

Notes on Interpreting Chopin

by Angela Lear

CHOPIN'S MUSIC HAS ALWAYS posed a challenge to pianists. His compositions have retained a universal popularity and continue to be performed in virtually all corners of the world. They have been recorded and rerecorded in their thousands, so Chopin is apparently 'well-represented' - but has the challenge to his interpreter ever been successfully met?

To gain further insight into his unique musical language and stylistic practices it is essential to comprehend as far as possible his expressed intentions. Our knowledge and appreciation of this most elusive and poetic of composers is greatly enriched by the combined study of not only his original manuscripts and related material (i.e. draft scores, early editions and annotated scores), but also the many statements made by his associates, friends and pupils who knew his playing and teaching principles. In addition to the considerable amount of general correspondence, reviews and reports of his concerts are revealing, although not always laudatory, especially from avid supporters of the 'piano pounders', as Chopin called them. To this list I feel it essential to include Polish folk music, the wonderful songs and dances, and the historical development of the Polonaise, Rondo, Krakowiak and Mazur. Most of us lead busy lives so is it really necessary to undertake the time-consuming task of such studies? To answer that question so often addressed to me I would like to cite just one example of the wide disparities that exist between Chopin's expressed intentions and the interpretative approach pianists commonly adopt (including many who profess faithfulness to the text) when playing his famous 'Black Keys' Study in G flat major, Op. 10 No.5.

We are familiar with performances of this remarkable Study executed in brilliant style - played Allegro con brio/Presto with highly-charged forte dynamics, heavily accented and liberally pedaled - to suit the desired virtuosic display. This approach is, however, in direct opposition to Chopin's original score markings and his concept of its interpretation. His score markings were actually given as *leggierissimo e legatissimo* (extremely light and delicate with a very smooth effect), carefully balanced against an un-pedaled staccato l.h. accompaniment. The exaggerated dynamics and 'express train' tempo markings imposed on this Study are not to be found in the original manuscripts and so we have, regrettably, arrived at an opposing concept to that of the composer! Of course, the delicate lightness of touch Chopin demands is much easier to ignore than achieve.

There is also the problem of maintaining the tempo from the outset to include the double-octaves that descend in a final flourish of triplets. No slowing down of pace is indicated here (not even a *poco rit.*!) but even acclaimed virtuosos apply the 'brakes' at this point.

Where score markings are correctly stated in publications, his compositions still continue to fall prey to all manner of facilitating alterations in performance - perpetuated by generations of pianistic 'tradition' and stylisation. Unfortunately, the variety of erroneous 'revisions' imposed on Chopin's scores from pianists who arrogantly seek to remold his music into something that suits their 'purposes' better, remain unchallenged. Interpretatively the easier performance options of 'personalized interpretation' with 'flexibility of expression' - to the extent that originally written score directions are all but eclipsed - are spuriously applauded (and strongly defended).

The idea of a *carte blanche* or 'free for all' when interpreting Chopin is often actively encouraged on the misguided premise that pretentious sentimentality and histrionic (mis)-interpretations actually 'improve' Chopin's compositions. To perceive Chopin as the

archetypal Romantic languishing in a violet-scented mist of indecision about his scores is a misconception borne of spurious legend.

Chopin had very clear and definite views on adherence to his score details: "Chopin could not bear anyone to interfere with the text of his works. The slightest modification was a gross error for which he would not pardon even his closest friends, not even his fervent admirer Liszt. The composer considered these alterations as a veritable act of sacrilege". (Reported by Marmontel -'Chopin: Pianist and Teacher' by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger.) Chopin occasionally penciled an altered dynamic or variant into the scores of selected pupils during lessons but it was only his prerogative as the composer-pianist to make any such alterations.

On the subject of the sentimentalized/Romantic approach, we know that he shunned all forms of excess or exaggeration and was never a Romantic composer in the Lisztian or Byronic sense. Rather his unique musical language and aesthetic belong to earlier forms of art-music and classicism. He revered the music of Bach and Mozart above all other composers - the significance of which should not be underestimated when playing Chopin.

It is vital from an artistic and aesthetic standpoint that the interpreter allows absolute priority to score directions and remains within the 'guidelines' marked on the texts by the composer. These provide our most fundamental link with his intentions. To clarify these 'guidelines', albeit simplistically, I refer to score indications that form the basis of an interpretation: e.g. that given *sotto voce*/*pianissimo*/*piano* markings are not substituted for a 'preferred' *mezzo piano*/*mezzo forte*/*forte*, or broad *Largo*/*lento* tempos exchanged for the faster pace of an *Allegretto*, etc.

Chopin was also strict about the observance of his precise phrase/slur markings and agogic signs, whilst pedaling 'remains a study for life', as he said, and requires constant consideration. Within the wide variety of musical terminology and signs that form our score instructions the expressive scope is comprehensive. It is evident from his manuscripts at least that Chopin left nothing to doubt for his copyists and editors, crossing out his rejected score details with thick webs of diagonal lines that render it impossible to decipher previously written details. To further avoid misunderstanding he would write a message on his score for the engraver to clarify his precise intentions. All of which proved no guarantee against errors from copyists and editors!

Whether to pander to popular tastes, for self-aggrandizement to win accolades, or merely to satisfy the less-discerning listener and those with jaded ears, there exists the ever-present predilection to sacrifice the ultimate realization of his music to personal whim. Wayward performances displaying an obvious ambivalence towards the text are often claimed as 'great' or even 'definitive interpretations' either for commercial purposes or from obvious misunderstandings of Chopin's music. 'Virtuosic' displays of meaningless digital dexterity and the flashiness of excessively fast tempos, hard-hitting aggressively exaggerated dynamics and uncontrolled tempo deviations, that debase and trivialize his music, have become the facile recipes for accepted Chopin interpretations. This is not only seriously misleading to the public and untruthful but commits a grave disservice to the composer.

The true art of Chopin playing presents a challenge that needs to be thoroughly reviewed and reassessed.

"Simplicity is everything. After having played immense quantities of notes, and more notes, then simplicity emerges with all its charm, like art's final seal. It is no easy matter." (From a statement made by Chopin to his pupil Friedrike Streicher-Muller, who studied with the composer from October 1839-March 1841 and was the dedicatee of his Allegro de Concert, Op.46)

Great music should surely ennoble the spirit, create a moving experience and provide a lasting impression to reflect upon after the final notes have been played. To allow the composer to be revealed through the re-creation of his music must be the ultimate aim of an interpreter.

About the Author



Following her debut recital at the age of twelve and winning numerous competitions and prizes, Angela Lear studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Professor Guy Jonson (Senior Piano Professor and former pupil of Cortot). As the result of winning a Gold Medal for her performance of Ravel's 'Miroirs' she had a period of study with Nadia Boulanger.

Louis Kentner introduced her to the importance of studying Chopin's autograph manuscripts and original sources due to the various discrepancies contained in many edited publications, which eventually became her life-long devotion.

Her CD series, 'The Original Chopin', has received critical acclaim. The recent double-CD albums, Vols. IV & V, include a gratis CD presented as a spoken commentary with illustrations and detailed discussion on Chopin interpretation. Ms. Lear has toured the U.K. and abroad extensively with her illuminating lecture-recitals on Chopin. She has performed at major concert venues worldwide including recitals for various Chopin Societies and had the privilege to be invited by the Chopin Society of Warsaw to give Chopin Recitals at the Ostrogski Castle and Zelazowa Wola.

"...Chopin held strong views about the performance of his music, and the directions he left in his manuscripts are so specific that it's astonishing how far modern performance practice has departed from his stated intentions. Most pianists overdramatise his music, playing too loudly and too fast, with scant attention to phrasing and dynamics - and with inappropriate pedaling.

"...Chopin experts have long sought to remedy the situation and to recapture the true style of playing his music - among them Angela Lear.

" ... her Chopin, alongside other performances, even by some of the most respected pianists, is a revelation ... Hear what Chopin really intended." [BBC Music Magazine]

** For details of this artist, reviews listing and Real Time Audio tracks from her Chopin CD series, please visit her website at www.angelalear.com*

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