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**CHOPIN'S MUSIC: UNDERSTANDING  
AND NEW INSIGHT INTO ITS CONTENT  
(THE 210th ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE COMPOSER'S BIRTH)**

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The purpose of the article is to consider the degree of music theory development on the interpreting issue of F. Chopin works in the context of understanding the melody semantics in his music; to provide theory base on methods for studying the emotional subtext of works by a comparison of melodies with musical rhetoric and sacred symbolism. Research methodology. The defining methodological principle was the method of analysing the construction of melodies through traditional musical symbols, as well as their texture for understanding the psychological states that music conveys. The method of systematisation and generalisation of theoretical and empirical data was used to justify the principle of reading musical rhetorical figures. The method of selecting and interpreting musical material was also used for an article's topic presentation. The scientific novelty is the profound inquiry of the nature of melodic designs in the works of F. Chopin based on an analysis of the musical rhetoric of its foundation for deeper insight and analysis of the musical works of the outstanding composer. Conclusions. Analysis of thematic material semantics allows us to open a new layer of study of F. Chopin's work. Understanding of musical rhetoric based on sacred symbolism contributes to highly professional performing interpretation of piano works. The methods proposed by the author of the article to compare and study the relationship of musical rhetorical symbols with the construction of melodies and rhythmic figures in the works of F. Chopin are the key to understanding the subtext of the emotional state of his music and hidden content. The characterisation and description of expressive means in terms of musical texture complement the range of techniques and methods that determine the composer's style and artistic image of the works proposed for analysis.

*Keywords:* F. Chopin; music; musical rhetoric; sacred symbolism; texture; semantics; chants; melody; interpretation

### Introduction

For over 200 years, Chopin's music belongs to the favourite repertoire of pianists all over the world. Interest in the works of the great Polish composer has increased, mainly thanks to the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition organised by the teacher and pianist Jerzy Żurawlew. The competition has been held since 1927 and was dedicated exclusively to the music of F. Chopin. Today, there is hardly a country where his music does not sound.

Many articles and books have been devoted to Chopin. Various facts of the composer's biography, questions about his life and work were studied, and performance recommendations for the interpretation of many works were offered. The long list of literature on Chopin includes such names of outstanding musicians as F. Liszt (1956), J. Milshtein (1987). Naturally, depending on the performer's point of view, understanding and reading of his music changed over time.

The scientific novelty of this study is that it opens up a new insight into the content of Chopin's music, which is based on the decoding of certain musical symbols that have roots in sacred melodies. Understanding the meanings of the musical rhetoric of these symbols opens up new research fields about this great composer. Such authors as Yu. N. Tiulin (1968) already addressed the content of Chopin's music. However, research was focused on literary works. New research directions of Chopin's works are aimed at both composer's deep religiosity, about which M. Szulc (1986) writes, and inspiration by J. S. Bach.

Author's scientific research in the direction of studying melodies of Chopin works (Kasianenko, 1999; 2000; 2003; 2012; 2014), as well as master classes and reports at international conferences confirm the growing interest in the subject since the method of studying the composer's work helps to reveal semantics that was previously overlooked. In particular, the use of chant themes with specific text, musical rhetorical figures,

and sacred symbols enriches the notion of the content of Chopin's music, which means it helps in the creative search for interpretation and pedagogical work. In this article, the author is proposing to analyse some of Fryderyk Chopin's works in terms of deciphering sacred symbolism of melodies and thematic constructions.

### The purpose of the article

The purpose of the article is to expand the sphere of research in the field of music theory, as well as to consider the problem of interpreting the works of F. Chopin in the context of a more accurate understanding of the semantics in the melodies of his works. Coverage of this issue is based on decoding and studying the emotional subtext of the works, as well as comparing melodies with musical rhetoric and sacred symbolism.

The methodological basis of the author's work is the principle of analysing the construction of melodies following traditional musical symbols, as well as their texture for understanding the psychological states that music transmits. Method of systematisation and generalisation of theoretical and empirical data was used to justify the principle of reading musical rhetorical figures, sacred symbols, and also elements of chants. Method of selecting and interpreting musical material was also used to present the topic of the article visually.

### Main research material

Nineteenth-century performers were attracted to Chopin's works mostly for its extraordinary melodiousness; namely the works of secular genres - nocturnes, mazurkas, waltzes, polonaises, etc. Ever so increasing level of performing skills allowed pianists to include in their repertoires more virtuous works of Chopin, such as scherzos, ballades and etudes eventually.

With the growth of performed repertoire interpretation of Chopin's vastly diverse works may be categorised in certain directions. For example, the influence of traditions developed in the 19th century's Parisian aristocratic salons. In this case, the exquisite elegance of Chopin's music is emphasised. Another direction focuses on nostalgic and patriotic moods of the composer, who lived away from his native land, Poland.

The new view of the content of Chopin's music discloses hidden meanings, previously overlooked. These discoveries are related to deep religiousness of the composer. This area of perception of the composer wasn't investigated earlier. Meanwhile, Fryderyk was born in the family of believers, so religious philosophy was instilled in him from an early age. It is widely known that since childhood Chopin admired music by J. S. Bach. It is no surprise that works by the great cantor are of colossal influence on Chopin's compositions. This influence can be seen in widely used rhetoric musical figures, sacral symbols and even quotes from church chants in his works: Gregorian Chants, Protestant Chorales, Songs. For example, the motive of one of the chants, "Out of deep anguish I call You", is often used by Chopin at the most critical moments of the musical dramaturgy.

One of the proposed works is Ballad No. 2 in F Major, Op. 38 (Fig. 1), which was written by the composer under the influence of the ballad by Adam Mickiewicz. One seems to hear in the music of the Ballade a certain display of the content of the poem "Świtezianka": "Who is the lad boy so comely and young, who is the maid at his side, who walk by the Świtez blue waters among the moonbeams that shine on its tide. A basket of raspberries she holds out; he gives her a wreath for her hair; the lad is her lover, and she is his sweetheart fair."



Figure 1. F. Chopin Ballade No. 2 in F Major Op. 38 (beginning)

In music, interrogative intonations are also heard, which correspond to the content of a literary work: "But will you be faithful to me?". We can also hear in music the requirement to observe the oath: "For woe to the man who shall break it, both while he lives and forevermore". A storm and tragedy are read in music: "On a sudden, the winds through the deepwood spread and the waters seethe and rise" (Fig. 2):



Figure 2. F. Chopin Ballade No. 2 in F Major Op. 38 (fragment)

“Through its open jaws as the seas divide: so the youth and the maiden drown.” The end of Chopin’s Ballade almost exactly depicts the finale of a poetic narrative: “And still when the lake waters foam and roar, and still in the moon’s pale light, two shadows come flitting along the shore: the youth and the maiden bright” (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. F. Chopin Ballade No. 2 in F Major Op. 38 (ending)

Of course, it would be a mistake to take Chopin’s music literally. But those verses could be heard in this music. In fact, of the four Ballads that Chopin wrote, this particular ballad is very clear in terms of content. Other pieces of the same name do not reveal their secrets to the end. Maybe that’s why Ballad No. 2 is not accidentally dedicated to Robert Schumann. It was R. Schumann who was very fond of giving names to his works. Among others, such titles as “Fear,” “The child falls asleep,” or “Coquette,” would immediately cause certain emotional associations. Chopin never offered names that would indicate the content of his music. It applies all the more to works that are not directly related to literature, such compositions as Sonatas, Preludes, Etudes, etc.

It turns out, however, that even Chopin’s “understandable” music, like Ballad No. 2, has secrets that are not noticeable at first glance. Therefore, the author will focus mainly on one of the essential layers of Fryderyk Chopin’s music, which is associated with the hidden meanings of his compositions, the semantics of a melody. The author is shedding light at Chopin’s use of sacred subject matter, and the so-called musical rhetoric figures, which don’t lie on the surface but are often hidden in different layers of the texture. Chopin, as a Romantic composer, often used texture to intensify the emotional expression of music. That texture sometimes carried a symbolic and sacred meaning of the musical language.

Therefore, in order to uncover the essence of what is being discussed, we must explore in more detail the fact that Chopin was a deeply religious person. His religiosity was most clearly visible in the last moments of his life, when, weakened due to his illness, Chopin wanted to have a priest at his deathbed. One of the first Chopin’s biographers, Szulc, in his monograph, first published in 1873, gives detailed descriptions in separate chapters on the illness and death of the composer (Szulc, 1986, pp. 134-148). Among diverse traits making up the portrait of his personality, we can find a characteristic statement of Szulc referring to Chopin’s works: “Many places show so much religious solemnity, such deeply emanating faith, as have few other new composers” (Szulc, 1986, p. 156). It was the religion that played a significant role in shaping the personality of the composer, which was mainly reflected in his works.

It is necessary to point out the importance of the influence on Chopin from his first teacher, Wojciech Żywny. Being a passionate admirer of Bach’s works, he promoted a love of this music for his pupil. Seeds sown in the young soul couldn’t be squandered in the future. Bach’s music became one of the essential musical experiences for young Fryderyk Chopin, and from that time invariably to the end of his life, it seemed to have served him as a guiding light.

To understand how Bach’s music influenced Chopin’s work, it’s necessary to say a few words about Bach’s music. It is known that many instrumental works by Johann Sebastian Bach have a deep sacred meaning that does not lie on the surface but can be revealed using symbolic chant motives, the so-called characteristic repetitions of the poetic structure. Most of them were established in the texts of church choirs, as the motives that most clearly express emotions. Repetitiveness and similarity in the texts corresponding to music provided a standard, which in the baroque period formed a lasting lexicon of the language of symbols that were understandable to musicians and listeners of the Baroque. Definite musical expressions with established semantic meanings improved communication through instrumental music; therefore, by an analogy to oratorian art, they were named musical rhetorical figures (Druskin,1972).

It seems necessary to conduct a comparative analysis of the themes of Bach and Chopin.

It is known that sometimes Bach did not use the beginning of the chant melody, but a fragment corresponding to a specific text. For example, you may notice that for him the melody from the chant „Was mein Gott will, das g’scheh allzeit” (What my God will, be done always), which coincides with the words: „will, das g’scheh allzeit” (be done always) (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Fragment of Chorale „Was mein Gott will, das g’scheh allzeit” (Nosina, 1993, p. 24).

The implementation of this topic can be found in many themes of Bach’s works. For instance (Fig. 5):



Figure 5. J.S.Bach Invention in C Major; WTK Book II Fugue in F # Major (fragments)

And it turns out that Chopin’s concerto in E minor, begins precisely with this motive (Fig. 6):



Figure 6. F. Chopin Concerto No. 1 in E Minor Op. 11 (beginning)

A peculiar dialogue between Bach and Chopin continues in the second central theme of the 1st part of the Concerto in E minor. This melody reminds the beginning of the fugue motive in C minor of J.S. Bach (Fig. 7, 8):



Figure 7. F. Chopin Concerto No. 1 in E Minor Op. 11 (fragment)



Figure 8. J.S. Bach WTK Book I Fugue in C Minor (fragment)

Both themes are based on the intonations of the chant “Vater unser im Himmelreich” (Our Father in Heaven) (Fig. 9):



Figure 9. (Berchenko, 1993, p. 119)

In the works of Chopin, one can often spot certain musical symbols of sacred meaning, used by Bach. For example, the ‘crying’ chant theme, four descending pitches, or tetrachord, is very often found in the works of the Polish composer. As well as four ‘crossed’ pitches, the musical gesture symbolising the cross (graphically, this theme resembles the cross: if the 1st and 4th sounds are connected, a horizontal line of the cross is formed, and if the 2nd and 3rd sounds are connected, a vertical line of the cross is formed) (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. F. Chopin Nocturne in F Minor Op. 55 # 1 (beginning); Prelude in E Minor Op. 28 (fragment)

All these motives are significant to Chopin, who used them to enhance the emotional impact of music. Sometimes, both motives are used side by side and complement each other (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. F. Chopin Prelude in C # Minor Op. 45 (beginning)

Among all the works of Chopin, Prelude is one of the genres popular during the Baroque period. Being a miniature, it has the ability to concentrate emotions and portray immediate impressions. In his preludes, Chopin conveys not only an unusual musical thought but also unique design of this thought. Preludes can be viewed as a kind of prism, through which one can see the full world of Fryderyk Chopin. So it is important to focus on the preludes in more detail. Through these miniatures, as through drops of water, the entire array of Chopin's work can be seen.

Undoubtedly, the idea of creating a cycle of preludes in all the major and minor keys came to Chopin's mind under the influence of Bach's Preludes. According to the Bach tradition, in his Preludes, Chopin widely

uses many musical rhetorical figures of the Baroque period: *catabasis*, *anabasis*, *suspiratio*, *exclamatio*, *aposiopesis*, *noema* and others (Zakharova, 1983, p. 75).

Some preludes of Chopin also reveal similarities with chant themes, which symbolise certain meanings. One of these cases very convincingly indicates that Chopin used the sacred symbol to enhance the musical semantics of his works. For example, the second episode in the Prelude in D flat Major, Opus 28, has themes based on both versions of the chant “Aus tiefer schrei ich zu dir” (Out of deep anguish I call You) (Fig. 12).



Figure 12. Two versions of the chant (Berchenko, 1993, p. 120)

Bach always used both chant themes in the same work. Following this tradition, Chopin also quotes both themes, however in a romantic style.

For each version of the theme from this chant, Chopin uses different expressive techniques of texture. Emotional state is underlined in music by using chant themes. This way “out of deep anguish” is portrayed with the usage of low register, where the melody in the bass is based on one version of the chant. “I call You” can be heard in the vibrant dynamics of octaves, representing the second version of the chant. It should be noted that the Polish translation forms the text of the chorale in the reverse order: „Z głębokiej potrzeby (out of deep anguish) wołam do Ciebie (I call You)”. Therefore, it is precisely this sequence of the meaning of the text that is conveyed by the composer in music (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. F. Chopin Prelude in D flat Major Op. 28 (fragments)

In this way semantics or content of a musical piece, move music closer to the verbal language.

If we return to the ballad, we will see that, in addition to the vivid musical “description” of the plot of Mickiewicz’s poem, sacred musical symbols are hidden in the melodies. They enhance the emotional impact on the listener and are a kind of musical prophecy of what will happen in the plot finale. At first, it can be noticed inside the serene melody at the beginning of the ballad, namely the downward tetrachord, mentioned above, as the theme of “crying” (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. F. Chopin Ballade No. 2 in F Major Op. 38 (fragment)

In this example, it almost does not attract attention. But at the tip of a climax, its appearance in large lengths becomes an important dramatic phenomenon. It is especially important because later on, we will recognise an equally important sacred symbol – the theme of the cross (Fig. 15).



Figure 15. F. Chopin Ballade No. 2 in F Major Op. 38 (fragment)

The theme of “crying” is also heard in a series of trills that also seem to depict bubbling waters that killed the heroes of Mickiewicz’s poem. And tremolo in lower voices mimics the beginning of Dies Irae (lat., Lit. “the Day of Wrath”, meaning the Day of the Last Judgment) is a sequence in the Catholic Mass, one of the most popular Gregorian chants to this day (Fig. 16).



Figure 16. F. Chopin Ballade No. 2 in F Major Op. 38 (fragment)

These and other melodic sacred symbols complement the textured design of the music.

Preludes Op. 28 are vivid evidence of the composer’s boundless imagination in the ability to formalise musical ideas. Therefore, particular attention is drawn to the works (or fragments of works), in which the texture, as a complement to musical thought, is practically absent. The Prelude in A Minor is an example of a concentration of religious symbols where the outline of the cross is read in the accompaniment architecture. In the original version of the musical notation, the lines mentioned above were marked with separate voices (see “Commentary” of this Prelude in the editor of I. J. Paderewski: Chopin, 1976, p. 65). Intonations of the old sequence “Dies Irae” sound in the melody of the horizontal line of the cross (Fig. 17).

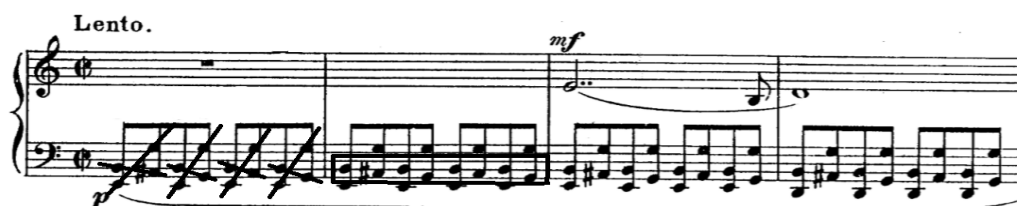


Figure 17. F. Chopin Prelude in A Minor Op. 28 (beginning)

The rhythm of the funeral march, as well as the musical-rhetorical figure of *aposiopesis* (sudden breaking the music off), is a sacred symbol portraying death. Shortly after, the ripple of accompaniment disappears, giving place to the lone voice of a recitative melody. The Prelude ends with choral chords (Fig. 18).



Figure 18. F. Chopin Prelude in A Minor Op. 28 (ending)

This Prelude is unique in its parameters. It is interesting that Szulc, in his book, apart from the life and works of Chopin, also provides his own advice toward the interpretation of pieces. Maybe at that time, there was still a need for popularisation of Chopin. Interestingly, Prelude in A minor has a short notice: “Nie grac, bo dziwaczne” (ought not to be played; as it is bizarre). Now we understand why this piece seemed so strange to Schultz. It turns out that in this Prelude instead of accompaniment, Chopin actually builds a cross simply written in the text. As we have shown, the accompaniment consists of a broad tenth and very narrow motive in the middle, which resembles the Dies Irae motive. Together they create a strange sound. For listeners of the 19th century, this is just a dissonance. But that was on purpose. Chopin did not use to try creating beautiful music in this Prelude. The textured “skeleton” and the abundance of tragic sacred symbols suggests that in this work, the composer creates a terrible image – the image of death.

Returning to the musical portrait of Chopin, it should also be noted that for him semantic meanings of sound were most important directives in music. Sound and its meaning were inseparable for Chopin. Recall a few quotes from his manuscript Methodology: “The word was born from the sound. Sound existed before the word. A word is a kind of sound. Using sounds, a person creates music.” The composer emphasised semantic meanings of sound: “The expression of our thoughts using sounds – the manifestation of our emotions using sounds” (Mycielski, 1968, p. 3).

It can be suggested that Chopin treated musical language as verbal. As if it came from the same matter – sound and emotions. “His genius was full of secret harmony of nature, expressed by equally sublime creations of his musical thoughts, and not by the slave repetition of sounds coming from the outside world” (Tomaszewski, 2003, p. 66). Being very private person by nature, Chopin, as George Sand noted, “spoke only to his piano” (Tomaszewski, 2003, p. 105). So, music for Chopin was a natural way of expressing himself in a particular semantic form.

### Conclusions

Author’s interpretation of musical rhetorical figures and sacred symbols is the key to a deeper understanding of the meaning of Chopin’s music and its content. Using sacred melodies and rhythms as musical words, Chopin accurately expressed what he wanted to say, and the choice of compositional methods indicates that he tried to convey his idea as clearly as possible. Operating with melodies and rhythms as musical “words”, Chopin emphasised what he wanted to say precisely. A selection of musical symbolic gestures proves that he wanted to convey his thoughts as consistently as possible. By analogy with the works of J.S. Bach, Chopin’s music is full of traditional symbols. It is often built on chants and is associated with rhetorical musical figures that have universal, timeless and non-standard semantic meanings.

Musical work for Chopin was a critical way of expression. It was in sound, in musical intonation, that the composer sought such a degree of artistic expression, which is sometimes unattainable for the verbal language.

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**РОЗУМІННЯ МУЗИКИ ШОПЕНА  
І НОВИЙ ПОГЛЯД НА ЇЇ ЗМІСТ  
(З НАГОДИ 210-Ї РІЧНИЦІ З ДНЯ  
НАРОДЖЕННЯ КОМПОЗИТОРА)**

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Мета статті – розглянути стан освітлення в теорії музики проблеми інтерпретації творів Ф. Шопена в контексті розуміння семантики мелодій його музики; теоретично обґрунтувати методи вивчення емоційного підтексту творів на основі зіставлення мелодій з музичної риторикою і сакральною символікою. Методологія дослідження. Визначальним методологічним принципом став метод аналізу побудови мелодій відповідно до традиційних музичних символів, а також їх фактурне оформлення для розуміння психологічних станів, які передає музика. Метод систематизації та узагальнення теоретичних і емпіричних даних застосовувався для обґрунтування принципу прочитання музично-риторичних фігур. Також був використаний метод відбору та інтерпретації музичного матеріалу для наочної презентації теми статті. Наукова новизна полягає в дослідженні природи походження малюнка мелодій в творах Ф. Шопена на базі аналізу музичної риторики його основи для більш поглибленого розуміння і інтерпретації музичних творів видатного композитора. Висновки. Аналіз семантики тематичного матеріалу дозволяє відкрити новий пласт вивчення творчості Ф. Шопена. Розуміння музичної риторики на основі сакральної символіки сприяє високопрофесійній роботі над виконавської інтерпретацією фортепіанних творів. Запропоновані автором статті методи зіставлення і вивчення взаємозв'язку музично-риторичних символів з побудовою мелодій і ритмічних фігур в творах Ф. Шопена – це ключ до розуміння підтексту емоційного стану його музики і прихованого в ній змісту. Характеристика та опис виразних засобів в ракурсі музичної фактури доповнюють спектр прийомів і методів, які визначають композиторський стиль і художній образ запропонованих для аналізу творів.

*Ключові слова:* Ф. Шопен; музика; музична риторика; сакральна символіка; фактура; семантика; хорал; мелодія; інтерпретація

**ПОНИМАНИЕ МУЗЫКИ ШОПЕНА  
И НОВЫЙ ВЗГЛЯД НА ЕЕ  
СОДЕРЖАНИЕ (ПО СЛУЧАЮ  
210-ЛЕТИЯ СО ДНЯ РОЖДЕНИЯ  
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Цель статьи – рассмотреть состояние освещения в теории музыки проблемы интерпретации произведений Ф. Шопена в контексте понимания семантики мелодий его произведений; теоретически обосновать методы изучения эмоционального подтекста произведений на базе сопоставления мелодий с музыкальной риторикой и сакральной символикой. Методология исследования. Определяющим методологическим принципом стал метод

анализа построения мелодий в соответствии с традиционными музыкальными символами, а также их фактурное оформление для понимания психологических состояний, которые передает музыка. Метод систематизации и обобщения теоретических и эмпирических данных применялся для обоснования принципа прочтения музыкально-риторических фигур. Также был использован метод отбора и интерпретации музыкального материала для наглядной презентации темы статьи. Научная новизна заключается в углубленном исследовании природы мелодического рисунка в произведениях Ф. Шопена на базе анализа музыкальной риторики его основы для более углубленного понимания и анализа музыкальных произведений выдающегося композитора. Выводы. Анализ семантики тематического материала позволяет открыть новый пласт изучения творчества Ф. Шопена. Понимание музыкальной риторики на основе сакральной символики способствует высокопрофессиональной работе над исполнительской интерпретацией фортепианных произведений. Предложенные автором статьи методы сопоставления и изучения взаимосвязи музыкально-риторических символов с построением мелодий и ритмических фигур в произведениях Ф. Шопена – это ключ к пониманию подтекста эмоционального состояния его музыки и скрытого в ней содержания. Характеристика и описание выразительных средств в ракурсе музыкальной фактуры дополняют спектр приемов и методов, которые определяют композиторский стиль и художественный образ предложенных для анализа произведений.

*Ключевые слова:* Ф. Шопен; музыка; музыкальная риторика; сакральная символика; фактура; семантика; хорал; мелодия; интерпретация