Art Horizons
ISSN Print: 3079-5176
ISSN Online: 3079-5184
https://doi.org/10.63313/ah.9030

A Brief Analysis and Performance of Chopin's "Grande Valse Brillante，Op.18"

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How to cite this paper: Meng, K. C. (2025). A Brief Analysis and Performance of Chopin's "Grande Valse Brillante, Op.18". *Art Horizons*, 2(1), 1-5. ISSN Print: 3079-5176; ISSN Online: 3079-5184.
https://doi.org/10.63313/ah.9030
Published: 2025-11-26

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Abstract

Frédéric François Chopin, a great Polish pianist and composer of the Romantic period, devoted almost all of his creative activities to piano music, holding a pivotal position in this field. This paper takes Chopin's representative work, "Grande Valse Brillante," as the research object. Based on a brief introduction to Chopin's biography and the background of the composition, it analyzes the technical characteristics of the work from the dimensions of harmonic form, formal structure, compositional techniques, melodic features, rhythmic type and treatment, and emotional expression. Combining training and performance experience, it summarizes the performance techniques, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the compositional style and key performance points of the piece.

Keywords

Chopin; formal analysis; performance

1. Author Introduction

Frédéric Chopin was one of the most representative and influential composers and pianists of the 19th-century Romantic period. He dedicated almost his entire life and creative output to the piano, and his works are renowned for their beautiful melodies, exquisite technique, and profound emotion, earning him the title of "Poet of the Piano."

Chopin was born in Wola Żelazowa, near Warsaw, Poland. He displayed remarkable musical talent from a young age, beginning piano lessons at age 6, composing his first work (Polonaise in G minor) at age 7, and giving his first public performance at age 8, where he was hailed as "Mozart's successor." He received systematic musical education at the Warsaw Conservatory, during which time he composed many mature works. In 1830, at the age of 20, Chopin left Poland for Vienna to further his studies, carrying with him a handful of soil from his homeland. However, due to the outbreak of the November Uprising in 1830 and the resulting political turmoil in Poland, he was unable to return to his homeland. [1] In 1831, Chopin settled in Paris,

then the cultural and artistic center of Europe. He quickly became a darling of the Parisian salons with his elegant demeanor, exceptional piano skills, and poetic compositions, befriending artists such as Liszt, Berlioz, and Delacroix.

In 1837, Chopin began a nearly ten-year affair with the French writer George Sand. This relationship profoundly influenced Chopin's compositions. During his time with George Sand (including his stay in Mallorca), he created many of his greatest works. However, this relationship broke down in 1847, dealing Chopin a devastating blow.

After his breakup with George Sand, Chopin's health deteriorated rapidly due to a long-term tuberculosis. In 1848, he made his final tour in England and Scotland, returning to Paris in a weakened state. On October 17, 1849, Chopin died at his Paris residence at the age of 39. According to his wishes, his heart was removed and sent back to Poland, where it was placed in the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw.

2. Background of Composition

In 1831, Chopin arrived in Paris and quickly won over Parisian high society with his elegant demeanor, extraordinary piano skills, and poetic music. He became the most popular artist and piano teacher in aristocratic salons.

Chopin composed 21 waltzes in his lifetime. "Most of his waltzes are for piano solo, characterized by varied rhythms, strong expressiveness, and gorgeous melodies with superb technique; they are common pieces in concerts." [2] The *Grande Valse Brillante* was composed in 1833, during a period when Chopin had established himself in Paris and was gaining fame. At this time, he was full of confidence in life, and his compositions also showed a magnificent and confident side.

This waltz was not composed for concert halls, but for the luxurious salons of Paris. Its purpose was to create a magnificent and joyful atmosphere in social settings, while showcasing the performer's superb skills.

This work was dedicated to Laura Bosford, the daughter of a British banker in Paris, a student of Chopin, and a socialite in salon circles. Such dedications were very common in the music world at the time, serving both as an expression of appreciation and friendship for students and as a clever way to maintain social relationships. This indirectly confirms the "social nature" of this work.

3. Form Analysis

This piece can be divided into five sections. The first section is an introduction in E-flat major, consisting of four measures of repeated unison notes. When the original combination of half notes and two eighth notes is transformed into two quarter notes interspersed with two eighth notes, the compression of note values instantly creates a rapid and intense auditory atmosphere. The dynamic marking of "f" and the highly recognizable rhythm, like a blaring horn, clearly signal to the listener that the ball is about to begin.

The second section is the exposition, still primarily in E-flat major, in binary form.

This section requires the performer to run their fingers quickly. Section A, measures 5-12, has a four-phrase square structure. Harmorily, it is based on a progression from the dominant seventh chord in root position to the tonic chord in root position, then back to the dominant seventh. Each measure's upward sequence propels the melody upward, ultimately reaching the powerful fourth dominant chord. The ninth measure introduces a second chord, and measures 9-12 use non-chordal techniques to delay the actual chord's appearance while simultaneously descending in tempo and weakening the dynamics, contrasting with the first phrase and converging the melodic line. The alternation of the same texture between ascending and descending sections creates a lively and joyful ballroom scene, concluding with a perfect cadence of SII-6—K46—D7—T. Section B (measures 21-37) shifts to the subdominant key of A major, employing a structure of four parallel phrases. Repeated notes and rapid arpeggio runs work together to create a beautiful main melody, with crescendos and diminuendos continuously building the ballroom atmosphere and pushing it to a climax. The left-hand accompaniment texture in both sections A and B has a distinct waltz style, possessing a waltz-like rhythm. In the measure preceding the first phrase, the melody consists of repeated notes and descending arpeggios, with the left hand maintaining the tonic chord sustaining; the following measure switches to ascending arpeggios, contrasting with the previous measure. The A section (measures 38-52) and the B section (measures 53-69) are repeated, which are variations on the original musical sections. Both sections end with the tonic chord.

The third section, the middle section, is in D-flat major. This part is more elegant, like an intermission in a dance. Section C, measures 70-86, is constructed with four equal-length, echoing phrases, with the second, third, and fourth phrases derived from the first. The first phrase has a 2+2 measure structure, with each subsequent measure ascending a third from the previous one, giving the melody a distinct rise and fall. The three short dominant notes at the end of each phrase in this section retain the musical dynamism while reinforcing the sense of belonging. Section D, measures 87-103, shifts to the relative key of A♭ major, following the development logic of section C. The melody is centered on arpeggios and rapid scale runs, with the use of ornaments giving it a humorous and playful flavor. At the transition between section D and the recapitulation of section C, the tempo change from "Poco rit" (slowing down) to "a Tempo" (returning to the original tempo) greatly enhances the musical tension. Section C, measures 104-118, is presented as is, returning to the key of D♭ major, with a clear structure, and concludes with a satisfying tonic chord. Section E, measures 119-136, consists of four regular phrases. The lyrical lines of overlapping thirds and sixths create a sense of harmony, while the addition of rests adds a dynamic interplay of stillness and movement, like the movements of a pair of perfectly synchronized partners on a dance floor. The third and fourth phrases, by raising the first and second phrases by an octave, allow the music to flow freely and gracefully within two octaves.

The F section (measures 137-151) enters the B-flat minor key, with each phrase developing from the first. The fourth phrase is formed by a descending second progression from the second. The extensive use of appoggiaturas and chromatic scales gives the music a strong sense of undulation while maintaining a seamless flow, creating an effect like twinkling stars in the night sky. This not only brings the ball to its climax but also becomes the highlight of the entire work. The E section (measures 152-168) recapitulates, returning to D-flat major, presenting the original E section exactly as it was.

The fourth part is a recapitulation in simple ternary form, essentially a recapitulation, with some reduction in the content of section B.

The fifth part is the coda, presenting a comprehensive recapitulation effect. Based on the tonic sustain, it weaves together the core material from sections A, B, and the F section of the ternary middle section. After the first beat of measure 291, the supplementary cadence follows, and the melody continues to climb to the high register, just like the atmosphere of a ballroom being pushed to a glorious climax, finally concluding the entire piece with a full and powerful force.

4. Performance Techniques

1. Rhythmic Foundation: The Lively Motion of Triple Beat

Emphasize "strong-weak-weak" (emphasis on the first beat, lightness on the second and third beats), avoiding a mechanical "bouncing" feel—the first beat is achieved by the natural weight of the arm sinking down, and the second and third beats by the fingertips flicking lightly, like the shifting of weight in dance.

The left-hand accompaniment, "bass + chords," needs to be neat and stable: bass notes are delivered with the heel of the palm (short and full), and chords are played with the fingertips quickly and closely touching the keys (light and nimble), laying a "flowing foundation" for the melody.

2. Melodic Expression: A Blend of Brilliance and Singability

The right-hand melody mainly consists of scales, arpeggios, and ornaments (tremolo, trills). Scales are played using "legato," with the fingertips sliding along the keys (avoiding excessive finger lifting) to ensure smoothness; ornaments should be fast and clear, slightly weaker than the main melody, not overpowering it.

In the climax (such as the middle section in F-flat major), the melodic line is thickened: the arm strength assists the fingertips, resulting in a full and bright tone, but the touch must be clean to avoid noise caused by "slamming" the keys. [3] 3. Touch and dynamics: contrast of layers is key Touch switching: legato is used for lyrical phrases, staccato for light passages, and spiccato requires the fingertips to "tap" (rather than the arm to exert force) to reflect agility. Dynamics control: follow the rise and fall of "crescendo-dim," for example, from a weak note (p) to a brilliant forte (f), the transition is natural with the increase or decrease of arm weight, rather than a sudden exertion; the chords in the coda should be supported by the whole body,

resulting in a brilliant and resonant tone. 4. Pedal Use: Clarity and Clearness

Core Principle: "Clarity First, Atmosphere Second"—Change the pedal (or half-pedal) once per measure for the left-hand accompaniment to avoid bass confusion; the right-hand melody can have its pedal extended (half-pedal) to enhance resonance, but ensure notes don't stick together.

The pedal can be slightly deeper in the climax to create a sense of "brilliance"; use a shallow pedal in lyrical passages to preserve the purity of the melody.

5. Tempo Control: Stability with Fluidity

The overall tempo is Allegro brillante, but it needs to be "stable without being rigid"—the tempo can be fine-tuned according to the breath of the phrase (e.g., slightly slower on long notes, maintaining stability in note drops), avoiding excessive speed that leads to rhythmic chaos.

At key changes or transitions between sections (e.g., from the theme to the middle section), the tempo transition should be smooth and not abrupt.

Conclusion: Friedrich Chopin's musical compositions are not only a brilliant gem of 19th-century Romantic music but also a profound fusion of personal life experiences and the spirit of the times. This article, through a review of Chopin's life, reveals how his Polish national sentiment, exile experiences, and artistic pursuits collectively constituted the spiritual core of his works; it analyzes the creative background from the perspectives of social trends and cultural context, clarifying the artistic characteristics of his works that are both rooted in national tradition and transcend the limitations of their time; through a detailed analysis of musical forms, it showcases Chopin's innovative expression within the framework of traditional forms—whether it is the lyrical structure of the nocturnes, the unity of functionality and artistry in the etudes, or the dramatic structure of the ballades, all demonstrate his unique exploration of musical aesthetics; and the discussion of performance treatment focuses on practical dimensions such as rhythmic flexibility, touch technique, and tonal layers, providing a professional and personalized path for the artistic representation of his works.

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