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**The Conflict Between
Classical Form
and Romantic Content
(reflected by piano music of Chopin,
Schumann, Brahms and Liszt)**

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A “conflict” – Who is going to win the whole game? Is there anybody who is going to win or will they continue struggling for ever?

Whenever we talk about “conflict” in linguistic terms there are two main ways to solve the problem: between both dialects fighting against one another (at the same area of time and place) one may “conquer” the whole space and then the other will certainly disappear; the second possibility says that they might reach a kind of constant quiet condition of both dialects being together (“symbiosis”), one as “Upper language” and the other as “Lower language”.

Anyhow, the two may still exist together and the conflict is slowed down into a very quiet stable one (but still exists!).

Content and Form – These two elements were always considered somehow together, and not only in the art of music. There is some eternal conflict between the two; the whole question of relations between Content and Form was, is, and will remain of a certain special quality.

There are already a few problems arising from the Fugue form of the Baroque. It is an “open form”, in other words the form is not built as a real complete structure. Every piece of Fugue could start or finish somewhere else than it rather does – it all depends on the composer's free decision. The essential point about Fugue is that it is first of all a technique of composing and the Harmonic Cadences (which more or less make the form) stand always in struggle with the demands of this special technique (which builds the texture and toughens the content). So it happens that there always occurs the “Fugire La Cadenca” that turns the piece into one entire nonstop movement. Then it sounds as if this abovementioned struggle never stops throughout the entire piece.

The Classical period is considered as the only one that has reached some completeness in relations between Content and Form. Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, the “classical Classicists” are signified for their desire to achieve completeness and balance of form and content (= kinds of motives, subjects and techniques of treating and developing them).

They succeeded in achieving this aim by formulating the “Sonata Allegro” controlled form. But still, there are lots of different cases in which certain events force changes in the balanced shape. Sometimes the mood of a subject turns a certain section to be longer or shorter; there are also various irregular key-relations, etc.

Classical composers try yet to re-balance all the elements in such cases of disproportion, so that the admired form will still be kept and won't be lost.

It is very easy, therefore, to realize that this situation didn't last too long. The same happened with Classical Greek culture as a whole. These classical periods are very rare and short. The “products” of such highlight times stand for ever as ideal examples or models for creation.

By reaching “Romanticism” it is worthwhile, in my opinion, to define that very special term, first of all from the lexical point. The French (“roman”) and the Medieval Latin (“romanicus”) routes

of the word are related to some sort of a big epic piece of literature. Secular epic songs of this kind were already written in the national-popular languages spoken by the “Roman” people. “Roman” content of those days used to describe features of the human beings and their mental life, especially people's troubles of love.

These sources seem to have remained the principal ones in shaping the basic content of Romanticism. If the classical attitude was seeking purity of form above all, the romantic one was concerned with expressing emotions first of all.

This very attitude was kept, even further on, in Impressionism as one of the dominating ideas, as we may read in one of Debussy's literary works: “... Lastly remember the word “Impression”, for I insist on keeping my emotion free from all parasitic aesthetics...”

Still, music of the Romantic era was written in various titles of forms. Let's look at some of these, the most typical ones¹:

“Fantasy” which means free flight of form, style, etc.;

“Impromptu” is meant to describe casual origin in the composer's mind, with big tendency towards elements of improvisation.

“Nocturne” – refers to a somewhat melancholy or languid style or mood, with an expressive melody.

“Capriccio” – as the name suggests, this is the least restrained of all others, of a humorous or capricious character.

There are a few more, as Serenade, Lied, Intermezzo, etc.

All these titles, as we might consider, point to “character” pieces. As to the names themselves they can hardly suggest any vague idea of some conventional form. On the contrary, they point at a very free approach in this subject.

Still, there are Sonatas, Concertos, Quartets, Symphonies that belong to the Romantic era. It will be rather interesting, though, to test what is the content “hiding” beyond all these titles of formed or non-formed pieces. Does the Capriccio or fantasy resemble an entirely free piece of music, or could there be at least a few remarkable points of some division or cuts within the piece? How does the Sonata form “behave” as a frame in the period of Romantic basic movements?

In the Romantic era there were two fundamental impulses influencing human's mind; there was on the one hand the “longing for the unattainable” form and on the other hand “love of traditional standards”. These two altogether had tremendous influence on the creation of those days. That condition surely led to an obvious conflict. This conflict was so basic, that it might not have “paid any attention” to titles hanging over the head of Romantic pieces. We have now to look deeply into the music itself to establish any statement at a more concrete-detailed stage.

1 Checked in the Harvard Dictionary of Music

Chopin, Preludium No. 15 in D^b

The main thing about Bach's preludes was that they used to introduce the basic elements of the thematic material. In comparison with Baroque's Preludes, here we have a much more organized form. The whole form is of A(D^b) B(C[#]m) A(D^b).

The most Classical-traditional point in the whole case is the full-symmetric first phrase (it could be compared in this aspect to any of Mozart's phrases). It is built of 4 (opening) + 4 (closing) bars, sentences related to each other by the element of question and answer.

Schumann, the First (Spring) Symphony, First Movement

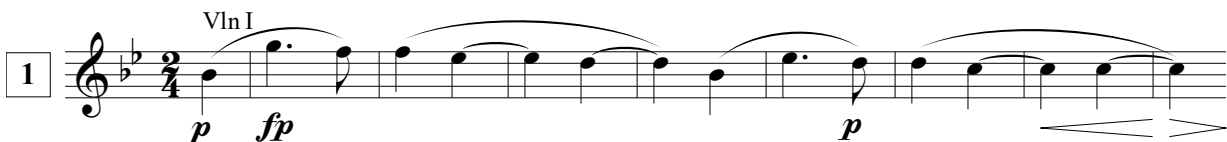
Here the Classical form of the First Movement is kept.

In the Introduction Horns and Trumpets give the dominating rhythmic motive of the movement.

The Development is again turned in the classical usual tricks. It is built almost on the dominating rhythm. The First Subject appears in A major and is repeated in its whole length. The Development is taken up again (b.202) driven to a climax which is reached on b.302, all the brass blazing forth the opening motive, till the strings “storm” to the summit.

In the Recap., the quotation of the first subject (interwoven into the Development) continues.

The Coda is a Stretta built on the dominating rhythm and introducing quite a new theme:



In fact, this rhythm is so prominent all the way through the movement, that Schumann introduces a new smoothly flowing hymn – like passage for the sake of contrast in the Coda. The same “call to awaken” generates the main theme of the slow movement; by transforming what appears to be an extravagant last minute – appearance of a new theme at the end of the slow movement:



This last way of analysis emphasizes the strong contact between the Romantic views which create the mood and its reflection in the music within the Classical form. One of the main elements supporting this survival of both Classical form and Romantic content (Romantic in its most original expression of nature, etc.) is the element of orchestration.

Schumann, Piano Concerto, First Movement

The first movement is built altogether on the first theme, thus every new idea is based on the first main one. The main theme is a very expressive singing one, a kind of phrase with a high-point.

Several developments of this main idea are introduced in illustrations [3] [4] [5].

Schumann, Piano Concerto, 1st Movement

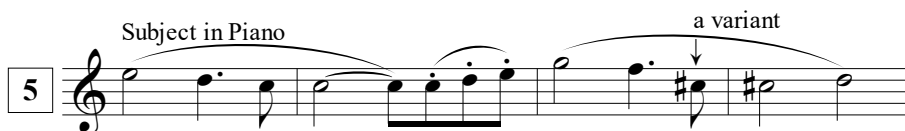
3 Subject in Clarinet



4 Another time - in Clarinet



5 Subject in Piano



↗ a further variant.
Pay attention to rhythms
and meter!

All along this movement we can feel the conflict between the lyric lines of the motives and the strict frame. It is still very strange to listen to a long Sonata Allegro First Movement with only one main idea “squeezed” all over. Perhaps that's the way to see some compromise as a solution of the conflict. A real authentic Romantic subject is always built as one long line and not as a periodical phrase (which can easily be broken to pieces and is followed by the contrasting idea immediately), or a set of phrases, and it does not fit the usage of Classical techniques for development.

By the way, the “Concerto” is not considered as having a typical Classical form. It stays “on the line” between Classical and Romantic areas. It developed from Mozart especially, and reached its climax in Romanticism; then it was intended especially to show the performer's virtuosity.

Yet, we've got here the ABA Classical form!

The following pieces are of the little Romantic forms already mentioned.

Brahms, Capriccio Op.116 No. 3 in Gm

The form is ABA, very strict. The First Movement is repeated exactly in the third part (put down in the score as “Tempo I”).

In between them there lies the second movement E \flat – Cm (not very strongly introduced) – E \flat .

It is again interesting to see the most lyrical First Movement with such a rich texture, and on the other hand the “frozen” form ABA limiting it.

First Movement
Allegro passionato

6

Second Movement
Un poco meno allegro

E \flat (key) → Cm (key)

Brahms, Capriccio Op.76 No. 2 in Bm

This is also a piece (as the later one) included in Brahms's fantasia opuses. Again the big form is ABA, but A in the Recap. appears in quite an extreme variant. Illustration [7] explains everything: First Movement contains two main ideas: the first is light, humorous, even cheerful, we may say, and the Second Movement introduces a much more lyric idea – idea C (illustration [8]).

Alleretto non troppo

A idea

7

Bm (key)

B idea

D (key)

C idea

8

p

And. * *And.* *

So there are three ideas. This is a little more developed ABA form, compared to Op.116 No. 3, but it is still a Sonata form!

A (A idea, B idea) **B** (C idea) **A**

I'd like to show here the Harmonic scheme of the first idea in the First Movement, which shows really the richness of Harmonic content (developed tonal row) – full of chromaticism (illustration [9]); that is very typical to the Romantic era. There are many chromatic shifts and changes of minor-major (see b.7-8 D^b leading to the F[#] chord!).

9

Bars → 1 2 3 4

Chopin, Waltz in C#m Op.64 No. 2

There are three ideas, and this is a sectional form

A B A
A B C B A B

Actually he puts a few waltzes one to another and repeats the sections exactly. It is one of the most popular waltzes Chopin wrote.

The exact repetitions turn this “dancy” piece into such a popular one, and we recognize the separate sections without taking notice of the big form.

The key-relations are not so usual: C# and D^b serve as the centers, changes of minor and major occur on the same tonic. The whole piece is still written in a very Romantic mood in spite of the very “clean” definition of traditional form.

It is quite interesting to look at Chopin's Nocturne Op.15 No. 2 (in F#) which is also built on three movements. The whole structure is very similar to that of the Classical Sonata Form – proof may be seen by comparing b.15-16 to b.55-56. There is the Classical change in the cadence, where at the Recap. Chopin wants still to develop a certain idea before completing the piece. The first theme of F# repeats again in C# which means on the Dominant; this procession is very famous of the Exposition in the Classical Sonata.

The Second Movement represents an entirely different aspect of texture. So far it is a Nocturne piece, tending to create the Romantic typical “storm of emotions”, and still is combined with the traditional form, even by sub-separations or technical strategies of development.

We shouldn't forget that in Liszt's Mephisto Waltz there is an inner conflict between the three moods, and this “sharp” conflict is dominated again by the ABA traditional form. There we may really see the conflict between content and form very obviously.

I have tried to discuss and evaluate this evidence of conflict by examining each composer from that very aspect. Actually, I've already mentioned Chopin, Schumann, Brahms and Liszt, but still the whole discussion is directed by looking at the various forms of Romanticism. Most of these forms are small, and therefore comfortable to analyze. As we may suppose, it is quite easy to define a form or learn it by examining little mediums². In this special case this sort of search provides quite a true picture or view of the world of Form typical to the Romantic era.

As a principle, according to my essential own concept, I'd never let the element of form “win” that of content. In other words, it is difficult to discuss such a deep question through the criteria of form as the only one. I always refer to content as the most real and “solid” component (also of life as a whole), which is most related to the specific style of each composer.

² By the way, that's the reason for dealing with small forms at the beginning of any “Forms” course in music. Many lecturers act like that.

The device of “Classical form and Romantic content” leads me to the second part of my discussion. I'm going to deal with the subject by concentrating on the classical Sonata form, showing it through the four composers.

The content of the Romantic era is of such wide range of aspects and motives, that the easiest point we can hang onto is the Sonata form. Through the Sonata we will be able to look further into the music written by these composers (typically featured) trying to see to what extent this conflict exists in their piano sonatas.

Although they all strongly represent Romanticism, they are still highly signified by their personal stylistic qualities.

When we start becoming familiar with the music of each of them, we could easily be lost by the changes differentiating them. This subjective-personal aspect “disturbs”, for sure, the purity of “abstract” discussion; however, we shouldn't forget that there were some other very important traditional forms used by the Romantic composers like the Symphony (especially Schumann), Concerto or Variations (Brahms's variations on Paganini's subject). Schumann and Brahms, for example, much more than Chopin and Liszt, were interested in composing Orchestral music. On the other hand, Chopin and Schumann are united by the element of the singing line. Both were very fond of expressing their emotions by this means as a central concept, and it is introduced very strongly in their way of composing.

Chopin, Sonata Op.35 in B \flat m

Chopin is considered the prophet of his own nation, as a composer who most succeeds in touching the listener's heart; a Chopin recital is still crowded, no matter who is the performer.

We may then believe that he wrote his Sonatas in the way he realized best suited him. As a composer whose gifts lay in the direction of long lyrical periods rather than the closely reasoned development of short pregnant themes, it will be answered that such a composer had better leave the Sonata form alone, to which the Chopin's retort was “if you think that a Sonata cannot exist except in the form fixed for all eternity by certain older masters, you are lost”.

Chopin was stimulated by the framework of a Sonata, still believing in expressing his emotions. The Sonata op.35 is considered as being “full of consciousness” and as one of the very single places in which he used Classical form. Its first movement is really overloaded with thematic material (the themes could almost serve as songs etc.). The superb flow of melody in the lyrical passages does not compensate for the feeling of strain, elsewhere, even though we admit the composer's right to adopt the Sonata form to suit his purposes.

The structure of the Sonata-Allegro is very clear, although the MT is missing in the Recap., and instead of it there is the ST transposed into B \flat (in the Exp. in D \flat). We get here – to the end of the movement – B \flat key (which is built on the same central tone as the whole Sonata).

In the Development he uses the two main ideas mixed together, but the MT plays a more important

part. The MT itself is very strong, stormy or quick, while the ST is more lyrical and singing. The Scherzo movement is also built very obviously on the ABA classical form.

The mood of this Scherzo could fit very little a “dance” piece of Chopin. The C idea (which is the big B) is built again of (a)(b). All the Romantic movements here are very typical to the period and especially to Chopin. They stand really in conflict with the big System of Sonata. The difference in mood between A and B is similar to the one in the First Movement.

The Funeral March is again built on ABA. A is very heavy, full of sadness. B is very lyrical. Again, we have here the extreme changes in mood which are very typical to Romanticism, and as usual point to human feelings, while in Classicism the difference is not related so strongly to emotional aspects and remain within music itself. This obviously shows our point of conflict.

Schumann, Sonata Op.22 in Gm

Schumann's original, noble approach of writing for the piano is very well introduced in his Sonata Op.22.

The First Movement is again built on ABA Sonata Allegro form. Perhaps the struggle of Form and Content is not so extreme here, because of the kind of mood that reminds a lot of Beethoven (in between his Classical and Romantic periods). Still, the Development is not “Beethovenic” at all; it devices the whole melodic lines of the previous subjects.

The MT is repeated in b.16 as a more colorful rich variant. This reminds us of the traditional symmetrical division of Classical subjects. The second syncopated theme is quite short.

Towards the end of the Development section we may recognize the “Auskomponierung” procession, which again strongly fits Classical tendencies. The bridge section is also never missing.

The Harmonic process of Development is introduced below in illustration [10]. This is a very typical row of Romantic quite developed Harmonies spread within this Sonata movement. There are many unusual Harmonic relations: chromatics, enharmonics, etc. This is an element that sometimes hides the tonal basic feeling³. It is a nonstop row of “Weaving Harmonies” turning only in its very end to the Dominant (D), in b.165.

This Harmonic process, except for being an excellent example of Harmonies typical to Romanticism, it tremendously reflects Schumann's specialty in this field.

Harmonic process of the Development in Schumann's Sonata Op.22 (in Gm):

3 This feeling is very typical to the Classic era.

End of Exp.

10

Bars → 93 94 97 98 99 101 102 103 104 109 111

Shortening the process into its basic line

112 119 122 124 125 129

Special relations

130 131 133 134 136 138 → 143 145

regular process

Brahms, Sonata Op.5 in Fm

Brahms is considered a most Classical Romanticist. He also loved the counterpointal techniques and always thought in terms of orchestration. His Sonatas sound quite strange, from both aspects – Classical and Romantic.

I have chosen the Sonata Op.5 in order to show the “capricious” (really according to the expression of this word) nature of the first subject “Allegro Maestoso”. The division is offered in between the notes with detailed explanations. There are a few little motives and they form the skeleton of all the other longer ideas, including rhythmic patterns; see the “jumping” Cadence in b.6.

This capricious mood directs the shape of the first subject which is very strange to the traditional form. This fits the Romantic atmosphere that could lead to such an impulsive section. Even if you try to analyze it in some rational way and succeed in finding the ABA, its unsteady nature destroys the feeling of such a structure.

We may remember that Brahms used to compose small pieces called “Capriccio”, and this reflects some of his basic tendencies. In this case the capricious mood stands in a big conflict with the traditional Sonata form.

Liszt, Sonata in Bm

Liszt's famous Sonata in Bm is the best and most important example of the whole Romantic trend, struggling with the limits of any traditional frame. The form of the First Movement introduced below could bring us to some thought of an entire crisis coming as a result of the well-known conflict.

		MOTIVE
Introduction:	Lento assai	A
"First Movement"	Exposition: allegro energico	
	1 st "theme-group" (B minor)	B, C
	Transition	B, C, then A
	2 nd "theme-group" (D major)	D
	"Closing group" (D major)	C'
	Development	B, C'
"Slow Movement"	Recitativo	D, then C, B
	Andante sostenuto	X
	Quasi adagio	C', D
	Retransition (F-sharp major)	X, C, A
"Finale"	Recapitulation: allegro energico	
	1 st "theme-group" (B-flat minor)	B, C
	Transition (B minor)	B, C; A; B, C
	2 nd "theme-group" (B major)	D
	"Closing group" (B major)	C'
Coda (B major)	Stretto quasi presto	C'
	Presto	A
	Prestissimo	B
	Climax	D
(B major)	Peroration	
	Andante sostenuto	X
	Allegro moderato	C, B
	Lento assai	A

The entire shape of form is a cycle, full of energy, as if Liszt used to take a little breath every few minutes and continue with some new idea which had just popped into his mind, through association with what had already happened somewhere. It could actually never finish in such a cyclic way of development.

To summarize all that has already been discussed I'd rather say that the conflict between Classical Form and Romantic Content created a new quite constant reality or situation of having both elements existing in almost all the pieces written in the era of Romanticism.

We can find, as usual, the ABA form in the wide range, containing various smaller elements (in which there is more freedom as to how the composers treat the issue of form). The title (“Prelude”, “Intermezzo”, “Sonata”) is not important at all – we may find the ABA traditional form behind a title referring to an entire Romantic sort of content dealing with emotional aspects of human being's life), and we may find as well some disorder in the first movement of a Sonata.

Still, the whole “scenery” is not so homogeneous or simple, because of the very large range of forms and ideas this “stage” of Romanticism offers. There are yet some very extraordinary examples which turn the more or less balanced picture to a non-balanced one sometimes.

It seems, especially from the aspect of the line drawn by the Romantic sonatas shown above, that the quiet existence of “Romantic Content” and “Classical Form” was becoming more and more a disturbed one. There was a certain gradual process (resulting from this increasing conflict) that brought this whole building “to its knees”. It grew more and more overloaded and might have reached an extent of collapse.

There is still a very big distance between the coexistence of these two elements (though strongly struggling with each other) and the collapse of Classical form (as we know still exists, even in our own days!).

I've decided not to deal with the dilemma what a Sonata or any traditional form means nowadays – but sometimes it certainly justifies its well-known meaning. This only proves that Form has successfully overcome all “obstacles” and “dangers” – because somehow it still survives.