

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Frédéric Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11 and Ballade No. 4 in
F Minor, Op. 52: A Comparison

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degree of Master of Music in Music, Performance

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ABSTRACT

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Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) is one of the most important composers in the history of western music with great influence and reputation. Chopin's music is filled with virtuosic ideas and uses vocal elements and inimitable personal expression. The Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor was composed in 1830, and his Ballade No. 4 in F Minor was written in 1843. There are similarities and differences between the two pieces. This paper will provide examples from Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 and Ballade No. 4 to discuss the history and style, the vocal elements used, and musical interpretation of the two works.

Section 1: Introduction

Chopin was one of the most significant composers of piano music in the Romantic period, and many of his piano solo works are central to the core piano repertoire.¹ Two frequently performed pieces are his Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11 and his Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52. While both pieces are technically demanding and have similar stylistic elements, Chopin also incorporates different compositional techniques in each piece. The piano concerto comes from his early period and includes simpler elements such as his unique orchestration, melodic structure, harmonic language, vocal style, and dance-like features. In contrast, the fourth Ballade is one of his late works, featuring more mature compositional elements such as the complexity of the development section, dissonant chromatic harmonies, and overall, a more adventurous compositional style and structure. Based on research and my experience in performing the two works on my Master's recital, this paper will discuss the history and style, the vocal elements used, and musical interpretation of the two works.

Chopin was born in 1810 in Poland. Chopin's father, Nicholas Chopin, was a Frenchman who came to Poland as a language teacher, and his mother was from a noble Polish family. Chopin's musical training was entirely local as he studied at the

¹ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), 615.

Warsaw Conservatory.² When he was young, he showed talent as both a pianist and a composer. When Chopin was nineteen, he embarked on a professional career in music. In 1829, he played his first public concerts in both Austria and Bohemia. In 1831, when Chopin moved to Paris, he played his first concert there, and the second public concert was in 1832. Those two performances made his reputation in France. Because of the political unrest in Poland, Chopin made Paris his home for the rest of his life, never again returning to Poland.³

While he also performed, Chopin's professional life in Paris centered around teaching and growing his reputation as a composer. He spent his career largely focused on piano music, writing in many genres such as Mazurkas, Polonaises, Nocturnes, Waltzes, Etudes, and Preludes. Chopin's entire output comprises about two hundred solo piano pieces, six works for piano and orchestra composed for his concert appearances as a young virtuoso, some twenty songs, and four chamber works.⁴ Chopin's reputation and success were quickly noticed by Robert Schumann who reviewed Chopin's Op. 28 Preludes, Op. 33 Mazurkas, and Op. 34 Waltzes in his music magazine "New Journal of Music." Schumann said these works represented the boldest and proudest poetic spirit of the time.⁵

Many scholars like to compare Chopin and Schubert, because both composers have vocal elements in many of their compositions. In the words of Jams Huneker: "Schubert was the most wonderful composer during his time, but Chopin is very

² Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature: Music for the Piano and Its Forerunners* (Schirmer, Cengage Learning, 1996), 277.

³ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 277.

⁴ Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 613.

⁵ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 277.

close.”⁶ Chopin wrote far less music than Schubert in sheer volume, but the quality of Chopin’s music is no less miraculous.⁷ In most of Chopin’s piano music, his melodies are based on vocal rather than instrumental qualities.⁸ The style of Chopin’s music was inspired by the *bel canto* style of Bellini’s operas. Chopin’s musical style also is exceptionally individualistic, and the combination of these characteristics makes Chopin’s music uniquely expressive.

⁶ James Huneker, *Chopin: The Man and His Music* (New York: Dover Publication, 1966), 62.

⁷ Huneker, *Chopin*, 62.

⁸ John Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), 232.

Section 2: Frédéric Chopin's Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11

Historical Background

Chopin's six compositions for piano and orchestra were composed before age 21. The Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11, was written when he was only 20 years old. It was first performed at the Warsaw National Theater in Poland in 1930, the year it was composed. While the premiere of the concerto was successful and had a large audience, there was also some controversy around the piece at the time. One of the main criticisms was the thin orchestration, described as one of the concerto's chief weaknesses.⁹ On the other hand, some critics thought the orchestra part was very supportive, written with simplicity, and fit the style of the piano writing. The vocal cantilena melodic elements in this piano concerto undeniably appears in much of the thematic material.

During the process of composing the E minor piano concerto, Chopin wrote the first and second movement at the same time. The first movement is highly original. More than any other work by Chopin, it has aroused critical censure for its unorthodox tonal scheme, even though this contributes to its 'profound effect' in performance.¹⁰ The second movement has been described as "rather a Romance, calm and melancholy, giving the impression of someone looking gently towards a spot which calls to mind a thousand happy memories. It is a kind of reverie in the

⁹ Herbert Weinstock, *Chopin: The Man and His Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 196.

¹⁰John Rank, *Chopin: The Piano Concertos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 63.

moonlight on a beautiful spring evening.”¹¹ To support that mood, the violins are muffled to create a different tone color. Most of the music from the third movement was inspired by Polish dance. Chopin transferred these elements into a virtuosic writing with his personal stylistic characteristics.

¹¹ Rank, *Chopin: The Piano Concertos*, 12.

Form and Musical Style

The first movement is in sonata form. After the first orchestral exposition, the piano enters in measure 139 with the first theme played in double octaves by both hands (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Chopin Piano Concerto No.1, first movement (mm. 137-142)

The entrance is followed by a melodic phrase in the right hand with a lyrical singing melody and hushed accompanying chords in the left hand. The main theme appears in measure 155 with an expressive melody accompanied by a repeated chordal texture, creating a melancholic atmosphere. After all the connecting material with 16th-note melodic and running passages (mm. 179-221), the second theme is presented in E major in measure 222 with the singing melodic line gradually becoming more expressive. The vocal idea is followed by the closing material in measure 275, becoming more lively with fast running 16th notes in large phrases. This musical

gesture keeps growing until the orchestra tutti takes over in measure 333, ushering in the development section with the piano solo entering in measure 385.

The development starts with the main theme in the piano in the key of C major. The music in here is marked *dolce ed espressivo* which creates a totally different atmosphere from the previous statement of the theme in the exposition. The music modulates to A minor and arrives at the next section of the development in measure 408. The piano part becomes busier with fast running 16th notes full of chromaticisms in both hands. The music goes through sequential modulations with the texture presenting technical challenges. Even with the runs, Chopin writes big slurs to maintain the vocal lines in both the outer and inner voices. At the end of the development, Chopin uses chromatic descending passages to lead to the first theme in the recapitulation.

The recapitulation begins in measure 486, and most of the material is similar to the exposition. When the second theme comes back in measure 573, the key changes to G major, which keeps the vocal elements lyrical and expressive. The Coda starts in measure 621 with repeating patterns in the piano part through measure 644. The solo part ends with a descending chromatic passage in both hands that leads to a deceptive cadence in measure 671, followed by the ending orchestral tutti.

The form of the second movement is difficult to define. Chopin used thematic material and key relationships as decisive factors to create a sonata form without a development.¹² The first theme of the second movement arrives in

¹² Ai, Chia-Huei, "Chopin's Concerto in E Minor, Op. 11: An Analysis for Performance" (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 1986), 28.

measure 13 after a brief orchestral introduction. The main theme is in the right hand with a singing *cantabile* melody that can be seen in Figure 2 below.

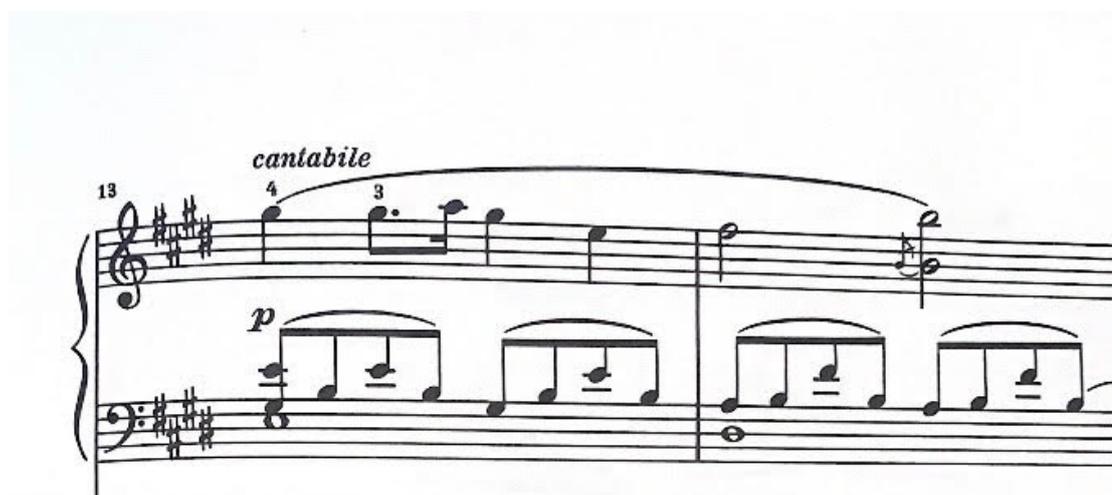


Figure 2: Chopin Piano Concerto No. 1, second movement (mm. 13-14)

Compared to the vocal elements in his first movement, this theme shows a calmer and softer character. The second theme begins in measure 23 in the dominant key, infused with more passion while the phrasing and melodic patterns are similar to the first theme. When the secondary theme returns in measure 63, it modulates to the mediant 3rd—C-sharp Minor. This is unusual in sonata form, but it is effective in establishing singing color changes. When the first theme returns at measure 105, the orchestra plays the theme with piano accompaniment.

The third movement is in rondo form. Most of the musical characters in the third movement were inspired by traditional polish dance music idioms.¹³ The first theme, beginning in measure 17, has a bright color and a strong rhythmic pattern. In the episodes, the piano part consists of chords, arpeggios, scales, sequences, large leaps,

¹³ Rank, *Chopin: The Piano Concertos*, 13.

and rapid passages.¹⁴ For example, in measure 128, the ascending run requires a fast moving finger technique with stretches. Still, there are sections that maintain the vocal elements such as the second theme appearing in mm. 171-210 and mm. 415-454. Both sections have the same material played in unison octaves in both hands. The Coda starts at measure 456. It is technically demanding for the right hand with fast running notes, finger stretches, and large leaps.

¹⁴ Ai, Chia-Huei, "Chopin's Concerto in E Minor, Op. 11," 40.

Section 3: Frédéric Chopin's Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52

Historical Background

During his creative lifespan, Chopin wrote four Ballades for the piano. The first Ballade Op. 23 in G minor was published in 1836, and the last Ballade Op. 52 in F minor was published in 1843. "The ballades have nothing in common with the old poetical ballad make up of three strophes followed by a refrain. Instead, his pieces are closer to the Romantic ballads of Friedrich Chiller and Johan Wolfgang von Goethe and have an even greater affinity with those of the Polish poets Adam Mickiewicz and Yulius Slovatski, whose narrative poems deal with legendary or fantastic subjects."¹⁵ All of those ballades have much in common with the other single movement extended works composed during these years, since Chopin was trying to add new contexts for the Sonata form archetype.¹⁶ The ballades also are similar in that they illustrate the vocal style used in many of Chopin's work. In his Ballade Op. 52, one finds many different musical characteristics such as narrative story telling, but the core of his musical expression is the singing vocal line.

¹⁵ Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, 232.

¹⁶ Jim Samson, *Chopin: The Four Ballades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 15.

Form and Musical Style

Chopin's Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52, is in sonata form. The entire analysis is based on major sections of the Ballade (Figure 3):¹⁷

Introduction: mm. 1-7

Exposition: mm. 8-100

 First theme: mm. 8-80

 Second theme: mm. 80-100

Development: mm. 100-128

Recapitulation: mm. 129-210

Coda: mm. 211-239

Figure 3: Chopin, Ballade Op. 52: Formal Chart

The introduction begins surprisingly with G octaves. (Figure 4) Both hands play their own lines with different melodic contrapuntal gestures. When the introduction ends on the dominant of F minor, the music moves directly to the narrative mode in measure 8.

¹⁷ Yu, Libby, "Harmonic Structure and Performance in Some Passages of Chopin's Ballade No. 4 in F Minor" (DMA diss., University of British Columbia Vancouver, 2010), 6-7.



Figure 4: Chopin Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52 (mm. 1-2)

In the main theme, Chopin uses two different musical ideas that contain the vocal character in the right hand, and the dance accompanying figurations in the left hand. Meanwhile, the character of this music has been described as the mood of a man who examines with morbid, curious insistence the malady that is devouring his soul.¹⁸ In measure 23, the second sentence of the main theme is varied with melodic 16th notes. The transition idea starts in measure 38, with modulations into G-flat and F-flat majors. Hushed low octave lines create a warm ambience, becoming more impassioned with thicker textures in the tenor voices at measure 45. A new variation of the main theme starts in measure 58 with the added inner voice in the right hand, the texture becoming more involved. After a modulation to B-flat major, a new theme appears in measure 84, which in a sonata form would serve as the second subject. This continuation of the musical phrase shows warm lyricism, as the lilting flow imitates a barcarolle (Figure 5). The top voice has a singing line.

¹⁸ Huneker, *Chopin*, 161.



Figure 5: Chopin Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52 (mm. 81-83)

Another transitional idea starts in measure 100. The music gets more agitated with virtuosic rising and falling melodic lines in the right hand. The music abounds in chromaticism. A new syncopated subject with a mazurka rhythm is introduced in measure 112, followed by a transitional section featuring motivic elements of the main theme on an A-flat pedal point (m. 120). This part is dramatic and unstable; the texture is filled with accidentals and chromaticisms. The climax comes in measure 125, where the bass needs to be played firmly in support of the melodic textures with their rich harmonic complexities. The descending modulating chromatic progressions bring back the subject from the introduction in measure 129, now stated in A major, its only reappearance. Starting in measure 135, the music undergoes a canonic reworking of the main theme in a tonally unstable chromatic sequential fashion, gradually returning to the original setting and the tonic key (m. 151). The theme is restated in measure 152 with rhythmic variation. The thematic idea in the right hand becomes more fluent and expanded. At measure 164, the music arrives at the dominant pedal point in the key of B-flat minor, leading to the secondary theme in D-

flat major by way of a chromatic passage in measure 167-169. This time, the secondary theme becomes more fluent with fast running notes in the left hand. Meanwhile, the right hand should to be played with lyrical singing octaves, using increasing dynamic levels.

The coda (Figure 6) starts in measure 211, presenting one of the most technically demanding sections of the entire piece. The closing section has extreme technical demands and extraordinary dramatic power, arguably unprecedented in Chopin's music.

The image shows a musical score for Chopin's Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52, measures 211-212. The score is in F minor and 3/4 time. It features a complex right-hand part with rapid sixteenth-note runs and octaves, and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The right hand starts with a forte (f) dynamic, while the left hand starts with a fortissimo (sf) dynamic. The score includes numerous fingering numbers (1-5) and articulation marks like slurs and accents. The piece concludes with a series of six 'Ped.' (pedal) markings.

Figure 6: Chopin Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52 (mm. 211-212).

Section 4: Vocal Stylistic Comparison

Chopin's Piano Concerto in E Minor, Op. 11 was an early composition and Ballade in F Minor, Op. 52 was one of Chopin's late works. For both pieces, some compositional and interpretive aspects are similar but there are also differences. Chopin's general musical style was formed very early, and it remained from his first piece to his last one. In Chopin's late music, his musical language becomes gradually more complex and polyphonic. Contemporary critics thought his Ballade Op. 52 was filled with dissonant sounds. They could not follow the development section, or understand the composer's advanced language.

Indeed, there are differences between Chopin's early and late styles, but there are also clear similarities. One of the most important features in his piano music is the melodic structure which is based on his vocal inspirations. 2018 Kosciuszko Foundation New York Chopin competition winner Takeshi Nagayasu noticed that most of the Chopin's early musical style was inspired by vocal music which infused his music with lyricism.¹⁹ In both the E Minor Concerto and the F Minor Ballade, the music contains chromaticism, subtle harmonic changes, and more importantly, vocal elements. Another similarity is the singing melodic lines written in unison octaves. Each piece begins with octaves; the concerto has octave notes in both hands, while the

¹⁹ Takeshi Nagayasu, "Chopin's Music in Actual Performance," interviewed by Zhanglin Hu, May 15, 2022, audio, 19:00.

ballade has repeated octaves in the right hand. The melodic structure of both pieces contains lyrical and vocal elements. The main theme of the Ballade Op. 52 has a singing melodic line beginning in measure 8. Also in the Concerto in E Minor, the opening piano theme in the right hand has a melodic line with a clear vocal, rather than instrumental nature. The vocal style melodic structure appears throughout both works.

One of the stylistic differences for both E minor Concerto and Ballade Op. 52 is their musical genre. One is a piano concerto written with an orchestral accompaniment. The other piece is a ballade for solo piano, which is the music of a distinct narrative. Stories and the original ideas for both pieces are different, which reflect their respective musical inspirations and music purposes. The musical atmosphere in Ballade Op. 52 is darker when compared to the E minor concerto. Most of the music in Ballade Op. 52 in the key of F minor expresses the idea of melancholy.

Section 7: Musical Interpretation

Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11 is filled with musical and technical challenges. It is also important for the piano to imitate a vocal sound by playing *legato*.

In the first movement of Chopin's piano concerto in E minor, when the piano enters in measure 139-146, the contrasting ideas require pianists to change the emotions from passionate to quiet in a sudden way. Dynamically, the *ff* and *pp* markings in those measures require pianists to adjust the hand position and use appropriate pedaling. In measure 155, the second theme is marked *espressivo*, which means the music needs to sound more expressive with lots of lyrical singing articulation. In this case, pianists need to use the right hand with a soft touch to create the legato sound. One of the hardest sections in this movement is in the development, with the fast-running notes in the inner voices. After measure 408, the 16th-note chromatic passages are connected by one to two measure phrase marks. To achieve the vocal quality and technical control in the development section requires both hands' independence and reliance on secure muscle memory. Pianists need to play these notes with clarity of phrasing. In the coda, the right hand also has fast 16th notes in the melodic voice with the moving eighth-note inner voice, which makes this section one of the most difficult of this movement.

The cantabile second movement requires more vocal elements than the first movement. To help achieve this goal, pianists need to use generous pedaling throughout much of the movement. The use of pedal is a significant part of Chopin's music style in general. The ear must listen carefully to make sure that the pedal does not hinder the clarity of the harmonic line. Pianists need to change the pedal with the harmonic changes to make the sound clear. The support of the pedal opens the strings inside the piano to create more overtones with a rich and mellow sound. One way to express the imaginative vocal elements in this movement is to play with legato in both hands, creating the feeling of a singing melody. Pianists need to control the depth of tone, how they press the keys in succession to one another to create legato lines. The end of the second movement is almost in the style of a nocturne. Performers must take time to connect the *attaca* to the third movement.

The third movement contains fast running notes that are technically demanding. Compared to the first and second movements, the musical atmosphere is livelier with bright characters inspired by Polish dance music. Most of the left-hand sections contain detached notes that require using of a light crisp touch in the left hand to create the feeling of a dance-like accompaniment. The most difficult section starts in measure 374 with the left-hand octaves creating the large lines. In contrast, the end of the third movement is relatively easy pianistically. After two E major scales in the piano part, the orchestra section repeats E major chords with a glorious ending.

Eleanor Bailie describes the opening section of the Ballade, Op. 52 as “all knowing yet beautiful sadness, and is one of the most beautiful ideas in the piano

literature—the texture is exquisitely limpid, with the left hand alternately materializing in fragments of counterpoint, and receding in accompaniment beneath the quietly swaying right hand quaver octaves and inner semiquavers.”²⁰ This introduction (mm. 1-7) requires the utmost soft finger touch to create delicate, tender, legato lines. Pianists should use touch, ear control, and pedal, to create an illusion of legato. The first theme is a lyrical dance. The hand creates a dance-like rhythmic pulse, while the right hand shapes the melodic line that requires the fingers to stay close to the keyboard. This is an example of where each hand creates a different character. The right hand needs to be freer, and the left hand need to be more steady. The first variation of the theme in measure 58 has two melodic lines in the right hand, and both the top line and the inner voices need to be heard clearly.

The second theme in measure 80 brings out the top soprano line following the orchestral transition. The combination of shaping the phrases with touch, speed, and depth and employing fingers, wrist, and full arms to depress the keys to avoid percussive accents aids in blending the tone into legato lines. Using the wrist and adding pedal will create a consistent singing tone.

The recapitulation, beginning in measure 152, has expanded musical ideas based on the first theme and is filled with accidentals that present reading challenges. In measure 169, the score is full of fast-running triplet passages and melodic octaves, filled with virtuosic display. The dramatic power of this section brings rich sound and character to the music by playing fast and lyrical at the same time.

²⁰ Eleanor Bailie, *The Pianist's Repertoire Chopin: A Graded Practical Guide* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1998), 489.

In the coda, the strong fast-running triplets in both hands should be practiced to sound articulate and comfortable. The coda also requires pianists to bring out the melody in the inner voices. For example, in measures 217-219, the right hand melody in fast thirds also requires bringing out the inner voices. After parallel runs in both hands, the last four chords in measure 237-239 require physical weight to bring out the final statement to end the piece.

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