

Schumann's Novellette, Op. 21, No. 1

From the Heart

For nearly three years leading up to the realization of the *Novelletten, Op. 21*, Schumann endured a topsy-turvy gamut of emotions centered on his attempts at kindling a relationship with Clara Wieck, eventually to become his betrothed, while all throughout taking inspiration from his affections for Clara and implanting them in his music. History has shown that Schumann was quite fond of the opposite sex and accustomed to their musings. Take for example when “the gifted British pianist Anna Robena Laidlaw entered Schumann’s circle during the early summer and, like several young women before her, inspired him to compose.” (Grove)

Certainly this sort of behavior comes with its share of ups and downs, and it is during one of the “ups” that we find Schumann tackling this piano cycle among two other of his most well-known piano collections – *Kinderscenen* op.15 and *Kreisleriana* op.16. A connection between his approach to all three works and his growing fondness and aspirations towards Clara, as well as his desire to seek out new forms that transcend traditional convention, can be seen in some of Schumann’s own letters:

The *Novelletten*, Opus 21, were also composed at a time when Schumann described himself as writing more than ever, straight from the heart; though a year later he told his friend Hirschbach that they were “on the whole light and superficial, excepting one or two places where I got deeper” . . . in writing to Clara (February, 1838) he described the work as comprising “Jests, Egmont stories, scenes with parents, and a wedding,” but no individual titles were given. He adds: “You appear in them in every possible situation . . . and I confidently assert that no one could have composed those *Novelletten* without knowing your eyes, nor without having kissed your lips.” (Bedford, 1925, p.133)

A New Form?

It is not surprising that Schumann took an altered approach to the form employed in the *Novellette No.1*. It is widely known that he was on a creative high due to recent developments with his relationship with Clara. The entire cycle of the *Novelletten* was one of Schumann’s escapes from formality and structural absolutes in music composition:

“To be sure, Schumann delivers more in this, his most ambitious keyboard cycle to date, than the title implies. The work is less a series of ‘diminutive novellas’ than of ‘extended, interconnected adventure stories,’ to quote Schumann himself – a collage of marches, passionate Florestan pieces, elegant waltzes,

rollicking polonaises, and provocative songs without words, many conceived on the grandest scale. In a high-spirited letter to Clara of 11 February 1838, Schumann wrote: "For the past four weeks I've done practically nothing but compose . . . ; I sang along with the stream of ideas that came flowing toward me, and for the most part have achieved success. I'm playing with forms . . ." (Deverio, 1997, p.164)

The form Schumann is "playing with" here is an altered version of the rondo form. Based on surface design alone there are clear demarcations where section breaks occur. The piece is clearly compartmentalized in seven sections with episodes appearing in-between each statement. The statements consistently close on the tonic of the tonal area of each statement. The following chart illustrates how this parses out structurally:

SECTION	MEASURE #s	# of MEASURES	KEY(S)	SURFACE DESIGN
A	1-20	20	F Major, D ^b Major, A Major	Mostly block chords in RH, octaves in LH. Strong, marked, march-like.
B	21-48	28	F Major	Single note melody in RH within triplet-based accompaniment. Softer and more lyrical.
A ¹	49-60	12	F Major	Same as A
C	61-81	21	D ^b Major	Eighth-note quasi-contrapuntal pattern. Legato, more pedal.
A ²	82-85	4	D ^b Major	Same as A
B	86-113	28	A Major	Same as B, transposed.
A ¹	114-125	12	F Major	Same as A
CODA	126-137	12	F Major	Similar to A section.

The opening four measures serves as the connective material between statement and episode. While the A section does not repeat every time in the same precise format or length as the original statement, this four-measure phrase is enough to establish a return, however brief, to the A section. The drastic contrasts in surface design, dynamics, articulation, and performance interpretation also factor in to the resemblance of the rondo form. While there doesn't seem to be much connection in the way of melodic design from one section to the other, there is a substantial underlying connection from the harmonic perspective.

The Harmonic Perspective

Note as illustrated in the chart above that Schumann quickly explores three tonal areas in the first instance of the statement – F major, D^b major, and A major – all of which are related by a major third (D^b major could be enharmonically respelled as C[#] major providing the major third relationship with A major). Thus as the progression of major thirds based on the ^bVI of the preceding key continues full circle, the result of this process carries the tonal center back to F major which is re-established in the first B section. Schumann then quite cleverly continues this progression of major thirds using the recurrences of the A section to confirm the importance of each tonal center. After the return of A¹ in F major, Schumann explores the key of D^b in the C section followed by a very brief statement of the opening four measures in the same key. He then returns to the B section but this time transposed to A major. Then a final return to the statement in F major, thus accelerating the progression in order to prepare for the conclusion of the piece. This concept of mediant relationships eventually reappears in the closing movements of the *Novelletten* and further supports the interconnection between all the movements:

While arranging the *Novelletten* into a "cycle" of "coherent tales", Schumann realized only at a very late stage that the multiple closure of the composite *Novellette* in F#, D, and Bb could be used for such a deeply poetic ending. Indeed, when the *Stimme aus der Ferne* fades away in a drawn-out descent, the work would seem to come to a close, since D major has been the key around which the *Novelletten* revolve. (Hoeckner, 1997, p.130)

When investigating the initial statement more closely, it is clear to see that Schumann makes a point to establish these three tonal areas immediately within the context of the opening 20 measures. Through a series of sequences, tonicizations, and pivot chord modulations, He creates a dynamic statement that sets the tone of the piece as well as the importance of the major third harmonic relationships. This progression is expanded upon throughout the rest of the piece, as explained earlier, and assists in linking the contrasting sections together, within the scope of this altered form, through the use of the harmonic developments. The sequential material, as well as tonicizations, can be seen in mm.5-8 and mm.13-16, while the modulations occur at m.9 to D^b major, m.17 to A major, and m.21 to F major (see RNA for details).

The tonicizations themselves are quite intriguing and at first glance can be challenging to ascertain. The emphatic octave downbeat at m.5 might lead one to believe that Schumann is taking us into the relative minor, or perhaps continuing in F major but delaying gratification through the use of a deceptive cadence to vi. Yet looking one measure ahead we find at the close of this two-measure phrase a secondary dominant functioning chord. This might invoke thoughts that this phrase is in C major, or perhaps *leading* to C major? Neither appears to be the case due to the clever use of these secondary dominant chords in m.6 and m.8. Schumann leads us to what appears to be C major in m.7, but it turns out that this is the dominant of the tonicized tonal area (this is true for m.5 as well). This octave downbeat becomes the pivot chord even though it is absent of any confirming chord tones other than the root! This progression continues into the modulation at m.9 where the B^b-minor chord serves as iv in the preceding tonicization, but acts as the return to vi from the opening statement in the new key. This use of secondary dominant chords throughout this section, as well as transitioning into all other sections, is a primary component to the inner workings of the harmonic texture that underlies this piece.

The Power of Melodic Design

Motivic development and melodic phrasing add another dimension to the analysis of this Novellette. Recognizing the march-like grandeur in the opening statement, it is worth noting Schumann's use of triplets within this context. One might expect the more common dotted-eighth / sixteenth pattern found in many marches, but the triplet pattern adds to the interest throughout the piece as well as the melodic progression. Right off the triplet figure is introduced in the left hand as a way to connect the bass line and provide more forward motion. This is carried throughout the statement by developing somewhat of a call-and-response figure between left and right hands in mm.5-8 and 13-16. On the surface this gives the melody a more contrapuntal flavor and adds motion to the melodic line. But is this really the reason behind these triplet figures?



Schumann devoted serious study to Bach's work during the few years leading up to this composition – "Their often richly imitative textures represent an internalization of Schumann's recent study of Bach's *Das wohltemperirte Clavier*" (Grove) – which may have led to his interest in incorporating contrapuntal devices. Yet not much more than imitation between voices is used in this work (this imitation resurfaces later in the C section as will be discussed later). Rather these triplet figures are providing ornamentation for a convergence of much simpler conjunct melodic motives incorporated in this section, as illustrated below:



The first note in the right hand (D5) begins an inner exchange between voices with only a minor second upper neighbor (D-E^b-D and then C-D^b-C) breaking the steadiness of the opening sonority. Concurrently, two additional motives, one in the upper right hand (C-D-C-B or B-C-B-A) and one in the lower left hand (G-A-A^b-G or F-G-G^b-F), appear as part of this contrapuntal dance between voices. This may in part account for the variety of recorded interpretations, particularly regarding the fluctuation of tempo surrounding these triplet motives. Because they are serving as ornamentations and not a foundational part of the melodic design, it seems that for the most part pianists regard these figures as a way of expelling power ("kräftig") and urging the tempo forward as a way of manifesting that power

within the music. If these triplet figures were vital to the melodic design then perhaps more care would be applied to their performance.

What's in a Phrase?

It must not be overlooked that Schumann's use of phrase structure also contributes to the overarching propulsion and power established in the grand design. In particular, the use of shortened and irregular phrase lengths is utilized in the B and C episodes, possibly to separate these sections that much more from the statement. First, examine the phrase structure of the B sections (the example shown is the first B section, however the second B section uses the same phrasing except in a different key):

The image displays four systems of musical notation, each consisting of a treble and bass staff. The first system is annotated with a solid line for a 'PHRASE' and dashed lines for two 'SUBPHRASE' sections. A bracket labeled 'OR EXPANSION?' spans the end of the first system. The second system also features a 'PHRASE' line and two 'SUBPHRASE' lines. The third system is labeled 'HALF-PHRASE' with a dashed line. The fourth system is annotated with a 'PHRASE' line and two 'SUBPHRASE' lines. The music is in a 2/4 time signature with a key signature of one flat.

Undoubtedly, Schumann deliberately establishes a symmetrical and predictable phrase design with the two four-measure subphrases (indicated by dashed arches) within a larger eight-measure main phrase at the start of this episode. However, by the third phrase, when the first phrase is repeated, the larger main phrase is cut in half, thus accelerating the piece toward the conclusion of this section. This might also lead to question whether the second subphrase found in the first main phrase is actually an expansion. If these four measures were removed then the entire B section would be completely symmetrical.

A similar use of irregular phrasing can be found in the C section, specifically the use of odd-numbered lengths of phrases. See how in the first half of this section the melodic phrasing is presented within the context of two three-measured phrases followed by an extended six-measure phrase:

During the second half of this episode, only one of the three-measure phrases¹ is used before moving on again to the six-measure extended phrase. The question arises again: is the absence of the three-measure phrase in the second half intentional in order to add to the building momentum, or is this phrase an expansion in the first half in order to prolong the arrival of the six-measure phrase? While the

¹ As an aside, it is interesting to note that the melodic design of the first six notes in the opening phrase of the C section outlines the exact tuning of an acoustic guitar (transposed down a half step). Whether this was intentional or not is a mysterious afterthought!

expansion is probable, the use of these phrase structures as fuel for the acceleration throughout the piece is more likely. One additional and clear use of elaboration can be seen in the coda by way off an extension in order to prolong the final cadence. These smaller extensions add to the intensity of the Coda while the Coda as a whole contributes to the closure of the entire work, confirming F major as the key of importance and finality.

The image shows a musical score for Schumann's Novellette, Op. 21, No. 1, starting at measure 133. The score is in F major and 3/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The melody is primarily in the right hand. The score includes annotations: 'ORIGINAL FIGURE' under measures 133-134, 'EXTENSION' under measures 135-136, and 'EXTENSION' under measures 137-138. The piece concludes with three measures of a final cadence marked with 'f' dynamics.

Ambiguous Nature

A final inspection will reveal how the ambiguous nature of certain musical events adds to Schumann's "playing with" the form and style throughout his first *Novellette*. To begin with, as illustrated in the preceding section, the irregularity of the phrase structure in the C section removes the listener from the neatly presented 4-measure phrases throughout the material that precedes and follows this episode. These three- and six-measure phrases are emphasized by the use of phenomenal accents outlining the melody primarily on beats 2 and 4. This illustrates rhythmic ambiguity in a classic sense where the listener is drawn to a sense of the downbeat on the accented material. It's not until the close of each phrase, when the next phrase begins (as an elision!), that the shift in beat is felt. The sense of the Common Time meter is eradicated by this subtle shift in rhythm.

Schumann's use of contrapuntal devices resurfaces here again, merely used as imitation, with the introduction of each melodic note expanded with a descending eighth note pattern as the melody traverses the range of voicings from the lower to upper register. While the key of D^b major is indicated and

F Major: IV V7/ii ii vi₆/₄ ii6 V₆/V C₆/₄ V ^{Red.}bII vii^o₆/₅ IV₆/₄ GER+6 V7

Playing with Schumann

As we have “played with” the many facets of Schumann’s *Novellette No.1* by way of a multi-dimensional analysis, it becomes apparent that Schumann indeed sought after new forms by adapting an already well-known form into a new entity. He accomplished this through the use of establishing a cyclical tonal structure based on major thirds, bridging sections with variants of the opening section, ample use of surface design changes between sections, contrapuntal devices and methods of elaboration, and ambiguity within tonal and rhythmic frameworks. A grand design birthed out of a heightened relationship with Clara Wieck and a passion for musical exploration – the epitome of the Romantic experience of the heart! Schumann took this experience so far as to even include a quote from one of Clara’s own compositions in the final *Novellette*:

‘I’m playing with forms’, he wrote to Clara while at work on the cycle on 11 February, and in the same letter implored her to read *Flegeljahre*. His attempt to imbue the *Novelletten* with the quality of a Jean-Paulian narrative resulted in fragmented reprises, the embedding of smaller within larger structures and an evolutionary approach to melodic design in several of the cycle’s larger pieces. Clara herself puts in an appearance in the eighth and final piece of the set, where a ‘Stimme aus der Ferne’ quotes from her Nocturne op.6 no.2. (Grove)

Schumann achieves great complexity and inventiveness amidst a fairly simple sounding work while including so much of his love and experience with Clara in this and the other piano cycles written during the same time. This duality of intellect and heart is part of what makes this piece so eloquent and worthy of deeper examination. We should all aspire to “playing with” the rigid rules that often hinder the freedom of creativity while fully enjoying the fruits of inspiration.

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