‘Romanticism in Two Musical Repertories: A Comparison of the Music of Frédéric Chopin and the Rock Group Nirvana’

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of romanticism within two widely different musical genres and repertories – that is, the music of Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) of the rock group Nirvana. The introductory chapter discusses the place of this study amongst other research, especially pertaining to romanticism in rock music. Drawing on a variety of sources, this chapter also explores aspects of the intensely debated concepts of romanticism (and beyond) that are relevant to the two case studies. Chapter 2 examines Chopin and his music through the lens of romanticism. A similar investigation into Kurt Cobain and Nirvana’s music is given in Chapter 3 showing what sort of conclusions can be drawn using categories that are atypical for contemporary rock music, and to what extent they are comparable to those drawn from the studies of Chopin. From such comparative analysis, this study provides some convincing evidence that a variety of musical and non-musical similarities can be discerned between these two artists and their respective musical outputs. The similarities that are revealed come under the broad label of romanticism; and more specifically they further encompass parallels between the two artists in the areas of gender, sickness and death.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Overview
This study examines the concept of romanticism\(^1\) within two widely different musical genres and repertories – that is, the music of Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) of the rock group Nirvana. Drawing on a variety of sources, the study will explore aspects of the intensely debated concept of romanticism (and beyond), and study Chopin and his music from this perspective. A similar investigation into Kurt Cobain and Nirvana’s music will then be undertaken and will seek to discover what sort of conclusions can be drawn using categories that are atypical for contemporary rock music, and to what extent they are comparable to those drawn from the studies of Chopin. From the comparative analysis to be performed, this study will attempt to show that a variety of musical and non-musical similarities can be discerned between these two artists and their respective musical outputs. The similarities that will be explored come under the broad label of romanticism; and more specifically, they further encompass parallels between the two artists in the areas of gender, sickness and death.

A growing number of attempts at tracing the roots of contemporary popular music in classical music have been made in recent years.\(^2\) The concept of romanticism in rock music has been explored by Robert Pattison in his 1984 book, *The Triumph of Vulgarity*,\(^3\) and more recently by Australian author Craig Schuftan in his 2009 work *Hey, Nietzsche! Leave Them Kids Alone*.\(^4\) The present study builds on their work by investigating two specific artists and their music as specific case studies.

As previously stated, the primary aim of this study is to explore the individual relationship between Chopin and Nirvana with respect to romanticism (this concept will be discussed shortly), gender, sickness and death: no previous study has attempted to cover these areas on a comparative basis. A broader objective of this study is to bridge the gap between classical and

\(^1\) Throughout the thesis, Romanticism with a capital letter refers to the Romantic period, whereas romanticism in lower case refers to the style or concept of romanticism.
\(^2\) Alex Ross, Clemency Burton-Hill and Perry Meisel are just three writers who have explicitly investigated this topic.
popular music research by shedding a clearer light on these music genres and integrating their seemingly contrasting perspectives.

Crossing the gap between these two genres of music can open new possibilities, both in music research and music practice. The study aims to utilize the connection between these two musical ‘worlds’ to provide a more comprehensive view of music and its evolution. By comparing two artists who are revered in their respective spheres, advocates and fans from both genres of music may be more open to the idea that they share common ground. By investigating the essence of these two genres of music, some clarity may emerge regarding the connections and divergences between two apparently disparate genres.

Several scholars who have performed comparative analyses of contemporary popular music and classical music have focused on contemporary artists who were directly influenced by classical music. Alex Ross’ *Listen to This* is a recent example of an author attempting to ‘cross the border’ between classical and pop music, though the majority of contemporary artists he discusses (such as Björk and Radiohead) have been directly influenced by classical music (with the exception of Bob Dylan). There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Kurt Cobain was interested in, or influenced by, classical music.

Comparing two artists who compose and perform in different music genres and historical eras has the potential to be revelatory in several ways. This study will seek to understand how Chopin and Cobain operate as composer and songwriter respectively. Through a deeper understanding of romanticism across two musical eras, this thesis looks to challenge the widely based assumptions of what can and cannot be classified as ‘romantic’. It is convenient to pigeonhole Chopin’s music as coming from a docile Romantic-era composer, and Nirvana’s music as angst-ridden grunge rock, but through deeper understanding and analysis of both musical worlds, perhaps a Nirvana fan can listen to Chopin with a fresh approach, and vice versa. For the present writer, who greatly loves both classical and contemporary popular music, but who often feels ostracized by members of each respective community as a result of their disregard for the ‘other side’ of music, this project is very exciting. When the undue layers of cultural projections placed on music are dissolved, it may be argued that music can be experienced more genuinely and fully in its essence.

Chopin was an exceptional composer who changed piano music forever. His approach to form, harmony, melody and rhythm was highly individual. His music is highly emotive and

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5 Alex Ross, *Listen to This* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), XV.
spontaneous and often regarded as ‘feminine’. Since mid-way through his life both Chopin and his music have been and still are subject to an enormous amount of analysis. It is not in the scope of this thesis to perform detailed formal analyses on any of his compositions, nor will it be overly biographical. Instead, using musical examples, part of the thesis will seek to understand how the man approached the task of composition, specifically, as stated, through the lens of romanticism, gender, sickness and death.

Cobain and Nirvana’s music will be approached in a similar way. Although much has been written about Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, his lyrics, and rock music sub-genres such as punk, metal, grunge and others from a historical or social perspective, little research exists pertaining to the actual music of Nirvana. Coehn suggests that perhaps the reason for this is to do with the band’s apparently ‘rough sound’. Nirvana’s music is characterised by repetitive harmonic patterns and simple instrumental arrangements and song structures that seem to thwart any attempt to discover ‘hidden complexity’ and richness below what might be construed as a simplistic surface. Further to this, it may be argued that the most individual element in Nirvana’s music is the timbre of both Kurt Cobain’s guitar and voice. Although timbre is a most significant aspect of Nirvana’s overall sound, on closer inspection one can discern an intriguing blend of traditional rock patterns from previous decades, while new harmonic possibilities are evident. Use of the Phrygian mode; power chords (dyads consisting solely of the first and fifth degree, thus blurring the definition between major and minor); chromatic clashes between melody and harmony; and texts that deal with pain, cynicism and bitter humour, all became trademarks of the grunge genre.

Romanticism

In 1947, Einstein professed that we ‘seek in vain an unequivocal idea of the nature of “musical Romanticism”’. These days we seem to be no closer to defining it.

Let us attempt to define romanticism in opposition to classicism. Stemming from the culture of the ancient Greeks,

[c]lassicism denotes the high esteem accorded to certain qualities, such as harmony, balance and clarity, emphasis on form and underlying structure rather than content, and a respect for tradition. The classicist often regards rationalism as the highest human ability, and a focus on objectivity and materialism can be seen as concomitant to an

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8 Ibid., 1
9 Ibid., 1
10 Albert Einstein, Music in the Romantic Era (New York: W.W. Norton, Incorporated, 1947), 4
emphasis on rationalism.\textsuperscript{11}

Pragmatic theory, which grew out of this, involves the creative artist being audience-oriented, with the aim to please patron or public.\textsuperscript{12} Famously, in his 1872 book \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, German philosopher Friederich Nietzche first proposed this dichotomy in relation to two Greek gods: Apollo and Dionysus, with Apollo as the God of reason, rationality and order (classicism), and Dionysus as the God of chaos, wine, ecstasy and emotional expression (romanticism).\textsuperscript{13}

This dichotomy between order and expression, structure and chaos, and classicism and romanticism appears to be at the forefront of a young Cobain’s mind, evidenced in the slogan ‘Organized Confusion’, which Cobain fantasised would be the name of his first band.

Although challenging to clearly define, in part due to the apparent contradictions found within it, romanticism may contain themes of the ‘artist as hero or confessor’, with an inexpressible yearning for the unattainable.\textsuperscript{14} Romanticism is difficult to define because it is predicated on the idea that the artist is a unique and special individual, and therefore how does one bundle all these special individuals into conformation to a ‘type’?\textsuperscript{15} As Craig Schuftan puts it: ‘[r]omanticism seems to dissolve as it’s subjected to scrutiny – a metaphor the romantics, with their suspicion of reason and science, would appreciate.’\textsuperscript{16}

‘Romantic’ is a term generally associated with Western art music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of its major proponents were Hector Berlioz (1803-69), Richard Wagner (1813-83), Franz Liszt (1811-86), Robert Schumann (1810-56) and of course, Frédéric Chopin. The term was initially applied to German literature in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} to early 19\textsuperscript{th} century and was then applied to music some time later (c1830), beginning in the post-Beethoven era and continuing into the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{17} Rousseau’s writings in particular had a marked influence on music, both through his writings and compositions. ‘In several of entries of his \textit{Dictionnaire de musique} (on “genius”, the “pathetic”, “expression” and especially “imitation”), Rousseau took a step beyond an expressive aesthetic, celebrating the elusive, suggestive powers

\textsuperscript{11} Runette Kruger, ‘The Classic/Romantic Dichotomy in De Stijl Theory’ (Doctoral Dissertation, Tshwane University of Technology, 2006), 3
\textsuperscript{12} Edward F. Kravitt, ‘Romanticism Today,’ \textit{The Musical Quarterly} 76, no. 1 (1992), 98
\textsuperscript{13} Charles R Cross, \textit{Heavier than Heaven} (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), 48
\textsuperscript{14} Kravitt, 101
\textsuperscript{15} Schuftan, 47
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 47
of music in ways that depart significantly from Classical thought.'

Many descriptions and definitions of romanticism have been attempted over the decades, but, at romanticism’s core, explains Edward Kravitt, the focus is on an expressive aesthetic, centred on the artist as creator. Kravitt takes issue with what he calls the ‘old definition’ of romanticism, which only describes romanticism’s outward characteristics through separated attributes; and therefore, in his opinion, fails to deal with the essence of romanticism – ‘introvert art generated by a consciousness of self’. This definition of romanticism more closely relates to the aims and significance of this thesis – and in many ways is at the crux of what underpins the commonalities between these two musicians.

Kravitt also succinctly describes the dilemma of the romantic:

The romanticist is vexed by society’s norms and prohibitions. They arouse an insatiable desire to escape from the monotony of daily life and the shackles of decorum. Unable to find happiness in the world of man, the romanticist looks for it in dreams. Upon realizing that the search is endless, and the goal unattainable, the romanticist’s yearning is increasingly painful.

Given the fact that Chopin is widely accepted and acknowledged as one of the leading proponents of the Romantic era, the idea of exploring elements of romanticism in his music is not a particularly controversial or contentious one. However, how well does his art fit into the ‘new definition’ of romanticism? And, 150 years later, how does Kurt Cobain compare? In the case of Nirvana and beyond, can the label of ‘romantic’ be used to describe rock music post-1960? Certainly, several authors have argued for the attribution of this label to rock music, emo music, and specific artists.

In Robert Pattison’s work, *The Triumph of Vulgarity,* the author contends that rock music mirrors the tradition of 19th-century Romanticism. Although valuable, a limitation with this work is that it was written in 1987, a time when glam metal bands such as Mötley Crüe and Poison ruled the airwaves, something against which Nirvana (and their counterparts) reacted strongly. Exuberantly masculine in their approach, glam metal championed flamboyant guitar solos and an emphasis on visual pyrotechnics. Certainly, romanticism can take shape in a grand, epic, masculine sense (Wagner, for example); but equally in an intimate and more feminine way (most Chopin, some Schumann, and Debussy). The dichotomy of masculinity and femininity in music is a strong theme in both Chopin’s and Cobain’s music, to which many texts attest and seek to

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18 Ibid.  
19 Kravitt, 93  
20 Ibid., 99  
21 Ibid., 100  
22 Pattison, 3
explore: this essay will indeed also analyse the role that gender has to play in regard to both case studies. Nevertheless, Pattison argues that the romantic influence had resulted in what he describes as the ‘vulgarity’ of all rock and roll. It is difficult to accept Pattison's proposition that all rock musicians, even the most chauvinistic, lurid and vulgar among the genre, have absorbed much, if anything, of what the Romantics stood for.\(^23\)

Possibly the most relevant work to this study comes from Australian author Craig Schuftan who, in *Hey, Nietzsche! Leave Them Kids Alone* also argues that romanticism lives on within rock artists such as My Chemical Romance, Queen, David Bowie and Weezer.\(^24\) However, Schuftan’s analysis is predominantly focused on *lyrics* from contemporary songwriters and *poems* from the Romantics. According to Schuftan, the most direct equivalent to romanticism today is in the rock music sub-genre ‘emo’. The ostentatious anthem that encapsulates 21st-century romanticism for him is ‘Welcome to the Black Parade’ by My Chemical Romance, in which the singer laments the disillusionment of life, before triumphantly proclaiming that true salvation can only be found in oneself. As Schuftan admits, ‘emo’ is just as hard to define as romanticism, despite being only 20 years old.\(^25\) Schuftan is successful in finding the more extreme examples of Romanticism in both his 18th- and 19th-century subjects (mostly poets and writers) and his 20th-century subjects (songwriters), which he then contrasts effectively with classicism – sometimes within the same artist (Cure and Weezer for examples). It is perhaps surprising that Nirvana is not examined more thoroughly in his book. The present study, therefore, intends to further his work by including 19th-century music in the discussion, and engaging in a formal and stylistic analysis approach to the actual music of Nirvana and their counterparts.

**Classic/Romantic Dichotomy**

If we think of the classic/romantic dichotomy as a continuum, where would Chopin and Cobain fit? One of the reasons why both Chopin and Cobain stood out from their contemporaries was through their appeal to sources which in their respective contexts were seen as exemplars. Chopin adored Bach and Mozart while his contemporaries were far more interested in Beethoven, while Cobain loved the Beatles, in a time where they were considered ‘uncool’.\(^26\) The Beatles are the quintessential, most successful rock/pop group of all time. Their pre-1966 albums in particular set the standard for what was to come in rock and pop music. These had the most influence on Kurt Cobain (he included *Meet the Beatles* in his top 50 albums of all-time

\(^{23}\) One thought-provoking argument forwarded by Pattison is that Romantic music, and rock and roll more recently, have greatly reduced the distinction between music for the elites and music for the masses.

\(^{24}\) Schuftan, 2

\(^{25}\) ibid., 47

\(^{26}\) Cross, 118
list and cited its influence on his songwriting in several interviews). Arguably, even from the early days of *Bleach* (most obviously with the track ‘About A Girl’), it was The Beatles’ influence on Cobain that made Nirvana stand out from the dozens of other north-west bands of the time.

Chopin was also influenced by early exemplars, in a time when it was not so fashionable to be. In Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger’s essay ‘Twenty-four Preludes op. 28: Genre, Structure, Significance’, the author discusses sets of preludes by post-Classical composers of which Chopin would have been aware. However, he declares the sum of their influence as ‘meagre and not very persuasive’. Contrary to this, Eigeldinger confirms that Bach was Chopin’s primary influence, particularly where the Preludes are concerned, and that Chopin’s decision to compose them in the twenty-four keys ‘appears not so much as a concession to a genre inherited from his predecessors as a mark of his grounding in the works of Bach’.

**Gender:**

References to the concept of gender are prevalent in writings about both Chopin and Cobain. Jeffrey Kallberg’s collection of essays, *Chopin at the Boundaries*, addresses a number of issues involving gender, sexuality and musical meaning within the social context of Chopin’s time and since. Kallberg examines how Chopin, through his music, has been viewed as feminine, ‘angelic’ and ‘other worldly’.

Metaphorical representations of him as an angel, sylph, fairy, and elf did not function solely as religious, otherworldly, or supernatural figures of speech. These terms also engaged a complex of unstable meanings having to do with sex and gender, and so ultimately helped forge a changing image of Chopin as an androgynous, hermaphroditic, effeminate and/or pathological being.

Similarly, with reference to her research on Nirvana, Cortney Alexander discusses how Kurt Cobain struggled with masculinity throughout his life. For instance, she points out that Kurt Cobain ‘publicly performed femininity as a challenge to the gender binary that enforced rigid masculinity’. Cobain saw himself as a feminist, and even went so far as to publicly challenge heavy metal – ‘I have nothing against heavy metal – except that some of it is pretty sexist’.

As there are so many references in the literature referring to both Chopin and Cobain as feminine, or as writing feminine music, concepts of gender within the music of these artists will be

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27 Ibid., 118
29 Ibid., 174
30 Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries* !!
31 Ibid., 70
33 REF
thoroughly investigated in relation to the overall research aims of the study. The concept of femininity has been imposed on Chopin, whereas Cobain was self-declared.

**Sickness and Death:**

This thesis will also examine the significant roles of the concepts of sickness, morbidity and death in the two men's lives and music. This resonates with Goethe's views on the nature of romanticism:

> The classical I call healthy and the Romantic sick...Most of the new poetry is not Romantic because it is new, but because it is weak, sickly and ill, and the old is not classical because it is old but because it is strong, fresh, cheerful and healthy.  

Whether or not it is exclusively or necessarily an attribute of romanticism, sickness is a theme that underpins many of both Chopin and Cobain's works. This stems from the fact that both of them spent much of their lives in physical pain and suffered from chronic ill health. This study will seek to explore the ramifications of this on their respective musical outputs.

From a young age, Chopin faced issues with his respiratory system, recurrent diarrhoea and weight loss. These conditions (in particular the respiratory ones) would plague him right up until they caused his death from tuberculosis. It is difficult to measure just how much this would have affected Chopin's music, although some studies have attempted to assess and analyse Chopin's music as a representation of his emotional and physical state. Kubba and Young also imply that Chopin felt a level of insecurity with his appearance, at least in regard to his lack of facial hair.

At the age of ten, Kurt Cobain was hospitalized because of malnutrition. It was perhaps the first symptom of a stomach problem that plagued him for his entire life. Cobain admitted to being in some way grateful to the pain he was constantly in, saying that it added to the ‘anger in our music’. Wood argues that Cobain saw this pain as a sign of authenticity and that for Cobain, hardship, intensity and risk comprised an ideal of ‘authenticity’. Cobain prized scatological

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35 Adam K. Kubba and Madeleine Young, 'The Long Suffering of Frédéric Chopin', *Chest*, 113/1 (1998) 210, 213
36 Ibid., 210
37 Cross, 22
imagery, eviscerating vocals and unintelligible lyrics as a means to signal the ‘realness’ of his art – that is, his art came from the ‘gut’. 39

**Thesis Overview:**

This research thesis comprises three chapters. Following the present introductory chapter, the second chapter will analyse the issues of romanticism, gender, sickness and death in relation to Frédéric Chopin and his music. In order to examine the cultural and musical influences on his development as a composer, the chapter will also provide a biographical examination of Chopin. Chapter Three will focus on Nirvana and its lead singer, guitarist and primary songwriter, Kurt Cobain, and will discuss similar issues in relation to Nirvana’s music and examine the cultural and musical influences on Kurt Cobain’s development as songwriter and performer. Finally, a brief conclusion will summarise and compare findings in the previous chapters. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to look at other genres of music which may be considered romantic (blues is one genre that comes to mind). It is also beyond the scope of this thesis to be drawn into overly theoretical formalized music analyses.

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39 Ibid., 332
Chapter Two
Chopin

Background

The music of Chopin holds a unique place in the hearts and minds of many music lovers. His morbidly beautiful piano music is exceptional, in that it seemed to come out of a void (although of course it did not), and the effect it has on many listeners is spellbinding. Chopin was unimpressed with the music of his contemporaries.\(^{40}\) In fact, he mostly avoided multi-movement genres and ensemble media, preferring to write miniatures and single movement works for piano solo. Not only is Chopin most frequently associated with preludes, nocturnes, etudes, ballades, scherzos, polonaises, waltzes and mazurkas, but he completely transformed these genres. At a time when the shadow of Beethoven’s grand forms still ruled, Chopin predominantly composed in forms regarded at the time (and arguably still to this day) as ‘feminine’.\(^{41}\) Many critics of the time, and up to the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, condemned his music for this reason, and believed him incapable of crafting a sonata that could rank with the great tradition of Mozart and Beethoven.\(^{42}\)

Years after Chopin’s death, many of the first notable biographers, analysts and writers on Chopin, saw the feminine qualities in his music as less desirable or less impressive than the masculine ones. For instance, Frédéric Niecks’s description of the nocturnes was: ‘these dulcet, effeminate compositions illustrate only one side of the master’s character, and by no means the best or most interesting.’\(^{43}\) Certainly, at least the first part of this quote is worth considering, namely the implication of bifurcation in Chopin’s output; since his compositional style oscillates between the bold and passionate (‘Revolutionary’ Etude) and the sweet and inward (Nocturnes, Prelude 13) – and sometimes both in the one piece (First Ballade), but almost always with a sense of melancholy. However, assessing Chopin’s greatness as a composer using the same criteria as one would use when assessing Beethoven is flawed, as De Jager asserts in his dissertation ‘Frédéric Chopin: Gender as a Factor in Reception’. De Jager argues, for instance,

\(^{42}\) Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries*, 44
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 42
that we ought not to judge Chopin by analysing the degree of theoretical complexity he uses to determine and unify the form of compositions in the same way we would judge Beethoven.\textsuperscript{44}

Drawing upon some musical examples, this chapter aims to reveal Chopin as a distinctive composer and performer within the Romantic era. Aspects of romanticism mentioned in the previous chapter will be explored in relation to Chopin, as will themes of gender, sickness and death.

Frédéric Chopin was born in 1810 in Żelazowa Wola, Poland. A child prodigy, Chopin’s name and reputation as a musical genius spread around Warsaw as early as during his teenage years. Certainly his mentors Wojciech Żywny and Jozef Elsner immediately recognized Chopin’s remarkable talent.\textsuperscript{45} After completing his studies in Poland and venturing to Vienna, Chopin settled in Paris where he was soon in high demand by the Parisian elite as both a performer and teacher.

Along with Schumann, Berlioz and Liszt, Chopin is considered an early Romantic composer. The Romantic movement emerged from the Classical legacy in which composers crafted large, formal structures such as symphonies, sonatas, string quartets and concerti. Contrastingly, the romantic aesthetic encouraged composers to be more passionate, intimate, rhapsodic and personal. As music became an outlet for personal expression, formal structures were loosened. Yet, Chopin differed from his contemporaries in several ways. Firstly, the aforementioned shadow of Beethoven’s grand forms meant little to Chopin. While his contemporaries were striving to match Beethoven’s ‘greatness’, Chopin did not care to write operas or symphonies, and even the few sonatas he wrote were highly unconventional. For instance, Schumann said of Chopin’s Second Sonata in B flat minor that he had ‘simply bound together four of his most unruly children’.\textsuperscript{46} As we will discover, Chopin’s approach to forms, both large and small, is innovative. He is set apart from other composers of the time by his extremely individual and colourful use of harmony, his ability to craft simple yet powerful melodies, and his particular range of musical influences.

In Chopin’s formative years, classical keyboard traditions were being overtaken by a repertory of post-classical piano music associated with the flashy, cosmopolitan and above all commercial concert life of a newly influential middle class. Engulfed in the powers of an instrument now firmly established, this repertory clearly focused on the virtuoso pianist-composer. A mania had arisen. Naturally, it was assumed that Chopin would take part in this fast-growing career option

\textsuperscript{44} Frédéric De Jager ‘Frédéric Chopin: Gender as a Factor in Reception' (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2004), 266
\textsuperscript{45} Samson, \textit{The Music of Chopin}, 15
\textsuperscript{46} Schumann as quoted by Samson, \textit{The Music of Chopin}, 129
of superstar international pianist-composer. However, despite some early pieces which clearly reflect this flamboyant sound and technique (Opus 2 ‘La Ci Darem’ Variations for instance), Chopin soon developed his own unique voice and sound world. Highly influenced by the traditions of Bach and Mozart, Chopin also managed to mesh his love of Italian opera and Polish traditional folk songs and dances with his own innate sense of musicality.

Chopin created a new type of music for the piano. He used the piano in ways that others before him never did, bringing out the qualities of the instrument that allowed a vast dramatic scope. His compositional approach seems to have been to sit at the piano and improvise, then make a sketch to build upon and refine. Therefore, Chopin’s compositional style derives directly from the instrument, and his music contains many idiomatic traits that pertain to the piano specifically. In performing many of his pieces, an effective Chopin interpreter will create and capture a sense of spontaneity. One way which he/she can achieve this is by making the melismatic runs in the right hand sound as if they are improvised. This is considered high-quality and well informed Chopin playing because, based on quotes by many observers of Chopin’s playing, it most closely mimics the way scholars believe the music would have sounded in its first incarnation. This spontaneous spirit of quasi-improvisation, also makes us feel as though the performer is ‘playing from his heart’ – a crucial aspect in an audience’s verdict of a Chopin interpreter.

Approach to form

Chopin’s approach to form is fascinating and highly individual. A detailed investigation of it is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is worth touching on in order to help gain a greater understanding of the way he approached music. De Jager contends that over the years pianists’ performance practices and musicological discourse have deliberately cleansed Chopin’s music from its associations with smallness and consequently with femininity. He outlines four aspects of Chopin’s composition and performance that could be considered to be small, three of which

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47 This is why there exists, as Kallberg puts it, the ‘Chopin “Problem”’ which is essentially the issue of making sense of the variety of often contradictory editions and marks in Chopin’s scores. Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, 215
48 There are several quotes from friends and music critics who heard Chopin play, that he was a great improviser with effortless technique. For instance George Sand felt that Chopin’s compositions were ‘but a pale shade of his improvisations’ and journalist and founder of La France Musicale, Léon Escudier spoke of ‘the marvellous ease with which he performs the most graceful runs...Listening to all these sounds, all these nuances—which follow each other, intermingle, separate and reunite to arrive at the same goal, melody...’ in his review of Chopin’s Paris recital in 1842 (quoted in Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, 64)
49 De Jager, Abstract (no page number)
will be discussed later in this chapter. The first aspect that supports the notion that Chopin was a miniaturist is that the majority of his compositions are short and written for solo piano.

Jeffrey Kallberg also supports this view, labelling Chopin as the ‘champion of the miniature at a time when many around him gravitated towards ever grander musical colossi’. Chopin did write in larger forms; however, often his approach to these was via a smaller form such as a nocturne or mazurka, reinterpreted through the guise of a sonata or rondo form. For example, in the third and final movement of his Second Piano Concerto we hear the unmistakable rhythmical influence of the Polish mazurka, and similarly, in the final movement of the First Piano Concerto, the influence is of a Krakowiak. Samson points out that in these instances Chopin was most likely drawing from Weber, whose two concertos also inserted ‘popular’ episodes as their finales.

There is some debate as to how Chopin approached the larger single movement forms such as the ballades. Drawing inspiration from the poems of Mickiewicz, the ballades are a lyrical form expanded through figuration, modulation patterns and placement of material. Revised Classical forms of sonata, rondo and variations are to be found in all four ballades. Chopin integrates these forms with daring flexibility. The predominant formal influence in the ballades appears to be sonata form, although with notable differences, such as reversal of the first and second subjects in the recapitulation. While Parakilas takes the view that all four of the ballades can be described in terms of a single formal model, his view of the model differs. In his opinion, the ballades seem to require three musical events: statement of themes, transformation of themes, and resolution. Samson differentiates the form of the ballades from the polonaises and the scherzos; where the polonaises and scherzos build extended structures from simple designs, the ballades favour ‘through-composed, directional structures, where transformation and variation are seminal functions, integration and synthesis essential goals.

Many of Chopin’s smaller scale compositions such as etudes, preludes and nocturnes are written in ternary (A-B-A) form. However, there are many examples of works by Chopin in which he deliberately obscures the changes in sections, so rather than being clear cut, they seemingly merge into one another. For example, in many of the Etudes Opus 25, Chopin appears to make a conscious effort to blur the divisions between each section, such that both the primary and

50 Ibid., 9
51 Ibid., 9-10
52 Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, Preface, ix
53 The Krakowiak is a fast, syncopated dance in duple time from the Polish region of Krakow.
54 Samson, The Music of Chopin, 56
55 James Parakilas, Ballads Without Words: Chopin and the Tradition of the Instrumental Ballade (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992), 72
56 Samson, The Music of Chopin, 175
secondary figurations/themes are not only motivically but also structurally linked in an almost seamless fashion.\textsuperscript{57} He achieves this through use of chromaticism, dynamics, voice-leading and phrase length manipulation.\textsuperscript{58} Another notable example of his blurring of structure is the Etude Opus 10 No 4, a study in voice leading (amongst other things). The melody bounces between left and right hands until just before the lead up to the B section where the right hand takes over, introducing the motif at the beginning of the B section, four bars before this actually starts.\textsuperscript{59}

We have already discussed the first of De Jager’s four aspects of Chopin’s composition and performance that could be considered to be small. The second aspect De Jager mentions is that Chopin the pianist preferred the single-escapement Pleyel piano as opposed to the double-escapement Érard preferred by Liszt.\textsuperscript{60} The Pleyel was known for its lighter touch and more dulcet tones compared to the Érard. Thirdly, unlike the great majority of performers of the time (Liszt, Thalberg, Kalkbrenner), Chopin did not involve pyrotechnical or excessively virtuosic elements in his playing. Chopin himself claimed that ‘after having played immense quantities of notes, and more notes, then simplicity emerges with all its charm, like art’s final seal.’\textsuperscript{61} Finally, the venues in which Chopin performed were also small in scale. Chopin eschewed the concert arena in favour of the more intimate surroundings of French salons.\textsuperscript{62}

No genre in which Chopin composed is smaller in scale than the Prelude.

Chopin’s Twenty-four Preludes, Op. 28, originally published in 1839 are a set of short pieces for the piano, one in each of the twenty-four keys. Chopin wrote them between 1835 and 1839, partly during his well-documented and tumultuous stay at Valdemossa, Majorca, where he spent the winter of 1838–39 after he had fled there with George Sand and her children to escape the damp Paris weather.

Chopin’s Preludes are revolutionary in history, for they are neither introductions to fugues, nor etude-like exercises as were those preludes by other early 19\textsuperscript{th}-century composers such as


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{60} De Jager, 10

\textsuperscript{61} Chopin, in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Chopin as Pianist and Teacher: As Seen by His Pupils, trans. Naomi Shohet and ed. Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 54

\textsuperscript{62} De Jager, 10
Clementi, Hummel and Kalkbrenner. Chopin’s Preludes are the first instance of piano preludes as independent character pieces.

For the present writer, these pieces best capture the moods of Chopin – oscillating between joy, fury, contentment, desire, agitation and despair. They are set alongside one another in a way that often highlights the juxtaposition between moods. One only has to think of the extremely short and agitated Prelude No. 14 in Eb minor which is embedded in between the long and lyrical Preludes in F# major and Db major. Another instance is the furious and restless Prelude No. 18 in F minor followed by the pure and cheerful Prelude No. 19 in Eb major. Each prelude (with perhaps one or two exceptions) essentially contains one single mood that carries throughout the duration of the piece. Despite the fact that Chopin never did so himself, when the Preludes are performed as a set of 24, the contrasts between them are obvious and clearly intentional.  

The Preludes can be analysed equally as a whole, or as twenty-four individual pieces. In the view of De Jager, analyses of common threads across the Preludes is further evidence that Chopin’s music has become more greatly cleansed of its smallness. In addition, Chopin sometimes used the Preludes as just that – ‘preludes’ into other pieces of the same or relative key just as had been done since the 15th century (the first preludes were free improvisations played on the lute).

From a musical analysis perspective, the Preludes are fascinating for several reasons. The relationship between Chopin’s Preludes and other works of Chopin, extending to the similarity of ‘mood’ and the type of figuration, is striking: for example between the Prelude No 3 and the Andante Spianato in G major to the E flat major Polonaise; between No 23 and the Etude Op. 10, No 8; between No. 22 and the end of the G minor Ballade; between No 10 and the figuration of the ‘chorale theme’ in the C sharp minor Scherzo; between No 14 and the Finale of the B flat minor Sonata. Thus, these cyclically connected miniatures can be taken, to some extent, to quintessentially embody the romantic features of Chopin’s works for piano in a microcosm.

The early style analysts of Chopin’s music, including the Preludes, such as Frédérick Niecks and James Huneker, use colourful metaphors and adjectives to convey the feeling of Chopin’s music, rather than focus on technical analysis, as has become the more commonly accepted method in today’s world of music analysis. For the purposes of this study they are still somewhat valuable, as they speak to the general ‘emotion’ that is evoked by the music of Chopin. For example, for Niecks, the middle section of the Fifteenth (‘Raindrop’) Prelude evokes the image of a monastery with monks processing in a funeral march. He speaks of ‘terrors and phantoms’ and ‘aggressive

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63 Marilyn Meier, ‘Chopin Twenty-four Preludes Opus 28’ (Doctor of Creative Arts Thesis, School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, 1993), 67
64 De Jager, Abstract
65 Samson, The Music of Chopin, 143
dreams’ in relation to the C sharp minor section, which are wiped clear by the ‘smiling freshness of dear familiar nature’ when the opening D flat major melody reprises.66

George Sand’s accounts of her time in Majorca with Chopin while he was writing the Preludes portray a tumultuous time, yet in her view, despite Chopin ‘[b]eing sick to death at Majorca, he made music that fully smelled of paradise’.67 Sickness is a theme that will be further explored later in the chapter.

Huneker describes the Second Prelude as ‘ugly, forlorn, despairing, almost grotesque and discordant...’ seeing the ‘deepest depression in its sluggish, snake-like progression’ and even an ‘aversion to life’.68 Interestingly, even more contemporary scholars are wont to employ the descriptive language model of analysis when it comes to this particularly unusual Prelude. Lawrence Kramer discusses the slow, awkward, tense and somewhat tonally ambiguous quaver theme in the left hand, which in his opinion produces harmonic mis-shapings that ‘carry the sound of wilful self-alienation’.69 On hearing this piece one may feel a sense of unease and even slight illness due to the anonymity of the brooding harmonies. It could be argued that very few pieces capture this sense of despair as well as the A minor Prelude.

However, there is another side of this piece – an almost mischievous side. Chopin, reputedly quite the practical joker in his younger days,70 plays one of sorts here on his audience. Being the second prelude of a set starting with C major, we do not know what key to expect this piece to be in. Will it be, as Bach ordered his preludes and fugues, in C minor? Through the use of many non-harmonic tones, Chopin alludes strongly to G major, which, being a fifth above C major, would therefore be a perfectly logical sequence in which to order his Preludes, before finally settling into A minor in the second last line of the piece. Even at the stage when the piece moves into A minor, we are led to believe that it is just another harmony that we may be passing through. The proper sense of resolution does not come at all until the coda. Also, we may speculate as to the audience of the day’s reaction to the ‘ugliness’ of this piece. It is tempting to suggest that Chopin may have taken pleasure in upsetting them with it just a little.

66 Niecks, Frédérick, Chopin as a Man and Musician (London: Novello, 1902), 256
67 George Sand in Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, 84
68 James Huneker, Chopin: the Man and his Music (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900).
69 Lawrence Kramer ‘Romantic Meaning in Chopin’s Prelude in A Minor,’ 19th-Century Music 9, no. 2 (1985), 155
70 Frank Liebich, ‘Chopin: His Wit and Humour’, The Musical Times, 69/1025 (1928), 604
Romanticism

Recalling the succinct definition of romanticism from the first chapter – ‘introvert art generated by consciousness of self’ – how does Chopin and his music fit this definition? Chopin’s music, although it exhibits such a variety of influences, is clearly deeply personal and comes from within. His music is, to some extent, a representation of his private thoughts and feelings, too abstract to put into words. We hear a figure withdrawn from the outside world, isolated. Although some of these sentiments have been embellished with mythology (for much of which we can thank the Liszt biography) it still must be said that whether or not we can absolutely prove them, they are certainly relevant to a listener of any of Chopin’s music. Chopin (with a few exceptions) did not depict anything exterior and hated titling his own work.\textsuperscript{71} This would imply that to put a descriptive title on a piece is limiting, as described by Chopin in a conversation reported by Wilhelm von Lenz: ‘I indicated; it’s up to the listener to complete the picture.’\textsuperscript{72}

Unlike Wagner or Schumann or even Liszt, Chopin almost never seeks to make grandiose statements, or to be ‘epic’. Chopin was isolated into his own sound world. His well-documented and slightly tragic venture to Majorca is an example of this. Throughout his life (especially after he left Poland), Chopin felt estranged from society, despite his best (and reportedly quite successful) attempts to mingle with the Parisian elite.\textsuperscript{73}

Recalling the ‘artist as hero or confessor’ as a tenet of romanticism from the previous chapter, De Jager states that:

> The Romantic hero had to represent the masses (even though he might have been isolated from them), and uphold the ideologies to which they themselves subscribed. Chopin, not seeing himself as part of the masses, cannot, in this sense be viewed as a Romantic hero.\textsuperscript{74}

De Jager argues that Chopin’s music is not considered ‘heroic’ in the sense of Beethoven or Berlioz, whose music was accessible to the masses who could identify with the largeness of scale that enabled them to triumph over the elite.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{71} Chopin is quoted as writing ‘Now concerting Wessel, [one of Chopin’s publishers] he is an ass and a cheater…if he has lost on my compositions it is doubtless due to the stupid titles he has given them in spite of my repeated railings at Mr. Stapleton; that if I listened to the voice of my soul, I would never have sent him anything more after those titles. Jeffrey Kallberg, ‘Chopin’s March, Chopin’s Death’, 19th-Century Music, 25/1 (2001), 14-15
\textsuperscript{72} Citation and translation in Eigeldinger, Chopin as Pianist and Teacher, 278
\textsuperscript{74} De Jager, 32
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 29
Jim Samson summarises the romantic soul in Chopin’s music, which existed within his need for order, structure and precision:

Chopin lived in his music, engaging there in an interior play of powerful emotions, marshalled and controlled by a compulsive need for order. The best of his music reflects that tension, taming or freezing the impetuosity which often seems about to erupt, harnessing a tumult of feeling in the lucidity of its forms.\(^{76}\)

Chopin himself said that the Polish word ‘żal’ – which in English can roughly translate to a kind of bittersweet melancholy – best described his music.\(^{77}\) However, paradoxically, żal is also linked to rage. Ryszard Przybylski writes (in Polish) that żal is a word that contains:

[R]emorse as well as threat of protest, humiliation, and a rise of complaint...in żal one can weep, but from żal one can prepare vengeance. One can accept one’s deserved defeat, but anger over undeserved injury may be born from it. A person plunged in żal may judge in justice actions against oneself.\(^{78}\)

Chopin’s music contains a lot of anger and angst; and according to Polish jazz musician Leszek Możdżer, when pressed on the issue of anger in his music Chopin is reputed to have responded affirmatively: ‘most of my music is permeated with żal’.\(^{79}\) It seems Chopin associated this three-letter word strongly with his emotions, in particular the feeling of loss he felt towards his homeland. When asked by an audience member to describe the feeling in his compositions, Chopin is said to have responded that:

[W]hatever his moments of cheerfulness might be, he never for all that got rid of a feeling which formed, as it were, the soil of his heart, and for which he found a name only in his mother-tongue, no other possessing an equivalent to the Polish word żal [sadness, pain, sorrow, grief, trouble, repentance, &c.]. Indeed, he uttered the word repeatedly, as if his ear had been eager for this sound, which for him comprised the whole scale of the feelings which is produced by an intense plaint, from repentance to hatred, blessed or poisoned fruits of this acrid root.\(^{80}\)

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\(^{76}\) Samson, The Music of Chopin, 7


\(^{80}\) Niecks, 1902, 214
Gender

‘Of all the artists of our day, it is Chopin who most took possession of the soul and spirit of women.’ Kallberg’s chapter ‘Small Fairy Voices’ contains many quotes from predominantly 19th-century colleagues and music critics who, using colourful gender-based metaphors, discuss Chopin and his music as other-worldly and feminine. For instance, upon hearing the rumour of Chopin’s upcoming concert, Parisian critic Théophile Gautier described Chopin’s playing as follows:

Chopin means melancholy elegance, dreamy grace, virginal sensibility, everything that the soul possesses that is delicate, tender, ethereal. He modulates, he sighs on that rebellious instrument and, under his fingers, the keyboard seems brushed by the wing of an angel.

Gautier’s labelling of the pianoforte as a ‘rebellious’ instrument under Chopin’s fingers is appreciated, and it is difficult to disagree with the premise of this particular quote – however, like many of the quotes from the time, it does fail to recognise the darker and more violent nature of much of Chopin’s music.

As mentioned earlier, Chopin has been criticized in several circles for both his approach to larger forms (equated with masculinity), and his lack of vigour and virility. ‘The want of manliness, moral and intellectual, marks the one great limitation of Chopin’s province,’ wrote Hadow. However, it must be said that to pigeonhole Chopin as a feminine and sickly composer is to be mistaken. Such a view seems to be contradicted among Chopin’s ‘miniatures,’ such as the Etudes Opus 10 No 1, 4, 12 or Opus 25 No 11 and 12, or many of the Preludes in Opus 28 (such as the 24th Prelude in D minor), which, despite their brevity, all contain an ongoing intensity, virility and are physically exhausting to perform. This is not to say that for a piece to be masculine it has to be difficult and physically demanding; but again, Chopin is pigeonholed as a delicate composer of feminine music who lacks the rage and violence found in more ‘masculine’ composers.

Chopin’s smaller forms were equated with femininity. Unlike Berlioz who ‘the more colossal the means that he set in motion, the better he felt’, Chopin’s short pieces for solo piano didn’t sound as if they were trying be more than just what they were. Instead, Chopin’s pieces capture personal emotions – moody, dark, personal and intimate – but almost always expressed with an over-arching sense of beauty.

81 Jules Janin quoted in Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, 66
82 Théophile Gautier in Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, 65
83 Hadow in Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries, 82
84 Einstein, 33
Interestingly, as Kallberg notes, many of the other-worldly metaphors used to paint Chopin are directly linked to Chopin’s frailty:

The worlds of angels and fairies evoked through metaphorical substitutions applied to Chopin were, at the most obvious level of perception, hallowed and magically charmed places. But we would be missing a key element of their signifying power were we not to recognize the diseased and disorderly images that also inhabit there.85

So, what are these diseased and disorderly images and what role do they play in Chopin and his music?

**Sickness and death**

Chopin’s frailty and tragic early passing both loom large in our image of the composer. According to Kallberg, ‘it also represents, according to a certain cruel logic, the culmination of tropes of frailty, illness, and pathology that surrounded Chopin during his lifetime’.86 Chopin’s famous Funeral March from the Sonata in Bb Minor, Op. 35, was performed at Chopin’s very own funeral; and, since it was written in 1837, has been ‘Western music’s foremost expression of public mourning’, being played at many notable funerals.87 In investigating the process through which the march assumed multiple meanings in relation to the social history of death, Lawrence Kramer describes the catacombs of 19th century Paris.88 ‘Gratuitous disorder is punctuated by rigid order, the mass of bones is both utterly meaningless and the most ancient of symbolic forms, the *memento mori*.’89

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85 Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries*, 84
86 Kallberg, ‘Chopin’s March, Chopin’s Death,’ 3
87 Lawrence Kramer, ‘Chopin at the Funeral: Episodes in the History of Modern Death’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 54/1 (2001), 97. Kramer also quotes Chopin biographer Moritz Karasowski saying that the funeral march expresses ‘the pain and grief of an entire nation’. Interestingly, figures as diverse as Franz Liszt, Duke Ellington and Orson Welles all heard it in similar terms.
88 Ibid., 98, 102
89 Ibid., 103
The brooding left hand that opens the movement comprises a slow, hypnotic oscillation between two chords with their bass notes a minor third apart (150 years later, Cobain would feature a similar progression in several of his songs). Death is upon us. Rarely in classical music do we find this kind of ‘riff’ or motive to begin a movement of a sonata. The right hand upper voice sits on the tonic. Two bars later we hear the famous three-note melody. Then it repeats, up a third, with the left hand incessantly continuing toward impending doom.

The composition of the Funeral March predates the other movements of the Sonata, which were written in 1839. It is generally accepted that the Funeral March was written in 1837, though Kallberg suggests that it may have been written as far back as 1835.  

The trio section of the march has sparked discussion among listeners, pianists and academics as to what part it plays in the context of the piece as a whole: is it a nocturne or a pregheria or neither? However the generic differences are interpreted, Kramer summarises the gulf

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90 Frédéric Chopin, *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35* (Peters, 1839), 799
91 Kallberg, ‘Chopin’s March, Chopin’s Death,’ 8
between the two sections: ‘The insistent gloom of the march seems to disconnect it from the world of the living; the studied sweetness of the trio seems to deny or overidealize its connection to the world of the dead.’

Chopin as a man, both through his life and even more so since his death, has attracted almost mythical status as a sick, frail, pathological poet of the piano. Alfred Cortot even went so far as to suggest that Chopin’s small body size correlated to his miniature compositions. For instance, the following comments by a music critic in an 1842 overview of Chopin’s career is typical of many common perceptions of Chopin as a man:

We have styled M. Chopin one of the most individual modern composers: and, indeed, the man and his music are one. The former, frail as a shadow, pale, gentle, gracious in demeanour, and as unworlidy in all his incomings and outgoings, as if he pursued his imaginative career in a wood rather than in that most worldly of cities, Paris,—offers one of the many examples furnished by contemporary annals of Music, studied and wrought out poetically. . . . The extreme delicacy of M. Chopin’s physical conformation, which makes his appearances in public very rare, and, comparatively speaking, ineffective, has also had its influences in determining the character of his works. It is at once to be perceived, that the latter have been written by one endowed with a man’s strength, but a woman’s sensitiveness of finger: and that, in their execution, force can be better dispensed with than flexibility. . . . But a certain fragility and delicacy, akin to those of form and feature, are discernible in M. Chopin’s compositions. He seems incapable of continuous effort. . . . One or two of his Studies and Preludes have a largeness and dignity of outline which more muscular composers might envy.

As touched on in the previous chapter, Chopin from a young age faced several physical and psychological health issues. Kubba and Young’s article ‘The Long Suffering of Frédéric Chopin’ outlines in detail Chopin’s lifelong struggles with a variety of illnesses, and the authors also suggest possible diagnoses. Chopin’s sickness affected his music, both as a composer and as a performer. He only gave thirty public performances in his lifetime, and this was partly as a result of the intensely physically demanding nature of piano performance.

Other articles discuss the impact of the frail composer’s health on his music. Kallberg writes, regarding Chopin’s final mazurka:

A clear connection would have been drawn between Chopin’s physical condition and that of the manuscript: from his body racked with pain arose the tortured document containing his last musical thoughts, ideas that themselves display, in their sinuous chromatic digressions, the soul of a man in extremis.

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93 Kramer, ‘Chopin at the Funeral’, 103-105
94 De Jager, 11
95 Contemporary Musical Composers, Frédéric Chopin, Athenæum, 1842, 18
96 Kubba and Young, ‘The Long Suffering of Frédéric Chopin’, 210-6.
97 Kallberg, Chopin at the Boundaries 123
Similar sentiments have been expressed about the Funeral March: ‘Those inclined to relate Chopin's works directly to incidents in his life will have no difficulty with the Marche funebre.’

Among Chopin’s own writings is a letter to Solange Clésinger of 9 September 1848, about events that he describes as having taken place in a Manchester Salon earlier that year:

A strange adventure befell me while I played my Sonata in Bb minor in front of some British friends. I had played more or less correctly the allegro and the scherzo, I was about to attack the march, when suddenly I saw loom up out of the half-open body of the piano the accursed creatures that appeared to me in a lugubrious night at the Chartreuse. I had to leave a moment to recover, after which I resumed without saying anything.

Chopin’s biographers have touched on the subject of mental illness: there is speculation of depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia by biographers, and also some psychiatrists who have examined his character and psyche.

In their article, ‘The Hallucinations of Frédéric Chopin’, Manuel Vázquez Caruncho and Francisco Brañas Fernández examine a series of hallucinatory episodes experienced by Chopin in his lifetime and propose a diagnosis (temporal lobe epilepsy) based on a fairly extensive investigation of the available sources that allude to Chopin’s mental and emotional wellbeing.

Chopin’s hallucinatory tendencies are also examined in Ewelina Boczkowska’s ‘Chopin’s Ghosts’ which focuses more on Chopin’s music than it does on diagnosing his illnesses. According to Boczkowska, ‘Chopin’s music carries a poignant relationship to loss and melancholy. Much of this music is imbued with unremitting melancholia and reflects a particular experience of shattered hope, forced displacement, and social estrangement’. Chopin creates musical narratives haunted by encrypted memories of loss.

There are countless examples of Chopin expressing his melancholia, in letters and quotes scattered throughout history. Chopin wrote a letter to his friend Tytus Wojciechowski on 25 December 1831:

I am gay on the outside... but inside something gnaws at me; some presentiment, anxiety, dreams—or sleeplessness,— melancholy, indifference,—desire for life, and the next instant, desire for death: some kind of sweet peace, some kind of numbness, absent-mindedness; and sometimes definite memories worry me.

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98 Samson, Chopin, 136
99 The letter was first published in Bernard Gavoty, Frédéric Chopin (Paris, 1974), 299-300, as quoted in Kallberg, ‘Chopin’s March Chopin’s Death’, 22
101 Ewelina Boczkowska, ‘Chopin’s Ghosts,’ 19th-Century Music 35, no. 3 (2012), 205
Of course, despite Chopin’s lifelong struggle with illness, at times he managed a phlegmatic, almost humorous approach to his decrepit conditions: ‘The first [doctor] said I was dead, the second that I am dying, and the third that I’m going to die.’

**Conclusion**

In many ways, Chopin is an archetypal romantic composer. He was innovative in areas of harmony and form, yet unlike his contemporaries, he looked to the classics for inspiration. The way Chopin utilized classicism and romanticism, or chaos and order, created a fascinating interaction of tension and beauty. We have seen that themes of gender, sickness and death are prominent in the music and musings of Chopin the man. Now, in light of this study into romanticism, let us move forward a century and a half to examine another well-loved figure of the world of music, Kurt Cobain.

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103 Chopin, letter to Julian Fontana in Paris from Palma, 3 December 1838, in Bronislaw Edward Sydow, *Selected Correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 164
Chapter Three
Nirvana

Background

Rock music’s soul and purpose has always been grounded in the idea of youthful rebellion, particularly by white men.\textsuperscript{104} One needs only to look at Elvis Presley in the 1950s to see one of the first examples of rock being situated in what Lawrence Grossberg has labelled ‘youth’s experiences of alienation, powerlessness, and boredom’.\textsuperscript{105} However, the corporatisation of rock music through the ’70s and ’80s meant that this rebellious spirit was being diluted, and, as a result, subgenres of rock commenced materialising more prominently. In the late ’70s, punk emerged, with bands such as The Ramones and The Sex Pistols bringing rock back to its key ingredients: loud guitars playing simple patterns and singers with snarling attitude. This coexisted with mainstream stadium rock,\textsuperscript{106} and psychedelic rock,\textsuperscript{107} two other popular subgenres of rock in the ’70s. By the mid-late ’80s, a focus on MTV and ‘over the top’ antics suggested that rock had become hedonistic and had lost touch with reality. This, once again, resulted in a further diversification of rock subgenres. Drawing from punk’s aesthetic, Indie rock (named this way because the bands were signed to small, independently-owned labels) became an increasingly lucrative alternative to mainstream rock, with bands such as R.E.M., The Replacements, Throwing Muses and The Pixies all gaining airplay on American college radio stations.\textsuperscript{108}

Doug Pray’s 1996 film, \textit{Hype!} is a documentary-style examination into the beginnings of the ‘Seattle scene’, which captures the attitude and culture of many north-west bands of the late ’80s and early ’90s. The film begins by giving grunge music (see below) a social and physical context – Washington State, with its dreary weather, high unsolved murder rate and general


\textsuperscript{105} Lawrence Grossberg, in Fast, ‘Rock’

\textsuperscript{106} Stadium Rock (or arena rock) is a popular form of rock music which is performed in large concert venues (such as sports venues). The music tends to be a well-produced and radio-friendly sounding hard rock genre involving hard rock songs and power ballads.


\textsuperscript{108} This chapter focuses on American (and to a lesser extent British) music; however many Australian artists and bands have had significant influence in underground rock music history. Queensland’s The Saints were one of the first Punk Rock bands; Melbourne’s The Birthday Party were hugely influential in a variety of subgenres and scenes (such as Goth music); and many (such as figurehead music critic Everett True) argue that Perth’s Kim Salmon and his band The Scientists were the first grunge band.
perception of it being the ‘end of the world.’

Add to this the wide-ranging disenfranchisement with President Ronald Reagan’s ‘conservative, money conscious, politically nasty and Republican’ era, and the fact that the charts were dominated by a glut of sybaritic glam metal bands, and one begins to see the reasons why such a large number of like-minded and relatively similar sounding bands spawned at this time in the north-west.

The growth in popularity of indie (or alternative) rock reached unprecedented levels on January 6, 1992, when, buoyed by post-Christmas refunds and exchanges, a three-piece band from Washington State, whose front-man only two years previously had been turned down for a job cleaning dog kennels, went to number one on the USA charts. On the back of their hit single ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’, Nirvana’s *Nevermind* was now the most popular album in the country. Subsequently, indie/alternative rock had become the dominant genre of rock music. Of course, this genuinely changed the face of rock music history, while throwing the record industry into a chaotic search for the ‘next Nirvana’. Out of all the many indie rock bands of the time, especially in north-west USA, it was Nirvana that the mainstream world found most appealing. Reasons for this are debatable and varied, and will be discussed later in the chapter.

From their outset, Nirvana had made great impressions on music critics, producers, Sub Pop (their record label) and of course their musical counterparts, with their profound musical delivery, the band’s ‘feminine side’, Cobain’s freakishly poetic lyrics and the band’s ‘actual living, breathing, life-enriching shows’. They released their first album, *Bleach* on Sub Pop in 1989 and it was moderately successful, but certainly did not break through into the mainstream. In 1991, Nirvana signed to major label Geffen and hired Butch Vig to engineer the new album. *Nevermind*, Nirvana’s first release on Geffen, with its ubiquitous teen anthem ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ and relatively sparkly production, specifically stood out. While Kurt Cobain was undoubtedly one of the most talented songwriters in the history of popular music, his appeal was that he was one of the disenfranchised many, and conveyed an almost angelic capacity for empathy. He seemingly understood the troubles that so many people were experiencing, even though he was powerless to control such forces in his own life.

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111 See description of glam metal on p5 in Chapter 1
112 Cross, 3
113 The idea of femininity in Nirvana’s music will be explored later in the chapter.
114 Everett True, *Live Through This* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd, 2001), 20
Grunge

Although the origins of the term are somewhat shrouded in mystery (Mark Arm, vocalist for Green River and later Mudhoney is generally credited as the first person to apply the term ‘grunge’ in this context), the style that this group of bands from the Pacific northwest played (and dressed and looked) became known as grunge. This term was quickly picked up by influential people such as Bruce Pavitt (whose record label Sub Pop had a significant role to play in the Seattle scene) and music journalists such as Melody Maker’s Everett True. Grunge signifies a social pose, or attitude just as much as it refers to a musical style. The grunge sound draws from hardcore punk, heavy metal and alternative rock. It fuses these styles to differing extents. Grunge rejects the glamour, mystique and commercialism of metal, but takes much from its slow, heavy sound. Punk’s DIY ethics are a major influence, but the up-tempo songs and political mindedness are less prevalent. The guitar tone is mid-range, distorted and fuzzy. Grunge guitarists incorporate guitar feedback into their sonic texture. Drums are pounded and vocals are generally melodic, but almost always shouted. The overall aesthetic is stripped down compared to other forms of rock, with a rejection of theatrics. Lyrics are filled with angst and deal with themes such as social alienation, apathy and confinement, often with more than a hint of bitter sarcasm. Perhaps Tad Doyle, front-man of seminal Seattle band, Tad, sums it up best when he describes grunge as the ‘most noisy, most absurd, heaviest thing that was going’.

Nirvana’s music in relation to Grunge

Given this general definition, can Nirvana be classified as a grunge band? To an extent, yes, Nirvana’s work is clearly indebted to the grunge sound. However, there are significant sonic, textural, formal and stylistic differences between Nirvana and the majority of grunge bands, arising from the influence of pop music on Cobain. Due to these differences, Nirvana inevitably stood out from the plethora of grunge bands from the Northwest at this time. Nirvana’s songs were not simply ‘grunge’ songs. Even on their first album, there are hints of Cobain being a genuine pop songwriter (most notably on the ‘Beatles-esque’ ‘About a Girl’). Nirvana’s influence was wider-ranging than just metal and punk. While there is no doubt many of Cobain’s favourite artists were from these genres, he also regularly spoke of the influence of pop in his music. However, as Mazullo states, ‘it is difficult to know exactly what he [Cobain]

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116 A common ideal shared by many punk bands was/is to ‘Do it Yourself’ – especially with regard to recording, advertising, managing, distribution, posters and flyers etc.

117 Pray, Hype!

118 In this context, ‘pop music’ refers to traditional popular music involving bands/artists who write melodic songs in a basic structure, utilising repeated choruses and catchy hooks. Generally, pop songwriters desire to have a mass audience appeal, unlike many punk and grunge bands.
meant because he conflated many disparate pop traditions and styles: the early Beatles, classic Motown, British teeny-bopper bands like Herman and the Hermits...’ and Indie pop bands such as the Vaselines, the Young Marble Giants and the Pixies (who pioneered the ‘soft verse, loud chorus’ dynamic contrast that Nirvana utilised and mastered). As a child, Cobain loved the Beatles; ‘I wanted to be John Lennon,’ he said, and his pop sensibilities shone through even the most dirge-like of guitar tones. In 1988, from the first printed article about Nirvana to appear in the influential London-based magazine, Melody Maker, critic Everett True distinguished Nirvana as follows:

Where Nirvana differs from their contemporaries is the strength of Kurdt’s [sic] songwriting. Among those in the know, Nirvana are said to be the cream of the crop... [F]ar from being a melting potpourri of every loud noise imaginable, Nirvana crafts their songs with a diligence not seen this side of Creation.120

Cobain’s direction for the band was to combine his love of simple pop music with the anger and aggression of the punk and heavy metal movement.121 On the Nirvana documentary, Live! Tonight! Sold Out!, Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl describes Cobain’s melodies as being catchy like ‘nursery rhymes.’122

There are two notable points to draw from the above: the notion of crafting songs with diligence, which carries implications with regard to form and structure, and the more obvious notion of Cobain as a supreme melodist. Here, parallels with Chopin can begin to be drawn. Firstly, like Chopin, Cobain had a penchant for producing magnetic melodies, which, though seemingly simple, were almost always catchy and almost always slightly twisted.

In the following transcription by the author of an excerpt from ‘Big Long Now’ from the 1992 compilation Incesticide, we see an example of a simple melody that still manages to sound twisted – thanks partly to the unsettling harmonies provided by the guitar.

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119 True, Live Through This, 36
122 Live! Tonight! Sold Out!, Directed by Kevin Kerslake, USA (David Geffen Records, 1994)
Appearing as the penultimate track on *Incesticide*, Nirvana’s ‘Big Long Now’ is certainly not a song for which the band is highly renowned.\(^\text{123}\) The track is highly repetitive, even monotonous, and contains a slow, awkwardly chromatic quaver theme (D♭ F D♮ F|D♭ F G F) played in the lowest register by a semi-distorted guitar. The most appropriate word to describe this song is ‘dirge’ – on the surface it is ugly, sombre, frustrated and utterly mournful. Yet the yearning for beauty is still evident in the descending melody which is always simple, memorable and hauntingly seductive, and his bittersweet vocals, which match the disconcerting yet sweet mood of the song perfectly.\(^\text{124}\)

\(^{123}\) Nirvana, *Incesticide*, 1992

\(^{124}\) This quest for beauty is even evident in the lyrics, in which the final line preceding the chorus is ‘can we show our faces now’ - possibly suggesting that Cobain is aware he is hiding behind the ugliness and monotony of the verses and is capable of producing something far more immediately appealing should he choose to.
As discussed in the previous chapter, Chopin’s Prelude in A minor opens with a slow, awkward, tense and somewhat tonally ambiguous quaver theme in the left hand, producing harmonic mis-shapings that ‘carry the sound of wilful self-alienation’. Like the aforementioned Nirvana song, this is contrasted with a more pleasing (though descending) melody, perhaps representing a struggle within or ‘the tone of voice of an ego impatient to establish itself as transcendental,'

125 Frédéric Chopin, *24 Preludes, Impromptus* (Budapest: Könemann Music Budapest, 1839), 7
126 Kramer, ‘Romantic Meaning in Chopin’s Prelude in A Minor’, 155
as incapable of final satisfaction or embodiment” or possibly represents ‘Chopin’s way of staging a larger dialectic between Classical authority and Romantic Innovation’.

Further, we note the precision and meticulousness in each composer’s approach to form.

**Cobain’s Approach to Form**

On the surface, Nirvana’s approach to form and structure does not appear to be particularly unique when faced with the preceding forty years of rock and pop music. The majority of their songs (particularly those better known) followed traditional rock formats, with components such as verses, choruses, bridges and guitar ‘sos’ quite common. However, there is evidence in Nirvana’s musical output, interviews with Kurt Cobain and discussions in the literature that suggests that form was an element of Nirvana’s music that was innovative, that Cobain was highly conscious of it and wished to utilize form as a musical element more sophisticatedly. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*’s David Fricke given just months before his death, Cobain speaks candidly about the constraints he feels with the musical formula Nirvana most commonly utilizes. The constraint also extends to being labelled as grunge. Cobain expresses his desire to transcend the current formula, wishing to ‘almost become psychedelic in a way but with a lot more structure,’ though he does add that ‘it’s a really hard thing to do, and I don’t know if we’re capable of it—as musicians.’

Mazullo surmises that ‘Cobain’s insistence that his own artistic voice had not yet been revealed in Nirvana’s music suggests that he was envisioning for his musical future a more deliberately composerly sensibility’.

Cobain and Nirvana were certainly aware of and influenced by Punk music, which, through the ‘70s and ‘80s experimented with greatly condensing song forms. It took an ‘all killer no filler’ approach with short fast and loud songs that often omitted bridges and guitar solos. Many punk songs were only two minutes long. We can hear that formal influence in early Nirvana songs such as ‘Downer’ as well as ‘Territorial Pissings’ off *Nevermind* and ‘Tourette’s’ off *In Utero*. Conversely, a few indie rock bands of the ‘80s did experiment with extended forms. Notably, Sonic Youth (close friends and tour companions of Nirvana’s) drew influence from the New York postmodernists and explored sprawling sonic territories through extended techniques and

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127 Ibid., p. 155
128 Ibid., p. 148
129 Solo is in inverted commas because Cobain’s style of soloing differed greatly from a typical hard rock guitarist. Cobain had two main ‘types’ of solos – (1) was the ‘anti-solo’, heavily distorted and essentially comprising chromatic passages mixed with feedback and string bends; and (2), a solo which followed the melody line of the vocals – the best example of which is in Nirvana’s most famous song, ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’.
130 Mazullo, 721-722
131 Mazullo, 723
tunings for the guitar. However, despite the fact that some of his contemporaries have explored form in the sense of experimenting with long forms, Cobain (with one or two significant exceptions as we will soon discover) mostly eschewed experimentation with large forms. For the most part, Nirvana’s songs followed a fairly typical rock format of verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus.

‘Cobain’s songs and arrangements...were sophisticated and well organized. But the music is organized loosely – at times, so loosely that it treads the boundary between organization and chaos’. Nirvana’s music threatens to fall apart, but never actually does so – just as Chopin’s music ‘reflects that tension [between order and chaotic emotions], taming or freezing the impetuosity which often seems about to erupt, harnessing a tumult of feeling in the lucidity of its forms’. Organized Chaos wasn’t just a band name Cobain dreamed up one day, it was his philosophy. And, as Jim Samson so eloquently describes, Chopin’s musical outlook exuded the same characteristics.

Tim Hughes also makes the point that ‘[t]he deliberate use of chaos within an organized context works because it effectively communicates spontaneity’. We know that spontaneity is a key component in Chopin, for example the quasi-improvised melismatic runs. Spontaneity in itself is not the end goal here, but the means through which spontaneity sends a signal to an audience: the music being played is a direct, honest, communication from these musicians.

One defining characteristic of many Nirvana songs is their renowned two-gear dynamic ‘strategy’: quiet (verse) and loud (chorus). Although seemingly obvious in retrospect, at the time this development marked a significant innovation in rock music – and while Cobain did not ‘invent’ this formula (he credits The Pixies for it in several interviews), he certainly utilized it most effectively and it was another factor in Nirvana’s music that made them stand out from many of their peers. Interestingly, despite this terraced dynamic structure, another feature of many Nirvana songs is the softening of the transition between the verse and the chorus. Gilad Cohen’s article ‘Grunge Music In Bloom: Musical Analysis of Nirvana’s Hit’ examines the Nirvana song ‘In Bloom’ from a variety of perspectives (Cohen even compares it to a Chopin Etude!)

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132 Sonic Youth’s album *Daydream Nation* is a great example of their experimentation with extended forms and sounds.
133 Cobain even made fun of his use of this formula too, entitling a B-side ‘Verse Chorus Verse’.
136 Ibid, 7
137 Hughes, 168
including the short transitional passage from verse to refrain.\textsuperscript{138} Although there is a clear point where the verse ends and chorus begins, Cobain blurs the transition in several ways, one of which is a change of timbre; Cobain introduces a distorted guitar sound one bar before the chorus. In the same bar Cobain also shouts a high F in his topmost register, initially creating tension over a C\textsubscript{b} chord, but anticipating the chorus by sustaining the note into bar one of the chorus over a B\textsubscript{b} chord.\textsuperscript{139} This harks back to examples in Chapter Two of Chopin obscuring changes in sections of the Etudes. In ‘Hairspray Queen’ ‘ends of phrases are slurred into subsequent beginnings while he [Cobain] takes his breaths in the middle of verse lines, rather than at their end’.\textsuperscript{140}

‘Endless Nameless’, a hidden track on \textit{Nevermind}, recorded as a semi-improvised jam,\textsuperscript{141} has been described as ‘nothing if not a punk anthem: a deconstruction of the rock song replacing any crafting of melody’.\textsuperscript{142} Mazullo interprets this song as an ‘extreme deviation from the remainder of Nirvana’s output’ as across the lengthy span of the track, it dismantles the structure that Nirvana (and the vast majority of rock bands) utilize most commonly. Beginning by parodying the quiet-loud, verse-chorus form as described in the last paragraph, ‘the song abandons that form altogether’. ‘[B]oth the alternation that defines the formula itself and the human voice are dispensed with’.\textsuperscript{143} The track ends with the sound of Cobain smashing his guitar (at 19:32). For the present writer, the emotion experienced in Chopin’s final three fff accented cannoning low Ds in the final prelude of Op 28 is identical to the violence, rage and turmoil of Cobain smashing his guitar. After all the beauty, innovation, warmth, wit and the entire gamut of human emotions experienced in the music preceding these respective moments, both composers feel that the final word must be one of (self?) destruction. This relates back to the earlier analysis of chaos and organisation, except these rare moments of destruction are the only times in which the threat of chaos being unleashed actualises and organization gets overwhelmed and ultimately defeated.

In Chapter 2 the point was made of Chopin’s compositional style deriving directly from the piano, i.e. throughout his compositions, abundant examples exist that contain idiomatic traits directly pertinent to the pianoforte. A parallel exists between Cobain and the guitar. Frequent use of

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\textsuperscript{139} For further analysis of this passage please see Cohen, ‘Grunge Music In Bloom: Musical Analysis of Nirvana’s Hit’, 12
\textsuperscript{140} Wood ‘Pained Expression: Metaphors of Sickness and Signs of ’Authenticity’ in Kurt Cobain’s Journals’, 346
\textsuperscript{141} Semi-improvised perhaps but Nirvana played ‘Endless Nameless’ live on several occasions, which suggests it was not improvisatory, but rather a planned-out or ‘controlled jam’.
\textsuperscript{142} Berkenstadt in Mazullo, 728
\textsuperscript{143} Mazullo, 729
\end{flushright}
open strings and chords are just a couple of examples of this method of composition. Cohen details the use of open chords in the song ‘In Bloom’ where other chords would be more expected in the context of the harmonic language of that particular song. Further, the vast majority of Chopin’s output is for piano solo. Cobain’s musical output is for a stripped back version of a rock band – vocals, one guitar, bass and drums, with minimal effects and overdubs. Both have a minimal, stripped back approach to instrumental textures.

**Other musical components**

Cobain’s use of his voice is a key facet to Nirvana’s sound. In Tim Hughes’s analysis of a live bootlegged Nirvana concert from 1990, he explains Cobain’s technique of distorting his voice, just like a distortion of electronic circuitry. An effect of a distorted voice is that it ‘de-emphasizes aspects that contribute to non-linguistic forms of expression, such as screams moans wails roars and shrieks.’ As a result, overdriven vocals can communicate feelings of great duress, urgency or intensity. Articulation of consonants and clarity of pitches are obscured; but vowels, phrasing, dynamics and pitch contour are relatively unaltered. Therefore the actual lyrics are obscured but the communication of feeling is heightened. Although Chopin wrote very little music for voice, in his piano music we know he hated the use of titles which added explicit meaning to his music. For him, this obscured the implicit meaning in the feeling of his music.

As a guitarist, Cobain favoured tone, timbre and texture as distinct from flashy pyrotechnics or virtuoso playing. Many guitarists at the time prided themselves on fast and highly technical playing, whereas Cobain came from an entirely different school of thought. Butch Vig, producer of Nevermind, is quoted as saying that Cobain had a ‘primal instinct for playing the guitar’. One of Cobain’s trademarks as a songwriter was to have both his voice and guitar sing/play in unison with each on the brink of distortion/feedback.

Cohen’s article also discusses motions of fifths and sixths in ‘In Bloom’, describing the alteration between the natural and lowered sixth degree as ‘In Bloom’s’ ‘harmonic hook’. He compares a similar motion of the lowered and natural sixth degree in Chopin’s Etude in A flat major (from

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144 Hughes, 166
145 Ibid., 166
146 Ibid., 166
148 Examples of this abound across Nirvana’s music, but one example is the first track off their first album, ‘Blew’ from Bleach
149 Cohen, 2
Trois Nouvelles Études). Boelcke’s dissertation entitled ‘Chopin’s 24 Préludes, Opus 28: A Cycle Unified by Motion between the Fifth and Sixth Scale Degrees’ contends that the motion between fifths and natural/lowered sixths is the motivic seed that unifies Chopin’s Preludes opus 28.150

Romanticism

Self-destruction was also central to grunge. This was personified in heavy drug use, the destruction of instruments, and ultimately Kurt Cobain’s suicide. The destructive drive comes from angst regarding the government, parents and other authority figures. Yet many of these serious issues are approached with a sense of hopelessness and the feeling of being unable to make a difference. However, through a sense of detachment, grunge musicians avoid taking themselves or their image too seriously. Apathy towards oneself, the audience, and society at large was a constant in the music, yet always contrasted with a sense of passion, hope and idealism. This duality was at the crux of grunge music, and certainly Nirvana’s.

‘Cobain and his fellow grunge balladeers never really aspire to protest; preferring to remain mired in their own sense of inadequacy.’151 Grunge engages in ‘a kind of mournful nostalgia for a childhood without violation’152. They have not come to terms with this loss. This sense of loss and melancholia is the subject of Ewelina Boczowska’s article ‘Chopin’s Ghosts’, where she argues that ‘Chopin creates musical narratives haunted by encrypted memories of loss.’153 Her distinction between a mourner who has come to terms with loss and a melancholic is in the way a mourner ‘can speak comfortably about the past’ whereas a melancholic ‘struggles to articulate memories and feelings of grief.’154 Not only did Cobain try to express the inexpressible like many other artists, but, according to Hughes, ‘Cobain also wanted to communicate his inability to express the inexpressible’.155 Melancholy, loss, and the inability to cope with all that which is associated with these is a central facet of both artists’ life experience, expressed through their music. In his analysis of Cobain’s lyrics, Duane Fish adds that emotions such as sadness, anger and fear provide Cobain a sense of comfort without which he would be disorientated.156

150 Andreas M. Boelcke, ‘Chopin’s 24 Preludes, Opus 28: A Cycle Unified by Motion between the Fifth and Sixth Scale Degrees’ (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2008), iii (Abstract)
151 Ferguson in Mazullo, 732
152 Ibid, 732
153 Bockowska, 212
154 Ibid., 212. Bockowska also goes on to say ‘The melancholic narrative is distinguished by discontinuity, lack of direct voice, masked expression, temporal disjunction, and the use of idiosyncratic expression or quotation’ – traits which can explicitly be applied to both Chopin’s and Cobain’s music.
155 Hughes, 169
156 Duane R. Fish, ‘Serving the Servants: An Analysis of the Music of Kurt Cobain.’, Popular Music and Society, 19/2 (22 June 1995), 90
Leading from this, Nirvana and, more specifically, Kurt Cobain, have often, rightly or wrongly, been referred to as Generation X spokesmen, icons or heroes even (or anti-heroes depending on one’s perspective). At the time, members of Generation X were generally described as lacking in ambition, indecisive, apathetic and having short attention spans\(^{157}\). From here Mazullo makes perhaps the most significant non-musical differentiation between UK punk and US grunge – punk was socio-political and working class driven, whereas (despite the occasional political song such as Nirvana’s ‘Downer’) grunge was generation driven and more about cultural rather than class politics. Where UK punk knew what it was rebelling against, ‘in the ideology of grunge, the enemy turns out to be the self.’\(^{158}\) However, perhaps contrastingly, Sonic Youth front man, Thurston Moore described grunge as ‘a nihilistic hippie movement.’\(^{159}\) This links closely to Chopin’s sense of żal in his music – he was rarely politically charged (with exceptions of course) but both he and his music possessed this bittersweet melancholy, which is also linked to rage.

**Gender**

Hard rock is generally perceived as a masculine genre – loud, abrasive, played mostly by men to a predominantly male audience. Yet Nirvana (and specifically Cobain) were often described as feminine. Anti-misogynistic and anti-homophobic, Nirvana speak to men and women in the same tone, as equals. This is entirely contrasting to the majority of popular rock bands at the time who were considered by many to have degrading attitudes and lyrics towards women. One of the reasons for Nirvana’s mainstream popularity is that they appealed to female listeners, as well as minority groups that did not typically listen to rock music, such as African Americans and Hispanics. Cobain strongly identified with women and with minority groups, as Jan J Muto discusses in her article ‘He Was the Woman of his Dreams’.\(^{160}\)

Muto describes the different ‘selves’ of Cobain in order to gain a greater appreciation for the complexity of his identity.\(^{161}\) Cobain himself was embarrassed by his frail body, and he wore several layers of clothing to ‘bulk up’.\(^{162}\) According to Muto, Cobain’s emotional self is less clearly masculine or feminine, where his surly, standoffish, angry aura was tempered by introspection, moodiness and nurturing characteristics.

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\(^{157}\) Mazullo, 731.


\(^{159}\) Azzerad, 7


\(^{161}\) Ibid., 73

\(^{162}\) Ibid., 74
'You could smell the talent on Kurt Cobain. He had this sort of elfin delivery, but it was not navel-gazing... He'd sort of hunch over his guitar like an evil little troll, but you heard this throaty power in his voice'.\textsuperscript{163} This quote from Iggy Pop, the godfather of punk rock, echoes very similar otherworldly sentiments to those discussed in Kallberg's 'Small Fairy Voices' chapter of \textit{Chopin at the Boundaries}. Something in the performances of these two men seems to have consistently evoked thoughts in audiences' minds of otherworldly, and often feminine characters such as angels and elves.

\textit{Sickness and Death}

Kurt Cobain’s suicide has contributed significantly to the mythical perception that many music lovers have of the man. Throughout his life, Cobain experienced significant levels of physical and emotional pain. Jessica Wood investigates Cobain’s fascination with the human form and bodily fluids, and argues that Cobain’s idea of the sick body functioned as a central metaphor that shaped his approach to his prose, lyrics, visual art and singing.\textsuperscript{164}

Evidently, throughout his life, Kurt Cobain was not comfortable with his body image. Stories abound of his wearing multiple layers of clothing to appear more bulky, in an effort to fit in, despite the pleasure he took in existing in opposition to the mainstream ‘jock’\textsuperscript{165} persona. Wood explains this duality: ‘While his small size was a feature to be masked in the everyday (because it placed him on the margins of masculinity), it was something to be marked in creative practice (because it gave him status as marginalised).’\textsuperscript{166} In his \textit{Journals}, Cobain refers to his body as ‘enemic [sic], rodent-like’ and ‘malnourished’\textsuperscript{167}. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Cobain’s primal ‘howl’ style of singing – ‘he croons, growls and then screams from the pit of his stomach’\textsuperscript{168} – caused his body further damage. Cobain expressed the relationship between sickness and emotion relative to his music in a \textit{New York Times} interview: ‘My body is damaged from music in two ways. I have a red irritation in my stomach. It’s psychosomatic, caused by all the anger and the screaming. I have scoliosis, where the curvature of your spine is bent, and the weight of my guitar has made it worse. I’m always in pain and that adds to the anger in our

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{164} Wood, 331
\bibitem{165} The ‘jock’ persona embodies mainstream heterosexual masculine traits
\bibitem{166} Wood, 338
\bibitem{167} Kurt Cobain, \textit{Journals} (London: Penguin, 2002).
\end{thebibliography}
music. I’m grateful to it in a way.’ Here we can see that the sickness causes the pain and authenticity in the music, which inadvertently cause further psychosomatic sickness and pain. One can hear this in many Nirvana songs such as ‘Milk It’, ‘Hairspray Queen’ and ‘You Know You’re Right’. ‘Milk It’ for example is particularly experimental harmonically, featuring much dissonance and guitar, then vocal melodies that are intended to make the listener feel uncomfortable. A particular feature is the way Cobain sings the verse sounding as though he is struggling to produce enough air to sing any louder, or to sing a ‘real melody’. It’s all too hard for him, or so we are momentarily led to believe, until the pre-chorus comes in with long screams that show us another side of his suffering.

The sense of sickness comes through in the music, as Wood explains in her case study of the song ‘Hairspray Queen’ and Rivers Cuomo (front man of Weezer) insinuates when he says: ‘I was just so in love with the [Nirvana’s] music that it made me feel sick’. Similarly, Oscar Wilde describes his sense of ill-ease: ‘After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed and mourning over tragedies that were not my own.’

**Authenticity**

Wood’s article on Cobain is about sickness and how it links in to Cobain’s idea of being authentic. So, what is authenticity in music? Is it the freedom to write and play whatever you want, however you want and whenever you want, without demands from a record label? Is it rejecting mainstream pop song formulas, structures, and pleasant sounds? Grove describes the notion of rock authenticity thus: ‘music should express an unmediated interiority’. Cobain and his contemporaries were fixated with being ‘real’ and coming across as real; of course what this means for them as individuals can vary somewhat.

Cobain spent time with, and was significantly influenced by Olympia lo-fi pioneer Calvin Johnson, who preached a strong DIY ethos, but in a sensitive way: ‘My whole point of view in music has been about inclusiveness…the expression should be the emphasis rather than the technical skill’. Although, in this writer’s opinion, Cobain the guitarist had more technical ability than what we are led to believe, Johnson’s sentiment of emotional expression triumphing over technical skill certainly applies to Nirvana. Renowned blogger Mark Prindle supports this as one

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171 Fast, ‘Rock’

of the main reasons why Nirvana were so popular: ‘Mainly, though, Nirvana were real. Regardless of the occasional funny make-up and women’s clothing, they were never simply “performers” - they were real folks who played songs about real feelings and real problems...’. Interestingly, the decade following Nevermind spawned a glut of bands that very much based their sound on Nirvana’s, and therefore failed to come across as authentic.

What is most important here is this idea of authenticity, as being something inherent in the artist and being communicated directly to the audience.

**Conclusion**

In the context of rock music, a genre that rapidly evolved over the four decades from its beginnings to the time of Kurt Cobain’s death, Nirvana stand out as one of the most recognisable, well-loved and unique bands of all time. With respect to romanticism, it is clear that the dichotomy between order and chaos was consciously significant to Kurt Cobain, as highlighted by his song structures, accounts of live performances, and his journals. Themes of gender, sickness, drugs and death all played substantial roles in Cobain’s lyrics and Nirvana’s music.

Although several comparisons with Chopin were made in this chapter, let us now move to the final section to examine further comparisons as we seek to find the relevance of and extent to which a common type of romanticism to is shared between these two artists.

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Chapter Four

Conclusion

Like Chopin, Nirvana and Cobain in particular have attracted and perpetuated a mythical status amongst fans since their breakthrough as the world’s biggest band in 1992. Of course, this mythical status was magnified and set in stone after Kurt Cobain’s suicide in April 1994. For a researcher and follower of the band, just as with Chopin, sometimes the myth can make it difficult to separate fact from fiction. However, if we were to ignore the myth that these artists leave behind in order to focus purely on the facts, we would lose something significant in what their music means to so many people.

One of the challenges in comparing the work of these two artists is the fact that Nirvana’s music contains lyrics, from which we can perhaps derive some meaning, while of course the vast majority of Chopin’s does not. Although Cobain did enjoy wordplay, experimenting with puns, alternate spellings and other linguistic devices in both his journals and lyrics, it was the music that gave the language its meaning as ‘visceral and biographically rooted communication’. Additionally, due to Cobain’s vocal techniques, for a great deal of the time the listener is unable to make out the exact words anyway!

As far as Chopin is concerned, the idea of music as language was central to his interpretative approach. Jean Kleczyński writes that:

> All the theory of the style which Chopin taught to his pupils rested on this analogy between music and language, on the necessity for separating the various phrases, on the necessity for pointing and for modifying the power of the voice and its rapidity of articulation.\(^\text{175}\)

Both Cobain and Chopin came out of obscure locations, Żelazowa Wola/Warsaw and Aberdeen/Seattle respectively. Not only geographically obscure, neither of these parts of the world was significant musically at the time of each artists’ birth (of course, due to the myth of both men, this has since changed). This impacted each man, and furthered the sense that they were neglected – as their home towns were both seen in that way.

Both Chopin and Cobain were constricted by the labels imposed upon their musical styles. As has been discussed previously, ‘grunge’ was a word that Cobain felt trapped by, just as Chopin did not see himself as a Romantic composer with anything in common with his contemporaries.

\(^{174}\) Wood, 343

\(^{175}\) Kleczyński, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin as Pianist and Teacher*, 42-43
Throughout this essay, many similarities between the ways the two men approached their art and expressed themselves through it have been revealed. Romanticism, this slippery concept that is expressed in many musical forms, is more than simply an era of western classical music containing certain characteristics: it is a *modus operandus* for artists such as Chopin and Cobain through which they create ‘introvert art generated by a consciousness of self’. Themes of sickness, death, melancholia, femininity vs masculinity, order vs chaos and authenticity constantly emerge in both Chopin’s and Cobain’s lives and music.

Beyond just these two artists, it may be confidently asserted that future research may reveal further links between different types of romanticism (such as Wagnerian) which may be drawn between other styles of contemporary rock artists and 19th-century composers. It is therefore also to be hoped that an awareness of connections found in essays such as this may stimulate contemporary composers, songwriters and performers to inform and shape new compositions/songs and approaches to performance.
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