

Set Piece:- Chopin Nocturne No.19 in E Minor, Op.72 No.1

Nocturne

“Chopin’s music is spontaneous, miraculous.... He found it without seeking it, without previous imitation of it. It came upon his piano sudden, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to hear it himself with the help of the instrument.”

In this quote, the renowned novelist George Sand perfectly encapsulates both the personality and the piano works of Chopin, one of the most imaginative and virtuosic pianists to have ever lived. Although he had never really seen himself as much of a performer, his compositional output and understanding of pianistic techniques have made him one of the leading composers for solo piano music that the world has ever seen. He established entirely new genres of piano works, including his mazurkas, polonaises, and waltzes, deriving his writing from the capabilities of the piano itself as well as the physical properties of the two hands.

He became inspired by the nocturnes of John Field when he was just nineteen years old, captivated by the aria like melodies supported by a widespread broken chord accompaniment that characterised the works.

Facilitated by the recent development of the sustain pedal, Chopin composed nineteen of his own nocturnes, through which he effectively established and formalised the genre. The nocturne is most typically defined by its texture. Expressive melodies are played in the right hand, similar to the cantilena of Italian opera. These melodies are usually highly ornamented with trills and appoggiaturas and commonly approached or left by chromatic passages upon the return of the opening theme. Meanwhile, the left hand functions as the rhythmically stable accompaniment, playing low pedal tones in the bass and filling in the rest of the harmony in the middle register. This promotes continuity in the piece while filling in the gaps in the melody, carrying it along when it takes off in its ornamental flights.

Importantly, the accompaniment usually plays a more interactive role in the piece rather than a supportive one. By setting the harmonies with the pedal tones, the accompaniment plays a crucial role in determining the overall tone of the piece. The extended arpeggiations up into the middle register help to emphasise the idea that the “Chopin melody” present in his nocturnes—as well as many of his other works—is more of a texture, rather than a single line. Other prolific composers such as Haydn, Clementi, and Mozart rarely spread their broken chord accompaniments beyond the stretch of the hand, so this new technique that Chopin used was monumental to the world of piano compositions.

Chopin derived his piano writing from the instrument itself as well as the physical properties of the two hands. His technique was governed by the principles that each finger was of a different strength and that that strength diminishes in the following order: thumb, little finger, first finger, second finger, and third finger. For the main notes of the melody to be brought out above the rest, he usually notated to use a strong finger.

Upon analysing his music, one can tell that he really understood the instrument and how to place melodies and harmonies in a none awkward way to facilitate smooth playing. Supple lateral movement of the fingers is required in order to play the fast legato scales and arpeggios, and the pianist must keep his or her fingers close to the white and black keys. Chopin had an advantage because his hands were extremely flexible, or as Sand called them, his “velvet fingers.” He could

stretch over a third of the keyboard with both of his hands, which gave him the ability to keep his music full of fresh possibilities of tonal combination.

Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1 Analysis

Chopin composed his first nocturne during his Warsaw years, shortly after graduating from the High School of Music in 1829. After his father's wealthy friends organized and financed his first trip to Vienna where he performed in two largescale public concerts, he began to realise that his native town had little left to offer him. He began to consider moving away to a big city with more opportunities but struggled with the idea of leaving the life he had always known. He began to feel increasingly moody, and the pressure that he was under to perform in grand concerts agitated him as well. It was also during this time that he engaged in a radical reworking of his musical forms, seeking inspiration from the earlier masters, particularly Mozart and Hummel. He began to compose more music solely for the piano, as opposed to the largescale, symphonic works of the great composers before him. He had a fairly clear idea of his musical goals and what he wanted to accomplish, but he was so indecisive about whether or not to act on it that he was almost driven to a point of emotional collapse. It was during this time that he composed his Nocturne in E Minor, Op. 72, No. 1.

This nocturne, like many of his other compositions from this period, shows evidence of the "brilliant" style of piano pieces associated with composers such as Hummel, Weber, and Kalkbrenner. These types of pieces are known for their cadenza like passages which require great skill and spirit in the performer, especially when the opening theme returns in the latter half of the piece. The bravura figuration matches the flowing, ornamental melodies in the upper voice, building tension as they interact with each other throughout the piece. These are some of 15 the essential aspects of post-Classicism and the starting point for Chopin's musical thought process. He was also heavily influenced by the works of John Field, and his first nocturne perfectly represents the defining aspects of the genre. The most central idea is that it features a beautiful ornamental aria in the upper voice alternating with a sequentially developing, tension building theme.

Having been educated in Italian and French opera as well as Polish folk music from a very young age, Chopin saw a significant link between the piano's capacity to express great lyricism and the bel canto style of the arias he had studied. The melody he uses in this nocturne shows some evidence of these ideas, featuring an assortment of portamentos, cadenzas, and fioriture, or the improvised embellishment of a melody. Chopin usually seemed to favour the decoration and elaboration of these melodic "arias" rather than exploring the development and integration of complex themes throughout the piece. He also had a tendency to sweeten these melodies with parallel thirds and sixths, keeping true to operatic duet textures. It was with this nocturne and the five others that he composed during his time in Warsaw that established the genre, and it was consolidated later on in his Vienna and early Paris years. The 4 aspects of this piece that most clearly define it within the genre are the overall sound, melodies, harmonies, and rhythm. The overall sound created by the melodies, harmonies, and dynamics of this piece clearly reflect the "night" for which the genre is named. The homophonic texture features expressive, lyrical melodies in the upper voice supported by a widely spaced, broken chord accompaniment.

The left hand begins each new harmony with a pedal tone in the bass and arpeggiates the other notes in the middle register until the next harmony begins, typically a bar later. Meanwhile, the melody sings out above it, beginning slowly and smoothly and pausing after every measure or two as if to take a breath. Note that it is characteristic for these bravura style pieces to sound virtuosic and even improvised, so the slow melody often pauses as if to stop and consider what it is about to say next.

Tension builds as the B section approaches, and the melody becomes more hurried in bar 17 as the phrases become shorter. The light, floaty B section is introduced in bar 23, marked *aspiratamente*. This section sounds less improvised, and the major mode is almost a sigh of relief after the building tension before it.

The return of the A section in bar 31 repeats the opening theme of the piece, this time sounding more confident and heartfelt. The now highly ornamented melody is marked with trills and *appoggiaturas* and fast chromatic passages that approach and leave some of the more important notes. The image of the “night” is also reflected in the dynamics, which range from a *pianissimo* to a *forte*, and are meticulously marked throughout the score to shape each phrase. Beginning on a soft *p*, the left hand should generally be played quietly while the right hand melody is brought out above it. As tension grows in the melody, the overall dynamics grow louder, landing with a triumphant *forte* indicated at the return of the A section and later ending the piece with a very soft *pianissimo*.

One of the most central ideas that help to define the nocturne as a genre is the use of *tempo rubato* to make the melody seem more improvised and expressive. In the returning A section, the arpeggiated accompaniment must follow along with a variety of 8, 10, and 11 against 3 lines in the melody, slowing down enough to accommodate for them while keeping the overall beat. Taking the extra time to do so makes the piece seem to flow more freely, as the 17 left hand does not have to rush or keep a rigid beat. Despite the newfound intensity in this section, the performer must not speed up in order to keep accordance to the *allegretto* marking in bar 31. The overall rhythm should instead be kept steady throughout, slowing down only when approaching the B section and at the *ritardando* indication in the last few bars.

This nocturne is different from Chopin’s later pieces most obviously because it is more simple. The overall texture is lighter, featuring a single line melody supported by a single line accompaniment. The phrases are shorter and more clearly defined as well; they don’t begin to unravel until the return of the opening theme, and when they do it is on a smaller scale than Chopin’s later nocturnes. The harmonies in this nocturne are less complex, changing on the first and third beats of most bars and ending phrases on consonant cadences or resolving them on the first beat of the next. Chopin may have chosen to add complexity on a smaller scale, however. For example, the left hand in the first measure of the piece starts out by playing an arpeggiated E minor chord in the accompaniment. However, instead of making the highest note a consonant B, he instead writes a C, adding the slightest dissonance to make the harmony more intriguing. Chopin provides a variety of basic, diminished, and augmented chords throughout the piece to make the harmonies more complex and intricate, and he had such a talent for doing so that it made him one of the most talented and virtuosic composers and pianists of his time.

Discuss the key musical elements:-

- Melody
- Harmony
- Tonality
- Structure
- Sonority (Timbre)
- Texture
- Tempo, metre and rhythm
- Dynamics and articulation