Tonal, Structural, and Narrative Analysis

Nocturne Opus P1 No. 16

Frederic Chopin

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# Table of Contents

## Contents

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................... 3  
   a. History on Chopin Nocturne Opus Posthumous and its composer  
   b. Review of key points on the nocturne  
   c. Relevance of Chopin Nocturne Opus Posthumous

II. Tonal and Structural Analysis.................................................................................................................... 4  
   Theme A: ................................................................................................................................................... 4  
   Theme B: ................................................................................................................................................... 7  
   Transitional Phase: .................................................................................................................................... 9  
   Foreword: ................................................................................................................................................ 10

III. Narrative Analysis .................................................................................................................................. 13  
   a. Foreword  
   b. Section A  
   c. Section B  
   d. Transitional Phase  
   e. Section A  
   f. Ending
I. Introduction

Chopin’s Nocturne Opus Posthumous in c# minor, also referred to as Opus P1 No. 16, KKIVa/16 or CT.127, was a nocturne written by Frederic Chopin published twenty six years after his death in 1849. The piece is written for the solo piano in 1830 for his older sister Ludwika Chopin. The piece was amongst the last works Chopin created before leaving Poland in late 1830, and therefore, it does not carry an opus number. Chronologically, this nocturne represented one of Chopin’s earlier nocturnes (his second nocturne composed). However, this piece already alluded to some of the passionate and melancholy characters found in Chopin’s later works.

The nocturne’s composer, Frederic Chopin, was a Polish composer and is considered one of the greatest composers during the Romantic era. Chopin’s style is famous for his representation of grief, a common element found also in the Opus Posthumous; some speculate that Chopin’s deeply moving and at times lamenting music traces to his physical being as he was constantly sick as a child. In the Opus Posthumous, the piece as shown in later sections may be narrated as a single flickering candle against the backdrop of moaning wind beside a deathbed. In many respects, this nocturne is consistent with Chopin’s other work. Later sections will discuss common methods employed by Chopin, notably the metronomic left-hand against a rubato-filled right. There is constant tension throughout this piece, both in its harmonics and technique. In technique, we see a strenuous scale runs of the right hand racing against the slow and constant dance of the arpeggiated left hand. In the harmonics of the piece, we see that strays from common practice harmony in place of an unorthodox collection of chords to increase suspension at times needed. Together, the Nocturne Opus Posthumous in c# minor is one of the most cherished nocturnes in music history.

Chopin’s Nocturne Opus Posthumous is often considered standard repertoire for the advancing piano student. Likewise, this piece has seen itself play several pivotal roles in history. World-famous pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman played the nocturne in September 23, 1939, five days before Warsaw
surrendered to the Wehrmacht of Nazi Germany at Polish Radio when a bomb exploded in the room and cut the radio transmission. Six years later, Szpilman played the same piece on Polish Radio in celebration of the Nazi defeat. This defining moment was later recaptured in Roman Planski’s film *The Pianist*.

II. Tonal and Structural Analysis

*Theme A – Antecedent*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 2.1: Measures 5 – 9, Theme A</th>
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*Theme B – Preview*  

| Figure 2.2: Measures 21 – 22, Theme B |

**Theme A:**

Two major themes prevail throughout the nocturne. The first theme is introduced in the fifth measure about a repeated “foreword” (first four measures of the piece, see Section II: Foreword). *Theme A* begins with a firm yet light (*dolce*) sounding of the first and fifth of the tonic chord. Note that the third is left out, leaving a hollow sound. This occurrence will later be stressed in the candlelight narrative (see section III). The first chord change in *Theme A* occurs in the third beat of the first measure, where it moves from a $i\frac{7}{2}$ to a $ii\frac{3}{2}$. The change from the tonic to supertonic is unsettling, perhaps purposely mastered by Chopin as emphasized by the quavering right-hand trill between the *third scale-degree* and *fourth scale-degree*. The second measure then ends back on the initial chord (see section III: narrative analysis in regards to the comparison of the trill as to a sputtering wick), followed by the final sounding of the *first scale-degree* in the melody. Within these two measures, it can already be seen that the melody is downward sloping, which is in-line with the downward motion of the “foreword”.

The melodic line in measure 3 jumps to the *first scale-degree* where it sustains into the third beat and is thus dropped again, this time to the *sixth scale-degree*. As consistent with the piece, Chopin crescendos notes as they rise higher and decrescendos them as they fall. The use of the triplet in the fourth beat of measure 3 is consistent throughout the piece, and will be explored more in-depth in later
sections (see Section II on the Transitional Phase). The harmonic progression of this particular measure may be disputed as either a major I chord or a V/iv. There are two major arguments for separate reasons. In the first argument, it is noted that in other reinstatements of Theme A, the fourth measure (counting from the start of the theme) finishes with a iv chord. One example is in measures 49 to 50, where a variation of Theme A is presented following the Transitional Phase:

![Figure 2.3: Measures 49 – 50, Theme A](image)

It is clear both in the melody and harmony that measure 50 is a iv chord. In such a case, it would clearly make greater harmonic sense if measure 49 were a V/iv chord resolving to the iv in measure 50. As a matter of fact, out of the three repetitions of Theme A, only once does the peculiar progression from either major I or V/iv to a possible ii₇ occurs in measures 3 – 4. In the first argument, the D# would be considered a denied resolution and therefore the harmonic progression of measure 3 – 4 would be V/iv, V₇/iv, and iv with a peculiar non-chord base.

![Figure 2.4: Measures 7 – 8, Theme A](image)

In the second argument, the first presentation of Theme A is a progression from major I, major I₇, and ii₇ with a missing third. The justification for the second argument comes from the strategic placement of the bass of the arpeggiation, as the root of the chord ii₇. Given that measure 8 is a ii₇, the designation of measure 7 as V/iv, V₇/iv would therefore be unwarranted, as that would result in an unresolved secondary dominant. The final harmonic chord progression of the antecedent phrase of Theme A may therefore be presented as:
Theme A Antecedent Phrase Chord Progression

Argument 1:  
\[ i \rightarrow ii_2^4 \rightarrow i \rightarrow V_v^i \rightarrow V_7^i \rightarrow iv \]

Argument 2:  
\[ i \rightarrow ii_2^4 \rightarrow i \rightarrow I \rightarrow I_7 \rightarrow ii_7 \]

Both arguments are acceptable when combined with the antecedent. The antecedent begins with a $V_5^6$ chord at measure 9. Again, since the melodic line moves from the fifth scale-degree to the second scale-degree, a decrescendo is added. The harmony resolves to the tonic in measure 10, then immediately increases tension by changing to a $ii_3^\frac{3}{2}$ (this time without dispute). Measure 11 is of particular interest; Chopin introduces a 4-3 suspension in the second beat which resolves in the fourth beat. At the same time, Chopin crescendos to where it peaks at the suspension resolve. In the melodic line, the familiar trill is presented again and the theme ends after the second beat of measure 12. The quarter rest signifies that the $G#$ in beat four is rather an anacrusis to the beginning of a variation of Theme A.

The harmonic chord progression of Theme A’s consequence phrase and reductive analysis of Theme A is as follows:

Theme A Consequence Phrase Chord Progression

\[ V_5^6 \rightarrow i \rightarrow ii_3^\frac{3}{2} \rightarrow V_{4-3} \rightarrow V \]
Theme B:

Unlike the downward-sloping motion found in Theme A, Theme B is upward-sloping. At this point, the piece has modulated to A Major, the relative major of the subdominant in c# minor (i.e. A Major is the relative major of f# minor, which is the subdominant of c# minor); for the purpose of this modulation, see Section III: Narrative Analysis. Compared to the fickle harmonic movements of Theme A, the antecedent in Theme B is solid, with only strong I chords with traces of the V7. The A in the bass is dragged throughout the piece as a pedal tone; this will be of particular importance in the ending measures of the consequence phrase explained later. The motion in the melody is more complicated here, with wave-like motion as the piece picks up spirit. Furthermore, for the first time (not counting the “foreword”), the melody takes on more than a simple single line starting in measure 23; this style is sustained throughout Theme B. In many ways, Theme B is seen as a solace, a momentarily brief interlude that provides a calm hue to the overall dark backdrop.
But even the solace is short lived. The consequence to the statement is followed quickly by a sharp change from the A Major key to the relative f# minor (which is the subdominant of c# minor). Chopin attempts to mask this through the written words sotto voce; it is as if the consequence is the rainclouds that will ultimately brew the storm. The consequence here is a sequence against the antecedent, mimicking if not mocking its relative major. Note how while the third and fourth measures of the antecedent phrase protrude upward, the third and fourth measure of the consequence phrase sink downward; equally true to his word, Chopin marks the section piano, noting that falling notes in this nocturne are consistently softer. Note again the use of triplets in the melody; these triplets foreshadow a unique feature of the “transition phase” seen four measures after the end of the consequence.

The first two measures in the bass are consistent with the antecedent, stressing the F# under a pedal tone, but this dramatically changes in the ending two measures. To propel the piece back to c# minor, Chopin emphasizes two authentic cadences which finally drives the key back home. Thus, in summary, the harmonic chord progression and reductive analysis of Theme B are as follows:
**Transitional Phase:**

The transitional phase (measures 33 to 46) may seem out of place at first. Its jocular nature reminds the musician of a mazurka than a nocturne. Starting from measure 32, a switch in the meter from common time then 2/4 followed by an immediate switch to 3/4 time in measure 33 offsets the mood established in previous sections. As a matter of fact, some editions of this piece do not include the right-hand of the transitional phase, and focus only on the odd three-bar interchange of I, V, and i₇⁰ chords on an A♭ Major key.

These factors may make the Transitional Phase seem out of place at first glance, but upon closer inspection, common elements do show up here. First of all, the interplay of triplets in the left hand is found in previous sections before in both the right-hand of Theme A and B.

![Figure 2.1: Measures 5 – 9, Theme A](image1)

![Figure 2.2: Measures 21 – 22, Theme B](image2)

![Figure 2.14: Measures 33 – 34, Transitional Phase](image3)

Note the manually added parentheses in between measures 33-34 in Figure 2.12 – Chopin could have equally kept the common time element, especially in the edition where a right-hand melody does not exist. However, Chopin purposefully changes the meter because triplets with a 3/4 time signature is more typical of his Mazurkas. For example, see the use of triplets in Chopin’s Mazurka Opus 6, No. 1:
A more reasonable role, and most technical definition, of the transitional phase is to bring the key back home to c# minor, as the form of Chopin’s nocturne is in rounded binary. The Transitional Phase ends in a dramatic ascent from G#1 to G#6, highlighting the V chord of its c# minor tonic. But in a deeper sense, the transitional phase is a dream phase; dynamics wise, it starts from p and ends on ppp, without ever rising even to mp (more will be elaborated in Section III: Narrative Analysis).

**Foreword:**

The foreword is a brief four measure phrase containing a single melody repeated twice. It is meant to set the mood of the piece.

Interestingly, the four measure phrase and its corresponding harmony essentially summarize the entire piece. The two melodic phrases which break down the four measure phrase into two, equally represent [Themes A + B + Transition], and then [Theme A Revisited + Ending]. The first chord, the c# minor represents the first chord of Theme A, followed by its progression throughout the c# minor ending on the f# minor chord (the iv chord which also is the ending chord of Theme A antecedent). The fourth chord of the foreword then corresponds to the end of Theme A, in which Theme B starts with the transition to the A major (fifth chord in the Foreword). The two measure phrase in the foreword then ends with a G# major chord, which is equal to the start and end of the Transitional Phrase.
The second half of the foreword summarizes the piece from the beginning of Theme A revisited and the ending. This starts in measure 47 of the piece and progresses through c# minor until it hits the iv chord in measure 50 (corresponding with chord three of the foreword’s second half). The actual piece itself then moves to a finish of Theme A at the first chord of measure 58, to which the foreword’s second half fourth chord does as well. The four runs on the trill may be summarized as the fifth chord in the foreword’s second half, ending with the sixth chord (a V chord) which is identical to the finishing chord of the piece at measure 64-65. Notice how the entire piece is falling, but ends in a half cadence; it is never fully resolved. The figure below highlights each individual chord found throughout the piece that corresponds to each chord in the Foreword.
It seems as if Chopin created his own reductive analysis of the piece itself within the piece; notice how every single chord pictured in the figure are pivotal moments of the piece.

**III. Narrative Analysis**

Throughout the entire nocturne, Chopin gives ample leads as to the mood and atmosphere he sets in the piece. Many musicians choose to attach a visual to certain pieces and narrate it through as he or she performs. The entirety of this piece may therefore be summarized as the story of an old man at his deathbed. A single candle is burning the last of its remaining oil on the nightstand of a death bed in midnight. The room is lit by this single candle as it flickers against the light summer breeze from the dilapidated window to the right of the bed. When the candle flickers, momentarily losing artificial lighting, the ghostly white moonlight invades the darkness, casting long shadows from the furniture in the room. The coat hanger, for example, covered by protective tarp as if it has already been sealed into a coffin, casts a long shadow over the death bed of the sickly man. The sickly man knows well that his life is almost over, and he is scared of death. The candle wick struggles to stay lit; it is fighting as the old man is. Both know well that when the last of its light is drained, all that is left is darkness to the silence.

The nocturne starts. The foreword captures the tone of the piece; it is hopeless. Six tones sound like death tolls, both times moving in downward motions, each softer than the other. The old man takes a deep breath and begins to reminisce over his life. There is a long pause, and Theme A begins with a strong but hollow C# and G# - the third is missing. As the man whispers his life story, the candle flutters (trill in first measure of Theme A). The tone shifts from foreboding to lamenting. As the man ventures to the end of Theme A, it seems that he has suddenly delved upon a happier time in life, but it is false. He is old and past events begin to blur, colors in the music mix together. He recounts a similar event, perhaps a part of his childhood (Theme A₂ repeats). Flashback sequence: he is a child at a carnival; he is small as his eyesight only up to the knees of adults, but he is joyful, eating his cotton candy. All the sudden, he
loses sight of his parents. He looks up but only sees the shoulders of tall men in suits; he is shattered (measures 14-15). A young man picks him up and carries him on his shoulder. The young man whispers to him “it will be alright,” but the boy is confused (measures 16-18). The boy is put into the same wooden-walled room as he is in right now at old age. A single toy, a miniature rocking horse, lies on the ground; he is crestfallen (measures 19-20).

Flashback again: The boy grows older, he is in his teens. He walking with friends back home, he no longer feels lonely or so he seems in Theme B antecedent (21-24). But the minute he feels that he is stronger (measure 24), he is reminded that he has lost his real parents when his other friends return back home to the arms of their true loving parents. He walks the same path in a darker mood to where he stays. The young man, older now, that picked him up years ago leans against the doorway of his “new home,” he throws up his arms to the boy and assures him that all is well (measure 30-32).

The next few years zoom by quickly; the boy turns into a young adult. He goes to college, falls in love, gets married, and has children. He forgets his past and forgets about his search for real parents (Transitional Phase). But despite such joyful moods (triplets in Mazurka dance style), he is at times confused about what happened that fateful day at the carnival (emphasized by the “a” half diminished chords). Things begin to drift in and out of consciousness, and the boy closes his eyes. He awakes from his dream (end of Transitional Phase) because of pain in his chest and looks at his wrinkled hand. He is back into reality (beginning of Theme A revisited). The man stares at the lone candle on the nightstand to his left. It is fluttering against the wind; he does not have much time left. A sudden wheezing cough spurs blood on his white sheets (measure 49), and he struggles to gain consciousness (measures 50-52). The candle flutters against his coughs, trying to withstand the force of the wind as well. The old man struggles to survive (measures 53-57) as years through his life, years) as of memories, zoom past in his mind. He stops, and releases his struggle (beginning measure 58). The wind howls in the distance, and
the candle is blown out. The single stack of smoke emitting from the candle dances under the moonlight (measures 58-60) each time slower than the first as it thins out. The old man is at peace (measures 62-64), all is at peace as he ascends to the afterlife (measures 64-65).