

Chopin's Barcarolle: an Imaginative Journey Through the Venetian Waters

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Barcarolles originated as Venetian folk songs sung by gondoliers and gradually made their way into art music in the 17th century. In the 1800s, *Barcarolles* reached their peak in European opera, with Jacques Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* being a notable example. The first documented transform of *Barcarolles* into piano solos was Felix Mendelssohn's *Venezianische Gondellieder*, and over the next few decades, more than 200 piano solo *Barcarolles* were composed.

Surprisingly, Frédéric Chopin, one of the most prominent figures in 18th century music history, only ever wrote one *Barcarolle*: *Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op.60*. It stands out due to its length (significantly longer), use of 12/8 time signature (against traditional 6/8), and unique tonal colors. In fact, Chopin has never visited Venice. He had but a fleeting encounter with Italian landscapes and atmosphere on a boat trip from Marseilles to Genoa.¹ Nevertheless, his *Barcarolle* demonstrates his artistic maturity and exceptional creative skill, and is considered one of the most important works from his later period.

Chopin composed the *Barcarolle Op.60* during a time of romantic troubles and declining health, as well as creative block. In the summer of 1846, he was engulfed by a depressive mood, where in a letter to his friend Auguste Franchomme he wrote "I am doing my utmost to work but have no success."² Despite the adversarial

¹"*Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, Op. 60*," *The Fryderyk Chopin Institute*, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://chopin2020.pl/en/compositions/32/Barcarolle-in-f-sharp-major-op.-60>.

²Frédéric Chopin, *Barcarolle Fis-dur op. 60*, ed. Ewald Zimmermann (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1985), 3.

situations, Chopin did manage to compose three new works during that summer, one of which is Barcarolle Op.60. Some scholars believe that in composing the Barcarolle, Chopin found a way to relieve his sadness and express his longing for the long overdue Italian and Mediterranean lightness.³

Op.60's opening is a surprising three-measure gesture. It starts with a low C# octave, followed by a brief pause, and a high G# minor first inversion. Once the color has been set, three voice lines emerge, spiraling downward, creating various dissonances with thirds, fourths, fifths, and sevenths. The swift shifts in tonal color create an impressionistic work, inviting the audience into a fanciful and colorful world. Two measures later, the tonicity settles down, and the voices come to a halt at the G# major first inversion. One final rest, followed by two measures of ostinato, the principal melody then appears. Chopin brings the audience onto a gondola in his imaginative Venetian lagoon.

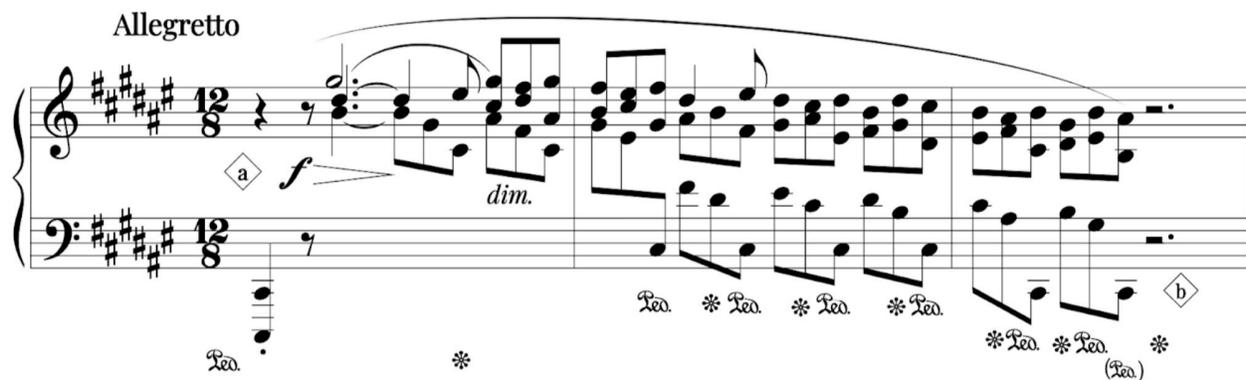


Figure 1: The three-measure introduction

Section A begins on measure 6 and ends on measure 34. In this section, the left hand is an extension of the ostinato in the previous two measures, with the use of eighth and sixteenth notes to vividly depict the rhythm of a gondolier's paddle. The right hand consists of thirds, which are played legato at times to represent a smooth boat ride, and at other times move up and down to represent the boat fluctuating in the waves. Here, Chopin also uses grace notes and rests, making the melody non-uniform, further creating a sense of motion. The theme then digresses into a second one, consisting of quickly moving sixteenth notes of sixths before returning to theme 1. This time, the melody remains largely unchanged, but Chopin replaces the songful melody of thirds by much more virtuosic sixteenth notes and tremolo of thirds. The crescendos are now done at a greater extent, the left hand's first beat of each measure further lowered by one octave, and chord progressions more complex. The piece began with a

³Frédéric Chopin, *Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, Op. 60*, ed. Jan Ekier, trans. Piotr Bienkowski (Krakow: PWM Edition, 2016), 5.

gondola drifting along the tides, but through these harmonic developments, it has evolved into a joyous scene with everyone on the boat singing and cheering.

Figure 2: First theme of section A. (i) ostinato LH, (ii) legato RH thirds, (iii) RH more movement.

Figure 3: Re-appearance of the first theme. (i) additional tremolo, single-note and thirds, (ii) sixteenth notes of thirds.

In Section B, Chopin shifts the mood from liveliness to tranquility as night falls. The repeating slurs of the left hand, consisting of an eighth note followed by a quarter note, and the down-up-down shaped alto line of the right hand create the feeling of a simple triple meter, dividing each measure of 8/12 into four measures of 8/3. This gives the impression of the soft waves gently hitting the gondola. The ascending sixteenth note ornaments at the end of each phrase introduce a sense of imagination, as if a fish has jumped out of the water, creating ripples that can be heard echoing around the peaceful boat. Despite the calmness, the melody remains warm, conveyed through the use of major keys. As the section progresses, Chopin injects more energy to the music, with the left hand now playing eighth notes grouped in threes and the right hand covering more notes in a higher register. The tranquility of the night is deepened, with the stars shining brightly above and numerous boats adorned with lights scattered across the ocean.

The nighttime contemplation comes to an end when Chopin moves back to the lower registers at measure 72, the beginning of the *meno mosso* section. While the top voice line remains simple and calm, the underlying chords become progressively darker with each passing measure, conveying Chopin's inner struggles, even within his imaginative world. But when darkness dissipates, Chopin unveils his most magical and beautiful episode yet: the *dolce sfogato*, which means to pour out emotion or more poetically, open your heart. The high register line, mysterious and ethereal, whispers softly and is joined by the soft ascending arpeggios from far below. The graceful,

unencumbered passage flows effortlessly and expressively, like a shooting star gliding among the sea of stars. The musical colors are light and airy, evoking a sense of weightlessness and timelessness, as if this heavenly sense transcends space and time. In these four measures, Chopin is free of real-life struggles and has let out of his innermost, tender, yet effusive emotions, as he creates a sense of pure joy and elation that may be considered the pinnacle of romanticism.

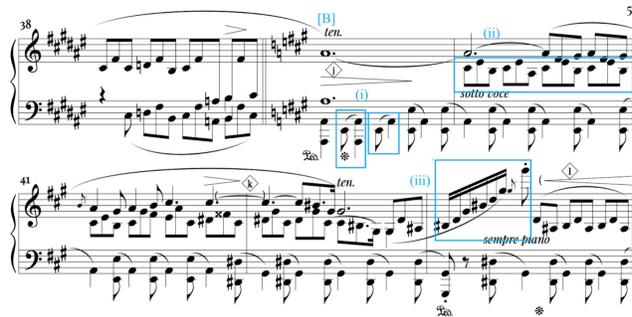
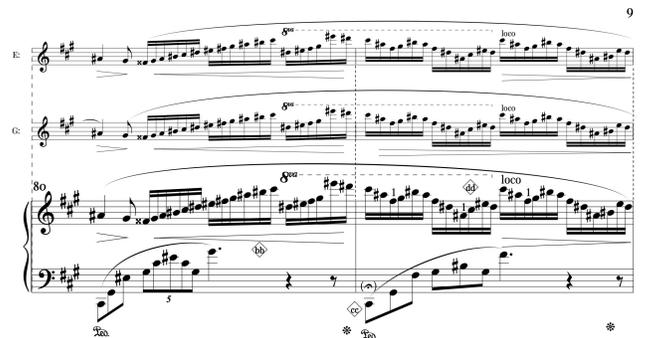
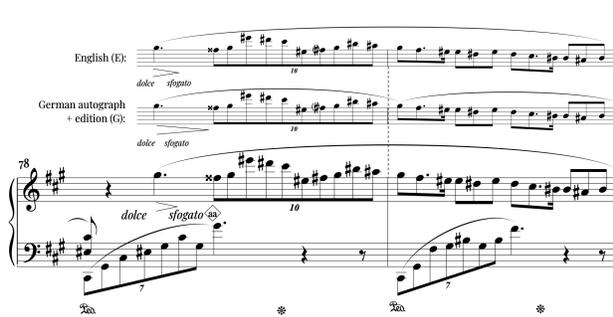


Figure 4: First theme of section B. (i) LH short slurs representing waves, (ii) RH alto repeating patterns, (iii) ascending 16ths at end of phrase.



Figure 5: Second theme of section B, starting from *poco più mosso*.



Figures 6 & 7: the four measures of *dolce sfogato*.

As the shooting star disappears from sight, Chopin pushes the Barcarolle into a frenzied recapitulation, where the dynamics, emotion, and intensity are all heightened to an unprecedented level. The left hand, previously a steady ostinato, now bursts into triumphant octaves, creating a grand symphonic effect. The right hand, once a gentle and tender vocal duet, is now of bigger chords, displaying an irresistible force. The emotional intensity continues to surge, foreshadowing Chopin's step-by-step elevation of the piece to its absolute climax. In this moment of ecstasy, Chopin is taking his one last chance pouring out his most sincere, most effusive emotions.

Figure 8: The grand return of the first theme; LH augmented into octaves, and RH more notes.

Figure 9: Second theme of recap, climax of the whole piece, starting from *più mosso*.

But like all good things, the ecstasy must come to an end. When the frenzy fades and the coda makes its entrance, the songful melody continues. In a series of colorful modulations, the dynamic begins to decrease and the chords descend. It feels like Chopin is reluctant to let go of the imaginary world he has created through his music. Perhaps he wishes to linger in this utopian universe, where everything is beautiful, free, and unencumbered by reality. However, the inevitability of time and the limitations of human emotion make it impossible to stay there forever. Chopin tries to reignite the ecstatic moment with four consecutive ascending tremolos, but it only works momentarily. After four more measures, bridged by a stunning tritone, the music enters its final cadenza, signaling the imminent end of this imaginative journey.

Figure 10: Coda. (i) start of coda, (ii) four consecutive tremolo attempting to bring the dynamic back up.

In the cadenza, the right hand launches into a sequence of vibrant arpeggios, accompanied by a steady base line from the left hand. Chopin once again appeals to his impressionistic, near-atonal style, evoking the surreal colors of his imaginative world. The arpeggios lead to a resolution in the tonic, and then followed by a series of short phrases that harken back to the rhythmic motion of the gondolier's paddles, just like when the melody first appeared at the beginning. Finally, Chopin introduces a bittersweet melody in the left hand, which is then taken up by the right hand in sweeping arpeggios. After hitting the softest high F#, in merely two measures, the melody cascades down, gaining momentum along the way, and Op.60 ends in four sonorous double octaves. The dreaminess fades away, and the lovers are left to contemplate their experience on the Venetian lagoon. The closing gesture happens so quickly that the audience is also left mesmerized by the poignant and bittersweet passage of the cadenza, as they exit from Chopin's inner world.

Figure 11: First half of cadenza. (i) Chopin once again creates special color, (ii) reappearing phrases reminiscent of gondola paddles.

Figure 12: Second half of cadenza. (iii) a beautiful, bittersweet melody leading to (iv), a cascade of running sixteenths, ending with (v) four sonorous double octaves.

Chopin's Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op.60 is a masterpiece demonstrating his artistic maturity and exceptional creative skill. It revolutionized the genre of Barcarolles, elevating it to a new level in terms of length, musical expressiveness, and compositional complexity. The piece is a rich and sincere reflection of Chopin's musical genius, with moments of gentleness and passion, as well as majestic and powerful passages. The modulations are clear and logical when necessary, yet also whimsical and unexpected, adding to the music's beauty and charm. The warm tones and hints of poignancy throughout the piece make it a truly unforgettable work of art.

In the history of the reception of Chopin's Barcarolle, one hears not a single disparaging voice. May the melody of this beautiful music painting continue to enchant the audiences for generations to come; may the gondola continue swaying on the serene Venetian lagoon; and may Chopin's imaginary lovers continue to bask under the moonlight, lost in their reverie.

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