

# How to Play Chopin?

## Part 1: An attempt to provide an answer

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DURING THE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS, which will soon elapse since Fryderyk Chopin's death (1849) rather extensive amount of literature on the interpretation of his music has been produced. Today Chopin's genius is generally admired and his music is widely popular; the number of both interpreters and avid listeners is growing, giving reason to believe that Chopin music-related problems are thoroughly known. Hence the question arises whether discussing the interpretation issue can be justified.

And yet ...

The last two International F. Chopin Piano Competitions (held in Warsaw in 1990 and 1995) failed to produce first-prize winners, previously unheard-of occurrence in the entire history of the Competition.

The growing number of pianists participating in the Competition does not ensure a high standard of performance. Increased interest in the Competition shown by young pianists all over the world is not a good enough guarantee that they will be searching for the spirit of Chopin's music or taking the right direction to this end. The passage of time puts Chopin's epoch further back, making it increasingly difficult for us to learn more about it and to deepen our understanding of it. New cultural phenomena of the present day tempt us into "altering" and "improving" Chopin's music, often attributing to its qualities, which, essentially, it does not have.

It is commonly known that the way Chopin's music is played undergoes constant change, with each new generation, or even each individual pianist, drawing out the richness of the music and making a particular choice of those elements of its form and expression which suit them most and which they like to emphasize in their interpretations. However, the point is that this choice should be confined exclusively to the attributes of Chopin's genius and to his totally unique and distinctive personality which reflected the most characteristic features of the culture and custom of the day.

For a better understanding of the above it might be a good idea to try to think what the art of interpretation actually is (in the general meaning of the term, not only as regards Chopin) and what rights and limits govern it.

According to lexical reference sources, the word/term "interpretation" (from Latin *interpretatio*) means "explanation", "clarification of" or "commentary on" something, and also "the way of re-creating a text, performing a piece of music, a play." Please note that from among many equivalent terms the relevant entries in all dictionaries record "explanation", "clarification" and "commentary" as well as "the way of re-creating", as if indicating its most crucial sense. For the purpose of our deliberations, "clarification"

requires that interpretation should be clear and distinctive as to its form and content, while the interpreter is expected to have several qualities which make this "clarification" possible. "Explanation of" and "commentary on" something require the interpreter to understand perfectly well and fully realize the form and content of the composer's idiom (the style of expression of the creator whose work he is going to interpret) in order to be able to "explain" it to the listener and comment on it. Intellectual power and extensive knowledge of music are critical here. "The way of re-creating" is an expression that broadens the term "interpretation" to include a sphere of irrational realities: creative imagination, artistic intuition, emotional quality and openness to transcendence. It touches upon both esthetics and psychology, drawing our attention to the re-creator's (interpreter's) spiritual potential. Although simplified, the above analysis enables us to get some idea about the structure of the phenomenon called the art of musical interpretation. This art comprises fine craft, intellectual ability and musical knowledge as well as the interpreter's creative potential, his performing temperament and spiritual culture, all of which are the hallmark of a genuine talent.

The complex structure of the art of interpretation, the multitude of its elements and the possibility of its many configurations, result in a hard-to-predict number of interpretative "versions" of one composition. Furthermore, it can not be ruled out that new "mutations" will be produced in consecutive interpretations of the same piece by the same performer.

While a piece of music, a composer's style, and the characteristic features and qualities of his work remain unchanged in the historical sense, the way it is performed does not change with time and that change depends on the interpreter's cultural background, sensitivity, imagination, knowledge and intelligence. Please note also that the stylistic convention of the composer's epoch, being an esthetic reality, definite and constant, is influenced by historical circumstances and contained within esthetic boundaries. The art of interpretation means using this basic material (the notation of a piece and its entire background) to the largest possible extent and taking the liberty, as such is the nature of its role, of transgressing those boundaries. This obviously, is an intellectually controlled process. The undisputedly invaluable gift of artistic intuition that interpreters boast, together with their creative inspiration, sometimes genuinely brilliant, which generally enrich the act of creative interpretation, must nevertheless be subject to intellectual verification (knowledge of the elements of the epoch's stylistic convention and of all available sources.)

The artistic-interpreter, having entered the area of free choice, completes in a way the presentation of the composer's image. He explains, places accents, lays out lights, arranges shades, and comments on the composer's work. He also presents himself, showing the color of his epoch. By doing so he becomes the co-creator.

It may, at this point, seem appropriate to note that there is no model interpretation of a piece of music. How unimaginative would be the belief that a composition, in the years or centuries of its artistic existence following its creation, should remain a "fossil" embedding the composer's ideas and passed on as such! An art work (especially one of a genius) is a living substance whose spirit cannot be destroyed and which acts on people- in some cases for centuries-with its unceasingly attractive content. The vitality of an art work can be seen in the fact it is perceived and interpreted anew and in a variety of ways by people living in different times and cultures.

Let us, however, firmly emphasize that each entry by the interpreter into that area of allowable freedom of choice, sometimes even expected by the composer, requires of him the ability to organize it by means of musical knowledge and performing ethic and culture. The music as recorded by the composer, the score, cannot serve as a pretext for the interpreter to produce his own, totally free idiom. It is only when the interpreter identifies himself with the composer's ideas, when he draws in his mind a clearly defined, perhaps even verbalized, emotional program of, and psychological motivation for the piece, where every note is qualitatively specified, fully understood, unique and indispensable, that the desired and laudable objective can be achieved: the presentation of a transcendent reality using means which, while limited, are comprehensible, convincing and aim at transcendence.

The true art of interpretation does not exist without high caliber artists. True art accepts only those who are great in talent, spirit and mind. It also demands that they have a great virtue, humility, arising not from the awareness that the role of their art is to serve. Loyal service to art creators, making absolutely certain that their ideas are presented faithful, leaving nothing to chance, is the performer's ultimate responsibility.

All known treaties on the art of interpretation written in past centuries and everything that has been written on the subject in recent times have one thing in common: they emphasize the importance and responsibility associated with the role of interpreters. The role rewards performers with an exceptional honor-participation in the process of giving the ultimate shape to one of the most beautiful domains of human creation, of being its complement.

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