

How To Play Chopin?

Part 3: Chopin's Etudes ^[1]

By Prof. Regina Smendzianka

THE REASON I took up the subject of Chopin's Etudes was a strong desire to challenge the rather common phenomenon existing in the interpretation practice (i.e. the perception and interpretation of the Etudes) in, it would seem, isolation from the great Polish composer's entire piano work. Emphasis laid on those qualities of the Etudes which can be used for improving the performer's manual abilities (clearly evident in the teaching practice in music schools), treating them as the so-called technical test at piano competitions, or the common practice of assessing a concert performance in terms of a sporting achievement rather than an artistic, creative effort, are the reasons why pianists, especially young virtuosos, have formed in their minds a much simplified picture of this musical form in relation to Chopin's work. Examples of this can be seen in the use of an absurdly fast tempo in the virtuoso Etudes or exaggerated bravura and dynamics (the latter going beyond Chopin's stylistic convention), or in the demonstration of a dexterity verging on sheer acrobatics while totally ignoring the expressive content or appropriate emotional program. Sometimes it is seen in the performers' failure to deal with the fundamental technical problem in a given Etude by simply ignoring it. These are but a few examples. The basic technical problem (fingering, passages, double tones, cantillena, highlighting the multi-part texture, varied articulation)^[2] gave Chopin a pretext to create the musical poems which his Etudes undoubtedly are. I would even venture the opinion that for Chopin the Etude, just like the Scherzo, was a title that should be treated figuratively rather than literally: in both cases conveying expression with profound content. The complexity and extreme difficulty of the means should not lead performers to make them an end in itself. Taking this invaluable tonal substance - Chopin's Etudes - performers should discard the mental associations with the etude concept, formed in their minds over the years of difficult daily contact with Czerny. They have to get rid of these associations in order to make a musical masterpiece out of the Etude with the help of their imagination, intelligence and talent. In his book, *Chopin - zycie i droga tworcza*, contemporary Polish musicologist Tadeusz A. Zielinski wrote, among other things, about the Etudes Opus 10 that "...not only did they become an orderly demonstration of a new piano style and the formulas peculiar to it, but also an artistic ennoblement of this style." ^[3] How very true, because when wishing to make an in-depth analysis (e.g. when we try to play Chopin's virtuoso Etudes in slower tempi) we are instantly amazed by the beauty of his melodic ideas (easily noticeable in the "slow" Etudes), subtle and refined harmonic turns and all the means of expression, which fascinate us in the composer's other pieces. Listening to his Etudes, we should notice the wealth of the shades of moods and emotional states or the possibility they offer us to form poetic associations, ranging from pathetic heroism and vital energy, passion and drama, to longing and regret, mysteriousness and fantasy, to simple joy and playfulness, humor, charm and elegance. They all determine the "subject" of his creative expression, the "program" and the motivation for the creation of these pieces. In addition, in Chopin's Etudes we find all the technical problems which are present in his other works. The sound of the piano in Chopin's Etudes, compared with that of his predecessors (Czerny, Cramer, Clementi), seems to be new, more complete and more magnificent. The whole keyboard is used ingeniously, while the Polish

composer's characteristic harmonic structure produces a whole spectrum of tonal colors. Let us quote again Tadeusz A. Zielinski who said that "...the difference between Chopin's Etudes and those of his predecessors is immense." [4] The previously mentioned artistic ennoblement of the etude which was realized in Chopin's music is not confined to the fact that under his hands, and as a result of the means used by him, the etude form ceased to be merely "training literature", i.e. material designed to help pianists improve their finger work. Instead, it became an art work and a creative accomplishment, and because of this, the etude is also, just like his other works, another proof of his vision of transcendence, a fact that has to be strongly emphasized. Performing his Etudes, Chopin as pianist gave them the form of artistic creation, just as he did with his other compositions which he performed. Of Chopin's playing at a concert in which he performed his Etudes Opus 25, Robert Schuman said, "A la Chopin." Having mastered the whole range of performing means, Chopin developed a piano technique which never captured the listeners' attention for its own sake. The genuinely great interpretations of Chopin's Etudes have been, and still are, based on the creation of a musical impression by means of the attributes of the Chopin style which was deeply rooted in 19th century culture, customs and mentality. The clarity, definiteness and suggestiveness of this impression should fascinate the listener no less than is the case with the Ballade, the Fantasia or the Sonata. Thanks to the excellence of Chopin's technique of composing, his etudes opened a new chapter in the history of development of this musical form, which, liberated from their previous "utility" function, entered the realm of great art.

English Translation: Jerzy Ossowski

[1] This is the third in a series of articles by Prof. Smendzianka to be printed in a few consecutive issues of our magazine. [The first article](#) dealt with the problems relevant to musical interpretation in the broad meaning of the term; [the second](#) discussed the workshop features of Chopin music interpretation, present deals in greater detail with the composer's Etudes, [the fourth article](#) is all about Chopin's Polonaises, while the next will deal with Waltzes and Ballades. [2] I assumed that the reader would easily connect these problems with individual Etudes (author's note) [3] Zielinski A. Tadeusz, Chopin – zycie i droga tworcza (Chopin - His Life and Artistic Path), p. 238. Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne (Polish Music Publishers), Cracow 1993. [4] Ibid., pp. 237-238