IRASM 41 (2010) 2: 379-388

# Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

What is greatness in music? Why does a certain collection of notes have it, and another fall short of the mark? It has been hard to define; and the reason for the difficulty is this: before we can say a piece of music is greatly beautiful, we need to be able to say, in clear language, what beauty itself is.

It is my opinion that the nature of beauty was articulated clearly for the first time by the American philosopher Eli Siegel. Himself one of the finest poets of the 20th century—(William Carlos Williams, for example, said that all the poets of our age »are compelled to follow his lead«)—Siegel he was also a path-breaking philosopher, who founded Aesthetic Realism in 1941. One of the central principles of Aesthetic Realism is his statement: »All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.«

Greatness in art, he explained in a lecture of June 20, 1975, has a relation to greatness as we think of it in ordinary terms. How big is something? How comprehensive? To see how »big« a work of art is, we need to ask: How much of what reality has in it,

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#### Abstract - Résumé

This essay is in honor of Chopin's bicentennial, and explores the question of musical greatness—something Chopin richly possessed. A purposefully »counterintuitive« decision was made to explore one of Chopin's »modest« compositions: his Waltz in Ab, Op. 69, #1. Yet greatness is here; modest though it be, it nevertheless presents a true picture of what reality is in its permanent metaphysics: the oneness of opposites. It also presents a true picture of an emotional drama which is universally human-and very much also of Chopin's own life: the drama of confidence and uncertainly. This essay is based on a core principle of Aesthetic Realism, as expressed by its founder, the great American philosopher Eli Siegel: »All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.« Keywords: Chopin • greatness • waltz • Diabelli • opposites • Aesthetic Realism • Eli Siegel

379

E. Green: Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

is also present in that work: how much of its heights and depths, its many kinds of motions, its surprising variety, its unified grandeur? In short: is the work true? Is it, as the world itself is, a oneness of opposites?

A work that lacks greatness is, in some manner, limited. The world it presents is smaller than the actual world. And it is important to be clear: greatness in art doesn't mean a work has to be outwardly large. A Mahler symphony may or may not be great; but if it is, it isn't because of the massive forces involved, or its hourlong duration: it's because an authentic emotion about the world can be gotten from it. Moreover, a simple folk-song, if it is great, accomplishes the same thing. »Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,« is a great thing, as is »Go Down, Moses,« or W.C. Handy's »St. Louis Blues.« Rouget de Lisle's »La Marsailles« is arguably the greatest song ever composed—and it is a mere minute or so of sound.

This matter, which the ancient Romans called »multum in parvo« (»much in little,«) is particularly important when it comes to appreciating the greatness of Chopin, since he most often worked within modest dimensions, both of instrumentation and duration. Many of his masterpieces are three minutes or less in length, and scored simply for a single musician: a pianist.

In this short article, I will focus on just one of these works: the *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1, written in 1835. Especially in its opening measures, there is music that deserves to be called great. Here is its famous opening, as we know it from the initial publication—the Fontana edition:



Example 1: Opening 16 bars

380

IRASM 41 (2010) 2: 379-388

# 1. How Much World?

To see why it is right to declare these sixteen measures great — with their exquisite mingling in sound of quiet and agitation, fluidity and interruption; with that gorgeous melody having in it both a cautious circling motion and sudden leaps into space — it is useful to contrast them with music written just a few years earlier by the Austrian composer, and music publisher, Anton Diabelli. Consider his *Waltz in C* of 1819. It is a good representative of what the waltz, as a musical form, was like in the generation before Chopin got his hands on it! Here is how it begins:



**Example 2: Opening portion of the Diabelli** 

Beethoven cared for this bounding and rough-hewn waltz very much. He made it the theme for one of his most important works, the *Diabelli Variations;* and through his extraordinary imagination, he discovered within this short composition of Diabelli a whole universe of sound. And that is just the point! It took Beethoven to do so—to sense grandeur where Diabelli, let alone all the other composers who did variations on this waltz, did not: including Schubert and the young Liszt. If we think back to those immortal sixteen measures of Chopin, one senses immediately how much larger his music is than the sounds which Diabelli (minus Beethoven) presents.

So, why do we feel this? Is there a good reason, a solid logic for what with feel? Yes—and it has to do with the fact that there is more honesty about the world

E. Green: Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

in Chopin's music, a richer, bigger, more comprehensive sense of what reality contains.

I learned from Aesthetic Realism that when reality is in our minds truly, we experience it as aesthetics: as a beautiful drama of opposites. The world, as Diabelli heard it, is a limited world; even—one might say—a »one-sided« world. We hear energy, crispness; a certain brightness, speed, and thrust in his music, but very little, if anything, of what opposes and completes those qualities. By contrast, in Chopin's music, we hear energy *and* gracefulness, neatness *and* atmosphere, assertion *and* haltingness: the bright confidence as well as the dark uncertainty of things. Chopin is giving us a larger, more honest picture of the world; and because it is more inclusive, it is truer; and because it is truer, it is also more beautiful.

# 2. Confidence and Uncertainty

»In order to see what greatness in music is,« Eli Siegel said in the 1975 class I quoted earlier, we have to see what human beings have wanted to hear.« He explained that among the opposites which people most are concerned with in life are confidence and uncertainty, hope and fear—and that these opposites take a technical form in all the arts; certainly, in music. »Everything in music,« he continued, »expands and contracts, and sometimes both.«

That—the drama of expansion and contraction—is what we hear in Chopin's melody. Consider again the opening bars. Does this melody rise hopefully, or sink with uncertainty? Is it contracting, tightly circling around itself; or is it in search, constantly, of new territory—that is, expanding? It seems to be doing both. And so, as we experience this melody, opposing qualities join seamlessly in our minds; and that's art!

Meanwhile, expansion and contraction in music are not just a melodic matter. These opposites are present in *every* aspect of sound. They are in dynamics: in the growing louder and the diminishing of tone. In texture: in the way a composition can focus tightly on one register, and then spread out, reaching at once to the depths of the bass register as it also rises to the altissimo heights. Rhythms also expand and contract; the Chopin »rubato« is famously about this. And in the field of harmony these opposites are likewise crucial.

Take, as just one aspect of the opposites in harmony, the relation of major and minor—with major, having that larger third, technically standing for expansion, and minor for contraction. One just can't help but feel more expansively confident with a tonic major chord and more contractile with a tonic minor. This, as Schubert was fond of showing, is especially clear if every other aspect of the music remains the same. And Chopin, too, is a master of this dialectic.

#### IRASM 41 (2010) 2: 379-388

An instance of that mastery can be heard in the opening section of this waltz—a technical miracle of major and minor. Though it is set in Ab major, it begins harmonically at a distance from the key, with a falling progression that strongly suggests the relative minor. To show this, here again are its opening eight bars, but with my taking the liberty of altering the final measures slightly. As a result, the phrase will end in the key of F minor. The result, I believe, sounds so natural that we need to remind ourselves the original indeed ends in the major.



Example 3: Altered opening 8 bars

I took this liberty in order to make vivid how well Chopin succeeded in imbedding the minor, with its accent on darkness and uncertainty, right in the midst of a waltz that, in fact, is major from start to finish. He was so successful that, humorously enough, in at least three books I've come across, the waltz is listed not in its true key, but instead in F minor! An honest error on the part of these authors, and yet an error which, ironically enough, helps us to see more clearly what the piece is all about.

I am hardly the first critic or theorist to point to Chopin's boldness and finesse with the interweaving of major in minor. Everyone knows it is a large technical factor in his musical greatness. As major and minor mingle in his music, we hear a new relation of pleasure and pain, brightness and darkness, confidence and uncertainty. Where Aesthetic Realism says something decisively new on the subject is this: opposites that in life people ordinarily feel are separate, and at war with each other—so much so that people feel at any given moment in life they have to choose one over the other—Chopin gloriously shows are one. And this means, we can learn from the beauty of his music what it would mean for our own lives to be more beautiful. We want to be like the world itself: a composition of opposites that makes sense. We don't have to choose between one aspect of our personality and another: we can unify ourselves.

E. Green: Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

# 3. Art as Ethics

»There has been a disposition for criticism to judge an artist in keeping with how much of reality the artist has seen, or been just to,« wrote Eli Siegel in his famous essay »Art as Ethics.« »To see a larger world is to be more ethical; to see more subtly is to see more ethically; to see more delicately is to see more ethically.« The main power of the waltz we are looking at, I believe, lies in the power of nuance; Chopin makes our picture of the world larger by making it more delicately exact. In other works, such as the »Revolutionary Etude« or the *Ballade in G minor*, he showed he also had the other power: the power to trumpet forth boldly the rocky grandeur of things.

But even as he was capable of both kinds of music, it is clear from a study of his life that Chopin was troubled about the matter. In many letters we see him trying to place the delicate nuances he so much loved to the thunderous, grand, and massive effects he also could manage, but which other composers seemed more steadily interested in. For instance, this is from a letter to Countess Delfina Potocka in which he compares himself to Beethoven:

I do not climb so high. A long time ago I decided that my universe will be the soul and heart of man. It is there that I look for nuances of every feeling, which I transfer to music as well as I can.

I wish Chopin could have known what, in our time, Eli Siegel so kindly taught—that »the soul and heart of man« and the large universe are not as different as we ordinarily think; in fact, they have something central in common. »The world, art, and self explain each other,« he stated, »each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.« There was a fight in Chopin's mind (as there usually is in people) between a sense of the world as warmly close and the world as vast and seemingly impersonal. A fight between the world as intimate, the world of our private feelings, and the world as large, awesome, immeasurable. To put it another way, there was a fight about contraction and expansion, confidence and uncertainty— the question being: can we feel at ease with the grandeur of things, or must we prefer a smaller world?

In an issue of the journal *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* titled, »Sureness, Unsureness, and Music,« the poet Ellen Reiss, who is its editor, wrote:

We will be sure when we feel there is a structure in us that makes sense — in fact, has grandeur — for it is like music. We will be sure when we feel the opposites in us are not things we have to be tossed between or which we adroitly play off against each other — but these forces and desire can become a vibrant integrity in us, as they are in music.

### IRASM 41 (2010) 2: 379-388

I cannot, of course, speak for the readers of this article, but from the evidence of my own life—and I have a notion it is a representative life—these words ring true. I have felt at times »tossed between« a kind of jaunty confidence and a morose humility. That is: unlike music, I've had a bad relation of high and low, speed and slowness. I have also »adroitly played off« feelings of sureness and unsureness. To get what I thought I wanted, I'd put aside questions about what I was doing and act surer of myself than I truly was. And to avoid doing things that were ethically right, but which required some courage on my part, I'd act as if I wasn't capable of it—pretending to be less sure of my ability to take decisive action than was honestly the case. This, again, was so unlike music, in which hesitancies and sudden rushes, clear diatonicism and wavering chromaticism, work together in behalf of beauty.

As Ellen Reiss makes clear, music has what we want for our own self-respect, our own integrity. It is why, deeply, we love it. And let me once again quote Eli Siegel, who gave the issue its most classic formulation when he stated: »The resolution of conflict in self is like the making one of opposites in art.«

# 4. The Depths of Self Show in the Structure of Music

It is very affecting to know the circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Waltz in Ab*, Op. 69, #1. Chopin wrote it as a farewell present for Marya Vodzhinska, whom he had just asked to marry, because he was about to leave for business in Leipzig. He was 25. For reasons that are still unknown, they hardly corresponded, and the engagement, though not formally broken off, became uncertain. Around this time, too, Chopin decided to end his career as a public virtuoso. For the rest of his life he would play almost exclusively in the intimate surroundings of the salon. During this trip away from Poland, he had an attack of influenza which Dr. Esmond R. Long, in his noted study of Chopin's medical history, writes of as the first evidence of the tuberculosis which, just fourteen years later, would cause his death at age 39.

Without wishing in any way to sum up the subtleties of what went on within Chopin's mind (and body), this much may conservatively be said: the opposites of confidence and unsureness, expansion and contraction, which are so central to this waltz, seem also to have been of the fabric of his life at this time—his thoughts and emotions, for sure; but also his physical constitution.

In his music in general, and very specifically in the *Waltz in Ab*, Chopin was able to give the pain and uncertainty he experienced beautiful form. In an Aesthetic Realism class, Eli Siegel once said something which I feel is so valuable in knowing the composer; he noted that his music »was less unhappy than Chopin actually felt, because in being able to make it into art, he made the unhappiness less.« The logic of this is clear: if we can feel there is a beautiful meaning to be found in what

E. Green: Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

we are enduring—and art is always the finding of more beauty in the world than we had previously suspected—then we are closer to meeting what Aesthetic Realism explains is everyone's deepest desire: to like the world on an honest basis. No wonder happiness is more, and unhappiness is less! And I would add: listening to Chopin's music *our* unhappiness is made less, because he gives us the privilege of experiencing more beauty in the world than we had imagined without him.

Though I believe the greatest section of this waltz is its opening—containing music which, rondo-like, returns several more times in the score—*every* melody in this composition is a study in the drama of confidence and uncertainty, expansion and contraction. For example, consider the theme to the second section, the »B« section of the rondo. It is outspokenly major, alert, vigorous—a clear contrast to the chromatic subtlety of what came before.



Example 4: opening eight bars of the »B« section

Yet we are not dealing *only* with contrast. We also hear in these measures definite melodic reminiscences of the main theme, especially at the onset. These reminiscences relate it to the more nuanced atmosphere of the opening »A« section, and by this means Chopin has us feel, as we hear the »B« section that within its outward, playful energy, there is also depth, and something implicitly ruminative.

Turning to the »C« section of this rondo-shaped waltz, we encounter a dialogue of two themes: one lilting, easy and sweetly complacent the other, sharper and more insistent.

# Image: transformed state Ima



Example 6: eight bars of rising sequences in the »C« section

In this episode, these themes seem both to arise from each other and yet ignore each other in a way that is charmingly humorous.

Meanwhile, different as this section is from all that came before, it is also structurally related to it. As we can see in the very first measure of Example 5, Chopin includes a triplet figure with a descending resolution. That figure is prominent in both earlier sections. Ah!—but in those sections there was something different: it fell on beat one; here it falls on beat three. And in Example 6 we see an even more subtle connection to the earlier music. It likewise is a relation of contraction and expansion, but in such a wonderfully fresh manner!—now the music constantly stretches outwards with an almost breathless series of rising sequences. Yet *how* does it rise?—by means of the tightest, most contracted interval in music, the semitone: the interval which most saliently characterizes the main theme of the waltz. In fact, the three note chromatic figure, moving in eighth notes, which we hear again and again in this episode's second melody is simply the opening melodic gesture of the waltz reversed: rising now, rather than falling.

# E. Green: Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

IRASM 41 (2010) 2: 379-388

E. Green: Greatness in Music, Aesthetic Realism, and Chopin's *Waltz in Ab*, Op.69, #1

All of this technical analysis points to another pair of opposites crucial to the beauty of this waltz; crucial, in fact, to art of any kind. I am speaking of the opposites of variety and unity. Nor are they only »aesthetic« opposites; they are central to life—to human happiness. If we can't be adventurous, diverse, surprising, our lives are stunted. But if we can't be true to ourselves as we go from one thing to another, if we don't sense an ethical unity continuing through all our diverse activities, then our lives are fragmented and confused. The fact that Chopin's »rondo« involves the constant discovery of new melodies, yet all of these melodies cohere and arise gracefully and naturally from the initial notes of the waltz—well, by means of the beautiful symbolism in sound which is music, we are hearing a »resolution of conflict in self.«

In a class he gave in 1965, published later by Definition Press with the title *The Opposites Class*, Eli Siegel explained:

When the opposites [in an instance of art] show a person and the universe in a way that is many enough, deep enough, surprising enough, and sincere enough, we have something like a great work. That is speaking roughly. The way the opposites are arranged by a mind looking at the world: that is what makes greatness.

Chopin exemplifies that greatness: in this waltz, and in so many of his other compositions—Scherzi, Mazurkas, Polonaises, Nocturnes, Preludes, Sonatas. And so, we are surely right, in this, the year 2010, in celebrating his bicentennial. Greatness, after all, is an enduring fact.

#### Sažetak

# Uzvišenost u glazbi, estetičkom realizmu i Chopinovu Valceru u As-duru, op. 69, br. 1

Ovaj je članak pisan u čast Chopinove obljetnice i istražuje pitanje uzvišenosti u glazbi, nečega što je Chopin posjedovao u izobilju. Donesena je namjerno »protuintuitivna« odluka da se istraži jedna od Chopinovih »umjerenih« skladbi, njegov valcer u As-duru, op. 69, br. 1. Ipak, i ovdje nalazimo uzvišenost. Premda je možda skromna, ona ipak predstavlja pravu sliku stvarnosti u njezinoj trajnoj metafizičnosti: jedinstvenosti suprotnosti. Ona isto tako predstavlja pravu sliku emocionalne drame koja je univerzalno ljudska, ali i isto toliko ona Chopinova vlastitog života: drama povjerenja i nesigurnosti. Ovaj se članak temelji na ključnom načelu koncepcije estetičkog realizma kako ga je izrazio njegov utemeljitelj, veliki američki filozof Eli Siegel: »Sva se ljepota sastoji u pravljenju jednoga iz suprotnosti, a pravljenje jednoga iz suprotnosti je ono za čim tragamo u sebi samima«.