The Emotional Outpour of Character Pieces in the Romantic Period

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Abstract

Romanticism, as a significant period in development of music, refers to the appearance of new deeper and more intimate musical compositions. Previously, absolute music concentrated on the formal structure of the particular piece taking its references from composers such as Bach and the Viennese school composers. In contrast, program music narrates stories or suggests imagery. Notable examples like Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons' and Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 'Pastoral' in F, Op. 68 foreshadowed the idea of program music. This paper will focus on the phenomenon of definite character pieces that depict certain moods, as composed by Schumann, Chopin, Rachmaninoff and others, and demonstrating how programmatic works serve the Romantic concern with individuality and emotional profoundness. Inclusion of various character pieces written by major composers, including Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin, will demonstrate how music was used to narrate complex emotional stories and their own experiences.

Keywords: Romanticism, character pieces, abstract music, absolute music, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Chopin, Dvorak, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Debussy, Ravel, emotional depth

1. Introduction

Music has always been a powerful medium for emotional expression, especially in the Romantic period, which brought a distinct shift towards deeper and more personal emotional expression in compositions. It is crucial to distinguish between absolute music and program music. Absolute music exists for its own sake, focusing purely on musical form and structure (Koh, 1866, p. 1). Composers like Johann Sebastian Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven were masters of this form. In contrast, program music tells a story or paints a picture through its sounds (Koh, 2010, p. 96). Antonio Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons', which depicts various scenes and atmospheres, is associated with the different times of the year. Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 'Pastoral' in F major, Op. 68 further developed this approach by portraying scenes of nature and rural life. Hector Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique Op. 14 is a quintessential example of showing how Berlioz was instrumental in popularizing program music, and conveying detailed, emotional narratives in music.

Beethoven's late period acted as the bridge between the Classical and Romantic periods, showcasing the transition from absolute music to program music. This transition gave rise to several new genres that emphasized emotional expression and narrative, including symphonic poems and overtures. Franz Liszt pioneered the Symphonic Poems, like Les Préludes, S. 97. Other notable works like Felix Mendelssohn's Hebrides Overture and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, showcased the blend of absolute music's formal elements with the descriptive factor of program music.

By the 18th century, the piano reached its peak of popularity, during which many composers started to write various miniature piano works. These works are most commonly known as character pieces. Character pieces are a staple of Romantic music that express a specific mood or idea, written particularly for solo piano, usually indicated with a title. Composers like Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Chopin, Rachmaninoff,

Scriabin, Debussy and Ravel showcased the stylistic changes and different compositional approaches to convey specific moods, emotions, or scenes. Thus, character pieces have become a significant medium for them.

In a word, this evolution of structured forms of absolute music to narrative-driven program music reflects the broader Romantic emphasis on individualism and emotional depth.

2. Composers of the Character Pieces

2.1 Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert was a prominent Austrian composer who bridged the late Classical and early Romantic eras. He produced a vast and influential body of work, comprising over 600 lieder and seven completed symphonies. Schubert wrote several character pieces — impromptus and moments musicaux (Musical Moments) — that serve as examples of brief poetic pieces that establish a particular mood. (Burkholder et al., 2014, pp. 606-607) An impromptu is written in a song-like, improvisatory style which suggests the notion of inspiration. Most impromptus are romantic character pieces in "free form"; often with a flowing melodic motif developed continuously throughout (Koh, 2010, p. 63). His impromptus are a series of eight solo piano pieces composed in 1827. These works were published in two sets of four impromptus each: the first set is D. 899 (Op. 90), and the second set is D. 935 (Op. 142). They were composed during a period of intense creativity following the completion of his song cycle Winterreise (Winter Journey), D. 911 (Op. 89) in 1827. Marked by both personal turmoil and artistic growth, the impromptus reflect this duality, combining introspective melancholy with bursts of lyrical beauty (Wilson, 2016). The first set, D. 899 are often described as reflective and melancholic, reflecting the emotional depth characteristic of Schubert's late works. The second set, D. 935 (Op. 142), is more varied in character, exploring different moods and technical challenges (Wilson & Buja, 2016). His impromptus would go on to influence later composers like Chopin and Scriabin.

2.2 Robert Schumann

Charles Rosen described Schumann's early piano works as "Song cycles without words", emphasizing their narrative qualities. Schumann's works are notable for deep emotional content and innovative structures. He composed a wide range of music, including piano works, symphonies, lieder, and chamber music. His character pieces contain evocative and descriptive titles: Papillons (Butterflies), Op. 2, Carnaval (Carnival), Op. 9, Album für die Jugend (Album for the Young), Op. 68, and Waldszenen (Forest Scenes), Op. 82 (Chissell, 1986, p. 56).

Schumann's Kinderszenen, Op. 15 (Scenes from Childhood) convey vivid expressions and aimed to depict specific moods or scenes, also reflecting his literary and poetic influences. They are characterized by their programmatic nature, resembling musical narratives without explicit verbalization (Chissell, 1986, p. 37). The thirteen pieces from Kinderszenen evoke an imagery of the children's world, like memories, dreams, candor and games. No. 5 'Perfect Happiness' for instance, satisfies all the child's entreaties and expresses a kind of naive happiness. Altered notes in the piece help to create a happy character and the shift from D major to F major enhances the happiness. Another example is No. 7 Traumerei (Dreaming), which is fairly slow, very lyrical, fantasy-like, and filled with innocence. The dynamics are mainly from pp to mp and the drone-like bass notes create a dreamy feeling (Burkholder et al., 2014, pp. 608-611). Schumann's Album für die Jugend and Kinderszenen have had a profound influence on subsequent generations of composers, like Tchaikovsky, Khachaturian, Prokofiev and Debussy, who also wrote their own sets of 'Children's Album'.

Schumann often employed the characters Eusebius, Florestan, and Raro as alter egos, representing different facets of his personality and artistic vision. These three characters can be found in Carnaval, Op. 9. Eusebius embodies Schumann's introspective, dreamy, and contemplative side; he is often associated with gentle, lyrical passages in Schumann's music, reflecting a more melancholic character (Chissell, 1986, p. 69). For instance, the fifth piece in the cycle, titled "Eusebius" in the key of E-flat major. In contrast, Florestan represents the passionate, extroverted, and impetuous aspects of Schumann's nature; he is characterized by dramatic, fiery, and energetic themes, illustrating a stark character, as evident in the sixth piece, titled "Florestan" in the key of G minor. Raro is a synthesis of Eusebius and Florestan, embodying a balanced and rational perspective. This character often served as mediator between the two characters, showing Schumann's aspiration for harmony and unity in his creative process, as evident in the twelfth piece in the cycle, titled "Chiarina". The use of these characters makes Schumann's compositions rich in psychological depth and expressive contrasts.

Cyclic form is one of the most important characteristics of Schumann's music, in which the motive is reused and transformed in other movements and returns to the original key, in order to create the unification of the piano cycle. Schumann wrote nine pieces to form a coherent description of the Romantic forest, found in the piano cycle, Waldszenen, Op. 82. This work was often considered as a typical example of German Romanticism and also represents the mood of the poetic Märchen (fairy tale). Schumann used B-flat major as the key center for the cycle, together with three closely related keys: G minor (relative minor), D minor (modulation by third), and Eb major (subdominant modulation). Another common feature in Schumann's music is musical cipher —

representing names through notes. In Carnaval, many of the movements feature melodies based on motives (A - Eb - C - B) spelling out 'Asch', which was the hometown of his fiancée at that time. These motives enhanced the unity to the entire work. Other composers, including Brahms and Chopin, followed Schumann's footsteps and also made their own contribution to the repertoire of character pieces, each leaving a unique imprint on the genre (Burkholder et al., 2014, pp. 608-611).

2.3 Félix Mendelssohn

Félix Mendelssohn portrayed German Romanticism similarly to Schumann. He integrated formal clarity and contrapuntal techniques with romantic emotion, lovely melodies, and irregular rhythms. He studied and took elements from the classical and romantic eras, more specifically elements from Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and his own contemporaries. Schumann using piano as a medium to convey emotional depth and storytelling, was a precedent for the subsequent creation of Mendelssohn's Lieder ohne Worte (Songs without Words). Thus, the extraordinary term "song cycles without words" encapsulates Schumann's ability to evoke emotions and narratives solely through instrumental music, foreshadowing the notion of conveying lyrical content without explicit lyrics, a concept later embraced by Mendelssohn. The work contains compelling melody and a fascinating accompaniment that merge to create a distinct mood, like a Lied. Mendelssohn's opinion is that music can convey emotions that words cannot capture, leading him to compose eight volumes of "Songs without Words", representing the idealist ideology that forms the basis of Romantic philosophy. Edvard Grieg subsequently wrote Lyriske stykker (Lyric pieces), Op. 12, which were modeled upon Mendelssohn (Stratton, 2016, p. 56).

2.4 Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was a German composer, pianist, and conductor, widely regarded as one of the leading figures of the Romantic period. The term "Intermezzo" originally referred to a short, musical or theatrical performance inserted between the acts of a larger drama or opera. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Intermezzi served as comic relief or provided music entertainment in between the serious acts of operatic performances, effectively lightening the mood for the audience. Later, in the 18th century, Intermezzo evolved into a standalone form, particularly known in opera buffa (comic opera), where it was characterized by its light and often humorous nature and were performed in between the acts of more serious operas. On the other hand, Brahms' Intermezzi displayed a more abstract and introspective nature, often linked to emotional depth and rich harmonies. These pieces were part of his exploration of the miniature form, showcasing a balance of classical structure with romantic expressiveness in piano music. Brahms developed a love for music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and he synthesized elements from their music with current classical and folk idioms to create a unique personal style. (Burkholder et al., 2014, pp. 724-730)

Schumann had previously used it as a link, evident in his Piano Sonata No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 11, which Brahms had modeled upon in the last movement (Ruckblick Intermezzo) of his Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5. Brahms' Intermezzi are short independent piano pieces with a light character (Koh, 2010, p. 64). Brahms wrote the Three Intermezzi Op. 117 during the summer of 1892 when he was going through a difficult period marked by the deaths of his sister and a close friend, as well as a strained relationship with Clara Schumann; as a result, Brahms subtitled the work Drei Wiegenlieder Meiner Schmerzen, which translates to "Three Lullabies for my Sorrow". The Op. 117 is an example of Brahms' techniques in creating unity out of diversity. Although each Intermezzo varies in its distinct qualities and approaches ternary form in a different way, they are all intertwined in a way that resembles a "multi-piece," much like the 7 Fantasien (7 Fantasies), Op. 116, which have a song-like quality, inspired by the lullaby idea of sending a child to sleep (Burkholder et al., 2014, pp. 724-730).

2.5 Franz Liszt

During the Romantic era, the violinist Niccolò Paganini and pianist Franz Liszt who with exceptional musical skills gained popularity. Liszt was a performer who was extremely conscious of his stage presence. Throughout the Romantic era, he was regarded as the busiest musician, composer, and superb pianist, as a result pioneering the term 'recital'.

Liszt's character pieces stood out as significant contributions to the Romantic repertoire. His short works are designed to evoke a single mood or atmosphere. One notable example is his Années de pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage), a set of three piano suites that are among his most evocative and profound works. These pieces encapsulate Liszt's ability to blend virtuosic technique with deep emotional expression, making them staples in the piano literature. Premiere année: Suisse (First Year: Switzerland), S. 160 is based on nature. Thematic metamorphosis, a term pioneered by Liszt, was based on Wagner's concept of leitmotif (lead motive). The tempo, key and time signature, rhythm, melody, tone color and texture of the work all contribute to the thematic metamorphosis process. For example, the second piece of the first book is titled Au Lac de Wallenstadt (At Lake Wallenstadt) (Ledos de Beaufort & Helbig, 2018, p. 207). Figure 1 illustrates how Lister depicts the ripple effect

of the left hand.

Figure 1. Liszt: Au Lac de Wallenstadt from Années de Pèlerinage: Suisse, S. 160/2 (Bars 7-18)

The rippling effect in the right hand was evident in the fourth piece Au bord d'une source (Beside a Spring), as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Liszt: Au bord d'une source from Années de Pèlerinage: Suisse, S. 160/4 (Bars 1-4)

In addition, Liszt typically portrayed water through the 3/8, 6/8, or 12/8 meters. These techniques would influence Debussy and Ravel later in their compositions, as shown in Figure 3and 4.

Figure 3. Debussy: Poissons d'or from Images II, L. 111 (Bars 1-4)

Figure 4. Ravel: Jeux d'eau (Bars 1-6)

Deuxième année: Italie (Second year: Italy), S. 161 is rooted in Italian culture, and was composed between 1837 and 1849. The first two works of the Italian set are based on two works of art: Raphael's The Marriage of the Virgin (1504) and Michelangelo's statue "The Thinker" (1534) respectively. By that time, Liszt had already completed numerous piano transcriptions of operas and symphonies. He went on to transcribe poetries, by incorporating aspects of text painting into his music. Petrarch was honored in this work, as Liszt wrote three pieces based on Petrarch's poetry, Tre Sonetti del Petrarca (Three sonnets of Petrarch 47, 104 and 123). The syncopation and frequent rests and fermatas make the melody of this composition monotonous, in contrast to the long, continuous melodic lines of typical Romantic pieces. In order to clearly separate the lines in his composition, Liszt used four staves (Ledos de Beaufort & Helbig, 2018, p. 211).

Troisième année (Third year), S. 163 discussed his travels in general. The fourth piece, Les Jeux D'Eaux A La Villa D'este (The fountains at Tivoli Villa d'Este) further reflects Liszt's fascination with the fluidity and beauty of water. He wanted to portray the sparkling fountains at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, Italy, through the cascading arpeggios and shimmering trills that create a sense of flowing water. This piece is an early example of the impressionistic style that would later be associated with Debussy and Ravel (Ledos de Beaufort & Helbig, 2018, p. 216).

Années de pèlerinage is considered a cornerstone of the Romantic piano repertoire. The collection illustrates Liszt's innovative approach to piano composition, incorporating elements of literature, art, and nature to create a deeply personal and expressive musical journey. His goal was to transcend mere technical display, using the piano to explore profound emotional and philosophical themes. Compared to Chopin's character pieces, these are more overtly programmatic (Ledos de Beaufort & Helbig, 2018, p. 221).

Liszt and Mendelssohn were two eminent composers of the Romantic era, who composed music that vividly captured the essence of water. Mendelssohn's Venetianisches Gondellied (Venetian Gondola Songs) — part of his "Songs without Words" collections — epitomize the lyrical beauty and tranquility associated with Venice. The most famous being Op. 19b No. 6 and Op. 30 No. 6, follow the 6/8 time signature, a common meter for barcarolles, which are songs traditionally sung by Venetian gondoliers (Stratton, 2016, p. 125). They are characterized by lilting rhythms and flowing melodies that mimic the gentle rocking of a gondola on the water. The right hand plays a melody reminiscent of an aria, floating over a gently undulating accompaniment in the left hand (Appold & von Sternberg, 2019). The Barcarolle in F-sharp, Op. 60 reflected Chopin's admiration for Italian music and culture, infusing his Polish roots with broader European influences. Besides retaining the tradition of a barcarolle, Chopin masterfully incorporated the characteristic lilting of the 12/8 rhythm with the serene, flowing melodies typical of the genre (Karasowski, 2018, p. 89).

2.6 Frédéric Chopin

Frédéric Chopin was known for composing mainly piano works, from solo works to concertos. Most of his music showcases his nationalistic features, which are particularly evident in his stylized dances, the Polonaises and Mazurkas. The Polonaise is a triple-time, slow-motion Polish dance that is performed as a march or procession. It is frequently indicated with a rhythmic eighth and two on the first beat of sixteen (Koh, 2010, p. 68). It is considered to be the most important genre in Chopin's music and in Poland. For example, the Grande Polonaise Brillante in Eb, Op. 22 is renowned for its lively, rhythmic character and virtuosic passages, embodying the spirit of the folk dance. The piece is preceded by an Andante spianato which is in the key of G major, serving as a calm and lyrical introduction. The Grande Polonaise recalls the Grande Valse Brillante in E-flat, Op. 18 (Nicholas, 2007, p. 27).

Another notable example is the *Heroic Polonaise* in A-flat, Op. 53, which was a tribute to Chopin's motherland, recalling the *Military Polonaise* in A, Op. 40 No. 1. The work contains three main themes that feature the polonaise rhythm — first is found in the lower register, second is more percussive and the third is a lyrical theme (As shown in Figures 5, 6, and 7).

Figures 5. Chopin: Heroic Polonaise in A-flat, Op. 53 — Lower register theme (bars 23-26)

Figures 6. Chopin: Heroic Polonaise in A-flat, Op. 53 — Percussive theme (bars 49-50)

Figures 7. Chopin: Heroic Polonaise in A-flat, Op. 53 — Lyrical theme (bars 85-86)

Mazurkas are renowned for their influences from Polish dance (Koh, 2010, p. 76). Their distinctive features include complex melodies, intricate rhythms, and a strong sense of national pride. Chopin frequently combined virtuosity with intense emotional expression in his pieces. He often used augmented seconds, atypical harmonies, and drone fifths (open fifth) to create an exotic sound. He also kept the pedals sustained to create a blurring effect (Burkholder et al., 2014, p. 289). There are three main types of mazurkas: the Mazur, the Kujawiak, and the Oberek. The Mazur, also known as the Mazurek, was originally a peasant dance, but it eventually made its way into the ballrooms of the nobility and later into classical music composition. It is typically lively and spirited, characterized by its strong accents on the second or third beat of the measure. The tempo is generally moderate to fast and involves a lot of hopping and stamping with joyful and energetic nature (Karasowski, 2018, p. 108). The Kujawiak originated from the Kuyavia region of Poland, which is characterized by its gentle, flowing movements and a slower tempo, often marked as Andante or Adagio (Karasowski, 2018, p. 110). In addition, it is the slowest and most lyrical of the three. As compared to the Mazur, the Kujawiak's rhythm is more subdued and typically features a more melodic, elegance, and expressive character, involving couples moving in a circular pattern. The Oberek comes from the Polish word "obracać," which means "to spin." The tempo is typically very fast, often marked as Vivace or Presto. The rhythm is highly syncopated, and involves a lot of vigorous turning, jumping, and stamping, making it the most physically demanding of the mazurkas. The lively and playful character made it a favorite among the peasantry and has also been celebrated in classical music compositions (Karasowski, 2018, p. 128). For example, from the set of three Mazurkas, Op. 59, the Mazurka No. 3 in F-sharp minor is written as an Oberek.

In addition to miniature works, Chopin composed lengthy and more intricate works like ballades and scherzi. He was among the first to call an instrumental composition a ballade. His Ballades are not based on a specific theme or narrative; rather, they are based on literary ballads. With a multitude of emotions (pastoral-lyrical, mystical, dramatic, heroic, and tragic) and flawless creative skill, these epic musical pieces captivate listeners (Nicholas, 2007, p. 110). His ballades blend elements with continuously new turns in harmony and form, whilst capturing the beauty and fire of Polish story ballads (Nicholas, 2007, p. 108). For instance, the Ballade No. 3 in A-flat, Op. 47, was inspired by Adam Mickiewicz's 'Undine', a Polish poem.

All of his Ballades contain two themes and are in 6/8 time, with the exception of Ballade No. 1 in G minor Op. 23, where the introduction and coda are in 6/4 time, to give the narration a flowing quality. The first inversion of the Neapolitan 6th (Ab), suggestive of an exalted atmosphere, acts as an introduction to the Ballade No. 1, as the first seven bars were written in 4/4 time. It ends with a discordant left-hand chord of D, G, and Eb that is not resolved until later in the song, as Chopin preferred to maintain a suspenseful tone, in reference to the opening of Mozart's Fantasia in C minor, K. 475. Written in 2/2, the Presto con fuoco coda section concludes in the same Neapolitan 6th chord as the opening. Chopin utilized a variety of tempi and transitions to maintain the narrative's flow through three primary themes (Nicholas, 2007, p. 189).

Unlike the typical scherzi of Haydn and Beethoven, Chopin modified their concept. Contrary to what the genre name suggests, Chopin's scherzi are serious and impassioned rather than lighthearted or humorous. Beethoven

had already demonstrated that a scherzo's humor might contain pointed, angular elements. The concept of "reprise form," which refers to a form in which the opening melody returns, either exactly or somewhat altered, to finish the work, is shared by all four of his scherzos (Orga & Orga, 1980, p. 98). An example is the Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31(See Figure 8). The opening notes and key scheme (Bb minor — Db major — A major) are the joke elements. The scherzo theme is in B-flat minor, however most of the piece is set in D-flat major, including the ending. Two arpeggiated pianissimo chords open the composition, which is followed by a brief pause, a series of fortissimo chords, and then a quiet arpeggiated chord that showcases Beethoven's influence.

Figures 8. Chopin: Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 (Bars 1-17)

Other than nationalistic works, Chopin was also famous for nocturnes. A nocturne is a night piece with a contemplative and dreamy tone, pioneered by Irish pianist and composer, John Field (1782–1837), which greatly influenced Chopin. The bel canto vocal style of Italian opera arias is reflected in Chopin's nocturnes, as he taught himself to "sing" on the piano (Orga & Orga, 1980, p. 102). A dreamy serenade or somber lament is featured in each piece, which has an especially appealing tune. Features like large leaps, triplets, quintuplets, cadenza-like sections, and parallel thirds and sixths — a texture typical of the vocal nocturne — are among them. To further build tension, he employed counterpoint. With his themes of operatic influence, more expansive use of intricate structures and melodic playing, and freer rhythms, he completely transformed the genre (Orga & Orga, 1980, p. 110). For instance, the Nocturne in B-flat minor, Op. 9 No. 1, contains freeness of rhythm, which would be a defining feature of Chopin's later work. Throughout the whole composition, the left hand plays an uninterrupted series of eighth notes in arpeggios, while the right hand is free to move however it pleases, sometimes in polyrhythmic patterns of seven, eleven, twenty, and twenty-two, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Chopin: Nocturne in B-flat minor, Op. 9 No. 1 (bars 1-4)

Another notable work is the Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48 No. 1, which was written in Chopin's mature and experimental period. There is an agitato passage, which is unusual for a calm and serene nocturne. It is almost like a fifth ballade. Chopin's nocturnes would go on to inspire both Gabriel Fauré and Samuel Barber.

2.7 Antonín Dvořák

Antonín Dvořák, a prolific Czech composer of the late Romantic era, was renowned for his ability to infuse classical forms with folk elements. Dvořák's Humoresques, Op. 101. Humoresques refer to vibrant instrumental

compositions, notable for their lyrical charm, emotional depth, flowing melody, whimsical character, and captivating rhythm. Humoresque No. 7 in G-flat major, is one of the most famous and beloved pieces in the Classical repertoire. Composed in 1894, this piece is part of a set of eight Humoresques written during Dvořák's summer holiday in Bohemia (Beckerman, 1993, p. 126). It is structured in a ternary form, with a brief coda. The 'A' section introduces a charming, lyrical theme that is both simple and expressive. This melody is characterized by its smooth, legato phrasing and graceful ornamentation. The 'B' section provides a contrast, offering a more rhythmically varied and harmonically rich exploration of the main theme. The return of the 'A' section brings back the initial melody, before concluding with a gentle coda.

2.8 Sergei Rachmaninoff

Known as one of the greatest performers of the 20th century, Sergei Rachmaninoff was regarded as a formidable and noble pianist. He made his living primarily as a pianist, especially after leaving Russia in 1917. The corrupted Russian government forced him to leave his home, resulting in him and his family moving to New York. His music combines influences from Western composers, such as Mendelssohn and Chopin, with Russian elements from Orthodox liturgical music to Tchaikovsky (see Figure10) (Burkholder et al., 2014, pp. 799-800).

The Études-Tableaux (Study Pictures) are two sets of piano works, Op. 33 and Op. 39, that showcase the remarkable virtuosity and a variety of musical moods similar to Chopin's Études, Op. 10 and 25. Tableaux means "paintings" in French, signifying that these pieces combine the technical demands of études (studies) with the expressive qualities of character pieces, essentially becoming musical paintings in Rachmaninoff's view. They can be viewed as miniature tone poems, which are orchestral works that illustrate the content of a poem, story, painting, or other non-musical source. Each étude-tableau in the collections either has its own narration or paints its own picture, albeit on a smaller, more intimate scale suitable for solo piano (Scott, 2024, p. 98). For example, Op. 39 No. 2 in A minor depicts the sea and seagulls. The story of Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf served as the inspiration for Op. 39 No. 6 in A minor.

The Études-Tableaux Op. 33 and Op. 39 differ in mood and technical demands. Op. 33, composed in 1911, is generally lighter and more varied in character. It includes pieces that are playful, wistful, and serene. Op. 33 No. 2, for instance, is a beautiful nocturne with a soaring melody over an arpeggiated accompaniment, showcasing Chopin's influence. Op. 33 No. 7 in E-flat major portrays the setting of a fair. On the other hand, Op. 39, (composed in 1916-1917), is darker and more complex, requiring intense emotional depth and technical difficulty. Rachmaninoff drew on literary and historical influences, such as the Dies irae chant from the Requiem Mass. This chant is featured prominently in several Études-Tableaux, particularly Op. 39 Nos. 2 and 9 (see Figure11 and 12), imparting a somber and foreboding atmosphere and creating a sense of impending doom (Harrison, 2005, p. 25).

Figure 10. Dies irae chant (Dies Irae, n.d.)

Figure 11. Rachmaninoff: Études-Tableaux Op. 39 No. 2 in C major (bars 1-2)

Figure 12. Rachmaninoff: Études-Tableaux Op. 39, No. 9 in D major (bar 1)

Rachmaninoff's Études-Tableaux are closely linked to the tradition of character pieces, which were popularized in the Romantic era by composers like Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt, with focus on expressing a single idea or emotion in a concise form. While Chopin's influence is seen in the lyrical and virtuosic elements of the études, and the impressionist techniques of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel can be recognized in the atmospheric qualities of the music. Rachmaninoff's preludes are often described as tone pictures, embodying dramatic devices that evoke vivid imagery and emotional depth. This approach aligns closely with the cyclic structure found in Liszt's Années de pèlerinage, where musical themes are interwoven to create a cohesive narrative across different movements. For instance, the dramatic intensity and rich harmonic language in Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor, Op. 3, convey a wide range of feelings, from melancholy to exuberance. His music often features complex textures and countermelodies, which enhance the storytelling aspect of his compositions. Both Rachmaninoff and Liszt masterfully employ dramatic devices and cyclic structures in their compositions to create profound musical narratives, and their works serve as prime examples of how character pieces can transcend mere technical display to become rich, evocative tone pictures that resonate deeply with audiences (Harrison, 2005, p. 28).

Rachmaninoff's 24 Préludes vividly encapsulate definite images of Russia, incorporating elements such as the bell sounds of the Russian Orthodox church, march and dance rhythms, and depictions of the natural landscape. The influence of literature is evident in these preludes through direct quotations of texts, the use of poetic meter-especially prominent in Scriabin's works, and the employment of Mendelssohn's "Songs without words". Notable examples reflecting these characteristics include Rachmaninoff's Preludes Op. 23 No. 1 in F-sharp minor, No. 4 in D major, No. 6 in E-flat major, and Op. 32 No. 5 in G major. Rachmaninoff also drew inspiration from Chopin's 24 Preludes Op. 28, which were considered partial mood pictures. His preludes are considered character pieces due to their length, complexity, and emotional depth, which are characterized by rich harmonic textures and expressive melodies that reflect a wide range of emotions, ranging from nostalgia to heroism. In contrast to Chopin's preludes, that are more concise and focused on a singular idea or mood, and also typically shorter with more fragmentations (Harrison, 2005, pp. 30-55).

Rachmaninoff revolutionized preludes by seeking inspirations from various extra-musical sources, including the mysterious and fantastical imagery in the paintings of the symbolist Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin. Böcklin's painting "Die Heimkehr" [translit. The Return] spurred Rachmaninoff on to write the Prelude Op. 32 No. 10 in B minor (see Figure 14). Another work that drew inspiration from Böcklin was his symphonic poem, Isle of the Dead Op. 29. Prelude Op. 32 No. 10, nicknamed "The Return" is considered the most Russian of Rachmaninoff's preludes (Harrison, 2005, p. 67). This prelude begins with an unhappy and solemn first section, building up to an overwhelming epic return in the middle section, and then disintegrating in the final section. It also features dotted rhythms and recalls elements from previous preludes, specifically Op. 32 No. 2 (see Figure 13), No. 11 and No. 13. The use of i-iv chord progressions evokes a pervading sense of sadness.

Figure 13. Rachmaninoff: Prelude Op. 32 No. 2 (bars 1-6)

Figure 14. Rachmaninoff: Prelude Op. 32 No. 10 (bars 1-9)

2.9 Claude Debussy

Both Debussy and Rachmaninoff's preludes serve as expressive vignettes, capturing specific emotions or scenes. Each piece in their collections can stand alone. Like Rachmaninoff, Debussy's preludes do not adhere to a strict formal structure or key progression, allowing for greater freedom in expression and interpretation. Debussy's préludes can be played in any order, unlike Chopin's preludes, which are organized in a specific key order and often serve as technical exercises. This flexibility allows performers to choose pieces based on mood or context rather than adhering to a predetermined sequence. Compared to Chopin's preludes, Debussy's harmonic language is more innovative and unconventional, consisting of unique harmonic patterns that create vivid imagery and evoke a range of emotions to reflect his impressionistic style. Furthermore, Debussy placed the titles of his pieces at the end of the scores, encouraging performers to engage with the music without preconceived notions. Debussy's préludes differ significantly in their titling from that of traditional Romantic music. While Romantic titles often provide a clear indication of the piece's emotional content or thematic elements, Debussy's impressionistic titles offer only vague hints at the imagery or feelings they evoke. This intentional ambiguity reflects a broader artistic movement combining impressionist art and symbolist poetry, where every piece in his préludes represents something symbolic (Vallas, 2008, p. 89).

One notable example from Book I is the Prélude No. 10 La cathédrale engloutie (The Sunken Cathedral), which is based on a Breton myth, surrounding the sunken island of Ys in Bretagne, France. Debussy employed a renaissance style to emulate the sound of an organ, recalling the forgotten past through symbolism associated with the cathedral, bells, and the sea. In Book II, Prélude No. 12 Feux d'artifice (Fireworks) representing festivities and celebration, was composed during the Second World War. It was a symbol of Debussy's patriotism

for France. It foreshadowed the music of the Second Viennese school with its pointillistic elements, particularly seen in the rondo-like structure and the toccata-like transitions within the piece, hinting at the future works of composers like Khachaturian, further showcasing Debussy's innovative spirit and his ability to blend traditional forms with modern influences (Vallas, 2008, p. 126).

Debussy's Images is another work that embodies the essence of impressionistic music, paralleling the character piece genre in its evocative nature. The word Images, meaning "mirrors," aptly reflects Debussy's intent to capture fleeting impressions and scenes through sound. There are two books, each containing three pieces, which offer a distinct character while maintaining a cohesive thematic thread (Vallas, 2008, p. 127).

In Images Book I, Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the Water) evokes the shimmering qualities of water, reminiscent of Liszt's Au lac de Wallenstadt and Ravel's Jeux d'eau. This piece creates an ethereal atmosphere through tempo rubato and parallel motion in the right hand, depicting light and shadow on the lake. In Images Book II, Cloches à travers les feuilles (Bells Through the Leaves) embraces oriental influences with its whole tone scale, capturing the three objects in the images, such as bells ringing, rustling of leaves and wind blowing or howling. Similarly, Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut (And the moon descends on the temple that was) reflects Gamelan influences, focusing on the moon and an ancient temple. The last work Poissons d'or (Goldfish) incorporates elements of Japanese and Chinese music, soundpainting the images of fish tails and water effects while using pandiatonicism and jazz-inflected harmonies to create a modern auditory experience (Vallas, 2008, pp. 56-77).

Debussy's Estampes, translated as "Prints," encapsulates a series of musical impressions that leave an enduring mark of the places they represent. Each movement captures the essence of its respective locale, showcasing Debussy's ability to evoke vivid imagery and emotion through his innovative compositional techniques. The first piece, Pagodes (Pagodas), draws inspiration from Javanese gamelan music. The opening is based on the pentatonic scale, creating a drone-like effect with open fifths and heterophonic texture. Debussy weaves five distinct melodies throughout the piece, with one long phrase featuring three different melodies intertwined. The use of syncopation blurs the rhythmic clarity, while the sustain pedal adds to the vagueness often favored by Debussy (Burkholder et al., 2014, p. 794). The second piece La soirée dans Grenade (Evening in Granada) transports listeners to Spain, bringing the warmth and vibrancy of a Spanish evening. The rich harmonies and rhythmic patterns create a sense of place and emotion.

2.10 Maurice Ravel

Ravel's Miroirs operates under a similar concept to Debussy's Images and Estampes. Miroirs meaning "Mirrors," aptly reflects the suite's intent to mirror images and capture fleeting impressions and impressions of the natural world. Ravel employed tonal centers rather than traditional key signatures. This approach allows him to blend Impressionist harmonies and rhythms artfully. He created a unique soundscape that is rich in beauty and charm. It effectively guides the listener through a journey of constantly evolving sounds and emotions (Burkholder et al., 2014, p. 797). The first piece Noctuelles (Night Moths), paints a flickering depiction of moths in flight. It captures their delicate movements through five motifs. Structured in the form of a nocturne. Although this movement is predominantly lyrical, there is a hint of chromaticism towards the end that adds to its ethereal quality. The next piece Oiseaux tristes (Sorrowful Birds) is dedicated to Ravel's mentor, the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes. This meditative piece evokes sounds of birds lost in a somber forest, characterized by soft chirps over a syncopated accompaniment. The accompaniment suddenly bursts into panic, portrayed by the disjoined ostinato in the left hand. The ornamental runs in the right hand further enhance the feeling of disarray and longing, reminiscent of Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony. The third piece Une barque sur l'océan (A Ship on the Ocean) begins with a calm theme, reflecting the ocean. As the piece progresses the rippling waves suggest lonely dangers faced by a mariner in the vastness of the sea. The wave patterns in the piece are constantly alternating from choppy to calm. In the fourth piece Alborada del gracioso (Morning Song of the Jester), Ravel infused Spanish influences reminiscent of Scarlatti's keyboard music. He employed characteristic upbeat rhythms, arpeggios and dynamic changes, bringing the music to life. The last piece La Vallée des Cloches (The Valley of the Bells) features continuous bell-like sound marked by repeated quaver notes and punctuated halts. Inspired by Gamelan music, this piece echoes the sonorous regular metrical time of bells. It culminates in powerful closing chords, reminiscent of the Sacré-Cœur's bell in Paris. The overall arch form (A B C B A) ties the movements together, thus creating a cohesive and immersive experience in Ravel's Miroirs (Burkholder et al., 2014, p. 810).

2.11 Alexander Scriabin

Alexander Scriabin was a Russian composer and pianist known for his highly expressive piano music. Initially influenced by Romantic composers like Chopin, Scriabin's work evolved into a unique voice that incorporated elements of mysticism and impressionism. He came up with the new genre Poème in 1911, which is a significant work in his oeuvre. Poème is structured as a single movement, and characterized by its lyrical melodies, rich harmonies (especially employing innovative harmonic progressions, moving away from traditional tonality, his

use of dissonance and chromaticism creates a sense of tension and release, enhancing the emotional depth of the music), and intricate textures (Ashkenazy & Pogorelich, 2016). Poème is imbued with a sense of mysticism and spirituality, particularly those related to synesthesia and the concept of music as a means of spiritual enlightenment, while evoking a range of emotions, from introspection to ecstatic joy (Predota, 2015). This reflects Scriabin's uniqueness in the early 20th century and his significant contributions to the development of character pieces in the piano repertoire.

Vers la flamme (Towards the Flame), Op. 72 is a tone poem, written for piano. This evocative piece captures a journey toward an intense, consuming flame, which symbolizes the ultimate transcendence and enlightenment. Scriabin often infused his music with philosophical and mystical ideas, reflecting his belief in the spiritual power of music. The piece begins with a subdued, mysterious opening, gradually increasing in intensity and complexity, much like a flame that begins as a flicker and grows into a blaze. Scriabin's distinctive harmonic vocabulary of modified dominant 9th, 11th and 13th chords were spaced in fourths for optimum resonance. The relentless build-up is achieved through the use of dissonant harmonies and complex rhythms, which convey both the allure and danger of approaching the flame. Although several tritones could be heard throughout the piece, they resolved by the end of the piece and sounded like consonance (Predota, 2015).

3. Conclusion

The evolution of character pieces during the Romantic period represents a significant shift in compositional style and emotional expression, allowing composers to convey specific moods, ideas, or narratives. As technical demands became more exacting, new styles of piano music emerged. Initially, character pieces were characterized by lyrical and melodic qualities in the works of Schubert, as demonstrated in the Impromptus and Moments Musicaux. Schumann expanded the concept by incorporating contrasting moods and personalities within his works, such as Carnaval and Kinderszenen. His works explore a range of emotional states, and are usually represented through his alter egos, Eusebius and Florestan. Later, Brahms focused on structural integrity and thematic development in the character pieces, his Intermezzi reflect a balance between emotional expression and classical form. Mendelssohn contributed to the genre, evoking picturesque imagery and emotional nuance. His 'Songs Without Words' exemplifies a new musical style, capturing a wide range of feelings and scenes without the need for text. Liszt transformed character pieces into more expansive forms, using elements from symphonic poems that narrate vivid stories and emotional range, as showcased in his Années de Pèlerinage. Chopin is another composer who is renowned for his deeply personal style, which often reflects his Polish heritage. His Nocturnes, Preludes, and Études are characterized by their lyrical melodies and intricate harmonies. Rachmaninoff often drew on Russian themes with lush harmonies and expressive melodies in his character pieces, as seen in works like Morceaux de Fantaisie and Preludes, which showcased his ability to blend technical prowess with profound emotional resonance. On the contrary of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin introduced philosophical and mystical elements into this genre, which explored complex emotional landscapes and innovative harmonic structure, as seen in his poèmes. Late romantic works also reflect ethnic influence and impressionistic tendencies including those of Debussy and Ravel. The evolution of character pieces through these composers illustrates the music in the Romantic era emphasis on individualism and emotional depth. Each composer contributed to the genre's richness and diversity and solidified the character piece as a significant medium for emotional expression in the Romantic repertoire.

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