

Web Feature 31.3

Narrative elements in Chopin's Ballade no. 1 in G Minor

Frédéric Chopin's Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Opus 23, was composed sometime in the early 1830s and published in 1836. This is an appropriate composition for considering the question of narrative because the piece is itself named after a literary genre.

Today, we may think of a “ballad” as a slow, romantic song (such as Celine Dion's “My Heart Will Go On” or the so-called power ballads of 1980s hard-rock groups), but originally a ballad was a kind of poem—a folk narrative genre, recounting the mythic or historical adventures of a single character. By the fourteenth century, the French *ballade* had a more constrained form; it usually consisted of four stanzas, the first three of which usually had seven, eight, or ten lines while the fourth stanza had four or five lines. Stanzas usually ended with the same one-line refrain. In the nineteenth century, the *ballade* came to represent longer narrative poems influenced by the spirit of the folk genre. It was a popular poetic form, attracting such writers as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (“The Wreck of the Hesperus”), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (“Rime of the Ancient Mariner”), and John Keats (“La Belle Dame sans Merci”).

So, why did Chopin call this piece (and, ultimately, three other compositions) a “ballade”? It would seem a bit like calling a musical piece a “novel.” Some scholars have asserted that Chopin based his piece on some unnamed literary ballad (no specific literary model was made explicit by the composer). Most of these scholars have pointed to the writings of the Polish nationalist poet Adam Mickiewicz, whose writings Chopin certainly admired, but there is no consensus as to which of Mickiewicz's poems inspired Chopin's work. Nevertheless, Chopin's Ballade shares with its literary namesakes a single story involving a single protagonist, a “mixture of dramatic (concentration on action and events, preoccupation with details), lyric (descriptions of nature and scenery), and epic (references to a legendary past, pre-destined world, and the all-knowing Narrator) elements,”¹ and a tendency toward dramatic changes in events. The listener is free to provide his or her own story line in which different themes may be heard as “characters” and different key areas as “locations.” Before we attempt this, however, let us examine some of the conventions of narrative structure, so that we can better understand how Chopin's Ballade may be heard as a kind of metaphorical narrative.

¹ Dorota Zakrzewska, “Mickiewicz's ‘Ballady’ and Chopin's Ballades.” *Polish Music Journal* 2, 1–2 (1999).

http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/2.1.99/zakrzewska.html.

A plot can be structured in chronological order, it can use flashbacks to jump back to reveal previous events, or it can begin *in media res* (in the middle of things), without an introduction or exposition. Around 350 BCE, Aristotle proposed a three-part “beginning, middle, and end” dramatic structure to describe a story that moves in a linear, cause-and-effect fashion toward the resolution of a conflict or crisis. This simple three-part model was elaborated by the German novelist and critic Gustav Freitag, who proposed a five-part narrative structure in his *Technik des Dramas* (1863). The first stage is the **exposition**, which provides the setting, introduces the major characters with their circumstances and relationships, and sometimes provides early hints of the initial conflict. This is followed by the **rising action** or **complication**, the series of events that introduce conflicts (the dramatic struggle between two forces) into the narrative. The third stage, the **climax**, is the turning point, the moment of greatest tension or uncertainty (in a play, the climax traditionally occurs in the third act). Following the climax is the **falling action**—all of the action following the climax. (In classical tragedy this stage also included the **reversal** or **peripeteia**—the moment when the protagonist’s fortunes changed irrevocably for the worse, followed by **catastrophe**—the culmination of the protagonist’s downfall, providing a moment of emotional catharsis for the audience.) The final stage is the **denouement**, or conclusion, which resolves all of the remaining issues in the narrative and sometimes adds a moral.

Before we explore Chopin’s piece in detail, listen to a recording—ideally with complete score in hand—if you have not already done so. You can download a copy of the score from the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) at:

http://ks.petruccimusiclibrary.org/files/imglnks/usimg/5/54/IMSLP113137-PMLP01646-FChopin_Ballade_No.1__Op.23_BHBand1.pdf

Intro: mm. 1–7 (Lento). A traditional ballad often began with some sort of prologue from the narrator, inviting the audience to pay attention to the story about to be told. In classical epics this was called the *exordium*; in folk ballads it became known as the “come all ye” section, because such sections often began with such an invitation. (Even today we see contemporary versions of this: Bob Dylan’s “Come gather ‘round, people, wherever you roam” at the beginning of “The Times They Are A-Changin,’” and the opening of the theme to the TV series *Gilligan’s Island*—“Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale. . .”.) Chopin’s introduction begins in such a fashion, with a dramatic unfolding of an A♭ major triad, embellished with non-harmonic B♭s (Web Example 31.10,

measures 1–3). Harmonically, then, Chopin begins the piece “in midstream”—the chord functions as a Neapolitan sixth in the piece’s tonic of G minor, and it takes an unusually long time to resolve (there is a weak movement to F \sharp —part of the expected V chord—in measure 3, but not until measure 5 does the line finally come to rest on D). The decrease of dynamics over the line is also unusual, as the arrival of the implied V is unexpectedly anemic after the strength of the opening (there appears to be a kind of dissipation of energy until the dissonance is resolved). The chord in measure 7 is also unusual; on first glance it might appear to be a VI $\frac{4}{2}$, but as the harmonic change in measure 8 shows, the bass note does not resolve as a chord seventh of VI should. Instead, measure 7 functions as a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ chord with an unusual E \flat dissonance in the chord (some early, errant editions actually corrected the E \flat to a D). Lingering on this chord for a full *lento* measure allows for the thorny minor-ninth dissonance between the D and E \flat to resonate; this tension between D and E \flat will surface later in the piece, and the E \flat actually foreshadows Chopin’s choice of key for the second theme when that arrives.

The introduction also presents, in a fragmentary fashion, several melodic ideas that we will encounter later in the piece, shown in brackets in the example. We will not “spoil the story” by showing where these elements occur later in the piece just yet.

The image shows a musical score for Chopin's Ballade No. 1, measures 1-9a. The score is in G minor, 3/4 time, and is marked "Lento." It features a piano with dynamics ranging from forte (*f*) to piano (*p*). The first section is marked "pesante" and "dim." (diminuendo). The second section is marked "Moderato." and "espress." (espressivo). The score includes a trill in the bass and a crescendo leading to a "dolce" (sweet) section. The score is written for piano with treble and bass staves.

Web Example 31.10. Chopin, Ballade No. 1, mm. 1–9a.

A: measures 8-36 (Moderato). The first section is characterized by a waltz-like theme with a distinctive arcing motive at the beginning of each subphrase. Being in the key of G minor, one would expect that at some point a likely destination for a key change would be the relative major key, B \flat major. One of the “narrative” qualities we might find in this section, in fact, is the numerous feints to and away from B \flat major, amounting to so many little twists in the storyline. In measures 13–14, for example, a key change to B \flat major appears to be imminent; no sooner does the key arrive, however, than there is a “pulling back” to G minor. (The chord sequence in measures 15–16, in fact, is a III – ii^{o7} retrogression in G minor—a detail that contributes to the effect of “pulling back,” rather than “moving forward.”) Another moment of apparent arrival into the relative major, heralded by the mild episodic markers of a trill in the bass and a crescendo, happens at measures 25–26; we might most likely interpret the second-inversion B \flat major triad in measure 26 as a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ chord. The expected V does not follow, however; instead, we are brought back to G minor in the following two measures. Following a beautiful

deceptive cadence in measures 31–32, there is an abrupt return to B♭ major accompanied by a dramatic ornamental flourish in measures 33–34; once again, however, we return just as quickly to G minor.

Transition 1: measures 36–67. After the perfect authentic cadence in measures 35–36, the texture intensifies with a pattern of flowing eighth notes, signaling the beginning of the first transition. It is at this point that the conflict between D and E♭, first indicated in measures 5 and 7, begins to receive greater attention; notice for example the “sigh”-like figurations in measures 36 and 37 and the elaborated version of this dissonance in the melodic figuration at measure 39. The phrase of measures 36–39 is repeated with octave reinforcements and louder dynamics in measures 40–43. From measure 44 to measure 57 there is a series of cadential flourishes, occupying a wide range of the keyboard; notice in the arc-like accompaniment patterns in the left hand of measures 48–51 that the E♭ – D motive continues to be emphasized.

Beginning at measure 58 we start to move away from the V – I emphasis of the preceding bars, and here it is interesting to notice the enharmonic “double duty” of the bass line in measures 59 and 62. The first time, the bass note is spelled as an F♯ reflecting its status as a lower neighbor tone; the second time, the note is spelled as G♭, functioning as a chromatic passing tone on its way to F in measure 63. The pause in the harmonic rhythm in measures 64–67, accompanied by a *ritenuto* and decrease in dynamics, suggests arrival at a new destination; after the turbulent struggle of the transition, our “ballad” protagonist seems to have arrived at a place of rest, perhaps a clearing in the forest. The open perfect fourths and fifths of measures 65–67 also create a sense of expectation. Harmonically, the progression of measures 63–67 suggests a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ chord going to a V chord in the key of B♭ major. Have we at last reached the relative major, the expected secondary key area?

B1: measures 68–82a (Meno mosso). As if our protagonist has taken stock of the surroundings and noticed that this is actually quite a different place, the A♭ in the arpeggio at measure 68 pivots the progression into E♭ major, still a closely related key (the submediant of G minor) but not what we had been led to expect. The arrival on E♭ appears to resolve, at least for the moment, the conflict between E♭ and D that had characterized the transition. With this new key comes the second theme, which is actually made up of two different ideas. The first idea (which we shall call B1) is languid and lyrical, with a rather lazy, drifting arpeggio accompaniment. This theme is also harmonically richer than the earlier G minor theme (Theme A), its descending third

motive allowing for rich ninth and thirteenth chords (e.g., see measures 68b–71). It is also more goal-directed than Theme A; instead of the feints and thwarted expectations of the first theme, whole stretches of this second theme are set to a circle-of-fifths progression. For example, Web Example 31.11 shows the progression of measures 72–77 in a textural reduction; comparing this reduction with the score, however, notice that in every other chord in the progression Chopin delays revealing the root to the last minute so that the roots are metrically weak.

F^{min}7 B^b7 E^bma^j7 A^bma^j7 D^m7^b5 G7 C^{min} F7 B^b7 E^b

Eb: ii⁷ V⁷ I⁷ IV⁷ ii⁷ V⁷ vi V⁷/V V⁷ I

c: VI⁷ i

Web Example 31.11. Chopin, Ballade No. 1, mm. 72–77, textural reduction.

B2: measures 82b–90a. The second thematic idea within this section, which we will call Theme B2, begins at measure 82, lasting until measure 90. It can be distinguished by the presence of a new rhythmic element—sextuplet eighth notes—in the accompaniment. This theme also shares with Theme A an arcing motive at the beginning of its subphrases; it also has a two-tier sentence structure, shown by the brackets in Web Example 31.12. Harmonically this section is notable for its extended tonic pedal tone. The overall mood of this theme is stable, with a slight increase in energy compared to measures 68–82a due to the increased rhythmic density.

Web Example 31.12. Chopin, Ballade No. 1, mm. 82b–86a, melodic line only.

Transition 2: measures 90b–94. It is at this point that the “rising action” part of the narrative paradigm begins in earnest. Using a version of the arcing-sextuplet motive from Theme B2, Chopin shifts upward by thirds in a progression of E \flat major, G minor (iii of E \flat), B \flat major (V of E \flat or I of B \flat), and D minor (iii of B \flat). The D minor chord at measure 93 acts as a pivot chord to the next key, A minor; it is also a iv of A minor. Measures 93–94, then, present a half cadence in A minor, setting up the new key and a reflective return of the A theme. By the end of this transition we are in a mysterious place indeed, in terms of our narrative.

A': measures 94–106 (a tempo [*meno mosso*]). The key of this section is A minor, which is not only our first distant key in the piece so far but also as far away from the previous key of E \flat major as possible (a tritone away and also in a different mode).

Although this is a return of Theme A, the bass line appears to be “stuck” on a dominant pedal, which gives the theme a less stable, hesitant quality. By measure 100, the theme has strayed into different endings for the arcing head motive, and the harmony appears to be stuck on an A minor cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ chord. We would expect this to be followed by a V, of course, but it does not come; instead, in measures 102–105 the i_4^6 in the left hand is joined by a vii_3^{04}/V in the right hand, a passage of considerable obstinacy and tension. Both of these harmonies point to a V resolution, which at last comes in measure 106; the arrival of the V seemingly releases a logjam of pent-up energy in the next section.

B1': measures 106–137. A change of mode brings us to A major, still a distant key from our original tonic. In fact, in terms of differences in the key signature, this is the point in the piece when we are farthest away from the tonic (a difference of five accidentals—subtracting two flats plus adding three sharps). In terms of the narrative, this appears to be the culmination of the rising action, the moment of greatest determination and resolve—even celebration—for the metaphorical protagonist of our story. The goal-directed circle-of-fifths harmonic progressions are made much more emphatic here. Instead of the meandering lines that barely touch on chord roots in measures 72–76, here the chord roots are boldly placed in octaves on the strongest beats in a waltz-like pattern (Web Example 31.13). As Web Example 31.13 also shows, Theme B1 appears in an

elaborated form here, with ornamental turn figures inserted into the line (measures 110–111). As it turns out, this very figure was foreshadowed back in the introduction; see measures 3–4 of Web Example 31.10.

107

ff

A: I V⁷/V V

110

v 3 3 4

vi⁷ ii⁷ V⁷ I⁷ ii⁶ V⁷/vi

113

v

vi⁷ V⁷/V V⁷ I

Web Example 31.13. Chopin, Ballade no. 1, mm. 107–115.

A brief restatement of part of Theme B1 (measures 115–117) leads to an extension that builds to the climax at measure 124, the apex of our narrative pyramid. In A major this E[#]7 chord would be a vii^{o7}/vi; by the end of measure 125 three pitches in the

arpeggio have been enharmonically respelled ($E\sharp$, $G\sharp$, and B have become F , $A\flat$, and $C\flat$), so by enharmonic modulation the chord has become a ii^{o7} of $E\flat$ major. As expected, the ii^{o7} progresses to V ; in fact, an elaborated V^{b9} chord is prolonged through measure 134, finally resolving to the tonic in measure 138.

Transition 3: measures 138–166a. Texturally, this transition recalls Transition 1. Harmonically it is somewhat less stable, although the section begins and ends in $E\flat$ major. Measures 138–145 recall the waltz-like accompaniment and two-note motives of measures 36–43. A rising harmonic sequence in measures 146–149 is followed by a more elaborate harmonic sequence in measures 150–153 that threatens to “spiral out of control” into the quite unrelated key of $F\sharp$ minor (Web Example 31.14 shows a textural reduction of measures 150–153).

$E\flat$: I $vii^{o4}_3 I^6$ F : $vii^{o4}_3 I^6$ G : $vii^{o4}_3 I^6$ A : $vii^{o4}_3 I^6$ B : $vii^{o4}_3 I^6$ | $f\sharp$: IV^6 Ger^{+6} i^6_4

Web Example 31.14. Chopin Ballade no. 1, mm. 150–154a, textural reduction.

In measures 154–158, we are quickly treated to a progression very much like an Omnibus progression, as the voice leading resolves outward chromatically to eventually come to rest on a second-inversion $E\flat$ major chord (a textural reduction is shown in Web Example 31.15); the expected V chord finally arrives at measure 166, with the return of Theme B1 in still a different setting.

The image shows a musical score for Chopin's Ballade no. 1, measures 154-158, in E-flat major. The score is a textural reduction, showing the treble and bass staves with various chords and accidentals. The chords are labeled as follows:

- Measure 154: $f\#:$ i_4^6
- Measure 155: $Eb:$ vii_5^0 (enh.)
- Measure 156: Ger^{+6}
- Measure 157: I_4^6

Web Example 31.15. Chopin, Ballade no. 1, mm. 154–158, textural reduction.

B1'': measures 166b–180a. Still in E-flat major, Theme B1 returns with an extended sequence of turn figures inserted into the melody (measures 169b–174a). The accompaniment this time evokes the rolling sextuplet eighths of the first appearance of Theme B2 (measures 82–90). As if following an inevitable course in the “falling action” sequence of our narrative, Theme B2 follows.

B2': measures 180b–188a. This appearance of Theme B2 is much like the first, except dynamically. With the expression marking *con forza* (with force), it is considerably more assertive. This assertiveness, however, will be shown in the context of what follows to be misplaced hubris.

Transition 4: measures 188b–194. This transition resembles Transition 2 (measures 90b–94), but this time the ascending-third chord sequence happens only once, from Eb major to G minor. Although, of course, this is all that is needed to return to the tonic as the end of the piece draws near, the narrative effect of this transition is that the protagonist cannot summon the energy to ascend farther. The net result of the effort is a counterproductive spinning gesture (measures 190b–193a) that leads us to the final appearance of Theme A.

A'': measures 194–208. The return of Theme A is not a true return to the theme as we first heard it; instead, it is a return to the more introspective, hesitant version of Theme A that we encountered in its A minor appearance (measures 94–106). The dominant pedal in this section means that we also see a return of the D/ Eb tension (measure 196). Perhaps

the protagonist is building up fortitude for one last assault upon the opposing forces; measures 201–205 suggest that, as before, we will be treated to one last triumphant return of Theme B1 in the parallel major key (G major). That would certainly suggest that the protagonist has at last emerged victorious. Instead, the climactic minor cadential $\frac{6}{4} - V$ of measures 206–207, coupled with the pathos-laden chromatic descent in measure 207, suggests the hero has at last succumbed in defeat.

Coda: measures 208–264 (Presto con fuoco). Given the connotations of the last section—and especially the cadence that concluded it—the coda takes on the quality of a panic-stricken flight for one’s life. Resolutely in G minor, the cadential repetitions are occasionally interrupted by the striking appearances of Neapolitan sixth chords (measures 216, 218, 224, and 226)—the harmony foreshadowed by the very opening of the piece (measures 1–3a). Other details in the coda also bring back motives heard earlier in the piece: The left-hand motive at measures 243–245 recalls the “obstinate” passage of measures 103–105, and the first five notes of measure 246—the pinnacle of the long, nimble descent down to measure 250—bring back the melodic turn in measure 5 of the introduction (an elaboration of the $E\flat - D$ motive).

From measure 250 to the end, we have reached the denouement. The hero is doomed, despite fitful surges to recapture past glory (the ascending flourishes in measures 251 and 255). Catastrophe occurs with the sudden, dagger-like strike of $B\flat$ and $E\flat$ octaves, *fortississimo* (measure 258), converging inward to a final G.

The overall form of this ballade is interesting. Thematically, the piece may be regarded as a kind of free adaptation of the sonata principle: there are two main themes, and the two keys in which each theme makes its first appearance are structurally significant to the work. However, there is no development section as such; instead, themes are revisited in different-styled settings, as the key areas wander farther away from the closely related keys of the tonic. Only at the very end of the piece do we find the tension between the two themes and the divergent key areas is resolved. Harmonically, a different form emerges; Chopin’s choice of key areas fits neatly into a symmetrical arch form (G minor, $E\flat$ major, A major, $E\flat$ major, G minor).

Although we cannot map a specific story line or epic poetic narrative to Chopin’s piece, there is no question that it shares certain rhetorical features with the narrative of classical tragedy as it was understood in the nineteenth century. Chopin’s “Ballade” is a story with no characters, for which listeners may provide their own situations.

Before we leave our discussion of this piece, it is fitting to consider here how the ballade was used in the 2002 film *The Pianist*. In the film's climactic scene, based on a true story, Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Polish concert pianist who has spent months evading capture by the Nazis and living by his wits in rubble-strewn Warsaw, has just been discovered by a German soldier. Upon learning of his profession, the soldier asks Szpilman to play something, and the pianist haltingly begins Chopin's G minor Ballade. Although the film's soundtrack recording contains a complete performance of the piece, it is interesting to see how director Roman Polanski edited the piece for the film. Szpilman plays all of the A section, and the first transition through measure 39. Measures 40–43 are omitted (probably because the repetition was seen as redundant), and then we hear measures 44–48 from Transition 1. At this point, the filmed performance jumps abruptly to the coda (measures 208–264). In other words, there is no appearance of the lyrical B section, no moments of haunting introspection in A minor, no triumphantly heroic waltz passage in A major. Almost all that is left—in the filmed performance—is the agitation and turbulence, entirely in G minor. The connotations of what is left perfectly support the uncertainty and anxiety of the moment when the pianist's hiding place has been found. (Of course, it is also possible that the performance was so severely edited due to the limited attention span of a movie audience!)