

Chopin's Ballade No.4 In F minor, Op. 52

The Fourth Ballade of Chopin is one of his later and better-known works, and to gain an understanding of it, we must look first into the composer's life. Though there is some confusion about his actual birth date, the accepted date is March 1, 1810. He lived only thirty-nine years, dying in 1849. He was born in the tiny village of Zelazowa Wola some thirty miles east of Warsaw, Poland, but his father, Nicholas Chopin, was originally from France. His father was extremely intelligent and played the violin and flute. Following the French Revolution, Nicholas moved to Poland to start a business. Soon, Poland revolted against Russia and he joined the National Guard. The revolt was crushed, Warsaw went to Prussia, and Nicholas was out of a job. Since he was educated in the Polish and French languages, he began to tutor. One family he tutored for was the Skarbels, of which the Countess had a lady-in-waiting named Justyna Krzyzanowska. Justyna later became Nicholas' wife and the mother of four children, one of them being Fredryk Chopin.

Chopin was deeply influenced by his father's logical thinking and judgment, and his home life impressed upon him good manners and proper education. Even after they noticed his extraordinary gift, Chopin's parents made special efforts to ensure his acquisition of general education by teaching him at home until he was thirteen. At an early age he had an unusual love for music. "There are stories, for instance, of how when his mother and Louise [his sister] played dances on the grand piano...he would burst into tears for the sheer beauty and fragility

of the sounds he heard”(p.12, Orga). Having a grand piano in the house was a luxury that greatly influenced Chopin. He began to experiment with it and by the age of seven was good enough for a tutor, namely Adalbert Zywny. His tutor gave him a solid foundation in the basics by directing him to the music of Bach and Mozart. Zywny was aware of Chopin’s unique style, and though he gave him proper boundaries he allowed him to explore. Chopin learned extremely quickly, and by age seven had been described as “Mozart’s successor”. As a child he was more interested in creativity than in technicalities, was very witty, happy, and intelligent, and enjoyed improvisation more than exercises. His first publishing was in 1817. In 1823, he began as a pupil at the Warsaw Lyceum. During the summers he stayed with friends out in the Polish country where he was exposed to Polish folk music, a style that characteristically incorporates the raised fourth scale degree of a Lydian scale. He learned the Mazurka and developed an interest in national music. The publication of Chopin’s first official work was of a Rondo in C minor, Op.1, when he was fifteen years old. Fredryk was an organist at the Lyceum and though he gained nearly complete technical mastery of the instrument, he never composed for the organ.

After finishing at the Lyceum, he studied for three years at Warsaw Conservatoire. At the school Chopin made weak attempts at theory and counterpoint, but he “...found his best expression came in individual and original pieces written solely for the piano”(p.20, Orga).

Orga goes on to say:

“For him the rigorous practice of writing fugues, masses or chamber music was a drudgery; he was not interested in such formalized composition, and his exercises were often outright failures. It was difficult, too, to channel his thoughts into pre-determined, stereotyped musical forms or procedures. He was more concerned to get on with *his* kind of music”(p.20, Orga).

Upon finishing at Warsaw, Chopin went to Vienna, the most important musical center in Europe at the time, second only to Paris. It was in Vienna that he made his big debut, himself saying, “I made my entry into the world”. He wrote to his family of how happy he was, and yet to his friends of how depressed he was. He had no certainty of his career and was extremely lonely. He hit his lowest point when he heard that Warsaw had revolted against Russia. He missed and worried about his family terribly which added to his depression. He gave a very unsuccessful concert in Vienna and felt that his trip there was a failure and that his talent had not been properly recognized. He considered the compliments he received to be stupid, and giving up on his trip there, he left for Paris. On his way to Paris he received word that Warsaw had lost the revolution to the Russians, and eventually it became a province of the Russian Empire, leaving Chopin devastated. He finally arrived in Paris in 1831, and at first the atmosphere was overwhelming. He first considered taking piano lessons, but after he settled in he realized it was pointless. He decided he wanted to create a new world of music, and that is just what he did.

His first Paris concert was a success and in a review by Fetis, his works were commented on as: “if not a complete renewal of piano music, at least a part of that which we

have so long sought in vain, namely an abundance of original ideas of a kind to be found nowhere else”(p.294, Hedley and Brown). Chopin was not a very showy performer, a characteristic not found in many of the popular pianists of the day, and his public performances only totaled to a count of thirty. There were many Polish refugees in Paris, and through their companionship Chopin was able to keep up to date with the artistic and political happenings in Poland. Here, he became acquainted with Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Meyerbeer, Hiller, and Bellini, and was patronized by the Rothschilds. He also met George Sand, a very important figure in the literary world, became her lover and lived with her for a number of years. They later moved to Nohant, where he began composing Ballade No. 4 in F minor of Op. 52. In the winter of 1842-1843, Chopin’s health was fluctuating and during this time he produced some of his best music, the most impressive being the ballade (yet some sources say it was written during the summer months). Tad Szulc quotes Tadeusz A. Zielinski from his book *Chopin-Zycie i Droga Tworcza*, saying the ballade was “the opening of ‘the last period of creativity.’ He writes that it is ‘the most lyrical and the most thoughtful of all the Ballades””(p.271). He finished the ballade at square d’Orleans in Paris and dedicated it to Baroness Charlotte de Rothschild, one of his best pupils and close friends.

Chopin composed almost exclusively for the piano. Some of his influences were: Bach, Mozart, Ignaz Moscheles, Hummel, John Field, Schubert, Wagner, his time as the organist at the Lyceum, and the Polish folk music he had been around during his earlier years. Polish people have a term called “Zal”. It is defined by Huneker as a subtle quality that is, “Ironical, sad, sweet, joyous, morbid, sour, sane and dreamy...”(p.349). Huneker also quotes Liszt on the definition of the word in reference to Chopin’s works: “all the tenderness, all the humility of

a regret borne with resignation and without a murmur”(p.350). “Zal” is rampant throughout Ballade No.4; as Huneker says, “The F minor Ballade overflows with it...”(p.350-1). This is the exact feeling I have when I hear the piece. There is no better word to describe it than “Zal”. Much of Chopin’s inspiration must have come from his broken heartedness about his homeland being taken over, his longing for his family and health, and his relationship with Sand, who eventually did not remain as interested in him as he was in her.

The ballade is in 6/8 and though it is written in the key of F minor, much of it, especially the main theme, is in B-flat minor. This type of tonal deception is characteristic of Chopin. Though written on the model of a sonata form, all four of the ballades are reinterpretations of the form. Samson refers to the variation from the sonata form as “a calculated ambiguity”(p.114, *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*). He also says, “In general their [the ballades’] structures are end-weighted, very often structural ‘crescendos’ with an accelerating rate of change in their formal activity and growth in their intensity curve”(p.112, Samson, *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*). An important characteristic of the ballades is the emphasis of “channeling its dramatic, goal-directed qualities towards narrative ends”(p.112, Samson, *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*). The Fourth Ballade can be most easily compared to the First in that there are likenesses in their expositions in the formal design and thematic material. The ballade begins with a breath-taking introduction that appears to be in the key of C major. A first and a second theme follow the intro. The first theme is more of a waltz, while the second is a barcarolle. We can hear a counter melody in measure 58, and another variation of the first subject beginning in measure 135. When this piece was written, Chopin had begun to review his composing style and therefore the piece has more interesting

counterpoint than earlier works, and a sense of control over his ornamentation, which was often improvised. Chopin's signature usage of tempo rubato can be found throughout the piece.

Tempo rubato can be defined as a deliberate unsteadiness of tempo, when one hand (or both) leads or lags behind the steady time usually kept by the other hand. Chopin is also known for using the damper pedal quite often, seen easily when flipping through the ballade's score. "He did not mind letting the pedal catch passing notes in the upper octaves, where, on the type of piano he preferred, the tone died away too quickly to blur the harmonies severely. Even in the tenor range...so that in many cases the 'accompanying' figure is no longer merely a broken chord but a freely moving melodic pattern"(p.301, Hedley and Brown).

The piece begins with a breath taking, seven measure introduction in C major. In measure 8, the main theme first appears. Ending in B-flat minor in measure 22, it is followed by its first variation from measure 23 to 37. From 38 to 57, we find a development, in which the listener naturally hears many hints to the original theme. The theme's third appearance follows directly after the development, measure 58, seeing its second variation. In measure 70 the piece begins a transition into the sub theme, but it does not begin the sub theme until first giving an introduction to it in measures 80-84. The sub theme starts in 85, lasts fifteen measures, and the next development begins in measure 100. In this development we can again hear hints to the main theme; in the right hand of measures 109 and 110, and in measures 125-128 for example. This developmental section ends in measure 128 and is followed by a recapitulation of the introduction, this time ending in A major, to lend a moment of peace in a rather excited part of the ballade. In measure 134 there is a short cadenza.

Beginning at 135, we see a recapitulation of the main theme, which cadences in B-flat minor in measure 145 and continues transitionally to measure 152. Here it begins an elaborate, final reprise, sounding much faster and more energetic. In 169 the sub theme is recapitulated until 191 where another transitional section appears. From 198 to 200 chords are played in sharp harmonic rhythm, much of the time assigning the use of the damper to every other chord. In 202 the transition ends with a I, V7, I progression in C major. The following eight measures rearticulate the V and I chord in different voicings to emphasize the tonic. From 211 through the remainder of the piece we have a coda in which we are eventually brought back to the written key of F minor; as in 225-226, and also in 227-228, we see a V, i cadence in F minor. In measures 238-240, Chopin ends the ballade with a powerful VI, iv, V7, i progression marked "*con forza*" and "*fff*" to cadence again in F minor.

It is interesting to note the similarity of the Fourth Ballade and Beethoven's Fur Elise. I hear a startling likeness in the first notes of the theme of Fur Elise and in the main theme of the ballade in measures 16, 18, and 21. Is it possible this was one source of inspiration for this particular piece?

It has been said of Chopin,

"A cluster of images gathered around this central preoccupation with expression. There is the poet of the piano: 'To listen to Chopin is to read a strophe of Lamartine'; there is the talent of the sickroom: 'Through music he discloses his suffering'; there is the feminine topos: 'Music for a woman's sensitive finger'...as one French composer said of Chopin, '[Chopin had] a mysterious language known only to himself'." (p.284, Samson, *Chopin*).

Chopin may have gained much of his fame in France due to the promotion he received in the most influential of the journals, the *Revue et Gazette musicale*. This resulted partly due to the fact that Chopin's publisher was the founder and editor of the Gazette. While the Gazette praised Chopin, it did not speak highly of Franz Lizst. Even though Lizst and Chopin did not have the best of friendships,

“Lizst confessed to his last mistress...at the beginning of 1876 that in 1849 he could not fully assess Chopin's genius. ‘Now I totally admire [Chopin's last works]. I assert and maintain that they are not only most remarkable but also very harmonious, nobly inspired, artistically proportioned, and measure up on all counts to his enchanting genius. Nobody can be compared to him-he stands singly and uniquely in the artistic heavens’” (p. 206, Azoury).

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