

**CHANGING CHOPIN:
POSTHUMOUS VARIANTS AND
PERFORMANCE APPROACHES**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to examine Chopin's own style of playing and to trace some of the approaches taken by 19th century pianists in interpreting Chopin. In doing so, the study hopes to challenge our assumptions about the sacrosanct nature of the text, while offering possibilities for performance.

Through examining the accounts of Chopin's playing and teaching as well as the customs that would have been familiar to him, this study offers a glimpse of the practices that is today often neglected or simply relegated to the annals of 'historical performance practice'. Special attention is also given to exploring the aspects of Chopin's style that might pose particular problems of interpretation, such as *rubato*, tempo and pedalling.

In the final analysis, perhaps it is not the early interpreters who represent a 'radical' break from Chopin's aesthetic, but we modern interpreters, with our more rigorous standards and stricter notion of 'fidelity to the score'. As will be demonstrated, it may ironically be by 'changing' Chopin while trying to maintain a certain level of restraint characteristic of the composer that we come closer to the sound world or practices familiar to him.

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1

Introduction

Chopin: The Man behind the Music

The music of Frédéric Chopin is today some of the best loved in the standard repertoire. Yet the performance style of Chopin's music is also arguably one of the most frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. Indeed, it is not uncommon today to hear the required poetic sensitivity degraded into affected sentimentality, or the dramatic, virtuosic episodes reduced to vulgar displays of speed and showmanship. His famous *rubato* is equally often reduced to distorted rhythms and unmotivated 'effects'.

But Chopin's music presents a challenge not only to the modern performer. Even during his lifetime, Chopin was somewhat of an enigma, heard live by relatively few and understood by even fewer. He himself gave no more than thirty public concerts throughout his entire pianistic career, in many of them sharing the stage with other artists. This was hardly surprising given his aversion to public display. Consequently, his style was more suited to the intimate atmosphere of the salon than that of the concert hall.

Even within the liberal performance practices of the 19th century, the notion of 'fidelity to the score' in the case of Chopin is an especially tricky and problematic issue, because he published divergent versions of his works simultaneously in France, England and Germany. To make matters worse, he was also fond of adding variants

and making changes to texts after they had been published, as the accounts and extant copies of various pupils testify. It is hence particularly interesting to examine Chopin's attitude to interpretation in the context of the standards and expectations of his time. This thesis aims to explore what can be discovered of Chopin's own style of playing, and to chronicle some aspects of the posthumous changes introduced into performance practice of his music during the later 19th century.

Chopin as performer

Chopin's contemporaries were unanimous in highlighting the distinctive sense of spontaneity that characterised much of his playing. Numerous accounts of Chopin's performances demonstrate that he himself rarely played his pieces the same way twice. An attendee at his concert in Glasgow on 27 September 1848 noted that:

[On this occasion] he was encored for his well-known Mazurka in B flat (op. 7 no. 1), which he repeated with quite different nuances from those of the first [time].¹

Alfred J. Hipkins, who made Chopin's acquaintance during his visit to London in 1848 and frequently heard him play, maintained that 'Chopin *never* played his own compositions twice alike, but varied each according to the mood of the moment [...]'.² Another similar claim made supposedly by a pupil of Chopin, F.-Henry Peru, reveals the impression that Chopin's playing left on his listeners:

¹ Hadden, 123.

² Hipkins, 7.

[Chopin] never played his works twice with the same expression, and yet the result was always ideally beautiful, thanks to the ever-fresh inspiration, powerful, tender or sorrowful. He could have played the same piece twenty times in succession, and you would still listen with equal fascination.³

All these contemporary accounts therefore suggest that Chopin did not view the score as a fixed entity but as a source of inspiration, capable of catalysing different interpretations.

In fact, Chopin would often improvise ornaments or *fiorituras*, especially in his nocturnes and mazurkas. Koczalski, a pupil of Mikuli (himself a pupil of Chopin), said his teacher told him that ‘When playing his own compositions, Chopin liked here and there to add ornamental variants’.⁴ This practice of improvising ornamental variants to the printed text did not stop at his own music. Mikuli himself revealed that ‘Chopin took particular pleasure in playing... Field’s Nocturnes, to which he would improvise the most beautiful *fiorituras*’.⁵ The pianist Charles Hallé described Chopin’s performance of the Barcarolle op. 60 at his 1848 Paris concert, where instead of increasing the dynamics to reach the climax in the last pages, he played the final return of the opening theme *pianissimo*, thus ignoring the markings in the text. Hallé, for his part, was nearly convinced that this version was preferable to the original!⁶

³ Peru, quoted in Eigeldinger, 55.

⁴ Koczalski, quoted in Eigeldinger, 52.

⁵ Mikuli, quoted in Eigeldinger, 52.

⁶ Hallé and Hallé, 36.

But perhaps we have been over-exaggerating Chopin's interpretative freedom or, more unrealistically, imposing our anachronistic standards on his music. It is worth noting that the interpretative customs of the era permitted a large degree of autonomy anyway.⁷ In other words, Chopin's lack of textual "fidelity" may seem extreme by modern standards, but by the standards of his time, it was perfectly admissible and not uncommon. We can take Liszt as a contrasting case study, for while he and Chopin were exact contemporaries, the two were diametrically opposed in artistic temperament. Compared to Liszt (who certainly was no stranger to taking liberties with the score in his younger heyday at least), Chopin's approach must have appeared very reserved. It is hence worth examining Chopin's opinion of Liszt, for it should shed some light on Chopin's own attitude to interpretation.

Chopin apparently disapproved of the liberties that Liszt took with his music, especially his transcribing tendencies. When asked his opinion of Liszt, he replied:

[Liszt] pulls his chosen star down from the heavens, dresses it up in an ill-tailored garment with ribbons and frills and an enormous wig, and launches this scarecrow upon the world... He is a clever craftsman without a vestige of talent.⁸

Yet Chopin was also known to have admired Liszt as a pianist and even highly praised some of his conceptions. He once wrote to a friend while listening to Liszt

⁷ Hamilton, 235.

⁸ Holcman, 33.

play his études, ‘I should like to rob him of the way to play my own studies.’⁹ Liszt himself recounts Chopin’s reaction on hearing him play the Polonaise op. 40 no. 1:

After the D major trio section, I play the return of the first theme [bars 65ff] softly, and then loud again in the following section [bars 73ff]. Chopin did not particularly observe this nuance himself, but he liked it when I did so: in fact he was thoroughly satisfied.’¹⁰

Such a remark from Liszt should not be treated lightly as self-aggrandisement, tempting as that may be. We know that Chopin, too, did not refrain from altering dynamic markings in his performances. If Chopin was surprised by Liszt’s dynamic variety, he was also pleased by it. In turn, Liszt’s remark to Chopin that it was necessary ‘to harness a new pianist of the first rank’ to play each of the Mazurkas earned the composer’s admiration, on this occasion seemingly without irony: ‘Liszt is always right. Do you imagine that I am satisfied with my own interpretation of the Mazurkas? Never!’¹¹ This extraordinary self-awareness from the composer himself is significant, since it suggests that Chopin evidently did not think himself the only authority on interpreting his music, and was ready to accept more than one reading of his texts.

Chopin as teacher

⁹ Hedley, 117.

¹⁰ Lachmund, quoted in Walker, 230-231.

¹¹ Lenz (1899), 53.

Perhaps it is in the realm of teaching that we come closest to understanding Chopin's intentions. While we do not have much detailed written evidence of Chopin as a performer, we do possess, in the form of pupils' memoirs and editions, his instructions to his students, providing us with valuable insights on how he intended his works to be interpreted. They are also particularly useful in demonstrating how Chopin might have performed those works himself.

Chopin's habit of introducing ornamental variants, which he would copy into the scores of his favourite pupils, is well established. The Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 in E-flat Major, for example, exists in no fewer than an astounding fifteen different versions. Moreover, Chopin was fond of modifying tempo and dynamic markings; not only adding in what was not previously found in the text, but also 'correcting' them in a way that directly contradicts the original version. This intriguing evidence (in Chopin's own hand) found in the scores of his pupils, does not always signify afterthoughts, but the possibility of alternative readings of the score. That Chopin would make changes even after the music had been published, suggests that he did not envisage the published version of any of his works as a final finished product, nor did he necessarily intend his pieces to be played according to the letter of the printed text (after all, he himself issued variant editions of his works to be published simultaneously in France, Germany and England). This seems to suggest that for Chopin, a certain amount of liberty was allowable, and even desirable, in order to render the music with insight and interest.

In his teaching, Chopin showed a ready appreciation of interpretations of his works radically different from his own. Adolf Gutmann, whose robust playing style was entirely antithetical to Chopin's (Lenz once said that Gutmann 'could knock a

hole in the table' with a left-hand chord in the sixth bar of the C sharp minor Scherzo¹²), was said to have been the composer's favourite pupil. On hearing an interpretation that was at variance with his conception for the work, but one that was emotionally convincing, Chopin would remark: 'That isn't how I would play it, but perhaps your version is better.'¹³ Lenz relates an occasion when Carl Filtsch (Chopin's prodigiously talented pupil of whom Liszt famously said 'when this little one begins to tour, I will have to close up shop.') played the E minor Concerto, accompanied by Chopin at a second piano. Chopin afterwards insisted that Filtsch played it better than he did.¹⁴ Such testimonies are by no means found only in Chopin's pupils' memoirs¹⁵ and they bear witness to the benevolence and generosity of the man himself.

Chopin even encouraged his more talented pupils to form their own interpretations of his music. The young Filtsch was told: 'We each understand this differently, but go your own way, do as you feel, it can also be played like that.'¹⁶ In turn, Filtsch's reply to the question of why he did not play (on this occasion the Nocturne op. 48 no. 1 in C minor) in the same way as Chopin was 'I cannot play with someone else's feelings'.¹⁷ This surprised but greatly pleased the master. Emilie von Gretsche was granted similar license:

¹² Lenz (1899), 70.

¹³ Cortot, 29.

¹⁴ Lenz (1899), 51.

¹⁵ Eigeldinger, 12.

¹⁶ Denis, quoted in Eigeldinger, 13.

¹⁷ Hedley, 217.

When you're at the piano, I give you full authority to do whatever you want; follow freely the ideal you've set for yourself and which you must feel within you; be bold and confident in your own powers and strength, and whatever you say will always be good.¹⁸

This declaration is remarkable, for it reveals not only Chopin's desire to nurture his pupils' artistic vision and independence, but shows that he evidently did not think the composer was the only 'authority' on the interpretation of his music. Occasionally, a pupil's sensitivity would win Chopin's approval in the form of a rare privilege,¹⁹ as seen in his declaration to Juliette de Caraman:

I give you *carte blanche* to play all my music. There is in you this vague poetry, this *Schwärmerei* that is needed to understand it.²⁰

In this respect, Chopin did not envision any single 'authoritative' interpretation of his works and could respect any approach as long as it was rendered with musical intelligence and conviction.

Such cases should, however, not be misused as justification for taking unthinking liberties with the score, for nothing irked Chopin more than careless, indulgent playing. He preferred, for example, his pupils to follow the text carefully rather than play from memory²¹, as one unfortunate pupil discovered: 'Are you reciting a lesson? I want to teach either precisely or not at all.'²² In some respects,

¹⁸ Grewingk, quoted in Eigeldinger, 12.

¹⁹ Eigeldinger, 13.

²⁰ Hedley, 8.

²¹ Eigeldinger, 11.

²² Hordynski, quoted in Eigeldinger, 28.

Chopin himself was exacting to the last degree in his regard for the score, even down to the technical details of execution.²³ His pupil Maria von Harder relates:

[...] expression and conception, position of the hand, touch, pedalling, nothing escaped the sharpness of his hearing and his vision; he gave every detail the keenest attention.²⁴

During his lessons, Chopin could be very particular about the exact comprehension and execution of his works. According to Mikuli, 'often the entire lesson passed without the pupil's having played more than a few bars'.²⁵ It was this 'severity, not so easy to satisfy, the feverish vehemence with which he sought to raise his pupils to his own standpoint'²⁶ that instilled in them a rigorous discipline and concern for precision and exactness.

While he patiently and indefatigably corrected the errors of their ways, Chopin's lessons could at times become stormy, especially as a result of repeated negligence or careless playing. Mathias recalled how he once saw him break a chair when an inattentive pupil bungled a passage. Hair would be torn out, pencils reduced to fragments and strewn over the floor. There was nothing for the wretched pupil to do but escape from the room. His exit would be followed by a thunderous decree forbidding him to show his face there again.²⁷

²³ Cortot, 28.

²⁴ Adelung, quoted in Eigeldinger, 11.

²⁵ Mikuli, quoted in Eigeldinger, 11.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Cortot, 34.

In addition, Chopin was generally quite strict with regard to allowing the performance of his works. He would go so far as to refuse to perform them in public if he thought it might cause them to be misunderstood. On turning down the offer to play his concerto at the Philharmonic Hall during his visit to London in 1848, Chopin reasoned that ‘as “Times is money” [sic] there will only be one public performance and they never have rehearsals, which makes it impossible.’²⁸ If we recall the great care Chopin took before appearing in public during the Warsaw years – calling the orchestra’s string section to several rehearsals that it might ‘understand his intentions’²⁹ – it all becomes clear that his refusal partly stemmed from awareness that an unrehearsed orchestral accompaniment would hardly be able to realise his intentions in any performance of his music.

Chopin also strove to avoid misunderstanding of his newly composed works by having his pupils perform them on occasions when he felt too weak to do them justice. Thus in 1839 his pupil Gutmann was called upon to play the Scherzo op. 39 no. 3 in C-sharp minor to Moscheles, so that the latter might not get a wrong idea of the work.³⁰ The reverse was also true. For the same reason, Lenz was denied the opportunity of learning certain pieces (‘You cannot play this piece’ was the master’s laconic reply³¹) because Chopin apparently felt that the Russian was incapable of capturing the true spirit of those works. It might be noted in these instances that Chopin’s criticism of his pupils’ taking liberties with the score were perhaps directed at his pupils’ ineptitude rather than an outright ban on taking a more imaginative

²⁸ Cortot, 139.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hedley, 120.

³¹ Lenz (1872), 290-291.

approach to the score. In any case, while inculcating in his pupils a reverence for the score, Chopin would likewise inspire their self-confidence and imaginative capabilities.

The legacy of a ‘Chopin’ school of playing

Unlike Liszt, whose list of pupils reads like a roll call of the nineteenth and twentieth century’s most prominent pianists (and whose teaching influence spanned several generations), Chopin was, as Liszt famously commented, ‘unfortunate in his pupils’.³² Although Chopin devoted most of his life to teaching after his arrival in Paris in 1831, his pupils were largely drawn from the young ladies of wealthy aristocratic families, many of them better known for their illustrious parentage than their musical abilities. Even amongst the talented few, the necessity of preserving their social status prevented them from performing in public or from actively pursuing a performing career. Amongst the men, Chopin’s two most famous pupils were Georges Mathias and Carl Mikuli, who were regarded as able teachers rather than outstanding pianists (the latter is today probably best known as an editor whose name graces the cover of Chopin’s works). Chopin did, however, have one promising pupil in a child prodigy named Carl Filtsch, but even he tragically passed away at the age of 15. In a sense, therefore, there is really no widely-established ‘school’ or ‘tradition’ to speak of when discussing Chopin’s music.

The advent of early recording technology around the late 1880s represents a milestone in the history of performance practice. For the first time, there was an aural

³² Niecks, 174.

means of assessing performance, whereas previously one could only make inferences from written records. Unfortunately for us, Chopin died well before the age of recording, hence we do not have direct aural evidence of how he played his works or how he might have liked his music to be interpreted. What we do have, however, are recordings of pianists born before Chopin died. Planté, for example, who was born in 1839 (ten years before Chopin's death) made his first discs in 1908. Pachmann, who was born in 1848, made several discs of Chopin's music from 1907 to 1927. It is worth noting that most of the early recording artists were already rather mature in age when they entered the recording studio. Thus, what we hear on these early recordings are in fact a reflection of performing practices from an earlier era, close to and even familiar to Chopin.

Tracing the Traditions

The aim of the present study, as previously mentioned, is to examine the approaches taken by nineteenth and twentieth-century pianists in interpreting Chopin – approaches that began during his lifetime and, in some cases, have little to do with the way that Chopin himself played. By examining the accounts of Chopin's playing and teaching as well as the practices that would have been familiar to him, we soon begin to realise that our notion of 'fidelity' to the score may in fact not be in line with the nineteenth-century understanding of the term. On the contrary, what we today view as veritable acts of sacrilege might well have been accepted performance practices of the period.

I first begin by examining the habit of preluding (a common and well-established practice throughout the nineteenth century and especially relevant for

Chopin, whose skills as an improviser were noted by his contemporaries. Particular attention is also given to exploring other aspects of Chopin's style that might pose particular problems of interpretation (i.e. *rubato*, tempo, pedalling). The chapter on 'Rewriting Chopin: Virtuosity and the Musically Virtuous' will examine the more sentimental and sensational aspects of performance styles as expounded by the school of Liszt.

This study could hardly attempt to offer unequivocal answers to interpreting Chopin – these do not exist. Instead it aims to challenge our assumptions about the sacrosanct nature of the text, and offer possibilities of reading it anew. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how a study of performance traditions can both enlighten and enrich our understanding of Chopin's music. Whether we eventually choose to adopt these approaches is another issue, but we should not lightly dismiss them as mere 'aberrations', and perhaps should learn to see them as valuable, if not always viable, options for performance. After all, traditions – whether authentic or divergent – have much to offer us, for they reveal not just the limitations, but also the possibilities of the art of interpretation.

2

Preludes and Interludes

Why

The practice of improvising at the start of a performance has for many decades largely faded into the mists of historical performance practice. Yet the tradition of improvised preluding is many centuries old. It was not only a sign of musical good manners but also an opportunity for creative and virtuosic display. Indeed, fundamental to the pianism of the Romantic era was the fact that virtually all pianists were composers as well as performers.³³ Preluding, therefore, was seen as continuing the creative process of composition, which accorded well with the romantic notion of the artist as genius and creator. Czerny proclaimed:

It is akin to a crown of distinction for a keyboardist, particularly in private circles at the performance of solo works, if he does not begin directly with the composition itself, but is capable by means of a suitable prelude of preparing the listeners, setting the mood, and also hereby ascertaining the qualities of the pianoforte, perhaps unfamiliar to him, in an appropriate fashion.³⁴

³³ Hamilton, 101.

³⁴ Czerny, 6.

A ‘suitable prelude’, according to Czerny, would heighten both performer’s ability and listener’s receptivity, thereby considerably enhancing the musical experience for all.

But implicit in Czerny’s advice, too, are the good practical reasons underlying the practice. ‘Preparing the listeners and setting the mood’ – indeed actually attracting their attention in the first place to let them know that the performance was about to start – was absolutely essential.³⁵ In the Parisian salons – a world Chopin frequented and thrived in – music was standard fare, as were the latest scandals and gossips. A casual atmosphere (not unlike that of jazz concerts today) prevailed at these social gatherings. Often, the audience took to ‘milling around, talking, laughing and even eating’ during a performance³⁶ (a far cry from the rather stifling atmosphere that pervades modern concert halls, where to let loose even a cough or sneeze is viewed as positively sacrilegious). Chopin himself remarked humorously that it is a rare privilege ‘if people do not talk while I am playing’.³⁷ In such settings, where social pleasures offered the music loud competition, an attention-grabbing prelude was of utmost necessity, whether to alert listeners and put them in the appropriate mood or to silence one’s all-too-chatty neighbour.

Czerny’s comment that preluding was useful to ‘ascertain the qualities of the pianoforte’ may seem anachronistic from a modern perspective. But this was hardly a matter of choice. It was a necessary measure given the state of repair and reliability of the early makes of piano. In the very early nineteenth century, most of the pianos

³⁵ Hamilton, 112.

³⁶ Atwood, 172-173.

³⁷ Cortot, 142.

still had a predominantly wooden structure, one that did not stand up too well to increased string tension and hammer weights under the hands of more robust pianists. In addition, the double escapement action (invented by Érard in 1821), which made the keys more responsive to the player's touch, only gradually supplanted other forms of action. Steinway's success at the 1867 Paris International Exhibition marked the initial triumph of the modern piano, but on early instruments, keys stick, hammers break, and strings go drastically out of tune with alarming frequency³⁸. Breaking strings seemed to be a particular speciality of Franz Liszt, whose notoriety in this respect meant that he always kept two pianos on stage, so that one could be immediately wheeled in to take the place of its less fortunate companion.³⁹ Chopin's preferred piano – the Pleyel – was fitted with a single escapement action and fitted with very light hammers that were shaped to a point rather than a curve. He himself often had a frustrating relationship with the instrument he called his 'perfidious traitor',⁴⁰ a comment no doubt on the notorious difficulty of controlling the tone on a Pleyel. Even if one did not possess Liszt's superhuman strength (and few did), it was usually considered necessary to find out what was working and what was not, how clean the damping was, what differences in tone colour there were between registers, and a host of other things.⁴¹ Only after familiarising him/herself with the instrument would the performer dare venture onto the piece proper.

Given the unreliable state of pianos at the time, preluding was a valuable opportunity for the pianist to try out the instrument, warm up the fingers and focus the

³⁸ Hamilton, 113.

³⁹ Gooley, 108.

⁴⁰ Williams, 38.

⁴¹ Hamilton, 113.

mind before the actual performance began.⁴² It was also an effective way to steady one's nerves, if Chopin's confession to Liszt is anything to go by:

I am not the right person to give concerts. The public intimidates me. I feel asphyxiated by the breath of the people in the audience, paralyzed by their curious stares and dumb before that sea of unknown faces.⁴³

Couperin, too, intended his preludes as warm-up exercises for his own music. Even the so-called 'legendary pianists' were not free from preconcert anxieties. The stories of Vladimir Horowitz having to be literally pushed onstage or Adolf von Henselt, who on one occasion forgot to leave his cigar behind in the wings and had to play a whole concerto before the czar with it hanging from his lips, inevitably invite laughter. Equally amusingly, Glenn Gould, who famously suffered from stage fright throughout much of his pianistic career, was known to literally 'warm-up' by soaking his hands in hot water. Without needing to resort to such drastic measures à la Gould, a prelude could have admirably done the trick by preparing the performer both physically and mentally.

The Revolutionary Prelude?

Chopin's *Twenty-four Preludes*, op. 28, occupy a unique place in the literature of the piano. More than a century and a half after they were first published, the preludes continue to fascinate as much as confound generations of listeners and performers alike.

⁴² Goertzen, 7.

⁴³ Cortot, 88.

On 2 May 1841, a review by Liszt of Chopin's recital on 26 April 1841 appeared in the *Gazette musicale*:

Chopin's Preludes are compositions of an order entirely apart. They are not only, as the title might make one think, pieces destined to be played in the guise of introductions to other pieces; they are poetic preludes, analogous to those of a great contemporary poet, who cradles the soul in golden dreams, and elevates it to the regions of the ideal.⁴⁴

Poetic metaphors aside, Liszt's description at once identifies the preludes as forging a new tradition – pieces somewhat freed from generic expectations and capable of existing as independent works – an impression perhaps heightened by Chopin's choice of programming them in small groups. On this occasion, he reportedly played a group of etudes, preludes and nocturnes.⁴⁵ A less favourable but no less astute judgment was voiced by Schumann in his own review of the entire set:

I would term the Preludes strange. I confess I imagined them differently, and designed in the grandest style, like his Etudes. Almost the opposite: they are sketches, beginnings of Etudes, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion.⁴⁶

In fact, both Liszt and Schumann were quick to recognise the disparity between what was implied by the title and their realisation in performance. Even in their comments, we can detect an awareness of the traditional generic functions served by Chopin's

⁴⁴ Liszt, 246.

⁴⁵ Cortot, 128.

⁴⁶ Schumann, 163.

preludes. Schumann's reference to them as 'beginnings' or 'individual eagle pinions' [*einzelne Adlerfittige*] suggests that he did not conceive of the op. 28 as a unified set. Likewise, Liszt's claim that 'they are not *only* [my italic]... pieces destined to be played in the guise of introductions to other pieces' at once acknowledges the traditional function of the genre while praising the ways Chopin expanded this tradition.⁴⁷

Chopin's preludes belong to a now largely neglected but longstanding tradition of published collections of preludes. He is likely to have known similar collections by Clementi, Cramer, Czerny, Hummel, Kalkbrenner and J.C. Kessler, whose 24 Preludes op. 31 (1834) were dedicated to Chopin. In return, the German edition of Chopin's own set of preludes was inscribed to Kessler.⁴⁸ Chopin habitually used the Clementi *Preludes and Exercises* as the basis of his teaching. For the more musically gifted pupils, he advocated the study of *The Well-tempered Clavier* (the 48 Preludes and Fugues) by J.S. Bach,⁴⁹ pieces he greatly admired. He once declared during a lesson that 'it is impossible to forget them'.⁵⁰ Few pupils could boast of having studied Chopin's preludes under his supervision,⁵¹ although we do know that he suggested two groups of four for study by his pupil Jane Stirling.⁵² Other contemporary collections of preludes, therefore, were not only familiar to Chopin – they formed a significant part of his teaching.

⁴⁷ Kallberg, quoted in Samson, 136.

⁴⁸ Hamilton, 102-103.

⁴⁹ Cortot, 32.

⁵⁰ Niecks, 341.

⁵¹ Cortot, 33.

⁵² Eigeldinger and Nectoux, p.xxviii.

Chopin's approach to programming his preludes in short sets may be understood on the grounds that his intention was to introduce a selection from his recent compositions,⁵³ as indeed was the case in 1841. But this was not an isolated phenomenon. In subsequent years, Chopin continued to programme the preludes in sets. A typical programme listing, from his 1842 Parisian recital, was 'Suite de Nocturnes, Préludes et Etudes'.⁵⁴ In a concert given on 16 February 1848 at one of Pleyel's concert rooms, the programme listed cites the last item to be performed 'Preludes, Mazurkas, et Valses, composés et exécutés par M.Chopin'.⁵⁵ Later in the year, at a recital given in Edinburgh on 4 October, Chopin concluded his performance with 'Préludes, Ballade in F, Mazurkas, and Valses'.⁵⁶

At the same time, Chopin did genuinely use his preludes as introductory pieces, often coupling them to another of his works. A surviving printed programme from his recital in Glasgow on 27 September 1848 lists the first item to be performed as 'Andante et Impromptu'. Beneath the printed line, someone entered in ink (presumably contemporaneously) 'No. 8 & 36'.⁵⁷ This last number likely refers to the impromptu in F-sharp major, op. 36, while the first likely indicates the Eighth Prelude of op. 28 in F-sharp minor (rather than the Andante spianato in G major, a work that often precedes the *Grand Polonaise* op.22).⁵⁸ In fact, a week later, a recital in Edinburgh on 4 October 1848 opened with the same 'Andante et Impromptu'. A

⁵³ Cortot, 128.

⁵⁴ Kallberg, quoted in Samson, 138.

⁵⁵ Cortot, 134.

⁵⁶ Cortot, 148.

⁵⁷ Mirska and Hordynski, quoted in Samson, 137.

⁵⁸ Kallberg, 150.

review in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* of 7 October 1848 bears the following description:

The first piece was an ‘Andante et Impromptu’; the opening movement being in three parts, with the theme standing out in alto relieve, as it were, from the maze of harmony with which it was surrounded.⁵⁹

This description thus further supports the case for the ‘Andante’ being the Prelude no.8 in F-sharp minor, op.28.

We are on even firmer grounds with the Prelude in D-flat major that was listed to be performed before the Impromptu in G-flat major, op. 51 at a *soirée musicale* given on 21 February 1842 in Paris. It would not be over-presumptuous to hazard a guess at Chopin’s rationale on this occasion, given the dominant-tonic relationship between the two – a conjecture further supported by the opening of the impromptu, which is essentially an extension of the prelude’s end, beginning, as it does, in the dominant of the key of G-flat (D-flat major). The D-flat prelude hence functions as the dominant preparation for the succeeding impromptu. In other words, preparing the key and setting the mood. Czerny would have heartily approved.

As late as the 1920s, some of the Chopin preludes were still used as preludes to other pieces. In Busoni’s 1922 recording of Chopin’s *Black Key Study* in G-flat major, op.10 no.5, he played Chopin’s Prelude in A major, op. 28 no.7 before it.⁶⁰ Busoni even adds a transitional bar of his own between the two pieces, modulating to the dominant of F-sharp minor (enharmonic G-flat minor) the relative minor of the

⁵⁹ Atwood, 256.

⁶⁰ In Busoni discographies, these tend to be listed as separate recordings. They are not. The prelude here hardly has the status of a miniature independent work, but is treated as a short introduction to the *Black Key Study*. See Hamilton, 101-102.

prelude's A-major, in order to facilitate the change of key from A major to G-flat major.

More frequently and unsurprisingly, a prelude in the tonic or dominant of the following piece would be preferred. The C-minor prelude seems to have been commonly used as an introduction to the C-minor Nocturne, op. 48 (and was so played by a pupil at one of Liszt's masterclasses in 1885).⁶¹ Here the similarity lies not only in key, but more significantly in thematic contour, which makes this prelude a particularly striking preface to the Nocturne (Example 2.1).

Ex. 2.1. (a) Chopin, Prelude in c minor, opening



(b) Chopin Nocturne in c minor, opening



Today, the *Twenty-four Preludes*, op. 28, are often performed complete. Occasionally a selection is given (as Chopin himself did in his concerts), and

⁶¹ Zimdars, 115.

sometimes one of the more substantial numbers (the A-flat Major or the D-flat *Raindrop*) is played on its own. What we seldom encounter, however, is a prelude being used simply as its title suggests – a prelude.

Postlude: A Case for Preluding

Although preluding has by and large lost its original function (with the increasing standardisation of pianos and respectful audience behaviour), it has not lost its *place* in our modern concert repertoire. Preludes survive, even if largely unrecognised, in the form of written-out introductions, studies and those works that attempt to capture the style of improvisation.

Written-out introductions in improvised style are not uncommon in Chopin's oeuvre. The Andante spianato preface to Chopin's *Grand Polonaise* for piano and orchestra⁶² (now almost always performed as a separate item) illustrates the sort of slow introduction often improvised before such works. It is in extempore style with no thematic connection whatsoever to the following Polonaise.⁶³ We find a similar example of this type of improvised-style opening in the Polonaise-Fantasia in A-flat major, op. 61. These sections, now mostly unrecognised for what they are, offer a rare glimpse of Chopin's style of preluding. In most cases, we can only deduce Chopin's preluding strategies from similar introductions in published pieces.

⁶² Chopin performed this work at a concert given by the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire under the direction of Habeneck on 26 April 1835 in Paris. This concert marked the premiere of the Andante spianato which Chopin had specially composed for the occasion.

⁶³ Hamilton, 128.

According to Czerny, such published versions of introductions tend to occur most frequently at the beginnings of rondos and variations. We have a typical example in the Rondo in C major, op. 73 (now often performed as a two-piano work) (Example 2.2). It opens with a dramatic flourish, starting in the lower register of the keyboard and sweeping through to the upper register with a series of semiquaver note patterns (bars 1-4). Chopin then repeats the entire procedure a tone higher (bars 9-11). Interspersed between these passages are more lyrical moments, evoking chorale-like chords (bars 5-9 and bars 12-16). Towards the end, Chopin even introduces grace notes and staccatos (bars 16-22), hence trying out not only the various registers, but also the responsiveness of the instrument in the course of the prelude.

Ex. 2.2. Chopin, Rondo in C major, bars 1-24

Allegro maestoso (♩ = 72) 51a

f *volace*

f

p *a-scarcato e legato*

51a

cresc *ff*

51a

p

More remarkably, we find in the Rondo in E-flat major, op.16 a section clearly marked 'Introduction', setting it apart from the rondo proper and hence emphasising its preludial status.

In fact, traces of the prelude were not only evident in works bearing the title 'rondo'. They could be found in individual movements of a work with a rondo structure, as is the case of the finale of the Sonata in B minor, op. 58 (Example 2.3). The opening eight bars employs a dramatic gesture designed as much to attract the attention of the audience as to test the various registers of the piano. The music then cadences on a dominant seventh chord in preparation for the theme. This opening passage functions brilliantly as *both* a prelude to the final movement and a transition between movements.

Ex 2.3. Chopin, Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, fourth movement, bars 1-8



At its simplest level, a preludial introduction could well consist of a single chord. The *Variations in A-- 'Souvenir de Paganini'* opens with three successive A major chords in the bass register of the piano (Example 2.4) – a gesture that brings to mind a similar approach undertaken by Anton Rubinstein in his performance of Chopin's Second Sonata, when he played “four crashing B-flat minor chords in the deepest range of the piano” between two movements of the work to increase the dramatic effect.⁶⁴

Ex. 2.4. Chopin, Variations in A 'Souvenir de Paganini', opening



More typically, Chopin's variations are prefaced by a longer introduction, a self-contained and fairly extensive section in extempore style. The *Variations on a German Air 'Der Schweitzerbub'* presents a case in point, with its loud declamatory opening consisting of rapid arpeggiated and and scalic movements, followed by a

⁶⁴ Mitchell and Evans, 99-100.

more lyrical passage, and finally ending on a dominant preparation for the theme – an approach very closely followed by the *Variations on Hérold's "Je vends les scapulaires"*, op. 12, and *Variations on a theme by T.Moore*.

A nocturne could also have a “written-in” introduction. Czerny himself provides the justification for this, by drawing a connection between the nocturne and vocal works⁶⁵ - a connection further reinforced by the knowledge of Chopin’s love of opera, and imitation of vocal models in his music. In fact, it is not difficult to see how the openings of Lieder found their way into the nocturne, given that in vocal music, which begins directly with the voice, an improvised preface, albeit only a chord, was highly recommended and often even necessary, as it enabled the singer to pitch the first note.⁶⁶

The series of works entitled ‘Nocturne’ reveal an astonishing number of such improvised-style introductions. Even in those works that do not include an extempore preface, a ‘prelude’ of some sort is strongly implied. We find, in the two Nocturnes of op. 27 and the Nocturne in E minor, op. 72 no. 1, passages reminding us of Czerny’s recommendation that the shortest prelude could consist of a single chord (Example 2.5):

Ex. 2.5. (a) Chopin, Nocturne in c-sharp minor, opening

⁶⁵ Czerny, 97-98.

⁶⁶ Hamilton, 124.



(b) Chopin, Nocturne in D-flat major, opening



(c) Chopin, Nocturne in e minor, opening



Slightly more elaborate versions can be found in the Nocturne in F-sharp minor, op. 48 no. 2, Nocturne in B Major, op. 62 no. 1 and Nocturne in C-sharp minor, op. posth., all of which end on the time-honoured dominant preparation for the theme (Example 2.6). In fact, it was not uncommon to find such instrumental imitations of vocal models in the works of Chopin's contemporaries. Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* are sometimes prefaced with some form of prelude, as are the nocturnes of John Field, whose works greatly influenced Chopin's own nocturnes.

Ex. 2.6. (a) Chopin, Nocturne in f-sharp minor, opening



(b) Chopin, Nocturne in c-sharp minor (op. posth.), opening



But we do not have to look far for examples of preludes or transitions, for Chopin's own Preludes and Études supply convenient examples. In fact, numerous studies have noted the similarities between Chopin's preludes and his études. In fact, the terms 'prelude', 'étude' and 'exercise' were used inconsistently and somewhat interchangeably by composers and publishers of the period. Hence it was not uncommon to find études published under the name of preludes and vice versa, suggesting that they were perhaps not as distinguishable (at least musically) as their generic titles made them out to be. Several of the études have also been singled out for their striking resemblance to Bach's Preludes.⁶⁷

Chopin's Études op. 10 and op. 25 are today treated no differently from their counterparts – the Preludes op. 28. They are often performed in sets or as a selection. Occasionally for the less faint-hearted, they are performed complete. This practice perhaps reflects the shifting categories of meaning to which the étude is subjected –

⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion, see Hugo Leichtentritt, "Die Etüden" in *Analyse der Chopin'schen Klavierwerke*, vol. 2. (Berlin: Max Hesses Verlag, 1992), 90-118.

either as a didactic work or a work meant to stand alone in performance – neither of which fully reflects their potential functions in a performance context.⁶⁸

According to Czerny, a prelude needed to command attention, if only to silence its audience. The first study that opens op. 10 (Example 2.7) is appropriately in bravura style, suggesting its suitability to be used as an extempore introduction. The use of octaves and arpeggio sweeps is also in line with Czerny’s recommendation to test the various registers of the piano.

Ex. 2.7. Chopin, Étude in C major, opening



In the Étude op. 25 no. 10, we see a further attempt at ‘ascertaining the qualities of the pianoforte’ (Example 2.8). Having executed the commanding double octaves that run the length of the keyboard, Chopin tries his hand at a more lyrical passage (bars 29-32), testing the instrument’s ability to sustain legato tones. When this proves successful, Chopin turns his attention back to the earlier passage, this time building towards a thundering climax. All at once, we see Chopin grappling with issues of dynamics, tone colour and balance. Given the fact that the études were

⁶⁸ Hamilton, 117-124. Hamilton cites the example of Liszt’s *Transcendental Studies* (1851) and analyses the inherent musical qualities that enable them to function as preludes. The same can be said of the Chopin études.

themselves ‘studies’ or technical exercises aimed at the improvement of the performer’s technique,⁶⁹ Chopin’s études would no doubt have served as fitting, if more ambitious, warm-up pieces, in much the same way as preludes would.

Ex. 2.8. (a) Chopin, Étude in B minor, opening



(b) Chopin, Étude in B minor, bars 29-32



More significantly, the études offer us a glimpse of Chopin’s prelude strategies, giving us an idea of the sort of improvisation we might have heard from Chopin in his teaching and playing. In the Étude op. 25 no. 6 (Example 2.9), we encounter a passage based on a string of diminished seventh chords. Its function, without a doubt, was to act as a link between the rather remote key the music had wandered to, and the home key.

Ex. 2.9. Chopin, Étude in G-sharp minor, bars 31-33

⁶⁹ Ferguson and Hamilton, www.oxfordmusiconline.com



A similar strategy, again using a series of diminished seventh chords to transit from one key to another, can be found in the Étude op. 10 no. 3 (Example 2.10). The intention to use this etude as a “prelude” to the next is further hinted at, when we find in the fair copy autograph the directive ‘*attaca il presto con fuoco*’ at the end of the étude, suggesting that Chopin envisioned the joint performance of this étude and the following one.⁷⁰

Ex. 2.10. Chopin, Étude in E major, bars 46-48



⁷⁰ Ekier, 146.

Another technique Chopin employs, perhaps further prompted by his reverence for Bach, is the use of the circle of fifths as a modulatory device. A rather ingenious use of this device is evident in the Étude op. 10 no. 1, where the music undergoes a series of modulations through the circle of fifths (Example 2.11):

Ex. 2.11. Chopin, Étude in C major, bars 35-47 (reduction)



In all these instances, Chopin's strategy of using passages based on diminished seventh chords and the circle of fifths frees up the possibilities of using the music as *both* preludes and transitions to a piece in *any* key. Above all, it gives us an insight into Chopin's practice of preluding, or at least the practices familiar to him.

Chopin issued a challenge to his audiences in the form of the Preludes. By using them as introductions to other works, he challenged us to re-examine our notion of the improvised 'prelude' – to recognise such pieces also as "composed" pieces. But by also presenting them as self-standing concert pieces, he freed up the interpretation of the preludes beyond their traditional generic function to include the possibility of accepting them as independent concert works. Perhaps our modern obsession with the "structural unity" of works has encouraged the idea of the preludes as a musically unified set. Yet the historical challenge is simply to recognise the preludes on their own terms—simply as preludes, and witnesses of an extinct performance practice.

3

Singing on the Piano

The cultivation of a beautiful ‘singing’ tone was an ideal that existed in keyboard playing since the time of Mozart and J.S. Bach. But it was especially intense in the case of Chopin, who had a deep fascination with the human voice. Chopin was an avid opera lover and ardent admirer of some of the leading singers at the time – Giovanni Battista Rubini, Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran and Laure Cinti-Damoreau. Although Chopin never seriously attempted to write an opera, the Italian school of singing found its way into his music. As the renowned Chopin player, Maurizio Pollini succinctly pointed out: ‘You can hear the human voice in all of Chopin’s works’.⁷¹ Indeed, much of Chopin’s pianistic writing is essentially ‘vocal’ – his melodies are adorned with vocal ornamentation and cantilena passages are to be found throughout his music, especially in the Nocturnes.

But the Italian *bel canto* tradition was not just a model for his compositional style. For Chopin, it was also a model for pianistic declamation and fullness of tone, which he believed could be achieved by listening to good singers. He accordingly recommended that his pupils listen to the celebrated opera singers of the day, even to the extent of encouraging them to take singing lessons: ‘You must sing if you wish to play’.⁷² During lessons, Chopin would repeat indefatigably: ‘You must sing with your

⁷¹ Dürer, www.deutschegrammophon.com.

⁷² Niecks, 187.

fingers!’⁷³ His pupils related how he took great pains to teach them the necessary requirements of touch and tone production. Beauty of sound was above all an object of importance to him and a harsh, uncontrolled tone would earn his rebuke of ‘a dog barking’.⁷⁴ In addition, Chopin even devised a way to imitate the breathing of singers on the piano using the wrist, which he called the ‘respiration in the voice’.⁷⁵ He himself marked these ‘pauses of breath’ into his pupils’ scores, along with the vocal phrasing that can be found throughout his piano music.⁷⁶

As early as 1853, just four years after the death of Chopin, the pianist Sigismond Thalberg warned performers against the excessive use of rubato (an approach taken by pianists to make the melody more ‘songful’ by delaying or anticipating it):

Avoid that manner, which is ridiculous and in bad taste, of delaying with exaggeration the striking of the melody notes long after those of the bass, and producing thereby, from one end of a piece to the other, the effect of continuous syncopation. In a slow melody written in long notes, it is effective, especially on the first beat of every measure or at the beginning of each phrase, to attack the melody after the bass, but only with an almost imperceptible delay.⁷⁷

He also offers advice on arpeggiation:

⁷³ Grewingk, quoted in Eigeldinger, 45.

⁷⁴ Mikuli, quoted in Eigeldinger, 56.

⁷⁵ Eigeldinger, 45.

⁷⁶ Hamilton, 140.

⁷⁷ Thalberg, quoted in Hudson, 196.

Chords that bear the melody in the upper notes should be performed in very close arpeggio... and the melodic notes should be dwelt upon more than the other notes of the chord.⁷⁸

In fact earlier in 1839, Czerny, as though predicting the mannerisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sounded a similar warning against abuse of arpeggiation, remarking that:

Many players accustom themselves so much to arpeggio chords, that they at last become quite unable to strike full chords or even double notes firmly and at once.⁷⁹

Thalberg and Czerny's fears were evidently not unfounded. By the end of the century, this breaking of hands (resulting from the delay or anticipation of a melody note) as well as the similar effect caused by arpeggiation, had become widely abused. It later came to be variously denounced by modern scholars as 'bad playing', 'old maid mannerism' and 'anathema to the modern listener'.⁸⁰ Yet, such techniques used to promote tonal beauty and variety – namely asynchronisation and arpeggiation – were not just a peculiar feature of the late Romantic period. The practice was in vogue up till the Second World War, and employed by most of the acclaimed pianists of the era – many of them genuinely regarded as amongst the finest interpreters of Chopin's music. In the succeeding pages, I will examine some of these approaches used by romantic pianists to 'sing' at the piano. It will perhaps also be shown that such practices were not simply born out of some late romantic 'malady' or indulgence in

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Czerny, 55-56.

⁸⁰ Hudson, 337.

‘sentimentality’. Instead, they may have derived from Chopin’s own practice of rubato whereby the left hand maintains a strict rhythm while the right moves more freely on its own. Chopin’s rubato, therefore, seems to be interlinked with such asynchronisation and arpeggiation.

Singing Out of Sync: Asynchronisation and Arpeggiation

Late romantic pianists often played one hand after the other or ‘broke’ hands in order to enhance a singing quality in the melody. ‘Breaking’ occurs when the accompanying note (usually in the left hand) sounds first, causing a delay in the melody. More rarely, the melody note in the right hand enters first, resulting in an anticipation of the melody.⁸¹ When the former happens, the melody is not only given emphasis, but ‘sings’ out with a fuller, resonant tone. This is no myth – if a melody comes in after a bass note, when used in conjunction with an open pedal⁸², sympathetic vibrations are produced, hence making the instrument ‘sing’.

We hear a prominent example of this type of asynchronisation in the recordings by Paderewski and Rosenthal of Chopin’s *Nocturne op. 9 no. 2* (Example 3.1). In the case of the former, delays and occasionally anticipations pervade the melody, which by our modern standards could easily be deemed as rhythmic inaccuracy. In fact, so frequently does Paderewski employ asynchronisation that the place where Chopin has marked ‘rubato’ in the score (measure 26) is treated no differently from what has gone on before. The moment passes by without any special

⁸¹ Hudson, 334.

⁸² Hamilton, 145.

emphasis. Perhaps when he saw the word ‘rubato’, Paderewski may have felt he was already performing in this way – in fact, almost consistently so. Rosenthal, on the other hand, is a little more circumspect in his use of asynchronisation, choosing to articulate only the moments of high intensity. In the opening bars of the same nocturne, for example, delays occur on the wide leaps in the melody, thereby generating a sense of yearning and endowing certain phrases with a particular rhetorical quality.

Ex. 3.1. Chopin, Nocturne in E-flat major, bars 1-4

The image shows a musical score for Chopin's Nocturne in E-flat major, bars 1-4. The score is in 3/4 time, marked 'Andante (♩ = 132)'. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system shows the first two bars, and the second system shows the next two bars. The right hand plays a melodic line with wide leaps, and the left hand plays a bass line with chords and single notes. The melody is characterized by a sense of yearning and rhetorical quality, particularly in the first bar where the melody note is delayed relative to the bass note.

Asynchronisation – resulting from a delay or anticipation of a melody note – can also take place on the level of structure (i.e. to mark out a theme or section). This use of asynchronisation as a structural device can be seen in Friedman’s recording of the *Mazurka op. 33 no.4* (Example 3.2) where, according to the notation, the melody and bass notes are supposed to sound at the same time. Yet Friedman anticipates the first note of the melody in the right hand, playing it slightly before the bass note in the left (probably echoing its earlier appearances where the note is tied over from the previous bar). Later on, the same note is delayed in measure 65. A closer examination

of Friedman's intentions suggests that this was probably not a whim of the moment. Since the melody at this point marks not only the return of the theme, but also the return of the opening *section*, the delay serves in effect to articulate the formal structure. Hofmann, too, marks the beginning of a contrasting section with a delay in measure 26 of the *Scherzo op 31*.⁸³ Asynchronisation, therefore, can be used for both expressive and structural effects.

Ex. 3.2. (a) Chopin, Mazurka in B minor, bar 1



(b) Chopin, Mazurka in B minor, bar 25



Arpeggiation seemed to have been used for the same purposes as asynchronisation: to enhance a *dolce* quality in the melody, to emphasise an important note or chord, and occasionally, to mark out a section.⁸⁴ On Rosenthal's recording of the *Prelude op. 28 no. 3* (Example 3.3), he arpeggiates the figure in the right hand on the first beat of measure 16. This enables the top 'F' note in the melody to ring out more emphatically, as well as giving the chord expressive warmth through subtle tonal shading.

⁸³ Hudson, 334.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Ex. 3.3. Chopin, Prelude in G major, bar 16



A similar strategy can be witnessed in the recordings made by Koczalski and Rachmaninov of the *Ballade in A-flat major, op. 47 no. 3*. In these instances, arpeggiation is employed for the same reasons of melodic emphasis and tonal variety. If we turn our attention to the same work played by Paderewski, the frequent recourse to the device is indeed astounding. In fact the use of arpeggiation is so profuse that the striking of chords simultaneously almost constitutes a special effect in itself. We hear immediately at the opening an arpeggiation on the second chord in measure 2 and later on its return in measures 38 and 46 (Example 3.4). Chopin, however, only notates an arpeggio for this last time (measure 46) and perhaps only because the same chord is repeated at a higher register, hence requiring a special colouristic effect. Paderewski arpeggiates on all four occasions.

Ex. 3.4. (a) Chopin, Ballade in A-flat major, bars 1-2



(b) Chopin, Ballade in A-flat major, bars 45-47



Needless to say, there are far too many instances of arpeggiation in this performance of the ballade by Paderewski to cite them all. More significantly for us, Paderewski does achieve truly remarkable effects in some places through his use of arpeggiation. For instance, by arpeggiating the left-hand chords from measures 52 to 58 (Example 3.5), Paderewski effectively creates a rhythmic lilt that adds to the dance-like mood.

Ex. 3.5. Chopin, Ballade in A-flat major, bars 52-57



Arpeggiation also serves to highlight the voice leading (Example 3.6) whereby the tenor line is emphasised as a result of the arpeggiated double notes in the left hand.

Ex. 3.6. Chopin, Ballade in A-flat major, bars 109-112



Paderewski's style may be dismissed as anachronistic today, but some of his approaches were guided by practical considerations, and perhaps justifiably so. Arpeggiation was frequently employed by almost all pianists of the era for expressive effects, but it also served a practical purpose – it addressed the problem of playing very widely spaced chords. These are not unusual in Chopin. Although he did not specifically notate the arpeggio, the impossibly wide reach in some instances must have necessitated its use. In the *Ballade in A-flat major, op. 47 no. 3* (Example 3.7), Paderewski arpeggiates on the extended chord (an interval spanning a 10th) in measure 33. But he also appears unable to resist spreading the succeeding chord, which is certainly playable. Evidently, 'old habits die hard', as the saying goes.

Ex. 3.7. Chopin, *Ballade in A-flat major*, bars 33-35



If Paderewski can be seen as the archetype of late romantic indulgence in asynchronisation and arpeggiation, Ferruccio Busoni, in contrast, was a model of restraint. In his approach to Chopin, Busoni shunned any use of asynchronisation and

unmarked arpeggiation, which he felt caused Chopin's music to degenerate into 'elegant sentimentality'.⁸⁵ His recordings of Chopin's works accordingly display few, or even scarcely any signs of the practice. In Busoni's piano roll of the *Polonaise in A-flat major op. 53 ('Heroic')*, even the chords Chopin marked as to be played arpeggiated are treated in a simultaneous fashion. More tellingly, in his edition of the same work, Busoni removed Chopin's original arpeggio markings (on the three chords in the second last bar), hence indicating that the chords are to be played together. Nevertheless, there were occasions when Busoni felt that the spreading of chords was necessary. This can be heard on his piano roll of the *Prelude op. 28 no. 15 ('Raindrop')* where chords are frequently arpeggiated in both the opening and closing sections.⁸⁶ Perhaps even Busoni was allowed to indulge in a little sentimentality at times.

Restraining order or ordering restraint?

In 1879, the pianist and pedagogue Jan Kleczyński complained of the way bad pianists inject false 'feeling' into the playing of Chopin's music by 'striking the chords with the left hand just before the corresponding notes of the melody'.⁸⁷ His grievance was seconded by other pianists, especially those so-called 'heirs' of Chopin's teaching – Streicher, Mikuli, Mathias and Saint-Saëns (via Pauline Viardot) – who unanimously denounced a 'pseudo-tradition' that submitted Chopin's music to

⁸⁵ Busoni, *Well-Tempered Clavichord*, vol. 1., preface.

⁸⁶ Hamilton, 169-170.

⁸⁷ Kleczyński, 19.

agogic distortations in the name of the vague and convenient term ‘rubato’.⁸⁸ Warnings against abuse of asynchronisation and arpeggiation continued to be sounded well into the twentieth century, even by those who themselves indulged in this breaking of hands. Hofmann regarded such ‘limping’ as ‘the worst habit you can have in piano playing’.⁸⁹ The accompanist Coenraad Valentyn Bos regretted later in life his earlier use of the ‘faulty mannerism’ and ‘unforgivable musical sin of anticipating the right hand with the left’.⁹⁰

In his examination of recordings made by Godowski, Hofmann and Hambourg, mostly of works by Chopin, Hamilton concludes that despite their reservations, they all employ asynchronisation, albeit – in the case of the two former players – less frequently and more subtly than their contemporaries. He also notes in the case of Hofmann and Hambourg that their criticism of the mechanism of ‘breaking’ appeared in didactic writings, respectively called *Piano Questions Answered* and *How to Play the Piano*. He concludes therefore that such advice was probably intended for amateur pianists, since they were much better off ‘avoiding asynchronisation altogether than indulging in it regularly and crudely’.⁹¹ In other words, it was the excessive and exaggerated employment of asynchronisation that was criticised, not its occasional use; cautioning against abuse rather than advocating disuse.

⁸⁸ Eigeldinger, 118.

⁸⁹ Hofmann, 25.

⁹⁰ Leikin, 34-5.

⁹¹ Hamilton, 149.

In this respect, we can perhaps view the claims of various pupils on what they learned about Chopin's rubato in the same light. In his description of Chopin's rubato as taught to him by Pauline Viardot, Saint-Saëns contrasts a subtle approach to asynchronisation with the manner in which it was employed by less sensitive pianists:

The accompaniment holds its rhythm undisturbed while the melody wavers capriciously, rushes or lingers, sooner or later to fall back upon its axis. This way of playing is very difficult since it requires complete independence of the two hands; and those lacking this give both themselves and others the illusion of it by playing the melody in time and dislocating the accompaniment so that it falls beside the beat; or else – worst of all – content themselves with simply playing one hand after the other. It would be a hundred times better just to play in time, with both hands together, but then they would not have the artistic air.⁹²

The implication is that 'playing in time with both hands together' is offered only as a better alternative than simply 'playing one hand after the other'. But it is hardly the ideal style of performance, least of all in Chopin.

In fact, Chopin himself seemed to have recommended a subtle asynchronisation in his teaching. His pupil Georges Mathias relates:

Chopin... often required simultaneously that the left hand, playing the accompaniment, should maintain strict time, while the melodic line should enjoy freedom of expression with fluctuations of speed. This is quite feasible:

⁹² Saint-Saëns, quoted in Eigeldinger, 49; Hudson, 195.

you can be early, you can be late, the two hands are not in phase; then you make a compensation which re-establishes the ensemble.⁹³

This manner of playing was taught to Mathias in the study of Weber's works. More revealingly, we find numerous examples of 'written-out' asynchronisation throughout Chopin's music. Indeed, Chopin often used highly elaborate and intricate notation in his melodic writing. In a Parisian review of his Nocturnes op. 15 in 1834, he was criticised for his 'affectation' in writing his music 'almost as it should be played'.⁹⁴ The reviewer might well have been referring to the *Nocturne op. 15 no. 2* (Example 3.8), where at the recurrence of the melody, Chopin, by means of written-out ornamental embellishments, clearly indicates that the A-sharp in measure 9 must occur later than the first C-sharp in the bass. In addition, the Paris edition prints the second bass note in the measure vertically below the G-sharp rather than the E-sharp.⁹⁵ The resulting effect is rubato or a dislocation of the hands, since the melody is now displaced from the bass. If we keep in mind that in Chopin's music, nearly all ornaments are to be executed on the beat together with the bass note (as Chopin's markings in his pupils' scores indicate), we have a remarkable wealth of evidence that hints at an attempt to notate precisely the sort of dislocation of hands involved in Chopin's rubato playing. More significantly, it provides us with a fair impression of how Chopin intended his music to be performed, or how he himself would have performed it.

Ex. 3.8. (a) Chopin, Nocturne in F-sharp major, bar 1

⁹³ Mathias, quoted in Eigeldinger, 49-50.

⁹⁴ *Le Pianiste*, March 1834, 78.

⁹⁵ Hudson, 190.



(b) Chopin, Nocturne in F-sharp major, bars 8-9



Likewise, Chopin's advice to his pupil Mikuli that chords should be struck 'strictly simultaneously' and that 'breaking was allowed only where the composer himself had specified it',⁹⁶ should not be easily dismissed as condemnation of all unmarked arpeggiation, but as caution against abuse of it. After all, Chopin sometimes told his students to imitate the sound of guitars in certain chordal passages, which suggests an arpeggiation that is not indicated in the score.⁹⁷ According to Lenz, this was recommended in the opening of the *Mazurka in B major op. 41 no. 3*. It was also applied to the accompanying chords following the main bass beats in the *Nocturne op. 9 no. 2* which Chopin maintained should sound like 'a chorus of guitars'.⁹⁸ A brief survey of the late romantic recording legacy reveals that most

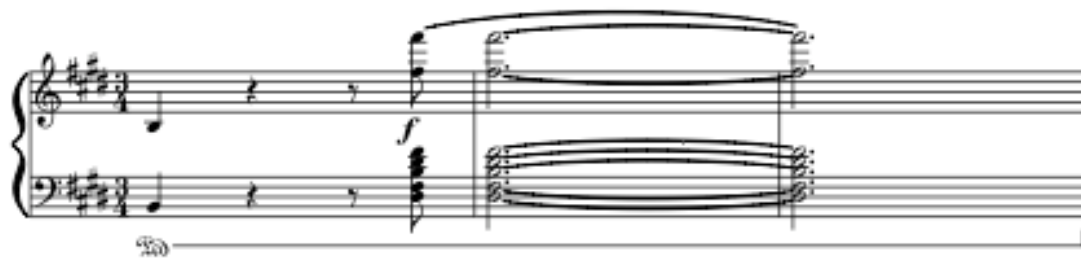
⁹⁶ Mikuli, quoted in Eigeldinger, 41.

⁹⁷ Hamilton, 150-151.

⁹⁸ Lenz, quoted in Eigeldinger, 76.

pianists arpeggiated some, if not all, of the chords in this nocturne. Furthermore, as noted earlier, there are places in Chopin's compositions where the spreading of chords, though necessary (given the different hand spans of pianists), is not always explicitly stated. A look at the *Scherzo in C-sharp minor op. 39* provides a case in point (Example 3.9). Lenz commented that Chopin had written 'a chord that no left hand can take – least of all that of Chopin, who *arpeggiated* [my italic] it on his light-touch, *narrow-keyed*, Pleyel'.⁹⁹ Most pianists nowadays, however, simply omit certain notes in the left-hand chord (usually the topmost F-sharp note) in order to preserve the rhythmic clarity, or simply play both the D# and F# with the thumb, rather than adopt arpeggiation as a viable solution.

Ex. 3.9. Chopin, Scherzo in C-sharp minor, bars 6-8





Afterword: An Inevitable Decline

What caused the decline of the preoccupation with the singing tone? Why did the techniques so critical to interpreting Chopin's music fall out of favour? A fundamental reason lies in the fact that modern pianism often has different priorities – structural delineation, rhythmic strictness, stylistic suitability and greater 'fidelity' to the score being the most important. This last aspect most likely deterred modern-day pianists from adopting the strategies so favoured by the Romantics, since they seemed to constitute a deliberate meddling with the composer's written instructions.

Perhaps developments in piano making were also partly responsible for this shift, as tone quality became more standardised and less input was required on the part of the performer. Even in Chopin's day, the Erard had already acquired a relatively smooth fullness of tone – in other words, a beautiful, ready-made sound. We know, however, that Chopin himself preferred a Pleyel: 'I play on an Erard piano where I easily find a ready-made tone. But when I feel in good form and strong enough to find my own individual sound, then I need a Pleyel piano'.¹⁰⁰ In fact, it was on the Pleyel (with its more variable tone) that Chopin was able to create the subtle

¹⁰⁰ Eigeldinger, 26.

tonal shadings and nuances so admired by his contemporaries. Unfortunately, or fortunately for us, we no longer need to concern ourselves with creating a beautiful tone quality given the ready-made tone available on our modern pianos. On the contrary, we are perhaps more preoccupied with ‘forcing’ the tone or in producing the greatest volume of sound. This is not to exaggerate, for there are still pianists today capable of producing a wide variety of tonal colours. But generally speaking, the emphasis has somewhat shifted in favour of the *quantity* rather than quality of sound.

A final point to add is that a poor recorded legacy probably dissuaded later pianists from adopting the same style of performance as their Romantic predecessors. After all, early recording technology was simply inadequate to capture tonal balance and subtleties, which were brought to a high point of creativity and excellence in the hands of the late romantic pianists. To our modern ears, many of these recordings sound careless, insensitive and even banal. Given that many of these pianists were already well past their prime when they entered the recording studio and that some of them did not take the recording seriously (viewing it as a transient technology), these recordings could hardly be seen as representative of their art.

Attempting to rediscover the art of ‘singing’ on the piano is not a lost cause. Today, the type of rubato as practised by Chopin survives, albeit in some unexpected places. Asynchronisation and arpeggiation continue to be widely practised in music of the Baroque period and remain standard aspects of harpsichord and clavichord playing. More illuminatingly, Chopin’s rubato has been linked to jazz and popular music. Virgil Thomson wrote in 1940:

Chopin's prescription for rubato playing... is that the right hand should take liberties with the time values, while the left hand remains rhythmically unaltered. This is exactly the effect you get when a good blues singer is accompanied by a good swing band.¹⁰¹

The analogy to jazz was also noted by Percy Scholes, who wrote in his 1936 article 'Rubato' in *The Oxford Companion to Music*: 'For an undoubted application in later times of the alleged Chopin principle of rubato, see "Ragtime and Jazz"'.¹⁰² Rubato also appeared in popular singing, widely employed by the likes of singers such as Al Jolson, Judy Garland, Ethel Merman and Frank Sinatra. In a sense, traces of the practice still exist and are very much kept alive in our modern repertoire. What this ultimately means for modern pianists is that perhaps we can view the practice less suspiciously and more welcomingly – not just as an authentic performance practice of the period, but also as a still valid method of interpretation. 'Singing' on the piano may have suffered a decline in popularity, but is not irrecoverably lost: it is merely waiting to be revived.

¹⁰¹ Kostelanetz, 123.

¹⁰² Ward, 894.

4

Rewriting Chopin: Virtuosity and the Musically Virtuous

Anton Rubinstein's approach to the Funeral March of Chopin's Piano Sonata no. 2 in B-flat minor, op. 35 is well known, for it was highly influential. At his 1885 concert in Pressburg, Rubinstein played the reprise after the trio as one large gradual decrescendo – beginning *fortissimo* and then descending uniformly into *pianissimo* – an approach entirely contrary to Chopin's dynamic indications. In fact, Rubinstein had invented for himself a program: a funeral procession approaching the graveside from a distance, halting by the graveside (trio) and afterwards passing away. In the audience that evening was Liszt, who later told Rosenthal (also present on this occasion) that the Funeral March was 'full of effects' but 'quite superficial'.¹⁰³ Liszt himself preferred Chopin's more interesting dynamic nuances, although he could not resist adding that Chopin's diminuendo marking at the end could be more effective had it been introduced earlier. Needless to say, Rubinstein's dramatic conception of the Funeral March found favour with pianists such as Busoni, Rachmaninov, Raoul Pugno and even Rosenthal (despite his criticism of Rubinstein's interpretation). Interestingly, a recent recording of crossover classical-pop pianist Maksim Mrvica features the now largely neglected Rubinsteinian reading – a nostalgic, albeit telling reminder that perhaps the imaginative freedom once so celebrated by the late

¹⁰³ Mitchell and Evans, 101.

romantics is now often dismissed by modern purists as distorting the original and pandering to popular taste.

Rubinstein was not above changing – even directly contradicting – Chopin’s dynamic markings in order to produce a desired effect. At one of his Historical Recitals in Paris, Rubinstein played the two *forte* passages in the recapitulation of the Barcarolle op. 60 *pianissimo*. The pianist Charles Hallé remarked that it was ‘clever but not Chopinesque’.¹⁰⁴ Yet Hallé, as mentioned earlier, heard Chopin perform the same piece at his last Paris concert in 1848, when he played ‘from the point where it demands the utmost energy, in the most opposite style, *pianissimo*’.¹⁰⁵ Hallé for his part was nearly convinced that this new version was preferable to the original. As also previously mentioned, an interesting suggestion concerning the Polonaise in A major, op. 40 no. 1 (‘Military’) was put forth by Liszt to his pupils. He claimed that after the trio section in D major, he played the return of the first part softly (Chopin marked this first time *forte*) and then loudly as written. ‘Chopin did not mark it thus’, Liszt explained ‘but he conceded to my playing it so; he was not at all dissatisfied with it’.¹⁰⁶ Here we have the performer expressly challenging the composer’s intention yet being given the stamp of approval by the composer himself. ‘The Great Pachmann’ (as he called himself) or the ‘pianissimist’ (as Liszt called him) was also fond of softening Chopin’s dynamic markings, especially in loud passages (Pachmann was famous for his extraordinary *pianissimo* or ‘Pachmanissimo’ sound – an unearthly quiet yet penetrating sound that could carry across the vast recesses of the concert

¹⁰⁴ Huneker, 54.

¹⁰⁵ Eigeldinger, 66.

¹⁰⁶ Walker, 251.

hall). In the Ballade no. 1 in G minor, op. 23, Pachmann played the coda *piano* rather than *fortissimo* as written. We hear this also in Horowitz's performance of the same piece, where *piano* is taken at least from the start of the coda until the first *crescendo* indication. The changing of dynamics in all these instances seemed to have been undertaken with the desire to avoid literal repetitions, to introduce programmatic ideas, or simply to offer a refreshing change to a well-worn repertoire piece.

More commonly, bass notes could be shifted an octave lower or doubled. This is entirely feasible on a modern Steinway with its strengthened upper registers (in contrast to an Erard or Pleyel of the 1830s where the bass resonance was prone to overwhelming the treble), although whether such a vast sonority was desirable for Chopin is debatable. When a pupil of Henselt played to Liszt a transcription (of a Romance by Count Vielgorsky) made by her teacher, Liszt expressed his disapproval at one place where single notes in the bass had been replaced by octaves. He then added rather wistfully: 'You will never find that with Chopin. He had an exceedingly fine feeling for such things!'¹⁰⁷ No doubt this was Liszt in his later years when he had gained a greater respect for the written score (the younger Liszt would have had no qualms about tampering with the bass). Needless to say, whatever feelings of ambiguity Liszt might have felt towards Henselt's compositional style, he certainly was very clear about Chopin's, and his comment reveals to us how particular Chopin could be about achieving a fine balance in his textures. Interestingly, Horowitz once commented that 'if Chopin were to see today's pianos he would change lots of things'¹⁰⁸ and one of the 'things' Horowitz took to changing was reinforcing the bass

¹⁰⁷ Walker, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Radio interview with Vladimir Horowitz. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0vOPbnbZrY>.

with octaves, especially in climactic passages. In the first movement of the Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, op. 35, Horowitz transposes the bass an octave lower, two bars from the end. In all fairness, the move is a logical one since the bass at this point is in a downward progression. This deep ringing B-flat hence adds to the dramatic build-up of sound, providing a satisfying conclusion. The same thing happens in the fourth movement of the same sonata, where the lowest bass note (B-flat) of the final chord is doubled an octave lower thus resulting in a rather startling but spectacular effect. The doubling of basses an octave below was likewise applied to the opening note of Chopin's Berceuse in D-flat major, op. 57, as heard on recordings by Eugen d'Albert¹⁰⁹ and Wilhelm Backhaus¹¹⁰. Leschetizky, in his 1906 piano roll of Chopin's D-flat Nocturne, also doubles the bass at frequent intervals.¹¹¹ Fascinatingly, on Paderewski's recording of the Funeral March from the Second Piano Sonata (in the reprise after the middle section), he plays the first chord in the left hand of every bar an octave lower and slightly spread, imitating rather impressively the tolling of bells.¹¹² Busoni did the same, only at every two bars.¹¹³

The extended use of bass notes was often accompanied by reinforcements in melody and harmony. In the Waltz in C-sharp minor, op. 64 no. 2, Thalberg reportedly played some of the single quaver notes of the *più mosso* section in octaves.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Busoni strengthened the melody with octaves and chords in the

¹⁰⁹ Arbiter CD 147.

¹¹⁰ HMV DB 1131.

¹¹¹ Pearl Opal CD 9839.

¹¹² Victrola 6470A.

¹¹³ Brugnoli (ed.), *Sonata no. 2, op. 35 per pianoforte*.

¹¹⁴ Porte, 87.

Étude op 25 no. 12 in C minor.¹¹⁵ Emil von Sauer, too, added some doubling in his recording of the same work.¹¹⁶ In his edition of the Études op. 25 no. 10 in B minor, Karl Klindworth recommends strengthening the octaves in the left hand by filling in chords for the first and seventh eighth notes of every bar, starting from the fifth bar from the last. He also added thirds to the harmony of the first six notes of the left hand, in the fifth bar from the last in the Prelude no. 4 in E minor. Such amendments may well have been aimed at exploiting the full sonority of the piano. But sometimes, the issue may be as simple as changing the text to suit the player's technique. Henselt in particular was fond of altering Chopin's score, and if in the process he could display his technical prowess, this made it even more desirable. In his approach to Chopin's *Black Key* Étude, Henselt added octaves to the right hand as well as extending some chords in the left¹¹⁷ (his ability to play widely spread chords single-handedly was legendary). Even more radical revisions were made to the first movement of Chopin's Piano Concerto no. 1 in E minor, for which he made a 'fragment' for piano solo. If Liszt found Henselt's transcription lacking in the delicacy and balance so critical to Chopin, he might have been even less impressed by the latter's attempts in this work. In addition to octave doubling of bass notes, harmonies were filled out and the range of figuration extended. At one point, Henselt even 'corrected' Chopin's harmony by rewriting the bass line so as to avoid the parallel octaves Chopin had overlooked. (Liszt too had noticed the offending

¹¹⁵ Couling, 185.

¹¹⁶ Hamilton, 223.

¹¹⁷ Schonberg, 131.

progression but refrained from making any changes, insisting that because it was Chopin, it sounded fine).¹¹⁸

Another liberty romantic pianists took with the score was to introduce extended figurations in the treble – a practice not unlike Chopin’s own habit of improvising ornamental variants. When Lenz played to Chopin the B-flat Mazurka with a prolonged ornamental embellishment introduced by Liszt, Chopin noted wryly: ‘*He* showed you that. *He* must have a hand in everything.’¹¹⁹ The remark was probably made in light jest of Liszt’s tendency to add his own interpretations to the text, but it could well have been applied to a whole host of other pianists. On his piano roll of Chopin’s D-flat Nocturne, Leschetizky extends the range of the ornamented figures at the second reappearance of the main theme, thus creating melodic variation and interest. Scalar passages in particular were favourite targets for such extended ‘re-writings’. Busoni, for example, extended the final scale of the Étude op. 25 no. 11 in A minor.¹²⁰ We hear a rather similar approach in Moiseiwitsch’s recording of Chopin’s *Minute Waltz*, where, eight bars from the end, Moiseiwitsch makes a lavish run, thus extending the scale by almost an octave.¹²¹ Pachmann, too, was not satisfied with Chopin’s original, and in his 1907 recording of the same piece, inserts a scalic run on D-flat major following the trill at the end of the lyric section.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Hamilton, 222.

¹¹⁹ Lenz, 49.

¹²⁰ Hamilton, 223.

¹²¹ Pearl GEMM CD 300.

¹²² G&T 5566.

One of the ways pianists attempt to ‘modernise’ the score (and one particularly favoured by pyrotechnic virtuosi) was the use of ‘blind’ or interlocking octaves. This could be applied to virtually any type of figuration – scales, trills, arpeggios, etc. – and when handled deftly, the result could be both aurally and visually impressive. Liszt recommended his pupils to substitute the final chromatic scale of Chopin’s Scherzo no. 1 in B minor, op. 20 with interlocking octaves. This approach was accordingly adopted by Rosenthal (a Liszt pupil) and, more famously, by Vladimir Horowitz. A more modern exponent of fidelity to the score, Claudio Arrau, readily disapproved: ‘It’s ten times easier that way than to play the chromatic scale with the accents as they are written, and the power’.¹²³ Similarly, in his edition of the op. 10 Études, Hans von Bülow provided a variant for public performance by replacing the *unisono* figuration at the end of the C minor Étude op. 10 no. 12 with alternating octaves. The effect, according to Huneker, is ‘brazen’ for ‘Chopin needs no such clangorous padding in this étude’.¹²⁴ Alfred Hoehn in his recording of the same piece likewise played the final cascade of semiquavers in interlocking octaves¹²⁵ (the pianist Frank Merrick summed it up with one word – ‘Execrable!’¹²⁶). The same ‘trick’ device was applied to the end of the third movement of Chopin’s Piano Concerto no. 1 in E minor. In this instance, the entire semiquaver passage (originally written in unison octaves divided between the hands) was re-written as interlocking octaves by Tausig and played as such by himself, Rosenthal and a few others.¹²⁷ The

¹²³ Horowitz, 122.

¹²⁴ Huneker, 96.

¹²⁵ Parlophone E10915.

¹²⁶ Campbell, 165.

¹²⁷ Hamilton, 221.

famous critic George Bernard Shaw was scathing about such ‘improvements’, declaring: ‘I am now more than ever convinced that Tausig’s early death was, like that of Ananias, the result of supernatural interposition for the extermination of a sacrilegious meddler’.¹²⁸ In the trio section of Chopin’s ‘Military’ Polonaise, Sigismond Stojowski suggests modifying the unison trills and octaves by alternating the hands with added chords and octaves.¹²⁹ He also points out quite accurately that it is paradoxically easier to achieve the intensity and power in this passage with the interlocking octaves. It is hence not difficult to see how the ease of execution coupled, with the capacity to achieve unparalleled force, makes the temptation to introduce such changes to the text hard to resist.

¹²⁸ Shaw, 279.

¹²⁹ Johnson, 40.

5

Tempo

In 1883, Liszt put himself on record against excessively fast tempos frequently indulged in by virtuosos: 'I am not in favour of extreme *tempi*, as often heard done by virtuosos of today. It is justifiable only in a few exceptions – perhaps with Mendelssohn'.¹³⁰ The comment was made in response to a pupil's playing of Chopin, and it gave Liszt occasion to caution his pupils against playing the bravura passages in Chopin too rapidly. In his memoirs, published at the beginning of the twentieth century, William Mason recalled having heard Liszt play many of Chopin's works and noted that Liszt's choice of tempo was markedly different from those of the present day. According to Mason, more moderate rates were not only adopted by Liszt, but by Dreyschock and other 'contemporaries and personal friends of Chopin'. This seemed to hint at a certain 'authentic' tradition regarding Chopin's tempo. He concludes therefore that in the current milieu 'there is a general tendency to play the rapid movements in Chopin... too fast' as well as a concomitant tendency to play slow movements too slowly.¹³¹

In any case, it seems that the tendency towards extremely fast and slow speeds in our time has not changed much from the situation detailed by Mason in 1901. After all, who today would be surprised to hear the *Minute Waltz* performed in literally less

¹³⁰ Walker, 275.

¹³¹ Mason, 243-247.

than a minute? Or who would be surprised to hear a very slow performance of the Study in E major, op. 10 no. 3 (until they realise that Chopin's original tempo marking perhaps suggests quite the opposite)? Decades of performance may have unwittingly resulted in a 'standard' reading of a piece, one that may depart radically from the composer's original intentions, at least as far as they can be ascertained. If Chopin were alive today, he would perhaps be amazed by some of the speeds at which his compositions are performed, but there is also no telling if he might have disapproved of such readings.

In the notes to his edition of the Chopin études, Kullak expressed the idea that Chopin's original metronome markings should not be strictly followed since the piano has developed in both touch and tone since Chopin's day:

Since the "English mechanism" has supplanted the German continually more and more... pianoforte passages, even in the most fiery tempo, must yield some of that former "quickfingeredness", which so easily degenerated into inexpressive trifling, and be executed with greater breadth of style.¹³²

He also added that the 'nobler' and 'more sonorous tone' of a modern piano would be better suited to a broader treatment in tempo; in other words, slower speeds of execution. In a sense, Kullak's assessment is correct, given that the lighter mechanism and shallower fall of keys on pianos of the 1830s certainly made many of the rapid passages in Chopin easier to execute than on a piano of only a few decades later. Kullak accordingly provided new metronome markings for several of the études, many of them substantially slower than Chopin's originals. For the first study of op.

¹³² Kullak, *Etudes*, vol. 1, 25.

10, for instance, Kullak gives Chopin's metronome mark (crotchet = 176), but adds that this 'impairs the majestic grandeur'¹³³ of the piece, and suggests 152 instead. For the study in F major, op. 10 no. 8, Kullak endorses the slower tempo of the Klindworth edition (minim = 80), as opposed to 96 in the autograph manuscript, while in the following study, op. 10 no. 9, he again prefers the more relaxed speed given by Tellefsen (dotted crotchet = 80) rather than the original 96. (Klindworth strikes a fair medium with 88).

Arthur Friedheim, in his edition of the Chopin études, likewise supplies much slower metronome markings compared to Chopin's (op. 10 no.1 is given at an even slower rate of crotchet = 144). In his preface, Friedheim claimed that the new metronome markings were derived from the elderly Liszt's performance practice, whereas Chopin's original metronome markings can be attributed to Liszt's early performances. Friedheim, a particularly favoured student of Liszt, might have sourced this from Liszt himself (the dedicatee of the *Études* op. 10) who claimed that he and Chopin 'discussed every detail most thoroughly'¹³⁴ before sending the score off to the printer. In any event, Friedheim seemed to view the slower metronome markings as at least reflective of Liszt's later attitude to tempo in practice. Friedheim further mentions having heard Anton Rubinstein perform at least eight of the études in 1873, and implies that the slower speeds accorded with his approach too.¹³⁵

To take one example from the études – the famous *Black Key* Étude in G-flat major, op. 10 no. 5 is now often used as a vehicle for display, with performers

¹³³ Kullak, *Études*, vol. 1, 2.

¹³⁴ Friedheim, *Études*, preface.

¹³⁵ Hamilton, 272.

competing to see who can play it faster. It is worth noting that the fast tempo marking (*Vivace brillante*, crotchet = 116) was not to be found in Chopin's autograph manuscript, which merely indicates '*leggierissimo e legatissimo*'. It was later added for publication (perhaps in consultation with Liszt?). There is also the problem of maintaining too fast a tempo from the outset, since the pianist eventually has to play taxing double-octaves that descend quickly in a flourish of triplets.¹³⁶ Most pianists on record (especially those that adopt an extremely fast speed) often slacken the pace at this point, but no indication for slowing down is given. In some cases, notably with pianists schooled in the late romantic tradition, the ending even involves a little 're-composition'. We hear this on Rosenthal's recording, where instead of triplets, he plays the final descent octave *glissandi* on the black keys – a move no doubt calculated to enhance the overall impressive effect, but also paradoxically easier to achieve than Chopin's original figuration at the given speed. On the other hand, the temptation to play at a dangerously fast tempo in Pachmann's case involves more than the need for rewriting – it needs a retake.¹³⁷ His recording of the *Black Keys Étude* made in 1927 remains one of the most extraordinary relics of the early recording era, as indeed of all time. Pachmann (or 'The Chopinzee' as the American critic James Gibbons Huneker fondly nicknamed him) chatters, hums along and mutters his way through the piece, essentially giving what the critic George Bernard Shaw famously called his 'pantomimic performance, with accompaniments by Chopin'.¹³⁸ Having launched full speed into the etude, he gets himself into a fix only a few bars later and with the words 'I try again...', he makes a second brave attempt and succeeds this

¹³⁶ Lear, www.angelalear.com.

¹³⁷ OPAL CD 9840.

¹³⁸ Schonberg, 313.

time. At the end of the piece, Pachmann too does not follow Chopin's score and plays instead the Godowsky version, with its modified ending of octaves in contrary motion, accompanied by a massive *ritardando*. Perhaps an interesting anecdote concerning performing Chopin at very rapid tempos can be illustrated by Nicholas Slonimsky, who famously performed the *Black Keys Étude* while holding an orange in his right hand and rolling it back and forth across the black keys of the keyboard. (In this writer's opinion, at least, this rather cleverly parodies the fast approach often taken by modern-day pianists-- playing the study too quickly often results in a lack of clarity, and may well sound no different from rolling an orange over the keyboard).

Excessively fast tempos also seem to have been the fate of the Polonaises. Chopin's recommendation to his pupils to determine the tempo of the Polonaises by counting aloud in quavers perhaps implies that the tempo should not be taken too quickly.¹³⁹ His pupil Mikuli recalled:

I remember Chopin's advice to feel the [Polonaise] in quavers. A 6/8 counted aloud in *allegro con brio* can determine the exact tempo with absolute certainty, for the simple reason that nobody will be able to count six quavers in a clear and loud voice in too fast a tempo.¹⁴⁰

A slower tempo would better suit the stately, dance-like character that Chopin intended for his Polonaises.

Another section that has become a showpiece of technical virtuosity is the famous octave passage in Chopin's Polonaise in A-flat major, op. 53 ('Heroic'). The

¹³⁹ Eigeldinger, 156.

¹⁴⁰ Mikuli, quoted in Eigeldinger, 82.

speed at which many virtuosi – past and present – execute the descending semiquaver octaves in the bass not only makes prominent what is simply an accompaniment figure, but destroys the essential nobility of the theme in the right hand,¹⁴¹ thus transforming Chopin's 'trampling of horses in the Polish cavalry' (according to Liszt) into a racecourse spectacle. Hallé recounts an occasion where Chopin confided to him 'how unhappy he felt, because he had heard his 'Grande Polonaise' in *A flat jouée vite!* [played fast], thereby destroying all the grandeur, the majesty of this noble inspiration'.¹⁴² The elderly Liszt also warned his pupils against playing this same octave passage too quickly, although he likely would have been doing the same forty years earlier. According to Göllicher, a pupil playing the Polonaise with 'great gusto' was rewarded with Liszt's rather icy remark 'I don't want to listen to how fast you can play octaves'.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the temptation to play this passage very rapidly as a sign of technical prowess has, perhaps regrettably, become the fashion amongst pianists.

If rapid tempos were all the rage for fast pieces, the reverse was also true for the slower ones. No doubt this had the added appeal of evoking the more 'poetic' side of Chopin (naturally such self-indulgent sentimentality has its own dangers). The tradition of playing the E major Étude op. 10. No. 3 extremely slowly and sentimentally may be traced as far back as Liszt, who in the 1880s was recommending a 'very slow' speed. According to his pupil Carl Lachmund, Liszt 'was sarcastic with a young lady who started... too rapidly'¹⁴⁴ (Lachmund was in turn admonished for

¹⁴¹ Jonson, 159.

¹⁴² Hallé, quoted in Eigeldinger, 82.

¹⁴³ Zimdars, 164.

¹⁴⁴ Walker, 159.

starting too slowly when he later came to play the same work to Liszt).¹⁴⁵ In fact, Liszt maintained that the metronome mark given was ‘completely wrong’—which does, in fact, make one doubt how closely he was originally consulted over it-- and proceeded to demonstrate to his pupils, playing ‘very slowly and broadly’ while singing along to the main theme.¹⁴⁶ A comparison of Chopin’s autograph manuscripts with later editions, however, suggests quite the opposite: Chopin had originally envisioned a fairly fast, flowing tempo for this piece. He had initially written ‘*vivace*’, only to add ‘*ma non troppo*’ later.¹⁴⁷ By the time of the first French edition, the tempo had been changed to ‘*Lento ma non troppo*’, together with an added metronome mark (quaver = 100).¹⁴⁸ In addition, Chopin’s 2/4 time signature as well as his rhythmic notation (quavers and semiquavers), strongly hint at a faster tempo than what has now become widely accepted as the norm – a slow, languorous 4/4 treatment. Additional hints are provided by the ‘*poco più animato*’ marking at measure 21, which did not appear in the two autograph manuscripts, suggesting that Chopin probably intended a fast and unified tempo from the start.¹⁴⁹ This incidentally also resolves the problem faced by many pianists when transiting back to the opening section, where often in order to accommodate the intensely slow tempo they have adopted at the outset, a massive and rather awkward retardation is required. Besides, a *sentimentalisé* approach would probably not have accorded well with Chopin (given his disdain of excessive emotions and exaggerated tempo changes) and would have invariably destroyed the sense of pulse and musical structure that he so carefully created.

¹⁴⁵ Walker, 232.

¹⁴⁶ Zimdars, 58.

¹⁴⁷ Higgins, 118.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Lear, www.angelalear.com.

Any slow lyrical section or movement could be treated in a similar manner. Rachmaninov drastically slowed down the tempo for the *sostenuto* middle section of Chopin's *Minute Waltz*, even though no change in tempo is stated.¹⁵⁰ Many pianists on record also slow down this section, even if only slightly, to provide a desired contrast to the livelier outer sections. To a pupil who played the slow middle section of Chopin's *Fantasia-Impromptu* too slowly, Liszt responded with what he thought was a fitting description of her playing: he kept opening his mouth, inhaled deeply, and snored rather comically.¹⁵¹ The tendency to intone this middle section in a broad, languorous manner is not helped any further by its adaptation into the popular song 'I'm Always Chasing Rainbows' – an extremely lush and sentimentalised arrangement of the melody of the *Impromptu*'s middle section – which has been recorded numerous times by singers over the years.

Chopin's pupil Adolf Gutmann claimed that the chorale-like middle section of the Nocturne in G minor, op. 37 no. 1, should be taken 'quicker' than the rest, adding that Chopin had simply 'forgot to mark the change of movement'.¹⁵² This may well have been true. But unfortunately we can never be certain, for although there exists an anonymous copy corrected in Chopin's own hand showing a change of tempo or mood at the beginning of the central section, it had been scored out almost to the point of illegibility.¹⁵³ The pianist Vladimir Feltsman too advised today's pianists against taking too slow a tempo in Chopin's Nocturnes. Drawing an analogy to the vocal

¹⁵⁰ Methuen-Campbell, 16.

¹⁵¹ Zimdars, 77.

¹⁵² Gutmann, quoted in Niecks, 264.

¹⁵³ Eigeldinger, 154.

tradition (which we know was a source of inspiration for Chopin's art), Feltsman reasoned that:

[The Nocturnes] should not be played too slowly. The Nocturnes are vocal in character; a good singer does not take a new breath in the middle of a phrase. If a very slow tempo is taken, the singer (the pianist) could die of asphyxiation!¹⁵⁴

Needless to say, some of the speeds taken by modern pianists in slow passages would not only threaten death by 'asphyxiation', but the audience too might well have died of old age, if not of boredom.

There is, however, one possible exception in the case of the Nocturne in F-sharp major, op. 15 no. 2. Raoul Pugno, a pupil of Georges Mathias (in turn a pupil of Chopin), takes an exceedingly slow tempo on his recording of this nocturne, a choice he justified by saying that his teacher Mathias had passed the instruction down to him:

Despite the metronome marking (crochet = 40), I think that this Nocturne is generally played too quickly. The tradition that was passed down to me by my master Georges Mathias, who himself had played with Chopin, was that he impressed on me that the time signature for the opening section should have been 4/8, rather than 2/4. I play it at quaver = 52, respecting the change necessary in the second part (i.e. double the time). This Nocturne, in a different tempo, loses all its character and intimate resemblance.¹⁵⁵

Pugno's claim does give one food for thought. But if Pugno's playing of this nocturne is truly representative of a 'tradition' as handed down to him by Chopin, as he asserts,

¹⁵⁴ Feltsman, *www.feltsman.com*.

¹⁵⁵ Pugno, quoted in Eigeldinger, 79.

why then was it not transmitted in the playing of other heirs of the so-called ‘Chopin tradition’? Both Raoul Koczalski (a pupil of Mikuli) and Alfred Cortot (a pupil of Emile Descombes) recorded this nocturne at a much livelier pace, not unlike what one is accustomed to hearing nowadays. Moreover, if we recall Chopin’s advice to his pupils ‘[not to] play by too short phrases; that is to say, do not keep continually suspending the movement and lowering the tone on too short members of the [musical] thought’¹⁵⁶, we must acknowledge that this is precisely what a 4/8 conception would cause, as can be heard from Pugno’s own recording of the work.¹⁵⁷

The issue of tempo in Chopin is indeed a contentious one. There are no definitive answers, only possible parameters. In tracing performance approaches from past to present, we may not have come closer to realising Chopin’s ‘intentions’, but we have at least come closer to answering the question of whether the composer’s ‘intentions’ supercede all other interpretative possibilities. Perhaps it may simply be the case that we prefer a more nostalgic nocturne or a quick-footed waltz. Each epoch, after all, has its own taste and preferences, to which history can bear witness. More importantly, traditions – both authentic and divergent – have much to offer in contributing towards the range of possible interpretations of the text. As often is the case, taste and judgment remain our best guides to interpretation.

¹⁵⁶ Kleczyński, quoted in Eigeldinger, 43-44.

¹⁵⁷ Eigeldinger, 152.

6

Pedalling

Chopin himself called the correct use of the sustaining pedal ‘a study for life’.¹⁵⁸ He was well aware of the complexity of the device and frequently warned his pupils against misusing it. He was also especially alive to its expressive potential, and in some of his music, the pedal is used to achieve truly inimitable effects. The accounts of Chopin’s playing and teaching suggest that his pedalling was subtle and sophisticated. One pupil claimed that ‘in the use of the pedal he had... attained the greatest mastery’.¹⁵⁹ Another fellow pianist, Antoine François Marmontel described Chopin’s use of the pedal in contrast to his contemporaries:

No pianist before him employed the pedals alternately or simultaneously with so much tact and skill. With most modern virtuosos, excessive, continuous use of the pedal is a capital defect, producing sonorities eventually tiring and irritating to the delicate ear. Chopin, on the contrary, while making constant use of the pedal, obtained ravishing harmonies, melodies whispers that charmed and astonished.¹⁶⁰

Liszt had similarly commented on Chopin’s ‘artistic use of the pedals’, adding rather perceptively that it was ‘more divinely beautiful than it is possible to describe in

¹⁵⁸ Streicher, quoted in Niecks, 341.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Marmontel, quoted in Eigeldinger, 274.

words'.¹⁶¹ Perhaps it was the realisation that his pedal usage was too complex in practice to be accommodated within standard musical notation that dissuaded Chopin from indicating pedal markings in some places.

The sustaining pedal

Often, Chopin gave few, if no indications at all for use of the sustaining pedal. In the Prelude op. 28 no. 4 in E minor, he provided no pedal markings until towards the end of the piece, where it seems to be included merely to bridge the wide leaps in the bass – a feat not achievable with the hands alone. Yet this is a piece to which many pianists apply some pedal virtually throughout, given the long legato melody over repetitive chordal figurations. Furthermore, the melody can benefit from the sympathetic vibrations set up by an application of the pedal, giving it an appropriate ‘singing’ quality. In another work from the op. 28 set – the Prelude no. 20 in C minor – only the last two C-minor chords have pedal markings. Few performers today would think twice about using the pedal here, for in addition to giving the slow-moving chords an appropriate sustained sonority, the pedal also helps to enhance the volume (marked ‘*ff*’). In a sense, the pedal marking at the end is included not so much to initiate the use of the sustaining pedal at this point, but to make it clear to the performer that in contrast to the previous procedure, it is to be held on so as to allow the deep ringing bass to resonate with the succeeding chord.

If however we turn to the *Fantasia-Impromptu* in C-sharp minor, the problem of pedal usage for the performer is evident, for no instructions for pedalling are to be

¹⁶¹ Liszt, quoted in Eigeldinger, 273.

found in this work. This is hardly surprising, given that the work was not intended for publication, which perhaps accounts for the lack of detailed performance directions. Yet the widely spaced arpeggiated figurations found in the bass of the opening section (and similarly on its return) must have necessitated some use of pedalling. Even if one favoured a drier approach, the arrival of the central section, which features a *cantabile* melody over wide sweeping arpeggio accompaniment, undoubtedly calls for a generous application of the sustaining pedal, whether on a piano of Chopin's day or of our own. What this means for the performer is that sometimes the lack of pedalling instructions in Chopin does not necessarily mean that he did not intend the pedal to be used, but on the contrary, that the pedalling was so self-evident that no specific indication was necessary.

When Chopin does in fact specify pedalling, some of his directions appear inconsistent and even contradictory. Of the three occurrences of the main theme in the Ballade no. 1 in G minor, op. 23, the first has no pedal marked, whereas its later two appearances are indicated to be played with pedal. Modern performers have long puzzled over this discrepancy, many viewing it as an oversight on Chopin's part and opting for the same treatment as with the later two occurrences. However, it is worth examining Chopin's intentions in this instance: the first time the theme appears, no pedal is to be used, so that when the theme later returns, there is a contrast set up between a dry, un-pedalled sound and a lush, pedalled sonority. To treat all three instances in the same manner would be deliberately to ignore Chopin's expressed intentions. Similar inconsistencies are to be found in the *Raindrop* Prelude in D-flat major, op. 28 no. 15. Chopin's autograph manuscript indicates that the pedal is to be depressed for the whole of the first measure and also on its repetitions in measures 5,

20, 24 and 80. But the return of the same motif in measure 76 signals that the pedal is to be raised earlier, on the fourth beat. Is this carelessness or a carefully calculated effect? Given Chopin's specific and careful treatment of the pedal, the latter case does seem more likely. Chopin probably intended two different treatments of the same motif.¹⁶²

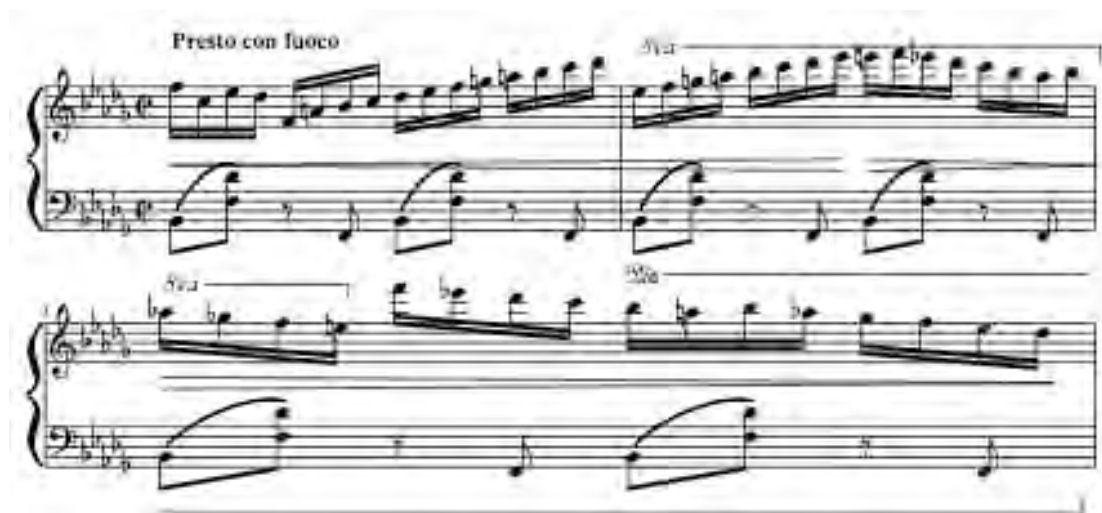
In some places, Chopin's pedal markings appear rather bold and unusual, at least to modern ears. In several of the preludes, pedalling is on the lengthy side, lasting well over several measures. This may have sounded acceptable on a piano of Chopin's day, but the greater volume and resonance of a modern Steinway means that some form of adaptation is necessary. In fact, the case of the Preludes op. 28 is particularly instructive in demonstrating the need for careful consideration when interpreting Chopin's pedal markings. Chopin conceived the Preludes on an upright Pleyel piano (not cross-strung and hence less resonant than a grand piano), which seems to account for many of the indications for long, sustained pedalling.

We find one prominent example in the B-flat minor Prelude, op. 28 no. 16, where the main theme is marked by a pedal extending over three measures (Example 4.1) and on its return in measure 18, further extended to encompass four measures. At first glance, the application is a logical one, given that there is no harmonic change throughout these bars and the pedal might even have suitably enhanced the '*presto con fuoco*' character. Yet when coupled with the rapid scalic figurations in the right hand, the extended pedalling may have created quite an overwhelming build-up of sonority. Moreover, the dynamic indications (marked '*f*' and '*ff*' with *crescendo*

¹⁶² Eigeldinger, 129-130.

respectively) probably resulted in exactly that. Even on a piano of the 1830s (a Pleyel or Erard), a considerable ‘blurring’ would have been inevitable, and this would be all the more pronounced on our louder and more resonant modern instruments.

Ex. 4.1. Chopin, Prelude in B-flat minor, bars 2-4



Similarly, we encounter extensive pedal markings in the D minor Prelude, op. 28 no. 24 – the longest extending over four and a half measures. No doubt this was intended to support the wide leaps in the bass that accompany a passionate *legato* melody, while further underscoring the stormy, tempestuous mood of the piece. It might also have sounded rather impressive on Chopin’s instrument. Needless to say, the passages where long pedalling occur are to be played *forte* (leaving no doubt of his intention, Chopin later on in the piece added ‘*sempre forte*’), which if played as such on a modern Steinway grand yields positively disagreeable results. One way pianists dealing with a post-1860s instrument can approach the problem of over-pedalling, as often pointed out by editors, is to employ more frequent changes or at least some form of half-pedalling. This would help clear away the density of sound while ensuring that the underlying harmonic basis is not lost.

Perhaps more controversial is Chopin's tendency to indicate pedalling straight through clashing harmonies. This may be easily denounced as 'bad' or insensitive pedalling by today's standards, but it is worth noting that Chopin's pianos allowed for a greater degree of such harmonic 'blending'. According to Marmontel:

The timbre produced by the pedals on Pleyel pianos has a perfect sonority, and the dampers work with a precision very useful for chromatic and modulating passages; this quality is precious and absolutely indispensable.¹⁶³

One crucial difference between Chopin's pianos and ours lies in the sustaining capacity of the earlier instrument. When a bass note is pedalled on a Pleyel or Erard, it could serve as a harmonic framework until the next bar, because the much more rapid decay of the treble notes allowed the player to blend together delicate and subtle harmonies without producing a cacophonous effect. This unique feature of the early nineteenth century pianos meant that one could hold down the pedal without prejudice even through several harmonic changes (without affecting the clarity of sound), whereas the same treatment on a modern piano would be positively disastrous.

One work that has no less perplexed modern performers with respect to Chopin's pedal markings is the Prelude in A major, op 28 no. 7. Here pedalling appears rather straightforward (with a pedal change on each new harmony) until one realises that the melodic tones on the first downbeat of every alternate bar create a clash with the prevailing harmonies. In some modern editions, Chopin's pedal markings are silently modified in favour of a timid change on each second beat, which

¹⁶³ Marmontel, quoted in Eigeldinger, 58.

naturally obliterates the fundamental tone in the bass.¹⁶⁴ Another frequent recommendation by editors is to make a light pedal change on the semiquaver each time. In any case, the question of how we can imitate the effect as desired by the composer while still maintaining clarity is paramount. One only has to look at the opening measures of Chopin's Polonaise-Fantasia op. 61 to realise how seemingly radical some of his pedal markings can be. We must also not forget that such long pedal markings are characteristic of the 'fantasy' style of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century (the most famous example being the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, 'Quasi una fantasia'). To apply our conventional rules regarding pedalling to Chopin's music would be tantamount to ignoring Chopin's intended effect, but most of all, we risk losing a unique and valuable insight into Chopin's art of pedalling.

Pedal markings are also especially problematic in the Ballade no. 3 in A-flat major, op. 47 (Example 4.2). In measures 9-10, there is a rather curious effect where the chords in the left hand 'resolve' on the third and fourth beat of the bar, but the pedal is not released till the sixth beat. Even more curiously, only a bar later in measure 11, the pedalling is altered to the 'correct' one, coinciding with the change in harmony on the fourth beat. An even more daring gesture occurs later in measures 73-74 where the pedal is held right through dominant and tonic harmonies. In both these cases, we may have to adopt some half-pedalling on the change in harmony in order to preserve the lower bass tones while allowing the harmonies to 'blend' without creating a discordant clangour. The mixture of 'unorthodox' markings together with

¹⁶⁴ Banowetz, 182.

many passages of conventional pedalling seems to imply deliberation on Chopin's part, rather than a random attitude to pedal indication.

Ex. 4.2. Chopin, Ballade in A-flat major, bars 9-11



Other pedal usages

Significantly, no markings for the *una corda* pedal are to be found in Chopin's autographs or original editions.¹⁶⁵ Yet Chopin himself frequently used it in his playing and teaching, as various accounts testify. Marmontel recalled how Chopin:

Often coupled [the damper and *una corda* pedal] to obtain a soft and veiled sonority... he would use the soft pedal alone for those light murmurings which seem to create a transparent vapour round the arabesques that embellish the melody and envelop it like fine lace.¹⁶⁶

Another pupil claimed:

¹⁶⁵ The only exception being the Nocturne in F-sharp major, op. 15 no. 2, which bears the direction '*i due Ped.*' in several places, although the directions are not in Chopin's hand. See Eigeldinger, 206.

¹⁶⁶ Marmontel, quoted in Eigeldinger, 256-257.

Chopin did not want [me to use the] pedal, yet he himself used it, particularly the soft pedal – without however indicating this to his pupils, in order not to exaggerate or overstep its resources.¹⁶⁷

The implication is that Chopin used the *una corda* pedal with great subtlety and skill, both for achieving dynamic nuances and perhaps even more so for the possibilities of tonal shading provided by the device. He never simply used it to obtain a dynamic effect that could otherwise be achieved with the fingers, as his advice to his pupils shows: ‘Learn to make a *diminuendo* without the help of the [*una corda*] pedal; you can add it later’.¹⁶⁸ This might also explain his criticism of Thalberg that ‘he produces... *piano* with the pedal instead of with the hand’.¹⁶⁹ As with the case of the damper pedal, Chopin probably also felt that use of the *una corda* pedal could vary according to the acoustics of the room, hence eventually decided that it was better to leave it up to the performer’s discretion rather than to impose a set of arbitrary rules.

But what about the other types of pedalling (namely syncopated pedalling and various techniques of half-pedalling) that were increasingly used by performers throughout the nineteenth century but were for a long time hardly reflected in musical notation? Did Chopin adopt any of these techniques in his playing? We have, as mentioned, reason to believe that Chopin’s pedalling in practice was much more sophisticated than as implied by his notation. It was frequently observed that when Chopin was playing, his foot seemed ‘literally to vibrate’¹⁷⁰, suggesting that he might

¹⁶⁷ Courty, quoted in Eigeldinger, 58.

¹⁶⁸ Franchomme, quoted in Eigeldinger, 57.

¹⁶⁹ Hedley, 76.

¹⁷⁰ Hedley, 123.

have employed some kind of half-pedalling or even flutter pedalling. In the Prelude in B-flat minor, op. 28 no. 16, Chopin originally wrote a pedal change on the half bar for the *Presto con fuoco* section that begins in measure 2. But he indicated the pedal to be depressed completely at the beginning of measure 2 and not raised again until the end of measure 4.¹⁷¹ As previously mentioned, the long pedalling would have created a significant amount of blurring even on an early piano. The question remains: Was this really what Chopin intended? Or did he perhaps do something more sophisticated here? In light of the descriptions of Chopin's playing (which describe the continuous rapid movements of his foot), it is possible that Chopin might have used some sort of half-pedalling throughout these bars. Even if Chopin had not intended these half changes of pedal, the greater volume and resonance of pianos from the 1860s onwards made the strict adherence to Chopin's pedal markings next to impossible by the next century, and some form of judicious adaptation is advisable on the part of the modern performer.

The Barcarolle in F-sharp major, op. 60 also presents an interesting case study regarding the difference between Chopin's written instructions and his actual performance. Liszt openly declared that it was remarkable that Chopin indicated pedalling in such great detail.¹⁷² Yet detailed as it is, there are no indications for syncopated or half-pedalling to be found in this work, although some pianists today almost unconsciously apply a bit of both in performance. After all, syncopated pedalling could help create a more sustained *legato* tone for the *cantabile* melody, while some short dabs of half-pedal might help clarify the denser textures in some

¹⁷¹ Rowland, 129.

¹⁷² Zimdars, 30.

places. The lack of indications for more ‘sophisticated’ pedalling (at least in the case of syncopated pedalling) may be explained by the fact that Chopin’s instrument might not have required it in the first place. Some nineteenth-century pianos suit syncopated pedalling more than others. Erards in particular had a peculiar system of under-damping (i.e. dampers that are pushed up onto the string from below rather than designed to fall from above). As a result, the bass often does not damp cleanly, especially if played strongly, creating a kind of ‘lingering’ effect even after the dampers have been engaged. In contrast, the more efficient dampers on grand pianos from the late 1850s onwards made the use of syncopated pedalling almost indispensable in achieving a fine *legato* tone.¹⁷³ Chopin’s indications may have been precise, but that precision was with respect to his own instrument. Modern performers, on the other hand, should be extremely cautious about making too literal assumptions about a notation that is imprecise, or in some cases misleading.

Chopin’s pedalling instructions, for the most part, are suitable and accurate for his own instruments. But will simply following Chopin’s text as written produce the effect the composer presumably desired? As previously discussed, the piano has changed substantially since Chopin’s time. To perform Chopin’s music according to his pedal markings necessarily assumes a piano of his era. In addition, as any sensitive performer is aware, pedalling is dependent on a number of variable factors – the characteristics of the piano, acoustics of the room, even the player’s touch. In pedalling Chopin’s music, there are no hard-and-fast rules, the only rule being to keep one’s ears as much as one’s eyes open. Time has proven that Chopin’s dictum ‘the

¹⁷³ Hamilton, 173.

correct employment of the pedal remains a study for life' holds true, perhaps even more so today.

7

Afterword

The various approaches undertaken by pianists of the past in interpreting Chopin's music reflect more general performance changes that have taken place over the last two centuries: the shift from salon to concert hall, the replacement of the mixed programme by the solo recital, the developments in piano-making and improvements in recording technology. In this study, my purpose is not to advocate a restoration of the practices of Chopin's era, nor do I claim mystical knowledge of his original intentions (which can never be fully ascertained). Instead, the tracing of performance approaches has been undertaken to draw attention to traditions that have often been neglected or simply relegated to the annals of 'historical performance practice'.

The question remains for the modern performer: should we ignore performance approaches that seem to depart from the composer's original conception? Are Paderewski's almost obsessive 'breaking of chords' or Anton Rubinstein's dramatic interpretation of the Funeral March late-romantic mannerisms to be shunned? Perhaps it is not the early interpreters who represent a 'radical' break from Chopin's aesthetic, but we modern interpreters, with our more rigorous standards and stricter notion of 'fidelity to the score'. As demonstrated, it may ironically be by 'changing' Chopin while trying to maintain a certain level of restraint characteristic of the composer that we come closer to the sound world or practices

familiar to him. Our modern text-obsessed practices, and strict adherence to the letter of the score might in Chopin's case prove unhistorical, and even occasionally—such as with the detailed observation of pedal markings originally designed for a very different instrument-- unmusical. In seeking to rediscover Chopin, we discover, in the process, what we as modern audiences may have lost in the possible variety of approaches to his music.

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