

Analysis Chopin Waltz Op. 34 nr.2 in A minor

General observations

Op. 34 consists of three waltzes, in Ab major, A minor and F major.

The title “Valse brillante” seems a little awkward, maybe: a “brilliant waltz” in minor?

The waltz was composed in 1831, and published in 1838, dedicated to Baronesse d'Ivry.

The Polish uprising 1830-1831 was happening and the year 1831 is the first year of what Alan Walker calls “An exile in Paris” in his biography of Chopin.

Of course the waltz is related to earlier dances in ternary time signature, like the Deutscher and Ländler. If we take Chopin background into account there is of course a direct connection with the *mazurka*, also in a ternary time signature. Weber's *Aufforderung zum Tanz* (1819) played an important role in the popularity of the waltz. Joseph Lanner and Johann Strauss were important composers of waltzes played in public ballrooms. The waltz became one of the most popular dances in the 19th century in the public domain and remained popular after that; even within jazz music.

Chopin and the waltz

From the outset Chopin's approach of the waltz moved away from the waltz to be danced on. His waltzes are compositions in which a great variety of musical characters/moods can be encountered, even within one waltz. This waltz in A minor is an example of that.

It is characterized by freedom in timing (“rubato”), freedom in rhythm (7 over 2, 7 over 3), a great variety of harmonic colour, and a sophisticated use of dissonance within relatively simple chordal material.

Form scheme

It is a simple *sequential form* which can be represented by the following letter scheme:

	A	B	C	D1	D2	B	C	D1	D2	A	E1	E2	A
Measure	1	16	36	52	68	84	104	120	136	152	168	176	188
Key	Am		C/Am	A	Am		C/Am	A	Am		C	E	Am

Segmentation and segmentation points

The points of segmentation are created by change in texture, colour (key and harmony) and periodisation (grouping of measures).

- A: the melodic line is placed in an inner voice, combined with a rather static harmony as a result of the use of a bourdon (“drone”), functioning as a pedal point.
- B: the melody shifts from inner voice to top voice, the pedal point disappears, a stepwise ascending bass line appears moving from (1) towards (5).
- C: colour change from minor to major, moving back and forth between I and V; colour change back to minor, changing back and forth between I and V.
- D1: Suddenly A major, in the consequent minor colour changes in comparison with the antecedent: V-VI and V-↓VI (augm. 6th on third beat)

- D2: Suddenly A minor and use of Np. 6 and chromatic movement around the note A (Bb-A-G#-Fx-G#-A).

After this B – C - D1 – D2 are repeated.

- A: return of the beginning.
- E1: Change to C major, the bass line is melodically the most active. Harmonic switching between I and V in C; the same seems to happen between I and V in A minor; V is reached by a “French sixth”, and the E major chord functions as a temporary tonic.
- E2: the musical texture remains unchanged; the move towards E major (Upper Mediant of C) is colourful. There seems to be a conclusion in E, but E functions as a dominant of A minor when
- A returns as the last form section. The circle is closed. The beginning functions as the end.

Phrasing

The grouping of measures is in general very regular and balanced; it stays close to the balanced grouping of measures which is characteristic of dance forms. men.

- A: 8+8 (= 4+4+4+4)
- B: 8+8+4
- C: 4+4+4+4
- D1: 8+8
- D2: 8+8
- A
- E1: 8 (4+4)
- E2: 4+4+4
- A

Harmonic patterns

Cadences, obviously during moments of phrasing, but also in form section C with continuous use of V-I in C major and A minor.

Bourdon/drone/pedal point in form section A (but also prolonged notes in the top voice in form section B....)

Movement in bass line from (1) to (5) an ascending pentachord; it's a for that time frame a very common pattern that can be traced back to the Rule of the Octave:



Dissonants and their treatment

Earlier we stated that the chord material Chopin uses is relatively simple. Standard suspensions and resolutions are used.

6-5

9-8

7-6

but also in combinations:

|6-5|

|4-3|

|9-8|

|4-3|

A special one is the suspension with an ascending resolution #4-5. Special because of the tritone that is involved.

Sometimes a dissonant is not directly followed by a resolution but by a rest (measure 17 and 19). Typical for Chopin.

Also chromatic embellishments of chord tones occur frequently.

Colour changes

Special colour changes occur when a returning melodic *contour* of a melodic voice is placed in another harmonic context: the line 3-2-1-7-1 in A major and A minor is a nice example. See form section D1 and D2.

The difference in colour between major and minor is also accentuated by the use of Neapolitan 6th in A minor (with the well known chromatic movement around the tonic note: Bb-A-G#-A).

Harmony and dissonant treatment

In the earlier presented form scheme we see that the used keys move between A, C and (towards the end) E (just once), a triadic/ third related pattern. One of the signs we are dealing with romantic music. In the Baroque and classical era fourth fifth relationships between keys are more common.

Special is the use of II7 as a neighbouring chord within I in the A section.

- Dissonances on a weak beat followed by a rest (17, 19)
- Many suspensions/appoggiaturas: with descending and ascending resolutions; #4-5 (25); sometimes parallel in thirds and sixths (37, 39)
- Frequent embellishment of chord tones (54, 58)

In the B section the harmonisation of the bass line, moving from (1) to (5) is special. The framework is traditional, the way in which the framework is used is special: (1)-(2)-(2)-(3)-(#3)-(5)-(6)-(5).

Bass line moving stepwise from (1) to (5):

1. simple diatonic

Am E/B Am/C Dm Am/E Am

I V₄⁶ I⁶ IV V I

2. Chopin version: inserted and substituted chords

Am E7/B B[°]7 F/C A/C# Dm Dm/F E

I V₃⁴ VII₅⁶ VI₄⁶ a.d. V₅⁶ IV IV⁶ V

*a.d. = applied or secondary dominant.

Harmonic excerpt

A harmonic excerpt in the form of a keyboard setting is available in a separate PDF file.