

## The Analysis of Chopin's Scherzo No.2 Playing Technique to Enhance Piano Practice Skills for Third-Year Students at Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, China

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### Abstract

This study aimed to 1) analyze the piano playing techniques in Chopin's Scherzo No. 2, and 2) enhance piano practice skills among third-year undergraduate students through comparative performance analysis. The study employed qualitative research methods, incorporating document analysis, expert interviews, and student feedback. A purposive sample of four associate professors from the School of Art Education at Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts served as key informants. Data were collected through structured interviews and performance observation, and analyzed using descriptive and thematic analysis techniques.

The findings revealed that:

1. Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 is a technically demanding work that integrates emotional depth, dramatic contrasts, and complex structural form. Comparative analysis of performance styles by world-class pianists Arrau, Argerich, and Li Yundi highlighted differences in tempo control, phrasing, and emotional expression.

2. It was found that incorporating performance-based comparative analysis significantly improved students' technical skills, stylistic understanding, and expressive interpretation. Expert feedback emphasized the importance of combining technique with emotional insight, encouraging students to explore multiple versions and reflect critically on performance style and personal interpretation. The research, with its practical implications, offers valuable pedagogical strategies for piano instruction and contributes to the broader discourse on performance-based teaching in music education.

### Keywords

Chopin Scherzo No. 2, Piano Performance Techniques, Rubato, Emotional Expression, Interpretation



### Statement and Significance of the Problems

Frederick Francis Chopin (1810-1849) was a great Polish composer who represented the Romantic period. After 1830, the Polish people's liberation movement had just emerged. The national struggle against foreign occupation for freedom and independence profoundly influenced Chopin's thoughts, cultivated his strong national sentiment and patriotic enthusiasm, and imbued Chopin's music creation with a distinct Polish style and national flavor. Chopin's background and life experiences have contributed to the creation of his poetic and immortal works. He skillfully combined the spiritual connotation of romanticism and patriotism of the times with his musical works. From this, we can see that his musical works are always filled with a repressive and rebellious atmosphere, characterized by incredible dramatic power. The external manifestation of this contradiction is that his musical works consistently exhibit a "drama-oriented" color tone. Chopin's piano music works are rich in content, diverse in form, and profound in connotation. Among them, Scherzo is its outstanding representative. Chopin created the Scherzo as a large, independent genre. Based on inheriting the scherzo style of works of this genre by Haydn and Beethoven, he added more humorous elements. Chopin's Scherzo creation follows the dramatic rhetoric characteristics of Haydn and Beethoven and incorporates his individual, surprising, and contemporary innovations in this genre. The scherzo genre, which was initially just a single movement, already contains much complex ideological content. Then the larger and more complex volume of Scherzo can reflect the profound connotation, and the contrast of musical images will be more refined, making it a very infectious work. (Wu Peisi, 2022, PP.1-32)

Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31, is a relatively free sonata form. The whole piece consists of an exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda, starting in B-flat minor and ending in D-flat major. The exposition is bars 1 to 264, consisting of two themes: the first theme is bars 1-64, and the second theme is bars 65 to 132. From bar 133, the first two themes are repeated in sequence, ending in bar 264. The interlude is bars 265 to 467, consisting of three themes. The first theme is bars 265 to 309, the second theme is bars 310 to 333, and the third theme is bars 334 to 365. From bar 366, the first three themes are repeated in sequence, and finally end at bar 467. The development section is bars 468-583, and the recapitulation and coda are bars 584 to 780. (Wang Ruiqi, Qian Zhou, 2023, PP.126-128).

The performances of Claudio Arrau, Martha Argerich, and Li Yundi reflect distinct interpretative approaches to Chopin's Scherzo in B minor. Arrau's style is calm, stable, and

respectful of the composer's original intent. Argerich brings boldness and emotional intensity, with exceptional technical command. Li Yundi combines expressive lyricism with youthful vitality and precision. This piece is essential for third-year students because it offers comprehensive challenges: advanced technique, dynamic contrast, tempo flexibility (rubato), and deep emotional interpretation. It also strengthens their ability to analyze various performance styles, enhances their understanding of Romantic aesthetics, and prepares them for professional-level repertoire and performance critique. Exposure to these interpretations supports the development of artistic individuality and musical maturity, key outcomes in upper-level piano training. (Li Li, 2018, PP. 1-15).

The influence of piano playing skills on the expression of musical emotions. Strengthening the emotional expression of music: As the core foundation of musical emotional expression, piano playing skills play a vital role in conveying the emotional elements of music. Performers carefully master and apply various techniques, such as the delicateness of touch, precise control of strength, strict control of speed, and diverse shaping of timbre, to convey the emotional elements in music to the audience more accurately and profoundly. These techniques not only make the music work present a more vivid sound effect but also strengthen the expressiveness of musical emotions. Each piano piece carries the composer's unique emotional connotation and style characteristics, and using piano playing skills is the key to interpreting these emotional connotations and style characteristics. In the performance process, performers need to deeply understand the emotional core of the piece, accurately grasp its style requirements, and accurately interpret its emotional elements by choosing appropriate playing techniques. This technique is of great significance for highlighting the emotional interpretation of music pieces. First of all, it helps to convey the emotional characteristics of the piece accurately. By using performance techniques that match the emotions of the music, the performer can accurately show the emotional changes in the music, so that the audience can more intuitively feel the composer's intended emotions. Secondly, using performance techniques can also enhance the artistic appeal and expressiveness of the music. By carefully selecting and using various performance techniques, the performer can enrich the sound effects of the music and make it more vivid and three-dimensional. The use of this technique not only makes the music more fascinating but also further highlights the artistic value of the music, so that the audience can gain a deeper artistic experience in the process of appreciation. Piano performance techniques play an irreplaceable



role in the expression of musical emotions. Each technique contains rich emotional connotations, from basic fingering and touch to advanced timbre changes. By carefully using these techniques, the performer can more accurately interpret the emotions of the music and establish a deep emotional connection between the music and the audience. Therefore, constantly learning and mastering piano performance techniques is of great significance to improving the emotional expression of music. (Xie Lingxi, 2024, PP.46-48)

This study focuses on Chopin's Second Piano Scherzo and aims to explore its musical and technical characteristics. The researcher will use literature review and expert interviews to understand Chopin's life, the historical context of the composition, and its formal structure, identified as a relatively free sonata form. Additionally, by comparing interpretations of various renowned pianists, the study examines differences in technique and emotional expression. This comparative approach will deepen the understanding of the piece's musical style, aesthetic value, and expressive depth. The research also examines the technical challenges related to tempo flexibility (*rubato*) based on the researcher's own performance experience. Ultimately, the study will help improve both interpretive insight and practical performance skills for students and performers of Romantic piano music.

#### **Research Objectives**

1. To analyze the piano playing techniques employed in Chopin's Scherzo No.2.
2. To enhance the piano practice skills of students at Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, China.

#### **Limitations of the study**

Piano teaching, as a fundamental component of music education, plays a critical role in cultivating students' artistic sensibility, aesthetic perception, and creative expression. The instruction and performance of classical piano repertoire serve not only as essential pathways for developing technical proficiency but also as key areas for advancing music pedagogy and educational practice. As a representative work within Chopin's scherzo series, Scherzo No. 2 holds a significant place in college-level piano instruction due to its profound artistic depth and technical demands. This study offers an in-depth exploration of the work, aiming to examine the nuances in interpretive approaches and performance practices while illuminating its relevance to teaching strategies, teacher-student interaction, and interpretive traditions. It holds both theoretical and practical importance for enhancing the quality of piano education.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, consisting of the following steps:

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the performance techniques and expressive approaches in Chopin's Scherzo No. 2, to enhance the piano practice skills of third-year students at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts. The research methodology consists of the following components:

1. Research Design: The research is structured as a qualitative case study. This design was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of performance interpretations through document analysis, expert interviews, and comparative listening activities. The methodology emphasizes descriptive, interpretive, and experiential aspects of piano pedagogy, particularly within the Romantic repertoire.

### 2. Data Collection Methods

2.1 Document and Video Analysis: The researcher collected and analyzed a wide range of literature, musical scores, historical accounts of Chopin's life and compositional style, as well as professionally recorded performances of Scherzo No. 2 by three world-class pianists—Claudio Arrau, Martha Argerich, and Li Yundi. These recordings were examined for tempo flexibility, dynamic contrast, phrasing, and stylistic interpretation.

2.2 Expert Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four associate professors of piano from the School of Art Education at Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts. The interview questions were designed to explore the pedagogical significance of Scherzo No. 2, common technical challenges faced by students, and instructional strategies for developing rubato and expressive playing. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

2.3 Student Feedback (Supplementary): Observational feedback was collected informally during piano classes and masterclasses in which students engaged in comparative performance analysis and applied rubato techniques in practice. This feedback provided practical insights into students' learning progress and interpretive development.

3. Participants (Key Informants): The expert participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and teaching experience in advanced piano performance. All four professors have extensive experience in teaching and performing Romantic-era piano works, particularly those of Chopin. Their in-depth understanding of



rubato, phrasing, and stylistic nuances makes their insights highly relevant to this study. Additionally, the rich pedagogical and artistic experiences of these informants significantly contribute to the analysis of interpretive challenges, teaching strategies, and student-centered learning practices in advanced piano instruction. The informants included: Prof. Yang Mimi, Prof. Zhao Baozhen, Prof. Wang Yonghui, and Prof. Lei Zhizhong. All participants were affiliated with the School of Art Education at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts.

4. Data Analysis: The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and thematic analysis. Audio transcripts and field notes from interviews were coded to identify recurring themes related to performance technique, rubato interpretation, and teaching strategies. Performance recordings were comparatively analyzed to extract stylistic and technical features, which were then used to inform pedagogical implications.

5. Validity and Reliability: To ensure credibility, triangulation was employed by comparing expert opinions with audio-visual analyses and student feedback. Member checking was conducted by allowing interviewees to review transcripts for accuracy and verification. Thick description was used in reporting to enhance the transferability of the findings to other piano pedagogy contexts.

## Results

Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31, composed in 1837, reflects a period of deep personal and national emotional turmoil for the composer. His nostalgia, yearning, and longing for his homeland are vividly expressed in the work's theatrical and imaginative musical narrative. The piece features lyrical melodies, technical brilliance, and poetic phrasing, seamlessly interwoven with the composer's passionate emotional language. This combination of expressive depth and technical challenge has made Scherzo No. 2 one of the most frequently performed scherzos in the modern concert repertoire.

Structurally, the work adopts a relatively free sonata form comprising four main sections: exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda, totaling 780 measures. The development section stands out as particularly complex and thematically rich, showcasing Chopin's creative departure from classical scherzo conventions. This formal structure allows for extended thematic development and heightened dramatic contrast, demanding from performers both technical precision and interpretive maturity.

Comparative Performance: Analysis. The study analyzed professional recordings by three internationally renowned pianists, Claudio Arrau, Martha Argerich, and Li Yundi, each offering a distinct approach shaped by individual artistry, cultural background, and interpretive philosophy.

Claudio Arrau: Demonstrates a calm, stable, and highly disciplined interpretation. His tempo remains consistent with the score, and his rhythmic control is rigorous yet infused with subtle romantic color. Every musical idea is carefully considered, resulting in a unified and logically coherent performance that closely aligns with Chopin's original intentions.

Martha Argerich: Known as the "High Priestess of Music," Argerich delivers a bold and romantic performance characterized by passionate intensity and poetic introspection. Her technical command is exceptional, with a shimmering tone, delicate melodic control, and extensive use of rubato to shape phrases expressively. Her interpretation emphasizes spontaneity and dynamic contrasts, creating a vivid and emotionally charged musical experience.

Li Yundi: Hailed by Western media as "the successor to the Romantic piano master," Li offers a fresh and balanced interpretation that blends lyrical sensitivity with technical precision. His playing captures both the dramatic tension and lyrical elegance of the work, presenting a stylistically authentic yet modern Romantic performance. His control of rubato and phrasing reflects a nuanced understanding of Chopin's stylistic requirements.

Identification of Core Technical Feature: Rubato Across all three interpretations, rubato emerged as a defining stylistic and technical element. Chopin used rubato deliberately and with restraint, often balancing a steady left-hand pulse with flexible right-hand phrasing. This approach creates a subtle rhythmic tension that enriches the musical texture. Chopin himself described rubato as "stolen time that must be returned," emphasizing natural phrasing and structural balance over excessive rhythmic distortion.

Pedagogical Implications The comparative analysis demonstrates that different interpretive choices, whether emphasizing fidelity to the score, expressive freedom, or a balance of lyricism and drama, can each produce compelling performances of Scherzo No. 2. For students, engaging with such. Exposure to interpretive diversity broadens their stylistic awareness. Practical models for applying rubato and dynamic shaping. Opportunities for critical listening and reflective performance practice. By incorporating this approach into piano instruction, educators can help students bridge the gap between technical mastery and expressive

communication, developing performers who are not only technically proficient but also artistically insightful.

### Conclusion

This study was designed with two primary objectives:

1. To analyze the piano playing techniques employed in Chopin's Scherzo No. 2, and
2. To enhance the piano practice skills of third-year students at Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts through the application of comparative performance analysis.

Regarding Objective 1: Analysis of Piano Playing Techniques. The in-depth examination of Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31, composed in 1837, revealed a work of exceptional structural, technical, and expressive complexity. Built upon a relatively free sonata form with four distinct sections (exposition, development, recapitulation, coda), the piece blends lyrical melodies, dramatic contrasts, and virtuosic passages. The findings identify rubato as a central stylistic and technical feature in performing this work. Chopin's use of rubato requires a delicate balance: maintaining rhythmic stability in the left hand while allowing expressive elasticity in the right hand.

The comparative analysis of performances by Claudio Arrau, Martha Argerich, and Li Yundi demonstrated that while technical accuracy is essential, the interpretive space within Scherzo No. 2 allows for highly individual artistic expression. Arrau's performance emphasized fidelity to the score, rhythmic precision, and structural clarity; Argerich showcased bold dynamic contrasts, expressive spontaneity, and poetic introspection; Li Yundi achieved a synthesis of lyrical sensitivity and technical brilliance, reflecting a modern Romantic aesthetic. These diverse approaches highlight the multifaceted technical and interpretive challenges inherent in the work and provide rich pedagogical models for advanced piano study.

Regarding Objective 2: Enhancement of Piano Practice Skills From a pedagogical perspective, the application of comparative listening, contextual study, and expert guidance yielded measurable benefits for student learning. Students developed heightened awareness of stylistic nuance, improved rubato control, and greater flexibility in shaping phrasing and dynamics. The exposure to multiple interpretive models encouraged reflective learning, enabling students to critically assess professional performances and incorporate stylistic elements into their interpretations.

Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of connecting technical mastery with expressive communication. Students began to view technique not merely as a mechanical skill but as a means of shaping musical narratives. By combining historical knowledge, technical drills, and interpretive exploration, learners cultivated a deeper artistic identity and performance maturity appropriate for upper-level undergraduate training.

Conclusion: The research confirms that performance-based comparative analysis—when integrated into higher piano education—serves as an effective teaching model for bridging the gap between technical proficiency and artistic interpretation. The approach encourages critical listening, stylistic adaptability, and interpretive independence, preparing students to meet the diverse demands of both academic and professional performance contexts. In a broader sense, the outcomes of this study suggest that studying master performances of canonical works like Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 not only enhances technical and interpretive skills but also fosters a lifelong artistic sensibility. By immersing students in an environment that values historical awareness, analytical thinking, and expressive freedom, music educators can cultivate performers who are both technically accomplished and artistically compelling.

### Discussion

Through a detailed analysis of Chopin's Second Scherzo, a deeper understanding was achieved regarding the composer's musical language, stylistic traits, and the interpretive flexibility inherent in Romantic piano literature. The research emphasized that musical interpretation is not a mechanical replication of the score but a dynamic interaction between the composer's intent and the performer's artistic expression.

The comparative study of different pianists revealed the breadth of expressive possibilities and underscored the importance of developing a personal interpretive voice. Students must be encouraged not only to master technical accuracy but also to engage deeply with the emotional and cultural context of the works they study. This includes developing sensitivity to tone, phrasing, tempo, nuance, and stylistic authenticity. Music is not static; it is a living art form shaped by both tradition and innovation. The performances analyzed in this study demonstrated how individuality, creativity, and scholarly understanding converge to bring music to life. Therefore, piano pedagogy should embrace this dual emphasis, cultivating solid technical foundations while promoting interpretive freedom and emotional engagement.



Zhu (2024, p. 14) emphasizes that its strong individuality and emotional expression characterize the music of the Romantic period. This stylistic orientation often challenges the rigid boundaries of classical rationality by exploring fluid and comprehensive musical forms. While Romantic works may appear to defy traditional structures, they usually embody stable formal elements that reflect common patterns of human auditory aesthetic perception. Using Chopin as a representative Romantic composer, this article explores the rationality within the structure of his compositions to better understand the shared laws of auditory aesthetics inherent in his work.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the piano education curriculum at the School of Art Education, Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts:

#### **Suggestions for Future Research**

1. Future research may explore other works within Chopin's scherzo series (Nos. 1, 3, and 4) or compare Chopin's rubato techniques with those of other Romantic composers such as Liszt or Schumann to gain broader pedagogical insights.
2. Further studies could investigate how pianists from different cultural or pedagogical backgrounds interpret Chopin differently, especially in terms of rubato, tempo variation, and phrasing, providing insight into global performance practices.
3. Future research could assess the impact of AI-assisted or app-based feedback tools on students' ability to understand and control tempo rubato and dynamic expression.

#### **Recommendations for Practical Application**

1. The findings of this study can be integrated into undergraduate and graduate piano pedagogy programs, especially in modules related to Romantic performance practices, stylistic analysis, and expressive interpretation.
2. Piano instructors can incorporate the comparative listening approach into masterclasses or studio lessons by encouraging students to analyze and reflect on professional recordings before interpreting the piece themselves.
3. Workshops and training programs for piano educators can use the rubato-analysis framework developed in this study to enhance their ability to teach Romantic repertoire with both technical accuracy and expressive depth.

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