

Jeffrey Kallberg

Chopin and the aesthetic of the sketch: a new prelude in E♭ minor?

How, in Chopin's Paris of the 1830s and 1840s, might we measure the relationship between the aesthetic categories of 'sketch' and 'work'? The meaning and importance of a sketch—and more broadly the process of composition—in relationship to a finished work was a charged topic among creative figures at the time. Their aesthetic positions provide an instructive framework for the interpretation of a remarkable sketch that Chopin drafted around the time he was completing the Preludes, op.28, in Majorca. This, like only one other extant sketch of a composition that Chopin did not finish and publish, preserves the skeletal remains—or the embryonic beginnings—of a 'complete' piece, with a beginning, middle and end.¹ Notationally ambiguous, the sketch will here for the first time be published both in transcription and in realization. Will the result thereby yield a hitherto unknown work by Chopin? What kind of sense are we to make of the E♭ minor sketch?

Debates about the aesthetic merits of sketches and, more generally, pieces that display something of the 'unfinished' about them were particularly acute in the visual arts. According to Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, the canvases of such artists as Constable, Delacroix, Corot and Courbet helped promote a taste for the seeming spontaneity of the 'unfinished', a quality that stood in stark contrast to the 'licked finish' of the academic artists known as *pompier*s—so stark, in fact, that by 1855 John Ruskin could claim that the question of sketch versus finished work divided all the artists of Europe.² Those who preferred the supposedly spontaneous sketches

of artists perceived in them something of the originality that lay behind artistic inspiration, whereas 'finished works' conveyed such values as probity, professionalism and discretion.

Delacroix, we know from his diary, worried often over the relative merits of the 'sketch' and the 'finished picture'. His appreciation of the heightened aesthetic potential of an artistic sketch gained some force from his admiration of spontaneity in literature, with Byron serving as his emblematic improvisatory figure. But even more important to him was the idea of extemporized music, and here none other than the example of Chopin stimulated his thoughts. That Chopin's activities at the keyboard might affect the way Delacroix thought about painting should come as no surprise, for an important element of their friendship revolved precisely around efforts by both men to grasp and somehow translate into their own creative endeavours expressive effects attained in the other's domain. Thus one evening at Nohant in 1841, after listening to a conversation between Delacroix and Maurice Sand about Delacroix's understanding of reflection and colour, Chopin responded at the piano with an improvisation that produced the celebrated 'note bleue' (as George Sand enigmatically termed a mystical effect that arose out of Chopin's modulatory playing).³ And Delacroix in turn continued even after the composer's death to ponder painterly dimensions of the spontaneous element in Chopin's musical art. In an entry in his diary dated 20 April 1853 he recorded the gist of a conversation with Chopin's old friend Wojciech Grzymała:

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We spoke of Chopin. He told me that his improvisations were much bolder than his finished compositions. It is the same, no doubt, with a sketch for a painting compared to a finished painting. No, one does not spoil the picture in finishing it! Perhaps there is less scope for the imagination in a finished work than in a sketch. One feels different impressions before a building that is going up and in which the details are not yet indicated, and before the same building when it has received its remainder of ornamentation and finish. It is the same with a ruin that acquires a more striking aspect by the parts that it lacks. The details are effaced or mutilated, just as in the building going up one does not yet see more than the rudiments and the vague indication of the moldings and ornamented parts. The finished building encloses the imagination within a circle and forbids it to go beyond. Perhaps the sketch of a work only pleases as much as it does because everyone finishes it to his liking.⁴

For Delacroix, the power of originality in a sketch essentially elevated it to the status of a work. (Many creative figures of his day, Baudelaire perhaps most notable among them, seconded this position.)⁵ The inconsistency in Delacroix's statement (he defended the finished work by describing why the sketch pleased more) is, for the present discussion, less important than his likening of Chopin's improvisations to painterly sketches. (Curiously, Delacroix, who had heard Chopin improvise often and who possessed a refined ear, offered Grzymała's opinion on the boldness of Chopin's improvisations rather than his own, as if somehow his own hearing were not to be trusted.) Chopin's improvisations, we may deduce from Delacroix's remarks, provided listeners with even more profound insight into his powers of imagination than did his finished works.

But would Delacroix have made this same claim of a written sketch by Chopin? Might Chopin's sketches reveal some of the same spontaneous spark that gave life to his improvisations? What was the relationship between these two domains of 'improvisation' and 'sketch'? To begin to answer these questions, we might first recall George Sand's oft-cited testimony about the profound difficulties that, for Chopin, attended the transition from inspiration, either at the piano or in his head, to written notation:

His creativity was spontaneous, miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without expecting it. It arrived at his piano suddenly, completely, sublimely, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he would hasten to play it to himself,

casting it down on his instrument. But then would begin the most heart-breaking labor I have ever witnessed. It was a series of efforts, indecision and impatience to recapture certain details of the theme he had heard. What had come to him all of a piece, he now over-analyzed in his desire to transcribe it, and his regret at not finding it again 'neat', as he said, threw him into a kind of despair. He would shut himself in his room for days at a time, weeping, pacing, breaking his pens, repeating and changing a bar one hundred times, writing it and erasing it with equal frequency, and beginning again the next day with meticulous and desperate perseverance. He would spend six weeks on a page, only to end up writing it just as he had done in his first outpouring.⁶

Although Sand's remarks concern specifically the composer's last year or two in Nohant (and perhaps thus tell us more about the decline of his powers during his late period), they may well only describe an extreme instance of what was always a troubled process. Far from representing any ideal of creative spontaneity, the written sketch, by Sand's account, would stand instead for the cramped suppression of Chopin's natural artistic inclinations. Sand, then, would appear to deny an ontological relationship for Chopin between improvisation (or inspiration) and written sketch in the sense that Delacroix might seem to imply it.

Yet the possibility remains that the 'rough edges' of one of Chopin's sketches might have held some aesthetic value to his associates, just as, in the 1830s, friends of Théodore Rousseau preferred his sketches to his finished canvases.⁷ We might detect these sorts of sentiments lurking behind the decisions made by Julian Fontana and Auguste Franchomme to transcribe and (in the case of Fontana) publish as op.68 no.4 a sketch of an F minor Mazurka as part of the 'authorized' posthumous compositions. (We will return below to the specific relationship of the sketch for the Mazurka to the E♭ minor sketch.) Fontana in fact devoted particular attention to Chopin's improvisational skills in the written commentary he attached to the posthumous pieces:

From the most tender age he astonished by the richness of his improvisation. He took good care however not to parade it; but the few chosen ones who have heard him improvising for hours on end, in the most marvellous manner, without ever recalling a phrase from any other composer, without even touching on any of his own works—those people will not contradict us if we suggest that his finest compositions are only the reflections and echoes of his improvisation.

This spontaneous inspiration was like a boundless torrent of precious materials in turmoil. From time to time, the master would draw out of it a few cups to throw into his mould, and it turned out that these cups were full of pearls and rubies.⁸

Fontana published these remarks in 1855, in the same year that Ruskin claimed that artistic debates about the relative merits of sketches versus finished works were at their peak. In this context, then, Fontana's words should be read not as a curious detour from the task of the rest of the commentary of justifying the publication of pieces that Chopin himself did not see fit to publish, but rather as precisely part of this very validation. By borrowing an argument similar to the sorts of positions espoused in the world of art by proponents of the aesthetic value of sketches, Fontana lent credence to his inclusion of what he elsewhere styled Chopin's *dernière pensée musicale*, a piece transmitted only in the form of a sketch.⁹

IN order to relate these aesthetic debates to the E♭ minor sketch, we need more closely to consider its peculiar physical state and its musical contents (see illus.1). Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's hypothesis that the contents of the leaf and its paper type indicate a Majorcan provenance allows us to make sense of several unusual material features of the sketch.¹⁰ The prominent tear at the lower left-hand corner of the leaf is consistent with the manuscript having been drafted on Majorca: in normal circumstances, with Parisian suppliers of paper close to hand, Chopin would presumably have discarded a ripped page rather than saving it for sketching purposes (and physical evidence confirms that the tear preceded the drafting of the E♭ minor sketch).¹¹ But the tear is not the only material feature of the sketch that suggests that the composer was conserving paper: so too does the physical layout. Chopin appears to have folded the leaf vertically in half, and to have drafted most of the sketch (until its very last bars) to the left of the fold. From this we may deduce that the tonal planning on the right half of the leaf (whereby, as Eigeldinger has ingeniously demonstrated, Chopin established which of the op.28 Preludes remained to be written) preceded the draft on the left half.¹² The need to sketch a prelude in E♭ minor arose precisely from this tonal plan (in other words, the abbrevia-

tion '3 o' [= 'terzo'] attached to the tonality of 'es moll' on the right half of the page told Chopin that the Prelude in E♭ minor was the third of those that still needed to be composed). And the presence of this tonal plan on the page prevented him from sketching in his normal fashion, using the entire page. Lastly, and because Chopin confined himself to a relatively small portion of the leaf, he drafted the majority of the systems in four-bar units.¹³ The exceptions to this pattern (in the first, fifth and seventh systems) point to compositionally fraught moments of the piece.

Chopin viewed his sketches as private documents whose notation need make sense only to him, and this particular draft displays some of the scribal shortcuts that he habitually used in such circumstances. Striving to transfer the sounds conceived at the keyboard onto paper, he seldom wasted time writing down aspects of the piece that were obvious to him. Thus he did not take special care with clefs and accidentals, since he knew what the notes were supposed to sound like. And when a pattern of some sort repeated itself, he did not fully write out what to him was a self-evident design. Hence in our sketch Chopin plainly intended the triplet pattern announced in the first bar (and reiterated in the fourth and fifth systems) to repeat in every bar of the piece save for the last three, and obviously intended trills to sound continuously in the left hand.

But, now in the public eye, this private document furtively cloaks some of its readings. To a certain extent the determinate aspects of the sketch are less striking than its indeterminate features. Many aspects of the piece resist definitive interpretation; pitches, rhythms and voice-leading fall onto the page with maddening imprecision. In some places, Chopin essayed more than one version of a given passage, and failed to leave any obvious sign as to which of them (if any) he preferred. Hence we discover three separate versions of the first part of the closural gesture (over the trilled dominant pedal), and two further versions of the very ending of the piece. And the opening four bars of the piece pose their own, very different, interpretative puzzles. Here the absence of clefs augments the customary ambiguities that arise from the inexact notation of pitch and the omission of implied accidentals.

Handwritten musical score for a prelude in E minor, featuring staves with notes, rests, and various annotations.

Annotations on the left side of the page:

- 1.0*
- 2.0*
- 4.0*
- 4.0*
- 5.0*
- 4x*
- 9 mod 22*
- 2.2*
- 2.4*

Annotations on the right side of the page:

- 1.0*
- 2.0*
- 4.0*
- 4.0*
- 5.0*
- 4x*
- 9 mod 22*
- 2.2*
- 2.4*

Handwritten notes and markings on the staves include various musical symbols, clefs, and dynamic markings.

1 Sketch for a Prelude in E minor (The Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit at The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York)

Ex.1 Five interpretations of bars 1-4 of the E \flat minor sketch

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

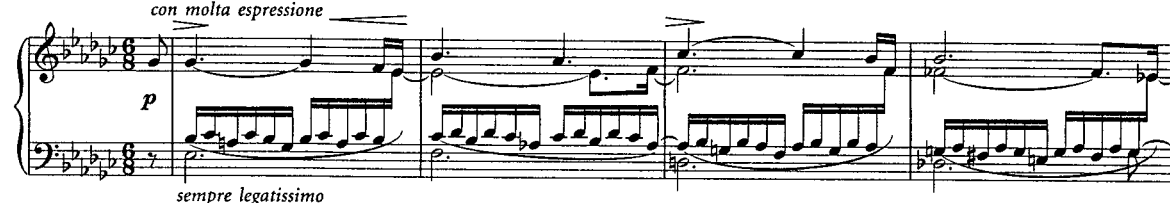
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Ex.1 shows five interpretations of Chopin's hasty scrawl (more readings of these bars are certainly possible); what is interesting is that some measure of dissatisfaction attaches to every one of them, since none includes every pitch that Chopin wrote at the level at which he apparently wrote it. Thus the accidentals in the top staff would seem to imply that the first two bars (and perhaps the next two as well) should be read in the bass clef (see versions 3–5 in ex.1); such an interpretation results in an ungainly overlap between the right and left hands, an overlap that can only barely make sense if we assume that the pitches in the lower staff represent successive, rather than simultaneous readings, with the upper B \flat replacing the lower E \flat . Moreover, as important as a lower register seems to have been for Chopin's general conception of the key of E \flat minor

(compare the Etude, op.10 no.6, the Polonaise, op.26 no.2, and of course the Prelude, op.28 no.14—see ex.2), it would be peculiar for him to place the opening two or four bars of a piece in a register below middle C when the rest of the piece clearly unfolds one to two octaves above this starting point. But every plausible version with the right hand in the treble clef also requires a certain suspension of disbelief with respect to the composer's notational habits. The solution I have opted for takes note of the absence of a brace at the beginning of the first system (compare the following three systems), and interprets it as a sign that Chopin may have intended that the music he initially notated in the bass clef be read two octaves higher, or in the register of the music found on the immediately following systems with braces.

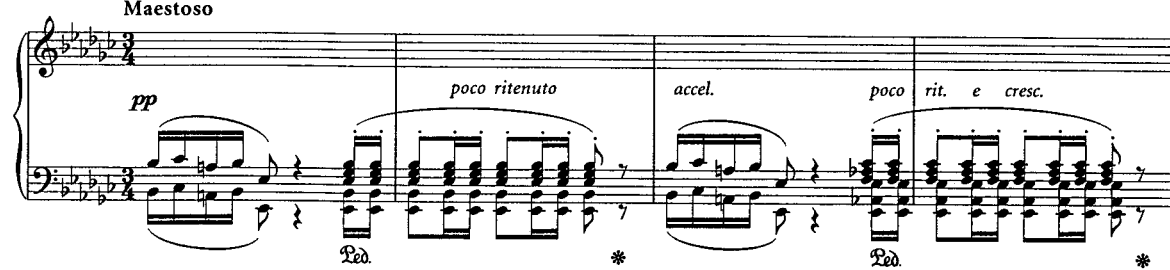
Ex.2 Register and Chopin's conception of the key of E \flat minor: (a) Etude, op.10 no.6; (b) Polonaise, op.26 no.2; (c) Prelude, op.28 no.14

(a) **Andante** $\text{♩} = 69$
con molta espressione




p
sempre legatissimo

(b) **Maestoso**



pp
poco ritenuto
accel.
poco rit. e cresc.
Ped. *

(c) **Allegro**
pesante



p