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THE FOUR CHOPIN IMPROMPTUS: TWO LEVELS OF IMPROVISATION

The four Chopin Impromptus offer unique models of contrast and continuity. When performed individually, each Impromptu expresses an improvisatory character using a variety of devices. When performed as a set, the Impromptus offer examples of contrast and continuity on a different level as each is based on its predecessors' thematic material.

Example 1

<p>Moscheles</p> 	<p>Chopin</p> 
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The Impromptu from which the others are derived is the Fantasia-Impromptu. (1) Its appearance as the fourth and last Impromptu obscures its function as the source for further elaboration. The Fantasia-Impromptu was composed in 1834 and published posthumously in 1855 by Chopin's friend Julius Fontana who included the word "Fantasia" to the title. Two common beliefs for its posthumous publication are that Chopin sold the work to Baroness d'Este to whom it is dedicated, and therefore could not sell it to a publisher,(2) and that Chopin hesitated to publish the Fantasia-Impromptu because of its resemblance to the Impromptu in E flat of Moscheles, the work which could have been Chopin's chief inspiration in composing the Fantasia-Impromptu.(3) The character, tempo, accompaniment and motivic material of both works is similar. (Example 1)

The character of the Fantasia-Impromptu, which is indeed fantasy-like, is set up by a suspenseful introduction that also announces important germinal motives. This introduction consists of two measures of a forte octave on V, followed by two measures of a broken chord accompaniment on 1. The brilliant main theme impetuously enters at measure 5 and is an elaboration of the introduction: its range encompasses an octave, and the theme itself is a decorated version of the left hand accompaniment of measures 3 and 4-a C sharp minor chord. (Example 2)

Example 2



The minor second, another important germinal motive is included as part of the turn figure of the main theme. The turn figure is prevalent in this Impromptu and appears as a new theme in double-stemmed notes. (m. 13-23) Contrast and continuity are also achieved in part B, where the brilliant theme is transformed into a lyrical melody coupled with a change of key and tempo. Example 3 illustrates both parts spelled in C sharp in order to clarify the relationship. (Example 3).

Example 3

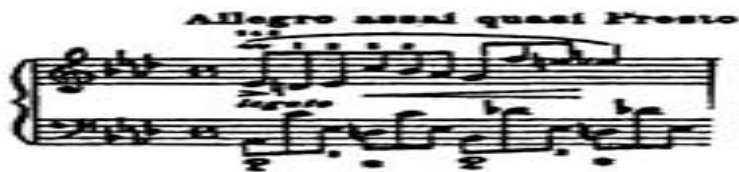


The return of part A, accomplished enharmonically, is followed by a coda in two sections. Section 1, (m. 119-126) maintains the fantasy-like texture of part A with sixteenth-note motion outlining syncopated minor seconds in the right hand. Section 2, (m. 129-138), consists of cleverly combining material of both parts A and B in order to summarize the entire Impromptu. The right hand is fantasy-like coinciding with part A, and the left hand contains the main theme of part B in rhythmic augmentation in a low register. This effective ending gradually leads to a pianissimo tonic chord on C sharp major, another unexpected turn of events.

Although the basic motivic properties of the Fantasie-Impromptu are retained in the Impromptu

in A flat Op. 29 (1837), such as the minor second, (which also appears as a major second and is often expressed as a mordent), octave range of the main theme, and turn figure, the character of the two works could not be more varied. "The A flat Impromptu Op. 29 is, if one is pinned down to the title, the happiest named of the set. Its seething, prankish, nimble, bubbling quality is indicated from the start; the D natural in the treble against the C and E flat, the dominant in the bass is a most original effect, and the flowing triplets of the first part of this piece gives a ductile, gracious, high bred character to it."(4) The original effect" is the result of using the minor and major second vertically, thus creating a "wrong-note" effect that contributes to the playful character of part A. (Example 4)

Example 4



The improvisatory effect of part B (m.35) is accomplished through vocal embellishment, where the stately theme in F minor, a transformation of the B theme of the Fantasie-Impromptu, quickly becomes more chromatic and ornamented. An effective use of rests is responsible for the improvisatory effect of the coda, as a portion of the B theme is further fragmented and separated by rests (m. 119-127): This ending gradually fades away accompanied by a "calando" indication.

In contrast to the Fantasie-Impromptu and the Impromptu in A flat, (whose formal scheme was ABA, fast-slow-fast), the Impromptu in F sharp major Op.36 (1839) expresses a unique formal scheme; A B A' C A'' (see Chart 1), a scheme which is largely responsible for the improvisatory character of the work. For instance, part A is based on the B theme of the Impromptu in A-flat, and is assigned the same tempo and character.(5) (Example 5)

Example 5



Part B (m. 39), assumes an unexpected character of a march. Dominated by the dotted-rhythmic figure () which made subtle appearances in each part of the preceding Impromptus, part B is accompanied by a remote modulation to D major. This is an example of an expanded use and chromatic alteration of a linear motive the minor

second; the relationship is D=N/V (C sharp), D being a minor second from C sharp. This relationship is also expressed in part A' (m.61), in F major. Part A', consisting of the main theme within the context of a triplet pattern, leads to Part C (m.82), which presents a new arrangement of texture. The left hand melody, an inversion of the main theme, is in double-stemmed notes while the right hand contains a brilliant figuration reminiscent of the Fantasie-Impromptu. Both right hand figurations share the turn figure, ascent and descent occurring in the same register, and a similar tempo as the Allegro agitato sixteenth note pattern of the Fantasie-Impromptu corresponds to the Allegretto (Andantino) thirty-second note pattern of part C. In addition, measures 98-100, and the coda of the Fantasie-Impromptu are both based on B themes. In the Fantasie-Impromptu, the coda contains the B theme in rhythmic augmentation under a right hand accompaniment. In measures 98-100 of the F sharp Impromptu, the melody, which, appears in the top voice of left hand chords, is a chromatic variant of the introduction in rhythmic diminution.

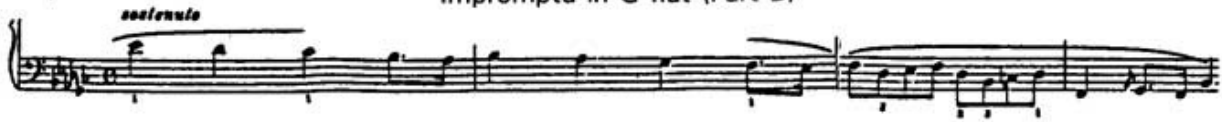
The section following (m. 101-110), originally appeared between parts A and B. Its unexpected appearance as an ending fits remarkably well with the pianissimo ending of part C. The fortissimo chords also come as a surprise.

The more complex formal scheme of the F sharp Impromptu is abandoned in the G flat Impromptu Op. 51 (1842) in favour of a structure that is similar to the Impromptu in A flat. Both works share ABA form, fast-slow-fast tempo scheme, and major-relative minor-major key plan. The melodic profile of part A in both instances is based on a rising and falling chromatic melody in triplets. Despite the similarities, the character of the two works differs. The A flat Impromptu is witty and playful whereas the G flat Impromptu is recitative-like and pensive. This is achieved through irregular phrasing, evaded cadences, and abrupt excursions to remote key areas such as to G major in measure 21, and to A major in measure 23.

This character is maintained in part B in E flat minor where the left hand cello-like melody is a transformation of the introduction of the Impromptu in F sharp. The first four pitches are identical and the descending conjunct motion fills-in the interval of a fourth. This is followed by disjunct motion of a third in both instances. In addition, both part B of the Impromptu in G flat, and the introduction of the Impromptu in F sharp express the same tempo and character. (Example 6)

Example 6

Impromptu in G flat (Part B)



Impromptu in F sharp (Introduction)



Although the themes assume unique characters within the setting of each Impromptu, their function as a link can be perceived due to the brevity and symmetry of each Impromptu. Each is approximately the same length in measure number and duration. (See Chart 1).

Chart 1

	Fantasia-Impromptu			Impromptu No. 1			Impromptu No. 2					Impromptu No. 3			
Tempo	Allegro Agitato			Allegro assai quasi presto			Andantino/Allegretto					Vivace			
Key	C sharp	D flat	C sharp	A flat	F	A flat	F sharp	D	F sharp	F sharp	F sharp	G flat	E flat	G flat	
Form	A	B	A (Coda)	A	B	A	A	B	A'	C	A''	A	B	A	
Measure nos.	40	42	36	20	34	48	45	38	22	21	19	10	48	27	29
	-138			-127			-110					-105			
Duration	5:34			4:40			6:01					6:17			

This linkage can only be appreciated when the Impromptus are performed as a set. A most effective perspective to the Impromptus and to the evolution of Chopin's harmonic language is demonstrated when the Impromptus are performed not only as a set, but in the order in which they were composed.

Donald Alfano
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ENDNOTES

1 The reader is directed to the article, "The Fantasia-Impromptu: A Tribute to Beethoven," by Ernst Oster in *Aspects of Schenkerian Theory*, David Beach, ad. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983.) P. 199

In this fascinating article, Oster believes that Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata was Chopin's chief inspiration in composing the Fantasie-Impromptu. He draws parallels between both works' motivic structure, key scheme, character and unauthentic titles.

2. Jan Ekier, ad. Chopin Impromptus. Wiener Urtext Edition, (Wiener Urtext Edition, Musikverlag, 1977.) preface viii.

Artur Rubinstein published his version of the Fantasie-Impromptu based on the autograph he discovered. His version, now regarded as authentic, appears in the Wiener Urtext edition along with Fontana's.

3. Arthur Hadley, Chopin. (London: Dent and Sons, 1963) p. 185.

4. James Huneker, Chopin: The Man and His Music, (New York: Dover Publications, 1966) p.238

5. The authenticity of the tempo and meter of this Impromptu is questioned. The reader is directed to the commentary of the Wiener Urtext Edition. See No. 3 above.