THE PHENOMENON OF THE CHOPIN’S CELLO SONATA

CHOPİN’İN ÇELLO SONATININ FENOMENİ

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Abstract

At first glance, the existence of the cello sonata, among the works of Chopin, famous with his piano pieces, may seem a surprising fact. However, with closer examination of the history of writing of this sonata, one can come to a strange conclusion about the almost inevitability of its creation. The appearance of this work was predetermined by all of Chopin’s prior experiences.

The fact that the Sonata was the latest large-form’s work, the latest published work during the composer’s lifetime, as well as being performed at his last concert, elevates this work to a more significant level, not only chronologically, but also because of its undoubted musical merit. The deep dramatic nature of this sonata has been transferred by rather admiring musical means. Among them are new for Chopin, surprising and interesting neo-classical music elements. Due to the beautiful musical material and to the

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masterly means of its transmission, Chopin’s cello sonata has become a favorite work for audiences throughout the world.

This work considers the artistic influence at the sonata of Franchomme, the great French master of the cello performance, as well as generally the artistic and private factors, which could influence Chopin of the sonata’s period. A separate section of the work was divided for the examining of the sonata’s peculiarities – the traditional and innovative.

We hope that this work, covering not only the history of its creation, but also observing the Chopin’s previous works for cello, will serve as research material for more detailed and comprehensive studies of this sonata.

Key Words: Chopin, cello, sonata

Öz

İlk bakıста piyano besteleriyle ünlü olan Chopin’in eserlerinin arasında çello sonatının var olması şaşırtıcı olabilir. Ancak, bu sonatın bestelenme tarihinin daha detaylı incelemesi ile bu eserin bestelenmesinin kaçınılmaz olduğu sonucu ortaya çıkmaktadır. Çello sonatı, Chopin’in hayati boyunca yaşamış olduğu deneyim ve tecrübenin ürünüdür.


Bu çalışmada, büyük Fransız çello ustası Franchomme’un, Chopin’in çello sonatına etkisinin boyutu ve çello sonatının bestelenme döneminde Chopin’e etkileyen önemli özel ve sanatsal faktörleri araştırılmaktadır. Bunun yanında makalenin diğer bölümünde de çello sonatının geleneksel ve yeni olan bestecilik özelliklerinin araştırılması yer almaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın, hem bu sonatın hem de Chopin’in çello için yazmış olduğu diğer iki eserinin bestelenme tarihini kapsaması nedeni ile yapılacak olan daha detaylı ve kapsamlı çalışmalar için araştırma materyalı oluşturmaları düşündülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Chopin, çello, sonat
The cello sonata g-minor is a symbolical, landmark work in Chopin’s art. His last large-form’s work, the cello sonata was the last published work during the composer’s life and the last work performed at his last concert in Paris.

Despite such significance, the existence of the sonata does not fit well into the homogeneous picture of the composer’s artistic heritage’s patterns and becomes a stumbling block for any researcher of the Chopin’s art. There are several reasons for that, but the main one consists in the matter that the cello sonata was in fact a deviation of Chopin’s originative artistic principles.

Chopin was a composer who tried to confine himself in specific artistic frameworks. Chopin’s creativity is distinguished with the dominance of certain genres of piano music. Throughout his musical career, Chopin did not advert to the composing of any orchestral, symphonic pieces, opera, or pieces for different instruments. Also, he obstinately resisted the insistent persuasions for their creation. It is known, that during his life, Chopin underwent serious pressure to persuade him to create, for example, an opera. In particular, Poland’s clergymen tried to entrust to Chopin the creation of the first national Polish opera. His friend Stefan Witzicki wrote him in a letter (6 June 1831): “Of course, you should be a creator of a Polish opera; you are able to become it, I have the deepest belief of this and as a Polish national composer you may discover for your talent the immensely rich field, on which you will earn the extraordinary honor” (Chopin 1964: 232).

However, Chopin deliberately refused to work upon an opera, and upon others, alien to his creative thoughts’ genres. He apparently felt his vocation and ability with the small forms. Chopin had the same firm position about composing for other than piano instruments: “Confining the composing with just piano compositions, Chopin showed the greatest artistic awareness and the deep knowledge of himself, which not every creator can boast” (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 240).

Chopin shielded his musical world from a far in his artistic spirit’s forms and instruments. Lo and behold, Chopin in this genre and instrumentally-limited world admitted, except the piano, only cello. Why did Chopin make such a strange

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1 In the letter of 8–9 June 1847 Chopin wrote: “… I am going to publish my sonata with cello…” (Chopin 1980: 165). The cello sonata was sold by Chopin to the Breitkopf und Härtel on 30 June 1847 and published in October 1847 (Chopin 1980: 170).

2 “On 16 February of 1848, the six days before revolution, Chopin gave a concert in Paris in the Playel Hall. He performed (with Alard and Franchomme) Mozart’s Trio for piano, violin and cello, and with Franchomme the last three movements of his cello sonata (the first movements was passed in case not to tire the audience). Besides, Chopin performed solo nocturne, barcarolle, etudes, berceuse, preludes, mazurkas and waltzes” (Kremlev 1971: 221).

3 In his youth, when a friend of Chopin urged him to write an opera, he witty replied to him, that why then he, his friend was not building on his estate a monastery, but a sugar mill (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 45).
exception? For the answer of this question we should trace most of Chopin’s artistic activity.

**Why cello?**

It is well known, that in Chopin’s art there are only three compositions for cello – three islets in the sea of the piano music. Many lances were broken with relation to why Chopin turned his attention to the cello. One of the versions on this issue was expressed by Moritz Karasowsky, a biographer of Chopin. He wrote that Chopin showed preference for the cello because “its elegiac tone was in harmony with his own nature” (Karasowski 1879: 337).

There is some truth, of course, in such a statement. It is hard to imagine that such an uncompromising creator, as Chopin would undertake composing a work for an instrument that had not met his aesthetic ideals. Chopin’s biography tells another story – that composer’s triple appeal to cello was caused not only by Chopin’s artistic preferences, but had quite occasional factors, and that his works for cello had no regular nature in his art. It means, that if there were not the certain circumstances in the Chopin’s life, those works wouldn’t be composed. Those circumstances were Chopin’s artistic acquaintances with two cellists.

Thus, Chopin’s first work for cello might not have been written at all if not the influence of a Polish aristocrat, Anton Radziwill, who was fond of music and composition, played cello well, and showed a great interest in the creativity of young Chopin (Kremlev 1971: 51). It was in Antonin, in Radziwill’s estate, where Chopin, in October 1929 wrote his first composition for cello – the Polonaise for cello and piano (op.3). Chopin himself wrote in a letter to his friend, that: “It has nothing in it but glitters for salon, for ladies; I wanted, you see, Princess Wanda to learn it. I have been giving her lessons for that time. She is quite young; seventeen years old and beautiful; and, O my God, how it was pleasant to replace her little fingers” (Chopin 1964: 142). It seems, Chopin was in love with Radziwill’s daughter – Princess Wanda and that the Polonaise was composed especially for Wanda and her father’s performance. So, thanks to love, Chopin showed his first interest in cello. Despite the critical attitudes of Chopin himself towards this work, it has quite interesting qualities and therefore has been firmly established in the repertoire of cellists all around the world.

In 1832 Chopin wrote his second composition for cello – the Grand Duo Concertant. This work (published in 1833) was created in a community with Franchomme, with whom Chopin was acquainted after his coming to Paris. This work apparently, would also not have been created if it were not for the influence of Franchomme on Chopin’s personality.

With some reservations, we can say the same about the cello sonata, Chopin’s third and last work for cello. The influence of Franchomme on Chopin of the sonata’s creation period is undeniable. In this regard, we should dwell on the personality of Franchomme.
The Phenomenon Of The Chopin’s Cello Sonata

**Franchomme’s Factor**

Chopin wrote in the dedication of the sonata: “a son ami August Franchomme”. These great musicians actually had close creative collaboration and purely human friendship. Chopin had become acquainted with Franchomme soon after his coming to Paris in 1832. A deep sympathy strengthened the friendship between two musicians. Their meetings had become regular and Chopin often visited Franchomme and his family. In the same year of their acquaintance, two musicians composed *The Grand Duo Concertant* – Chopin’s only piece created in collaboration with another musician! This fact shows us the deepest artistic respect between two musicians. The friendship between Chopin and Franchomme was further strengthened in the 1841–1842 biennium; it becomes clear from the correspondence between them, which is not very informative, but quite often. From this correspondence, it is understandable that Franchomme helped Chopin in every possible way, in his dealings with publishers. The sonata, apparently, was conceived by Chopin and Franchomme at the end of 1844. At that time, in the Chopin’s letters, the name of Franchomme occurs most frequently. From some letters (in December 1844) it becomes clear that they meet almost every day.

Franchomme’s role in the cello sonata’s creation is crucial. In the work’s autograph, by Franchomme, his hand-writing says: “The cello part of the piano and cello sonata of Chopin written by me under his dictation” (Ginzburg 1978: 93). No doubt that such a great musician as Franchomme could not limit himself with just the fixation of the cello part. Most likely his role in the working on the piece was much more important than it is considered to be. We can suppose that Franchomme’s contribution consisted in thorough and comprehensive elaboration of the cello part and possibly in creative proposals for some of the ensemble moments.

During the creation of this work, Chopin was in constant creative contact with Franchomme. They often gave concerts together. Throughout the whole history of this sonata – from the conception until the publication and the performance, Franchomme rendered creative support to Chopin.

The chronology of the work’s composition is to be covered in more detail, as it is, like much about this sonata, very unusual for Chopin’s art.

**The chronology and the history of the sonata’s composing**

Perhaps the cello sonata was a composition on which Chopin worked for more than any other – almost two years (in 1845–1846). This, as well as some other facts, suggests that working on this composition was very difficult for Chopin.

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4 The fact, that the last letter written by Chopin was addressed to Franchomme, also testifies that there was a deep spiritual connection between them.
The first time Chopin mentioned the sonata was in a letter to his family in Poland, on 12–26 December of 1845. Chopin wrote, that he was about to finish the cello sonata. That could mean that Chopin had begun the composing of the sonata no later than summer 1845, while in Nohant (Chopin 1980: 113). In the same letter, Chopin wrote that he had already tried this sonata with Franchomme and even hoped to publish it in the same year (Chopin 1980: 115). Almost a year later, in a letter dated October 11, 1846, again to relatives in Warsaw, Chopin wrote the following: “I play a little and a little compose. Sometimes I am happy with my cello sonata, other times I am not. Throw it into a corner and then pick it again”5 (Chopin 1980: 134).

The sonata was apparently ready in early 1847, because in a letter from Chopin to his friend Grzymala, on February 17, 1847, he invites him home for the listening of the sonata (Chopin 1980: 147). Further the sonata was played at a few evenings, for Countess Potocka (Chopin 1980: 150) and some other friends (Chopin 1980: 168) in March 1847.

From these objective chronological facts, we can conclude the following: Chopin enthusiastically started composing the essay, rapidly and easily managed with the first stage of the work; he had, as it follows from the letters, almost finished it. However, further work on this sonata was excruciatingly long, apparently with great breaks and serious refinements. Perhaps Chopin even postponed the composing for a long time, and it is not excluded that this work could be never finished. What caused such a long and in general difficult work for Chopin?

Apparently, there were few reasons. The first reason consisted of Chopin’s increasingly deteriorating health. During the sonata’s creation Chopin had become ill. From letters, we learn that for Chopin it became more and more difficult to practice piano and to compose for a long time, as well as to give the private lessons, which were almost the only source of his livelihood. From the 1842, Chopin had almost ceased to give public concerts. The famous last concert6 in Paris, to which he agreed (again, apparently, not without persuasion of Franchomme) finished very lamentably for Chopin. Right after the concert, he fainted (Kremlev 1971: 222).

Another important reason was the personal issues related to his complex relationship with George Sand. The writing of this sonata occurred against a background of their worsening relations, and then a complete break with George Sand, which finally took place in 1846,7 and was a heavy blow for Chopin, from which he could never recover.

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5 Many remained sketches of the same fragments testify that Chopin wasn’t very satisfied with his composing. As a result the significant amount of the material was not used at all.

6 In a review of the concert February 16, 1848, it is said in glowing terms about the works performed at this concert, including the cello sonata, which was called ‘perfect’.

7 But, these very years marked for Chopin’s with rapprochement with his family in Poland. His letters there are imbued with light and beautiful sentiments. Echoes of the joy which he found in the bosom of his family, are sounded in some of the themes of the sonata.
Another, though not less important, reason consisted in the political views of Chopin, which were responsive not only to political developments in Poland, 1845–1846, but also with similar circumstances in his second motherland – in France. The revolutionary situation in both countries extremely worried Chopin and reflected on his poor health.

But, the main reason probably was in general difficulties for Chopin to work on the musical material of major form, with an unknown to him (in spite of the two previous works) instrument. This was reflected in some features of the sonata.

**Sonata’s peculiarities – the traditional and innovative**

Chopin’s cello sonata – is an amazing fusion of art and features of Chopin's musical thinking of the different periods. We can say that this sonata reflects the originality of Chopin’s music interests and some duality in his artistic worldview, which appeared in a greater extent in the second half of his artistic life. So, on the one hand, the sonata had concentrated and enhanced the traditional for Chopin musical thought’s direction – some fragments of the sonata are a real crystallized style of Chopin. On the other hand, the sonata for cello is a work that goes far beyond the Chopin’s ordinary manner; it is an example of some innovative techniques peculiar to the later Chopin. Some specific properties of this sonata enable us to characterize it as a unique phenomenon in his work. Let us consider these features.

One of the most important characteristics of this sonata is an increased importance of neo-classical elements that influenced the change in the style of Chopin’s late period. It is strange, but the cello sonata largely has the properties of Viennese classicism, and in particular, Beethoven’s musical thought. Russian music critic Stasov believed that the general character of Chopin’s music: “is a true and complete embodiment... of the Beethovenian spirit of passion, suffering and emotional lyrical introspection” (Stasov 1894: 98). The cello sonata, like several other late works of Chopin, responds to this vision even in a greater extent.

Chopin’s deviation from his own tradition was, however, too complicated for receiving it without reservations. Many researchers believe these artistic experiments rather unsuccessful. Kremlev said: “The neoclassical retreat of the late period, of course, counts for nothing, because it is not the best, and not the ‘primary’ Chopin” (Kremlev 1971: 529).

Another unusual quality that allows us to isolate this sonata from other works of Chopin – is the composer’s removal from the use of his traditional folk motifs. Chopin, in this Sonata, almost had not referred to the rich intonational material of Polish folk music. However, it is interesting that, with the weakening of the national element in the cello sonata’s music, one of the brightest features of Chopin – the cosmopolitanism of his musical thinking was revealed more clearly. Some critics
estimated this kind of experiments from one side as the inevitable depletion of national folklore’s incentives and on the other side as a negative aspect in the works of Chopin: “Simultaneously as a result of Chopin’s inevitably fading intonational memories of his native land in his art had appeared the danger of non-national thinking, most clearly expressed in the cello sonata” (Kremlev 1971: 522).

It is impossible to say that Chopin, in this sonata, had completely asided from the folklore’s principles of his art. The melodic contours and the rhythmic pulse of some parts of this sonata (for example, in the Scherzo) reminds us of Polish folk music, the connection with which characterizes Chopin’s art and which had influenced Chopin until the last days of his life. However, those rhythms and intonations were brought by Chopin to an almost unrecognizable form. Chopin (probably intuitively) used the various tools for this aim in the sonata, one of the most striking was his overcoming of the plagality – one of the harmonic foundations of the Slavic folk, that Chopin so vividly and variously used in his early works. In the cello sonata, Chopin studiously avoids the subdominant idioms, giving to the harmonic development’s authenticity a special, key role. In such a harmonic solution we again can clearly feel the influences of European classicism.

Another feature concerns the emotional content of the sonata’s music. In this regard, the cello sonata also is not quite traditional for Chopin’s art. Iwaszkiewicz said that “For Chopin the music is an expression of feelings” (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 102). The music of Chopin’s cello sonata, as well as his other works, is imbued with emotions. Emotional human experiences – the concentration of Chopin’s attentive interest – in this sonata were expressed most acutely. Chopin tried to understand and convey through the musical means, the inner, psychological world of a person. However, here, Chopin’s sensibility had found expression in rather original, even strange forms. So, Largo – the sonata’s third part – by its form and character is close to Chopin’s Preludes – full of very rich and deep emotions. Nevertheless, this music is more close to Western European music mentality than to Chopin’s Slavic intimacy that is so familiar to us. The same can be said about the emotional saturation of the first part of the sonata, some excerpts of which can compete in this sense, with the best examples of expressionism, one of the first steps to which, apparently had been also reached by Chopin.

Another strange feature is some inequality in the composition of the cello sonata. Artistic enthusiasm, clearly perceived in the bright emotionality and dramatic fullness of the first part of the sonata, is replaced in the following parts with other moods, which can be called a classical objective detachment with a few lyrical exceptions. It is difficult to tell what caused such a creative solution – a natural reflection of a bright burst of inspired emotions and its attenuation, which generally characterizes the Chopin’s art, or the searches for new compositional techniques.

One researcher, who found in this sonata more innovative features than traditional ones, was a Soviet musicologist, Kremlev, who called this sonata “the least
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Chopinian” work, said of its “experimental” and partly “enforced” nature of it (Kremlev 1971: 507).

Almost the hundred years before Kremlev, Niecks wrote the same critique. The cello sonata is “hardly anything else but effort, painful effort, manifests itself” (Niecks 1888: 229).

Both of these musicologists reflected the traditional – bewildered, astonished look of criticism for this sonata. In general, it must be said that criticism throughout the existence of the sonata was more negative than positive and sometimes it had been rewarded with quite uncomplimentary epithets. Niecks in the late 19th century expressed the most negative criticism. He wrote: “The first and last movements are immense wildernesses with only here and there a small flower. The middle movements, a Scherzo and an Andante, do not rise to the dignity of a sonata” (Niecks 1888: 229), “In composition Chopin proves that he has only isolated happy thoughts which he does not know how to work up into a rounded whole. In the just published sonata with violoncello I find often passages which sound as if someone were preluding on the piano and knocked at all the keys to learn whether euphony was at home” (Niecks 1888: 229), “To me it is a tangled forest, through which now and then penetrates a gleam of the sun” (Niecks 1888: 229).

In spite of all these opinions, though in varying degrees reflecting objective factors, the cello sonata is still just a Chopinian work. Let us consider some features of this sonata, inherent to the composer’s traditional style.

One of the most impressive features of this sonata is its deep connection with the previous three piano sonatas. At first glance, the apparent uniqueness and singularity is emphasized by many researchers. This sonata on closer inspection turns out to be nothing more than a logical element in the development of Chopin’s musical thinking. Such a view was also expressed by some musicologists: “Chopin’s cello sonata is closely related to his immortal piano sonatas” (Ginzburg 1978: 148).

Even such notable quality of this sonata as a classical detachment was, apparently, the natural result of an acute conflicts’ solution in the culminate works of Chopin’s art – in his last two piano sonatas. Kremlev wrote about the piano sonata in b-moll in such way: “In an impulse of desperate emotions and intrusive mournful thoughts, Chopin, certainly came here very close to a dangerous border, where art renounces a faith in power of good and fatally disillusions with life. But he still hadn’t crossed that border, keeping even in despair, the great longing for happiness” (Kremlev 1971: 463–464).

In that sonata, as much as is sonata in h-moll, which Ivashkevich called “born by loneliness and longing” (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 26), Chopin had solved in his own way the dramatic antithesis of life and death. In the cello sonata, as well as in other works of
a later period Chopin had entered with a more tranquil and detached mind. For this reason in the cello sonata: “Chopin’s sorrow, the existence of which is difficult to put into question – this mixture of grief, homelessness, the disease and the lack of personal happiness” (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 52) is almost absent.

Chopin’s vision of the world in the last period of his art, particularly in the cello sonata, became more aloof, and in any case not as tragic, as in the middle period of his life. Thus, the more enlighten codas became the tradition of Chopin’s last period.

The cello sonata has many similarities with piano sonatas in the way of the form’s solution. Chopin in this sonata had not departed from his traditional form solutions’ principles as of the sonata cycle’s form and of the sonata allegro. This principle applies to the four-movement form with a fast second part – the scherzo and the slow third one, as well as the traditional exclusion of the first theme in recapitulation – which is one of the most prominent features of Chopin’s sonata form.

As to a relation of the cello sonata to the first piano sonata, some researchers believe that it is even more organic than any other works belonging to Chopin: “There was as though a second, subsurface flow in the art of Chopin, another manner, quite different from that, in which he wrote and which is known to us in all details. We heard only the first and the last splashes of this underground, grim and cold river: the first piano sonata and the last sonata for cello⁸, which are closely related to each other⁹ (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 72–73).

The cello sonata also reflects the typical Chopinian way of thinking, in the sense of thematism. So, this sonata is an example of the widespread phenomenon in the art of Chopin – the opposition of contrasting character’s themes – for example, the active, volitional theme against the emotional and lyrical in scherzo. In addition, the thematic material of the sonata is clearly separated, and it is also one of the highlights of Chopin’s musical thinking. Thus the traditional isolation of Chopin’s contrasting images is achieved.

One of the final characteristics of the sonata is Chopin using a main melodic element – here it is halftone leitmotif. For example, the first sounds of the cello’s first theme la–sib–la. This motif is frequently encountered in a variety of rhythmic and melodic variations throughout the development of the whole sonata. The use of such a dramatic seed is also one of the hallmarks of Chopin’s creative thinking. As it is known: “Chopin, firstly found the basic elements of melody, and then developed (or expanded) them” (Kremlev 1971: 371).

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⁸ In fact, these two sonatas were subjects for most criticism among the Chopin’s works.

⁹ This view, despite its controversial nature, may at least explain the unusual nature of these both works in Chopin’s art.
Conclusions

We can say that Chopin’s cello sonata is distinguished to a greater degree with character of the exceptionality than academism. Chopin in the cello sonata is quite a different Chopin – one who is more dramatic, artistically bold and musically-uncompromising. Completely new features of the musical thought woke up in Chopin’s art with this sonata.

Chopin’s cello sonata is a bizarre combination of different musical styles. As we have already noted, the features of Chopin’s traditional art had organically merged with the features of neoclassicism, impressionism, and even expressionism.

Considered by some musicologists as negative, such a stylistic diversity is regarded by us as the search for new ways in music, as a manifestation of the experimental approach, characteristic to the last period of the Chopin's art.

This sonata is perhaps the most striking attempt of an intellectual composition by Chopin. Chopin in his last period had come to such a milestone, when he felt the urgent need to change his musical language. Undoubtedly this was caused by the evolution of his musical thinking. The achievement by Chopin the climax of his musical career is marked with the creation of the last two piano sonatas, which had made him change directions to find new creative ways and forms. This resulted in the cello sonata’s creation.

Chopin’s cello sonata – work that bears the experimental spirit of intellectualism in music, the clearest evidence of Chopin’s tormented searches for new forms – is a phenomenon of his art, expected and at the same time also a surprising creation of a genius, his last swan song.

REFERENCES


10 Chopin in his uncompromising attitude was “almost unrivalled” (Iwaszkiewicz 1963: 5).