into a second theme in chorale style with lingering dissonances across almost every bar line. The sentimental C Minor third theme recalls *Mazurka Op. 30 Nr. 1*.

The fourth work, a dance poem, begins in C-Sharp Minor (a perfect-authentic cadence using the third dance's ending). It opens with a softly-whistled *przyśpiewki* (a ditty communicated by a dancer to a folk ensemble, turned by ensemble into a dance tune). Presented in extroverted, introverted, and wistful moods, the *przyśpiewki* is recast in *fortissimo* octaves at the work's climax.

The dance poems in *Op. 30* and *Op. 41* are alike. Both are in C-Sharp Minor and conclude with pessimistic overtones. The pervading nuance in these dances is known in Polish as *żał* (bittersweet resignation; regret). Playing these *Mazurkas* is like looking into a kaleidoscope of homesickness, delight, and nostalgia. Chopin's mood changes are heard phrase-by-phrase. There are nuances of paradox in each dance poem: the need to share personal feelings and the need to hold one's tongue; the agony of remembering but the comfort of the memory itself. Chopin often reveals his dandyism in transition passages. After groups of sardonic or despairing harmonies, Chopin uses single notes or octaves to deprive listeners of harmonic or emotional contexts. Then, he fills the empty space with wry frolicsomeness: a forced smile and attempt to lighten the mood. In the *Mazurkas*, Chopin's youthful memories are touched by jaundiced cynicism.

—M Ravel: *Miroirs*, “*Une barque sur l’océan*” (1906)

Une barque sur l’océan (*A Boat on the Ocean*) is the longest piece in Ravel’s *Miroirs*. In a 1938 interview about his compositions, Ravel specified that writing *Miroirs* “marked a change in my harmonic development which was great enough to disconcert even those most accustomed to my style up to that point.” Ravel commented on his chosen title:

The word ‘*Mirror*’ should not lead one to assume that I want to affirm a subjectivist theory of art. A sentence by Shakespeare helped me to formulate a completely opposite position: ‘*the eye sees not itself / but by reflection, by some other things*’ (Julius Caesar, I.II).²

The musical text depicts a boat on calm, windy, and stormy waters. Ravel uses ascending and descending arpeggios in all but 13.6% of the text (19 bars of 139). Ravel orchestrated the work because its textual contents — arpeggios, notes indicating the boat, dynamic gradations — lend themselves naturally to orchestral instruments (harps, violins, flutes). The orchestral version displeased Ravel, who was a decadent perfectionist. Olivier Messiaen explains: “there exists an orchestral kind of piano writing which is more orchestral than the orchestra itself and which, with a real orchestra, it is impossible to realize.”³

—F Schubert: *Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960* (1828)

Schubert’s death on 19 November 1828 came seven weeks after he completed *Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960*, which remained unpublished until 1839. The last of his piano sonatas, Schubert’s cyclical approach (all movements share similar themes) is often interpreted as a summation of life and death. Repeated instances of the same melodies invite listeners to hear each instance as distinct events in the *Sonata*’s narrative. The halcyon first theme — an otherworldly chorale — begins with a pair of B-flat chords melting into a rising tetrachord (four-note scale):

² Ornstein, *A Ravel Reader*, 66. Interview with Alexis Roland-Manuel.

³ Ornstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, 74.

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Molto moderato.



Three repeating C's lower the melody (bar 3) before it returns to its original B-flat. The slow harmonic rhythm and delicate *ostinato* (repeated bass rhythm) give the impression of pacing through tranquil, desolate landscapes. Joseph Kerman calls this Schubert's "last wanderer" in which accompaniments create "an open, empty space into into which the melody resonates as a lonely, searching song."⁴ The haunting bass trill (bar 8) has become synonymous with self-doubt and fear of the unknown.

Schubert relates the first theme (above) to themes in the second, third, and fourth movements. Over time, the appearances of first theme permutations resemble the process of considering one's identity from different angles and in different states (splenetically, calmly, methodically). In the *Andante Sostenuto* second theme, Schubert starts with two A's and a short scale, as happened in the first theme of *Molto Moderato*:

I. *Molto Moderato* (m. 1)

II. *Andante Sostenuto* (mm. 43-44)



⁴ Kerman, "Schubert's last 'Wanderer'" in *Returning Cycles: Returning Cycles: Contexts for the Interpretation of Schubert's Impromptus and Last Sonatas*, ed. Charles Fisk, pp. 238–268.

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The *Scherzo* is fairylike raillery with a lachrymose *Trio*. The flute-like melody recalls the *Molto Moderato* first theme's B-flat—A—B-flat, followed by five-note scales expanding what was once a tetrachord. The melody is one octave higher than the *Molto Moderato*:

I. *Molto Moderato* (mm. 1-3) III. *Scherzo e Trio* (mm. 1-4)

The image shows two musical excerpts. The first, on the left, is from the first movement, 'Molto Moderato', measures 1-3. It features a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex, chordal texture in the left hand. The second excerpt, on the right, is from the third movement, 'Scherzo e Trio', measures 1-4. It shows a flute-like melody in the right hand, marked 'pp' (pianissimo), with a simple accompaniment in the left hand.

In the fourth movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, Schubert recalls the repeating C's of the *Molto Moderato* first theme. In the first movement, these are three C's, in the fourth movement, three A's. Schubert likewise uses repeating notes to structure of the *Coda*:

I. *Molto Moderato* (m. 3) IV. *Allegro, ma non troppo* (mm. 122-23; mm. 513-14)

The image shows three musical excerpts. The first, on the left, is from the first movement, 'Molto Moderato', measure 3. It shows a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex, chordal texture in the left hand. The second excerpt, in the middle, is from the fourth movement, 'Allegro, ma non troppo', measures 122-23. It shows a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex, chordal texture in the left hand. The third excerpt, on the right, is from the fourth movement, 'Allegro, ma non troppo', measures 513-14. It shows a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex, chordal texture in the left hand.

The fourth movement's *Coda* concludes the *Sonata* by breaking the spell cast by the endings of the three previous movements. Those endings emphasized slowness and stillness in the process of thinking and feeling. In the fourth movement, Schubert partially follows this pattern with a bar of silence before the *Coda* (marked *fermata*, the performer may elongate the silence). Suddenly, there is an almost brutal paroxysm of *Presto* octaves. The effect brings the *Coda* of the work — after almost forty minutes of brooding — into relief: the *Sonata* (and/or Schubert) finally snaps. Curiously, this is the first and only virtuoso passage in the sonata's tonic key.