

Chopin: Beyond Piano Boundaries

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Abstract

In 1848, Fryderyk Chopin gave a series of concerts throughout the United Kingdom, which constituted a characteristic phase of his artistic output during the final years of his life. These performances were significant not only for the British musical scene but also for the reception of his late works beyond France's borders. The purpose of this paper is an analysis of the Cello Sonata in G minor, Op. 65, for cello and piano—one of Chopin's rare works written for a bowed instrument—as an example of the extension of his musical language. It illustrates how the techniques implemented in the Sonata serve as a link influencing the development of Romantic-era chamber music. The author focuses on the dialogue between cello and piano in the Sonata, Op. 65, which represents a mindful attempt to explore new forms of musical expression. This analysis is based on detailed score interpretation, with a focus on thematic relationships, chromaticism, and textural balance. Furthermore, the study reflects on the historical and performative context—in particular, the plausible performance of this composition during Chopin's 1848 tour in the United Kingdom—to demonstrate the atypical role of the Sonata as an example of Romantic chamber music expressiveness. The results indicate that this work transcends the typical boundaries of Chopin's style, and it had a considerable influence on the development of the Romantic sonata—not only in terms of virtuosity but also as a testament to the partnership in musical dialogue between the two instruments.

Keywords: Fryderyk Chopin, Chopin cello sonata, Frédéric Chopin, Auguste Franchomme, Jane Stirling, Chopin's death

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Introduction and Historical Context

In the last years of his life, Fryderyk Chopin rarely performed in public. His health steadily deteriorated, forcing him to limit his stage activity. However, in 1848, at the invitation of his student Jane Stirling, he embarked on a concert tour across Great Britain. This was an extraordinary event not only because of the composer's health but also because it allowed the British audience to become acquainted with his late, lesser-known works. Among them, a special place is occupied by the C minor Cello Sonata op. 65, which has become the subject of numerous analyses and interpretations, and is also an expression of Chopin's innovative approach to chamber music.

Figure 1

Jane Stirling (Achille Devéria)

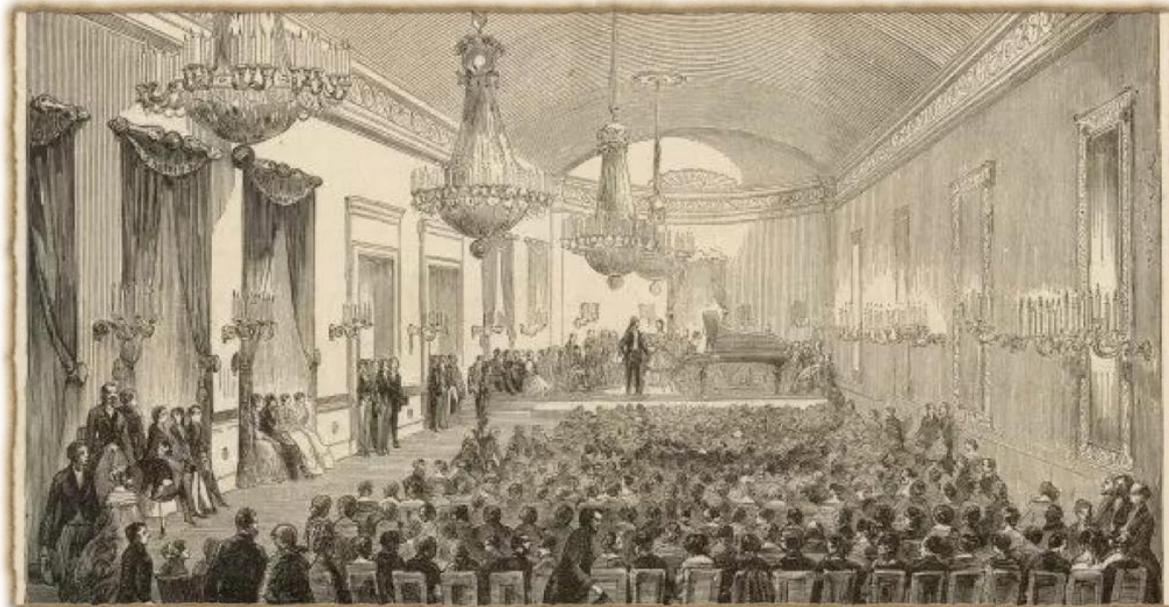


This is the only large-scale instrumental form by Chopin written not solely for the piano as the leading instrument (excluding concertos and songs with piano accompaniment), showcasing the mature, reflective style of the composer and opening new perspectives in the development of 19th-century chamber music. The sonata not only poses technical and interpretative challenges for performers but also expresses a rich musical language, full of contrasts and subtle nuances, which makes it a unique work in Chopin's oeuvre.

This study presents the historical context of the work's creation, its formal structure, the specific character of the instrumental dialogue, and the significance of the piece within the broader context of the Romantic era.

Figure 2

Salle Pleyel, Paris XIX Century



The Sonata Op. 65 was composed in 1846, at a time when Chopin was struggling with advancing illness and limited opportunities for public performances, compounded by the unstable socio-political situation in mid-19th-century France (the Revolution of 1848), which created an increasingly unfavorable environment for artistic activity in Paris (Clark, 1999; Witt, 2021). One of the possible causes of Chopin's death is pulmonary tuberculosis; however, the exact etiology remains uncertain due to the absence of conclusive primary documentation and the loss of both the original autopsy report and the official death certificate, which were prepared by Dr. Jean Cruveilhier (Witt, 2021). Nevertheless, period literary sources — Jane Stirling's letter to Franz Liszt written after Chopin's death, as well as a letter from Chopin's sister Ludwika Jędrzejewiczowa — raise questions regarding the claim that Chopin died of tuberculosis and that this was recorded in his death certificate. In light of the above, the cause of death remains undetermined (Heldey, 1962). These adverse circumstances prompted Chopin to seek performance opportunities abroad, where conditions were more conducive to artistic activity. A representative example of a period source illustrating the very poor state of Chopin's health during his stay in Great Britain is his letter dated November 17th, 1848, in which he describes his condition as follows:

I have been ill for the last 18 days. Ever since I reached London, I have not left the house at all. I have had such a cold and such headaches, short breath and all the bad symptoms (my head is very painful apart from the cough and suffocation). The doctors visit me every day. (Karasowski, 1879)

Additionally, Jane Stirling in her letter to Ferenc Liszt quoted Dr. Jean Cruveilhier as saying that “the autopsy did nothing to disclose the cause of death, but it appeared that the lungs were affected less than the heart. It is a disease that I have never encountered before.” Ludwika Jędrzejowiczowa (Chopin) later also quoted Dr. Jean Cruveilhier as saying that “the

autopsy did nothing to disclose the cause of death... nevertheless he could not have survived... diverse pathology... enlarged heart... did not disclose pulmonary consumption... lung changes of many years' duration... a disease was not previously encountered" (Heldey, 1962). This issue requires further purely medical research (if possible after such a long time). Currently, there are more unknowns, questions, and hypotheses than strictly scientific answers regarding the pressing matter of the direct cause of Chopin's death.

Figure 3

Fryderyk Chopin 1849



Although his piano compositions at that time acquired a more personal, introspective character, he did not abandon the search for new forms and challenges. The Sonata for cello and piano is a result of these pursuits and constitutes a valuable contribution to the chamber repertoire of the era.

Figure 4*Auguste Franchomme c. 1860*

The premiere of the work took place with Auguste Franchomme, a cellist, pedagogue, and close friend of Chopin. Franchomme was one of the most outstanding cellists of his time, and thanks to his suggestions, Chopin chose to significantly adapt his developed compositional technique and style to suit the performance capabilities of the cello. which is evident in the detailed elaboration of the cello part. Their collaboration was exceptional—it allowed Chopin to experiment with new solutions and to go beyond the purely piano idiom (Kallberg, 1996).

Le concert, joué dans une salle bondée, comprenait trois mouvements d'une sonate de M. Chopin pour piano et violoncelle. Certains des passages, en particulier l'Allegro moderato, étaient d'une compréhension difficile pour le public, et l'on dit que le compositeur choisit de ne pas terminer l'exécution complète. Cependant, l'Ame romantique et mélancolique de l'œuvre en ressortait puissamment, provoquant admiration autant qu'étonnement [The concert, played in a full hall, included three movements of a sonata by Mr. Chopin for piano and cello. Some passages, especially the Allegro moderato, were difficult for the public to grasp, and it is said that the composer chose not to conclude the complete performance. Nevertheless, the romantic and melancholic soul of the work emerged strongly, provoking both admiration and astonishment]. (Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris, 1848, p. 59)

Le morceau principal était une sonate de Chopin, pour piano et violoncelle; cette œuvre a quelque chose d'intime et de mystérieux, c'est que tout en elle est plaintif et mélancolique... Franchomme, sur son éloquent violoncelle, a trouvé des accents admirables, qui donnaient aux belles mélodies de Chopin une suavité pénétrante et pleine de religieuse poésie [The main piece was a sonata by Chopin, for piano and cello; this work has something intimate and mysterious, as everything in it is plaintive

and melancholic... Franchomme, on his eloquent cello, found admirable accents that gave Chopin's beautiful melodies a penetrating sweetness full of religious poetry]. (Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris, 1853, p. 6)

This second description of the sonata's performance appears particularly meaningful in the context of Chopin's letter to Franchomme: "Your cello breathes life into my music in ways the piano alone cannot. Together, we create a voice that speaks my heart's deepest yearnings" (Chopin, 1846, as cited in Opieński, 1931, p. 123).

The Cello Sonata was completed shortly before Chopin's 1848 concert tour in Great Britain, which suggests that it may have been performed during that period—especially considering the presence of prominent virtuoso cellists such as Alfredo Piatti in the British musical scene at the time. Although the Sonata was not published until several years after Chopin's death, with editions appearing in England and Germany (Brown, 1960, p. 112; Kallberg, 1996, pp. 85–87; Samson, 1992, p. 213), its early reception remains unclear, likely due to the private and intimate character of Chopin's performances and the insular nature of London's musical circles. Chopin's late work, marked by a shift from technical virtuosity toward greater expressive depth and reflection, is thought to have resonated within British musical scene.

Figure 5

London Commemorations of Frédéric Chopin's Performances



Figure 6*London Commemorations of Frédéric Chopin's Performances*

Chopin's late output is characterized by greater intimacy and profound quietness, which contrasts with the virtuosic works of his earlier years. The Sonata op. 65 is an excellent example of this—it contains no space for technical virtuosity; instead, it clearly highlights emotional depth and the complex interaction between the instruments. It can be seen as a fruit of the composer's artistic maturity and personal experiences. The annotation in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, "Relation: Belongs to: [Collection. Works for piano by Frédéric Chopin annotated and corrected by the author and his student Jane Wilhelmina Stirling. Volume 7]" (Chopin, 1847, [Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Musique, call number: RES VMA-241]) suggests that the sonata may have been performed by Chopin during his concert tour in Great Britain.

Formal Structure and Technical Analysis

The sonata consists of four movements that form a coherent yet varied form:

- Allegro moderato
- Scherzo
- Largo
- Finale: Allegro

The first movement, Allegro moderato, takes on the character of a classical sonata form; however, Chopin treats it with considerable formal freedom. The traditional contrast of themes is replaced by their complementarity, which perfectly emphasizes the partnership between the piano and the cello. The instruments do not compete but collaborate, creating a nuanced thematic and harmonic dialogue. Frequent chromatic shifts and subtle modulations testify to the composer's masterful craft, employing modern means of expression.

The second movement, Scherzo, introduces a livelier, more playful mood, yet retains the lightness and delicacy characteristic of Chopin's late works. The rhythm is more diversified, and the melodic phrases are expanded, lending this movement distinctiveness and energy. The Scherzo forms an interesting contrast to the more reflective movements, building the drama of the entire work.

The third movement, *Largo*, is the emotional and expressive climax of the entire sonata. Both instruments become equal partners here—the piano weaves a rich harmonic background, while the cello spins a lyrical, longing, and profound melody. In this movement, one can discern references to the Baroque *arioso* style as well as the singing qualities typical of Chopin's songs. The *Largo* presents the composer as an outstanding interpreter of tradition, who simultaneously can transform and make it his own musical language.

The final movement, *Finale: Allegro*, is dynamic and full of energy. Chopin develops motives from earlier movements, creating a coherent and expressive whole. Attention is drawn to the balance between the instruments and precise rhythmic interplay. The finale contains moments of contrast that introduce drama and emphasize the instrumental dialogue as the structural axis of the work.

Instrumental Dialogue as the Structural Core of the Work

The Sonata op. 65 is not a typical cello concerto with piano accompaniment but a true chamber work based on partnership dialogue. Chopin achieves a refined interplay between the instruments, establishing a sense of balance and mutual complementarity that emerges from the very first bars of the piece.

Figure 7

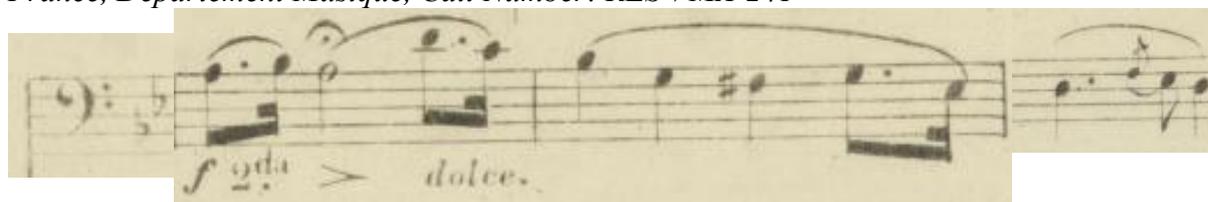
Fryderyk Chopin. Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op. 65. The Piano Part, First Movement Allegro Moderato, Measures 1–2, Including the Anacrusis. Paris: Schlesinger, 1847. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Musique, Call Number: RES VMA-241



The composition employs various techniques—imitations, canons (especially in the first movement), and thematic transformations in both instruments, which intertwine and change the role of accompaniment between parts. Joint cadenzas highlight unity and cooperation, showing that both instruments are leading elements of the musical narrative.

Figure 8

Fryderyk Chopin. *Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op. 65. The Cello part, First Movement Allegro Moderato, Measures 8–10. Paris: Schlesinger, 1847. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Musique, Call Number: RES VMA-241*



The slow, cantabile Largo movement begins with the theme first presented by the cello and subsequently repeated by the piano. This represents the reverse of the situation in the first movement of the sonata, where the piano introduces the theme and the cello then repeats it. The indications cantabile and dolce, present from the very first bar of the third movement point to the high degree of emotional subtlety characterizing this passage.

Figure 9

Fryderyk Chopin. *Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op. 65. The Cello and Piano Part, Third Movement Largo, Measures 500–503. Paris: Schlesinger, 1847. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Musique, Call Number: RES VMA-241*

This instrumental dialogue also has a dramatic dimension—the work relies on tension and contrasts that develop throughout the cycle, engaging the listener in an intimate, emotional conversation. Chopin managed to convey not only technical mastery but also subtle psychology of musical relationships, making the sonata an exceptionally lively and universal work.

The Significance of the C Minor Sonata in the Context of the Era

Chopin's cello sonata had a significant influence on late-Romantic chamber works. Its texture, independence of parts, rich chromaticism, and expressive melody can be compared in terms of the refinement of its formal structure and the subtlety of its textural qualities with works such as Brahms's cello sonatas (op. 38), the music of César Franck, and even later compositions by Edvard Grieg and Sergei Rachmaninoff. This not only indicates the composer's progressive approach to the development of musical substance, but also underscores the vitality and timeless resonance of the work itself.

Chopin's work demonstrates that his music was not confined to the piano idiom. The composer showed deep understanding of the string instrument's specifics and was able to empathize with the cellist's needs, creating a work that is technically demanding yet full of emotional depth. The C minor Sonata establishes a new musical language, combining classical elements with Romantic expression and innovative approaches to instrumental dialogue.

Performance Issues

Interpreting Sonata op. 65 poses not only technical but also artistic challenges. Performers must decide on many questions related to tempo, phrasing, dynamics, and sound balance.

Should the piece be played more symphonically, with full sound and power, or more chamber-like, maintaining intimacy and delicacy? How to convey the characteristic Chopin rubato that gives the music fluidity and flexibility without disrupting rhythmic coherence?

How to maintain the balance between the voices of cello and piano, especially in the finale where both instruments lead complex dialogical parts? These are just some of the difficulties that require not only technical perfection but also a deep understanding of the musical narrative.

Conclusion

Fryderyk Chopin's C minor Cello Sonata op. 65 is not only a personal statement of the artist at the end of his life but also an important contribution to the development of Romantic chamber music. Its refined instrumental dialogue, flexible form, and deep expression make the work resist classification and inspire further research into Chopin's late output and its reception in Europe. This work remains a bridge between tradition and modernity, combining the richness of musical language with emotional sincerity. It also presents a challenge for subsequent generations of musicians, who can discover new interpretative spaces and depths of sound through it.

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