

Frederic Chopin's Selected Nocturnes - An Examination of the Composer's Interpretive Indications.

by Lydia Kozubek, translated by Slawomir Dobrzanski



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It is recommended to read these analyses while consulting the score. The author based her observations on the following three editions: Wiener Urtext, Breitkopf & Haertel, and the Paderewski edition.

The single most important stylistic aspect of the music of the Romantic Era is the domination of melody. During the 19th century, the majority of musical ideas were expressed through melodic lines. Artistic shaping of melodic phrases was based on musical principles known to professional musicians for centuries. These principles passed from generation to generation, from the baroque and classical periods to the romantic generation. As these rules are about relationships and connections between melodic notes, they naturally belong to the professional musician's "toolbox". Without these rules and principles we would be called "amateurs".

Some 20th century masters, the likes of Theodore Leschetitzky and his pedagogical "grandson" Zbigniew Drzewiecki, continued to teach the "obvious but unwritten". Assistants of the former quote many of the master's secrets in publications devoted to Leschetitzky's method. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, many piano teachers neglected to pass this knowledge to next generations, which resulted in a gradual devaluation of this aspect of piano interpretation. Why would this happen? – It seems that the development of piano texture in so many directions in recent decades and the appearance of so many new musical languages during

the last century have both led to too many "exceptions" from old rules and principles, resulting in abandonment or even a total disregard for old rules. Currently, only few but the best masters, such as Harnoncourt, Sawallisch or Michelangeli, respect the "old school"; their interpretations not only display their own musicality, but also display a broad interpretative knowledge.

Paul and Eva Badura-Skoda, in their book "Mozart Interpretation", note that until recent times most of the discussions about interpretation were dominated by such elements as harmony, form and articulation. There has been a noticeable lack of consideration for the melodic element/cantilena.

The reexamination, or rather the reintroduction of the old principles and rules is an urgent matter, as more and more purely "coincidental" musical interpretations are heard. Many interpretations today frequently contradict the composer's original ideas. A true interpretation is more than following one's own (often misguided) intuition, or exposing the audience to an emotional firework without any limits. A truly artistic interpretation depends not only on one's musical talent or emotional maturity, but also on musical education and the ability to use the professional knowledge in a truly artistic fashion. Individuality – if one possesses it – shows itself in the way each artist interacts with the instrument, how the musical ideas are presented and in the presentation of the logic of a particular composition. A true interpretation relies also on proper sound quality, an appropriate choice of tempo and the underlying rhythmic pace. Disregard for these factors is not only unmusical but also shows an embarrassing incompetence, which Michelangeli called "ignorante".

Has Chopin made a conscious use of the old principles of interpretative logic? An analysis of the composer's interpretative markings can provide an answer to this question.

Let us take a look at these markings in some of his Nocturnes.

Nocturne in B flat Minor, op. 9, no. 1

Already in the first measure, on the repeated note F, there is a *crescendo* sign up to the last F of the group (on the second strong beat of the measure), followed by a *diminuendo* in the descending group of eighth-notes. In the second measure, on the D flat half note there is a *tenuto* (or accent) sign, but even if it were not there, this D flat, according to musical logic, would need to be stressed. The stressed D flat is subsequently released on the following B flat. This particular gesture will often be repeated throughout this Nocturne.

In the fourth measure, there are again repeated notes, this time quarter notes on B flat leading to a long A flat. The A flat has a *sforzato* sign followed by an immediate *piano* sign, which applies to the following “alto” voice. Interestingly, this voice begins with an accent, meticulously added by the composer. The accent is followed by a *crescendo*. Both voices meet on the G flat and resolve on the dotted half-note F in the following measure. Four last eighth notes in measure six are marked *diminuendo*.

In the seventh measure, there is, for the first time, the term *smorzando*, which applies to the second half of the measure. This little motive seems to be an exception from the known rule about increasing volume (*crescendo*) of melodic lines leading upwards; however, it is logical here, as it is simply the closing gesture of the opening eight-measure phrase.

The following measures, beginning with the preceding up-beat figure, represent a variation of the major subject of the beautiful piece. In the third measure of the variation, the melody descends in a triplet figure from the note F in the high register of the piano towards the half note on measure 12. The figure is again marked *diminuendo*, and the preceding material is marked *crescendo* (Examples 1 and 2).

The image shows two examples of musical notation for the Nocturne in B flat Minor, op. 9, no. 1. Example 1, labeled '1', shows the first two measures of the piece. The tempo is marked 'Larghetto' and the time signature is 3/4. The first measure features a repeated note F with a crescendo sign up to the last F of the group, followed by a diminuendo in the descending group of eighth notes. The second measure features a D flat half note with a tenuto sign, followed by a B flat. Example 2, labeled '2', shows measures 4, 5, and 6. Measure 4 features quarter notes on B flat leading to a long A flat with a sforzato sign, followed by an immediate piano sign. Measure 5 features a long A flat with an accent, followed by a crescendo. Measure 6 features four last eighth notes marked diminuendo. The score is written for piano and includes various dynamic markings such as p, sfz, and cresc.

The opening melody of the Nocturne is often adorned with *fiorituri*, notated as irregular eighth notes. The grouping of these little notes is often problematic. The division upon which one has to decide should not only be influenced by mathematical logic, but also by the shape of these little melodic lines – their ascending and descending pattern suggesting minuscule *crescendi* and *diminuendi*. The *fiorituri* end usually with triplets leading to long notes placed on the strong beats of a measure. It is interesting that all these final long notes are consistently marked with accents or *tenuto* signs (meas. 4,6,11,13,15,16,17). Placed always on the strong beats of a measure, these interpretative signs follow perfectly the “obvious but unwritten” interpretative principles.

In measure 15 proper relationships between longer and shorter rhythmic values should be considered while performing the markings *forte* and *appassionato*; triplets, performed more lightly,

should always come out from the longer preceding notes and at the same time lead to the following stronger beats. Similarly, while performing the *crescendo* in meas. 16 and the *con forza* in meas. 17, one should always remember the principle of lighter triplets, always leading to or coming out of strong beats, even though in this case they should be played with real energy (Ex. 3).

3

Leading to the next section of the Nocturne measure 18 has the accompaniment figure marked, according to the melodic directions of the line, *crescendo* and then *smorzando*. These markings seem almost unnecessary because an educated musician would interpret this passage instinctively right. Chopin was very precise and obviously didn't want to leave any doubts (or, perhaps in his day, many pianists ignored basic principles).

The middle section of the Nocturne begins *pianissimo*. One should pay close attention to the syncopation marked with accents on half notes in meas. 20 and 21 and in similar moments later on. As syncopations, these half notes would be slightly accented even without the actual accent signs. One has; however, to understand

these markings sometimes as simple “external” accents and sometimes as *tenuto* markings indicating a stressed, deeper singing tone. This is a huge difference for truly artistic expression.

In measure 36 the *crescendo* adheres to the ascending figure in octaves and the accent marking is applied to the quarter note at the end of the measure. Measure 37 has accent markings on the beginning of the descending octave lines, even though they begin on weak parts of the measure. Similar situations occur at several other places in this part of the piece, as for example, in measure 46 (Example 4 and 5a, b).

4

5a

5b

The culmination in *fortissimo*, on the first chord in meas. 51 also has an accent sign, and the variation of the same material in measure 53 has an accent placed this time on a second strong beat of that measure. Generally, in this part of the Nocturne, accents have been placed on many strong beats. For experienced and educated players, they are hardly needed.

Very original accents can be found in measure 70, in the melodic line, on A and B flat. These two notes are apparently intended to be slightly prolonged, through a skillful *tenuto*.

In measure 75 – similarly to measure 13 – an accent on a dotted eighth note G flat has been placed to indicate that this note has more melodic intensity than any other in this little motif (Examples 6 and 7).

6

7

In measure 81 another interesting situation occurs – the accent has been placed on the second strong beat of the measure, yet the entire 16-note passage is marked *smorzando* (suggesting a *diminuendo* on an ascending melodic line), obviously to give a special meaning to this measure (Ex. 8).

8

All descending double notes in measure 83 have accents attached to them. Simultaneously, the composer wishes to have them played initially in *accelerando*, followed by *diminuendo* and *ritenuto*. The last two measures, in chordal texture, are notated in *pianissimo*. It is recommended the middle voice of this passage is played slightly deeper – it contains a fading echo of the main melodic idea.

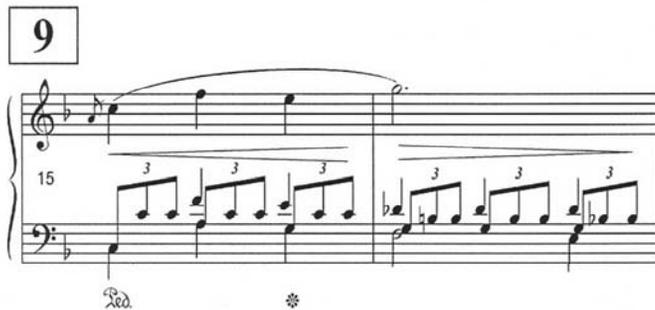
The above analysis proves that the entire Nocturne op. 9 no 1 is an example of Chopin's perfect knowledge of interpretative logic and his, at times almost pedagogical, insistence on it. □

Part II will be printed in the Spring 2007 issue of the "Polonaise". The complete article can be found on the Chopin Foundation website at www.chopin.org under 'publications'.

Let us have a closer look now at the **Nocturne in F Major from Op. 15.**

In this composition Chopin's markings are as clear as they were in the previous Nocturne. *Crescendi* and *diminuendi* always accompany ascending and descending melodic lines accordingly. In measure 14 *crescendo* is applied to the left hand part, where accompaniment leads to the diminished chord B-D-G sharp. Measure 15 should be compared with a similar measure in the recapitulation (meas. 63-64), where *crescendo* is applied only to the last quarter note (E) leading to the dotted half note G. The difference in these identical measures could have been simply a result of an inaccurate printing (see Examples 9 and 10).

9



10

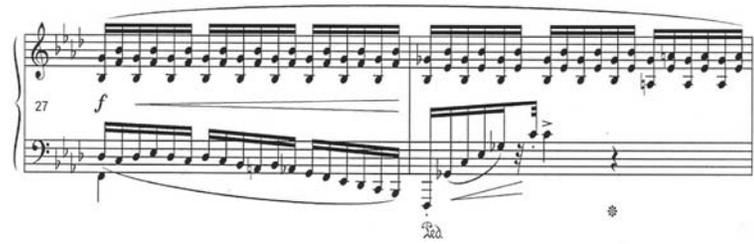


Diminuendo is found again in meas. 17-18, according to the logic of descending melodic lines. Short *crescendi* and accents can be found in several measures and are placed on syncopated figures (measures 5,10,19,20,21).

In the middle section of the Nocturne (*con fuoco*), measures 25 and 27 could cause a little confusion. The *crescendi* here are marked throughout the measures, even though the left hand part is a clearly descending line accompanied only by a repeated trill in double notes in the right hand part. In measures 26 and 28, the *crescendo* over the left hand part follows the "ascending line rule". This suggests that the preceding material should actually reach no further than *mezzo forte*. A similar pattern occurs in measures 37-40 (Examples 11a, 11b).

11a

Con fuoco. ♩ = 84



11b

con fuoco



And how to explain accent markings on the 32nd notes in measures 26 and 28, and then later in measures 38 and 40? And then also the accents on the quarter notes in the same measures? The composer's intention is clarity, and the notation precisely indicates that the 32nd note should be clearly audible and, at the same time, lead to the dramatic accent placed on the quarter note. The notation of the first 16th note in measure 28 and 40 separately from the rest of the group indicates similar intention to heighten the dramatic content of the passage. One can wonder why has Chopin not notated measures 26 and 38 in the same manner. Perhaps he wanted the latter passages to sound slightly more intense. Several editors, however, unify the notation and apply the pattern of measure 28 to any similar situation. This wasn't necessarily Chopin's original intention.

The *crescendo* in meas. 29 – 31 should be applied only to the right hand (reaching for *fortissimo*), while in the left hand there is a descending melodic line (measures 29, 30, example 12).

12

The repetition of this melodic figure in the right hand (meas. 33, 34) is marked *pianissimo* and *poco ritenuto*. In measures 29-31, there are two separate dynamic parts. The leading role belongs here to the upper part. The following measures (35,36) constitute a brief transition to the repetition of this section. They are marked *crescendo* and, subsequently, *diminuendo*. Even though measures 41- 44 are notated similarly to measures 29-31, the left hand should actually participate in the *crescendo* – the melodic motifs in this instance are syncopated and play a modulatory role.

In the transition leading to the reappearance of the A section (measures 45-49), short melodic motifs in the right hand have been notated with slurs “*contra metrum*”.

This leads to an actual change of meter in measure 48. In meas. 60 one can notice a little accent mark on the second chord in the accompaniment absent in its first appearance (measure 4). Most probably Chopin intends the accompaniment figures to be played a little differently this time.

One little detail seems noteworthy – in measures 21 and 69 Chopin added little dots on the repeated C's in the triple figure, as if indicating a special lightness at that particular moment (these C's are actually two octaves apart from the low bass dotted half note C).

The Nocturne ends with a beautiful *appoggiatura* in whole notes (G-F), where the final notes are each preceded by a broken chord, all in *smorzando*, *diminuendo*, and *ritenuto* (ex. 13).

13

And how is the melody phrased in the Nocturne G Minor from Op. 15?

A *crescendo* sign is found in measures 3, 4. Actually it is unnecessary there – every educated musician would follow the logic of the ascending and descending melodic lines; even the accent on the long note F – measures 4-6 – seems unnecessary, for similar reasons. In contrast, the accents placed on the upbeats in measures 7-12 and 19-25 are indeed important because they indicate a special mood, a somewhat hesitant character of the melody (Ex. 14).

14

Lento. $\text{♩} = 60$

In the first part of this piece, the accents appear in the left hand on dissonant chords – to be slightly exposed before their resolutions in the following measures (measure 8, etc.)

A variation of the melody (meas. 35-36) begins with repeated triple notes D. An accent has been added to the first D in each of these two groups, which, although counter to the accepted “principles”, is very useful for artistic expression (Ex. 15).

15

34

leggiere

Throughout the piece there are examples of *crescendi* seemingly contradicting the interpretative common sense – in measures 53-54 and in measure 57. They underline the modulation and lead to the long notes placed on strong beats. (The phrasing in similar measures (65, 66) follows commonly accepted principles.)

The accents placed in the alto voice on the first beats in measures 69-76 are rather interesting. Their appearance indicates that the composer wants the right hand to lead two independent voices. It is a rather difficult moment for the pianist, especially that the half note in the soprano should not be neglected (Ex. 16).

16

69

cresc.

In the modulatory sequences and progressions leading to the culmination in meas. 77-79, the chords have been notated as descending pairs of “contra metrum”. The first pair has accents in the National (Wiener Urtext) Edition and only *diminuendo* markings in the Breitkopf & Haertel Edition. In the final measures of this passage (measures 79-80), a *sforzato* has been marked, followed by *ritenuto*, *diminuendo*. The addition of meas. 81-88 was necessary to calm down such a magnificent culmination and to prepare the upcoming section of the piece. (Ex. 17)

17

The following section, marked “religioso”, contains a beautiful chorale in which the melody, located in the top voice of the chordal texture, ideally follows commonly accepted principles (Ex. 18).

18

Measures 97, 98, 99, and 100, have a different dynamic notation. The first measure contains only one long *diminuendo*, the following measures have a separate *diminuendo* in each measure. The same pattern appears in measures 113, 114, 115, and 116. The composer’s intention here is to treat the two measures with one *diminuendo* as one phrase, and the measures with single *diminuendi* as small independent phrases (ex. 18).

The final measure of this section, which at the same time is the final section of the entire composition, contains some characteristics of a mazurka. (Ex. 19)

19

All long notes placed on strong beats have been marked with accents (meas. 121, 123, 129, 133, 137, 139, 145, and 149). The same applies to notes on the weak beats (meas. 125, 127, 131, 141, 147), and these notes have also *sforzati*. Chords in this section are often marked as light *staccato*. It all serves as means to differentiate the frequently repeated phrases from one another.

A four-measure long cadence ends in *pianissimo* and in a bright color of G Major in this rather nostalgic Nocturne, which Chopin described as “*languido a rubato*”. The G Major ending sounds utterly convincing among all the other rather dark sounding chords. I would advise the performer to stress slightly the B natural in the G Major chord; Chopin indicated its significance through minuscule *crescendo* and *diminuendo* placed under this chord.

There are an impressive number of interpretative suggestions provided in this Nocturne by the composer. All pianists, especially the younger ones, should always carefully examine all indications that come directly from the composer.

The compositions discussed in this essay prove that in his earlier compositions Chopin was very meticulous in his notations. Chopin’s later compositions contain fewer markings. Possibly the composer assumed that educated musicians would always follow certain rules, and that these rules would always be taught from generation to generation.

While comparing editions on which I have based my discussion, I have noticed a significant difference in how the crescendo sign is marked, specifically the length of the crescendo sign. These differences in notation (or, in printing) can change the entire interpretation. Sometimes the crescendo sign leads only to the first note of the next measure; sometimes, like in meas. 122 and 124 in the G Minor Nocturne, the crescendo sign suggest a *crescendo* ending on a weak beat of a measure, which would contradict accepted rules. For example, in the German edition the *crescendo* ends promptly on the strong beat of the following measure.

Similar situations occur in the B flat Minor and the F Major Nocturnes. In the National Edition, in the F Major Nocturne (meas. 42, 44) a *crescendo* sign ends before these measures, while the word “crescendo” has been placed across bar lines. In the German edition, the word “crescendo” is missing.

Other differences that appear frequently in Chopin’s editions affect the slurs or phrasing marks, but it is an entirely different subject. Ornaments should always be performed more lightly than the melodic notes and they should have their own specific color.

Finally, I would like to remind all performers that all Chopin’s indications are not simply intellectual; they should be internalized spiritually and deeply felt, so that they become an intrinsic part of a truly inspired performance. A truly artistic playing consists of a combination of authentic knowledge, true feeling, appropriate artistic taste and an ability to balance all available elements in a given composition.

I hope my reflections will inspire pianists to follow the composer’s intentions, to search for a more responsible treatment of the score, and to aim for artistic truth.

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