

**CHOPIN IN PERFORMANCE:
HISTORY, THEORY, PRACTICE**



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THE PERFORMANCE OF WORKS BY FRYDERYK CHOPIN AS AN AESTHETIC-HISTORICAL PHENOMENON

For as long as the idea of the piano concert or recital has existed, concert performances have constituted an event during which and through which the work, or the very idea of the human and aesthetical personality of the composer, is transmitted and often transformed, taking on the form of a presentation and performance which, according to Gadamer's idea, may become a 'text', that is, an interpretational document which may enter the history of the composer-performer relationship.

In the case of concerts of music by Fryderyk Chopin, this question is exceptionally delicate and complex, both because one must first establish whether the composer intended – in respect to the idea of 'performance' – to enter the circle of concert pianists in the modern sense of the word and also in the context of the following problem: how to respect the composer's wish to be understood and well known and at the same time approach the question of performance treating the idea of the piano concert in line with the tenets of Ferenc Liszt and as a contemporary phenomenon?

This problem would appear to be linked to that which Claudio Arrau points to as the most widely found personality type among performing artists:

[...] What we most frequently encounter is Jung's differentiation between the introversive and extroversive personalities. The extrovert finds it much easier to make a career, especially at the beginning, when he is full of confidence. But for most of the time he remains on the threshold of the final stage in maturing. The introvert, meanwhile, if he has the strength to face up to the difficulties, often attains, in my opinion, considerably better results.¹

Linked to the subject of the performance of Chopin's works are both the question of the relationship between the composer and the text, on the one hand, and the performer, on the other, as well as the expectations and reception of both critics and audiences within a specific musical atmosphere. In his famous book *Alcuni aspetti di Chopin* [Some Aspects of Chopin], Alfred Cortot wrote the following:

There is no name which could gain a universal splendour superior to the pianistic glory of Chopin, regardless of any consideration as to the genius of the composer and taking into account only the aura of legend that surrounds to this day the exceptional nature of his performances.

And yet, through a sort of contradiction bordering on paradox, there is no example of a virtuoso who would resort less than he to the public sanctification of his pianistic talent.

Performances of Chopin works have always constituted particular events: from the rare concert appearances of Fryderyk Chopin himself, through historical performances, traditions and schools, to the outstanding personalities of the great performers. The changeability of historical epochs, and so of tastes, in line with changes in perception, has led to the appearance of interpretations and conceptions often very different from one another, since respect for tradition has not always meant faithfulness to the composer's thinking.

As Cortot commented in Paris, during Chopin's lifetime:

Conversations would soon turn to the unusual personality of the young artist, who, contrary to the custom of his profession, shared the favours of his talent, which was considered quite wondrous, only with listeners chosen by himself, and not with those on whom he had to depend.

Everyone who heard him spoke of him with enthusiasm, while anyone who had not would quote comments through a desire to be seen as better informed than others on the subject of privileged encounters. And so the echo began to resound [...] intensified even more by mysterious voices from one knew not where, anonymously spreading a reputation surrounded by legend, which in their expression of praise often went beyond a sanctification based on evident merit.

A reputation which in this case was not confined to virtuoso qualities, but encompassed to varying degrees, on the basis of a certain kind of infectious osmosis [...] the attractiveness of the person himself and his manner of being. It must undoubtedly be stressed that it is not our intention to make the celebrity of Chopin the pianist – for we speak of him here solely as a pianist – conditional upon the opinions of ordinary, worldly snobbism. Yet we cannot but acknowledge that he had a decisive influence on the behaviour of future gener-

ations, which, imitating the Parisian salons of 1830, accepted blindly, as an irrefutable truth, the greatly suggestive formulation of Duchess Belgijoso: 'Chopin is not only the greatest of pianists: he is something more; he is unique'.²

This subject is unusually complex also because it is inseparably tied to the definition of creative and recreative thinking. After all, what is the notation of a work recorded on paper at the will of the composer? The answer to this question is closely linked to a familiarity with his creative thinking and his poetics: does this signify a desire for the careful consideration of every written detail, so as to best recreate through creative processes the essence that it contains, or can it constitute a substance, a 'canvas' which may be modified in accordance with the capacities and characteristics of performers, in line with the premisses of expressive and communicative phenomenology?

One might think that the poetry of Fryderyk Chopin belonged rather to the former category, whilst the latter referred rather to the creative thinking of composers such as Gioacchino Rossini, involving the tradition, Italian and otherwise, of eighteenth-century music. And yet, given that Chopin's music is so profound and so filled with emotional and evocative states, it seems legitimate to suppose a need for a vivid experience of poetical communication in order to be able to express it, for that indefinable experience that lies between the notes and enables one to carry on a narration in his music. In this sense, every performance is new, and the performer decides during the concert on the final version of the work which he or she wishes to convey.

When we read, among others, the words that Robert Schumann left in his writings on the subject of a performance he had heard of the opus 25 *Études* which was in keeping with the indications of the composer himself, it seems to be clear:

In these études, I have the additional advantage of having heard Chopin himself play nearly all of them, 'and very much à la Chopin he plays them', whispered Florestan in my ear. Imagine an aeolian harp possessing all the scales, and an artist's hand combining these with all kinds of fantastic embellishments, but always with an audible deep ground bass, and in the treble, a softly flowing cantilena – and you will have some idea of his playing. No wonder, then, that we were most of all charmed with those pieces which we had heard played by himself, and particularly with the first, in A-flat major, rather a poem than an étude. But it would be a mistake to suppose that he allowed us to hear every one

of its small notes. It was rather an undulation of the A-flat major chord, brought out more loudly here and there with the pedal. But, exquisitely entangled in the harmony, there ensued a wondrous melody in the big notes. It was only in the middle section that a tenor voice once broke clearly from the chords and joined the principal melody. And when the étude was ended, we felt as though we had seen a lovely picture in a dream, and, half awake, we strove to seize it again; but such things cannot be described, nor can they be fitly praised. Then he played the second in the book, in F minor, again one in which his individuality displays itself in a manner never to be forgotten; as charming, dreamy, and soft as the song of a sleeping child. That in F major followed; fine again, but novel less in its character than in its figuration; here the master shows his admirable powers of the most amiable bravura – but what use are words?³

Although they seem by now to be almost too familiar, such bibliographical references always conceal a certain artistic truth, which lies at the core of the very idea of a tradition and school, in spite of the different poetical Romantic experience and, even more so, the different aesthetic.

Apropos, we know that Chopin appreciated Liszt's performance of his *Études*, and also how the opinion of Robert Schumann – and also of Heinrich Heine⁴ – differed on the subject of the two great 'pianists'. In reference to the publication of Liszt's *Grandes Études*, volumes 1 and 2, the German composer wrote the following:

[...] We are happy to acquaint our readers with a discovery of ours concerning these études which will greatly increase their interest in them. We refer to our collection, published by Hofmeister, numbered opus 1, and titled *Travail de la Jeunesse*; and to another published by Haslinger and entitled *Grandes Etudes*. But on our closer acquaintance we find the latter to be, in most of its numbers, recasts of certain youthful compositions which had been forgotten because of the obscurity of the publishing house, and which have been brought to light and newly published by the German publisher. Though we cannot term this collection...an original work, it will remain doubly interesting, because of the aforesaid circumstances, to any professional pianist who has the opportunity of comparing it with the old edition. On making this comparison we immediately perceive the difference the pianist of then and now, and find how the latter has gained in richness of means, brilliancy, and fullness; while we cannot fail to observe that the original simplicity, which is natural to the first flow of youthful talent, is almost entirely suppressed in its present form. [...] Opinions vary so greatly on the matter of Liszt's talent for composition that an examination of its most important elements and its manifestation at various times will not be out of place here. [...] There can be no doubt, however, that we have here to deal with an extraordinary, multiply moved mind as well as with a mind influencing others. His own life is to be found in his music [...]⁵

This quotation, which should really be presented in its entirety, also makes us aware of how the origins, certainty and identity of his own aesthetic 'credo' had a fundamental influence on his way of playing, too, and so also on his way of transmitting his interpretational poetry. For while it is certain that during his early life in Warsaw, his brief sojourns in Vienna and his appearance in Paris, Fryderyk Chopin also wished to achieve success as a 'pianist-composer'. Testimony to this effect is provided by the famous letters he wrote at the time when he played for Friedrich Kalkbrenner – full of assessments, including technical evaluations, and critical elements. It is also true that both the reticence he displayed towards encouragement and advice and also his later existential and artistic watershed confirm the Polish composer's tendency, proper to his personality as musician, towards a more restrained, personal, almost covert communication, intended for the 'initiated' in the world of his spiritual experiences, and by the same stroke hampering the definition of the tradition and history of his pianistic output. This stands in contrast to Ferenc Liszt, whose overwhelming virtuosity enables critical evaluation to perpetuate his pianistic and compositional art.

Indeed, on 14 December 1831, Chopin wrote a letter to Józef Elsner, who was urging him to follow a path in composition leading him beyond a pianistic vision, in which he answered his master's doubts and explained in a few fragments the justification of his particularly keen interest in the future development of his compositional and interpretational art:

In 1830, although I could see how much I was lacking and how far I was from being able to come up to any of the models that I had in You, Sir, I did venture to think to myself: I shall get just a little nearer to his level and if not Łokietek, then perhaps some Laskonogi will come out of my brain. Yet, today, seeing all hopes of this sort now dashed, I am obliged to think of forging a path for myself in the world as a pianist, laying aside for only a time indeterminate the higher artistic aspirations which You rightly present to me in your letter. In order to be a great composer, one requires vast experience, which, as You taught me, is gained not only by listening to others, but even more by listening to one's own works. A dozen worthy young men, pupils of the Paris Conservatoire, await with folded arms the production of their operas, symphonies and cantatas, which only Cherubini and Lessueur have seen on paper. [...] Why, Meyerbeer, creditably renowned for 10 years as a composer of operas, for three years worked, paid and sat in Paris before (when at last there was too much Auber) he came to produce *Robert le Diable* – which now is all

the rage. In my opinion, as regards revealing oneself in the musical world, lucky the man who can be both composer and actor. I am already known as a pianist here and there in Germany; some musical journals have recalled my concerts in the hope of seeing me soon among the leading virtuosi of my instrument [...] Today I perceive the only opportunity of fulfilling my innate promise: why should I not grasp it? In Germany I would not let anyone teach me on the piano, for though more than one observer felt that I still had some shortcomings, they knew not what. Meanwhile, I have not seen in my eye that beam which the homeland today raises for me yet higher. Three years is too much! Too much, even, as Kalkbrenner himself, on scrutinizing me better, admitted (which should prove to You that this true virtuoso, deservedly lauded, is not of a jealous disposition). Yet I would even agree to those three years if I could only thereby make some progress in my undertakings. I have enough of an idea that I will not be a copy of Kalkbrenner: he will not succeed in effacing my lofty, albeit perhaps too bold, desire and thought: to create for myself a new world; and if I am going to work, it is so that I may stand on feet that are stronger for this idea. [...]⁶

Continuing his reflections on the personality of Liszt, Schumann writes the following:

And while he developed his piano playing to an extraordinary degree, the composer in him lagged behind; this always leads to a disequilibrium, the consequences of which are felt in his most recent works. Other influences stimulated the young artist in still other works. While he endeavored to present in his music the ideas of French romantic literature among whose representatives he lived, he was stimulated by the sudden appearance of Paganini to develop even more his playing and attempt the almost impossible. Thus, in his Apparitions, for instance, we find him brooding over somber fantasies or indifferent to the point of boredom; in other places indulging in the most extravagant artifices of virtuosity, mocking and madly audacious. The sight of Chopin, it seems, first brought him to his senses again. Chopin always has structure; through the strange forms of his music there always runs the red thread of a melody. [...] However, we must not forget that his intention was to give études, and that the difficulties and complications he has added in this new version of them are justified by the purpose, namely, the provision of difficulties to be surmounted. [...] It would be useless labor to attempt to criticize them in the ordinary manner, or to seek for, and correct consecutive fifths and false relations. Such compositions must be heard; they were wrung from the instrument with the hands; and hands alone can make them resound.⁷

In drawing to the conclusion of his article, the German composer touches on two questions of fundamental importance for such a perception of the performance of a piano piece; his comments may be regarded as pioneering in respect to contemporary theories and studies

on aesthetics, on the sociology of communication and the reception of music, including the theory of Theodor Adorno:

And one ought also to see their composer play them; for just as the sight of any virtuosity elevates and strengthens, so much more does the immediate sight of the composer himself. Struggling with his instrument, taming it, making it obey every tone ! [...] As we have said, all these should be heard played by a master, and, if possible, by Liszt himself. Even then, some passages in them might offend us, where he exceeds all limits, where the effect attained does not compensate sufficiently for the sacrifice of beauty. But we eagerly look forward to the visit he has promised to pay us next winter. It was precisely with these études that he made such a tremendous impression during his last sojourn in Vienna; but great effects can only be produced by great causes, and a public cannot be brought to enthusiasm for nothing. So let everyone prepare himself for this artist by provisional examination of both collections. He himself will give us the best criticism on them at the piano.⁸

There is a striking similarity between these remarks and that which Chopin confided to Liszt on the subject of his nature as a public performer in comparison to the performances of the great virtuoso, as is quoted by Cortot:

I am not suited to public appearances – the auditorium saps my courage, I suffocate in the exhalation of the crowd, I am paralysed by curious glances, and the sight of strange faces compels me to silence. [...] But you, you can, since if you should fail to win over the audience you at least have the possibility of murdering them.⁹

In the juxtaposition of aesthetic approaches elaborated by Schumann with his characteristic clarity, there appears one question of particular, perhaps even paramount, importance: the question of the composition-interpretation relationship in the work of Chopin. The German composer understood the event of the concert performance differently in respect to each of the two artists. In the case of Liszt, it was already the modern conception of a solo recital, whilst Chopin preferred a more focussed and composed public appearance. A Chopin concert remains a symbol of delicacy and complexity, so very closely connected with the composer's personality, allowing him to transmit the marvellous achievements of his art: his intuition and talent, with the ability to combine respect for the text with freedom to interpret the work, each of which is exceptional in its essence.

In Chopin's case, recreation becomes a subtle and profound process, which yields less to a reduction to evident cultural factors – at most to traces found in scores, in rare phrases left in correspondence or in the accounts of his contemporaries – than in the case of his fellow contemporary musicians, such as his friend Liszt (with whom he shared the common experience of the atmosphere of Paris in those years) or Schumann.

So in speaking of a Chopin performance tradition or school, today one generally has in mind the way in which Chopinesque performance is comprehended and taught more in the phenomenological than the ontological sense of the word 'school'.¹⁰

Since many concert interpretations of Chopin appear to correspond to the tastes and aesthetics of a given period, this phenomenon is perceived through the prism of historical or national factors, linked to a certain tradition or school. At the same time, there remains a vivid notion of the ideal interpretation of Chopin, resulting solely from a correct reading of the text and its 'appropriate' execution. For it is also true that encoded in the text, in the style and in the very structure of the language employed by the composer are specific stylistic features (*stilemi*), distinct and distinguishable in formal interpretational analysis. In the work of Chopin, this occurs, for example, in relation to such elements as melodic culmination in particular genres, a lyrical-poetic *spianato* (*Tondichter*), a specific tone, the manner of performing *rubato* connected with the kind of expression of the work (above all as a significant *eroico* element or an element emphasising the rhythm of the dance), the dynamics and phrasing, and the agogics (including metronome markings).¹¹ Such factors are different with other composers, such as Beethoven, Schubert or Liszt. And yet an expressive approach on the part of the performer may oscillate between aesthetical objectivity and emotional psychologism. This can be seen in distinctive theatrical interpretations (a typical example being a realisation of the monologue of Shakespeare's Hamlet, with its natural classicism and at the same time reflective psychological subjectivism). This, and no other, 'rhetoric' of the dynamics of expression, this presentation of spiritual states, in a word this performance, is dictated – almost subconsciously – by the cultural traditions of a particular nation or even a particular local area, in various relations with the objective aesthetical features of an era. Thus the identification of the charac-

ter of the work performed is always expressed not only through a specific sensibility, through personal, subjective cognitive processes and a subjective reading of the text and the unique technical properties of the performer, but also in respect to the reception of the dominant aesthetic in the tastes of a particular era and a particular country. For example, the epic-heroic element in Chopin, although already disseminated in the sense of an expressive *topoi*, may receive different interpretations at the hands of pianists from a Slavic, French, German or Italian culture, due to these differences in conception of an aesthetical-emotional dimension, allied to personal sensibilities and expressive rhythmic-melodic tendencies. The very 'gradation of nostalgia' proves to be different in the conceptual worlds of different cultures: *Sehnsucht*, a desire for the absolute, takes on a different form to *żal* [sorrow, grief] and to 'spleen'. Also, the mind set of both the interpreter transmitting the idea of the composition and the listener expressing his emotional expectations are subject to change. Furthermore, if it is true that the work of Fryderyk Chopin is deeply rooted in his era and in the complex poetico-musical signification of Romanticism – oscillating between classical-neoclassical clarity, tragic dramaturgy, Slavic pathos and a 'rarefaction' combined with melodic-polyphonic sublimation – it is also true that on the basis of existential, and so also nationalistic, experience, it forges the most profound universality.

This state of affairs is the source of frequent divergence among critics with regard to particular renditions, the emergence of 'schools', the classification of the style of particular pianists and the emergence of various stylistic trends. Emblematic in this respect are the Slavic-Jewish and Russian-Soviet 'Chopinesque pianistic traditions' and the expressive emphasis residing in the performance of pianists from lands belonging to this cultural circle (including the brilliant realisations of such artists as Sergei Rachmaninov, Ignaz Friedmann and Ignacy Paderewski).

A freedom of execution with regard to the text and to the elements typical of Chopinesque pianism, such as the dynamics, attack and 'rubato' rhythm may derive from a particular way of understanding, and therefore of interpreting, the work of Chopin, with its allusions and meaning. In speaking about 'concert idols' in Berlin during the early years of the twentieth century, Claudio Arrau drew attention to the pop-

ularisation of a particular way of understanding and performing the music of Fryderyk Chopin in various artistic and national environments as the consequence of a misguided taste which should be countered, almost by force, with an attitude enhancing the sublimated reality of this music.

Here is how he describes the performance of the great pianists of that period:

Arrau: Many in Germany, particularly before the Second World War, did not consider Chopin to be a composer of great worth. And if they admired something in his music it was only with a certain dose of indulgence. He was reproached for never writing anything for orchestra and hardly any chamber music.

Horowitz: Some great German pianists were interested in Chopin. Schnabel, for instance.

A.: I heard him in the E minor Concerto. It was as if Bach had decided – I want to show you how Chopin should really be played. It was like a Bach fantasy.

H.: There is a certain recurring prejudice concerning Chopin: that his music is a pretext for exhibitionism.

A.: Yes, a pretext for a personality cult rather than music of value for the whole of humanity. Many Germans regarded him as a salon composer and exploited him to show off their technique and refinement. Of course, Chopin's music has an elegance in the best sense of the word. But that is only one element. The idea of playing this music only to mezzo forte is absurd. The fact that Chopin was ill and as a consequence was deprived of physical energy doesn't mean that others have to mimic him. His music is much more robust [...]

H.: There was somebody in Germany, Busoni I think, who defended Chopin as a great composer.

A.: Yes, Busoni adored the Preludes. But like Schnabel he wanted to defend Chopin against the attitudes that other pianists displayed towards him. Admittedly, I didn't hear him talk about it, but I think that was indeed his position.¹²

Chopin's Preludes in Busoni's rendition were extraordinary. It wasn't the usual perfumed Chopin. It was something magnificent, shocking, and at the same time exciting and unfamiliar.¹³

Meanwhile, Artur Rubinstein, solely from the point of view of interpretation, wrote the following:

Ferruccio Busoni, with his beautiful pale countenance like Jesus Christ and fiendish technique, was without doubt the most interesting living pianist. [...] The famous Campanella in his rendition was a breathtaking experience, although I have to admit that his Beethoven and his Chopin left me completely cold. To my surprise, he approached the final Beethoven sonatas

sarcastically, treating tempo and rhythm freely, whilst his Chopin, so technically dazzling, lost that warmth and allure that is so vital on the pages of his text.¹⁴

This does not mean, however, that the Chopin interpretations of Wilhelm Backhaus (for example, the *Études*, Opp. 10 and 25,¹⁵ and *Fantasy-impromptu*, Op. 66¹⁶) could not be numbered among the 'most beautiful' in the full aesthetical sense of the word, with regard to both their depth and the elegance of performance.

The same factors which determine the character of a musical work are subject to the course of history, and as a consequence to continual analysis, including in terms of performance practice. For performance is also defined as the style of execution, as theatrical gesticulation, charisma. 'Pianism' itself, as technique and means of poetic expression, can be applied to various schools, as is shown by the works of Neuhaus, taking into consideration different approaches and interpretational conceptions, from the conception of the master to the conceptions of particular pupils. The master wrote the following:

Each pianist possesses his or her individual palette of sounds. I sense this so strongly that I sometimes have the impression that the grand hall of our Conservatory is even illuminated differently depending on the tone of one pianist or another (for example, Richter, Sofronitsky, Gilels) [...] There is no such thing as 'absolute' tone, just as there is no 'absolute' interpretation, 'absolute' expressivity or anything 'absolute'. [...] Someone once asked Anton Rubinstein if he could explain, and in what way, that extraordinary impression that his interpretations made on his listeners. He answered more or less thus: this should probably be ascribed to a great power of sound, but above all to the great effort that I have put into making the piano 'sing'. Sacred words! They should be inscribed in marble in every piano class of music schools and conservatories.¹⁷

Similarly, style, technique, understanding of the fundamental elements of music and musical language differ between eras. The way of communicating through behaviour, a common and recognizable sensibility, the tradition of employing certain technical and expressive means are identified with the history of style. This is testified both by literary and epistolary descriptions as well as by illustrations and paintings from a given era. Today, thanks to the remastering of old recordings (admittedly differing from the actual performance on the level of the sonic recording¹⁸), we have the possibility of hearing interpretations from

which there arises a different and relative reception of melody (an emphasis on melodiousness, melodic elasticity and its cryptic elements), tempo (differences in *rubato* and in the manner of realising dance motifs), voice leading and tone (both in relation to the use of pedal and in various blends of tones).

In light of the above, wherein lies the difference between historical renditions, the difference between traditions and schools? Without doubt, the realisation of expressive topoi, which constitute the 'original' crux of the Chopinian language, cannot fail to reflect the way in which they were received in the era to which the interpreter – with all his individual artistic and psychological baggage – belongs. Thus the understanding of the composer's creative thought often derives from the potential aesthetic and historic possibilities, and also from the infinite theoretical possibilities, leading – according to Roman Ingarden – to a paradox involving the complete transformation of the work, which consequently leads to the cancellation of its original identity.¹⁹ Therefore, one is justified in posing the question as to what musical thought involves, in particular the musical thought of Chopin. This is expressed in a particular language (the language-thought relationship is an ineluctable logical condition). A link to this language manifests itself through the respecting of the constant compositional values, that is, the original topoi, and, at the same time, through their interpretation, all the more universal the greater the sensibility of the performer and the genius of the composer. Of course, besides a textual, or purely pianistic, rendition, we also demand of the great interpreters the 'spiritual' rendition of the works of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin.

From a deeper perspective, this question also concerns Chopin's *imagined world* in relation to such factors as the compositional idea, interpretation and reception, occurring simultaneously in the experience of performance, and so equally in relation to the dimension of the performer's imagination, to the era in which he lived and to his vision of the past. As Cortot rightly points out, it also concerns, in part, the world of legend. In the reception of the Chopin concert rendition, a fundamental significance is assumed by that dimension of the idea-presentation and by the *Stimmung* (*Erlebnis*) related to it, which is often linked to inexpressible elements,²⁰ such as tone, rhythm/song (instrumental phrasing) and changes in rhythms (rhythmic and melodic *rubato*).

The essential problem concerns the point of contact between the ontological sonic form residing in the very essence of the work and the phenomenological-representational form connected with the personality of the interpreter and, by consequence, with reception. It is at this point that the role of the interpreter (or the recreator) occupies centre stage. Therefore, both the idea of *communication-representation* and the moment of *expectation-listening-reception* are part of the *presented creative and recreative world*.

Reception of Chopin's music has always been connected with a classical-Romantic sentimental perception alluding to inner life and to a kind of musical, aesthetico-psychological metaphor. This is confirmed both by testimonies from the era and by examples drawn from the history of Chopin performances, in relation both to the most eminent interpretational personalities and to prevailing fashions, various traditions and a national-historical and aesthetico-universal framework. Every era or country manifests characteristic tendencies in art, aesthetic and philosophical attitudes, and a greater or lesser tendency to highlight the fantastical-narrational, lyrical-contemplatory or, as was the case particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, analytical-formal aspects.

The Chopinian 'visions': the heroic, melancholic, intense and suffering, lyrical and contemplative, introspective, symbolical-evocative, epic, oneiric-nocturnal, mnemonic, and gesticulatory-dancing vision, and also his tendency to reminisce, constitute both aspects of his poetry and constituents of the expectation on the part of the listener. It should be recognised that such a specific complexity results from Chopin's fundamental stance as man and artist, capable of deliberating and making choices – in life and in music – on the basis of a clear awareness of that which he considered to be essential. The doubts and crises related in the bibliographical sources constituted merely a necessary requirement of that determination and sacrifice. Chopin knew how to make choices as a composer, as is testified by the sureness of his creative innovation. He did the same as an interpreter, directing his powers of expression and rendition, his 'improvisations' to a specific circle of listeners capable of understanding him even when he only whispered, rather than declaiming. He countered Friedrich Kalkbrenner, who proposed to teach him for three years, in order to iron out the deficiencies in his training and

help him to become a great founder of a pianistic school, with an aesthetic 'ego', capable of discovering a way of playing and understanding music 'à la Chopin', alongside and above the marvellous virtuosi of the era .

Some of the pianists who succeeded in recreating the ambiance of Chopin's concerts themselves became legends (Paderewski, Cortot), whilst others approached 'Chopinesque concert performance' in the most general sense of the modern-day recital. The dawn of the era of recordings and discs has brought with it a new element, namely the possibility of listening to interpretations over and over again – a possibility hitherto alien to the very essence of music as becoming, and achievable only thanks to the power of memory: 'How Ignacy Paderewski played, and what about Alfred Cortot!', legend upon legend, an accumulation of myths. And so historical interpretations also took on the charm of the historical 'source'. Today, one can listen as often as one wishes, compare, choose renditions and become attached to listening to them as if to one's own models of a relationship with the composer. Thus we face the beauty of a fascination with history – with all the possible variants arising from the technical application of sonic reproduction in different eras and different means – although we are also deprived of the charm of the vision of historical experience and of that (perhaps not always precise) dimension produced by memory.

Reflections on the performance of Chopin's music during the twentieth century cannot fail to mention the 'founders of schools', and thereby the revision of interpretation that took place in Polish didactics, in the wake of a revision not only of the relations between the text and its rendition but also of the style itself, through the various properties of the historical reception of 'Romanticism'. Zbigniew Drzewiecki wrote on this subject in an essay from 1960, in which he also summarised that line which today we might refer to as a tradition deriving from the Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw – a tradition which unquestionably made its mark on subsequent developments:

The general tendencies in contemporary interpretation have had undeniable repercussions in the Polish pianistic style of the last decade. These tendencies, in a most general definition, represent objectivity, an aspiration to preserve due proportion between the intellectual and the emotive. [...] An eminent role in this process was played by the two great coryphaei of Polish pianism – Josef

Hofmann and Ignacy Paderewski (the latter during the peak period of his artistic activity). [...] The fact that Chopin offered in his works a sublimation of national Polish music saved – in my view – pianists of Polish origins from an exaggerated virtuosity and salon sentimentality. Such an assertion does not eliminate individual differences. Different pianists gave prominence to different stylistic factors – the lyricism of the melody, the form, the drawing of the ornamentation – in accordance with their particular dispositions. The change in the mode of interpreting Chopin is in some measure attributable to the collective work of the group of pedagogues preparing Polish pianists for the 1949 and 1955 editions of the Chopin Competition. [...] The tendencies within contemporary Polish pedagogy referred to here are not its exclusive property. Similar tendencies in Chopin interpretation are manifest in French and Russian pedagogy. Yet one and the other differ in their varied explanation of certain elements of interpretation [...].²¹

Close to this interpretation of the Polish maestro is the opinion of Alfred Hoffman with regard to that great figure in the pianistic firmament that is Dinu Lipatti. The recordings made by this pianist are unquestionable achievements, particularly in the case of works which one ascribes to Chopin's classical-neoclassical vision, and in this sense one should also consider the interpretations of Arturo Benedetti-Michelangeli (Geneva, 1950, 6 Mazurkas), although listening today to interpretations of some of the Mazurkas – namely those less inclined towards a folk-inspired atmosphere – leads to reflections on the subject of the complexity of the term 'sublimation' in reminiscence and imagination, signifying a departure from diffuse and elusive reality (D. Lipatti, Mazurka, Op. 50 No. 3 in C sharp minor – 4'27").²² It is in reference to Lipatti's interpretation of the C sharp minor Mazurka that A. Hoffman wrote: '[...] it seems to us to be very close to that of the eminent Polish pianists, in the sense of a marked prominence given to the national rhythm, within the framework of the complex artistic image that is evoked by every magical page by the great Romantic. We discern the tight organicity of the musical discourse, centred around the prominence given to the folkloric source of the composer's inspiration, even at the cost of foregoing the highly refined colouristic details that we admire, for example, in the interpretation of a Horowitz [...]',²³ thus seeking to emphasise the character of unity and universality in the conception of even such a highly specific genre as the mazurka. For in respect to the performance of Chopin's 'dance' forms, the question becomes highly complex with regard to an understanding of the

rhythms, and especially the 'rubato', which takes on a prismatic vision either generally subjective or characteristic of a particular school – suffice it to mention the electrifying interpretations of Ignaz Friedmann – and which, in accordance with what Drzewiecki himself remarked, constitutes 'un problème en soi' for all pianists.

For in subsequent decades, after a separation from the life-giving lymph of the recollections and accounts of those who lived at that time, such a conception, important from an aesthetic point of view, which in that period was deemed the 'new path' that should be taken in order to overcome the baggage of manneristic accretions – effecting an almost historical restoration of the works of Fryderyk Chopin based on a fidelity to the text and on a performance-interpretation equilibrium of clarity and classical transparency – turned out to be a path of continuous 'distortions', which led almost to the demise of the Chopinesque style.

Thus in our times we are faced with the fundamental question: is there still an awareness of characteristically Chopinesque performance? Can we maintain that the atmosphere reconstructed from the sources left to us by history may still be recreated in the audience's expectations and the interpretational attitude of new generations of pianists? And if all of this, as it seems, is already very labile and vague, how can we get to that wonderful legacy left to us by the music? Perhaps we should attempt, on the basis of the text, to retread a path too long considered by critics and by the organisation of the world of music as outmoded and anachronistic, as a museum piece. Or perhaps we should once more breathe in that life-giving air without which art, and above all the work of Chopin, cannot exist, and which allows us to rediscover the values of the past. At the heart of all this lies the need to return, almost miraculously, to the ethics of art.

Endnotes

¹ Claudio Arrau, in Joseph Horowitz, *Conversazioni con Arrau*, ed. Oscar Mondadori (Milan, 1984), 68.

² Alfred Cortot, in J. Horowitz, *op. cit.*, 121–122.

³ Robert Schumann, *On music and musicians* (University of California Press, 1983), ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld, 136–137.

⁴ Heinrich Heine, *Cronache musicali 1821–1847* (Fiesole-Firenze: Discanto, 1983).

⁵ R. Schumann, *op. cit.*, 146–147.

⁶ Fryderyk Chopin, letter to Józef Elsner in Warsaw, Paris, 14 Dec. 1831, in *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina* [The Correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin], ed. Bronisław Edward Sydow, I (Kraków: PIW, 1955), 204–205; see also letter to Tytus Wojciechowski in Poturzyn, Paris, 12 Dec. 1831, in *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina*, op. cit., 199–200.

⁷ R. Schumann, op. cit., 147–148, 150.

⁸ Ibidem, 150–152.

⁹ See A. Cortot, op. cit., 125–126.

¹⁰ See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils* (Cambridge, 1986); also Kazimierz Morski, 'Aspetti di Interpretazione Musicale: Il Pianismo di Fryderyk Chopin', in *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, Università di Macerata, XIX (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1986).

¹¹ Chopin had the habit of giving metronome markings only up to c.1836, as can be seen from the example of the Mazurkas, Op. 24 (1833–36), whereas no markings are given in Op. 30, the Nocturnes up to Op. 27 (1833–36), no markings appear in Op. 32 (1835–37), and the first Scherzo, Op. 20 (1831–32), whilst no markings can be found in the second Scherzo, Op. 31.

¹² C. Arrau, in J. Horowitz, *Conversazioni con Arrau*, op. cit., 151–152.

¹³ C. Arrau, in J. Horowitz, op. cit., 92.

¹⁴ Arthur Rubinstein, *My Young Years*, (New York: Knopf, 1973), 31, in J. Horowitz, op. cit., 92.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Backhaus, *Pianostory*, Frédéric Chopin, *12 Studi op. 10 – 12 Studi op. 25*. Recording from June 1928, 'La voce del Padrone', EMI Records, 1984-EMI Italiana 1984.

¹⁶ W. Backhaus, *1908–1935 from Acoustic to Electrical Recordings*, F. Chopin, *Fantasie-Improptu op. 66*, Original Recordings, New Remastering with Cedar Sound System.

¹⁷ Heinrich Neuhaus, *L'arte del pianoforte*, (Milan: Rusconi, 1985), 105–106.

¹⁸ E.g. interpretations by Ferruccio Busoni are mentioned in numerous accounts, including those by Alfredo Casella and Claudio Arrau, as fascinating in their tone. Casella highlights the use of the pedal. Arrau recalls an unforgettable interpretation of the opus 28 Preludes, whereas the recordings give one the impression of lacking such elements.

¹⁹ Roman Ingarden, *Utwór Muzyczny i Sprawa jego Tożsamości* [The Musical Work and the Question of its Identity] [Kraków: PWM, 1973].

²⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983).

²¹ Zbigniew Drzewiecki, 'Le style d'interprétation de Chopin dans la pédagogie polonaise contemporaine', in *The Book of the first international musicological Congress devoted to the Works of Frederick Chopin* (Warsaw, 16–22 Feb. 1960 (PWN), 430–432.

²² Dinu Lipatti, *Chopin, Mazurka en ut dièse mineur, op. 50 n. 3*, recorded in Studio 2 of Radio Geneva, 11 July 1950, EMI Classics Records, 1986; A. Benedetti-Michelangeli edition, 'F. Chopin' (Brescia, 1967).

²³ Alfred Hoffman, 'Un Grand Interprète Roumain de la Musique de Chopin: Dinu Lipatti', in *The Book of the first international musicological Congress devoted to the Works of Frederick Chopin*, op. cit., 438–443.

