

## Technical Features of Chopin's Piano Style

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**Abstract:** The performing art ennobles, through all its elements, music in its completeness, lifting it to the level of artistic events. However, musical performance is not always synonym with the performing art, although it often correlates on a wide range of technical significances.

Chopin's music acquired new dimensions after he left Poland. Biographical factors must have put a mark on his stylistic maturation – a radical change from the admiration nurtured by Warsaw, to Vienna's indifference, and a growing disappointment towards the career intended by the composer-pianist. Regardless of the causes that driven the change, the development were reflected not only in Chopin's musical style, but also in his demeanour of approaching a composition. He invested more in his activity as a composer than in his activity as a pianist. Generally, it is not difficult to conclude on the changes in the nature of his style. An essential starting point is to recognize that Chopin's musical style crystallized less according to the classical Viennese model than to the post-classical repertoire. This style was occasionally described as the brilliant style, which Chopin embraced and remodelled in his works.

It is well known that the way in which Chopin's music is performed undergoes constant changes with each new generation, with each new pianist. The change occurs through the selections among the richness of his music and those specific elements of expression that suit them best and may be used to emphasize in their performances. However, the choice should be attributed to the Chopin's genius and his unique and distinct personality, which reflect the most characteristic features of his culture and customs. Comments on the music are exceptionally instructive because of Chopin's performing traditions. Cantabile, rubato, tempo giusto, the play with sound timbres, the flexibility in observing metric benchmarks that contribute to the unification of all elements specific to a musical piece and comply with the need of using an adequate prosody of musical phrase, the pedalling according to Chopin's annotations, but also to the varying acoustic conditions in concert-halls – all these are the basic elements, conferring clearness and accuracy upon the conveyance of the composer's thought. The sounds, the melody, the structural purity, the rhythmical elasticity, the pelicular rubato – all are essential elements to Chopin's creativity and they establish the tradition as objectively as possible on the basis of interpretational phenomenology.

The complex structure of the performing art, the multitude of its elements and the possibility of its multiple configurations yields an infinite number of interpretative versions of a composition. While the musical score, the composer's style and the characteristics and qualities of his work remain unchanged in the historical sense, the way in which they are performed does change in time and the change depends on the cultural background of the interpreter, sensitivity, imagination, knowledge and artistic intelligence.

## 1. Introduction

In music, art interpretation ennoble its entirety musical performance by lifting it to the level of artistic events. However, not always the musical performance tends to be synonymous with the interpretation art, although it is often based on a wide range of technical significance. The complex structure of art interpretation, the multitude of elements and its countless configurations can result in infinite versions of interpretation of a single composition. It is known that Chopin's music is not only a range of tonal construction but an expression of his feelings. Therefore, the pianist should be a sensible person, with aesthetic sense and above all, a complete musician's mission is to create a bridge between the composer's feelings and experiences that he has shared, more or less, in his work. An interpretation includes many items; we can never consider one thing more important than another. When one of the elements is missing or is not a good quality one, the interpretation as a whole will suffer. The Polish musicologist Jozef Chominski says: "... it happens that the tonal form of a piece differ every time in details not only in the case of different pianists but often in the interpretations of the same pianist. " [1] A talented artist will use his own artistic intuition to explain, comment and complete in certain way the work of the composer. To understand some features of Chopin's compositional technique one must carefully analyse the notations. In his unfinished method, *Esquisses pour une methode de piano* [2], Chopin tried to explain in a simple manner the notation problems, hand position as natural as possible, without excessive movement during playing, through exercises that prepare hand to use a tone of the highest quality. He highlights the importance of the correct fingerings which defines the purpose of making music "an expression of feelings, thoughts and

impressions through sounds"[3]. The way Chopin played the piano is known from the memoirs of those who listened to him. His contemporary's memories emphasize the Chopin's delicate touch, the infinite dynamic shades and colours of his tone. It also emphasizes the impression of vocal music performed by Chopin, agility in difficult passages, the subtle and legato phrasing and a great ability to use pedals to enrich the artistic effect; all these qualities are perfect by his resourcefulness of the ornamentation and the original fingerings.

## 2. What it means the interpretation of a piece composed by Chopin?

Chopin's genius is generally admired and his music is very popular; the number of performers and listeners is growing, giving reason to believe that the issues of Chopin's music are well known. Therefore, the question is whether to discuss the interpretation can be justified. Yet, the growing number of pianists does not provide a high level of performance. The increasing interest shown by young pianists about Chopin's music all over the world is not a pretty good guarantee that they will find the spirit of Chopin's music and will follow the right direction for this purpose. The passing of time puts a barrier between the present and Chopin's era, which makes it difficult to understand and deepen his work. At present, new cultural phenomenon tempt the pianists to change and improve the music of Chopin, often misunderstood.

It is known that the way Chopin's music is interpreted undergoes constant changes, with each new generation, or even every new pianist, selecting from the richness of his music and making certain choices of those elements of form and expression that suit them best and which they like to emphasize in their interpretations. However, the idea is that this choice should be limited solely to the attributes of Chopin's genius and his

completely unique and distinctive personality, that reflect the most characteristic features of the culture and customs. For a better understanding of the above, might be a good idea to find the answer to the question what really is the art of interpretation and the rights and limitations which govern it.

According to lexical reference sources, the word/term interpretation means explanation, clarification or review something, understanding and also how to re-create a text, playing a song, a piece of theatre. It should be noted that many equivalent terms to all registered dictionaries have the definition of explanation, clarity, comment and how to re-create. The term clarification requires that the interpretation should be clear and distinct in form and content, while the interpreter is required to have several qualities that make this clarification possible. Explanation and review ask the interpreter to understand very well and realize the full form and content of composer's idiom in order to be able to explain to the listeners that piece and to comment it. How to re-create is an expression that extends the term interpretation to include broader irrational realities: creative imagination, artistic intuition, emotional quality and openness to transcendence. It touches both aesthetics and psychology, drawing our attention to re-creative spiritual potential. Although simplified, the above analysis allows us to get an idea about the structure of the phenomenon called the art of musical interpretation. This art includes intellectual ability and musical knowledge and creative potential of the performer, his temperament, performance and spiritual culture, all of which are the hallmark of a genuine talent.

### **3. Composer-performer relationship**

The art of interpretation means using the base material in the greatest possible extent and the freedom to deviate from these limits.

The obviously is an intellectually controlled process. The priceless gift of artistic intuition that performers are praising, along with creative inspiration, sometimes truly brilliant, which, in general, enriches the act of creative interpretation, should still be subject to intellectual verification. The performer, after entering the area of free choice, completes, in a certain way, the composer's image. He explains, places emphasis, determine what needs to be highlighted, organize the nuances and comments on the composer's work. It can be said that there is still no model of interpretation of a certain piece. How unimaginative would be the belief that a composition, after years or centuries of artistic existence from its creation, should remain a fossil of integrating the composer's ideas. A work of art is a living substance whose spirit can not be destroyed and is acting on people, in some cases for centuries, with its constantly attractive content. The vitality of a work of art can be seen in the fact that it is perceived and interpreted again and again in a variety of ways by people living in different times and cultures. However, each entry of the performer in the area of freedom of choice, sometimes even expected by the composer, requires the ability to organize through music knowledge, ethics and culture. The music recorded by the composer, the part, can not serve as a pretext for an interpreter to produce its own expression. The true art of interpretation does not exist without high-calibre artists. True art accepts only those who are great in talent, spirit and mind. All known treaties about the art of interpretation written in the past centuries and everything that has been written on this topic lately have one thing in common: they emphasize the importance and responsibility associated with the role of the performer. This role reward performers with honour, participation in the process of giving the final shape to one of the most beautiful areas of human creation.

#### 4. Technical interpretation of Chopin's music

Comments on the music are exceptionally educative for observing the Chopin performing tradition. *Cantabile*, *rubato*, *tempo giusto*, manipulating with sonic timbres, such a flexibility in observing metric markings that helps the unification of the course of a piece and respects the need of using an adequate prosody of musical phrase, pedalisation according to Chopin's annotations, but also convenient with the varying acoustic conditions in concert-halls - these are the basic elements, making communication of composer's thought clear and exact. Artistic truth is labile; composer's notation is ontological, and the performer's version-phenomenological. Chopin's contemporaries emphasized on improvisation as this was a characteristic of Chopin's playing-meaning composer's performances does not change the problem but rather gives a beginning to different tradition. The existence of two fundamental trends in the art of interpretation could be assumed-one based on sensitivity and beauty, and another consisting on proper reproductiveness, in accordance with the text. It is true, too, that within one and half a century ago the amount of pianists endeavoured to play Chopin as far as their skills have had let them to, but their stolidity for beauty of sound and Chopin's vein had turned into a sort of struggle against the instrument. This evoked some negative opinions which had also an influence in perceiving his works. The great Chopin players might be comprehended as a creator of a new one that would be perhaps closer to Chopin's idiom. The quality of his playing could create an overvalue of criterias for e.g.:from classical to romantic or the opposite way round and this may influence change of perception for the listener. Franz Liszt, the greatest pianist in history, the author of the first biography of Chopin and excellent performer of his Etudes, created a

tradition determining reference-point of many pianist generations. Europeanism with remarkable Polish elements, and not in any way the opposite, is Chopin's characteristic. Half of his life-time was spent in his father's homeland as well as the world of memories were primary meaning for his production, and an extraordinary sensitivity yealded with deeply sublimated expression and artistic profundity. The national and religious elements coded into his ego during his childhood and youth obtaining a universal and supranational measure.

Acknowledging composer's life and artistic environment in which he had been residing should exclude an opinion on Chopin's tradition by a prism to the followings epochs. Changing the manner of living, mentality, sensitivity, artistic company, and the historical outlook may cause perfectionism sacrificing artistic self-expression and profoundness.

The text had been interpreted often freely and at choice, while the means of expression are nowadays considered to be exaggerated or simply unacceptable. Within the last period of time, no longer than half a century ago, it seems however, that the playing according to the text appears to take the advantage, and that the playing is appropriate, precise, possibly faithful to the composer's writing. For Chopin, there is a cohesion between composing and performing; it is well confirmed in his letters, where there are often comments on pieces performed, and rarely his estimation about them. We can find there also many indications concerning his musical preferences, which is also helpful to appraise the executory tradition. The sound, the melody, the structural purity, the rhythmical elasticity, the pelicular *rubato*- are essential elements of Chopin's creativity and as a basis of interpretational phenomenology determine the tradition as objectively as is possible. The means by which composer's

ideas are expressed on the surface of relatively common ethics of interpretation-might be defined on the name of school. Talent, musical instinct and sensitiveness associated with regard for the original text-are indispensable when communicating an appropriate understanding of Chopin's musical idea.

The method written by Chopin provides a reliable source of relevant information. This unfinished essay written in French is complemented by comments made by Chopin's pupils and their pupils, which gives a vivid description of the master. Chopin thought the only proper use of the hand and proper training can allow the interpreter to extract matching tones of the instrument in a natural way. One of the effective ways in which the pianist can use the motor functions is the fingering, that depends on the natural shape and size of the hand and therefore, the characteristics and skills of each finger. He believed these things, given that each finger is different and it is better not to destroy the unique charm and the unique touch of each finger. Instead, he prefers the touch to be refined by all means, taking into account there is a certain power in each finger, based on its construction. These observations have requested Chopin to introduce new rules in fingering and hand position on the keyboard.

The Chopinian's sonority, like other elements of the performance of his were radically altered once the Polish composer's style matured. For example, the Polonaises composed during his youth, first Mazurkas or Waltzes, bearing the imprint of distinctive pre-Romantic style and that resemble with compositions like those of Mary Szymanowska and Kleofas Michal Oginski are played with relatively short tones if they are intoned, tones that saves the use of the pedal and with a limited dynamic scale: p-f. There are also slight tempo changes like *rallentando*, *ritenuto*, *rubato* and emotional restraint in these parts. Convention salon and

emotional restraint and functional role of this music, which can not be excluded even in the Mazurkas or early Waltzes of Chopin, should guide performers to a noble interpretation, charming and elegant. However, the music must also be rhythmic disciplined and subordinate to the dance choreography.

### 5. Vocality in Chopin's music

Melodic structure used by Chopin- soft, emotional, vocal-singing- makes his listeners to want to know more about the singing art. Aware of this, Chopin often discussed this with his students. Dominance of the song in homophonic texture of Chopin's compositions, forces the performer to develop a technique that would allow him to show its beauty in the most attractive way possible. The melody, supported by the bass and subtle highlighted in the complementary parts should show through dynamic and colour, the unique and unparalleled harmonic structures. The homophonic quality of Chopin's music should not discourage the performer to look the part linearly, where can often find a special polyphony: interesting line of bass and extremely ingenious harmonic functions in the inner parts. The interpretation of this multi-linear texture enriches the overall tonal impression.

The right tone is the base in the development of an interpretive concept for a musical work of any composer. In the case of Chopin, the tone should be soft and resonant, like the interpretation of the singing quality through the dynamic scale. The tone of Chopin's music differs from that of other Romantic. As a pianist and teacher, Chopin placed a heavy emphasis on timbre sounds when he composed his works. Also, Chopin spent a great deal of space to this problem in his reports, regarding the progress of its students. The term used frequently, a beautiful tune, [4] although this indication is not very accurate, indicating his

noble qualities made by specific technical procedures.

## 6. Tempo rubato

Chopin's obvious reluctance to repeat exactly the same certain phrases or long fragments, which the interpreter must consider, and, using imagination, to produce various interpretive versions with every repetition. Without diminishing the role of the processes related to dynamic and colour, designed to enrich the interpretative concept of repetitions, we must emphasize the importance of using tempo rubato which is a characteristic aspect for the Chopinian style. [5]

Tempo rubato, sparingly used in interpreting pieces written by Chopin at his youth, becomes extremely important in his compositions at maturity. It accompanies each cantilena and is an expression of the relationship between vocal and instrumental elements. This connection is manifested in the voice. Quality of the tone mentioned earlier, in the delay of the second note of the interval and in the prolongation of the notes in the treble and dotted or in a free recitative of cantilenas [6]. The pianists should be advised not to use when they repeat some parts the tempo rubato in an identical manner and should be encouraged to use asymmetric models of the phrases. Tempo rubato should not destroy the narrative continuity. It should sound like when you say a sentence in which some words or syllables are highlighted and over which we do not stop abruptly and the tempo does not change.

Small ornamental notes of Chopin's compositions are integrated into the melodic line as in the case of Italian belcanto tradition. The danger of excessive use should be corrected by a good knowledge of style, a sense of rhythmic organization and an artistic taste. Many musicologists derived the rubato from the Polish folk music. Thus, the Chopinian rubato comes from two

sources: popular music in the Mazovian region and Italian music. However, proper use of rubato is the key to Chopinian style.

## 7. Stile brillante

Chopin's genius, and the rapid development of his compositional technique in a relatively short period of time, led to his early works of virtuosity expressed more deeply later, which requires the performer to use an increasing range of means. Some elements of stile brillante obviously found in concerts in Paris during the early parts quickly paved the way to compositions that reveal an individual and significant expression. [7]

The convention from the interpreting stile brillante does not require a separate review because it is regulated by European standards. However, typical of this convention are noble tones, highly refined, often transmitting deep thoughts. Therefore, some problems about articulation and pulsation require some explanation. Problems are those that occur in parts of Chopin's brilliant style, every time the narrative melodic interferes with long virtuoso cadence

Organic connection between cantilena and virtuoso ornament is achieved by blurring the articulation differences, by grading instead of a sudden change, and simultaneously, by controlling the pulsation in a way that prevents the tempo to become suddenly slower or faster. The above applies to the problem of playing in tempo rubato, a difficult art, which requires refinement, and is one of the characteristic features of interpretation of Chopin's music.

Most brillante examples of the heterogeneous texture can be found in the works of Chopin's maturity. Harmonic, melodic and rhythmic ingenuity of the composer reaches higher levels, the texture reflected by the development of compositional technique being very



innovative and going beyond the predominant stereotypes.

### 8. Piano pedal

When a pianist has to perform one of the maturity works composed by Chopin, it is not enough for a pianist to focus on the clearly visible symptoms, like the dynamic increasing scale and volume, a richer pedal technique and a much more free agogic, refined harmonies and the individual form of the parts. Using these means, the pianist should focus mainly on the expressivity.

From the first look at the score, the pianist should be careful to the balance between the form and the content of Chopin's compositions. The reason is that Chopin's aristocratic spirit, a characteristic so typical of him. An exaggeration, lack of proportion or emotional falsity will have disastrous consequences for the pianist who will seem ridiculous in front of his audience. [8] In the interpretation of Chopin's music the tone should be soft and resonant, with vocal qualities throughout the dynamic scale. Chopinian tone differs from that of other Romantic composers and is the prerequisite for a stylish interpretation.

Pianists need to consider how much pedal they use in Chopin's compositions, how expressive they are interpreting not only the cantilenas but also the virtuoso parts, rich in cadences replete with ornaments. Mature Chopin's style will change too, the tone will change too. For example, the compositions of youth bearing the distinguishing signs of pre-Romantic style are interpreted with short tones with a reserved use of the pedal and limited dynamic scale. In his later brillante compositions, especially in the cantilena parts, the tone is extended and supported by a richer using of pedal. Interpreting the last mature works of Chopin requires a deep and full sound but their voice quality must be preserved through the entire dynamic scale. In this period Chopin has created the sound on

a wide range of effects that concern both colour and dynamics through the use of both pedals. Some of Chopin's compositional fragments are anticipating the Impressionism. Should be noted that Chopin did not use the pedals just to enrich the dynamics and colour, but also to significantly enrich legato performing

### 9. Conclusion

From the complex structure of performing art, the multitude of its elements and the possibility of its multiple configurations, is resulting an infinite number of interpretative versions of a composition. While a musical score, a composer's style and the characteristics and qualities of his work remain unchanged in the historical sense, the way in which they are performed does not change in time and the change depends on the cultural background of the interpreter, sensitivity, imagination, knowledge and intelligence. Also, the stylistic convention of the composer's era, being an aesthetic reality, clear and constant, is influenced by historical circumstances and within the limits of aesthetic.

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