

Introduction

The Romantic miniatures or 'character' pieces, are generally short lyric pieces for piano which describe a mood or character, and usually have titles suggestive of a mood or scene. As in Romantic song, nature played a significant role in the lyric piano genre – many character pieces have titles depicting aspects of nature. Romantic miniatures are the piano equivalent of the vocal lyric song or lied. The genre gradually emerged through the development of the minuet into the characteristic piece of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and others.

The most common types of character pieces are bagatelles, impromptus, intermezzos, elegies, humoresques, études rhapsodies, ballads, scherzos, mazurkas, nocturnes, preludes, waltzes, and fantasias. Some composers grouped a number of short character pieces together into loosely organised cycles; as did Schumann, for example, with the piano cycle *Carnaval*. This shows another characteristic trait of the Romantics, that of depicting in music the characters of people.

The most important composers of the Romantic character piece are Schubert, Schumann, Clara Wieck Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt, Mussorgsky, Dvorak and Grieg. Although there are certain characteristics which are common to all, their individual styles are quite different.

Identifying compositional techniques

If you understand and are able to identify the characteristic compositional techniques of the genre, it will help you with your own compositions. In the following section we will look in some detail at the stylistic features of the music of three important composers of the Romantic miniature: Chopin, Schumann and Grieg.

Writing Romantic miniatures

Key considerations

When starting to compose miniatures in the Romantic style, you need to think about the following points:

Form

Form is usually but not always ternary.

Style

Decide on the style, character and mood of your piece. If you are writing in the style of a particular composer, incorporate appropriate stylistic musical elements.

Tonal/harmonic framework

Work out the tonal and harmonic scheme, the modulations, phrase structure and cadence points. Build the shape of your framework on ternary form ABA sections and consider the following:

1. The tension or climax points – your piece must have a sense of direction, largely determined by the tonal plan and harmonies. Dissonant harmonies – dominant and diminished 7ths, augmented and Neapolitan 6ths, altered chords and so on all create tension points
2. Tension points can be heightened by the length of time the dissonance is held before resolution, by changing chords, by modulating, or otherwise delaying a resolution point
3. You can appear to be moving towards resolution or the 'home' key, then take a different turn and move into another key
4. As we have seen, secondary dominants are very common in the Romantic era and very effective in changing the expressive colour of a piece. Try incorporating secondary dominant progressions based on the circle of 5ths in your piece
5. Remember that chromatic harmony works best within a predominantly diatonic framework.

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Melody

Melodies must be in character: for example, long, lyrical and expressive, or in a dance form. Melodies are often phrased in regular eight-bar measures, and need shape and stylistic musical elements.

Texture

Work out your textural contrasts through the piece.

Chopin

Repertoire

Chopin wrote almost exclusively for piano. His principal works are two concertos, three sonatas, twenty-seven études, four scherzos, four ballads, twenty-four preludes, three impromptus, nineteen nocturnes, and numerous waltzes, mazurkas and polonaises.

Piano style

Chopin's style of composition is introspective and intimate. His own playing style was subtle and restrained with its exquisite delicacy in contrast with the contemporary virtuoso 'Titans' of the piano. Playing Chopin's piano works demands flawless technique, imaginative use of pedals, control of the full range of dynamic shadings, and subtle nuances of piano tone colour and musical understanding of *tempo rubato*.

Melodies

Chopin's melodies are highly expressive. Influenced by the Italian opera *cantabile* style, his melodies range from ornamental figurations and passagework, intimately related to the underlying harmonies, to long languid melodic lines, often with ornamentation derived from vocal music. His ornamentation is often chromatic, as it imitates the operatic singers' *portamento* and *rubato*. Expressive melodies can also be found in inner voice lines. His melodies are basically diatonic, and, like the Italian *bel canto* are constructed in regular

eight-bar phrases. Chopin liked to displace the eight-bar feel of stable regularity by elliptical cadences. His melodies frequently begin *cantabile*, or are derivative of folk-song and quickly develop into ornamental arabesque-like decorative lines. The Polish Lydian 4th is often present in his melodies and in his mazurkas, polonaises and waltzes, in particular. (The Lydian scale is on the white notes and starts on F, with the raised 4th being the B natural.)

Counterpoint

Chopin was highly influenced by J. S. Bach, particularly his *The Well-tempered Clavier*. Chopin's music is rich in contrapuntal brilliance. We see free canonic writing, or voice leading, contrapuntal part writing, and harmonic and melodic dissonance treated contrapuntally. His melody lines often appear in contrapuntally derived arpeggio figurations.

Harmony

Chopin's harmony was conspicuously innovative. His harmonic schemes are rich with chromatic chords, notably chord extensions, and chromatic and enharmonic inner parts. A favourite chord of Chopin's was the diminished 7th in second inversion, associated with the Lydian 4th – thus combining his loves of chromatic harmony with Polish musical characteristics. Typical chromatic harmonic progressions begin and end in the tonic key and use mostly tonic-dominant relationships to rapidly move through a series of keys. Through such excursions into passages of pure chromaticism, discreet melodic clashes, ambiguous chords, delayed or surprising cadences, and unresolved dominant 7ths, Chopin pushed the boundaries of dissonance and key into previously unexplored territory. It is important to remember that in much of his music, chromatic harmonies were intended to be glided over, the interest being in the changing tonal colour.

Tonality

Chopin was fond of remote or sliding modulations and of modulating using an unresolved

dominant 7th chord in third inversion, followed by runs and scale passages. His pieces often begin on chords or chordal figurations other than the tonic. His tonalities are often ambiguous, with chromatic chords fluctuating around tonal ambiguity.

Rhythm

Although largely derived from Polish dances, Chopin's rhythms are flexible. Common features include various types of cross-rhythms, notably passages of figurations of irregular grouping of notes, fitted to a regular quaver accompaniment. The effect of the cross-rhythms is again to create an intimacy of colouring, rather than to energise rhythmic complexity. *Tempo rubato* is an essential part of

Chopin's music. His rhythms, although written with specific accuracy, rely on the flexibility and fluidity which *tempo rubato* provides. Rhythms characteristic of Polish folk dances and songs are present in his mazurkas and polonaises.

Texture and form

Most of his works have a simple texture of melody and accompaniment. Many of the shorter pieces are basically ternary in form, with a contrasting middle section and with the return being varied, delayed, shortened or extended in different ways.

Analysis of Chopin's style

Nocturne Op. 27 No. 2, bars 1-9
Chopin

This is a beautiful example of Chopin's *cantabile* style, over characteristic arpeggio bass. Note the ornamentation and improvisatory style between bars 7 and 9; the meticulous articulation and the low bass notes, sustained by the pedal. The harmony of the passage is

characteristically based on diatonic progressions, but includes dominant and diminished 7th chords, a long held appoggiatura in bar 5 and a chromatically altered diminished 7th in bar 8, marked *sf*.

Nocturnes Op. 72 No. 1
Chopin

Extract 1: bars 1-5

Again, this is an example of a characteristic flowing arpeggio bass with a long lyrical melodic line. It is selected here to show the different

elaborations on the melody, as the piece progresses.

Extract 2: bars 31-34

A more elaborately decorated version, with trills, mordents, ornamental passagework and grace notes. Chopin subtly urges the music forward by crossing the rapid ornamental

passages from the end of one bar to the beginning of the next. The bass harmonic scheme remains the same.

Extract 3: bars 39–42

The melody is now played in octaves, with some gentle but highly characteristic changes in the melody line. This is worth noting carefully as an example of Chopin's individual style.

Bercesse in D \flat Op. 57
Chopin

Over a harmonically and melodically static, repetitive bass, Chopin presents highly ornamental, arabesque-like passages in an improvisatory style, suffused with exquisite deli-

cacy. Many of Chopin's most intimate ornamental characteristics are present in the bercesse.

Nocturnes Op. 9 No. 2
Chopin

Here the more complex broken-chord bass shows a typical fast harmonic rhythm modula-

tion – not a true modulation – as it starts in the home key and returns to it.

Fantasia Impromptu Op. 66
Chopin

This extract shows Chopin's frequent interplay of cross-rhythms. Note the contrapuntally constructed lines, with the melody within, both in the lower and upper figurations of the passage. The bass arpeggio passages maintain the harmonic framework, but are also an intrinsic part of the *tempo rubato* required to effectively per-

form the piece. The middle section of this *Fantasia* contains one of Chopin's most well-known and popular melodies. It was set to the words 'I'm always chasing rainbows' in the early part of the twentieth century, transforming it into a popular song.

Preludes Op. 28 No. 1 in C major
Chopin

Agitato

Preludes Op. 28 No. 19 in E \flat major
Chopin

Vivace

These are two examples of Chopin's contrapuntal techniques.

Nocturne Op. 27 No. 1
Chopin

Più mosso
ten.

p

30 *ten.*

35 *ten.*

poco a poco *cresc.*

f

P

40

sempre più stretto ed

cresc.

fz *P*

passionato

45

ff

P

sostenuto

50

riten.

dim.

Many of Chopin's nocturnes are in simple ternary form, with a contrasting middle section. This extract shows Chopin's fondness for introducing very contrasting, dramatic middle sections in his nocturnes. This middle section shows real passionate power. Marked *più mosso*, the section builds up quickly to a pas-

sionate climax, which first peaks at bar 45 with a diminished 7th on A#. This is followed by an enharmonic modulation from C# minor to Ab major, another dramatic moment which dies down only to build up again and introduce a new melody, before the reintroduction later of the first section.

Mazurka Op. 6 No. 1 in F# minor
Chopin

Chopin's mazurkas show great variety in mood and contain some of the most interesting melodic and harmonic ideas of any of his compositions. Within the constraints of the dance form, Chopin used Polish folk origins not as mere arrangements of popular tunes but as infusions of fragments of melody and hints of national rhythms into his own sophisticated style. The mazurkas show his marvellous con-

trapuntal skills, explorations of new harmonies, masterful exploitation of the emotional effect of obsessive rhythm repetition, and of course, *tempo rubato*. One of the most common rhythmic traits in the mazurka is that of strong accents unsystematically placed on the second or third beats, a rhythmic aspect inherent in his folk-like tunes, illustrated below:

The opening section of this mazurka also displays Chopin's characteristic combination of folk rhythms with melodic motifs in sophisticated counterpoint; the common eight-bar phrases which characterise much of Chopin's music and

the beautiful effect of the change from F natural to F# in bars 13–15, combined with the variation in the melody line from the previous rhythmic repetition.

Schumann

Schumann had a highly individual musical style and was a true Romantic composer. His published compositions from Op. 1 to Op. 23 were all written for piano. Many of his character pieces are linked to literature. He used more descriptive titles and extra-musical connections than any other composer, apart from Liszt. His piano works contributed greatly to the change in public taste from sonata to character piece. The piano cycles, which are sets of loosely organised cycles of character pieces, built on

forms of variation techniques, show Schumann at his most Romantic. The pieces include variations on the name of one of his lady friends, Abegg (the musical notes A-B-E-G-G), the character pieces *Davidsbündlertanze* (Dances of the League of David), *Carnaval* (pieces with literary or other allusive meanings, including one on the notes A-S-C-H after the place another girl friend came from), *Phantasiestücke* (a collection of poetic pieces around the character of a mad Kapellmeister) and *Kinderszenen* ('Scenes From Childhood'). Key features of his piano style are highlighted in the extracts below:

Carnaval Op. 9 Prélude No. 1
Schumann

This shows his powerful dotted-note march-like passages with full chordal weight in both hands.

Carnaval Op. 9 Marche des Davidbündler contre les Philistins
Schumann

This extract features characteristic triple metre chordal passages which incorporate the melody, alternating parts of the chord in 3rds with a leaping waltz-like octave bass.

Album for the Young: A Stranger
Schumann

Stark und kräftig zu spielen

Featuring Schumann's octave, chordal style in both hands, with characteristic ascending motion, contrary motion and dotted rhythmic patterns.

Faschingsschwank Op. 26, Allegro
Schumann

Allegro molto
Schr lebhaft

In the opening of a piece, or new section, Schumann often writes full chords, with arpeggio to passages and rising full chords in short phrases.

Faschingsschwank Op. 26, Intermezzo
Schumann

Con molto energia

This is an example of Schumann's characteristic sweeping arpeggio lines with the melody an integral part of the figurations.

Kinderszenen Op. 15, Traumerei
Schumann

Beautiful melodies, often song-like in conception, which derive from the simple, symmetrical shapes of the German folk-song are a key feature of Schumann's style.

As can be seen in this example, Schumann used chromatic harmonies for expressive reasons within a diatonic harmonic framework. Schumann's music reveals much use of first inversions, secondary dominants, dominant and

diminished 7ths and 9ths and altered chords with added 7ths. Secondary 7ths can be often found in sequence in circle of 5ths and in wide-ranging modulations, all held within a tonal structure.

**Romance in F# minor
Schumann**

This is an example of an inner melody in arpeggio accompaniment.

**Album for the Young: Sheherazade
Schumann**

Look for the continuous rolling quavers in the middle of the texture.

**Faschingswank Op. 26, Finale
Schumann**

This extract features spiky fragmented semi-quaver passages punctuated by sudden *sf* chords emphasising phrase beginnings and

endings. Note the frequency of the parallel intervallic rising and falling in 3rds and 6ths.

Grieg

Although Grieg's piano music shows the influence of both the Romantic piano writing of Schumann and the delicate ornamentation of Chopin, the overriding influence on his music is that of Norwegian folk-song and dances. Grieg was essentially a lyrical composer and his music encompasses a wide range of emotional expression and atmospheric colour.

The composer's Norwegian heritage is reflected both in his melodies with characteristic folk-like ornamentation and in his innovatory use of almost impressionistic harmony and piano sonorities, particularly those melodies and harmonies based on modal elements such as the Lydian raised 4th. Much of his piano music includes drone basses reminiscent of old Norwegian stringed instruments. Another common characteristic of his music is his liking for combining 2/4 and 6/8 rhythms. Grieg's miniatures are commonly in ternary or five-part form.

**Norwegian Bridal Procession Op. 19 No. 2
Grieg**

Of all his miniatures for piano, Grieg's ten books of *Lyric Pieces* represent his finest works in the art. They are his most important works for piano, holding a wealth of characteristic mood-sketches. In this extract from his *Lyric Pieces*,

note the drone effect of the bare 5ths in the bass in the introduction, the ornamental folk-like melody and the wide leaps in the bass accompaniment.

**Butterfly Op. 43 No. 1
Grieg**

This extract is an example of Grieg's characteristic wide arpeggio lines, subtle sonorities and harmonies, embraced in a lovely lyrical line. The harmonies include altered chords, and non-harmony tones; altered major and minor

3rds, which are suffused with chromaticisms. It is a beautiful mood picture of a butterfly. The tonality fluctuates from A major to E \flat major, to G major, and finally to F \sharp minor through an array of chromatically altered chords.

Approaches on writing for the piano

When planning a Romantic character piece, or set of pieces, you must first consider effective ways of writing for the piano. If you are a keyboard player, you may find it useful to play parts or all of some pieces, looking particularly at the compositional procedures involved. If you are not a pianist, it would be worthwhile discussing with someone who does play the piano the particular nature and character of piano writing in Romantic short forms.

- Consider carefully what works well within the limitations of ten fingers, particularly when writing characteristic long *legato* melodies over expansive arpeggio figurations.
- Take into account the stretch, or span. Although Liszt, for instance, often writes chords spanning intervals of a 10th, as a guideline it would be best to work within a maximum span of a 9th or better, within an octave. It is more difficult to play a full three- or four-note chord spanning an octave than a series of bare octave passages. Wider chords, the notes of which cannot be played

simultaneously are indicated by a ' ' meaning 'spread the chord'.

- An important factor to take into account is the tempo of the piece. Wide leaps in the bass, running semi-quaver passages, broad arpeggio sweeps – all typical Romantic characteristics that need care when writing to ensure they can be fitted in and actually played at the tempo you choose.
- The pedal is used extensively in Romantic piano music, often functioning as an integral part of a work as it maintains harmonic progressions, sustaining low harmony notes under long arpeggio passages and long *legato* melodies. It also maintains harmonies over wide leaping bass lines.
- Textural contrasts are achieved through varying the spacing of chords – both in individual chords and in chordal phrases; varying the spacing between melodic; inner and bass line part movement; voice leading; registral contrasts; and full use of the expansive tone colours and range that the piano offers.

Further work and listening

Chopin: Listen to *Waltz Op. 70 No. 1* for a characteristic light, graceful, ornamental melody line and a typical waltz bass line. This piece has a contrasting middle section, again common in Chopin's waltzes, many of which were in straightforward ternary form. The melody in the middle section is in 3rds, again a common contrasting feature. The waltzes show the use of spread chords and Chopin's marvellous textural subtleties and contrasts. *Waltzes Op. 69 No. 2, Op. 64 No. 1 and Op. 34 No. 2*, are well worth listening to and studying, as is the famous 'Minute' *Waltz, Op. 64 No. 1*. For a more complex and powerful set of works, try listening to any of the polonaises, but perhaps especially the one in A major. Try comparing John Field's nocturnes with those of Chopin which served as a model for Chopin, but are not of the same quality. Chopin's nocturnes are marvellous miniatures, and again worth studying in detail. If you are considering writing a study or prelude, you may find listening to and studying the *Op. 10 Etudes and Preludes Op. 45 in C# minor* useful.

- **Schubert:** Listen to (and trying playing if you are a keyboard player) *Moments Musicaux D780* and the *Impromptus*. All are short, appealing pieces. They are easy to listen to and display many characteristic Schubert features.

- **Schumann:** Listen to and study

Schumann's piano cycle *Carnaval*. The dominant idea is that of a masked ball where masked characters, portrayed in short character pieces, flit back and forwards. Each is a microcosm of a particular personality characterised in the music. Try working out how Schumann depicts the characters, and how he uses particular musical features. You may like to explore this approach yourself in your compositions. Also well worth studying are Schumann's *Kinderszenen Op. 15*.

Grieg: Listen to the *Watchman's Song Op. 12 No. 3*. Inspired by a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the piece succinctly depicts the watchman's call and the ghostly voices he thinks he hears. Look at the piano writing, in part influenced by that of Schumann but infused with Grieg's individual harmonic style. Try composing for similar circumstances.

Mendelssohn: The composer himself was a virtuoso pianist. Listen to his *Lieder Ohne Worte* (Song Without Words). Some of these pieces have suffered from over-popularity over the years, but there are some lovely character pieces in the collection which are easily equal to the finest Romantic short forms, notably 'Spinning Song' *Op. 67 No. 4*. 'Album Leaf' *Op. 117* reveals particularly well the elfin-like lightness and clarity which characterises much of Mendelssohn's music.