

Michael Kravchuk

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Professor Leo Elyar

### Chopin and Liszt's Contribution to Piano Technique

During the Romantic Period piano music was expanded into incredibly difficult and seemingly impossible new territories. New innovations introduced by two of the greatest piano composers, Fredric Chopin and Franz Liszt, completely revolutionized the piano. Chopin's op. 10 and op. 25 Etudes introduced new techniques that were never heard of prior to that time. Liszt's twelve Grand Etudes feature multiples melodic lines played simultaneously forcing the performer's hands to leap, run, and jump all over the piano. The Etudes were declared unplayable in their time. Both composers stretched and redefined the limits of the piano. However, the new school of pianists introduced a far more important aspect of technique into the new era other than increased virtuosic difficulties. [Thesis] The most important innovation brought out by these two composers was the *importance* (more appropriately worded as *necessity*) of musicality within virtuosity. The new set of technical demands for piano also required a need for simplicity and effortlessness within the easiest and the most difficult passages to bring about the most beautiful tone quality one could manage, and to play with deep emotional expression at all times.

Fredric Chopin was the first most important piano innovator at the start of the Romantic Era. Most of the his predecessors, such as Hummel, Field, and Weber, were not given the

opportunity to work with the new piano instrument constructed during that time. Both French and English manufacturers were continuously working and developing the piano, particularly focusing on the damper pedal by enabling the bass string vibrations to be substantially prolonged. Chopin was one of the first composers who was able to work extensively with this new innovation. He expanded piano technique by developing a new dependence on pedal, therefore influencing his entire writing style. One particular Chopin invention was the the elaboration over a bass note which could be held on the pedal without dwindling too rapidly. He took advantage of this to develop his writing for the left hand. This is most effectively seen in pieces like the *Spianato* op. 22, the *Berceuse* op. 57, most of his Nocturnes, and the trio in the “Funeral March” from the Sonata op. 35. The bass line is sustained while the left hand makes runs up and down the keyboard. This technique was not very effective in the older pianos of the time. (Eigeldinger 18).

Chopin’s pianistic writing also reveals two other major innovations that were revolutionary in their time, involving an inspirational, very pianistic, element. First, (although this technique was already used by other composers but nowhere near the extent that Chopin incorporated it) playing two notes against three notes, each in a separate hand, which requires extreme independence of the hands for all the parts to fall harmoniously into place. This is seen in Etude op. 25 no. 2, *Nouvelles Etudes* No. 1 and 3, *Fantaisie Impromptu* op. 66, and his Waltz op. 42. At the end of Chopin’s Nocturnes op. 32 no. 2 and op.55 no.2 there are groupings of five notes against three notes; very easy to play alone, but incredibly difficult when played with both hands. Secondly, the other innovation is, as Franz Liszt put it, “small groups of grace notes, falling like tiny drops of speckled dew over the melodic figure”. This was something Chopin

transplanted into piano writing from his Bel Canto experience. Chopin borrowed from the ornamentation and melismatic style that was practiced by singers in Bel Canto repertory. The result was virtuosic passages which embellished his melodies. Although his ornamentation differed from vocal ornamentation, the similarities are evident. (Liszt 14-15). This is readily seen in Chopin's *Andante Spianato op. 22*, his Concertos op. 11 and 21, *Impromptus op. 29*, and *36*, Nocturnes, many other compositions (Eigeldinger 19).

During Chopin's time there was a quote about piano performance which stated that "Everything is a matter of knowing good fingering" (Eigeldinger 18). Although Chopin did not disagree with that statement, he sums up his own contribution to piano playing differently. He was no longer content, like most of his contemporaries and many other pianists at that time, solely with finger articulation aided at best by the wrist. In Chopin's playing, the fingers activate the whole arm; all new technical innovations rest upon the feeling of perfect continuity from the shoulder to the tips of the fingers. Within difficulties one must feel the arm to shoulder to wrist to finger connection with minimal tension. This was the start of revolutionizing virtuosic technique. August Kahlert, one of Robert Schumann's collaborators on his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, wrote about Chopin's playing; "His manner of playing is denial of all heaviness, based on a maximum reciprocal independence of the fingers and on the lightest touch which can be imagined" (Vosteen). Naturally, these innovations are reflected in his piano writing style which was substantially richer and flashier than that of his immediate predecessors, such as Hummel, Field and Weber, and of his contemporaries. The first of all his Etudes, op. 10/1 composed in 1829, illustrates this perfectly by extending over the entire length of Chopin's keyboard in its opening phrase. This reflects Chopin's particular physiological discovery; in covering distances

on the keyboard, the central pivoting finger is not the third, but the index finger, leading finger *par excellence*. From that he derived the following innovations:

1. *Flexible extension of the right hand (Etudes op 10/1 and 10/8),*
2. *Extended left-hand writing (Etude op 10/9; Nocturnes op. 27/1 and 2; prelude op 28/24),*
3. *Simultaneous extensions in both hands (Etude op. 25/1, Prelude op. 28/19),*
4. *Elaborations of scale passages to patterns alternating stepwise motion with larger intervals (Etudes op 10/4 and 25/2),*
5. *Extension of broken chords to the whole length of the keyboard (Etudes op. 10/1 and 25/12),*
6. *Extended chords either struck together or rapidly arpeggiated (Etude op 10/11, Nocturne op 48/1).*

If Chopin's technique perhaps appears as one of the most beautiful examples of Romantic pianism, it obviously does not represent all the technique that has since been composed for the instrument. After Chopin, came Liszt, who exhausted the technical possibilities of the Romantic piano by fully exploring the paths opened up by his predecessor, and joining to them his own discoveries (Eigeldinger 20). Liszt writes: "In its span of seven octaves (the piano) embraces the range of an orchestra; the ten fingers of a single man suffice to render harmonies produced by combined forces of more than 100 concerted instruments" and also "We make arpeggios like the harp, prolonged notes like wind instruments, staccatos and a thousand other effects which once seemed the special prerogative of such and such an instrument" (Liszt 136). Liszt was true to his words. He wrote for the piano as one would write for the orchestra: Multiple voices, multiple

textures, different tone colors, and contrasting sound qualities. He imitated different instruments in different registers hoping to come as close as he could to creating the illusion of an entire orchestra in one person's "ten fingers".

In 1830 Liszt was inspired by Niccolo Paganini virtuosic performances and began striving to recreate the piano and pianist in the violist's image. Liszt began practicing fourteen hours a day, re-mastering his technique which was already on a very high level. The result was an easiness and lucidity of playing which became the new standard for virtuosos around the world. Carl Lachmund, a student of Liszt writes:

“...Both etudes he played with that quiet ease and lucidness of phrasing that always impressed on in his playing, and there was an entire absence of any show of virtuosity or of dynamic extremes, so often heard in the playing of great piano virtuosos. His apparent disregard of metric time, without disturbing the symmetry of rhythmic balance, which lent the Lisztian charm to his phrasing, was to me most characteristic and wonderful.”(Lachmund 244).

This quote points to an important aspect invented for piano performance; the “ease and lucidness” of playing. The biggest expansion to piano performance may be summarized by the following; within the most difficult passages the pianist must strive for a calmness of the body especially in the shoulder, wrists, and hands, substituting virtuosic showcasing for musical ease and expressiveness.

One of the most striking aspects regarding piano technique in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the emphasis not on the fingers, but the relationship between the mind and physical execution in technical development and piano performance. It was no longer about finding “good fingering”. The new school of piano involved diving deep into the music of the

piece, connecting the mind to musical expression, and seeking simplicity and calmness within the most technically demanding challenges (Whiteside).

The impetus for pianistic development and performance lies in the imagery and the power of the mind.

“It is only when the emotional response to the aural image of the music creates in the performer’s body a physical response, a basic rhythm, as a counterpart to the rhythmic flow in a composition, that he is enabled to realize to the fullest extent the beauty inherent in the music” (Whiteside, from Perry pg. 18).

Liszt and Chopin were one of the first pianists who were able to convey this message in their playing. Despite the fact that their music contains some of the most technically demanding pieces ever written for the piano, they both sought the beauty of the music far above the amazing showcase of technique.

One of the best ways to see the emergence of the new piano school is to compare etudes written from earlier times. Chopin’s Etudes are considered one of the most wonderful masterpieces ever written for piano, despite the fact that they are *only* etudes; same goes for Liszt. The etudes prior to their time are nowadays disregarded by most modern pianists. Abby Whiteside, an influential American piano teacher writes about Czerny’s and Hanon’s etudes;

“Czerny has been responsible for untold boredom, and that is exactly why his exercises should be discarded. Creativeness in ideas is fostered by response to beauty, not to boredom. It is time we learned to use beautiful music for achieving results if we are interested in producing beautiful playing. Hanon is used for developing independent fingers with equal hitting power. Obviously this cannot be accomplished. Each finger may gain more power, but there will still be inequality in the fingers. Fingers need to be

expert only in transmitting the power of the arm. This is a different and far simpler problem, which does not demand mechanical and uninteresting patterns”

(Whiteside 177).

Both Chopin and Liszt understood this concept very well. Their etudes emphasize the melody and music and not the technique. Czerny's etudes focus more on fingerings and technique, which makes the music disengaging and uninteresting. Thus, there is a clear distinctive line; the new piano school favored musical expression far above technical adequacy. Although Chopin's etudes as well as Liszt's etudes still exercises a player's technique, they develop the player musically, which is very different from piano etudes written by Czerny or Hanon.

Using these innovations, modern pianists have built upon and contributed to the new piano school. The new image of the virtuoso was not someone who could play incredibly difficult technical passages, but one who could play them with ease and **musicality**.

Joseph Prokoff and Sophie Rosoff, students of the notorious Abby Whiteside, quote their teacher: “The ultimate result of automatic, uninspired practicing can only be an automatic, uninspired performance.” In the study of piano technique a new technique was introduced; the study of musicality. Musicality needed to be practiced along with technique and should not be considered an entirely separate matter. Chopin himself did not build his technique through hours of purely mechanical exercises. He placed tone production, beautiful sound, lyrical line, high above the “acquisition of velocity” (Eigeldinger 103). Pianist Leimer writes “critical self-hearing is, in my opinion, by far that most important factor in all of music study! Playing for hours without concentrating the thoughts and the ear...is wasted time!” (Leimer 5). Students were encouraged to listen to what they produced at the piano. Famous pianist Josef Lhévinne wrote

““Technique was never a goal in itself, rather, it was only a means to express the ideas of the composer” (Lhévinne 22).

Just like Chopin and Liszt in their time were able to play with a calmness and simplicity, most piano schools of today follow that tradition. Teacher’s attempt to eliminate unneeded tension in their students playing. Leimer writes that one must avoid “all not absolutely necessary movements and in not using all not momentarily needed muscles, and these in relaxation, is undoubtedly the system which carries one quickest to this goal” (Leimer 6). Students who focus on relaxing, listening, producing beautiful tones, expressing the melodic line in the music in their practice will find that their playing will become more graceful, more pleasurable, more satisfying to their sense of tonal beauty and the audience will hear this as well (Lhévinne 22).

Chopin and Liszt’s contribution to piano technique may also be summarized by the following: they combined the use of both the mind and the body in piano technique. It was no longer about fingerings but the right mental attitude and the engagement of the mind in both practice and performance. Josef Lhévinne comments on this by writing “Why is much playing inaccurate? Largely because of mental uncertainty” (Lhévinne 33). This revolutionary idea, which was achieved only after thousands of wasted hours of practice and numerous failed attempts, has become a standard today and is the greatest contribution that these piano legends left to the world.



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