

Robert Schumann, "New sonatas for piano" (excerpt), *Gesammelte Schriften für Musik und Musiker*, vol. 4 (1854 [1841]), 21–25.

For the expert's eye to see something of the first movement of the lastly named sonata [in this review of several works by different composers] and still be able to doubt who it was from would scarcely be worthy. Only Chopin begins this way and only he ends this way: with dissonances via dissonances inside dissonances. And yet, this piece also holds so much that is beautiful! That he named it a sonata, one might sooner call a caprice, if not arrogance, for he has just joined together four of his best children, perhaps to mark them on a spot under this name where they would not otherwise be obliged. Assume, for example, some choirmaster from the countryside comes to a city of music to make a few artistic purchases. He is presented with the latest works, but he wants nothing of them, and finally a clever fellow holds out a 'sonata.' Yes, he says in delight, that one's for me, a piece from the good old days, and he buys it for himself. Once he gets home, he launches into the piece, but I would be much mistaken if he did not, before he had painstakingly wound his way through the first page, swear by all the holy musical spirits whether it was the standard sonata style and not something rather truly more secular. But Chopin has achieved what he wanted: he finds himself in the choir loft, and who can then know whether a romantic grandchild will be born and grow up in this same accommodation, dust off the sonata, play it, and think to himself: "the man wasn't so wrong after all."

With all this a partial judgment has already been given at the outset. Chopin no longer composes at all what one could just as well have with others; he remains true to himself and has reason to do so.

It is to be regretted that most pianists, even well-trained ones, are not capable of seeing beyond and judging what they cannot manage with their own fingers. Rather than initially surveying such difficult pieces, they squirm and gnaw their way through, measure by measure; and when they have barely gotten straight the crudest relations of form, they put it away and then it is labeled "bizarre, confused," etc. Chopin indeed ... has his finger-twisting stretches and parentheses that one cannot dwell on at first reading, in order not to lose the trail. For one comes upon such places on almost every page of the sonata, and Chopin's frequently willful and wild chord composition makes picking things out all the more difficult. He does not like easy harmonizing [*my best guess at the neologism here—KH*], if I may so express myself, and thus one often gets ten or more measures crossing each other, and keys which we like only in the most important cases. He is often right, but often also confuses without reason, and, as was said, alienates himself from a goodly portion of the public, which (it maintains) does not want to be made a fool of constantly and driven into a corner. The sonata thus has five B major or B minor [key] signatures, a key [combination] that certainly cannot enjoy any particular popularity. The opening goes namely: [see musical figure]

After this adequate Chopinesque opening follows one of those stormy, passionate movements that we know already from many of Chopin's works. One has to hear these several times, and well-played. But this first part of the work also brings a lovely song; it even seems as if the national Polish aftertaste that clung to most of the early Chopin melodies is disappearing with the passage of time, as if he were even favorably disposed at times (*vis-à-vis* Germany) toward Italy. It is known that Bellini and Chopin were friends, and that they, who had often shared each

other's compositions, could not very well have remained without artistic influence on each other. But, as was said, it is only a light inclination toward southern ways; as soon as the song ends, the full Sarmatian flashes from the tones again in his defiant originality. At the least an interweaving of chords, as we encounter in the conclusion of the first passage of the second movement, Bellini did not dare, and could never have dared. The whole movement ends in scarcely Italian fashion—here Liszt's apt phrase comes to mind, who once said: Rossini and his gang always end with a 'your most humble servant.' It is different with Chopin, whose endings express more the opposite. The second movement is only the continuation of this mood, bold, spirited, fantastic, the trio tender, dreamy, all in Chopin's manner: A scherzo only in name, like many of Beethoven's. What follows is gloomier, a funeral march that is even a bit off-putting; in its place an adagio, perhaps in D, would have had an incomparably more beautiful effect. For what we get in the closing movement under the inscription 'finale' is more equivalent to mockery than to any music. And yet one confesses, from this unmelodious, joyless movement also breathes an original and terrifying spirit that holds down with mailed fist everything that seeks to resist [it], so that we listen fascinated and uncomplaining to the end—though not to praise: for this is not music. The sonata closes as it began, enigmatic, like a Sphinx with a mocking smile.