

# AQA AoS1: the piano music of Chopin and Schumann

KS4

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### Introduction

Chopin and Schumann are Romantic composers who wrote many piano pieces in the first half of the 19th century. Though there are some significant differences between them, there are many links: they were both born in 1810; they both died prematurely; they met each other and Schumann was impressed by Chopin (though perhaps not the reverse!); and they considered careers as piano virtuosos, before concentrating on composition. Both relished the opportunities afforded by the developments to the piano, and were giants in the world of the piano miniature.

In the exam, students will listen to an excerpt of piano music and answer questions about musical elements and context, and may have to read and write in staff notation. Students should be able to recognise typical features of the Romantic piano style of the two composers. They may need to focus on particular musical elements in their answer. If the question asks about melody, rhythm and the use of the instrument, then a detailed answer about harmony will obviously not be awarded any marks.

The AQA specification suggests that students study Chopin's Preludes (including the 'Raindrop' Prelude Op. 28, No. 15) and Polonaises (including the 'Military' Polonaise Op. 40, No.1). For Schumann the suggested work is *Kinderszenen*. These and other works are discussed below. Recordings and sheet music are freely available online.

### Romanticism

The two composers' piano pieces exhibit many general features of the Romantic style, including:

- ▶ Lyrical melodies.
- ▶ Thick textures, with active accompaniment patterns, pushing to the limit what is achievable with ten fingers.
- ▶ Accompaniments including block chords, arpeggiated and broken chords and countermelodies.
- ▶ Experimentation with melodies in the middle of the texture, with a bassline below and accompaniment above.
- ▶ Interest in rhythms including syncopation and clashing rhythmic patterns and metres.
- ▶ Some irregular phrases (though both composers mostly used regular phrases).
- ▶ A wide range of pitch, made possible by the changes to the piano.
- ▶ Detailed and wide-ranging dynamic markings, including sudden changes.
- ▶ Richer harmonies, including chords such as the diminished 7th, extended chords (7th, 9th, 11th and 13th), dissonance and much chromaticism.
- ▶ Wider-ranging and quicker modulations to more distant keys.
- ▶ Links to art and literature, with compositions based on poems or paintings or telling a story (programme music).
- ▶ Nationalism, through use of traditional dance forms, rhythms, scales and folk tunes.
- ▶ Tempo changes and some *rubato*.
- ▶ Great expression of emotion.

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Robert Schumann

Students who have already studied the the orchestral music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven in AoS1 could compare these features with those of Classical music.

### The development of the piano

In the early 19th century, the piano underwent significant developments, changing it from the style of piano used by Mozart and his contemporaries, and bringing it closer to what we would recognise as a modern instrument. Understanding these changes will help students to identify features of the music exploiting the instrument. The rise of the piano virtuoso, giving concerts to audiences of a thousand or more, meant that pianos needed to be much more powerful.

The construction of the piano changed in the following ways:

- ▶ Thicker and longer strings, under greater tension.
- ▶ Frames were strengthened with metal components, or made entirely from cast iron, allowing greater resonance and sustain.
- ▶ The range was increased from five to seven octaves.
- ▶ Felt covering on the hammers replaced leather, giving a softer tone.
- ▶ The double escapement action allowed fast repeating passages, and other improvements allowed faster trills and arpeggios.
- ▶ The sustaining and *una corda* pedals were improved.
- ▶ The case structure was made heavier.

Up until the 19th century, pianos were made individually. The Industrial Revolution, however, led to mass production, meeting the demand from the middle classes for instruments to play in a domestic setting. Composers also responded to the demand for music for amateurs to play at home, creating ‘character’ pieces. These were short works describing a particular mood, usually with a descriptive title.

## Schumann (1810-56)

German composer Robert Schumann had an interest in both writing and music. A weak finger meant that a career as a pianist was not possible, so he concentrated on composing. Schumann also founded the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, in which he and others wrote about the new music of the time, including praising the talent of Chopin.

Schumann had many love interests in his early adulthood, some of which are referenced in his music. However, he ended up marrying Clara Wieck, the daughter of his piano teacher. Clara was a very accomplished pianist and composer and, in addition to inspiring many works, helped to bring Schumann's music to public attention, through performance and publication. This continued after Schumann's death in an asylum.

Nearly all of Schumann's early works (Op. 1 to Op. 23) are for solo piano. Many have descriptive titles, but Schumann claimed that these were often added after the work had been composed. Common features of Schumann's piano style include generally diatonic melodies, accompanied by chromatic but functional harmony, with frequent modulations, balanced phrases and a texture of melody and accompaniment (though the melody is not always in the top part). He did not write virtuosic music for its own sake, and kept mostly to the middle register of the piano. Schumann also loved playing with rhythm: syncopation, offbeats, duple against triple metre and cross-rhythms are frequent.

### Carnaval, Op. 9

Schumann's *Carnaval*, a set of 21 short piano pieces, depicts a masked ball at a carnival and was composed when the composer was infatuated with Ernestine von Fricken, from the town of Asch. Schumann realised that the name of the town could be represented in music (in German, A flat is As, E flat is Es, and B is H). He composed a set of pieces, each with a descriptive title, and most incorporate the 'Asch' notes. Schumann called the four-note patterns 'sphinxes', and even notated them in his score between Nos 8 and 9.

Many of the pieces are named after fictional or real people: Eusebius and Florestan were Schumann's pen names for himself (representing his fiery side and his more relaxed persona); Chopin and Paganini are musical tributes; Estrella is Ernestine; and Chiarina is Clara. Schumann often put together a longer work from a series of short pieces. Material from the first piece is also used in the finale, helping to give a sense of unity. Generally, the musical portraits alternate with dances, frequently a waltz.

### 'Paganini'

This brief presto movement appears between the two statements of a German waltz, as No. 17 embedded within No. 16. It is in F minor, the relative minor of Paganini's Caprice No. 12 in A flat, which it emulates. References to Paganini's virtuosic technique include legato and staccato rapid octave leaps and double stopping. Schumann also creates cross-rhythms, with the left-hand semiquavers one semiquaver behind the right.

### Kinderszenen, Op. 15

Schumann wrote to Clara that he had composed 30 short piano pieces, from which he had selected 12 to become *Kinderszenen* (or 'Scenes from Childhood'). These actually 13 pieces look back on childhood from an adult's perspective, and each has a descriptive title, giving 'hints for treatment and interpretation'. Many are monothematic: a musical idea of just one or two bars is used throughout the movement.

### No. 1 'Von fremden Ländern und Menschen' ('Of Foreign Lands and Peoples')

This provides a good example of Schumann's piano texture: it is in three parts, with the middle part split between the two hands, and detached bass notes below a legato melody. 'Ped' in bar 1 indicates that the sustaining pedal should be used throughout. In bars 9 to 14 the left hand has the melody. The movement is in two clearly marked halves, both repeated, but since the opening is heard again from bar 15, the form is rounded binary. A modulation to the relative minor is suggested in bar 12 (via a descending sequence and part of the cycle of 5ths), but Schumann subverts expectations by moving to a G major chord at the end of bar 12. There are several perfect cadences in G major, including bars 7-8 and bars 21-22. Schumann makes repeated use of the diminished 7th chord, first heard in the second half of bar 1. The melody is completely diatonic and features much repetition: bars 1-2 are heard again in bars 3-4, 17-18 and nearly in 5-6, 15-16 and 19-20. When the melody moves to the bass (from bar 9) the rhythm is identical to that of the opening, and it still uses the idea of steps filling in a large leap. Again, Schumann plays with rhythm: bar 1 could easily be in compound duple time (6/8), but the dotted quaver and semiquaver at the top of the texture in bar 2 create a cross-rhythm with the triplets.

**No. 10 'Fast zu ernst' ('Almost too serious')**

This is probably *Kinderszenen*'s most technically challenging piece, and demonstrates many Romantic features. It is pedalled throughout, and rhythmically includes both syncopation and displacement in an unusual time signature (2/8). It is in the key of G sharp minor with modulation to the relative major (B major) at bar 8, though to an unstable second inversion B major chord. Bar 9 continues with repetition of the opening, but a 3rd higher, so reaches D sharp minor at bar 16 (again, on a second inversion chord). The following four-bar link features a tonic pedal (D sharp), played in the left hand on the first beat of every bar and leads to a section very similar to the opening, modulating from G sharp minor to B major (the music from bar 27 is identical to that of the opening). However, a new four-bar ending, including a sudden leap down in the right hand and the left hand two bars later, concludes the movement in G sharp minor, on a root position chord, but lacking the 3rd. The continuously flowing left hand descending arpeggios are a typical accompaniment and the wide range means that the two hands overlap.

**No. 11 'Fürchtenmachen' ('Frightening')**

Sudden changes in tempo and ambiguity of key (G major or E minor?) create a sense of unease in this piece. Double bar lines and repeat marks delineate the structure, which is symmetrical rondo form (ABACABA). The four-bar phrases and regular cadences create more predictability (perhaps Schumann didn't want to frighten the child too much!) and there are examples of imperfect cadences in this movement (eg bar 4 in G major). This follows an opening that seems to be initially in E minor, using much chromaticism, including two diminished chords in bar 2, the second a semitone lower. Except for bar 2, the melody is diatonic. When the melody is transferred to the bass in bar 5, it follows the same contour as that of the opening. There is a descending sequence in the left-hand melody in the B section, which is more disjunct and includes octave leaps, accompanied by offbeat chords. The second half of the C section also involves a descending sequence. Here, Schumann uses textural effects to unsettle the listener: the melody mirrored in 6ths is followed by single bass notes and *sf* offbeat five- or six-part chords.

**No. 12 'Kind im Einschlummern' ('Child Falling Asleep')**

In E minor, this piece begins with a rhythmic ostinato in the bass, imitated a beat later in the right hand. Bar 8 ends on a dominant chord, leading into the following section in E major. Bars 9-11 alternate tonic and dominant chords and bar 12 is a perfect cadence in B major (the dominant of E major). Bars 13-16 are a repetition of bars 9-12. The following section modulates through a variety of keys, from B minor in bar 17, to B major at bar 20 and then G major (a distant key) at bar 22. The addition of the D sharp in the bass in bar 24 leads to a modified repetition of the first section from bar 25. The piece ends on the subdominant, suggesting that the child falls asleep before the music ends.

**No. 13 'Der Dichter Spricht' ('The Poet Speaks')**

Here, Schumann may be speaking directly to the performer or audience, rather than telling a story. The piece begins like a chorale, with block chords, but evades a clear cadence on the tonic (G major) until the end. The first four-bar phrase begins on chord V7d and ends with an imperfect cadence in bar 4. The music then becomes more chromatic, with diminished 7th chords at the start of bars 5 and 6, leading to a perfect cadence in A minor in bar 8. From bar 9 there is typical piano figuration (descending broken chords) with a melody in minims at the top of the right hand. Schumann adds pauses in bars 10 and 12, highlighting the diminished 7th chords. A recitative-like passage follows, then repetition of the opening eight bars. However, repetition of the rhythm from bars 22 to 23 a tone lower finally allows a perfect cadence in G major in bars 27 to 28.

**Album für die Jugend, Op. 68**

This album is divided into two books with 43 pieces in total. Some of the earlier pieces were composed for Schumann's eight-year-old daughter. Key signatures are up to three flats or four sharps, with just simple quadruple, simple duple or compound duple time. Schumann asked that the cover be designed by Ludwig Richter, who was famous for illustrating fairytales. These short, approachable pieces would make good further listening for GCSE students.

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Sixteen seconds of No. 3 'Humming Song' appeared on the June 2018 paper as a melodic dictation.

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## Chopin (1810-49)

Born near Warsaw, Chopin was a child prodigy, performing and composing from a young age. He studied at the Warsaw Conservatory and began touring Europe in 1830. However, the uprising in Poland, crushed by the Russians, led to Chopin remaining in Paris in September 1831. There, he worked mainly as a teacher and composer. Nearly all Chopin's works are for solo piano and have many Romantic features. However, unlike Schumann, he did not use descriptive titles. Some of Chopin's works have a nationalistic flavour and many of his shorter pieces reflect his position as a teacher. Performing the music requires good technique and a delicate touch on the keyboard and pedals and some *rubato*. Like Schumann, Chopin wrote lyrical melodies, accompanied by rich harmonies, requiring the large range of the left-hand part to be sustained by the pedal. Regular phrases predominate, together with a melody and accompaniment texture and rich harmonies with unexpected and distant modulations.

### Preludes, Op. 28

The title 'prelude' usually refers to a work that precedes another, as a kind of preparation for the following piece. However, Chopin's Preludes are self-contained pieces, inspired by the preludes of JS Bach. Like Bach, Chopin wrote a set using all the major and minor keys, resulting in 24 in total. Each major and relative minor prelude is followed by the next step in the cycle of 5ths. In many of the Preludes, a simple idea is played through a variety of keys and over different harmonies throughout the piece.

#### Prelude in D flat, Op. 28 No. 15 'Raindrop'

This Prelude's 'Raindrop' nickname is possibly due to the repeated quavers sounding like falling raindrops. It is one of the longest preludes, and one of only a few with an extended middle section. The cantabile melodic line divides into regular four- and eight-bar phrases. The overall structure is ternary, but the A section at the end is shorter. The long B section is easy to spot as it has a double bar and change of key to C sharp minor (the enharmonic tonic minor). The harmony is mostly diatonic, with a few chromatic chords and modulations mostly to related keys.

The texture is mostly melody and accompaniment (there is monophonic texture in bars 82 to 83), though sometimes (particularly in the B section), the melodic interest is in the bass, with the right hand accompanying. The 'raindrop' quaver pedal note is heard for much of the piece, as a dominant pedal in the middle of the texture at the start and at the top of the texture, for much of the B section, sometimes reinforced in octaves. The B section also has a denser texture, with up to six notes at once. Playing this Prelude requires the pianist to balance the different parts, bringing out the more important lines. As ever, Chopin's markings are very detailed, with dynamics from *pp* to *ff*, several Italian tempo and other indications, and pedalling given throughout.

### Mazurkas

Reflecting his love for Poland, Chopin composed about 60 mazurkas. A mazurka is a traditional Polish dance or song in triple time with an accent on the second or third beat of the bar. Many include other folk-music features: a raised 4th (found in the Lydian mode); dotted rhythms; and tonic (or tonic and dominant) pedals. Chopin added some chromatic harmony.

#### Mazurka in C sharp minor, Op. 6 No. 2

Although this Mazurka is in C sharp minor, it begins with a drone on G sharp and D sharp, leaving the key slightly ambiguous until bar 9, with a perfect cadence in the tonic in bars 15-16. There is then a chromatic section, including an ascending sequence. In the A major section from bar 32, Chopin uses the raised 4th. Each section of this mazurka is eight bars long and many of the second beats are marked with accents. The score is filled with markings, indicating dynamics, tempo, articulation and pedalling.



The first part of this Prelude appeared on the June 2019 paper

## Polonaises

The polonaise was another national Polish dance, though it was taken over by the nobility and became a stately procession. It is of a moderate speed, and the division of the first beat of the bar, with accentuation on the second half is common, together with repetition of rhythmic patterns and cadences on the third beat. The polonaise had already been used by composers before Chopin, who wrote about 15. These are generally longer than his mazurkas, which made them more suitable for concert performance.

### Polonaise in A, Op. 40 No. 1 'Military'

This majestic Polonaise was given its nickname due to the strong war-like dotted rhythm and fanfare style of the opening. Chopin perhaps hoped for it to be played at the coronation of a monarch in an independent Poland. Despite the composer's extremely fragile health at the time, this is a very powerful piece of music and it is possible to imagine it being played by brass and percussion.

Although Chopin's own piano was more suited to delicate dynamic nuances, there is use of the marking *fff* (bars 33 and 57). There is also an excellent example of Chopin's attention to detailed markings in his music in bar 48, where he indicates the sustaining pedal should be raised and lowered on every quaver. Observers said that Chopin's use of the pedal sometimes made it appear as though his foot was vibrating!

The first eight bars repeat the same motif three times, a little higher and more exciting each time, followed by two bars to conclude the phrase, with a perfect cadence in the tonic in bar 8. The same motif is used in the following bars, but with more chromaticism and hinting at other keys, before the original version returns from bar 17.

At bar 25 Chopin moves to the subdominant (D major) rather than the dominant, complete with a change of key signature. At this point a stereotypical polonaise rhythm is introduced in the left hand, below a more lyrical right-hand melody. At bar 41 there is a move towards D minor (the tonic minor), with trills in octaves, possibly representing drum rolls. The final A section of the ternary-form design is simply a *da capo* of the opening.

## Études (Studies)

Composers wrote studies to help pianists work on technical issues. Chopin raised the status of the study to become a beautiful piece of music, writing more than 25 of them. Op. 10 No. 12 in C minor is known as the 'Revolutionary' Étude, since it was written after Chopin heard that the Polish uprising had been crushed. It is a study for the left hand and was influenced by Paganini and Liszt.

## Waltzes

The waltz had developed in the late 18th century and Chopin wrote about 20 waltzes for solo piano. None of Chopin's dance-related works were intended for dancing.

### Waltz in D flat, Op. 64 No. 1 'Minute'

This Waltz's 'Minute' nickname has nothing to do with Chopin, nor with playing it in under a minute! It was given by the publisher and refers to the fact that the piece is small (ie miniature). In French, the piece is known as the 'Little Dog Waltz' as apparently Chopin was watching a small dog chasing its tail when composing. It is in D flat major, and the tempo indication (*molto vivace*) suggests a very fast pace. It is in ternary form, with a contrasting B section from bar 37 to 69. The B section contrasts with the outer sections in many ways: note values are longer (with the marking *sostenuto*) and it is generally within a narrower range. When the A section is repeated from bar 54, Chopin characteristically makes it more virtuosic with the addition of acciaccaturas and a very fast final scale over three octaves (rather than two). The A theme divides into two halves: these are similar, both using many stepwise quavers, but the second half adds triplet quavers. Except for the opening and linking bars, the left hand accompanies with a traditional 'um-cha-cha' pattern: a bass note on the first beat followed by a repeated chord on the second and third beats.

## Sonatas

Chopin wrote three piano sonatas, all with four movements. The third movement of Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 35, is the famous 'Funeral March'.