

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA

CHOPIN: THE TEACHER



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CHOPIN: THE PIANO TEACHER

In 1832, Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin (1810-1849) successfully debuted as a pianist in Paris and began a lifetime occupation of teaching piano and composing. He interacted with the intellectuals and aristocrats of Paris and became an important piano teacher. Although Chopin disliked concertizing and had few outstanding pupils, he enjoyed teaching piano. His contemporaries of the Romantic Period considered his teaching method revolutionary, and it predicted modern piano pedagogy. I intend to offer an overview of Chopin's pedagogy in order to not only understand his "method," but also to provide an understanding of his personality, his music, and his style. First, I intend to discuss the importance teaching held in Chopin's life. Second, I will offer the practical details of his studio regarding the establishing fees, the way he conducted his schedule, the lessons, and his students. Finally, I will include a survey of Chopin's general principles of teaching, regarding technique and musical style.

The Role of Teaching in Chopin's Life

Fryderyk Chopin taught piano for 17 years, from 1832 to 1849, when he also divided his time as a composer. He devoted summers to composition and winters to his piano students. MacCabe offers a reason for this when stating, "Since Chopin despised concertizing in public and his compositions only produced a meager income, he sustained himself by teaching."¹ Although some biographers insist that teaching was a detested task that he just endured for his financial need, Chopin in fact "enjoyed this occupation immensely and was very meticulous."² One of his most important students, Carl Mikuli describes these characteristics:

Far from regarding his work as a teacher, which his position as artist and his social connections in Paris rendered difficult of avoidance, as a burdensome task, Chopin daily devoted his entire energies to it for several hours and with genuine delight. True, his demands on the talent and industry of the pupil were very great. There were often "de lecons orangeuses" ("stormy lessons"), as they were called in school parlance, and many a fair eye wet with tears departed from the high altar of the Cité d' Orleans, rue St.

¹ MacCabe, 150.

² MacCabe, 151.

Lazare, yet without the slightest resentment on that score against the dearly beloved master. For this same severity, so little prone to easy satisfaction, this feverish vehemence with which the master strove to raise his disciplines to his own plane, this insistence on the repetition of a passage until it was understood, was a guaranty that he had the pupil's progress at heart. He would glow with a sacred zeal for art; every word from his lips was stimulating and inspiring. Single lesson often lasted literally for several hours in succession until master and pupil were overcome by fatigue.³

In a letter to his parents in Warsaw, dated June 8, 1847, Chopin wrote: "You would not believe how charming my kind pupils are..."⁴ We can certainly conclude, based on these last quotations that teaching represented for Chopin much more than a source of income, it was in fact, his passion.

PRACTICAL DETAILS OF CHOPIN'S STUDIO

Lessons' Schedule

For a regular student of Chopin's studio, two lessons per week was the norm. There are, in fact, many exceptions to this statement: "Charles Filtsch, [for example, one of Chopin's most promising student], received three lessons per week. Marie von Harder claimed to have had daily lessons."⁵ The lessons were theoretically supposed to last from forty-five minutes to an hour, however for his gifted students, he would prolong the lesson for several hours. According to Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, the exact number of lessons per week per student, depended on Chopin's "availability, their own individual needs and their talents-and secondarily on the state of their finances. Some pupils maintain that Chopin unofficially taught them practically free of charge, or that they were offered numerous additional lessons."⁶

"Generally Chopin gave five lessons per day."⁷ According to Jeanne Holland, Chopin definitely kept individual abilities in mind when he made out his teaching schedule. "What great confusion would have resulted if, after having scheduled his usual five lessons for the day, Chopin

³ Mikuli, iii.

⁴ Chopin, *Selected Correspondences*, 299.

⁵ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 39.

⁶ Eigeldinger, 6.

⁷ Sand, 160.

prolonged even one lesson to several hours!”⁸ Due to this, Chopin reserved Sundays for his gifted students; whose lessons usually lasted for longer intervals. Madame Streicher wrote:

Many a Sunday I began at one o’ clock to play at Chopin’s and only at four or five o’ clock in the afternoon did he dismiss me.⁹

Chopin’s Fee

According to his students Jan Matuszynsky in 1834 and Charles Halle in 1836, Chopin charged at least twenty francs per lesson. A letter from George Sand dating 1841 reveals that Chopin’s fees were still the same. In fact, Chopin’s fee was considered one of the highest fees of his day. “During that period the wage of a skilled French laborer probably seldom exceeded four francs a day; therefore Chopin was earning, through forty-five minutes of teaching, five times as much as the worker was earning through an entire day of skilled labor.”¹⁰ When criticized for his high fees, Chopin responded arrogantly. George Sand wrote:

A few fine ladies protested that the rue Pigalle was too far from their elegant districts. He answered: “Ladies, I give much better lessons in my own room and on my own piano for twenty francs than I do for thirty at my pupils’ homes, and besides, you have to send your carriages to fetch me. So take your choice.”¹¹

In another situation, he replied:

Kalkbrenner charged twenty-five francs. Today I am to give five lessons. You probably think I am making a fortune, but you are wrong. The cab [carriage] and white gloves cost more than I earn but without them I would not be in good form.¹²

Chopin preferred teaching in his own apartment and on his own pianos; although as mentioned by Sand’s letter he would accept teaching at his students home with an additional fee, plus transportation costs. “Almost all his students who wrote about their lessons with Chopin wrote of going to his apartment.”¹³ In fact, Chopin maintained an elegant apartment in Paris, where he lived and maintained his studio. In a letter to Chopin, his father shows understanding of the necessity of

⁸ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 39.

⁹ Streicher in Niecks II, 340; quoted from Holland, 39.

¹⁰ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 40.

¹¹ Chopin, *Selected Correspondences*, 214.

¹² Gavoty, 153.

¹³ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 40.

having such a fashionable apartment, although he expresses worry with the expenses caused by such a luxury:

So now you are settled with your own furniture, and indeed not without some little luxury, if I may say so. But I quite understand that you had to have it since you give your lessons at home, and now, as always people judge by appearances. But go steady, my boy, go steady.¹⁴

Chopin's Pianos

Chopin was always punctual in his lessons and almost never missed them. When a student arrived in Chopin's apartment, he/she would find two Pleyel pianos in the room, a concert grand and an upright. The pupils used the grand and Chopin the upright. Mikuli remembered how Chopin demonstrates his lesson on the upright:

The whole lesson-hour often passed without the pupil's having played more than a few measures, while Chopin, at a Pleyel upright piano (the pupil always played on a fine concert grand, and was obliged to promise to practice on only the best instruments), continually interrupting and correcting, proffered for his admiration and imitation the warm, living ideal of perfect beauty. It may be asserted, without exaggeration, that only the pupil knew Chopin the pianist in his entire unrivalled greatness.¹⁵

Contrary to many of the leading pianists of that day, such as Liszt and Thalberg, who preferred the Erard piano, Chopin praised the Pleyel pianos. One of his students, von Timm used to prefer Erard pianos, but after studying with Chopin she clearly change her mind. She describes Chopin's preference to Pleyel pianos:

Up until now I have worked more on difficult pianos than on easy ones; that has strengthened my fingers a great deal. However, on this kind of piano it is impossible to obtain the finest gradations by the movements of the wrists and the forearm as one can with each finger taken separately. I have had the experience of hearing these gradations in Chopin's home on his fine piano. He himself called it "un traître perfide" [a perfidious traitor]. That which came forth perfectly on my solid and robust Erard became brusque, rough and ugly on Chopin's piano. Chopin found it dangerous to use a good-sounding instrument with a ready-made tone for a long time, such as the Erard. He said that these instruments ruined the touch: "Qu' on tappe, qu' on frappe dessus c'est égal, le son est toujours beau et l' Oreille ne demande pas autre chose parcequ'elle est sous le son plein et sonore." (Whether one touches, whether one strike from above it is the same, the sound is always beautiful and the ear does not question anything different because the ear is under the full and sonorous sound.)¹⁶

¹⁴ Hedley, 85.

¹⁵ Mikuli, iv.

¹⁶ Holland, *Chopin's Teaching and his Students*, 207-208.

Chopin's Students

It is a well-known fact that most of Chopin's students did not become recognized musicians, because most of them were female members of the aristocracy. "Nevertheless, many of them were serious musicians. There is no reason to assume, as many authors have that being of noble birth - or being female, for that matter- precludes having musical talent."¹⁷ Franz Liszt once ascertained, "Chopin was unfortunate in his pupils."¹⁸ In fact, even though Chopin did not form a "school" like Liszt did, he taught a considerable number of students, who later became responsible for the Chopin tradition (see Table 1 with the list of Chopin's major students). According to Jean Elgendinger:

[It was not in Chopin's nature] to impose his personality on pupils, in the way that the Liszt of Weimar did. Too much of an aristocrat and poet to become a leader, Chopin was content to suggest and imply, winning devotion without any attempt to convince. Such an attitude could hardly be conducive to an analytic approach on the part of his disciples. And then it has its corollary: with the exception of a very few professionals, the core of Chopin's clientèle consisted of ladies of the Faubourg-St-Germain or of the Slavonic aristocracy exiled in Paris. Talented as they may have been (many of them were), their social status effectively forbade them to perform in public except for charity functions. Princess Marcelina Czartoryska, generally recognized as Chopin's most faithful disciple, fits the description exactly. And people of this category rarely communicated anything more than anecdotal reminiscences- by no means without value! - and fragmentary indications of the training received.¹⁹

Another important aspect of Chopin's personality that is reflected in his teaching is his aversion for concertizing. He once confessed to Liszt:

I am not fitted for public playing. The public frightens me, its breath chokes me. I am paralyzed by its inquisitive gaze, and affrighted at these strange faces; but you, you are meant for it. If you can't win the love of the public, you can astonish it and deafen it.²⁰

In fact, Chopin's teaching was unlike that of Liszt's because it "was not oriented towards the concert platform."²¹ Chopin once declared to one of his students that "concerts are never real music; you have to give up the idea of hearing in them the most beautiful things of art."²²

¹⁷ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 39.

¹⁸ Elgendinger, 5.

¹⁹ Elgendinger, 4-5.

²⁰ Bie, 257.

²¹ Elgendinger, 5.

²² Grewingk, quoted from Elgendinger, 5.

Table 1

THE MAJOR STUDENTS OF CHOPIN

Kornél d' Abrányi (1822-1903)
Princess Marcelina Czartoryska (1817-94)
Emile Décombes (1829-1912)
Laura Duperré
Countess elise de Eustaphiew (Madame Peruzzi)
Carl Filtsch (1830-45)
Adolf Gutmann (1819-82)
J. C. Hadden
Caroline Hartmann (1808-34)
Vera de Kologrivoff (Madame Rubio) (1816-80)
Mademoiselle R. de Könneritz (Madame von Heygendorf)
Ignacy Krzyzanowski (1826-1905)
Wilhelm von Lenz (1809-83)
Ignace X. J. Leyback (1817-91)
Georges Mathias (1826-1910)
Madame Antoinette Mauté de Fleurville (?- 1893)
Carl Mikuli (1821-97)
Friedericke Müller (Madame Streicher) (1816-95)
Camilla O'Meara (Madame Dubois) (1830-1907)
Napoléon Orda (1807-83)
F. - Henri Péru (1829-1922)
Countess Delfina Potocka (1805-77)
Anton Rée (1820-86)
Brinley Richards (1817-85)
Madame Marie Roubaud de Cournand (1822-1916)
Zofia Rosengardt (Madame Zaleska) (1814-68)
Marie de Rozières (1805-65)
Lindsay Sloper (1826-87)
Princess Catherine de Souzzo
Jane Stirling (1804-59)
Thomas Tellefsen (1823-74)
Pauline Viardot-Gracia (1821-1910)
Emilie von Timm (Madame von Bülow, later Madame von Gretsck) (1821-77)

Source: Holland and Methuen-Campbell, quoted from MacCabe, 220.

Regarding the amount of students of Chopin, it is difficult to have a precise number. Since Chopin was a “fashionable” teacher of his era, there were a lot of pianists that advantageously claimed to be his pupils. In fact, Chopin was aware of this and was known to have once responded: “I never gave him lessons; but if it’s of any use to him to pass as my pupil, then let him be. Let him remain one!”²³ Elgeldinger believes that if one considers anyone who received Chopin’s advice as a pupil, then the number of students would reach around 150. Besides the great number of students, “his reputation as pianist and pedagogue reached far and wide: one finds his pupils coming not only from France and Poland, but also from Lithuania, Russia, Bohemia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Sweden, and Norway.”²⁴

Chopin did not accept children or beginners in his studio. In addition it was not considered easy to approach him:

Chopin was surrounded, adulated and protected by a small entourage of enthusiastic friends who defended him from unwelcome visitors or second-rate admirers. Access to him was difficult; as he himself told Stephen Heller, one had to make several attempts before one could succeed in meeting.²⁵

Meetings did not necessarily assure a place in Chopin’s studio. Even after meeting and being able to play for Chopin, if a student did not have the “talent or artistic personality”²⁶ he required, he would politely refuse him/her.

²³ Karasowski, quoted from Eigendinger, 5.

²⁴ Eigendinger, 9.

²⁵ Eigendinger, 9.

²⁶ Eigendinger, 9-10.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF CHOPIN'S TEACHING

This survey of Chopin's teaching principles is based primary on his *Projet de Méthode* (*Method of Methods*), which he started in 1849 and never finished, in combination with his student's recollections of his pedagogy.

Repertoire

Chopin's lessons usually began with technical exercises and proceeded such works as "Cramer's Etudes, Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and works by Hummel. Chopin regarded the latter as the best preparation for his own works."²⁷ Mikuli mentioned:

Field's and his own nocturnes also figured to a certain extent as studies, for through them - partly by learning from his explanations, partly by hearing and imitating them as played indefatigably by Chopin himself - the pupil was taught to recognize, love and produce the *legato* and the beautiful connected singing tone.²⁸

Chopin also included pieces by "Mozart (only mentioned by Mikuli), Handel, Beethoven, Scarlatti, Weber, Mendelssohn, Moscheles, and Hiller. Several students of Chopin claimed that Chopin neither taught pieces by Liszt nor Schumann."²⁹ However, there are exceptions, "Madame Dubois mentioned learning Liszt's *La tarantella de Rossini* and the Septet from *Lucia*. Mikuli recalled studying works by Schumann but did not specify the pieces."³⁰

Piano Practice

In his preface of his piano treatise, Johan Nepomuk Hummel (1778- 1837) wrote:

Many pianists, already advanced, believe that it is necessary to play at least six to seven hours a day in order to achieve their goal; they are in error: I am able to assure them that a regular, daily, attentive study of at most three hours, is sufficient for this purpose; any practice beyond this, damps the spirits, produces a mechanical, rather than an expressive and impassioned style of playing, and is generally disadvantageous to the performer, inasmuch as when compelled to play aside this incessant exercise, if

²⁷ Holcman, 11.

²⁸ Mikuli, iv.

²⁹ Holcman, 11.

³⁰ Holcman, 11.

called upon to play any piece on a sudden, he cannot regain his usual powers of execution without having some days previous practice.³¹

According to one of Chopin's student Madame Dubois, it seems that Chopin agreed with Hummel. For Delfina, another of his students, Chopin wrote: "Once again I repeat – don't play more than two hours a day; that is quite enough during the summer."³² For von Timm Chopin recommended "not practicing too long, but to reading, looking at beautiful art works, or taking walks as periods of rest from practice."³³ Chopin did not believe that six or eight hour practice periods "signified diligence. He considered it mechanical, unintelligent and useless labor. He insisted upon complete concentration, alertness, and attentiveness as the utmost requirements for good practicing."³⁴

Technique, Fingering and Pedaling

One of the most important principles of Chopin's piano pedagogy was to achieve beautiful touch. The manner in which Chopin taught touch "lies in the root of his teaching, technique and fingering."³⁵ Technique and interpretations were almost always inseparable in Chopin's teaching. He believed that "technical skill was not an end in itself, but merely a means of freeing the hands for musical expression."³⁶

Chopin would begin his lessons with exercises intended to develop hand elasticity. Mikuli wrote:

On beginning with a pupil Chopin was chiefly anxious to do away with any stiffness in, or cramped, convulsive movement of, the hand, thereby obtaining the first requisite of a fine technique, "souplesse" (suppleness), and at the same time independence in the motion of the fingers. He was never tired of inculcating that such technical exercises are not merely mechanical, but claim the intelligence and entire will-power of the pupil; and, consequently, that a twenty-fold or forty-fold repetition (still the lauded Arcanum of so many schools) does no good whatever- not to mention the kind of practicing advocated by Kalkbrenner, during which one may also occupy oneself with reading!³⁷

³¹ Hummel, 4.

³² Wierzynski, 178.

³³ Holland, *Chopin's Teaching and his Students*, 215.

³⁴ Holcman, 10.

³⁵ Maccabe, 232.

³⁶ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 42.

³⁷ Mikuli, iii.

Chopin in fact, did not believe in mindless and mechanical repetitions of exercises. When he gave hand elasticity exercises, he “only demanded complete mental and physical concentration.”³⁸ In his

Method of Methods he wrote:

To those who are studying the art of touch, I submit some very simple practical considerations which, in my experience, have proved to be of real value.

Many futile methods have been tried to teach pupils to play the piano, methods which have no bearing on the study of the instrument. They are analogous to teaching someone to walk on his hands in order that he may go for a stroll.

As a result of this, people have forgotten how to walk properly and know very little about walking on their hands either. They are unable to play music in the real sense, and the difficulties they practice have nothing to do with the works of the great masters. These difficulties are theoretical- a new kind of acrobatics. I am not dealing with ingenious theories, however valuable these may be, but go straight to the root of the matter.³⁹

In contrast to other pedagogues of his time, who sought to equalize the fingers “by means of laborious and cramping exercises, Chopin cultivated the fingers’ individual characteristics, prizing their natural inequality as a source of variety in sound... In this way he would quickly develop a great variety of colours in his pupils’ sound meanwhile sparing the much tedious labor in fighting their own physiognomy.”⁴⁰ Chopin’s thoughts about the individuality of the fingers can be expressed in this passage:

For a long time we have been acting against nature by training our fingers to be all equally powerful. As each finger is differently formed, it’s better not to attempt to destroy the particular charm of each one’s touch but on the contrary to develop it. Each finger’s power is determined by its shape: the thumb having the most power, being the broadest, shortest and freest; the fifth [finger] as the other extremity of the hand; the third as the middle and the pivot; then the second [illegible]. And then the fourth, the weakest one, the Siamese twin of the third, bound to it by a common ligament, and which people insist on trying to separate from the third-which is impossible, and, fortunately, unnecessary. As many different sounds as there are fingers⁴¹

As an example of pure technique exercises that apply the concept of “keyboard’s proper relationship to the physiology of the hand,” Chopin would suggest that his students begin the study of scales with B, F# and Db Major (“following the basic fingertips 1-2-3-1, 2-3-4-1 and 2-3-1, respectively”⁴²). He

³⁸ MacCabe, 161.

³⁹ Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, 42.

⁴⁰ Eigendinger, 17.

⁴¹ Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, 44.

⁴² Eigendinger, 17.

considered that these scales follow the natural, comfortable position of the hand, due to the fact that the longer second, third, and fourth fingers would be playing on the black keys.

Other primary requisites of achieving a beautiful touch taught by Chopin were a proper hand position and a correct seating.

The student should sit at the piano “in front of the keyboard, so as to be able to reach either end, without leaning sideways. [Then, the] right foot [is placed] on the pedal, without bringing the dampers into play.

We find the position of the hand by placing our fingers on the notes E, F#, G#, A#, [and] B...The long fingers will be found to be on the black keys with the short fingers on the white. In order to obtain equality of leverage, the fingers on the black keys must be kept in line. The same applies to the fingers on the white keys. The resultant move will be found to follow the natural formation of the hand.

The hand should remain supple and the wrist and forearm round themselves into a curve making for ease of movement that would be unobtainable if the fingers were outstretched.⁴³

Chopin suggested the “elbow’s level with the white keys and the hand turned neither to the left nor the right.”⁴⁴

Regarding fingering, Chopin considered a correct fingering the key to proper performance. During lessons he used to work out meticulously with his students. He always adopted “the easiest fingering, although it might be against the rules, that came to him.”⁴⁵ In fact, Chopin was not “slave to the traditions of fingering laid down by theoreticians and publishers. On the contrary, good finger was a matter of finding the most comfortable succession of fingers, best suited both to the form of the hand and to conveying the musical discourse. So it was precisely by breaking many a Classical rule that Chopin opened new horizons with his revolutionary way of fingering.”⁴⁶ Summarizing Chopin’s contributions in this field, based on his own music or in his notes in his students score, we can perceive:

- Emancipation of the thumb, which is allowed the freedom of the black keys (*Etude* op. 10/5) and entrusted with melodic fragments (*Etude* op. 25/7, *Nouvelles Etudes* no.1)
- Letting the 3rd, 4th and 5th right hand fingers cross over one another in chromatic passages (*Etude* op. 10/2) and in singing legato lines (*Berceuse* op. 57, *Nocturne* op. 9/2, *Prelude* op. 28/15, and elsewhere).

⁴³ Cortot, *In Search of Chopin*, 43.

⁴⁴ Hedley, *Chopin*, 42.

⁴⁵ Hipkins, 5.

⁴⁶ Eigendinger, 19.

- Crossing over these same fingers in passages of chromatic thirds (*Etude* op. 25/6, *Berceuse* op.57, *Prelude* op. 28/24).
- Passing the 5th finger over the thumb (*Etude* op. 25/11, *Impromptu* op. 29, and elsewhere).
- Using the same finger on successive notes in a melodic line, diatonic as well as chromatic (*Nocturne* op. 37/1 and elsewhere).
- Notes repeated with the same finger, as far as the writing and the tempo permit it.⁴⁷

Another important development of Chopin's piano technique is associated with the "new dependence on pedal, a factor that decisively influenced his piano writing. The progress made by French and English piano manufactures enabled particularly the bass strings' vibrations to be substantially prolonged by using the damper pedal. The fingers could then elaborate over a bass note which could be held on the pedal without dwindling too rapidly."⁴⁸ It can be said that Chopin took advantage of this to develop his writing for the left hand. According to Eigendinger "is this extension of suppleness that underlies the accompanying voice in compositions such as the *Andante Spianato* op. 22, the *Berceuse* op. 57, most Nocturnes (particularly op. 27/1 and 2), and the trio in the *Funeral March* from the Sonata op.35."⁴⁹

Chopin used to say to his students that "the correct employment [of the pedal] remains a study for life."⁵⁰ To his student Delfina, Chopin wrote:

Be careful with the pedal for this is a frightfully touchy and noisy rascal. One must deal with it very politely and delicately- as a friend it is very helpful, but it isn't easy to reach the stage of intimate acquaintance and love with it. Like a great lady, mindful of her reputation, it will not dally with the first comer... But, once it consents and yields, it performs real wonders, like a practical lover...⁵¹

Chopin suggested that his students learn to make diminuendos without using the *una corda* pedal. In addition, he believed that the student, regardless of level, should control degrees of dynamics without pedal first. "After mastered this technique, he/she then learned to employ the pedal."⁵² According to Péru, Chopin was very careful in notations, especially pedaling and dynamics. He remarked:

⁴⁷ Eigendinger, 20.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 20.

⁴⁹ Eigendinger, 20.

⁵⁰ Niecks, quoted from MacCabe, 211.

⁵¹ Sydow, quoted from MacCabe, 211.

⁵² Aguetant, quoted from MacCabe, 211.

When asked to put in marks of expression [Chopin] put them in carelessly, never playing his pieces as they appeared in printing, and marking a pedal at the beginning of each bar without paying the least attention to the sense of music...⁵³

Interpretation

According to Holland, there is less information about Chopin's teaching of interpretation than about other aspects of his teaching. In his notes for his piano method, Chopin "wrote nothing specifically about interpretation."⁵⁴ This does not mean however, that interpretation was not important for him. In fact, interpretation is "elusive; writing general principles about it would be risky, for the unimaginative might apply those rules slavishly."⁵⁵ In addition, Chopin "was by nature a pure musician, [who was] always shy of committing ideas to paper: 'The pen burns my fingers,' he would say by way of excuse... [He also] did not like to express himself on matters close to his heart except through music."⁵⁶ It may certainly be assumed for the available sources regarding Chopin's interpretations, that in summary he praised primarily individuality and simplicity.

In Chopin's lessons, when a student played stiffly and mechanically, he would say impatiently, "Do put your whole soul into it."⁵⁷ He considered "feeling" the most essential quality for becoming a fine pianist. Even though Chopin often played to his students, to demonstrate an idea or purpose, he did not want them to become his imitator. He wrote to his student Delfina:

Music, rich, full of feeling, not soulless, is like a crystal on which the sun falls and brings forth from it a whole rainbow. And everyone may admire it for a different reason; one will enjoy the fact that the crystal has been artfully carved, another will like the red color, still another the green, while the fourth will admire the purple. And he who put his soul into the crystal is like one who has poured wine into it.

You know that I tell my pupils to play my own and others' works as they feel them, and that I dislike it if they imitate me too much, adding nothing of their own in the interpretation.

As for myself, you know, I seldom play a thing twice in the same way. You realize that the cause is in the disposition.

People sometimes tell me reproachfully that I have been playing better, e.g., at Cusine's than at the Perthuis, but they don't understand that man is not a machine.⁵⁸

⁵³ Matthay, 89.

⁵⁴ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁶ Eigendinger, 4.

⁵⁷ Karasowski, 317.

⁵⁸ Sydow, quoted from MacCabe, 214.

One example of Chopin's students who played through their own instincts and not through imitation, was Carl Filtsch. Chopin praised him as follows:

He plays almost all my compositions, without having heard me' without my having to show him the least thing- not exactly as I would (because of his own style) but certainly not less well.⁵⁹

On the other hand, Péru, another Chopin's student, imitated Chopin at each lesson. In order to discourage him from doing this Chopin would play a different interpretation at each time. Péru wrote:

How many exceptional pianists can execute Chopin's works like he expresses them! How often I had seen him rise from the sofa where he was listening and take his place at the piano, in order to demonstrate – he feels it – the work that I would play for him – badly – that is to say in a completely different expression, though having worked on it a great deal! The lesson was finished because I did not wish to forget the feeling that I heard religiously. The following lesson, almost satisfied with the imitative style that I worked on this piece, I played it. Unhappily when I had finished it, Chopin, always listening, got up and after having mocked me brusquely, began to play the piano and said to me: "Listen, there are to play, how so?" and he played it in a completely different style from the last time. Only my tears answered to this demonstration which did not at all resemble the first time. The discouragement affected me completely. However, he had pity for me and said, "It was almost good but not as I feel it." He shook my hand, and I left sadly and discouraged.⁶⁰

The ostentations were just as distasteful to Chopin as were the imitators. Chopin loved simplicity in interpretation. He admired Filtsch because he played with a simple style, "as if it could be no other way."⁶¹ Mikuli wrote:

A lofty, virile energy lent imposing effect to suitable passages- energy without roughness; on the other hand, he could carry away his hearers by the tenderness of his soulful delivery – tenderness without affectation. But with all the warmth of his peculiarly ardent temperament, his playing was always within bounds, chaste, polished and at times even severely reserved!⁶²

At a lesson with Madame Streicher, Chopin said that calmness was necessary to overcome technical difficulties and "simplicity is the final thing. After having conquered all difficulties, after having played a huge quantity of notes, it is simplicity that emerges with all its char as the final seal of art."⁶³

⁵⁹ Sydow, quoted from MacCabe, 68.

⁶⁰ Péru, quoted from MacCabe, 216.

⁶¹ Der Humorist, quoted from Holland, 44.

⁶² Mikuli, iii.

⁶³ Niecks, quoted from MacCabe, 217.

Phrasing

Chopin strongly recommended that his pupils study singing and Italian opera for a better understanding of phrasing. He would recommend to a student:

Don't practice the piano so much, but go and listen to good singers, and then you will learn to phrase a melody... You must use your wrists much the same way a singer breathes in playing a melodic line.⁶⁴

As a very demanding professor, Chopin would take great pains in teaching phrasing. This can be demonstrated by way of Mikuli, who described the manner in which Chopin demonstrated phrasing at one of his lessons:

On phrasing, and on style in general, he gave his pupils invaluable and highly suggestive hints and instructions, assuring himself, however, that they were understood by playing not only single passages, but whole pieces, over and over again, and this with a scrupulous care, an enthusiasm, such as none of his auditors in the concert-hall ever had an opportunity to witness.... [When a pupil failed he would say]: ...that it struck [me] as if some one were reciting, in a language not understood by the speaker, a speech carefully learned by rote, in the course of which the speaker not only neglected the natural quantity of the syllables, but even stopped in the middle of words. The pseudo-musician shows in a similar way, by his wrong phrasing, that music is not his mother-tongue, but something foreign and incomprehensible to him, and must, like the aforesaid speaker, quite renounce the idea of making any effect upon his hearers by his delivery... In the shading he insisted on a real and carefully graduated *crescendo* and *decrescendo*.⁶⁵

Regarding dynamics, it can be said that Chopin was very exacting. Although he confessed to his student Delfina that he could “obtain everything regarding feelings”⁶⁶ but his forte was very poor, he does mention a trick:

I am always telling my pupils that those for whom the forte is difficult must learn to shade their *piano* in a dozen ways, and well manage the pedal, then the listener will not regret the lack of the *forte*.⁶⁷

He recommended his students to see and hear the musical ideas as a single unit rather than as a series of short phrases. “Too frequent *ritenutos* were avoided; otherwise the idea was curtailed. However, phrase elongation sometimes became tedious. He also taught his pupils to mark the beginning and endings of a musical idea or phrase, i.e., using commas, brackets, or slashes.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Janis, 12.

⁶⁵ Mikuli, iv.

⁶⁶ Holcman, 1.

⁶⁷ Sydow, quoted from MacCabe.

⁶⁸ Holcman, 16.

Tempo Rubato

According to Holland, Chopin insisted that his students play in time. Madame Streicher wrote: “He hated all lingering and dragging, misplaced *rubatos*, as well as exaggerated *ritandandos*... And it is just in this respect that people make such terrible mistakes in the execution of his works.”⁶⁹ Mikuli also remembered that Chopin was so serious about tempo, that the metronome never left his piano.

Although such statements of his students guide us to believe that he allowed no digression from the beat, “we must remember that it was misplaced and exaggerated *ritandandos* that Chopin railed against.”⁷⁰ According to Holland, Chopin wanted the *candenza*-like embellishments in his own works to be played freely, sounding like an improvisation. In general, “his music should not be played pedantically but spontaneously with elasticity, and flexibility.”⁷¹

Tone Production

Chopin stressed that the *legato* touch was the singularly most important touch in piano playing. Mikuli wrote that:

He treated the various styles of touch very thoroughly, more specifically the full-toned *legato*. ...Field’s and his own nocturnes also figured to a certain extent as studies, for through them- partly by learning from his explanations, partly by hearing and imitating them as played indefatigably by Chopin himself – the pupil was taught to recognize, love and produce the *legato* and the beautiful connected singing tone.⁷²

Ornamentation

According to MacCabe, Chopin was a true master of ornamentation, in both composing and performing. He knew the function of each ornament regarding respect to rhythm, melody, and

⁶⁹ Niecks, quoted from Holland, 45.

⁷⁰ Holland, *Chopin the Teacher*, 45.

⁷¹ Strauss, 25.

⁷² Mikuli, iii-iv.

harmony. “He exploited the use of ornaments to the utmost, and the pianist who performs [his] works must realize that Chopin wrote his ornaments for specific purposes. The pianist needs to be [in fact], cognizant of the accepted execution of Chopin’s ornaments, exceptions, and also be able to perform them musically.”⁷³

Chopin never wanted the ornaments played hurriedly. He constantly advised his students to study singing and to listen to the great singers and Italian operas. Consequently they would understand ornamentation and appreciate its beauty. Mikuli wrote:

For paired notes and chords [Chopin] exacted strictly simultaneous striking of the notes, an arpeggio being permitted only where marked by the composer himself; in the trill, which he generally commenced on the auxiliary, he required perfect evenness rather than great rapidity, the closing turn to be played easily and without haste.

For the turn (*grupetto*)⁷⁴ and appoggiatura he recommended the great Italian singers as models...

Pauline Viardot-Garcia confirmed Mikuli’s statement in this passage:

Chopin considered the trill to commence on the upper auxiliary. When [the trill] is preceded by a little note (identical to the principle note), it does not mean that the note must be played twice; it only means that the trill must commence on the same note, and not on the upper auxiliary as usual.⁷⁵

⁷³ MacCabe, 212.

⁷⁴ Mikuli, iv.

⁷⁵ Wierzynski, quoted from MacCabe, 214.

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