



CHOPIN

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FANTASIES

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Alberto Nones *piano*

“Something I don’t know what to call.” Chopin and the forms of fantasy

by Alberto Nones

The popular fantasy may well associate the term “fantasy” with Chopin, but the term recurs in his catalogue only a couple of times. One is inclined to recall first of all the much beloved *Fantaisie-Impromptu*, op. 66, but the fantastic element there is most of all in the title. To start with, op. 66? The last composition with an opus number given by Chopin himself is op. 65, the magnificent (and unusual, for a composer devoted almost entirely to the piano) *Sonata for Piano and Cello*. From op. 65 onward, opus numbers are apocryphal. But even more importantly, it was not Chopin who titled the composition with reference to fantasy, with that strange and literary-sounding combination of *Fantaisie-Impromptu*. Today we know that the title

given by Chopin was simply *Impromptu*, which would make for the fourth *impromptu* of the author, written back in 1835 and hence before the other three, with such Moschelesian influences that, as Gastone Belotti hypothesized, could have constituted one of the reasons for the merely private circulation originally meant for this composition. Belotti also recalled the suggestion by Arthur Rubinstein, who, after analyzing the composition’s autograph that he had had the good fortune to buy at an auction, discovered the phrase *Composé pour la Baronne d’Este*, that is, *composed for* the Baroness and not, as typical for Chopin’s works, *dedicated to* someone. Knowing of the date marked by the composer on the manuscript,

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“*Paris Vendredi 1835*”, adds an evocative element: it was an unspecified Friday, it was the year 1835... good starting points to trigger fantastic imagination, of a kind that can dictate one to keep associating the concept as well as the term “fantasy” with a composition like the *Fantaisie-Improptu*. A spontaneous association lingers on there, derived from the perception of something fluid when listening to this piece, which flows apparently like an improvisation prompted by inspiration, unstoppable and rich, quite a harbinger of images – but actually then sifted by a remarkable *labor limae* in order to get to the final compositional result, as always in Chopin. Careful though: in order to signify all that fluidity, the term *Improptu* would be more than enough; and the form of the piece, indeed, is exactly that of a classical *improptu*, that is, an ABA form. We simply find a first section with restless virtuoso figurations, a central lyrical section, and the virtuoso section returning again just in the same form (or with rather

unimportant variations) followed by a coda, a form which characterizes all typical *improptus*, from Schubert (and actually the much less known Bohemian composer Voříšek) onwards. Our composer could not but consider the title *Improptu* to be quite exhaustive. The idea of applying the label “fantasy” was a bit of sagacious marketing by Fontana and partners: audiences all over the world have come to love this piece also thanks to the undoubtedly charming title of *Fantaisie-Improptu*. Charming and not entirely misleading. *Lato sensu*, there is always a lot of fantasy in Chopin’s music, and it demands as much from the performer to interpret it.

The specific title of *Fantaisie*, though, jumps out a couple of times in Chopin’s catalogue, and it is always because of the specific form (or, rather, lack thereof) of a piece that the composer was working on. I am not referring to the title given to op. 13, a *Grande fantaisie sur des airs polonais* for piano and orchestra in which the eighteen-year-old composer wanted to make himself known to

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the world by reference to the popular musical heritage of his homeland, and for which the broad implications of the term “Fantasy” might seem useful (probably, also in that case, most useful to the editors). Only in the full maturity of 1841 did Chopin give for the first and only time in its specificity the title *Fantaisie* to a composition of his, op. 49. Composers back in the Renaissance had begun to title instrumental pieces “fantasies,” especially for keyboard, where one would find either virtuoso figurations with an improvisational character (and thereby Fontana’s *Fantaisie-Improptu* appears to be even less arbitrary) or free imitations in the manner of the *Ricercare*. Baroque composers continued to write fantasies increasingly characterized by a free form, and this concern with form is where Chopin comes into play. The formal factor—apart from the fact that the imaginativeness of the inspiration is transversal to all of Chopin’s work—must have been the eminent reason for the choice of the title *Fantasy* on

the part of the composer. Chopin was in many respects a composer who had been educated in the classics, which was something rather rare at that time in Europe. His teacher made him study Johann Sebastian Bach, a guide he too will offer his own pupils, and the Baroque *stylus phantasticus* (think of the preludes, the toccatas or indeed the fantasias of Johann Sebastian Bach) nicely fits in a matrix of influences for Chopin, particularly apt for the discussion of the fantasies of our composer – and Mozart, another key figure in the transformation of this genre from the *Empfindsamkeit* of Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach to its Romantic elevation. Romantics, counterintuitive as it may seem, are concerned more with form than with sheer emotions. Leaving behind the boundaries of the recognizable tripartite ABA form of the *Improptu*, it is a much more convoluted structure that informs, *stricto sensu*, Chopin’s *Fantaisie* op. 49. Chopin’s typical *labor limae* was here more meticulous than ever: “never filed

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enough,” writes Chopin to Fontana talking about this composition, because at stake was not just a matter of attention to detail, but also the elaboration and metabolization of a very complex architecture in whose detailed analysis we cannot enter here. I point out only a few remarks about form among those that I consider most useful to the listener to orient themselves in the composition. At the beginning one finds a march, which then reappears twice in gradually more triumphal and exalted tones, some sort of Schumannian “March of the Davidsbündler Against the Philistines,” a few years later and *à la* Chopin, which does not mean simply “pianistic”. A whole symphonic orchestra emerges from the piano of this mature Chopin, just like or even more than in Schumann (who, needless to say, was the true symphonist). But the real, illuminating surprise is enclosed within the piece where one would not expect it, in an offset position: it is a kind of trio (in its turn tripartite), a *Lento sostenuto* of only twenty-four bars reminiscent of

a religious chorale, presenting a wholly new theme, never to appear again. The tonality is B major, very far from the home F minor, although it is connected inasmuch as it corresponds to the augmented fourth of the Lydian mode, the “Slavic fourth” so dear to Chopin. If some kind of religious expression is at play, there, in the guise of some sort of prophecy or voice that comes from above, says what it has to say, and withers away, we must note that it comes from a man whose religious nature, in the sense of an observant, was, if anything, a part of Polish family tradition but not of personal choice and practice. Rather, Chopin transfigured religiosity into a sense of contemplation through art, through music (which is physical, and therefore intrinsically materialistic, but can become metaphysical, spiritual) of what is human, in the good and in the bad. This is a moment in the composition that, even more than those memorable sections of arpeggios that rise by thirds, comes from and leads to another dimension. Fantasy here has nothing left



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of those sentimental and showy features that the term carries in itself at a non-specialist level, nor of a kind of meaning that would tend to link to the literary genres. Rather, it is fantasy in the purest sense, the one connected to its Greek etymology: having to do with apparition, manifestation.

Manifestation of what? Of the very creative faculty of the mind, which is not so much telling a story as it is representing itself by showing something that will survive it (survive the mind itself): something that perhaps was already in the air, and it was only a matter of grasping and knowing how to fix musically. The vague forms of Ariel's spirit, which in Chopin are also if not foremost strenuously formal and ponderous architecture, become necessary in every fold of the music. Every note, whether just whispered or peremptorily declaimed, supports the full weight of the construction. This is characteristic not exactly of all Chopin — “too many notes,” Joseph II could have said about some early compositions

of our composer, as in aspects of the Piano Trio. The precision and reduction to the essential that I am thinking of is typical of the mature Chopin. How did a composer, who could easily have been satisfied with the Biedermeier world, achieve such an artistic stature, in an attempt at constantly overcoming himself and refining his way of composing? What is it that leads one not to be satisfied with the seemingly reassuring climate of an Empire-style salon inclusive of the elegant Pleyel piano? Evidently, something necessary, something internal. The same path walked by every great artist. “Something I don't know what to call,” wrote Chopin to his family on December 12, 1845 in a letter in which he referred to the compositions he was then working on: the Barcarolle, the Sonata for Piano and Cello, and the “something I don't know what to call,” which would become the Polonaise-Fantaisie op. 61. Here we come to the last, arguably most intriguing occurrence of the term “fantasy” in Chopin's catalogue. We see

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how, once again, the term fantasy and the title Fantasy come up for Chopin when a term and a title were lacking. For the form was different from that of a typical Polonaise, and something new, something more, was needed. Preserved from the genre of the Polonaise are some rhythmic characteristics, the expressive climate of at least some areas, and the heroic temperature at least in some sections; but this composition carries a conventional Polonaise toward other regions. As for the Fantasy we talked about above, here the structure is, if anything, comparable in some respects to that of a very extensively modified sonata form, but above all with important aspects of a free form. Talking of a composition in which even the pauses (also those resulting from some autograph pedal indications, in a careful reading) assume formal significance would require a dedicated essay in terms of structural analysis, just like and even more than in the case of op. 49. Here, I will limit myself to a few remarks, starting from the end. Our attention is

importantly conveyed to what, following Edward T. Cone, has been typically taken as a final apotheosis; yet, due to the fading away of that apotheosis in a diminuendo (often neglected in interpretations and performances) toward rarefied trills that recall a truly magical (and extraordinarily modern) trill at the heart of the piece, such apotheosis takes on the appearance of an act of imagination, and despite its almost unprecedented strength (a *sempre ff* that perhaps only today's pianos can render in the imagined conception of sound) has a paroxysmal character, almost of schizophrenia when compared to the moments of discouragement and abandonment that precede it and the very nature of the diminuendo that follows it; note that also to the fore in the piece comes, but this time only for a moment before being transformed into something different, the old mystical fire once again in the form of a chorale and once again, like in the Fantasy op. 49, in B major (here the home key is A-flat major, so that we are

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confronted this time with a modulation to the augmented second, typical of the gypsy scale, also dear to Chopin). Was it by then clear to Chopin and his audience that a united and independent Poland, an exceedingly high goal, was destined to remain unfulfilled for the time being? In a conference I recently convened on Music and Narration, Michael Klein insisted sharply on several anti-heroic aspects of this composition. No doubt, frustrated aspirations would seem to be aptly symbolized in such an erratic and stratified composition; the last chord in *fortissimo* after a pause with fermata to follow a *pianissimo* bass, could be interpreted as the waking up after a long, very long dream, a dream that lasted perhaps through all the Polonaises, or a whole life. Klein makes a compelling claim there, and it is no coincidence that precisely in those same years of the nineteenth century seeds were incubating — in the arts, in literature — that would have led shortly thereafter to the blossoming of studies on dreams. It is beyond doubt that dreams live at

Chopin's quarters. At the same time, though, Chopin himself showed how he understood that the historical process yet to be accomplished was long and tough in a letter of the revolutionary year 1848, in which he can be read as prophesizing that in the end there will be “a prestigious and great Poland, in a word Poland”. I am inclined to think that perhaps more suitable than any idea of dream, and inclusive of dream *and* reality, is our very idea of fantasy. Applied to music, it is a means to artistically face formal and also expressive limits, and be able to make ideas and sentiments appear through the senses in all their multiform varieties, not only in their coherence but above all in their contradictions, in the “contrary motions” of our lives, divided between small personal events and larger historical events, momentous and meaningless facts, achievements and failures. Fantasy to confront one's own limits, move toward other dimensions, give life to metamorphoses.

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CHOPIN *complete* FANTASIES

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