

Robert Schumann – Novellette Op. 21, No. 2

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Context

The period in which Robert Schumann composed the eight piano pieces he collectively called his *Novelletten*, Op. 21, was a time of both great creativity and great personal emotional turmoil. During the spring of 1838 while his turbulent romantic relationship with his former piano teacher's daughter Clara Wieck was on a temporary upswing, Schuman produced three keyboard cycles: *Novelletten*, *Kinderscenen*, and *Kriesleriana*, as well as completing his *Phantasie* in C major, Op. 17 (Law, 1996, p.1). In a letter to Clara in February of 1938 he wrote "For the past four weeks I've done practically nothing but compose...; I sang along the stream of ideas that came flowing towards me, and for the most part achieved success. I'm playing with forms..." (Taylor, 1982, p.164). The term Novellette was first coined by Schumann himself, and in a letter to his publisher later in 1838 described the collection as interrelated adventurous narratives (Law, 1996, p.8). In the spirit of the Romantic movement in music (of which Schumann was at the forefront along with the likes of Chopin, Berlioz, Wagner, and Liszt), several of his compositions were inspired by, and contained references to the love interests in his life. To Clara Wieck (his eventual wife) he wrote that all the *Novelletten* contains "images of you in every possible setting and harmony, an in other ways in which you are irresistible!" (Burton, 1988, p.213). She was in fact the inspiration for several of his piano works and in a 1839 letter to Heinrich Dorn, his former counterpoint teacher, he wrote "I dare say the struggles I have endured about Clara are to a certain extent reflected in my music . . . The concerto, the sonata, *David's Blindfold*, *Kreisleriana*, and *Novelletten* were almost entirely inspired by her" (Burton, 1988, p.212).

Form and Harmony

Upon first hearing Schumann's *Novellette Op. 21, No.1* it is difficult not to notice the initial march-like quality of the opening section with its strong rhythms and staccato block-chord stylization which was not an entirely unusual approach for the Romantic composers of the of the 19th century (Schwandt & Lamb). Through several incarnations, this bold and harmonically unstable A-section alternates with two contrasting B and C sections, which are more lyrical and relatively harmonically stable as well, for a total of seven sections (Table 1). Although Schumann referred to his *Novellette* as an adventurous narrative, its form can be seen as quite similar to that of a Classical rondo, or perhaps even the sonata-rondo in view of the somewhat exploratory and thematically developmental nature of the C-section. In looking at the table below it should be quite obvious that Schumann's composition clearly diverges from classic rondo form primarily in its approach to the harmonic tonal centers of its components.

Table 1 : Schumann's Novellette Op. 21, No. 1 Harmonic Form

Section	Measures	Primary Key	Closed/Open	Comments
A	mm.1-20	F (I), Db (bVI), A (III)	Open	Harmonically unstable
B	mm.21-48	F (I)	Closed	More harmonically stable
A1	mm.49-60	F (I)	Closed	Abridged version of 1 st A
C	mm.61-81	Db (bVI)	Open	Motivic developmental character
A2	mm.82-85	Db (bVI)	Closed	First subphrase only
B2	mm.86-113	A (III)	Closed	Exact transposition of B
A1'	mm.114-125	F (I)	Closed	Repeat of A1
Coda	mm.126-137	Gb(N), F(I)		

In terms of harmonic movement within the *Novellette*, the keys of the main sections are presented in F major, Db major, and finally in A major. This series of tonal centers represents a sequence of chromatic submediant (bVI) relationships which when complete, symmetrically

divide the octave into three equal parts (a concept that would later become a cornerstone of the harmonic approach of the jazz artist John Coltrane). Much in the way a diminished seventh sonority divides an octave into four equal parts, such a relationship creates an overall sense of instability to this form. In a sense the A-section can be viewed harmonically as a microcosm of the composition as a whole in that the section itself harmonically unfolds in the same manner. The introduction of each section other than the A-section also follows this sequence of F, Db, and A. Worthy of note too, is that each successive A-section becomes progressively shorter as if to continually diminish its role until the final occurrence at m.114, when back in the tonic key, the section re-blooms and is brought to conclusion with a coda. Schuman employs the submediant relationship numerous times throughout his *Novellette* as shall be further explored. The opening sonority of the entire work for instance is D minor, the vi of the tonic, and actually each reoccurrence of the A-section follows suit.

In terms of harmonic form, the internal workings of the A-section also function as a sort of compressed or abridged rondo form with only five instead of seven sections as illustrated below (Table 2).

Table 2 : Harmonic Organization of A-Section

Measures	Phrase	Harmonic Motion
mm.1-4	Statement A	F: vi -I
mm.5-8	Sequence	Gm-Cm-Fm-Bbm (vi of Db major)
mm.9-12	Statement A'	Db: iv-I
mm.13-16	Sequence	Ebm-Abm-Dbm-Gbm (enharmonic vi of A major)
mm.17-20	Statement A''	A: iv-I

As stated earlier, the A-section while harmonically unstable, represents a microcosm of the entire work both in harmonic movement and in form. It consists of three four-measure statements in the sequential keys of F, Db, and A, while connected by two four-measure sequences bridging them together derived from motivic material of the main statement. These four-measure bridges contain within them harmonic sequences of their own which can be analyzed in two (albeit directly related) ways, each with its own certain elegance.

In an effort to best illustrate the relationship between the two, I have chosen to specifically analyze the A-section with the more ‘complex’ view so as to better facilitate a comparison to the ‘simpler’ view (See attached RNA 1 and RNA-alternate). Essentially from this approach, these four-measure sequences consist of a pair of two-measure phrases descending by whole-step and can be analyzed as a series of one-measure tonicizations through the functional relationships to their respective tonic as ii, v, i, and iv. In mm.5-9 this translates to G minor, C minor, F minor, and Bb minor; and in mm.13-16 translates to Eb minor, Ab minor, Db minor, and Gb minor (Table 3).

Table 3 : A-section Tonicization Alternatives

Measures	Main Key Centers	Whole-Step Tonicizations	Cycle of 4th Tonicizations
mm.1-4	Fmaj		
mm.5-8		Gm	Gm
			Cm
		Fm	Fm
			Bbm
mm.9-12	Dbmaj		
mm.13-16		Ebm	Ebm
			Abm
		Abm	Dbm
			Gbm
mm.17-20	Amaj		

This of course represents a sequence of fourths in each case. With this approach the three major key centers move through a cycle of three ascending chromatic submediants (or descending major thirds) while the eight minor tonicization key centers ascend through a cycle of fourths.

The second approach bypasses the second of each minor tonicization and results in what amounts to a sequence of two minor tonicizations descending in whole steps. The appeal of this second approach is first that it can more directly reflect the two two-phrase nature of this material, and secondly that it involves tonicizing only the ii and parallel minor of the key from which it is extending. In either case Schumann presents to us in the opening twenty measures of this work a sequence of three key centers linked by yet another sequence of minor tonicizations for a cumulative total of potentially eleven keys both major and minor. He has essentially created sequences within sequences all within the guise of a march, historically (and ironically) one of the most simple and straightforward of all musical forms.

The second and fourth reoccurrence of the A-section (the ones which do not appear initially in transposition at m.49 and again at m.114) are noteworthy with regard the way Schumann employs this sequential material as means to connect the progressively transposed iterations of the initial four-measure phrase. In the first A-section, the sequential four-measure phrases begin by tonicizing ii in order to finally cadence to the vi sonority which begins the next transposed iteration of the larger pattern of submediant relationships within the section. At mm.49-60, (mm.114-125 repeat the exact same qualities) one can observe several distinct differences. In this case, the four-measure sequential phrase must cadence not to a transposed iteration of the previous phrase, but to one in the original key of the tonic. Not only that, but this second non-transposed iteration begins not on the vi sonority as it did the first time, but on the

tonic instead. In order now for the four-measure sequence's final cadence to resolve to F (I), it must begin this time by tonicizing vi so as to reach its functional goal. Here one can observe yet again Schumann's repeated thematic employment of the submediant relationship throughout the piece.

Melody, Phrase, and Meter

Along with the tonal instability of the opening A-section, Shuman also creates a significant amount of metric ambiguity by way of his use of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic phrasing all within the first four measures of this work.

Figure 1: mm.1-4 Schumann Novellette Op. 21, No.1

At m.1 Schuman immediately puts the listener slightly off balance by presenting a vi chord on the first beat of the opening measure as the beginning of a vi-V-I cadence-like phrase, a cadence which might otherwise normally have placed the tonic sonority at the beginning of a measure on a stronger beat than it now appears at (Figure 1). On beat four the listener is given a strong ascending triplet in the left hand to signal the downbeat of the next measure, which is not the tonic but the subdominant, B flat. Subsequently on beat three of the second measure Schumann gives the listener a similar strong left-hand ascending triplet, but by rhythmically offsetting of the placement one beat earlier Schumann creates a sense of metric displacement

which is not relieved until the ascending triplet leading into m.4 which finally brings this opening phrase to a cadence. Note that throughout the entire four-measure phrase a complete tonic does not once appear on the downbeat. (Even at m.4 the tonic can only be inferred and even so appears in a relatively unstable 64 inversion.) In this way Schumann reconfigures these four measures as 4+3+5+4. Melodically the tonic note F in the soprano only appears twice at beat three of m.2, and similarly at beat three of m.4, never on a strong beat.

When the A-section repeats later on in the piece at m.49, (and then again at m.114), not only is the original four-measure phrase repeated now in a non-transposed form at m.57, but a number of significant rhythmic and harmonic alterations can also be observed.

Figure 2: Measures 57 - 60



By providing the tonic for the first time at the strong downbeat of the phrase (Figure 2), the harmonic ambiguity originally established in the corresponding phrases preceding it is reduced. The Cadential 64 at the downbeat of m.60 is now also a complete sonority unlike all the previous occurrences where the tonic root could only be inferred. Finally Schumann's placement of the triplet figure within the second measure no longer falls on beat three, but on beat two instead, thereby targeting the sonority at beat three as a less metrically disorienting accent in comparison to its former incarnation during the phrase at mm.49-52. This same rhythmic figure is repeated again at m.59 as well, so that all accented sonorities occur on uniformly strong beats.

The phrase is now somewhat less ambiguous than it was before. These elements help to slowly resolve the tensions and ambiguities created throughout the work, and eventually lead the listener to a satisfying conclusion by the end of the entire form.

Motivically the A-section acts as a seed-bed for much of the melodic and motivic material in ensuing sections. The triplet figure first presented in m.1, the rising and falling contour of the soprano at mm.2-4, as well as the contour and rhythm of mm.5-6 (now including the triplet) all become “connective tissue” to subtly tie together such otherwise seemingly contrasting sections in a sea of harmonic instability.

Figure 3: mm.1-4 Schumann Novellette Op. 21, No.1

The musical score for the first four measures of Schumann's Novellette Op. 21, No. 1 is shown. The tempo is marked 'Markiert und kräftig' with a metronome marking of M.M. ♩ = 108. The score is in 3/4 time and begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes in the bass line. The second measure features a rising and falling contour in the soprano line. The third measure includes a triplet of eighth notes in the bass line. The fourth measure concludes with a 5/4 measure, indicated by a bracket and the numbers 5 and 4. The score is marked with a first ending bracket (1.) and includes various fingering and articulation markings.

In spite of the prominent ambiguity and harmonic instability of the A-section, the overall phrase structure of this section is fairly straight-forward in comparison to the sections that follow. The first twenty measures can be essentially viewed as two eight-measure phrases that can each be further broken down into four-measure antecedent consequent subphrases of alternately relatively stable and unstable qualities, followed by a final four-measure extension (Table 4).

Table 4 : A-Section Phrase Structure

Measures	Phrase	Key	Comments
mm.1-4	Subphrase 1 Antecedent	F	
mm.5-8	Subphrase 1 Consequent	unstable	
mm.9-12	Subphrase 2 Antecedent	Db	
mm.13-16	Subphrase 2 Consequent	unstable	
mm.17-20	Extension	A	

The B-section of this piece is significantly more stable both harmonically and rhythmically. The melodic phrases are much more flowing and lyrical, and display a more uniform linear quality. Harmonically too, save the brief excursions to the Neapolitan (Gb major) at mm.33, and the bVI (Db major) at m.45, this section remains essentially in the key of the tonic F major. Here one can observe the continuation of the motivic triplet element, now a constant feature of the left-hand accompaniment, as the contour and rhythmic quality of the soprano can be traced back to that of mm.5-6 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: mm.5-6 and mm.21-22

The figure displays two musical excerpts. The left excerpt, measures 5-6, shows a soprano line with a triplet of eighth notes circled in red. The right excerpt, measures 21-22, is marked 'TRIO' and shows a similar triplet in the soprano line. The left page includes dynamics like *sf* and *f*, and the right page includes *p*. The left page also shows a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes.

As pointed out by Law (1996, p.37), the motivic material at m.33 of this section could quite possibly have been derived from Clara Schumann's *Soirees Musicales Op. 6, No. 2* composed two years earlier in 1836 (Figures 5 & 6).

Clara's theme plays a significant role in this and the other Novelletten. This theme comprises two elements: 1) a descending seven-note motive beginning on the third scale degree and ending on the fourth scale degree, interrupted after the fifth note of the descent by: 2) the turn figure around the sixth degree. Both elements assume significance in almost all the Novelletten in one form or another (Law, 1996, p.37).

Figure 5: mm.33-34 Novellette Op. 21, No.2



Figure 6: Clara Schumann - Soirées Musicales Op. 6, No 2

Andante con moto.

N^o 2.

sempre legato.
Ped.

dolce.

sf

sf

In analyzing the phrase and subphrase structures of the B-section, one can again see that they are reflective of the overall seven part rondo form, with the expansion of phrase 2 exactly in the middle where the C-section of the rondo form would be (Table 5). One can also notice that this is exactly where Schumann has employed Clara's motivic material to begin the expansion as if to give special significance to this arrangement.

Table 5 : Phrase Structure of B-Section

Measures	Phrases	Subphrases
mm.21-28	Phrase 1	Subphrase 1A
		Subphrase 1B
mm.29-32	Phrase 2	Subphrase 2A
mm.33-36		Expansion
mm.37-40		Subphrase 2B
mm.41-48	Phrase 3	Subphrase 3A
		Subphrase 3B

If Schumann's *Novellette* were to be compared to the classical sonata-rondo form with its C-section functioning as the development, then the corresponding C-section of this piece could perhaps be considered in a similar light. In a sense the C-section of this *Novellette* represents the developmental peak of the entire work with regard to the treatment of the melodic thematic material and surface design.

Figure 7: Measures 61 - 64

It is not difficult to see the essential five-note descending motive (now in diminution), first appearing in the bass at the last beat of m.60 (tied to m.61), employed as the seed for a series of sequentially transposed, cascading, and overlapping repetitions, expanding from a single voice to full harmony, and finally cadencing to the V, over the course of only the first four measures (Figure 7). The overlapping nature of this motivic material to form the initial phrase of the section becomes the model for the ensuing elisions that occur from phrase to phrase as each

phrase ends while the next has already begun. Here the motivic figure ascends from the left to the right hand in an imitative quality as a further development of the imitation exhibited between the left and right-hand ascending triplets in mm.5-8 of the A-section.

Whether this C-section qualifies as a true development section in the classical sense could perhaps warrant debate. The fact that this section utilizes previous motifs as a means to create new material and phrases is clear. The degree to which this section is modulatory (at least by comparison to the extremes of the A-section), along with its repetitive nature however can leave some doubt. In either case, this C-section does seem to function as a peak from which the piece now slowly descends towards its final resolution.

Table 6 : C-Section Phrase Structure

Measures	Phrase	Comments
mm.61-64	Phrase 1	Cadence to Ab (V)
mm.64-67	Phrase 1'	Cadence to Ab (V)
mm.67-72	Extension/Development	Unstable - Unresolved cadence to Bbm (vi) at m.72
mm.73-76	Phrase 1''	Cadence to Ab (V)
mm.76-81	Extension/Development'	Unstable - Bbm cadence this time resolves at m.82 to section A2

The Coda

Although during the first several measures of the coda Schumann maintains a significant amount of chromaticism, a number of elements present in the piece are re-addressed, and in the end, finally resolved. The interval of the minor second present in the soprano of m.5 of the A-section, the brief excursion to the Neapolitan sonority at m.35 of the B-section, as well as the now re-established triplets occurring consistently at beats two and four in the bass are all brought

together within yet another sequence of two four-measure phrases this time moving by the interval of an octave—signifying the sum-total of the original three equidistant keys of F, Db, and A symmetrically dividing the octave into three equal parts. Also worthy of note is the fact that within the final five measures as the melody makes its final descent, the entire range of register exhibited throughout the piece is encapsulated. It is also perhaps significant that Schumann concludes this work with three identical voicings of the tonic chord as if to further signify this trinity of key centers.

References

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