

Chopin's Grande Etudes

by Angela Lear

Chopin's first set of studies entitled Douze Grande Etudes, Op.10, was composed from 1828-1832, published in June 1833 and dedicated to Liszt. The second set, Douze Grande Etudes, Op.25, was composed from 1833-1836, published in 1837 and dedicated to the Countess Marie d'Agoult.

In October 1829 Chopin wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski, "I have composed a grand study in my own manner." Those last four words provide some insight into the originality of Chopin's style: the man and his music being inseparable.

The basic character and purpose of old stereotyped keyboard exercises and studies was principally didactic. To the young Chopin of eighteen existing exercises and studies were not sufficient to conquer all of the technical and musical demands his compositions presented. Within the year Chopin produced his first composition that would ultimately form part of Op.10 (probably No.8 in F major) and had created a new genre - the 'grande étude'.

No's. 8-11 were first to be completed, originally numbered 7-10, and by 1831, when Chopin arrived in Paris, all but No's. 3 and 4 had been completed. On completion of the set he arranged their order into a cycle for publication.

Chopin's études far transcend the basic didactic purposes of dealing with a principal technical difficulty. They present a formidable challenge to pianists and with few exceptions exhaust all technical and musical possibilities. His undeniable mastery as a composer of works of the highest art is amply demonstrated in these magnificent compositions, described by Louis Kentner as "a perfect fusion of the athletic and aesthetic".

This essential 'fusion' is not always evident in performance where there is a predilection to dismiss Chopin's score directions for those of personal preference. Although well-documented that he had a grave distaste for all forms of excess and exaggeration applied to his music, (the 'sledge-hammer' school he referred to), this has not always prevented it from being subjected to distortions. Each étude is as much a study in expression and emotional dynamic as pure technique - and the extreme technical demands should remain 'only a means to an end'.

There have been numerous editions of the études since their first publication, including those edited by Chopin's pupils; Mikuli, Tellefsen, Gutmann, Wolff and Fontana, who were all in disagreement! This is a disconcerting fact since some critical editions have been based on these spurious copies. Pianistic 'traditions' are not to be relied upon for credibility. With the plethora of editions to choose from there exists a musical 'minefield' for the serious interpreter seeking to give interpretations as closely as possible to Chopin's intentions.

In 1972 my former teacher Louis Kentner introduced me to the importance of studying all available original sources; Chopin's autograph manuscripts, original copies, first edition scores, draft copies, annotated scores and documentation, including correspondence. The importance of such extensive research studies became clear to me as a result of my performance of the Op.10 No.8 étude in F major, which I attempted to play for Kentner at my first lesson according to the score markings in my accepted edition. These score markings were also evident from the acclaimed performances I had heard; forte and veloce with accents on each r.h. group of semiquavers (16th notes), a considerable amount of

sustaining pedal and a very fast tempo. I had only played about a dozen bars when Kentner ordered me to stop playing. He took my place at the piano and played the same opening bars with an exquisite lightness and consummate ease, explaining that Chopin's original score markings were opposite to those stated in my edition - *leggierissimo e legato*, and no fast tempo indication. Some way removed from the technical showpiece it has now largely become. Chopin's favoured dynamics are undoubtedly easier to ignore than achieve, especially on our powerfully resonant and 'fleshier' toned concert pianos, but his scores are not just a form of interpretative 'graph paper' on which a variety of designs can be plotted.

A similar fate tends to befall the Gb major étude, Op.10 No.5 (Black Keys Study), originally marked *leggierissimo e legatissimo*, with no tempo indication. This étude is generally performed with heavier dynamics and over-dramatised, eclipsing its essentially elegant and light-hearted character.

Given the confines of this article it is not possible to detail the numerous disparities found when comparing original sources with various edited publications. Each étude demands a detailed interpretative analysis*. To cite one other example: the celebrated E major étude, Op.10 No.3, was originally given the tempo *Vivace* by Chopin, who later added *ma non troppo*. A labouring, or variable, pulse that disregards the 2/4 time signature (notated in 8th and 16th notes) is damaging. It is not in 4/4 time and the passages (from bar 46) have no *fortissimo* or *doppio movimento* indications. The *poco piu animato* (often marked at bar 21) is not given in the original ms. Chopin's ardent dislike of the sentimentalisé approach and exaggerated tempo deviations are well known. Additional tempo changes break down the musical logic and structure of the whole, subverting Chopin's expressed intentions.

One final thought, quoting from Eleanor Bailie's excellent book *The Pianist's Repertoire*: Chopin, "With the picture of this poet-aristocrat in our mind's eye and ear there is one searching test-question we can apply to each of our would-be interpretations - Could Chopin have liked it this way?"

About the Author

*Angela Lear's latest CD (No.6 in the Chopin series) features the Op.10 & 25 Etudes, based on her extensive research. * This two-disc set includes a gratis CD with illustrated comparative examples and detailed discussion on each étude. All CD's are £10.00 (including postage & packing in the UK), €10.00 for the rest of Europe or equivalent currency for other countries, all prices include postage. Visit Angela's website at www.angelalear.com for further details, reviews, CD excerpts and listings, and to order online directly from the site's Webshop. You may also e-mail your order to szafarnia.uk@btinternet.com*

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