

Chopin and the Romantic Sonata: The First Movement of Op. 58

[excerpt]

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One of the results of having misconstrued Chopin's sonata practice in such ways is that his contribution to the evolution of the genre in the Romantic period has been mostly overlooked. That is, rather than understanding Chopin as one who abandoned the tradition and forged a completely new genre, or as a miniaturist incapable of deploying his considerable creative powers in the expansive dimensions of a large Classical form, or—worse—as a composer who never fully apprehended the basic principles of sonata logic, we might better understand him as one who availed himself of the sonata's rich generic conventions to construct complex, expressive works that situate Classical procedures in a dialogic opposition to strategies that can be productively understood as having roots in the Romantic aesthetic currents of his own time. That is, the first movement of op. 58 exhibits not only an underlying Classical approach to sonata organization but also characteristically Romantic features, where the latter are associated primarily with what I think of as a fragmentation of the musical structure into what would be regarded in structural narratology as multiply directed narrative, or temporal, trajectories or streams. In the broadest possible sense one of these streams resides on what can be described as the principal, or first, narrative-temporal level—what Gérard Genette, for example, would call the “first narrative,” or

what Byron Almén has recently characterized as the “primary narrative level”;¹ the others reside on any of a number of possible alternative temporal levels, where all of these are in some sense separate from, or external to, the level of the first narrative. In what follows I will characterize the distinction in terms of an opposition between *temporal* music and *atemporal* music. The music on the first narrative level is the temporal music—temporal in the sense that it articulates the temporality of the principal narrative stream or the primary trajectory through the sonata structure (the sonata temporality proper, perhaps). The music on the other levels can be categorized broadly as atemporal music, where I would like to use the term “atemporality” in a narrative sense—in which it means not so much an “absence of time” (or an “absence of moving time”) but rather connotes a *negation* of the first narrative: in this view, atemporal music becomes not literally “music without temporal motion” (although it may be possible for some forms of musical atemporality to signify just such a meaning) but rather music that comprises an alternative narrative stream “dislocated from” the first narrative level of the musical structure.

I find that allowing for this kind of multivalent temporal narrative provides a compelling way of accommodating, structurally and hermeneutically, some of the more idiosyncratic features of a Romantic sonata form such as Chopin's, and thus at the same time it provides an interpretive framework within which we can reach a more nuanced understanding of Chopin's contributions to sonata evolution in the nineteenth century.

¹ See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 48–49, and Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, 163–64.

**note: this is an excerpt from a longer article; it's the section in which I attempt to apply some aspects of Genette's structural narratology to music.

The movement's problematic structural and expressive discontinuities are understood not as manifesting any kind of compositional shortcomings on Chopin's part but rather as reflecting a particular aspect of contemporary Romantic aesthetics: that in which a deliberate fragmentation—an intentional breaking down or splitting apart—of traditional Classical forms and genres constitutes one of the Romantics' preferred modes of expressing a heightened skepticism toward Classical, Enlightenment values of logic, clarity, and rationality. Such skepticism forms a central facet of a wider aesthetic enterprise in which the Romantics sought to introspectively, self-consciously, and self-critically evaluate and comment upon the state of their own art.

Temporal and Atemporal

Recent work of Karol Berger serves as a useful point of departure, in that Berger has drawn a distinction between two kinds of forms that will prove useful in developing critical categories that can be deployed in interpreting Chopin's treatment of the sonata genre. These are Berger's *narrative* and *lyric* compositional forms, which he regards as the two fundamental forms (where *form* is a vehicle for the expression of content) underlying a wide range of arts and genres, from literature to architecture, painting to music.² This narrative-lyric opposition can manifest in various ways in the arts: some art describes or depicts (narrative), other art reflects (lyric); some art signifies

² This discussion draws mainly on Berger 1992. This article clearly shaped Berger's later book (2007), although his examination of the narrative-lyric distinction does not appear in the book.

motion in time (narrative), other art signifies temporal stasis (lyric). The distinction has a long history in narrative theory, dating from Plato's differentiation between *diegesis* and *mimesis*, two modes in which a narrative can transmit content: the diegetic mode entails a narrator speaking directly to the audience, while the mimetic mode entails a narrator speaking indirectly, usually through characters. For Plato, diegesis and mimesis were among the principal determinants of poetic genres, of which he thus named two: epic poetry, characterized by diegesis, and dramatic poetry, characterized by mimesis. Seventeenth-century narrative theory added a third genre, one that Plato never considered: lyric poetry, or poetry concerned with the ideas and sentiments, rather than actions, of a narrator.

Berger has asserted that although this three-way categorization scheme—epic, dramatic, and lyric—remained standard through the Romantic era and into the present, it invites confusion.³ The distinction between epic and dramatic genres lies in the mode of presentation, or the method with which poetic content is delivered; one uses the diegetic, the other the mimetic mode. But the distinction between the lyric genre, and both epic and dramatic genres, lies in the nature of the content, not in the mode of its delivery: lyric poetry has no linear plot, whereas epic and dramatic poetry does. To avoid the confusion, Berger proposes removing the mode of delivery from the equation and distinguishing the types solely according to the nature of their content: the natural

³ In German Romantic literary criticism these three are the highest of the literary genres, on the uppermost level in Schlegel's hierarchical categorization of "fundamental forms"; for a discussion, with references to works of Schlegel, see Daverio 1993, 24–34.

consequence is that *lyric* poetry becomes one category, while epic and dramatic are folded into another, called *narrative*.⁴ These new categories constitute *forms*, not *genres*, because—according to Berger—they distinguish ways of organizing narrative content into intelligible relationships between the smaller parts and the larger whole. Narrative forms impart discernible, causal (“one motivates another”) or reactive (“one follows from another”) relationships onto what would otherwise be mere ad hoc arrangements of unmotivated rhetorical events; thus in a narrative form, the order of events in time becomes an essential facet of those events’ identities and expressive potential.⁵ Lyric

⁴ Berger’s (1992, 454–57) conflating of epic and drama into one category, *narrative*, follows from Paul Ricoeur’s (1984, vol. 1, 32–45) observation that the end of all narrative poetry, epic and dramatic alike, is the representation of action, or the *plot*—what Aristotle called *muthos*; the mode of representation, whether *diegetic* or *mimetic*, does not affect the emplotment in narrative poetry; and thus we can justify ignoring the modal distinction in favor of focusing only on the thematic distinction.

⁵ Berger 1992, 458. Note Berger’s important observation (Ibid., 459) that most narrative forms contain numerous non-immediate and long-range relationships among phases of the narrative; the relationships of *causing* and *following from* are not restricted to immediately adjacent phases. Note also that Berger focuses only on relationships of causality, perhaps implying that the sonata unfolds in an irreversibly linear, forward- vectored trajectory. Clearly some phases of the narrative may also have reactive qualities, in which they respond to events that have already unfolded in the sonata

forms, meanwhile, represent not actions but rather thoughts, mental states, emotions, or situations (not “the actions one does” but “the states one finds oneself in”⁶), none of which depend on time, and as such allow events to occur in any order, or even simultaneously, without changing either their meaning or the form’s ultimate expressive outcome.

At the same time, work in structural narratology has recognized that even in a narrative form dependent for its expressive meaning on the order of rhetorical events in time, not all these events must participate in the governing narrative structure in exactly the same way with regard to their temporal-significative value. Some of these modules may lie in some sense outside the narrative’s principal temporal space. This is possible because, as Gérard Genette (following Christian Metz) has explained, any narrative, whether, for example, oral, written, or cinematic, necessarily exists within a kind of temporal duality, in that it engages simultaneously with two temporal spaces:⁷ that of

space. On the concept of *reactive modules* and their importance in reading a sonata narrative, see Hepokoski 2012, 230.

⁶ Ibid., 459.

⁷ Genette takes Metz as a point of departure, specifically Metz’s *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18, where Metz writes that narrative is a “doubly temporal sequence” in which “there is the time of the thing told and the time of the telling (the time of the significate and the time of the signifier)”; “this duality . . . invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme.”

the narrative's content (the time of the story itself, or what some have described as the *erzählte Zeit*—literally the “narrated time” or, in Genette's rendering, “story time”), and that of the actual narration (the time it takes to recite or otherwise tell the story, or the *Erzählzeit*—literally the “narrative time,” which Genette says we must accept as a “quasi-fiction” or “pseudo-time,” “a false time standing in for a true time”).⁸ To assume that all rhetorical events in a narrative participate in that narrative in temporally equivalent ways is to confuse (“naively,” says Genette)⁹ a narrative's syntagmatic presentation of its events with the temporal function, or the signified temporal value, of those events within the story; that the two do not necessarily coincide is one of the most basic aspects of Western literary narratives in all their forms.

According to Genette, any narrative, by definition, engages with the temporal duality outlined here. As a result, any narrative has the capacity to disengage its narrative time from its story time, where such disengagements may effect multiple temporalities within the space of the narrative itself: these include, on the one hand, what may be thought of as the temporal space proper, comprising the principal narrative stream (as mentioned, Genette's “first narrative,” or Almén's “primary narrative level”), and, on the other hand, atemporal (“non-first-narrative”) spaces

⁸ The terms *erzählzeit* and *erzählte Zeit* appear in Gunther Müller, “Erzählzeit und erzählte zeit” (1948), in Müller, *Morphologische Poetik: Gessamelte Aufsätze*, ed. Helga Egner and Elena Müller (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968) (cited and discussed in Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 33–35).

⁹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 85.

comprising various forms of alternative streams that remain secondary or otherwise subordinate to the first (these might include flashbacks, anticipations, descriptions, reflective pauses, or any number of other similar deflections off of, or digressions from, the principal pathway through the story).¹⁰ Such a formulation applies just as well to novels, narrative poetry, film, and, I would suggest, music, in that some musical forms must be understood as *narrative* forms and, as a result, can be understood as having the capacity to engage—in some specifically musical sense—with the multiple temporalities and multiple narrative streams outlined here. Such musical forms include, most obviously perhaps, the sonata form, the Classical identity of which depends on temporal order and a teleological trajectory in time: that is, a sonata's expressive argument, and ultimately the expressive meaning of the entire work, is premised on a cogent, ordered succession of rhetorical events and affective or expressive states, all of them staged by the composer as aiming at particular structural stations or goal-points within a governing, forward-driven, linearly directed sense of time.¹¹

¹⁰ My formulation here follows that proposed in Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, esp. 48–51.

¹¹ The specific issue of whether we must “prove” that a sonata, or music, for that matter, is “narrative,” and, if we must, how the proof might be carried out is not entirely germane to the present discussion—itsself a theorizing of the treatment of various narrative-temporal streams within a sonata environment, where that environment is understood as analogous to a narrative environment even if it may not be specifically *narrative* in all the complex senses of that word. The literature on this

This particular aspect of the genre may be best contextualized analytically using tools provided by the recent Sonata Theory of James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy. This is because Sonata Theory seeks to apprehend a sonata temporally—as a narrative that unfolds within a formal framework comprising multiple passes, or rotations, through a series of zones. The zones are conceived not as musical “themes” or “groups” thereof but as *action spaces* inhabited by what we might think of as narrative agents—perhaps themes in the traditional sense or, more generally, musical-rhetorical modules; principal sonata action spaces include those that house what are traditionally known as the primary theme (abbreviated P), transition (TR), secondary theme (S), and closing (C).¹² Sonata Theory also understands the sonata as having a fundamentally teleological

issue is vast: for an introduction to the central concerns, see the especially trenchant treatments of the subject in Seth Monahan, “‘Inescapable’ Coherence and the Failure of the Novel-Symphony in the Finale of Mahler’s Sixth,” *19th-Century Music* 31, no. 1 (2007), 53–95; Michael Klein, “Chopin’s Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 26, no. 1 (2004): 23–55; and Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). For another helpful survey of the issues with an eye toward matters relevant to the present discussion, see also Monahan, “Mahler’s Sonata Narratives” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2008), esp. 11–17 (in which Monahan states a concern for “how music is ‘like’ narrative without wrangling over whether it ‘is’ narrative” [15]).

¹² For an introduction to the Sonata-Theory concepts and terminology invoked here, see Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 9–22. For further discussion of

character, in which it normatively aims at certain rhetorical objectives or structural punctuation marks, the most important of which include those known as the Medial Caesura (MC), the Essential Expositional Closure (EEC), and the Essential Structural Closure (ESC).

Within this sonata-as-narrative framework, I would like to propose that one of the ways of effectively confronting structure, musical meaning, and expression in a sonata such as the first movement of Chopin’s op. 58 is to recognize that (to recast now an earlier point on narrative forms in general in specifically musical terms) a sonata may comprise certain musical-rhetorical events not all of which necessarily participate in the governing sonata-narrative structure in exactly the same way with regard to their temporal-significative value. Some of its rhetorical modules—the temporal modules—will articulate what could be characterized as the “first sonata narrative,” while others—any number of other atemporal modules—may be understood by listeners as disengaged in some way from the first narrative stream, or as residing outside the principal sonata-temporal plane of action. Atemporal musical modules defined as such would comprise musical analogues to passages commonly encountered in literary

the sonata-as-narrative view latent in Sonata Theory, see esp. Monahan, “‘Inescapable’ Coherence and the Failure of the Novel-Symphony”; Monahan, “Success and Failure in Mahler’s Sonata Recapitulations,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 33, no. 1 (2011): 37–58; and Monahan, “‘I Have Tried to Capture You . . .’: Rethinking the ‘Alma’ Theme from Mahler’s Sixth Symphony,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 1 (2011): 119–78.

narratives, passages Genette refers to as *achronies*: various kinds of narrative modules that lack a clear temporal identity or an unambiguous temporal relationship to the material that surrounds them.¹³ For Genette, literary achronies suspend or divert the first narrative trajectory and invite the reader into alternative narrative streams: some of these might signify the mimetic space of interiority, for example, as when a character sinks into a reminiscence, reflection, dream, or trance; others might signify the diegetic space of exteriority, as when a narrator's voice is revealed as intruding into the narrative to offer a commentary or a description delivered from outside the first-narrative space. Musical achronies might be understood similarly: in a sonata, they might temporarily deflect, divert, immobilize, suppress, or suspend the sonata's generically obligatory forward-vectored progress through time in favor of what can be construed expressively in terms of—just as in a novel or a poem—descriptions, commentaries, reminiscences, reflections, dreams, crises, corrective actions, or any number of other types of narrative or non-narrative spaces (including, perhaps, specifically musical forms of analepses or prolepses). In some cases atemporal musical modules conceived as such might even be best understood structurally as interpolations into the first sonata narrative proper, in the sense that they may comprise parenthetical digressions that could be removed from the sonata without disturbing the form's larger outlines.

In any event, exactly how we identify, and construe the specific expressive nature of, these kinds of atemporal narrative streams in the abstract world of musical

¹³ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 59.

discourse is an exercise in hermeneutics or musical semiotics just as much as it is an exercise in structural analysis. Existing work in semiotics and literary criticism as well as music analysis provides tools that can guide interpretation. One might say, for example, that shifts in music among temporal and atemporal streams should be marked by what Christian Metz has described as "*change[s] of intelligibility*, in the sense in which one speaks of a change of gears in automobiles."¹⁴ Such changes might be cued by rhetorical procedures known in recent musical-semiotic literature as "shifts of level of discourse"—shifts that often manifest as various forms of musical *non sequiturs*, perhaps triggered by, among other procedures, interrupted themes, deflected or rhetorically charged harmonic progressions or modulatory schemes, stalled developmental procedures, sudden or unusual tonal shifts, or marked changes of style or topical register.¹⁵ And, more generally, the principles according to which such multivalent, fragmented narrative-temporal structures are conceived in music might conform to structural principles outlined in work of figures such as Roland Barthes (for whom multiple voices, or "codes," interweave throughout a text—a short story or a novel, for example—in order to articulate various levels of meaning), Mikhail Bakhtin (whose *heteroglossia* involves the populating of "dialogic" novels with "a system of [expressively and rhetorically divergent] languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate one another"), and, in music, Carolyn Abbate (who draws on Barthes, Bakhtin, and others such as Julia Kristeva to formulate a view of musical narrative

¹⁴ Metz 1974, 74 (emphasis original).

¹⁵ Hatten 1994, 174–83; Hatten 2004, 47–52.

involving shifts among multiple “voices,” some of which may or may not be specifically *narrative*).¹⁶

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¹⁶ For Barthes’s five codes, see Barthes 1966 and 1974 (1970); see also McCreless 1988. For heteroglossia, see Bakhtin 1981. For Abbate’s view of multiple voices and narrativity, see Abbate 1991.