

The Musical Language of Schumann's Three Romances, Op.28

Gu Shuang

Wuhan Conservatory Of Music, Wuhan, 430060, China

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Abstract: Robert Schumann, one of the presentative figures in the romantic period of Western music, composes many musical works which are full of lyrical and humanistic feelings. These feelings can be perceived through the harmony, tonality, musical structure, and its diversified development of music language. Therefore, this article will start with three aspects of composition of the Three Romances including the overall structure, the development of thematic motive, and the tonality from the perspective of harmony to analyze the musical language of the work in order to explore the features of the Schumann’s piano works.

1. Introduction

Schumann Three Romances(op.28) was drafted in 1839, and later published in 1840. It is a piano composition with a compact structure and diversified materials. Prior to this piano work, Schumann completed his piano compositions from Op. 1 to Op. 23, and then he detoured his composing path to lieder. Therefore, Three Romances was created in the so-called transformation period of Schumann's composing career. Besides, while composing this piece, Schumann and Clara finally defeated Clara's father Wieck and get married after undergoing various difficulties. So it can also be said that this work was emerging at a turning point in Schumann's life. At the same time, as far as the music language is concerned, the work condenses the stylistic characteristics of Schumann's early music compositions, and embodies the “sensibility” of romanticism. This work is also an important symbol of Schumann's “enrichment” in the compositional techniques of piano works. Therefore, the analysis of the musical language of this work is the key to help piano learning, and to understand the artistic value of Schumann and Romanticism.

In terms of music structure, the Three Romances are mainly written in binary and ternary form among other short and simple forms. This work no longer inherited the sonata form from the classical period. In terms of the development of thematic materials, the use of some common variations, the combination of the homophony and polyphony, and other methods are spread all over the piece to create its unique acoustic color. In terms of tonality, the composition greatly expands the harmonic vocabulary of the classical period by using a large number of seventh and ninth chords with semitones, chords with dissonance, transitions with distant key relationship, and modulations without pivot chord. The setting makes the development of the harmony itself greatly promoted, and enriched the overall color of the music works.

2. The Material and Characteristics of the Formal Structure:

2.1 The First Movement - Ternary

The overall structure of the Three Romances conforms to the ternary form which was commonly used in piano compositions at the period of time. The first one directly uses a single ternary form with a 2/4 time signature. The musical material in the first movement is extremely uniform, and the division of the structure is basically based on the melodic material and tonality. The entire movement is filled with consistent sixteenth notes with the thematic development highlighted in the right-hand melodic part.

The development of the right-hand melody part of A section (mm. 1-24) is mainly dominated by the quarter note, and the middle part of the phrase develops with the dotted rhythm. The register range of the whole A segment is rather narrow, and the pitch of the left and right hand parts does not

change more than an octave, and the melody is squeezed to move in the narrow sound zone. In the B segment (mm. 25-62), the tonality changes, and the sound zone is continuously enlarged in contrast to the first segment. The right-hand rhythm and pulse are dominated by the quarter note and the eighth note. The A1 segment (mm. 63-111) was completely repeated at first. However, in order to avoid the duplication caused by the repetition, the slight change is made. The wider register range was also made compared to the A segment.

2.2 The Second Movement - Single Binary

The second movement is in two-part song form, 6/8. The biggest feature is that three staves of the writing is used in some sections. Similar to the first movement, the whole movement is also shrouded with the sixteenth notes. Section A is divided into two parts due to different forms of the texture: a part (mm. 1-8) theme melodic part (in the second line); b part (mm. 9-17) bass becomes octave mono line with right hand treble part serving as the melodic line, in contrast to a. Section B begins to repeat from part a (mm. 18-24), while segment c (mm. 25-34) exhibits a new texture material that combines the development of the homophonic and polyphonic texture, which forms a stronger contrast to the former section. All in all, the second one is uniform in material. However, the development of the texture constructs diversity of this movement in terms of formal structure.

2.3 The Third Movement - Rondo:

The third movement is in Rondo form, returning to 2/4. Different from the first two movements, it is changed to the eighth notes throughout the entire movement. In terms of overall texture, it is no longer comprised with repetitive rhythmic patterns. but the use of materials remains consistent from the beginning thematic materials. All the materials appear later are basically developed from the material changes presented in the first theme. While in the development of the music, the A segment interspersed continuously to make it exhibit a strong gyroscopic feature. This sometimes confuses the listeners with variation form. Even though it is extremely uniform in the development of the material, it is noteworthy that the entire movement is not in variation form.

3. The Development of Thematic Motives

3.1 Theme Variations

In the third movement of Three Romances, a large number of theme variations have appeared. The main musical passages in the third movement are derived and deformed from the first theme. Besides, there are different kinds of variations such as variations with melody or harmony.

The first appearance of the theme consists of an ascending scale segment which can be divided into two truncations: the first is a short introduction; the second is comprised with a pick-up note B and an eight-note rest as a clear theme.

The first variation appeared at the beginning of the 26th bar, and also began with a pick-up B. The theme continues with another voice joined to form an inverted two-part voices. Here can be perceived as the first variation of the theme. The opening theme recapitulates in measure 67 for the first time.

The second variation appeared at the beginning of measure 114, maintaining the original melodic contour of the theme; However, due to the change of the key, the melodic contour also modulates to another key. At this point, the variation develops into a combination of the homophonic line and the intervals. This part of music is constantly shifting through the changing pitch of the harmony, and the inverted variation with simple and pure melody returns.

The change in the fourth theme variation is not obvious. Starting from the 171th bar, the theme melody appears as an octave variation from the left and right hands due to the key modulation to F minor, and is alternately presented in the subsequent development of the left and right hand parts.

The last variation begins in measure 258, and the key begins to shift to E minor. This time the theme has changed to a large extent. The theme continues to be maintained; however, the rhythmic patterns change a lot. The eighth notes and eighth-note rests that appear before no longer exist here,

nor the development of monophonic line. The chords and monophonic line are placed under the equal eighth note. However, a little observation will find that the right-hand part hides a descending scale line, which is exactly the same as the first occurrence of the two-stage truncated theme to form a shift retrograde variation.

3.2 The Use of Polyphony

In the classical period, the creation of piano music began to shift from the mature polyphonic compositional technique of the Baroque period to the creative writing technique based on the homophonic music. However, in the segment C of Section B of the second romance, Schumann uses the polyphonic techniques to enhance the sense of flowing of music, and it seems that the tension of the horizontal rhythm alignment is greatly contrasted with the previous synchronization. This kind of combination also enriches the sense of musical development.

3.3 Fixed Rhythm Type

The first and second movements of Three Romances use an underlying rhythmic pattern dominated by the sixteenth notes. The so-called underlying rhythm means the particular rhythm type that acts as the entire background music in the whole movement of music, and other main theme is often dominating. The tempo of the sixteenth note fixed rhythmic pattern always runs fast, which will create a strong sense of flowing in the music. For example, in the first movement, 16th notes running notes are divided into triplets in the accompaniment and the tempo marking is rather fast, while the melody appears in the three staves part with quarter notes.

In the second movement, a fixed rhythm of the sixteenth note is spread all over the movement with 6/8 time signature, and the melodic line is hidden in the middle of the three staves. The right-hand part has a dual function, which functions not only as the presentation of the background but also the melody.

In the development of the thematic materials, Schumann combines the composition logically through seemingly common and simple development methods. The theme is always concise, and there is no cumbersome feeling in the overall sounding effect, and it conforms to the logical development of the overall structure. At the same time, Schumann has always been concise and unified in the use of thematic materials, while through such compositional techniques as the theme and variations, the alternation of polyphonic and homophonic writing, and the application of fixed rhythm among other techniques to make the music flow and smooth. Although it is not difficult to find that these composing techniques are not as innovative as we think in comparison with other composers' works from the earlier or later periods. However, Schumann has formed his unique way of writing in the pursuit of romantic and lyrical sound.

4. The Characteristics of Tonality and Harmony

The harmonic language of the romantic period has been greatly enriched, and a large number of dissonances, dissonant chords, opposite chords, and disappearance of pivot chords have been used frequently. The use of linear harmony in Schumann's piano works also reflects certain characteristics such as some semitone lines no longer only appear in the high and low voices but also in the inner voices, which result in the movement of multiple horizontal lines.

4.1 Break the Feeling of Beat - the Use of Suspension

In the beginning of the first movement, there is a lingering sound that breaks the sense of rhythm. The suspension is spread throughout the whole movement. With a closer observation, it is not too difficult to find that both melodic line and chords from the weak beat in each measure are suspended, which creates a strong sense of syncopation.

4.2 Secondary Dominant Chords

In the pursuit of semitones, it is often accompanied by the use of secondary dominant chords. And sometimes in order to further emphasize the tendency of semitones, variant secondary

dominant chords will also be added, which does not only combines with each semitone material to form a highly semi-tone harmonic line, but also increases the sense of tension on the harmony. In the first movement from measure 75 to measure 80, there is a semi-tone development. This part of the tonality is based on the B minor. At the beginning of the 75th measure, there is also a constant development of the chord from the dominant of dominant chord to other secondary dominant chords. In measure 78, and the descending third of the b3V56/II chord satisfies the pursuit of the semitone.

4.3 The Alternation of Natural Major Chords and Harmonic Major Chords

The combination of natural and harmonic chords diversifies the color of the keys. In the first romance (measure 33 to measure 35), subdominant chords including the II chord and the IV chord with a lowered fifth to form a harmonic major chord, and the other one is maintained in the natural major to form a contrast of colors in a short time.

5. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that the works of Three Romances pursue short and refined in the style of the music; the material is simplified and unified in the development of the theme; the new chords are explored to obtain the color change in the harmony. Under this characteristic, Schumann pursues conciseness in form and diversity in development techniques. His work achieves effective unity. The Three Romances achieve a sense of romanticism acoustically.

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