Strength and Weakness: Gendered Dualities in Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie Op. 61

Hannah C. Young
University of Redlands

Follow this and additional works at: https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors

Part of the Musicology Commons

Recommended Citation
STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS:
GENDERED DUALITIES IN CHOPIN’S POLONAISE-FANTAISIE, OP. 61

Hannah Young
University of Redlands Honors Thesis
16 January 2016
When historical critics referred to Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), they described him as "an elegiac poet" and "the Ariel of pianists."\textsuperscript{1} Such descriptors create a strong association between the feminine and Chopin personally, an association that then extends to his works. This understanding of Chopin's music as "feminine" creates issues for pianists who may feel constricted to a stereotype that often does not address the complex interweaving of themes and generic traits that tend to challenge our expectations of what constitutes masculinity and femininity in music. For this project, I have chosen to analyze Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61, because as one of his later works it represents his style at its most mature stage and, as a larger piece, it offers a greater opportunity for discussion than one of his shorter pieces such as the waltzes and nocturnes. Through my analysis, I intend to examine the ways in which Chopin's piano music is understood as gendered, and how these stereotypes might affect one's performative decisions.

First, the question must be addressed: can music express gender? Musicologists such as Solie and McClary have already examined this issue in depth, but the short answer is that music has been described or defined in masculine/feminine dualties since the 18th century, when Rousseau labeled the melismatic Old Roman plainchant "effeminate and theatrical," favoring instead the more restricted (and, it is implied, more masculine) Gregorian style.\textsuperscript{2} His contemporary, theorist Georg Andreas Sorge, also made a gendered distinction between major and minor triads, relating the former to the male, "splendid and perfect," and the latter to the female, "not as complete as the first, but also lovely and pleasant to hear."\textsuperscript{3} In both instances, feminine is associated with lyricism, excess, weakness, and

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item McClary, Susan, \textit{Feminine Endings}. University of Minnesota Press (1991), p. 11
\end{enumerate}
incompleteness, while masculine equates to clarity, order, strength, and wholeness. Perhaps then the initial question should be reworded. In their descriptions of what constitutes masculine versus feminine music, Rousseau and Sorge create a rather limited model of gender which allows for no convergence between dual characteristics. Evidently music can construct gender to a certain extent, in that it either reinforces or challenges dominant ideas on the subject.

If one were to group composers according to these dualities, it would seem that Chopin belongs in the feminine category. He shied from public concerts, instead performing in the more intimate atmosphere of the salon, unlike his colleague and arch-nemesis Franz Liszt. He had a passionate nine-year relationship with George Sand, the cross-dressing feminist author whose sharp intellect and cigar habit caused some critics to question whether she wasn't actually a man—perhaps also insinuating that Chopin, who taught piano lessons and had a frail constitution, was the woman in their relationship. Indeed, his death almost resembled the demise of a soprano in the last act of an opera: he died from tuberculosis two years after Sand left him. Composer Giacomo Orefice made such a parallel when he wrote Chopin, an opera in which Chopin reminisces on his life from his deathbed. The subsequent interpretation of his piano works as “feminine” might be due to the historic portrayal of him as a frail, introverted composer, ever pining for his native Poland. There is also the fact that Chopin composed primarily in “small” forms. With the exception of his piano concertos, he never composed orchestral music, and he failed to compensate for it with extensive touring. His shorter works, including the nocturnes, waltzes, preludes, and mazurkas, were designed in part for middle to upper-class women, whose ability to play the piano was considered a genteel skill, useful for entertaining company or charming potential suitors. Brief pieces were appropriate because they allowed the woman to display

---

skill without taxing her mental capabilities.\textsuperscript{7} Chopin's works were popular among female consumers, and for some reviewers, this translated to him being an androgynous figure capable of bridging the alleged gap between feminine sensibilities and masculine ingenuity.\textsuperscript{8} In Chopin's case, it seems his contemporaries had bought into the Romantic era's belief that music was the expression of an individual's deepest self. The result was and remains a never-ending attempt to determine whether Chopin is masculine or feminine, as researchers and theorists continue to categorize aspects of his piano music according to dualities.

These dualities reinforce gendered implications within and between the titular genres of Chopin's Op. 61 based on their formal traits. The polonaise adheres to a ternary structure; in contrast, the fantasia is defined by its lack of fixed form.\textsuperscript{9} The polonaise is characterized by a distinctive rhythmic pattern and regular downbeats that give it a march feel despite its triple meter; one definition says it bears “martial overtones.”\textsuperscript{10} The military connotation would be enough to designate it as masculine, but Chopin's previous works within the genre include other elements that emphasize this interpretation. Both the Op. 40 and Op. 53 polonaises open with swift ascending gestures that end poised on a long downbeat, as though the theme, full of bravado, wants to convince the listener of its coolness. Thick, forceful chords throughout the A section denote power. Even the structure of Chopin's polonaises relates to a gendered reading: his use of ternary form, where the martial theme is contrasted with a more lyrical B section before it makes a triumphant return, fits the representation of the masculine as rational and ordered. The passionate elements Chopin incorporates, such as the showy \textit{stile brilliante} passages and overreaching phrases, are still subject to an overarching reason.

Meanwhile, the fantasia's amorphous character is similar to the spontaneous improvisation associated with genius performers, so that it embodies both excess (it has no formal restraints) and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{7} Kallberg, “The Harmony of the Tea Table,” \textit{Chopin at the Boundaries}, p. 39
\textsuperscript{8} Kallberg, “Small Fairy Voices,” p. 66, 67
\textsuperscript{9} Arnold, Denis; Lalage Cochrane, “Fantasia,” \url{www.oxfordmusiconline.com} (accessed 13 August 2015)
\end{flushleft}
creativity (it allows the composer/performer to express their full artistic ability). These traits have been considered feminine since the Romantic period, when artists “were thought to be different from other men precisely because they incorporated 'feminine' imagination with 'masculine' reason, madness with craft.”\textsuperscript{11} Excess, here defined as the creative push against pre-established boundaries, is equated with the irrational and is undesirable unless framed within some sort of social organization. But the fantasia denies formal organization; it is irrational in its exploration of material and thus categorized as feminine.

One might assume, then, that the Polonaise-Fantaisie Op. 61 is a juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine with an internal narrative in which the former must overcome the latter. However, Chopin does not ascribe to such a narrative. Instead, he subverts gendered stereotypes through his handling of the two titular genres and their respective traits. The result is a piece that favors the feminine even as it embodies the unique characteristics of Chopin's style.

The importance of the feminine is evident from the beginning. The Polonaise-Fantaisie starts with an eight-measure introduction reminiscent of the opening gesture in Chopin's first Ballade. Dotted rhythms displace the downbeat, creating an immediate sense of imbalance; the repeated ornamental arpeggiations, ascending from the lowest to the highest registers of the piano, resist the confines of time and meter. This is the Fantasia: its shifting, impetuous character unfolds throughout the introduction, reaching its full expression at m. 9. In some respects, it conforms to gendered expectations. It stresses 'weak' beats through the afore-mentioned dotted rhythms, as well as syncopation. It also makes liberal use of chromaticism, “which enriches tonal music but which [according to the dictates of the Western tonal tradition] must finally be resolved to the triad for the sake of closure.”\textsuperscript{12} These traits are two further examples of excess: the accented off-beats push the phrase beyond the barline, undermining its

\textsuperscript{11} McClary, p. 103
\textsuperscript{12} McClary, p. 16
authority, while the chromaticism postpones a tonal resolution. Once again, excess represents a denial of "masculine" reason (whether appearing as formal structure, regulated meter, or functional harmonies), making it "feminine" by default.

On the other hand, the Fantasia also challenges a feminine stereotype. The introduction establishes A-flat as the tonal center: the dotted notes within the first beats of m. 1-3, 7-8 outline a fundamental descent from E-flat to A-flat in the minor mode. This is confirmed in m. 18-19, where a V7-i cadence provides a firm close to the opening section. The dotted rhythms also hint at a French overture, suggesting fanfare or a march rhythm, another "masculine" gesture. One might argue that the use of rhythm and the clear delineation of tonality is an attempt to frame the excessive traits of the Fantasia, to contain its irrational character within a larger, ordered system. At very least, they seem to temper its passion and forcefulness, which will become more apparent later. However, Chopin's approach in establishing the key area suggests a different relationship between the Fantasia and the tonic. Each note in the fundamental descent falls a sixteenth note after the downbeat; the resolution to the V7-i cadence is postponed until the second beat of measure 19, making it a "feminine" ending. Instead of containing the Fantasia's excess, these tonal gestures validate it. As a result, the Fantasia becomes associated with A-flat major/minor and, as shall be discussed when we reach the A reprise, with closure, which is usually described as masculine in nature. "[S]atisfactory resolution – the ending always generically guaranteed in advance by tonality and sonata procedure – demands the containment of whatever is semiotically or structurally marked as 'feminine,' whether a second theme or simply a non-tonic key area." But in the Opus 61, the so-called feminine genre is linked to resolution from the beginning, inverting gendered expectations.

Likewise, the Polonaise denies a strictly "masculine" interpretation. Its distinctive rhythmic motive begins strong (m. 22) but is interrupted without warning by a lyrical, mezza voce passage. When

---

the Polonaise raises a feeble protest in the middle voice (m. 25, 29), a fragment of the Fantasia emerges to silence it, revealing that this aria-like melody is but a softer incarnation of the Fantasia (compare m. 26 and m. 14). It builds in texture and dynamic, reaching its apex at measure 40; then it gradually diminishes and returns to its original character (m. 44-50). At this point it seems as though the Polonaise has been forgotten, but not so: a brilliant passage in thirds leads up to its return, this time with a theme in octaves (m. 56). However, the Polonaise still isn’t the aggressive, take-charge character one would expect. Although the fortissimo dynamic and large chords should convey a sense of power (and by extension control), the syncopation in the right hand undermines the authority of the rhythmic motive in the left. Instead of a heroic ascent that reconfirms the tonal center, minor seconds and tritone leaps pull the theme down in an erratic descent that culminates in a rapid chromatic scale. It seems that the characteristic elements of the Fantasia have pervaded the Polonaise and that, contrary to convention, the latter is incapable of “overcoming” the former. Not until the section cadences (m. 65-66) does the Polonaise reassert itself: the bass line rises like the proverbial Phoenix, albeit a quiet and cautious one, while a reaching gesture in the right hand grasps for control. The ubiquitous rhythmic motive appears in the middle voice, too tentative to direct the piece from the stronger bass position. Instead, ascending lines and brilliant sixteenth-note passages drive it forward, though towards what destination is unclear, as it moves from A-flat major to the unrelated E major and back. Unlike Chopin’s other works in the genre, this Polonaise can offer no resolution, no sense of fulfillment.

On one hand, the Polonaise retains all the characteristics associated with its genre; on the other, these traits have been stripped of their power, so that the Polonaise fails to realize its heroic ideal. This failure leads to its eventual undoing. After its transition from E back to A-flat, it is interrupted yet again by the lyrical Fantasia, singing over a flowing triplet pattern in the bass (m. 94-115). When the Polonaise returns, it is unrecognizable: the dolce theme in B-flat contains neither the militant rhythmic

14 McClary, p. 15
motive nor the headstrong rush of sixteenth notes that marked its previous appearances. The thing that
initially distinguishes it from the Fantasia is its underlying eighth-note pulse, which contrasts with the
prior triplets and imparts the sense that the piece has slowed down. But as it continues, the Polonaise
character – at least, the dithering, timid version explored here – becomes more apparent. The leaping
bass in measure 120 recalls the first time the Polonaise gains a moment of control in the piece (m. 56);
likewise, the left hand part in measure 126 is an echo of an earlier gesture (m. 52). In the same section,
the grasping, almost desperate ascent in the right hand is familiar because, although it has no
doppelgänger, it resembles other moments of ascension in that it embodies this Polonaise's attempt to
assert dominance. However, it must be admitted, this iteration of the Polonaise is the weakest; it is also
the most affected by “feminine” traits, such as lyricism (m. 116-121), chromaticism (m. 126, 128), and
florid ornamentation (m. 123, 126). As these traits culminate, the Polonaise falls apart: it manages to hit
G6 before its jagged descent based around minor seconds, a prevalent interval in the Fantasia's
ascending flourishes throughout the introduction. The descent is both loud and dramatic, with octave
leaps between the dissonant seconds, as though the piece has come unhinged (m. 132-133, 136-138). It
at once demonstrates the power of the Fantasia, which controls even this moment of devastation, and
the ineffectual nature of the Polonaise, which cannot fulfill its ideal. With this realization, the latter
genre collapses, bringing us to the close of the A section.

What remains of the Polonaise is the ternary form that governs the Opus 61. It provides an
overarching structure but also allows Chopin to explore multiple genres. In his other polonaises, the B
section is usually either a trio or a mazurka, which provides a lean-textured and lyrical contrast.\(^{15}\) In
this piece, the B section is a nocturne, a genre which “transferred to the keyboard the cantilena of Italian
opera.”\(^{16}\) Over an undulating bass, the quiet melodic line marked il canto sostenuto resembles
something from the vocal repertoire, perhaps a chorale or lyric aria with its long phrases, primarily

---

15 Downes, Stephen, “Polonaise,” www.oxfordmusiconline.com
...stepwise motion, and narrow range (m. 148-180). Its association with vocal works characterizes the nocturne as a “feminine” genre, and such gendering is further reinforced through brief allusions to the Fantasia, such as the rhythmic motive that appears in the melody at m. 169. In the context of the Opus 61, the nocturne serves as an interlude after an extended moment of devastation; it also demonstrates some of the most graceful and delicate aspects of “feminine” expression.

As the piece moves toward its end, tonal and formal cues prepare the listener for Chopin's final subversion of expectations. The B section closes with an unsatisfactory diminished seventh chord (m. 180), anticipating the closure that the A reprise will bring. Here the reprise is not a straight repetition of material from the A section; instead, it bears a closer resemblance to the recapitulation of sonata form, as it modulates from B to A-flat major while expounding on fragments of previously introduced ideas. However, unlike the recap of the Classical sonata, where a “masculine” primary theme overthrows a “feminine” secondary theme before returning triumphant to its original key, the Opus 61 reprise suggests that the feminine Fantasia is the dominant genre. Although its initial theme never explicitly returns, the Fantasia's character permeates the whole reprise. The lyrical theme that appears in measure 224 moves upward by minor seconds, the same interval that tore down the Polonaise. Chromaticism carries the reprise to a stunning finale in A-flat major (m. 251-254): constant triplets propel long melodic phrases forward, reminiscent of a previous passage (m. 94), which also shares the same asymmetrical phrase groupings. The emphasis on A-flat as the tonal center, with repeated V-I cadences (m. 272—end), alludes to the introduction and its establishing of the piece's key. Again, it must be noted that throughout this piece the Fantasia has the strongest moments of tonal stability.

Of course, the ambiguity of the reprise means that one could argue the regular downbeats, overall ascending line, and forward momentum are remnants of the Polonaise, and that the reprise is actually a draw between two opposing genres. However, there are two instances which discourage such

an interpretation. The first of these is a direct quote of the Fantasia (m. 214-215): the introduction's melismatic gesture appears at a crucial moment in the reprise, allowing for the modulation from B to A-flat major (what is, in effect, a Neapolitan chord in B also serves as a V/vi in A-flat). The second is actually a single statement of the Polonaise rhythm (m. 232-233), which occupies a strong position in the bass, but begins on an offbeat (displacing its accent to the downbeat of the next measure), and is overwhelmed by a rapid descending line in the right hand. In fact, each time a trait associated with the Polonaise tries to assert itself (such as the ascending sixteenths starting at m. 238), some subtle aspect of the Fantasia arises in answer. Throughout the piece, the feminine nature of the Fantasia either corrupts, absorbs, or deflects any oppositional material, making its overthrow of the emasculated Polonaise seem inevitable by the end.

The gendered duality of the Polonaise-Fantaisie affords an interesting opportunity for interpretation on the part of the performer. A pianist who approaches this piece as though it is one of Chopin’s nocturnes, emphasizing melodic line and lyricism above all else, demonstrates a fundamental ignorance of the piece. As the previous analysis has shown, the Opus 61 is a complex work, and the performer must be able to make clear the gendered aspects of both titular genres, as well as distinguish between a redirection of listener expectations and an actual shift in character. In some ways, the pianist is more limited in their capacity for such subtle distinctions than, for example, a singer, because whereas the latter has facial expressions and words and costuming to help them express an abstract ideal, the pianist has only technical tools such as phrasing and articulation. The quandary, then, is for the pianist to employ these tools so that they effectively express the underlying tensions between masculine and feminine, while also taking into account historical accuracy and the composer’s stated intentions.

In addressing such a challenge, it is easier to parse broad concepts into more manageable details. For instance, the Fantasia has two sides: the passionate, dotted-rhythm driven primary theme and its
more subdued, lyrical counterpart. The pianist must be able to relate these so that the audience understands they are the same idea expressed in different ways. To this end, the pianist could voice the uppermost line in measures 14-15, as well as 17-19, so that when the same line recurs as a mezza voce melody (m. 26), it is easily recognized. This melody occurs throughout the piece, often in less obvious places (such as the agitato at m. 108, or fragmented in the B section at m. 169, 171), and serves as a motive for the feminine Fantasia throughout. It also serves as a point of reorientation for the audience: as Chopin moves away from a stable key area and toward instability\(^\text{17}\) (as demonstrated through the gradual dissolution of the Polonaise), the continual appearance of the Fantasia is an assurance, a constant that the audience learns to anticipate, even up to the re-establishment of A-flat as the tonal center. Thus it’s appropriate for a pianist to bring out this theme whenever it appears, since it affirms the Fantasia’s eventual dominance, as well as unifying what could seem like unrelated sections.

Likewise, the Polonaise should be given due emphasis, not only in overt appearances (such as the isolated rhythmic motive at m. 22) but also in its moments of instability. For instance, in the brief E major section that begins at measure 80, the polonaise rhythm in the middle voice and the ascending line in the bass are distinctive traits of the genre, although here Chopin inverts their usual positions. These two traits drive this section toward the next modulation; however, most pianists would only voice the topmost line, believing that the fragmented melody is the most important aspect. In fact, the difficulty and complexity of the Polonaise-Fantaisie is that it requires the pianist to create layers of thematic material, so that the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine traits is evident to the audience. As a result, the pianist will have to bring out multiple voices in such a way that they form a coherent whole. This involves a more contrapuntal approach than most people associate with Chopin: the pianist must be aware of counter-melodies and fragments of prior themes, and bring them to the foreground when appropriate.

---
\(^{17}\) Kallberg, “Chopin's Last Style,” *Chopin at the Boundaries*, p. 98
Granted, voicing is only one aspect of performance. Articulation is another: for example, the pianist might use a rounded tone and legato touch for the “feminine” Fantasia, and then use a harsh attack and staccato touch to express the “masculine” Polonaise character. Both of these techniques are subject to the broader issue of phrasing. How the pianist shapes each phrase – including points of emphasis, climax, and release – can to a large extent dictate how the audience hears the overarching structure of each section, thus either obscuring their understanding of the piece or enabling them to make connections between seemingly unrelated parts, resulting in a more meaningful listening experience. In other words, the pianist must have an intimate knowledge of the pivotal details in the Polonaise-Fantaisie and be able to shape them into a cohesive whole that resonates with an audience. Perhaps this sounds obvious, but when approaching a piece from a very specific and nuanced point of view – such as Chopin's inversion of gendered expectations – it can be easy to fall back on broad ideals of performance practice, or else become so mired in details that the work falls apart under its own weight. For this reason, it might benefit the pianist to find a recurring idea and note how Chopin uses it across various sections; then, the pianist could draw a larger conclusion about its function in the piece, and determine how it should be performed. One example would be the polonaise rhythm that first appears at measure 22. As previously examined, it reoccurs multiple times over the course of the A section, but each time it is compromised in some way until it is overwhelmed by the Fantasia. Perhaps the pianist could introduce this rhythmic motive with a sharp, firm attack; but as the section progresses, they play the motive less aggressively, making its pronouncement less forward. The pianist might even phrase certain passages so that the Polonaise rhythm beats counter to the melodic line (the slurs and syncopation in mm. 56-59 seems to indicate such an interpretation). Of course, such decisions belong to the pianist, and no two artists will perform a passage the same way, even if their understanding of it is similar.
In his masterful Polonaise-Fantaisie, Chopin takes two genres that could be categorized according to masculine/feminine dualities and subverts the subsequent gendered expectations. The Polonaise, which bears the “masculine” characteristics of a clear-cut form, regular downbeats, and a martial rhythmic motive, might ordinarily be the dominant genre, or at least the one that introduces and brings closure to the piece. Instead, the Fantasia, with its dissonance, syncopation, and long legato phrases, proves to be the singular constant, threading pieces of itself through various sections in order to make them a whole. Eventually, elements of the Fantasia corrupt the Polonaise, which ultimately is absorbed into the “feminine” genre. Such a large-scale subversion is not something which is associated with Chopin, whose personal history and prolific output of short lyric pieces are often conflated to create a waifish caricature of the actual composer. The pianist who seeks to undertake a performance of the Polonaise-Fantaisie, especially from the perspective of the above analysis, must understand the layers that comprise it in order to make it comprehensible to an audience. It is not enough to emphasize the melody, obey the given dynamics, and group phrases according to pedal and slur markings. The pianist must consider the details that characterize both the Polonaise and the Fantasia, and bring them to the foreground so that the tension between them is obvious to anyone listening, whether they are familiar with the piece or not. Of course, how the pianist realizes these details and shapes them into a singular interpretation will vary from person to person. As is always the case in art, the possibilities are endless, but the performance must be well-informed.