Chopin's Pianism and the Reconstruction of the Ineffable

JONATHAN D. BELLMAN

Prélude

THE BICENTENNIAL OF CHOPIN'S BIRTH, 2010, was a propitious year for taking stock of our knowledge of Chopin's pianism and performance practices, and of the extent to which our playing reflects the results of our research in this area. Chopin is an almost unique case in that his music is central to both the concert pianist's meat-and-potatoes repertoire and to student and amateur repertories, but unlike others who composed in a multitude of genres there is no extra-pianistic context for him. The 160-plus-year lineage of pianists playing for each other, publicly and privately, is entirely responsible for the way his music is conceived and interpreted. Because his music has been in high demand since it was first written and performed, it is easy to assume that contemporary schools of Chopin playing represent something of a continuous tradition, more or less faithful to what the composer originally intended. Readers of *Keyboard Perspectives* might be less likely than others to make this assumption, but the ubiquity of Chopin's music in piano culture still obscures how different the dominant ways of playing his music have become in the 160 years since his death.

Traditional performance practice methodologies aim to scrutinize and clarify, as much as possible, what those present actually heard when Chopin played his own music. These lines of inquiry focus on his preferred instruments (their properties and what they could do), and his own realizations of his own music on them: general conceptions of dynamics and sound, his sometimes idiosyncratic fingering, varieties of articulation, his celebrated rubato, the complex of issues involving ornamentation, and so on. As will become clear, even cursory investigation in all of these areas suggests that what continues to be the usual way of playing his music — on recordings, at competitions (including those devoted to his music), on recital stages, in practice rooms — is in many ways demonstrably opposite to the way he himself conceived it. This is not morally wrong, of course, but it does raise the possibility that quite a bit more has been lost in translation than we might imagine, and that in a very

real sense what we consider to be "Chopin's music" is but a pale and highly incomplete approximation of it.

The picture is complicated even further, though, because the piano's cultural context during the composer's own lifetime was radically different from that of the Chopinolatrous present day. Today his music is the most beloved and dependable of "classical" repertories; when it was new music it was often found to be strange and incomprehensible, especially under the composer's own hands. To experience the immediacy, vividness, and even strangeness of a new work, even by a known and appreciated artist, is a very different experience from hearing a familiar, beloved work about which one already has a clear opinion on "the way it goes." The potential disjunction between the way things were heard by the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century ear (so to speak), and the way they are perceived today, crosses the traditional faultlines of historically informed execution and moves into the realm of interpretation. This is essential if such inquiries are to have any real usefulness today. In one sense, all musicological research is ultimately performance practices research, and it is especially true for the study of the music of a Chopin, for whom everything points back to the magic of his own performances.

Chopin was not only an accomplished pianist; he was widely held to be a unique and inimitable one, and even the fragmentary surviving sources and accounts are in agreement on this point. Berlioz put it this way: "Unfortunately, virtually nobody but Chopin himself can play his music and give it this … sense of the unexpected which is one of its principal beauties; his interpretation is shot through with a thousand nuances of movement of which he alone holds the secret, and which are impossible to convey by instructions."[1] Beethoven's former student Anton Schindler spoke to the same issue:

> Chopin's inner ideal reveals itself, as is well known, in the very original and absolutely inimitable way in which he interprets his nationalistic Polish pieces, with a genuinely characteristic stamp. For that reason he himself, in his own music, could not be a model to imitate. Even the playing of his students gives the impression just of a lithograph of an original oil canvas radiating colors.[2]

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[1] Hector Berlioz, "Concerts," *Le Rénovateur* II/345 (15 December 1833), quoted in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher* [1970], 3rd ed., ed. Roy Howat, trans. Naomi Shohet with Krysia Osostowicz and Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 71.

[2] Anton Schindler, *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven,* ed. Eberhardt Klemm (Leipzig: Reclam, 1973), 489; quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 72.

The pianist and conductor Charles Hallé, himself a student of Chopin, agreed:

> I can confidently assert that nobody has ever been able to reproduce [his works] as they sounded under his magical fingers. In listening to him you lost all power of analysis; you did not for a moment think how perfect was his execution of this or that difficulty; you listened, as it were, to the improvisation of a poem and were under the charm as long as it lasted.[3]

And Pierre-Joseph-Guillaume Zimmerman, chair of the piano department at the Paris Conservatory and Chopin's neighbor at the Square d'Orléans, tried to describe Chopin's rhythmic inflections this way:

> When we come to name Chopin we must remark that his music has a character that permits a bit of relaxation in the rigorous observation of the beat. It is, however, necessary to be moderate in making use of this information we are giving for it is only a matter, in some pieces of this master, of a certain ease [*abandon*] filled with an inexpressible charm under the fingers of the author. Chopin, like every original talent, is impossible to imitate, however it is necessary to try to enter into the spirit of his compositions in order not to do the opposite [of what he intends].[4]

There are more such remarks to be found in the literature. What Chopin was able to do at the keyboard was clearly striking and original enough that people were *warned off* from imitating him rather than being encouraged to do so — I know of no other such case. This uniqueness or ineffability, to judge from virtually all contemporary descriptions and recollections, extended across all aspects of his pianism and ranged well beyond the classical elegance of the pianists of the Parisian school, to whom he was at least initially drawn and with whom he had much in common.

Instrument and Temperament

It is a commonplace of the literature that Chopin preferred the intimate sound of the Pleyel piano to the more public, projecting sound of the Érard (which Liszt, for example, preferred). As Maurycy Karasowski, Chopin's early biographer, recounted it:

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[3] Charles Hallé, *The Autobiography of Charles Hallé, with Correspondence and Diaries,* ed. Michael Kennedy (London: Elek, 1972), 53–54.

[4] Pierre-Joseph-Guillaume Zimmerman, *Encyclopédie du Pianiste Compositeur* (Paris: n.p., 1840), 59.

> "When I feel out of sorts," Chopin would say, "I play on an Érard piano where I easily find a ready-made tone. But when I feel in good form and strong enough to find my own individual sound, then I need a Pleyel piano."[5]

The question of Chopin's preferred instrument and instrumental aesthetic is not completely settled by this comment, though, and continues to be investigated. Halina Goldberg's study of musical Warsaw in Chopin's formative years suggests both that he was not as disdainful of all Polish-built instruments as has sometimes been supposed and that his tastes were already being formed by the Polish and Viennese-built pianos, including those of Buchholtz and Graf, to which he had access.[6] Chopin seems always to have preferred a delicate and responsive touch to a heavier one, and a fine, clear, pearly tone (well suited to the *stile brillant* of the Hummel school) to a louder, fuller, but perhaps less clear tone better suited to a rich legato and pedaled sonorities. In Chopin's youth, a delicate and responsive touch and a pearly tone corresponded to the Viennese taste in pianos, while a heavier touch and a rounder tone were characteristic of the English piano aesthetic. His early disposition toward the former is completely consistent with his subsequent preference, in Paris, for Pleyel's instruments, as noted in the oft-quoted remark above.

It is deceptively easy, though, to generalize about the properties of instruments that are long gone, and Chopin's preferences regarding them, on the basis of a few descriptions or even some personal experience with original instruments in variable states of repair. Among the conclusions drawn by Robert Winter in his article for the Norton/Grove Performance Practice Encyclopedia is one that seems to contradict the source material Goldberg brought forward; after noting nine famous pieces that Chopin probably composed on "the best Viennese instruments, including a Graf," Winter mused that "their clear, woody tone was not ideally suited to the novel textures Chopin was introducing. His decision to move to Paris was made for many reasons, but the predominance of the English-style grand pianos in the French capital was probably an important factor."[7] For this to have been the case, Chopin's preference for French rather

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[5] Maurycy Karasowski, *Friedrich Chopin: Sein Leben, Seine Werke und Briefe* (Dresden: Ries, 1877), II, 96; quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 26.

[6] Halina Goldberg, *Music in Chopin's Warsaw* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 2 and especially pp. 51–53.

[7] Robert Winter, "The Nineteenth Century: Keyboards," *Performance Practice: Music After 1600,* ed. Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie (The Norton/Grove Handbooks in Music; New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), 358–59.

than English pianos cannot have been as clear as it is convenient to imagine. Still, English pianos were improving in a variety of ways throughout the 1820s, and it is in view of those developments that Goldberg observes that "the distinction between the design of the Viennese and English instruments began to blur, and standing outside the two prevalent pianistic styles associated with the Viennese and English designs, Chopin was in the vanguard of change; his piano playing heralded a new era of pianism, and his compositional language revealed hitherto unexplored timbral possibilities of the piano."[8]

It is probably unproductive to go too much further without having substantial time to spend with fully restored originals and first-class modern replicas of the relevant instruments. Drawing a connection between, for example, the "singing tone" ascribed to English pianos and Chopin's cantabile style — his celebrated pianistic evocations of operatic vocalism — is deceptively easy, and seems justified from the vocalistic point of view. They are not the same, however, nor are they even necessarily linked; one refers to a specific, rich sound quality of a school of instrument building and the other to a variety of techniques and artistic strategies intended to approximate the singer's art. It is not that they are entirely unrelated to each other, but rather that it is impossible to establish a precise correspondence between the "singingness" of Anglo-Viennese piano tone and Chopin's own cantabile, which he most liked to realize in the context of the elegant clarity of the *stile brillant* as realized by exponents such as Frédéric Kalkbrenner and Hummel. Of course, Pleyel pianos themselves were going through certain changes in the third, fourth, and fifth decades of the nineteenth century, and so the Chopin remark Harasowski quoted has to be evaluated in terms of that hazy picture also. In sum, Chopin's stated preference for Pleyel pianos was contingent on several factors, and it would be unwise to draw conclusions that are too specific.

Chopin's approach to pedaling and the way he sought to realize it on the Pleyel is another issue about which a good deal is known but not yet realized in performance and recording. The comments from Antoine François Marmontel, echoed by others in the nineteenth century and often quoted today, provide an apt introduction to the subject. Chopin, he wrote, would often combine the sustain and *una corda* pedals

> …to obtain a soft, veiled sonority, but more often still he used them separately for brilliant passages, for sustained harmonies, for low bass notes, for forceful, dazzling chords; or he used the soft pedal alone for those light murmurings that

[8] Goldberg, *Music in Chopin's Warsaw*, 52.

> seem to surround in a transparent vapor the arabesques that adorn the melody and envelop it as delicate lace. The timbre [produced by] the pedals of Pleyel's pianos has a perfect sonority…[9]

This description of the wide variety of effects Chopin could achieve with the pedals must be weighed against the variety of (often inconsistent) pedal indications to be found in the manuscripts and first editions of his music. His own affection for the Pleyel cannot be taken as proof that the indications found in German, Italian, and English Chopin editions necessarily reflect a Pleyel's capabilities; it might well be that (as with certain variants in chord voicing) the various editions might have been produced with differing national tastes in pianos in mind. The ongoing work in this area by Sandra P. Rosenblum has opened up a variety of possibilities in approaching Chopin's pedaling, but since the pedals are integral to the instrument (as opposed to, say, touch, rubato, or ornamentation), the indications can only be realized literally on historical instruments, and must today be read in context: what effect *would* a certain indication have had? What do the variant readings suggest? What balance between veiled sonority, shimmering texture, and clarity of line are we meant to achieve?

Here even more variables come into play. Most modern pianos (certainly Steinways and Asian pianos, and most others too) have a characteristic tone throughout all registers — analogous, perhaps, to the way modern singers are trained to achieve a consistency of sound and support throughout the entirety of the vocal range. Singers of Chopin's beloved Italian *bel canto* and French Grand Opera repertories, though, were expected to bring different "voices" to their interpretive task, and the different registers had different characters.[10] So it was with pianos; registral differences enabled effects that are all but impossible on modern instruments because the aesthetics of consistency vs. diversity result in very different pianistic capabilities. Discussions of this phenomenon do show up in the literature, but without a clear demonstration it is difficult to understand how important such instrument-related considerations really are.[11]

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[9] Antoine François Marmontel, *Histoire du piano et de ses origines* (Paris: Heugel, 1885), 256–57; Quoted in Sandra P. Rosenblum, "Some Enigmas of Chopin's Pedal Indications: What Do the Sources Tell Us?" *Journal of Musicological Research* 16/1 (1996): 42.

[10] Helpful information on this subject can be found in Lucie Manén, *The Art of Singing* (London: Faber Music Ltd, 1974), 33–41.

[11] One brief discussion of registral effects in the closing bars of the Nocturne, op. 27/2 in D-Flat Major appears in Winter, "Keyboards," 360–61; a more expansive treatment of this issue as it applies to Brahms is found in Camilla Cai, "Brahms's Pianos and the Performance of His Late

The performance implications of the piano itself and its pedal effects lead to a crucially important but often ignored issue in Chopin's music: temperament. It is a common misconception that the syntactically awkward "well temperament" associated with J. S. Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues is actually equal temperament, but this is wrong. The Well-Tempered Clavier, in order to demonstrate that music could be played in all keys, consisted of demonstration pieces for all keys, major and minor, *not* one major and one minor piece to be played in all keys. Although some would argue that the existence of Claude Montal's 1836 treatise giving instructions for equal temperament suggests that such a temperament is ideally suited to Chopin, I find arguments to the contrary to be stronger, though doubtless my point of view is most effectively advanced through an actual demonstration, not description.

Chopin commented in a letter of 18 August 1848 that, since the death of his favorite tuner, "I have not in the whole world a piano tuned to suit me."[12] Chopin's harmonic explorations always had more to do with juxtapositions of major and minor triads than with the more "progressive" sonorities often found (for example) in Liszt's music. In an unequal temperament these triads had individual colors, so that the juxtaposition of them became another part of the musical exposition, an adventurous and creative exploitation of the traditional *Tonarten*, or key characteristics.[13] The Prelude op. 28/9 is an especially strong demonstration of this: it makes a lot more sense as a voyage through tonal colors and even timbres than it does as a speculative harmony exercise. The Prelude op. 45 in C-Sharp Minor, too, transposes its relatively few ideas to a sufficient number of different keys to suggest that the intended musical effect was something that is not apparent from the notation — nor, indeed, from performances in equal temperament.

The case of Montal aside, moreover, several different piano-based music theorists of the late nineteenth century (for example Mathis Lussy, Ernst Pauer, and Albert Lavignac) openly discuss the unique characteristics of

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Piano Works," *Performance Practice Review* 2/1 (Spring 1989): 58–72.

[12] Claude Montal's treatise, *L'Art D'Accorder Soi-Même Son Piano* (The Art of Tuning One's Own Piano), was published in Paris in 1836 and was reissued in facsimile form by Éditions Minkoff (Geneva) in 1976. A preliminary study of Chopin and musical temperament is Jonathan Bellman, "Toward a Well-Tempered Chopin," in Artur Szklener, ed., *Chopin in Performance: History, Theory, Practice* (Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2005), 27–40.

[13] The traditional key characteristics are given a thorough and highly usable treatment in Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* [1983], 2nd ed. (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002).

each individual key, so the idea that Chopin allied himself with a bland equal temperament that emerged when he was nearing thirty years of age seems far fetched (and in any case it is unclear how effective Montal's treatise would actually have been at helping someone achieve a true equal temperament). And to circle back to the issue of textural clarity and the piano's registral differences that enabled discrete lines to be heard without conflict, my experience indicates that matters of balance and voicing become far easier in unequal temperaments; the overtones accommodate and enable the proper sonorities to be achieved rather than hindering them in the way overtones on a modern piano in equal temperament often serve to do.

The real significance of the temperament issue is that, for the reasons just stated, many Chopin pieces gain a strikingly vivid kind of harmonic relief with that single adjustment. The problem is that it is unlikely that Chopin's *specific* preferred tuning is recoverable; such information would not and could not have been preserved in written form at the time. That leaves us to experiment, "tuning" prospective temperaments to his music, recovering the harmonic piquancy of his music without allowing certain sonorities to turn harsh to the point of unusability. But ultimately, like so much in the study of performance practices, mere description of instruments and sound and temperament will only go so far; useful inquiry must move into the realm of experimentation and experience. Even the recordings of vintage Pleyels do not help as much as we would hope; not only are the instruments scarce and often inadequately restored, but there is also usually a substantial loss of sonic information when sound is converted into digital data. It may be that high-definition recording will solve this problem, but to this point I know of no recordings that clearly demonstrate the potential of Chopin's music played on a properly tuned, well-restored Pleyel. Like so much else in the area of Chopin's performance practices, this is a future project that promises rich returns.

Fingering

We fare better with descriptions of how and what to do at the instrument, since that kind of information is better transmitted in writing. Valuable information is to be found in piano treatises (including Chopin's own sketch for one), notations in students' scores, and descriptive accounts such as his students' recollections of the way Chopin taught and played. With respect to fingering, for example, it is clear that Chopin was absolutely opposed to the approach — a dominant one today — that sought to discipline each finger to be as strong

as the others. In his own sketch for a piano method, Chopin explained: "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 after that, and then the fourth, the weakest one, the Siamese twin of the third…as many sounds as there are fingers."[14]

Chopin continues with the observation that Hummel was the most knowledgeable on this subject; Hummel's own piano method of 1828 advocated long-over-short fingering (that is, three and four sometimes crossing over five, especially in slow, cantabile passages) and the same practice is reflected in some of the fingerings Chopin put into his students' scores. This represents not so much familiarity with or reversion to older, harpsichord-based practices, where such fingerings are more common, but avoidance of placing the thumb in the middle of melodic phrases, where it will (unavoidably, and despite hours of practice) sound like the aural equivalent of a speed bump. A related practice was that of his frequent finger changes while notes were being held; the goal is the right finger for the right job, and that job is always defined by the musical idea and phrasing rather than, say, accuracy or solidity of memory.

Chopin's oft-repeated comments to the effect that his students should listen to good singers, should imitate singing with their pianistic phrasing ("one must *sing* with the fingers!"[15] and "the wrist: respiration in the voice"[16]) reflect the overall goal: cantabile playing should evoke not only a fine singer's lovely tone, but perhaps more importantly the breathing and phrasing, and the wealth of tools brought to vocal interpretation. Fingering that resulted in awkward or unvocalistic phrasing, whatever its other advantages, was to be avoided. In today's pianistic environment, governed by piano competitions, obsession with note accuracy, ironclad security of memory, and ever-increasing technical demands of all kinds, Chopin's fingering precepts — though known — have very different goals than those currently called for.

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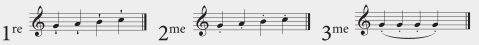
[14] Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 195, translation emended following the photo of the original (sheet 10r) and Eigeldinger's later reading in Frédéric Chopin, *Esquisses pour une Méthode de Piano* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 74. For a discussion of the 'weak' fourth finger, see James Q. Davies, "Reflecting on Reflex, or Another Touching New Fact about Chopin," *Keyboard Perspectives* II (2009): 55-82, especially at 76-81.

[15] Chopin/Eigeldinger, *Esquisses,* 76.

[16] Chopin's student Emilie Gretsch, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 45.

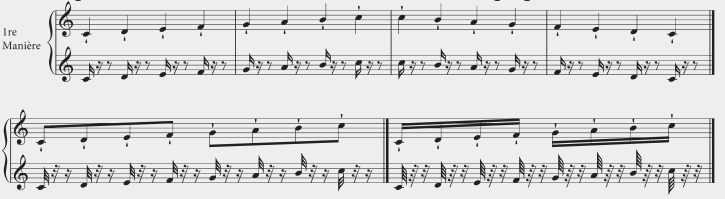
Des trois manières de détacher les notes.

On se sert de trois sortes de signes pour indiquer le *staccato* qui sont



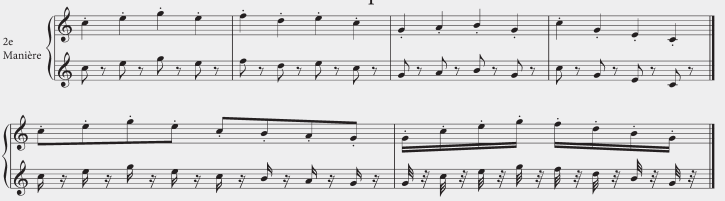
Lorsque la première est employée, il faut prendre la note très sèchement, piquer la touche et relever aussitôt le doigt, en lui ôtant les trois quarts de sa valeur.

Exemple des trois manières de détacher les notes expliquées dans l'article



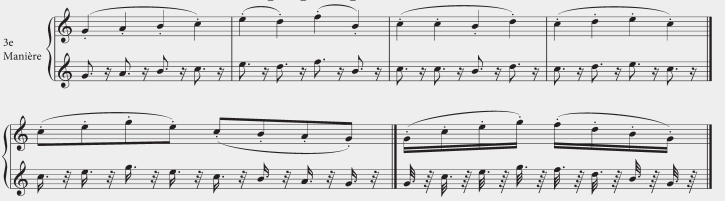
La seconde manière marquée par un  demande à être détachée un peu moins sèchement que la première et s'exprime en ôtant la moitié de la valeur de la note.

Exemple



La troisième marquée par des points avec une liaison dessus est la moins détachée de toutes; on appelle *notes portées* celles qui sont marquées avec ce signe, et on les exprime en ôtant seulement la quatrième partie de la valeur de la note.

Exemple pour porter les notes.



Example 1 *Louis Adam,* Méthode nouvelle pour le piano *(1805), types of articulation, pp. 154–55.*

Articulation and Touch

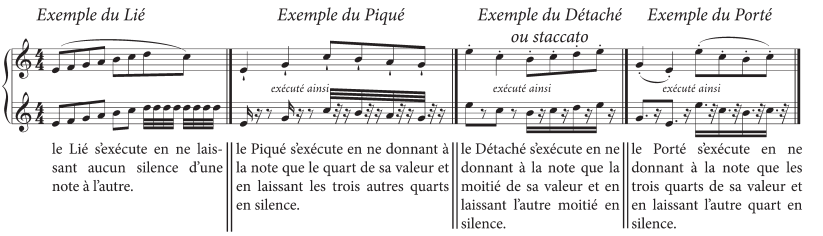
Closely tied to fingering choices are questions of articulation and touch. A variety of articulations were specified in the piano methods circulating in Chopin's Parisian milieu. The varieties of articulation signs and how to realize them are explained by Louis Adam (*Méthode nouvelle pour le piano,* 1805; see example 1), Henry Lemoine (*Méthode théorique et pratique pour le piano,* 1827; see example 2), and Kalkbrenner (*Méthode pour apprendre le piano-forte,*1831; see example 3). Alexis de Garaudé (*Méthode complette pour le piano forte,* 1820; originally published some years earlier) devotes a page to the same subject, with a somewhat different presentational style. Clearly, four distinct and quantifiable articulations were considered to be part of a good pianist's equipment: a short staccato (the notated note is held for only a quarter of its value, with the remaining three-quarters of its value separating it from the next note), an intermediate level (half and half), portato (three-quarters held, one-quarter separation), and legato.

It is a measure of how much things have changed that this kind of articulative variety is rarely exploited by pianists today. It is certainly possible to produce the different articulations on modern instruments, but they are not as effective on these pianos, and the larger the performance venue the more minimal such effects become. Nonetheless, for Chopin himself even this variety was only part of the story. The Nocturne op. 37/1 in G Minor features a sort of exaggerated portato in measure 6 and analogous places, indicated by an accent mark under a phrasing slur. As Chopin's own fingering for this passage calls for consecutive uses of the third finger, this probably bears some relation to Kalkbrenner's *notes portées,* "to be played as if with one finger." Chopin authority and grand-student Jean Kleczyński described the variety of articulations Chopin taught somewhat differently: *staccato* ("effected by a free movement of the wrist," and "a wonderful means of counteracting heaviness," indicated by staccatissimo wedges), *legato staccato* ("or heavy *staccato*, in which the finger rests somewhat longer on the key," indicated as typical portato with staccato dots under a phrasing slur), "accented *legato*" (indicated by vertical accent marks under a legato slur), and true legato.[17] Even this selection does not include the standard tenuto mark (which is difficult to find in Chopin's music, if indeed he ever used it), the staccatissimo wedge under a phrasing slur (found for example in m. 10

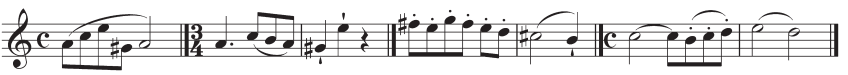
[17] Jean Kleczyński, *How to Play Chopin: The Works of Frederic Chopin, Their Proper Interpretation* [1880], 6th ed., trans. Alfred Whittingham (London: William Reeves, [1913]), 27–29; quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 33–34.

EXEMPLES des SIGNES employés pour la PONCTUATION musicale

1º.le LIÉ, 2º.le PIQUÉ, 3º.le DÉTACHÉ, 4º.le PORTÉ



Example 2 *Henry Lemoine,* Méthode théorique et pratique pour le piano *(1827), types of articulation, p. 119.*



Example 3 *Friedrich Kalkbrenner,* Méthode pour apprendre le piano-forte *(1831), types of articulation, p. 6.*

of the op. 2 *La cì darem la mano* variations), or the short descrescendo over a single note (common in the Nocturnes), often mistaken by editors for an accent, which has a dynamic significance, an agogic implication to accommodate the decay, and quite possibly an articulative component as well.

The articulation issue is related to but not identical with the matter of touch. Chopin advocated loose hands and wrists, fingers falling to the keys freely and lightly, and above all he eschewed any kind of stiffness.[18] Several students and other contemporaries, moreover, observed his use of a caressing touch — the finger sliding on the key. Called *carezzando* by Chopin's Polish-born contemporary Antoine de Kontski, this caressing touch goes back to clavichord technique, but was fairly widely practiced within the orbit of the Parisian piano school and its *jeu perlé* tradition.[19] Beside Chopin, Kalkbrenner mentions an *en caressant* touch in his piano method, and *carezzando* per se is really the only interesting aspect of Kontski's own treatise (originally published in Paris, 1845),

[18] See Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 30–31.

[19] See Jonathan Bellman, "Frédéric Chopin, Antoine de Kontski, and the Carezzando Touch," *Early Music* XXIX/3 (August 2001): 399–407.

where he even invents a notation (a small "o" above the notehead) to indicate it.[20]

Given all the varieties of touch and articulation described and notated, the essential aspect is not the exact fractional distinctions between them, which seem a bit over-notated, even fussy. What really matters here is significant to the Parisian piano school but absolutely central to Chopin's pianism: vocalism. In realizing melodies as a singer would, the wide variety of articulations gives the pianist the tools of a singer: an endless variety of different syllables — as if in different languages — different emphases, different emotional responses to words, different inflections. However celebrated, it may be that absent other characteristics, the vaunted "singing tone" itself is a fairly minor aspect of the cantabile style.

Rubatos

The question of Chopin's rubato has been much discussed, debated, and analyzed, but it is surprising how much confusion still surrounds this topic. What is formally called *tempo rubato,* "stolen time," is in its earlier sense a phenomenon traceable at least to the early Baroque: the rhythmic freedom or *sprezzatura* (nonchalance) of an expressive singer when he or she sings a melody over a rhythmically more stable accompaniment.[21] While singers of opera seem to have become more rhythmically straitened, this practice is still very much within the contemporary popular singer's interpretive arsenal; when Chopin used it at the piano, moreover, it was widely acknowledged and indeed

[20] Kalkbrenner, *Méthode,* 12; Antoine de Kontski, *L'Indispensable du Pianiste,* c.1851 edition, 15–17. Two more references to Chopin's use of the *carezzando* touch (or something equivalent) are by Henry F. Chorley, the music critic for *the Athenæum,* quoted in a paper by A. J. Hipkins (a keyboard technician and scholar who tuned for Chopin in 1848, when he was in England and Scotland). Hipkins's paper, otherwise unpublished, is included in a lengthy multipart article on Chopin in *The Musical Times,* over several issues in 1882. Chorley observed that "[Chopin's] harmonies, from time to time, are such as require his own sliding, smooth, delicate finger to 'carry off,'" (*The Athenæum,* 6 May 1848, p. 467) and he later made reference to Chopin's "manner of sliding with one and the same finger from note to note, by way of producing a peculiar *legato*, and of passing the third over the fourth finger," (*The Athenæum,* 1 July 1848, p. 660). These quotations are both found in Joseph Bennett, "The Great Composers — XI. Chopin," *The Musical Times* (1 June 1882): 315.

[21] Two significant sources on the subject include Gastone Belotti, *Le Origini Italiane del 'Rubato' Chopiniano* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1968) and Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time: The History of Tempo Rubato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Sandra P. Rosenblum refers to the earliest form of "rubato" as "contrametric rubato" and traces it throughout the Classic era. Sandra P. Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 373–82.

celebrated — another aspect of his evocation of the vocal art. Several of Chopin's students described it clearly, and Chopin's advice to Wilhelm von Lenz about practicing the Nocturne op. 9/2 even describes the process by which others can master it themselves:

> Chopin wanted "the bass to be practiced first by itself, divided between the hands — with a full but *piano* sonority and in strict time, maintaining an absolutely steady *allegretto* movement without the 12/8 lapsing into triplets, then the left hand can be trusted with the accompaniment played that way and the tenor invited to sing his part in the upper voice."[22]

This seems clear enough. The hands are simply not together for every subdivision, and the right (the soloist) interprets the melody in a flexible rhythm over the more stable accompaniment (the band, orchestra, or chamber choir) — today any accomplished country, jazz, or ballad singer does precisely the same thing. Lenz's account is certainly clear enough that this skill may be learned, with considerable patience, but even so it is not often heard today among classical pianists. One noteworthy realization can be heard in Pierre Goy's performance of Chopin's Nocturne op. 9/2, which offers a persuasive example of how this can work (see the CD accompanying this volume, Track 1).[23] It is immediately apparent, here, that the idea of rhythmic "displacement" is irrelevant; instead, the pianist listens and plays contrametrically, artfully maintaining both a stable and unobtrusive accompaniment while articulating the right-hand melody with a naturally soloistic rhythmic subtlety and inflection. Since no singer is, nor should be, perfectly synchronized with the accompaniment, this *tempo rubato* evokes a completely natural vocalism.

Indeed, more than half a century ago Paul and Eva Badura-Skoda acknowledged the importance of this approach, and bemoaned its disappearance, for which they blamed piano teachers — an odd idea, given that piano teachers are hardly in control of changing styles of performance, nor is it impossible for any pianist to rediscover how to achieve a contrametric rubato (as Pierre Goy's recording, among others, demonstrates).[24] Regardless, one of the real problems in the transmission of "Chopin's rubato" seems to be terminological.

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[22] Wilhelm von Lenz, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 77.

[23] Pierre Goy's recording of Chopin's Nocturne in E-Flat Major, op. 9/2, on a copy of an 1826 Graf, is to be found on his *Chopin in Vienna* (Lyrinx: CD LYR 247 [2006, distributed by Qualiton]). I am deeply grateful to Mr. Goy for allowing me to use this recording.

[24] Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart at the Keyboard* [1957], trans. Leo Black (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), 43.

Although a variety of Chopin's students and associates made it clear that this traditional *tempo rubato* was Chopin's standard (and celebrated) approach to the cantabile style, it is nonetheless not clear that he himself actually used the term "rubato" for it. The only one to associate the specific term in this context with Chopin ("rubato as *he* understood it") was Wilhelm von Lenz, a somewhat problematic source, and not necessarily one to be trusted in matters where his is the only testimony (but very helpful where his voice is one of a chorus, as in this case, because no one else transmitted the nuts and bolts of learning to play this way).[25] In fact, Chopin's use of the word *rubato* for a different and largely unrelated practice is, it seems, one cause of the confusion surrounding his uniquely flexible approach to rhythm.

When Chopin used the word "rubato," such as in the scores of the Mazurkas opp. 6 and 7 and in the one nocturne with a thoroughly Polish character, op. 15/3 in G Minor, he was referring to a specifically national kind of rhythmic inflection, kinesthetic rather than vocalistic in origin, and one that required a specific kind of flexibility with the beat itself (as opposed to the previously described *tempo rubato*). This specifically Polish rubato sparked a famous anecdote (and a less well known echo of it), and a great deal of (mostly misguided) speculation. Here is Lenz, again:

> Meyerbeer had seated himself; Chopin let me play on.
>
> "That is two-four time," said Meyerbeer.
>
> For reply, Chopin made me repeat, and kept time by beating loudly on the instrument with his pencil; his eyes glowed.
>
> "Two-four," Meyerbeer repeated quietly.
>
> I never but once saw Chopin angry; it was at this time! A delicate flush colored his pale cheeks, and he looked very handsome.
>
> "It is three-four," he said *loudly,* he, who always spoke so softly.
>
> "Give it me for a ballet in my opera…I will show you, *then*."
>
> "It is *three*-four," almost screamed Chopin, and played it himself. He played it several times, and stamped time with his foot — he was beside himself! It was of no use; Meyerbeer insisted it was two-four, and they parted in ill humor.[26]

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[25] See Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 52.

[26] Wilhem von Lenz, *The Great Piano Virtuoso of our Time*, trans. Madeleine R. Baker (New York: Schirmer. 1899), 66-67.

Charles Hallé noted the same phenomenon, and moreover knew of the encounter with Meyerbeer:

> A remarkable feature of [Chopin's] playing was the entire freedom with which he treated the rhythm, but which appeared so natural that for years it had never struck me. It must have been in 1845 or 1846 that I once ventured to observe to him that most of his mazurkas (those dainty jewels), when played by himself, appeared to be written, not in three-four, but in four-four time, the result of his dwelling so much longer on the first note in the bar. He denied it strenuously, until I made him play one of them and counted audibly four in the bar, which fitted perfectly. Then he laughed and explained that it was the national character of the dance which created the oddity. The more remarkable fact was that you received the impression of three-four rhythm whilst listening to common time. Of course this was not the case with every Mazurka, but with many. I understood later how ill advised I had been to make that observation to him and how well disposed towards me he must have been to have taken it with such good humor, for a similar remark made by Meyerbeer, perhaps in a somewhat supercilious manner, on another occasion, led to a serious quarrel, and I believe Chopin never forgave him.[27]

And Ignaz Moscheles had told Hans von Bülow that when his daughter was taking lessons with Chopin in 1848, she "had played … a new Chopin Mazurka with such a rubato that the entire piece gave the impression of being in two-four instead of in three-four."[28]

The rhythmic peculiarity for which Chopin's mazurka playing was so famous may not have been quite as clear as Hallé made it out to be. As he described it, all that was necessary was to double the value of the first beat, which would result in an effective four-four meter — and which would hardly have been a sufficiently elusive effect for Chorley to write, in *The Athenæum,* that the Mazurkas "lose half their characteristic wildness if played without a certain freak and license — impossible to imitate, but irresistible if the player at all feel the music."[29] As we puzzle this out, it is fortunate that a certain number of recordings — including a few from the first half of the twentieth century, when the memory of this kind of inflection was fresher — preserve this kind of triple-as-duple realization. Maddeningly, though, even when the mazurkas are persuasively done (and it is not quite as simple as doubling the value of one of the beats), the questions

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[27] Hallé, *Autobiography,* 54.

[28] Quoted in Hudson, *Stolen Time,* 185.

[29] Henry Chorley in *The Athenæum* No. 1079 (1 July 1848): 660.

are not all answered. This is especially evident in comparing the recordings of the middle section of the Mazurka op. 50/2 by Ignaz Friedman, a refugee from the Nazis who had grown up in Poland (accompanying CD, Track 2), and Fou Ts'ong, the Chinese pianist who emigrated to Poland and made a lifelong study of Chopin's music (accompanying CD, Track 3): both middle sections are effectively in duple meter, both seem natural, idiomatic, and persuasive… but Friedman's second beat is the one that receives agogic stress, while Ts'ong emphasizes the first. It may be that competing local Polish traditions play a role here: there are differences in inflection between the *mazur,* the *oberek,* and *kujawiak,* the three related, triple-meter dances that Chopin mixed and matched in composing his mazurkas. An unpublished paper by the Polish scholar Michał Podolak advances this provocative thesis, but for now there is a good deal about Chopin's Polish rubato that is not widely understood, and which complicates the interpretive issues for those not versed in localized Polish traditions of the mid-nineteenth century.[30]

It is fair to ask, though, how much of this actually may be "understood" in the usual performance practices sense of identifying the tools, mastering them, and confidently using them. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger has pointed out the obvious but often overlooked point that Chopin would also have used a third type of rhythmic flexibility, "called rubato by extension only": this third kind, commonly used by all musicians, "consists of fleeting changes of pace relative to the basic tempo" — "agogic modifications" that "may affect a whole section, period, or phrase, slowing down or accelerating the flow depending on the direction of the music."[31] This, too, seems to bear a relation to vocalism, at least to singing of a natural and uncultivated kind: the "direction of the music" corresponds to how a singer would naturally approach the peak of a phrase, taper off at the end, and characterize particular ideas. So the rhythmic component of Chopin's pianistic ineffability consisted of some kind of highly personal, completely fluid combination of three types of (using the term broadly) rubato: the soloistic *tempo rubato* proper, the Polish national dance inflection, and the more common interpretive agogic flexibility. None of these would necessarily have been used in the absence of the others, nor (probably) could have been, and when we consider expressively soloistic passages that seem to possess a Polish character or inflection (the middle section of the

[30] A thorough and painstaking discussion of Chopin's rubatos is to be found in Hudson, *Stolen Time,* Chapter 7.

[31] Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 120n98.

Nocturne in B-Flat Minor op. 9/1 and opening of the Nocturne in G Minor op. 15/3 are two examples) it becomes clear how inimitably personal — and from our perspective, probably irretrievable — Chopin's own rhythmic vocabulary really was. Realistically, it may be that the best approach for performers today is to master these techniques and use them not only "appropriately" — when the musical style clearly suggests a Polish or *bel canto* context — but also resourcefully and creatively, discovering interpretive opportunities for such rhythmic flexibilities (or, indeed, the varieties of touch and articulation) that are less obvious but plausible, effective, and persuasive. Central to the idea of inimitability, after all, is the element of *surprise,* the shock of recognition and pleasure when something unexpected has a good effect, offers a new idea, or casts a new light. It is in that somewhat magical and unquantifiable realm that interpretive ineffability is to be found.

Musical Vocabulary and Frames of Reference

The unavoidable lesson here is that ineffability is less a matter of what is done at the piano than how "what is done" affects the listener. The vexatious problem of "authentic nineteenth-century ears" is best approached not primarily through an original instrument or specific technique but rather through musical culture: what can be established about the dominant repertoires, and how we can sensitively read descriptive responses to Chopin's playing — especially when they describe aspects of his performance that were strange and different, or familiar but better, or unexpected but effective. This is far from hard science, but a few things are clear. The most important of these is that people were in the habit of *listening* imaginatively and describing what they heard in visual, extramusical terms. The sampling of comments that follows, beyond illustrating that point, should also serve to remind us how far this is from the way any self-respecting classical music aficionado today would write about music (and, therefore, how different our musical priorities are from those of Chopin's time).

The poet Bohdan Zaleski described an improvisation "in which [Chopin] evoked all the sweet and sorrowful voices of the past. He sang the tears of the *dumkas* and finished with the national anthem, 'Poland is not [yet] dead,' in a whole gamut of different forms and voices, from that of the warrior to those of children and angels. I could have written a whole book about this improvisation."[32] The pianist Ferdinand Hiller averred, "What in the hands of others was elegant

[32] Zaleski, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 283–84.

embellishment, in his hands became a colorful wreath of flowers; what in others was technical dexterity seemed in his playing like the flight of a swallow. All thought of isolating any one quality — novelty, grace, perfection, soul — fell away; it was simply Chopin."[33] Charles Hallé wrote to his parents that "During Chopin's playing I could think of nothing but elves and fairy dances, such a wonderful impression do his compositions make. There is nothing to remind one that it is a human being who produces this music. It seems to descend from heaven — so pure, and clear, and spiritual."[34] One of the most evocative descriptions comes from Solange Clésinger, George Sand's daughter:

> Under the flexible and responsive fingers of Chopin's pale and frail hand the piano became the voice of an archangel, an orchestra, an army, a raging ocean, a creation of the universe, the end of the world. What divine majesty! What elemental forces, what cries of despair! What triumphant hymns! What suave grace, what angelical tenderness, what infinite sorrows! What funeral marches and triumphal processions! What rays of sunlight on flowers in full bloom, on the glittering river, on the valley of scented lemon trees! What tears from the depths of the damp cloister! What impatient whinnyings of the war-horse, what duels of knights, what village or courtly dances (what minuets) interrupted by the jingling of arms or the cannon of the citadel! And what melancholy raindrops falling one by one on the tiles in the cell garden![35]

There is much, much more. In the musical culture of Chopin's listeners narrative music played a very important role: not only in operas, but also in programmatic piano works by the likes of Daniel Steibelt, Jan Ladislav Dussek, and a host of lesser composers. Clésinger and others who listened to Chopin could hear whinnying horses, tears from the cloister, funeral marches, triumphal processions, and all the rest because a musical vocabulary for these things had already been developed in the consumer-based repertories.[36] What this means in general is that our discomfort with musical depiction and literalism, our resistance to the idea that great musical works actually were heard to (or, even more uncomfortably, *intended* to) tell stories and evoke extramusical ideas, is anachronistic. It is a modernist fastidiousness that prefers to hear (or make as if to hear) form, motive, intervallic content and so on — putatively objective

[33] Hiller, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 270.

[34] Hallé, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 271.

[35] Clésinger, quoted in Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 281.

[36] In Clésinger's specific case, there may have been the additional influence of some ideas of her mother George Sand, written down years before. Eigeldinger, *Chopin,* 281n19.

elements, in other words — but to remain completely innocent of the gestures on the musical surface. Yet, it is clearly those surface gestures that Chopin's listeners most clearly heard and understood, and most ardently celebrated.

A related area is that of interpretive ornamentation. There is ample proof, both from memoirs of his playing and musical passages he jotted into students' scores, that Chopin participated in the tradition of altering ornamental passages as the mood dictated, or as he felt his students would be capable of playing. He was inclined to do this in the nocturnes especially, and many of the surviving variants are preserved in the two editions published under the editorship of Jan Ekier: the New Polish National Edition and the Wiener Urtext. The nocturnes, which are essentially idealized opera arias, are the most appropriate genre for such ornamentation in that they evoke not only the rich italianate melodies associated with celebrated opera singers but also their ornamental *fioriture*. A similar (and similarly optional) ornamental passage is provided for a nocturne by Pierre Zimmerman, in his 1840 treatise, and both he and Henry Lemoine (1827) also provided wide selections of recommended trill ornaments for pianists to learn and use.[37] As with other extramusical ideas associated with the wide variety of style gestures that recur throughout Chopin's works, the broader musical and cultural context of the nocturne would have informed listeners' expectations, understanding, and appreciation of whatever approach to ornamentation the pianist took, in addition to any other performance elements (*tempo rubato,* articulations) that would tie it to the operatic repertoire with which most listeners were thoroughly familiar. Track 4 on the accompanying CD gives a recording by Chopin's grand-student Raoul Koczalski of the Nocturne, op. 9/2 with variants gleaned from students' scores, Track 5 gives Bart van Oort's version of the same nocturne, with his own ornamental variants, and Track 6 gives one of my own performances of Chopin's C Minor Nocturne, op. posth., with my own variants, from a live performance at the University of Richmond in Fall 1991.[38] Van Oort's *fioriture*, both here and in other Chopin Nocturnes,

[37] Zimmerman's Nocturne trill termination chart (found on p. 60 of his method) is also to be found in Jonathan Bellman, "Improvised Ornamentation in Chopin's Paris," *Early Keyboard Studies Newsletter* 8/2 (April, 1994), 4, and the nocturne *fioriture* passage, transcribed for improved readability, appears on both p. 6 of that article and in Bellman, "Chopin and His Imitators: Notated Emulations of the 'True Style' of Performance," *19th-Century Music* 24/2 (Fall 2000): 156. The Lemoine trill termination chart appears on pp. 128–29 of his method.

[38] The Koczalski recording may be found on several different reissues. Bart van Oort's recording of Chopin's Nocturne in E-Flat Major, op. 9/2, may be found on his *Nocturnes Complete: Frédéric Chopin/John Field* [+others] (2005; Brilliant Classics CD 92202). I am deeply grateful for Mr. van Oort's permission to use this recording.

seem completely idiomatic stylistically and yet possess a certain piquancy, as if to call special attention to the embellishment of the "singer."

This matter of the conceptual vocabulary and musical experience that Chopin's listeners brought to his music seems to remove us somewhat from performance practice matters such as instrument, temperament, articulation, rhythm, and so on. Yet it is central to the magic — the ineffability — we seek to rediscover. Given the sheer amount of testimony to the effect that it was as if one saw images when Chopin played, that the actual piano playing receded beyond the poetry and visions, it seems reasonable to master the relevant techniques to the point of eventually moving beyond the responsible but somewhat pedestrian, bar-by-bar decisions to use this rubato here or that articulation there. Rather, the first step should be reconceiving the music, after which — equipped with the tools outlined above — the goal becomes bringing the pieces to life in vivid and imaginative ways. Only after the pianist has decided what the aria is really about and what kind of singer is "singing" it (and in which language), what story this Ballade is trying to tell, what sort of dance this particular mazurka or waltz is, can real performance and interpretive decisions be made. Above all, we cannot continue to passively endorse and partake in the usual way Chopin is played. That, it seems to me, is the one approach above all that is misguided and inauthentic. To master certain specialized (and currently all but forgotten) pianistic tools, to engage our imaginations to produce creative and individual interpretations, and to approach this task with the intent of surprising and delighting those that hear us: *these* are the approaches that Chopin himself used to astound and delight his listeners. While it could never be possible to reproduce what Chopin was actually playing, we have many more tools for "reconstructing the ineffable" than we have so far put to use: varieties of rhythmic flexibility to master, a much wider palette of articulations to deploy, different temperaments to experiment with, and so on. In telling the stories we need to tell, then, there is the necessity of approaching not just the rhythm of a dance (even given an idiomatic national inflection), but also the bodily gives and takes; not just a rich "singing tone" but all aspects of vocalism (speaking, enunciation, an actor's delivery of the sung words, with syllables of subtly different lengths, ornamentation, and so on). Chopin's command of those almost infinite variables clearly resulted in the ineffability of his playing, and it is in the pursuit of that ineffability, not simply the use of older instruments (or facsimiles thereof) and techniques, that the historically informed and stylistically sensitive approach to his music ought really to reside.