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Kato, I., & Tomita, Y. (2018). Chopin's Canons: Technical development, chromaticism and its relationship with the aesthetics of his late style. ONgaku Kenkyu: Daigakuin Kenkyu Nenpo.

Published in:

ONgaku Kenkyu: Daigakuin Kenkyu Nenpo

Document Version: Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

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Chopin's Canons:

Technical Development, Chromaticism and Its Relationship with the Aesthetics of His Late Style

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Introduction

Chopin's use of counterpoint has been discussed by such scholars as Broniława Wójcik-Keuprulian, Gerald Abraham, Charles Rosen, Ludwik Bronarski, Jim Samson, Carl Dahlhaus, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (see References), but few studies attempt specifically to trace how Chopin's imitative counterpoint developed and matured. The present paper examines Chopin's use of imitative counterpoint with the aims of discovering how the technique developed together with chromaticism, so as to gain a better understanding of the aesthetics of his late style.

1. Chopin's imitative counterpoint in his studies

As far as we know, Chopin composed only one fugue: *Fugue* in A minor. All the other examples of his using counterpoint are either canons or free canonic passages that were incorporated into various compositions that are found, more or less exclusively, in two distinct periods: the early years during his education and the period of his late-style after 1841 as summarised in Table 1.

Following chronologically, we find two compositions by Chopin that were written under the influence of Vojtěch Živný and Józef Elsner during his education period. Chopin's abrupt use of imitative counterpoint is detected in the opening section of his *Variations* in B flat major on '*La ci darem la mano*' by Mozart Op. 2, as well as in the first two movements of his *Sonata* in C minor Op. 4, both written in 1827–28. In the *Variations* (Fig. 1), the motif first appears in the cello part, which is imitated by the second violin and the first violin a bar later. While the motif is developed in the upper strings in bars 2 to 4, the cello finds another motif, a form of lament bass, i.e. a chromatically descending tetrachord.

Table 1. The sections of works in which Chopin used the imitative counterpoint

Periods	Opus number	Compositions	Creation Dates	The sections where imitative counterpoint is used B.=Bar
The education period	2	Variations on "Là ci darem la mano"	1827-28	BB.1-8
	4	Sonata No.1	1827-28	1st and 2nd movements
Preparatory stage of the late style		Draft of Canon	c.1839	
	38	Ballade No.2	1839	BB.98-102, BB.104-108
		Fugue	c.1840	
The late style	47	Ballade No.3	1841	BB.1-6
	49	Fantasy	1841	BB.127-142, BB.294-309
	50 No.3	Mazurka	1842	BB.1-9. B.125
	52	Ballade No.4	1842-3	BB.135-145
	56 No.2	Mazurka	1843-4	BB.53-68
	56 No.3	Mazurka	1843-4	BB.183-185
	58	Sonata No.3	1844	Development of 1st movement
	59 No.3	Mazurka	1845	BB.97-102
	60	Barcarolle	1845-46	B.42, 46, 53, 57, 103, 104, 107, 108 (Overlap of the motifs)
	61	Polonaise-Fantasy	1846	BB.13-22
	62 No.2	Nocturn	1846	BB.40-42, BB.49-51
	63 No.3	Mazurka	1846	BB.65-73
	65	Sonata for Piano and Cello	1846-47	BB.78-87
	68 No.4	Mazurka	1849	BB.31-39

Fig. 1. Beginning of *Variations* in B flat major on 'La ci darem la mano' by Mozart, Op. 2 (1827 - 28)



Moving on to *Sonata* Op. 4 (Fig. 2-1), the theme appears to be taken from Bach's *Invention* no. 2 in C minor (BWV 773) (Fig. 2-2), and although incomplete, the theme is imitated in the bass in bar 2. As in the *Variations*, we also find a lament bass from the second half of bar 2. The layering of the lament bass with the imitative counterpoint appears to be a defining characteristic of Chopin's imitative counterpoint in the early period, which he used emphatically right at the beginning of large-scale works.

In the year before he composed these works (on 28 August Chopin 1826), admitted to the Main School of Music at the University Royal Warsaw (hereafter, the Main School of Music) and began the study of harmony and counterpoint with Józef Elsner whose teaching

curriculum is based on
Johann Philipp
Kirnberger's Die Kunst
des reinen Satzes in der
Musik
(Nowak-Romanowicz:

186-187). Even though Chopin never used imitative counterpoint before this period, we find such rudimentary types of contrapuntal techniques as contrary motion (Fig. inversion (Fig. 4) in the second movement of the Sonata, as if to attest to experimenting with the

Fig. 2-1. Beginning of the 1st movement of *Sonata* No.1 in C minor Op 4. (1827 - 28)



Fig. 2-2. J. S. Bach, Inventions No. 2 C minor BWV 773



Fig. 3. Beginning of the 2nd Movement of *Sonata* No. 1 in C minor Op 4. There is contrary movement in BB. 5 - 6.



Fig. 4. Beginning of the *Trio* of 2nd Movement of *Sonata* No.1 in C minor Op 4. Double Counterpoint is used.



techniques he has just learned from the textbook.

After graduating from the Main School of Music on 20 July 1829, Chopin did not use any imitative counterpoint for nearly 10 years. However, Chopin's continuing interest in counterpoint can be detected in a letter to his friend Titys Wojciechowski dated 12 September 1829. Having heard August Klengel performing in Prague, he writes, "[...] He played his fugues for me (one may deem them a continuation of Bach's: there are forty-eight of them and the same number of canons)." (Helman et al 2009: 303; English trans. Frick 2016: 128).1

2. Early years in France (early October 1831 to the summer of 1841)

When Chopin moved to Paris in early October 1831, he noticed the general absence of the Baroque especially Bach's music, which disappointed him. The early music revival that sprang up all over Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century was slow to take hold in France. Even much later, in a letter to Elsner dated 30 July 1840, Chopin bemoans, "[...] the Conservatoire lives on old symphonies, which it knows by heart — and the public is fortunate if once in a while they get to hear an excerpt from Handel or Bach. It is only the second year they are beginning to develop a taste for Handel, and that is only fragments, not entire works. [...]" (Sydow 1955 v.2: 9-10; English trans. Frick 2016: 323).² However, it should be noted the significant roles Alexandre Choron, Pierre Baillot François-Joseph Fétis and Ferdinand Hiller...etc. played in the early music revival in Paris in this time.³

In November 1838 Chopin visited Majorca with George Sand. It is generally thought that he brought there with him a copy of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. After Majorca where 24 Preludes Op.28 was completed by 22 January 1839,⁴ Chopin did not return to Paris directly but went to Nohant and stayed there until the autumn of that year. It was during this period that he carefully examined the text of Bach's WTC as given in his score and annotated it as we learn in Chopin's letter from Nohant to his friend Jullian Fontana in Paris dated 8 August 1839: '[...] Since I have nothing to do, I am correcting the Paris edition of Bach, not only the engraver's errors, but also the errors accepted by those who supposedly understand Bach (not claiming that I understand better, but out of the conviction that, from time to time, I can guess right.) [...]' (Sydow 1955 v.1: 353-4; English trans. Frick 2016: 309). It would be extremely exciting to see exactly what Chopin wrote in his copy; unfortunately, however, its whereabout is still unknown. In any case, it is significant that Chopin spent many hours studying Bach during this period.

Fig. 5. A Draft of Canon in F minor (TiFC F. 1737)



The fruit of Chopin's Bach study is evident in the various pieces from this time that make use of imitative counterpoint. Nothing seems to offer more striking proof than the draft manuscript of *Canon* in F minor which was written in c.1839 (Fig. 5).⁵ Notice that it makes use of numerous chromatic progressions. After bar 13 Chopin tried to worked out twice, but after much struggle, he crossed them out and replaced with a third version, and continued up to the first beat of bar 16. This manuscript manifests composer's frustration with contrapuntal writing. However, this canon, as will be mentioned later, found its way into his *Sonata for Piano and Cello* in G minor Op. 65.

3. Later years in France (Summer of 1841 to October 17, 1849)

Chopin's study of imitative counterpoint entered a new phase in 1841. In a letter to Fontana, written in Nohant in mid June, Chopin asks him to send the theoretical treatises by both Luigi Cherubini and Jean-Georges Kastner (Sydow 1955 v.2: 21; English trans. Frick 2016: 326), which indicates his intent to relearn the contrapuntal techniques and styles of the time from the latest publications.

Theoretical treatises published around that time commonly classified the system of counterpoint into "strict" and "free" and explained the former using the tonal system of their

time instead of that of plain chants. Both Cherubini's *Cours de contrepoint et fugue* and Kastner's *Théorie abrégée du contrepoint et de la fugue* use the present tonal system.

Cherubini, on the one hand, discsses all styles of counterpoint in his treatise starting with "[species] counterpoint", then moving on to "imitation", "double counterpoint" (including triple and quadruple counterpoints), and ending with "fugue". He considers fugues as "the transition between the system of strict counterpoint and of free compsition" (Cherubini 1835: 100; Cherubini 1841: 286). He explains that fugues are made up by four elements—subject, answer, countersubject and stretto—and classifies them into two principal types, tonal and real. A tonal fugue comprises the subject (tonic) and the answer (dominant), the type for which Cherubini had other strict rules as well. In contrast, the real fugue, which is based on an older model than the tonal fugue, commences with the subject in the tonic and proceeds to any other chord than that of the dominant. When all the voices are imitated exactly, it becomes a canon. Cherubini allows free modulation based on the methods employed by "modern composers" (Cherubini 1835: 115; Cherubini 1841: 333). He also allows the subject to be chromatic.

Kastner, on the other hand, generally takes a more liberal stance than Cherubini. In his view, the strict style is represented by Johann Joseph Fux who forbids large melodic leaps and enharmonic modulations, the techniques which are only permitted in the free style counterpoint. Kastner distinguishes the two styles of fugues by the devices employed therein: the strict fugues that employ the subject, the answer, the restatement of the subject, countersubject and episode, and the free fugues that lack one or a few of these devices (Kastner 1840: 4). He also permits the non-exact imitation of the subjects and answers, chromatic notes in the subject, and modulation to remote keys.⁶

Unlike Cherubini who considered the canon as a real fugue, Kastner recognised canons and fugues as separate entities. He classified canons into two kinds, viz. finite canons that have an end, and cyclical or perpetual canons that do not.

Although there are minor differences between the two treatises Chopin obtained in 1841, the both distinguished between pre- and post-eighteenth-century counterpoints as regards the use of chromatic notes in the subject and unrestrictive modulations. These are important points to consider when establishing the style of the nineteenth-century counterpoint (Osako 2017: 89-90).

Fig. 6 Chopin's copy of Ex. 220 by Cherubini *Chromatic Fugue in Four Parts, with Two Counter-subjects.* (TiFC F. 1677-4)



Between the two, Chopin appears to have studied Cherubini more closely, going so far as to copy out Cherubini's examples.⁷ Chopin's copy is not a mechanical duplicate of the original that was set in open score; Chopin rescored them in the grand staff. Among these are Example 220, which features the chromatic subject (Fig. 6). From these one may infer what kinds of knowledge Chopin could have gained in the process, ranging from the inner workings of fugues to the use of chromatic motifs.

4. Chopin's canons

At this point, let us look at the canons and the free canonic passages in Chopin's work more closely.

In the opening section of *Mazurka* in C# minor Op. 50, no. 3, which was composed between 1841 and 1842 (soon after reading the Cherubini), we find a canon being inserted twice (Fig. 7). An antecedent of the first canon appears in the soprano, which is followed by a consequent in the tenor two bars later at an octave lower. Following this, from the second beat of bar 5, the process is similarly repeated in the dominant key. This is a very simple

Fig. 7. Mazurka C Sharp minor Op. 50 No.3 (1841-1842)



example of Chpin's canon. What is fascinating, however, is that Chopin uses gypsy scale at the first canon whereby the fourth note of Hungarian gypsy scale is raised by a semitone. What is particularly interesting here is the way the modified pitch assumes its prominence in the melody as being the augmented 4th from the tonic, as if to suggest Chopin's predelection for the Polish folk music.By integrating an element of folk music into the canon, Chopin succeeds in creating a poetic and contemplative mood. But at this point in time, Chopin's canonic writing still remained in two parts.

In *Ballade* no.4 in F minor, which he wrote in 1842, Chopin inserts a free canonic passage in bars 135-45 (Fig. 8). The melody of the canon comprises motif A which comes from the first half of the primary theme of the Ballade, and motif B which comes from the second half of it (Fig. 9-1, 2). Motif A' includes an extra note but preserves the characteristic tritone descent, while motif B functions as cadential passage. In this segment the canon appears three times. The first canon starts with motif A in D minor in bar 135. Three quaver beats later, the consequent follows an octave lower. Motif B appears in bar 137 in the soprano and resolves in the fourth beat of bar 138 in its relative key, F major. The first canon begins in two parts, but closes in enriched texture by incorporating motif A in the alto. Then, the tenor, having already made its preparation on the third beat of the same bar (bar 138), starts with motif A in the parallel key of F minor as the antecedent of the second canon. It is followed by the alto and soprano as a consequent 1 and a consequent 2 in stretto, although the latter is technically the continuation of the tenor being transposed up by two octaves. Motif B appears in the fourth beat of bar 140, resolving in the relative key of Ab major on the first beat of bar 142. Although the second canon appears as if it is written in three parts, its

Fig. 8. Ballade No.4 in F minor Op.52 (1842)



technical make-up is essentially identical with the first canon. The third canon is likewise initiated in the tenor at the end of bar 141 (Fig. 10). This time, not only do the soprano and alto follow in stretto but

Fig. 9-1. Primary theme of Ballade in F minor Op. 52

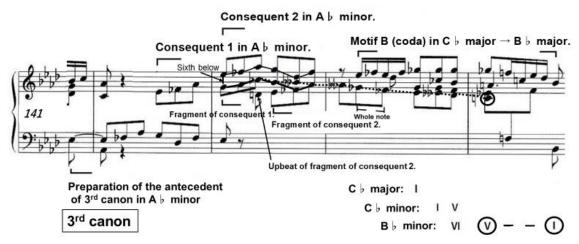


Fig. 9-2. Melody of the first Canon



also a new voice is added which I call the 'fragment of consequent', creating an illusion of thick five-part counterpoint. The fragment of consequent 1 starts on the first beat of bar 143 in the alto. It is in Cb minor, and this motif remains independent untill the third note, then after the fourth note it is absorbed into the harmony. This voice becomes a chromatic scale and descends to C4 on the first beat of bar 145. This chromatic scale is very important as it leads the harmony, as the bass, of this section to the dominant of Bb minor. With it, one more voice is added on the third beat of bar 143. The new voice is the 'fragment of consequent 2' with an upbeat, and this motif joins the chromatic scale at the fourth note

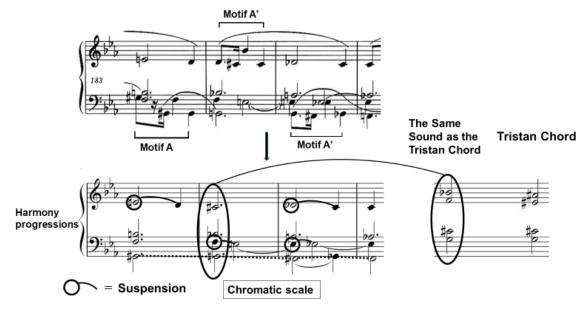
Fig. 10. 3rd canon of Ballade No.4



of this motif. Notice that the 'fragment of consequent 1' is sixth below the consequent 2 of the soprano, and creates an illusion that the fragment of consequent 1 is to continue with the fragment of consequent 2, i.e. G4-Ab4-Cb5-Bb4-Fb4-Ab4 (Fig. 10). Such a technique to merge two voices to create an illusive induction of motif probably manifests Chopin's artistic achievemet from his studies of counterpoint. And yet again Chopin used the chromatic scale, tactfully incorporating into the imitative counterpoint. The combination of two devices has already been seen in his early works as if they are some of his favourite compositional techniques.

Next piece to be discussed is *Mazurka* in C minor Op. 56 no. 3 which was written in 1843. In the closing section (bars 183-6), we find Chopin's use of imitative technique (Fig. 11). A kind of motif is employed in the framework of 'sideslip of the diminished seventh' three times in a row. Harmony is very important at this point. When Chopin was young, he used

Fig. 11. Mazurka in C minor Op. 56 No. 3



the chromatic progression of the diminished seventh chord crudely and abruptly; in his late years, however, he often used it with suspensions. The Wagner (Fig. 11).

Now we move on to Sonata for Piano and Cello in G minor Op. 65, which was written from 1846 to 1847. the In fourth movement, we find canons inserted three times from bars 73 to 86 (Fig.12). This is the Canon in F minor which we have seen before. but now transposed to G minor (Fig. 13-1, 13-2), with some minor changes, made to the opening of the theme, most notably the dominant note in crotchet inserted on the first beat of the theme. Change are also made to the rhythm and some details as well as this highly chromatic theme. The first canon begins on D3 in the

Fig. 12. Sonata for Piano and Cello in G minor Op.65 (1846 - 1847), 4th Movement



Ex. 13-1 Canon in F minor



Ex. 13-2 Sonata for piano and cello in G minor



cello part on the first beat of bar 73, which is followed a bar later by the concequent at the octave in the right-hand part of the piano (Fig.12). The second canon, starting at bar 78, is constructed in the same manner; just the canonic roles are interchanged between the two

Fig. 14. 3rd Canon of Sonata for piano and cello op.65 in G minor



parts (Fig.12). They are also in G minor, the tonic key. The third canon, however, is written in three parts, and shows very interesting features particularly the way the modulation is worked out.

In the third canon, the antecedent starts at Ab3 in the alto of the piano part on the first beat of bar 82 in D♭ minor, which is the augmented fourth of the tonic key of G minor (Fig. 14). Such a modulation was not endorsed by the eighteenth-centiry music theory. However, these keys have a relationship, i.e. its Neapolitan chord (of the enharmonic key, C♯ minor) functions as the dominant (of G minor). The key in the third canon changes at first on the fourth beat of the same bar (bar 82) from D♭ minor to C♯ minor by means of enharmonic modulation. The first consequent starts in bar 83 in the soprano of piano part in C# minor. The second consequent starts a bar later in the cello part in D minor, which is also the key of dominant [minor] of this Sonata. When we see the processes of the modulation from C♯ minor to D minor well, we understand that the modulation is prepared in bar 83. The bass of the third beat of bar 83 is sounded as the root of tonic chord of C♯ minor. But the chord on fourth beat is changed to the submedient (VI½) of C# minor, which is also the dominant of D minor, allowing smooth transition by means of the pivot-chord modulation. With it, the large leap in the first consequent in the cello part on the fourth beat of bar 83 is changed from minor sixth (C♯4 – A4) to diminished seventh (C♯5 – B♭5). The change of chord after hearing the bass note produces the distortions of tonality. In this way the chromatic modulation can be heard like a magic! In Chopin's musical language a close relationship between chromatic modulation and the diminished seventh exists. Such a chromatic modulation in upper line assumes a passionate character as manifested in Chopin's dynamic markings cresc. and f at

Fig. 15. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Exercise book, fol. 67v (Todd: 67)



this point. Indeed, D minor suits the cello better than C♯ minor for producing richer sound. Naturally, Chopin must have considered it and designed such a tonal scheme.

The third canon amply demonstrates some of the issues we have discussed so far: the element of chromaticism in motifs, the modulation to the key of the augmented 4th, the enharmonic and chromatic modulations, to name but four. Can we find these elements to be found in the counterpoint of the nineteenth century as mentioned by Cherubini and Kastner?

5. Discussion

The musical treatise of Kirnberger from which young Chopin learned the rudiments of music in Warsaw, was based on Jean-Philippe Rameau's thoroughbass theory. It was considered old-fashioned compared to the textbooks used in the Paris Conservatoire at the time.⁸ It is likely that it did not intrinsically offer much for Chopin's musical development. The omission of fugues in Kirnberger's treatise may also have been a factor.⁹

Students aiming to become composers need to study counterpoint not only from fragmentary exercises but also from training themselves thoroughly of writing fugues that have a systematic set of rules. It would seem that Chopin did not have this opportunity in his youth. In this respect, he was unlike Germans such as Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy who not only studid the treatises of Kirnberger but also did extensive practical exercises including fugues in his *Exercise Book*.¹⁰

There is no evidence that Chopin had such an exercise book. However, it is plausible that Chopin realized the importance of fugues for his artistic development in his own way through familiarising himself with fugues from such as those in Bach's *Well-Tempered*

Clavier in the latter half of 1830s, and decided to relearn the subject afresh from the latest theory books of the time. Still, he did not write fugues; he learned to write canons which he incorporated into his own works. While we may never know why he did not write fugues, there seems a possible answer that is worth pursuing further in future studies, that is: the element of improvisation. Fugues are bound by strict rules and procedures, particularly in the exposition whereby the subject entries need to be placed within the tonal framework of the tonic and dominant, the confinement of which perhaps did not suit Chopin's musicality. Would it not be the case that his desire for exploring free modulation that we have examined in the present paper manifests the answer?

Conclusion

As a genre, canon has no "countersubjects" or "episodes"; canon is the purest and the most condensed contrapuntal form, for which one just needs to focus on intervals and the progression of notes. As we have tried to demonstrate in this paper, Chopin considered these elements in his canonic passages very carefully, producing the melodies and harmonies full of chromaticism in his own unique ways by working out enharmonic, chromatic, and tritone modulations. How could this style, where he integrated pre-eighteenth-century counterpoint with mid-nineteenth-century ideas, be compared with the so-called "Third Style" (Bronarski: 238) of Chopin's late style? By extending both carefully considered placement of notes and richly chromatic and elaborate musical thinking to the areas where no imitation technique is used, Chopin appears to have created an entirely new style within his late-style period.

¹ It is also worth noting that in a letter dated 20 October 1829, he writes to his friend Titys Wojciechowski: "I have written a big Technical Exercise in my own special manner. ..." (Helman et al 2009: 317), hinting that he is now breaking away from Elsner's sphere of influence and moving on to discover his own style.

² According to Elwart (1880: 164), baroque music was not regularly performed in Paris until 1838; from 1839, the situation has changed gradually as the works of G. F. Handel, J.-Ph. Rameau and G. B. Pergolesi were heard more frequently.

³ Alexandre Choron contributed to the revival of religious music through his activities at Royal de Musique Religieuse (Haskell: 16-18). François-Joseph Fétis promoted the early music through his "Historic concert" (Haskell: 19-20). Pierre Baillot and Ferdinand Hiller often performed Bach and Mozart (Fauquet: 100 and 325).

- ⁴ The completion date of the *24 Preludes* is usually assumed from Chopin's own statement 'I am sending you the Preludes. *Copy them, you and Wolff*; I think there are no errors. ...' [emphasis in the original] in a letter to Julian Fontana written from Valldemossa, Majorca dated on 22 January (Sydow, I, 1955: 334-5; English trans. Frick 2016: 292),
- ⁵ The date of the Canon is given in Brown 1972: 132. The manuscript was discovered by Bronarski. It came from the collection of Mme André-Le Mire, No. 67, and now in the possession of the Fryderyk Chopin National Institute, TiFC F. 1737. See Bronarski 1958.
- ⁶ Kastner regarded this modulation as a specifically modern device that was not allowed previously.
- ⁷ These specimen were discovered by Bronarski. They are in the collection of Mme. André-Le Mire, No. 155–158. See Bronarski, op.cit. and now in the possession of the Fryderyk Chopin National Institute, TiFC F. 1677 1-4.
- 8 Maciej Gołąb, Chromatyka i tonalność w muzyce Chopina, Kraków: PWM, 1991, pp.5-47.
- ⁹ Although fugues are not discussed as an independent topic in his treatise, Kirnberger uses Bach's fugues as examples to explain various contrapuntal issues. Thus one cannot ignore the possibility that Chopin became aware of Bach's fugues and their pedagogical values through this channel. For the list of Bach's pieces and the extent of quotation, see Hans-Joachim Schulze (ed.), *Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs 1750-1800*, Bach-Dokumente III. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik; Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1972, no. 767, pp. 216-37.
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