The Anatomy of Revolution: Overthrowing Conventional Phrase Rhythm in Chopin's Opus 10 No. 12

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THE ANATOMY OF REVOLUTION: 
OVERTHROWING CONVENTIONAL PHRASE RHYTHM 
IN CHOPIN’S Op. 10 No. 12 

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Introduction

In his brilliant 1989 book *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music*, William Rothstein claims that, “The later works of Chopin—those composed after 1840—are known for their often dense chromaticism...During the decade of the 1840’s both [Chopin and Wagner] were moving toward an increasingly seamless style of melodic writing.”¹ A little later, he claims, “In its more advanced stages, especially in some of [Chopin’s] later works, there seems to be an attempt to transcend phrase boundaries altogether.”² The relevant point is that Rothstein is reluctant to assign pre-1840 Chopin pieces the quality of phrasing that he would assign to later pieces. This paper aims to assure Rothstein that such reluctance is unwarranted: advanced, “transcendent” quality of phrasing (including “endless melody”) can be found in Chopin’s earlier etudes, namely Op. 10 No. 12, subtitled *Revolutionary*. Phrase rhythm is intimately tied with notions of melody, harmony and form, so those topics will be discussed as they are relevant.

What does Rothstein mean when he writes that Chopin, “attempt[s] to transcend phrase boundaries altogether?” As I see it there are two interpretations: (1) An analytical interpretation, where *Chopin the Innovator* is consciously attempting to dissolve recognized phrase structures and yet retain musically meaningful phrases, or (2) A romantic interpretation, where *Chopin the Artist* is “transcending” analytical notions of phrase and composing from some place of pure musical thought. Though this paper emphasizes the analytical, the romantic interpretation should not be dismissed, and I will return to it toward the end.

Rather than attempt an exhaustive analysis of Op. 10 No. 12, I will focus on particular characteristics that are salient to my thesis. Nevertheless, we will encounter harmonic, formal,

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² *Ibid.* 233
phrase, melodic, contrapuntal, and speculative analysis and content. For aesthetic purposes, I have relegated all musical examples to an appendix, rather than dispersing them throughout the text.

**A Call to Arms**

In November 1831, an uprising of Polish nationalists was brutally suppressed by the Russian Empire. A possibly apocryphal tale relates how Chopin realized his resultant grief in this impassioned etude, threshing it out in less than a day. The turmoil in Chopin’s heart may be reflected in the ambiguous phrasing and harmonies we shall now uncover.

The piece opens with an eight measure *introduction* phrased as a *sentence* (2:2:4). After striking a G\(^7\) in first inversion on the first beat of m. 1, Chopin flies down a C harmonic minor scale outlining the tones of the previous chord. The scale resolves to tonic on the 3rd beat of m. 2. In the right hand on the following beat we see a iv\(^{4}\)_3 chord serving as an harmonic anacrusis to return to V. Measures 3-4 are essentially identical to mm 1-2. Measures 5-8 mark the *continuation* of the sentence, but Chopin blurs the phrase by purposely misaligning the beat and the scale articulation. The scale is patterned as four descending notes before an ascending one, but the pattern begins on the third 16th note of beat 1 of m. 5 (see example #1), marked *crescendo*, instead of having the four descending notes align with the four 16th notes in the beat. A harmonic reduction would label this entire introduction as dominant 7th of tonic in second inversion. However, combined with the *crescendo* marking, the continuation sounds like a series of asymmetrical waves rather than the logical, melodic follow-up to mm. 1-4. This introduction
alone may demonstrate how Chopin’s rhythmic ideas can “transcend” phrase rhythm even as early as 1831.

Measure 9 marks the beginning of the A section. The larger form is of a parallel period, with the F♯ sevent at m. 14 acting as a half cadence in the key of G, separating the antecedent and consequent. The consequent echoes the rhythmic phrasing of the antecedent with the anacrusis motive, (justifying the “parallelism”), before a descending chromatic scale leads us to scale degree 2, allowing for a return to tonic at m. 19. Though the half-cadence suggests a dominant harmony, I hesitate to call it a modulating period, because the larger phrase returns to the tonic key (mm. 18-19). The half cadence merely tonicizes G. This tonicization emphasizes the midpoint of both the sentence and the period with a chromatic harmony in a thus far almost purely diatonic piece.

The motives that make up the phrase structures in mm. 9-15 are highly unorthodox. The primary accompaniment figure is a striking phrase-rhythmical structure I call the retrograde sentence. Whereas a sentence has a 1:1:2 structure, a retrograde sentence has a 2:1:1 structure. Measure 9 contains one full melodic “arc,” while m. 10 contains two, yielding a 2:1:1 pattern outlining a tonic harmony vamp (see example #2). The harmonies in the right hand are interpreted on their own at this point, as separate movement from the tonic vamp. The phrasing here between the right and left hands is remarkable. While the left hand is playing two measure retrograde sentences (1: ½: ½ in measures), the right hand is playing prograde (i.e. normal) sentences (2:2:4 in measures). An anacrusis leads into the first portion of the sentence at m. 11, and the pattern repeats going into m. 12—but here something else remarkable happens. A Cm⁶ leads into the Ab⁶ on the first beat of m. 12. However, the new chord is simply revealed to be an
upper neighbor, as the Abs resolve to G on beat 2. However (again), when we were moving from m. 10 to m. 11, the downbeat of m. 11 was the resolution of that particular motive, so when we hear that rhythmical pattern repeated, we expect the Ab major chord on the downbeat of m. 12 to be the resolution of that particular motive. The immediate sonic effect is one of a deceptive cadence, not of an upper neighbor. Given that second inversion triads traditionally function as dominant suspensions, there is theoretical justification for seeing this as a deceptive cadence, with the $6_4$ resolution elided. Other composers have used similar phrase structures as well, e.g. Wagner and Brahms interpreting a dominant 7th chord as a $G^6$ chord, then eliding the dominant of the new key and going directly to tonic. If we choose to call the chord C minor going to Ab major, then it is a relationship by thirds, a common Romantic-era harmonic movement. Rothstein describes an almost identical scene taking place in Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 3. “This analysis strongly suggests that Chopin has taken advantage of the identity sound between $6_4$-as-dominant and $6_4$-as-tonic...sealing the harmonic reinterpretation with a phrase overlap, the resolution of the cadential $6_4$ to the simply V or V$^7$ is elided completely; the concluding sequence represents an expanded final tonic.”

We can conclude, before even reaching the middle sections that contain much more harmonic drama, that Chopin has, (a) briefly expanded the motive, (b) contrasted a retrograde and prograde sentence, and (c) committed to a simple but deviously ambiguous harmonic movement.

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Harmony and Revolution

The harmonies of mm. 15-18 deserve a close inspection. The F#°₃ chord in m. 14 leads to G⁶, followed by Gb⁶, going to F⁶, Fm⁶. Roman numeral analysis in the key of C minor yields V⁶, v⁷₆, IV⁶, iv⁶, I⁴₄, i⁴₄, V⁷. Beginning at m. 14, we can trace the bass note from C down through B, Bb, A, Ab, and finally G in m. 17: a chromatic descent from tonic to dominant. Coincident (though syncopated) to that is a descending chromatic line in the top voice of the right hand, starting in m. 13 on A. Through a leaping melodic figure Chopin descends the voice through G in m. 15 to F, E, Eb and finally D in m. 18. The chromatically descending parallel 6ths outline the roots of the chords on top with the thirds of each chord in the bass.

As the bassline descends, Chopin has the option of lowering other chord tones as well. In m. 15 for example he flats both the third and fifth of G⁶ to render G°₃. He does not though change the F⁶ to F°₆ in the following measure, opting instead to drop only the third, yielding the F minor. Imagine Chopin had chosen the opposite direction: G in m. 15 goes to G minor, which then descends to F, which then goes to F°₆. F°₆ can be respelled from F, Ab, Cb, to F, G#, B, and chromatically raising the F to F#, outlining a G#m⁴₃ (minus the 5th, but the D# is enharmonic to the Eb which is written in the right hand at mm. 17-18). That can easily be chromatically altered to be G#₄₂, respelled as Ab₄₂, the dominant of the Neapolitan chord in C minor, leading to a more conventional V-i cadence. This would yield the following progression in Roman numerals, starting in m. 14: V⁶, v⁷₆, IV⁶, iv⁶, ii⁴₂/#iv, V⁴₂/N⁶.

It is easy to see why Chopin chose the progression he did rather than the bizarre and tonally confused Frankenstein progression just outlined. However, before I reveal the purpose of this thought experiment, it must be reemphasized that these chord progressions are based on a
simple contrapuntal figure of chromatically descending parallel 6ths. The point is this: Rothstein emphasises Chopin’s increased reliance on counterpoint after 1840 to help overlap and expand his phrasing. But in this *Revolutionary* etude, composed in 1831, Chopin *could* have gone further than he ever did by cracking the mold of tonality even earlier than Wagner’s famous *Tristan* chord (1865). Obviously, this would have had profound implications for the entire musical culture, and phrase rhythm—a musical feature highly interdependent with harmony—would have been drawn into the maelstrom. Even more impressive is the appeal to an older, established compositional technique (counterpoint) that by most accounts reached its zenith in the late Baroque era. It may be argued that Chopin, like all people, was of his time, and the reason he did not choose a more revolutionary progression is simply that he did not compose in a more revolutionary milieu. That may even be trivially true. To return to the thesis of this paper though: Chopin’s *Revolutionary* etude illustrates advanced or “transcendent” phrase rhythm occurring prior to 1840.

The *A section* closes with a dramatic example of phrase overlap. The descending chordal melody goes from m. 14 to m. 18, but at the beginning of m. 17 the left hand begins a two-measure cadential phrase that concludes at the downbeat of m. 19. The last part of this phrase outlines a G7 chord. A similar pattern can be found in mm. 27-28. In terms of large scale phrasing, mm. 19-28 can be considered a varied repetition of m. 9-18. One notable difference is that the phrase overlap at the end of the second set is only one measure long. A glance at the right hand reveals why: Chopin is building up the climax of the continuation section and wants the melody to seamlessly flow into the following sequence at m. 29. Another difference is in

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Chopin’s handling of counterpoint: the chromatic 6ths in mm. 15-16 were descending to the repeat of the A section at m. 19, while they ascend toward a climactic sequence at m. 29.

**Storming the Castle**

Measures 29-40 comprise the climactic section of Op. 10 No. 12, divided into two sections. Beginning with a G# minor chord, it sequences through D# minor, F# minor, C# minor, G#6, Bb6, and C6, ending at m. 37. The second section, mm. 37-40, contains the peak of the piece, before we return to the introduction at m. 41.

Notice the dual character of mm 37-40. As the climax of the piece, Chopin draws special attention to them, however he also blurs the boundaries of the climax with other sections. The transition from m. 40 to m. 41 is completely seamless. The left hand continues the 16th note scales it has been maintaining the entire piece, but now in long melodic arcs that are displaced with the barline. The first melodic arc fits neatly into mm. 35-36, but the second takes up 1 ½ measures, and the third takes up 1 ¾ measures. Chopin adds melodic “tails” to make up for the remainders of mm. 38 and 40, before effortlessly (it seems) returning to the introduction. This is as clear an example as anything else in the Revolutionary etude of Chopin “transcending” phrasing.

In the introduction, I suggested two ways of understanding the notion of “transcending” phrase rhythm, one analytical and the other romantic. I think the striking overlap of phrase rhythm in Op. 10 No. 12 shows that Chopin the Innovator is in command, intentionally pushing phrase structure to its limits. However, the romantic interpretation is valuable, and given the
romantic emphasis on individual expression, I will attempt to explore it largely through my own experience as a musician.

**Lessons of Revolution**

Theoretical distinctions are often drawn between technical ability and expressive skill. While such distinctions provide us room to interpret, praise and/or criticize various musicians, I have found that technique is expressive ability. In the experience of studying and practicing an instrument, being able to think only in theoretical terms and play/compose in narrow, linear ways, no matter how cleanly it may be done, is poor technique. A dynamic player who plays more sloppily is not necessarily less technically endowed than a precise, undynamic player. The point of this is simply to show that the distinction between Chopin the Innovator and Chopin the Artist is mostly one of convenience. If technique can be considered part of artistic sensibility, then artistic ability and capacity to “not think” about analytical issues while making such advanced music is itself a technique.

Aesthetcian Susanne Langer argued that the forms of music are analogous to the forms of our conscious, emotive experience. If this is true, then the dramatic conflict of phrase structure and ambiguity of harmony may be analogous to the conflicts of life in Chopin’s world: the hope and disappointment of the revolution and his own ill health. All this is not to say that Chopin intentionally expressed these things this way, or that direct lines can be drawn between a particular thought or emotion and a particular music movement. Only that the immediate,

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emotive life was central to the romantic ideology. And Chopin, as an arch-romantic composer, lived his music as much as he wrote it or thought about it.

Considering this piece was written in 1831, 9 years before what Rothstein calls Chopin’s “late period,” it contains a number of striking features. Chopin (a) contrasts common phrase structures with retrograde versions of themselves (b) expands inner parts of phrases via devious harmonic language and (c) creates seamless transitions between sections through a furious left hand technique that plays an almost literally endless melody. Perhaps most importantly, Chopin accomplishes all of this through the unorthodox use of orthodox technique—sentence structures, counterpoint, etc. Thus, we can conclude that Chopin has literally transcended the phrase rhythm in his 1831 Revolutionary etude.
Appendix

Example #1. Four note scalar descent with metrical displacement (marked).

Example #2. Chopin’s retrograde sentence in the left hand.
Bibliography

