Kallberg

Chopin at the Boundaries

HARV

Chopin at the Boundaries

Sex, History, and Musical Genre

Jeffrey Kallberg

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1996

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kallberg, Jeffrey, 1954–
Chopin at the boundaries : sex, history, and musical genre / Jeffrey Kallberg.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-674-12790-0 (alk. paper)
1. Chopin, Frédéric, *1810–1849*—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Music—19th century—History and criticism. 3. Music and society. I. Title.
ML410.C54K16 1996
786.2'092—dc20 95-42776

To my mother, Elaine A. Patchett

Preface

Chopin unsettles us. At once exalted and shadowy, he cuts a curious figure in contemporary culture. Ethereal composer and enervated *enfant mâle* (or so the popular biographical image of him would have us believe), he parries attempts to reconcile the music with the man. A Pole who wrote most of his works among Frenchmen, his music exudes exoticism at the same time as it partakes of the European common-practice tradition. Champion of the miniature at a time when many around him gravitated toward ever grander musical colossi, he confounds our abilities to hear his contemporaries and him on equal footing. A male composer who wrote in "feminine" genres like the nocturne for domestic settings like the salon, he confuses our sense of the boundaries of gender. Central to our repertory, Chopin nevertheless remains a marginalized figure.

Now Chopin hardly qualifies as a composer in need of special pleading. But (to mention just one realm where we might observe the phenomenon) a glance toward the world of concert pianists lays bare the uncommon level of anxiety that he arouses. We might note first those great pianists who mostly avoid performing Chopin (Rudolf Serkin, Glenn Gould, and Alfred Brendel come immediately to mind). Is there any other composer of similar stature who is shunned by a group of pianists of such renown? We can hardly imagine a pianist attaining fame while sidestepping, say, Beethoven; certainly great Chopin interpreters like Artur Rubenstein, Dinu Lipatti, and Maurizio Pollini (who might seem somehow to balance culturally those who slight Chopin) have felt it necessary to explore other pianistic terrain as well. What is it specifically about Chopin that allows him to be shunned by concert artists of the highest order?

Some explanation may come from two pianists who, though they perform Chopin, were or are troubled by the experience. Speaking

recently to the *New York Times,* Murray Perahia and Hélène Grimaud expressed different kinds of apprehension over being too closely associated with Chopin in the minds of the listening public. Perahia mentioned his misgivings while describing how a forced hiatus from the concert stage resulting from an injured thumb had occasioned a rethinking of his art (*New York Times,* 3 April 1994, Arts and Leisure section, p. 25). The lyrical style that he had cultivated early in his career seemed best displayed in smaller-scale works (among his most notable recordings from that time were refined performances of Chopin, Mozart, and Schumann). But at some point before his injury, Perahia grew disenchanted with being so particularly affiliated with the miniature, and he set out to broaden his repertory and style into more grandiose, overtly virtuosic realms. He remarked: "One instinctively doesn't want to be thought of as a miniaturist. I considered it pejorative. Now I don't. But at that time I felt dissatisfied. I was looking for something bigger. I was looking to gain a more heroic style, more epic. I made the mistake of thinking it could be gained through loudness. I had to learn my lesson, that I wasn't being true to myself."

How did he find his "true" self again in the world of miniatures? Among other explanations, the pianist cited his newly found absorption in the theories of Heinrich Schenker, an Austrian contemporary of Freud. Schenker's theories of deep structure particularly affected Perahia's thinking about Chopin: "Schenker is a framework that I keep in the back of my mind, although with Chopin it's more in the foreground [Perahia's specific reference is to a forthcoming performance of the Ballade in F Minor]. I feel I become more free, not less, when I'm aware of these structures because I get away from the pedantry of measure-by-measure and into something much bigger." In other words, Perahia's *rapprochement* with the musical miniature, as Michael Kimmelman pointed out in the conclusion to his article, came by reconceiving, through Schenker, the nature of this repertory. If the miniature now comes encumbered with the large-scale structure whose heft he originally sought in a repertory that was "something bigger," then the "miniaturist" too can display a depth of attainment akin to those pianists who specialize in more "heroic" pieces. Perahia diminished his anxiety about Chopin (and other miniaturists) through a transfusion of Schenkerian deep structure.

A few weeks later, Hélène Grimaud directly spelled out in the *Times* the gendered terms of her anxiety about Chopin (*New York Times,*

29 May 1994, Arts and Leisure section, pp. 22, 36). Grimaud (whose discographical focus on Rachmaninoff and Brahms the author of the interview, John Rockwell, termed "odd not only for a French pianist but also for a female one") mentioned that she had moved away from playing Chopin and Debussy, "feeling she was typecast there in her teens." She described her resistance to Chopin as part of a rebellion against performing in ways that might be "expected" of a female pianist: "At the conservatory I was always told that Chopin was my thing. Maybe I was not ready, physically, to play Brahms, but I haven't changed that much since." Instead of focusing on Chopin (and Debussy), Grimaud would rather "play like a man": "People always say to me now that I play like a man. I never felt feminine at all . . . I'm not gay, but I always thought I should have been a man."

By what "instinct" could Perahia rebel against being labeled a miniaturist? Why did formalist theory provide a salve to his conscience? Why should Grimaud's worries about being perceived as "feminine" devolve precisely onto Chopin? To understand the complexly unsettling status of Chopin in our culture, we cannot just examine present experience, for the anxieties that I have detailed have a long history when applied to Chopin. But if we situate him and his music historically within his native Polish and adopted French cultures, we can begin to fathom the powerful effects these historical constructions can and do have today. This book suggests some of the pathways that historical inquiries into Chopin might pursue.

The seven essays that I have gathered here hardly sprang to life under a single, unifying methodological umbrella. The matter is really the other way around: reflecting on and writing these essays resulted in the foundational convictions that I currently hold. In collecting these essays, then, I have made no attempt to disguise the evolution in my thinking on such matters as the role of close formal analysis in historical investigations of Chopin. But I can nevertheless point to some consistent principles in the motivation behind these various studies. Through an exploration of some of the historical contexts of Chopin's music and the social constructions of meaning that were applied to it, I wanted in each of the essays to reduce the sense of distortion that has governed attempts to understand the composer's works. And not conversely, I also tried to expose and partially recover aspects of Chopin's style perceived in his day to be marginal or foreign, but which today's listeners have transformed or repressed.

Historically oriented and socially grounded, the seven chapters of this book play continuously and variously on the tensions between past and present that figure into our understandings of Chopin and his music. The chapters fall naturally into three groups. The essays of the first part combat the misconception that Chopin's piano works were conceived and understood as primarily autonomous forms of music, free of any extra-musical significance. In Chapter 1 I examine how the Nocturne in G Minor, op. 15, no. 3, became freighted, through the conduit of genre, with ideological significance; in Chapter 2 I explore what it meant—culturally, historically, and musically—that commentators in the nineteenth century persistently couched their reactions to the piano nocturne in feminine imagery; and in the third chapter I investigate how sexual meanings figured into the understanding of Chopin through processes of linguistic deflection and deferral around images from the worlds of art, literature, and medicine. The second part of the book tackles the presentist assumptions that govern contemporary critical assumptions about Chopin's creative process and style. In these two essays I attempt to shed light on some of the social constructions that ought to enter into our understanding of the ways Chopin composed and the purposes he might have had in mind when he did. Chapter 4 focuses on a group of pieces Chopin wrote at the end of his creative life, and Chapter 5 on the Preludes, op. 28. Finally, the essays of the last part expose the ineluctably social nature of the musical work in the nineteenth century, in order to demonstrate that what determined its status as a "work" was not only the creative act by the composer but also its engagement through the institutions of publishing with a variety of publics. In Chapter 6 I examine in detail the complicated international negotiations required for Chopin to bring his music before the public eye, while in the final chapter I demonstrate how the musical variants that resulted from the editions published through these negotiations constitute a fundamental aspect of the work of art as conceived by both Chopin and his audiences.

Over the years, I have benefited from countless insightful suggestions from friends and colleagues. I want first warmly to thank Philip Gossett and Gary Tomlinson, who not only read and improved most of the chapters in this book, but in many ways inspired them through their own exemplary scholarship. Charles Rosen, reading an earlier

draft of the book, enhanced the final version by offering me a number of critically and musically discerning suggestions. I am grateful to Edward W. Said for showing interest in my work, and for encouraging me to publish it in his laudable series. Without Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's superb research on Chopin and his friendly willingness to share ideas, my own labors would have been immeasurably more complicated. To Bonnie J. Blackburn, Marcia Citron, Carol J. Clover, Krzysztof Grabowski, Douglas Johnson, Joseph Kerman, Robert L. Marshall, Wojciech Nowik, John Rink, Jim Samson, Ruth A. Solie, Susan T. Sommer, Leo Treitler, Alan Tyson, Robert Winter, and Deborah Wong, I offer my appreciation for their comments on individual chapters. And for their highly professional and caring efforts on behalf of this book, Lindsay Waters, Alison Kent, and Mary Ellen Geer of Harvard University Press have earned my unending praise.

No less important to me are those institutions who supported my work in various ways. For providing time free of all constraints but the scholarly, I am thankful for fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The University of Pennsylvania has generously furnished me with scholarly leaves and funded travel to collections abroad; most recently, through a grant from their Research Fund, they have helped defray costs associated with the publication of this book. And I want to offer special thanks to the staff of two of these collections who have particularly assisted—and, indeed, enabled—my work on Chopin for many years: the Towarzystwo imienia Fryderyka Chopin, Warsaw, and the Département de la Musique of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Many friends have seen me through the stages of writing these essays (whether they knew it or not). I have happy memories of the support provided at various times by Gloria Apt, Lawrence F. Bernstein, Victoria Cooper, Joseph Farrell, Jacob Lateiner, Jennifer Marik, Eugene Narmour, Rip Rense, Ralph Rosen, Mike Rugg, Norman E. Smith, Margaret and Karol Sołtan, Gary Tomlinson (again), and Eugene K. Wolf. I find myself most grateful for what made this book truly possible: the daily love and care of Charlotta Thunander. And I offer special thanks to Erik Hans Kallberg, whose birth lent the latter stages of the production of this book an air of wonder and grace.

Contents

I

Ideology, Sex, and the Piano Miniature

1

The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor

Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.
George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, "Finale"

Idiosyncrasies abound in Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor, op. 15, no. 3. Robert Schumann, one of Chopin's most acute early listeners, responded aphoristically to it: "Florestan once rather paradoxically uttered: 'In the *Leonora* Overture of Beethoven there was more future than in his symphonies,' which would more correctly be applied to the most recent Chopin Notturno in G Minor."[1] "Future" is an enigmatic critical category, one that could reflect numerous aspects of the piece. But in making this vague distinction, Schumann must have reacted at least in part to the many differences between this Nocturne and other members of its genre.

Unorthodox gestures stand out on every page of the Nocturne. Many of the stylistic devices popularly thought to typify the genre do not appear in op. 15, no. 3. The melodies are bare-boned and static, strikingly different from the floridly ornamented tunes of earlier nocturnes. The accompaniment nowhere deploys the widely-spanned broken chords that we think of as a hallmark of the genre. The rhythmic stress falls persistently on the second beat of the measure, unlike the downbeat accents found in most nocturnes. The large-scale tonal plan moves by semitones, not by subdominant-related keys. Most strikingly, there is no return at the end to the opening theme.

Thus the Nocturne in G Minor seems almost to defy its type. If so,

how can ideas of musical genre help us understand the piece? Genre and idiosyncrasy might seem to be antithetical: the one apparently emphasizes norms, the other singularity. And individuality of just the sort found in the Nocturne in G Minor has led some to dismiss genre as a conceptual category that is of little use in criticism. Nevertheless it was Chopin who called the piece a Nocturne. Unless the title was arbitrary or cynical, the concept of genre must have meant something to Chopin and his audience—and so must Chopin's gesture in labeling this piece.

Our challenge is to recover this meaning, to discover what Chopin hoped to communicate through genre in the Nocturne. By invoking "communication" rather than "classification," this statement already presumes a rather different understanding of the concept of genre than what we commonly encounter in musical studies.[2] Hence, before I turn to the work itself, I want first to explore some of the assumptions about genre that govern my interpretation of the Nocturne.

The Rhetoric of Genre

> But in reality genre is much less of a pigeonhole
> than a pigeon.
>
> —Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*[3]

While often construed as a concept inherent in musical compositions themselves, genre is better perceived as a social phenomenon shared by composers and listeners alike. The distinction is basic. The literature abounds with efforts to define particular genres according to the music itself. Usually, such studies purport to answer questions like "What is a sonata?" or "What is a motet?" by providing either a history of the use of the term, or a description of the apparent contents of the class. That is, they seek to define the genre according to those characteristics shared by all of its members, mistakenly assuming that shared characteristics inevitably form part of any definition.[4] The result often is a category so attenuated as to be virtually useless or one so broad as to embrace entire epochs.

But, as Wittgenstein and others have argued, shared characteristics are only partially relevant to definitions.[5] They provide factual information about a term; they classify it. But they do not explain its mean-

ing. The meaning of a term instead is connected to the willingness of a particular community to use that word and not another; meaning sheds light on the characteristic uses of a particular term as opposed to others that are available. This is why definitions that consider only the term itself are of limited value: they fail to consider the community that employs the word. A proper definition, then, will investigate the responses to various uses of the word. Meaning, in short, must emerge from the context of the term.

Hence the need for studies of genre to look away from the immanent characteristics of the music: without a broader focus, the meanings of genres will continue to elude us.[6] Shared characteristics will doubtless still figure in most definitions, but they should more importantly treat the appropriate responses to the term, "appropriateness" being largely determined by the conventions associated with the genre.[7] Research into the effects of genre should involve the reconstruction of contexts and traditions, and the perceptions of composers and their audiences, both historical and modern.

This formulation properly locates genre as a communicative concept, one that actively informs the experience of a musical work. It is this experience that we want to recapture for Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor.

Genre exerts a persuasive force. It guides the responses of listeners—this is why I refer in my title to the "rhetoric" of genre.[8] The choice of genre by a composer and its identification by the listener establish the framework for the communication of meaning. The genre institutes what E. D. Hirsch has termed a "code of social behavior" and Hans Robert Jauss a "horizon of expectation" (a term derived from Husserl's phenomenology of perception), a frame that consequently affects the decisions made by the composer in writing the work and the listener in hearing the work.[9] A kind of "generic contract" develops between composer and listener: the composer agrees to use some of the conventions, patterns, and gestures of a genre, and the listener consents to interpret some aspects of the piece in a way conditioned by this genre.[10] The contract may be signaled to the listener in a number of ways: title, meter, tempo, and characteristic opening gestures are some of the common means.[11] The contract may include notions of what cannot appear in a genre as well; such constraints can tell us a great deal about what is permissible in a genre.[12]

Generic contracts, like their legal counterparts, may be broken; indeed, frustrated expectations often play a key role in the communicative process. Departures from perceived norms or expectations in genre have been a persistent stumbling block for many critics. The notion persists that genres represent fixed and prescriptive types, that their value is limited because no composer of any achievement would remain bound by inhibitory rules. Prescriptions and norms have been fundamental to generic theory for centuries, and still are today, but it does not follow that they must restrict composers. On the contrary, the rejection of the prescriptions of a genre by a composer can be seen as a major force in the promotion of change.

Thus Claudio Guillén has styled genres "an invitation to form," and suggested that genre as a category looks backward and forward at the same time.[13] The "form" embodies tradition and experience; it offers an ordered mental space in which to work. The "invitation" involves creating the form all over again, in the process reconstituting and altering it in some way. The way in which the invitation is accepted can reveal much about a composer's attitude toward the past, whether respectful and conservative or contrary and reformative. A composer can choose to write in a certain genre in order to challenge its attributes instead of to demonstrate an allegiance to them.

Contracts may be breached by listeners as well. Willfully or not, listeners sometimes read different implications into a generic title than those the composer intended. This commonly happens when a gap separates the listener from the time in which the genre was current. Explanations of the works of J. S. Bach in the early nineteenth century, for example, cloaked Bach's genres in modern garb. In 1813, a reviewer of the English Suite in D Minor urged his readers to ignore the antiquated title "Sarabande" and instead simply to think of the movement as an "Andante."[14] Associations with an old dance form were to be denied; instead readers were to perceive the "feeling" of the movement. Even more common is the misreading of a genre with a long life span: later listeners interpret earlier exemplars according to the current precepts. Musicology has taken the uncovering of such "mistaken" readings as one of its paradigmatic tasks (an example is the effort to recover the context of the symphony in the eighteenth century).[15] Less common, but potentially significant to the historian, is the contemporaneous misinterpretation of a genre. Such instances

can shed fascinating light on a composer's success in communicating meaning through a given genre.

The assertion that a generic contract governs a particular interpretation of a work implies that the piece was planned to be heard in the tradition of previous works in that genre. How then are the *first* works of a genre to be understood? Clearly they cannot have been designed to fit with a tradition that they were retrospectively understood to have commenced; when the genre initially appeared, that tradition normally would have been an unforeseen consequence of the creative act. To the extent that they can be identified, then, the initial exemplars of a genre assume a special status. Designed by their authors to be interpreted under one set of circumstances, they are taken by later listeners to form part of an altered tradition. The first works of a genre, as Gary Saul Morson has observed, are normally interpreted according to an anachronistic set of conventions.[16] The diverse set of genres apparently used to measure the dramatic works of Peri, Caccini, and Cavalieri around 1600 was different from the idea of "opera" that composers in Venice applied in the 1640s.[17] When hearing initial works in a genre, later listeners ordinarily, rather than unusually, break the generic contract.

Works that seem to be anomalous with respect to a genre, that seem somehow to lie on the edge of it, can play a key role in generic studies. Such works expose the flaw behind viewing genre only as a classifying concept. The shared characteristics of the members of a genre can tell us much, but precisely in instances like the Nocturne in G Minor, where the search for common gestures yields a confused picture, we discover that such searches cannot inform us about the meaning of a genre. Unless, like Croce, we conclude from the lack of shared elements that the concept of genre itself is worthless, we soon realize that cases where the appropriate responses cannot be firmly fixed will figure centrally in our understanding of a genre. For in making us hesitate and waver in our responses, these works can reveal much about what these responses ought to be and what the real effect of them is in more clear instances of the genre. Marginal works focus our attention on interpretive decisions that ordinarily might pass without notice.[18] This is why it remains profitable to frame a discussion of the idiosyncratic Nocturne in G Minor in terms of genre.

Genres do not necessarily act in isolation from one another; rela-