

How To Play Chopin?

Part 2: Technical Features in the Interpretation of Chopin's Music ^[1]

By Prof. Regina Smendzianka

THE RIGHT KIND OF TONE is the basic medium in the process of developing an interpretive concept for a piece of music by any composer. In the case of Chopin the tone must be soft and resonant, with a singing quality through its entire dynamic scale (the piano *bel canto*), not too "broad" (unlike e. g. Brahms' music), but it must also allow the interpreter to play the ideal legato. The Chopin tone differs from that of other Romantic composers (e. g. Schumann or Liszt). As a pianist and a teacher, Chopin placed much importance on tones (their type, the ways of producing and carving them) when he performed his own compositions. Also, Chopin allotted a great deal of space to this problem in the preserved reports on his pupils' progress. The frequently used term, "a beautiful tone," although far from precise, indicates its noble quality achieved by means of concrete technical procedures.

Esquisses Pour Une Methode de Piano ^[2], written by Chopin himself, provides a reliable source of relevant information. This unfinished essay in French is supplemented by comments made by Chopin's pupils and their students, which give a vivid description of the Master. The extensive bibliography at the end of Chopin's book may be of help in a detailed study of the problems of tones and other secrets in interpretive techniques of Chopin's music.

Chopin believed that only the correct use of the motor apparatus and its proper forming may enable the performer to extract the right tones from the instrument in a perfectly natural manner. "It may appear that a well-formed mechanism means a skillful modulation of tones which lends them a beautiful quality." ^[3]

One of the effective ways the pianist can use the motor function is through fingering, which depends on the natural shape and size of the hand and, consequently, the characteristics and deftness of each finger.

"...Given the fact that each finger is formed differently, it is better not to destroy the charm of its unique and particular touch, on the contrary, it should by all means be constantly refined. There is strength in each finger which depends on its build." ^[4]

These observations prompted Chopin to introduce new rules of fingering and positioning the hand on the keyboard.

Chopin's tone, just like the other elements of performance of his music (the uses of dynamic scale, agogic, tempo rubato, pedal technique, kind and intensity of emotion) were radically modified as the Polish composer's style became increasingly mature. For instance, his youthful Polonaises, early Mazurkas or Waltzes, which bear the hallmarks of the pre-Romantic style (Sentimentalism) and closely - to the point of deception - resemble the compositions of Maria Szymanowska ^[5] and Michal Kleofas Oginski ^[6] (the precursors of Chopin), are played with comparatively "short", if singing, tones with a sparing use of the pedals and a limited (p-f) dynamic scale. There are also slight departures from the prevailing tempo (*rall.rit.rubato*) and an emotional distance in these pieces. The drawing-room convention and emotional restraint, as well as the functional

role of this music which cannot be ruled out even in Chopin (early Mazurkas or Waltzes), should guide interpreters in giving a noble, charming and elegant performance. However, the music must also be rhythmically disciplined and subordinated to the choreography of a dance.

The power of Chopin's genius and the rapid development of his composing technique quickly resulted in his early works exhibiting virtuosity and, a little later, more profound expression, which require performers to use an increasingly wide range of means. Some elements of the "brilliant" style, evident in the Concertos and pieces from his early Parisian period (Polonaise op. 22), quickly gave way to compositions which reveal individual and very meaningful expression.

The convention of the "brilliant" performing style (with respect to the Polish composer) does not require a separate comment as it is governed by European standards. However, typical of this convention are tones of the noblest kind, extremely exquisite and frequently carrying profound thoughts. Hence, some issues related to articulation and pulsation require some explanation. The issues in question are those which occur in Chopin's "brilliant" pieces each time long virtuoso cadences (represented by smaller symbols in the notation) are interwoven into the melodic narration. In both slower (e.g. Larghetto in F-minor Concerto op. 21 bar 26) and faster (e. g. Polonaise op. 22 bars 57, 61, 132) tempos the "meeting" of the fixed-pace cantilena with a sudden cascade of an ornamental, rhythmically irregular cadence, usually consisting of a large number of notes, if played improperly, may come as an unpleasant surprise to the listener, disturbing his peace, creating the impression of disagreeable confusion instead of charming embellishment. The organic link between the cantilena and the virtuoso ornament is achieved by blurring the differences of articulation through its gradual rather than sudden change, and, simultaneously, by controlling the pulsation in a way which prevents the tempo from dashing or slackening abruptly. The above equally applies to the problem of playing in tempo rubato, a difficult art which requires subtlety and which is one of the characteristic features of the interpretation of Chopin's music. The art is governed by the laws of a specific symmetry of movement, i. e. the "entering" and "exiting from" a momentary imbalance of the principal tempo. Thank to this symmetry the rubato, modeled in this way, is heard as a naturally pronounced word or even a whole sentence. Tempo rubato, moderately used in the interpretation of Chopin's early pieces, becomes extremely important in his mature and late compositions, where it occurs more frequently and is more distinct. It inseparably accompanies every cantilena, permitting performers to display vocal "mannerism" (e. g. holding back the higher notes, prolonging them, emphasizing modulation, etc.). It is also an expression of the close link between the instrumental and the vocal element, a distinctly typical feature of Chopin's music.

Chopin's melodic structure - mellow, emotional, singing - makes his listeners desire to know more about the vocal art. Aware of this, Chopin often discussed this subject with his pupils. The dominance of the melody (the leading part) in the homophonic texture of Chopin's compositions forces the performer to develop a technique that would enable him to show its beauty in as "attractive" way as possible. The melody, supported by the bass part and discreetly stressed ("commented on" harmonically) in the complementary parts should show, through the dynamics and color, Chopin's very unique and unparalleled harmonic structure (exquisite modulations, the chromatic scale, deceptive cadences, enharmonic changes). [7]

The homophonic quality of Chopin's music should not discourage the performer from looking in a "linear" way at the score, where he can often see a peculiar polyphony: the interesting bass line (with a melodic quality) and extremely ingenious harmonic functions of the inside parts. Highlighting and interpreting this multi-line texture greatly enriches the overall tonal impression.

Careful attention should be paid to Chopin's polyphony that appears in relatively short sections of a homophonic composition. These sections show the sophistication of the composer's counterpoint.

Below are a few examples of Chopin's polyphony:

Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat major, bars 66-70, four voice part polyphony

Polonaise in C minor op. 40 no.2, bars 97-104, ostinato

Polonaise in C sharp minor op.26 no. 1, bars 104-108, several independent melodic lines-the right hand

Mazurka in C sharp minor op. 50 no. 3, bars 1-8 and 33-41, with pick-up note, imitation

Mazurka in C major op. 56 no. 2, bars 53-69, canon

Fugue (1841), a short piece, an experiment in strict counterpoint

Ballade in F minor op. 52, bars 135-144, imitation.

Most of the brilliant examples of a heterogeneous texture can be found in Chopin's mature, late work. As the composer's harmonic, melodic and rhythmic [8] ingenuity reached higher levels, the texture reflected the pace of development of his composing technique, which is very individual and innovative and goes beyond the prevailing stereotypes. When dealing with Chopin's mature works, it is not enough for the performer to concentrate on the easily noticeable symptoms, e. g. a rising (pp-ff) dynamic scale and the sound volume, a richer pedal technique and a much freer use of agogic, refined harmonics and the individualistic form of each piece. Employing all of these means, the performer should primarily focus his attention on the expression.

The maturation process of Chopin as composer, from the youthful lyricism of his music to virtuosity and drawing-room elegance, to humor and folk orientation, and finally, to the drama and pathos of being a national composer with a prophetic vision takes him to the level of transcendence (Polonaise-Fantaisie, Barcarole and the last Mazurka.)

Those who have studied the evolution of Chopin's style find it surprising that it takes place regardless of the musical form of his compositions. His evolution can be seen in the Sonatas, Polonaises or Mazurkas of the same period. From the first look at the score, the interpreter should try to do his best to render clearly the implied meaning of expression of each piece. He should be equally careful to strike the classical balance between the form and content of Chopin's compositions. The reason is Chopin's aristocratic spirit, a feature so typical of him. An exaggeration, a lack of proportion or emotional falsity will have disastrous consequences for the performer as he will lay himself open to ridicule. The amazing popularity of Chopin's music and the pure delight it evokes in most pianists - that's what induces them to enter this enchanted world and to experience the magic of his music.

Let's wish them good luck!

English Translation: Jerzy Ossowski

[1] This is the second in a series of four articles by Prof. Smendzianka to be printed in four consecutive issues of our magazine. [The first article](#) dealt with the problems relevant to musical interpretation in the broad meaning of the term, present discusses the workshop features of Chopin music interpretation, [the third](#) deals in greater detail with the composer's Etudes, [the fourth](#) is all about Chopin's Polonaises, while the next will deal with Waltzes and Ballades.

[2] Chopin, Frederic, Esquisses Pour Une Methode de Piano. Flammarion. France 1993. Chopin Fryderyk, Szkice do metody gry fortepianowej [An Essay on Piano Methods]. Musica Iagellonica. Cracow 1995. Polish translation: Zbigniew Skowron.

[3] Chopin F., Esquisses...

[4] Chopin F., Esquisses...

[5] Maria Szymanowska nee Wolowska (1789-1831), Polish virtuoso pianist and composer. She made many tours of Europe during which she gained a reputation as an excellent pianist. Szymanowska wrote some 100 pieces. Thanks to her piano Etudes, she came to be regarded as a precursor of F. Chopin.

[6] Michal Kleofas Oginski (1765-1833), Polish composer noted for his many Polonaises which became extremely popular. Also regarded as a precursor of F. Chopin. As a young man Oginski was involved in politics. In his declining years he wrote memoirs in addition to composing.

[7] Bronarski, Ludwik, Harmonika Chopina [Chopin's Harmonic Structure]. Towarzystwo Wydawnicze Muzyki Polskiej. Warsaw 1935 (in Polish).

[8] Chopin's rhythms will be discussed in the article dealing with the interpretation of his Polonaises and Waltzes.