

Particularities of compared interpretation of Chopin's Studies for piano

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Abstract: - This paper studies the problem of interpretation of some Chopin studies using the method of comparing the performances of different pianists. The final goal is not to make positive or negative appreciations about the interpretations in question or to grade them, but to analyse them consciously in order to understand and to be able to draw conclusions about the stylistic and interpretive options chosen by different interpreters of the same music piece.

Key-Words: pianistic interpretation, compared interpretation, studies for piano, interpretive tradition, musical score, message of music

The problem of the pianistic interpretation has always existed. Any pianist knows that the most important fact in playing a piano piece is how to play it. If you can manage to play all the notes, this does not necessary mean that you will obtain a good interpretation of the work. In order to obtain a valid interpretation, you have to understand the message of the piece, the composer's idea behind it, and to have the technical and emotional skills to bring this message to the listener. The beauty of music is that there are many different possibilities of decoding a musical piece, which automatically leads to a large number of possible different interpretations. You don't have to say which interpretation is the best, but just try to discover the many faces of the same work every time you listen to another good performance and enjoy the display of a completely new conception of the work you just didn't think of.

Any good interpreter must begin with what we in musical language call "interpretative tradition". Let us suppose we have to play the *Revolutionary Etude* by Chopin. Everybody knows it, we all listened to it at least one time. We can affirm that it is a real "hit" and in conclusion, we could say that we know how it must be played. Anyhow, no matter how many versions of the same play we would listen to, we will observe that every pianist has his own vision on this piano work. There are performances which emphasize the virtuosic side of the piece, performances in a more calm tempo, which accentuate the dynamic and character contrasts and others, which combine these two distinct sides. And even all of these pianists start from the same material source, namely the score,

instead of playing all in the same way, we consider exactly the opposite: the beauty of music, its uniqueness between all the other creations of arts consist in all these variations. The musical score only offers a starting point of own creation and it doesn't represent a finite work, like for example a sculpture or a painting. Every performer has to build his own image of the piece. This is due to the fact that musical notation isn't perfect and it cannot fully provide what the composer has to express through his music. Otherwise, some composers don't even want to say really everything, but they let enough space for the performer's imagination to develop and create new feelings.

Anyway, in order to come back to the starting point, it has to be said, that a good interpretation has to show respect to the tradition.

“What can tradition be when the text of a classical piece remains by its value itself immutable? It is the average of the tastes of the different periods separating the composer from our era. It is what remained after decantation from the contributions of the great interpreting personalities. Tradition, the good tradition, not the accumulation of traditional clichés, may be defined as the most refined approximation of the text, filtered by the experience of generations “. [5]

Although the composer is the creator of the work of art, its interpretation by an artist is also an act of creation. In the same way as people perceive the specific interpretation of a work of art in an auditory manner and assess it according to their own value system, an interpreter departs from certain objective data about the composer and his style, and

then passes the piece through his own mental and emotional filter, thus resulting that every interpretation is a unique and unrepeatable act. Never will we hear the same piece executed identically by two different interpreters, the same way as never will we hear the same piece executed identically by the same interpreter.

In order to be able to compare two interpretations certain evaluation criteria need to be established in advance. It is obvious that no evaluation can ever be 100% objective because it is again subject to the evaluator's personal value system, age, outlook of music, style and interpretation, musical culture, artistic experience and talent. However, there is an objective aspect of every evaluation, based on common data which should be valid and generally recognized by most musicians whenever they listen to a musical piece.

The objective factor from which we usually depart is known as execution. Execution lies at the base of interpretation and is an integral part of it. A good execution of a musical piece is first and foremost the correct rendition of the musical text from the metric and rhythmical point of view and from the perspective of accuracy of music notes. It also supposes the quality and ease of the rendition of the entire dynamic range required by the score, the tempi which must conform to the requirements of the music piece, the pianistic technique, as well as the logical organization of the musical discourse which must prove an understanding of the formal structure of the text and a logic of phrasing.

However, the interpretation of a piece is far more than mere execution. The artistic interpretation is "the synthesis between the technical and the inward aspects of the artistic phenomenon." [3]

In his book "*Words about sounds*", Anatol Vieru rightfully claims that "an interpreter is all the more powerful, the more he creates within the limits of the text. Maximum signification by means of maximum adaptation to the text- here is the most difficult, but also probably the most fertile ground for an interpreter". [5]

A good interpreter will always know how to combine reason and affection. Therein lies the quality of an interpretation, or better said, it is this combination that distinguishes between ordinary and landmark interpretations.

Generally speaking, interpreters are divided into two wide categories: those who place emphasis on affection whom we may consider romantic interpreters and those who focus on reason, whom we may call classical style interpreters. These two categories may also be found in pure state, but usually we deal with combinations of these

categories, in which one of the characteristics prevails.

The extremes, that is the purely musical or the purely cerebral interpreters are not desirable. The former usually bound in sentimentality and means of expressions, while lacking the so-called spine, since their interpretation is not based on a clear formal structure and on the understanding of the architecture of the piece. They sing themselves, pouring in their interpretation a multitude of their own feelings, with no connection whatsoever with the piece, only in order to prove that they are sensitive, musical and expressive. This type of interpretation does not bring out new meaning to the musical piece, but distorts the meaning by depriving it of the effects of reason.

The latter are more of theoreticians/ technicians. They stop at the complex analysis of the music piece from the structural, technical and interpreting viewpoints, but fail in combining this reason dominated work with affection. Thus they do not manage to transmit the message of the piece expressively, but play technically and dryly.

Due to thus cause the best interpreters succeed in combining both aspects. "The fundamental issue of creating the optimal formula for the music message consists essentially in finding the appropriate affection-reason relation and in presenting the finite product as a synthesis in which the constitutive elements are organically incorporated and indiscernible. This synthesis is not the result of rehearsing and sensitizing each faculty on its own, but by means of continuous heuristics in which logic is incorporated in affection and in its turn affection allows for its logical organization." [4]

Therefore, if we listen to several interpretations, whether landmark interpretations or not, and if we want to compare them, we must first consider the unity between technique and expression. It is obvious that we will not always find the exquisite interpretation that peaks both in terms of technique and in terms of expression, but we must follow and balance the relation between these two components in order to be able to formulate a valid opinion as to the concrete value of a particular interpretation.

This is why it is highly advisable to listen to as many interpretations as possible during our study, because due to the uniqueness of each, we can learn something different from every interpretation. The idea is not to listen to several versions and to copy the one that seems more interesting or to reproduce fragments of diverse interpretations, but to analyse these interpretations with the music sheet in front of us, and to listen to them several times so as to

understand and to draw conclusions about the phrasing, the dynamics, the pianistic technique, the pedalling, and even about the dramatic conception. This process of listening has a comparative purpose, thus enlarging our musical horizon and enabling us to perceive details that we would not have thought of otherwise and forcing us to go into deeper analysis of the music text in order to discover its most hidden meanings. The result is our stylistic and interpretive development.

Furthermore, some versions may illustrate variants that are entirely opposed to our own version, which at deeper analysis, turn out to be perfectly viable, being both perfectly logical and very convincing from the expression standpoint.

“An execution in which one finds toning, gradation, the chosen sonority, the just rhythm, eloquent phrasing, that is a wide range of methods, as well as the values of sensitivity, reason and will, will inevitably lead to the creation of a veridical interpretation.”[2]

As to the comparative analysis, it must be understood that their role is not to make positive or negative appreciations about the interpretations in question, and not to grade them, but to analyse them consciously in order to understand and to be able to draw conclusions about the stylistic and interpretive options chosen by different interpreters of the same music piece.

The observer who makes the comparative study must try to be as objective as possible. In truth, no evaluator may be entirely objective, simply because in the course of the study there is a confrontation between the image that the assessor has of the message of the music piece, and the image that the interpreter has of the said piece. And since both have their own individuality and their own way of understanding a musical piece, two different interpreting visions, each containing its own subjectivity, will clash.

Starting from this parting point, we reach the conclusion that any opinion regarding certain interpretations must be viewed as relative and by no means absolute and generally valid. Nobody has the power or the right to give definitive verdicts regarding various interpretations, particularly because the interpretive part (keeping in mind the distinction between execution and interpretation) in music is not an algorithmic process. The very word interpretation involves giving meaning to a fact, perceiving it in a certain way, passing it through the filter of personal thought, which in turn implies that every person may interpret something in his own way, and differently from others. In music too, every interpreter will express his/her own theory

about the work in question, and the listener cannot just voice simplistic opinions of the type “I like it” or “I do not like it”. It is evident that personal opinions about certain interpretations may be expressed, but they must be motivated, and even then, if we listen to opinions of different people on the same interpretation, they may vary widely.

The analysis of an interpretation, when we deal with comparative studies, starts with an initial listening of the different versions, which leads to a general opinion, not necessarily an exact one, about each interpretation. This first impression will consist in observations of certain typical characteristics of the style of the interpreters involved since the similarities and differences are easy to distinguish by observation. This first impression is to be confirmed or not by further listening, which will involve more analysis and the methodical observation of every element of the musical discourse. In the last stage, we reach a general conclusion of the respective interpretations. At this point the listener has already formed an opinion about the subjectively chosen elements in each interpretation and will focus on the semantic elements of the music discourse.

At this stage, as well as at the previous stage, the internal assessment model of the evaluator may be completely different from that of the interpreter. The evaluator must be open to the new and capable of appreciating an interpretation manner that is different from his/her own, so long as he/she can discover its real value. In this case, the model of the evaluator will be improved, which will lead to better understanding of the music text.

As regards the principles I have obeyed in the analysis of these interpretations, the following must be mentioned: pianistic sonority, manner of phrasing, metro-rhythmical attitude, tempo options and the realization of the formal scaffolding.

By means of the comparative analysis of the following studies by Fr. Chopin I have tried to reveal the still undisclosed beauty of these small works of art and to prove that we can always find new interpretive nuances by listening to diverse interpretive concepts.

Study op. 10 nr. 3 by Frederic Chopin

I have looked at two interpretive versions of this study by Wilhelm Backhaus and by Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Chopin’s concept of the notion of study is extremely large and breaks the extremely limited

framework of its common understanding. By study he does not understand a mere exercise for the display of technical abilities, but a problem of great artistic expression. Most studies have great tempo, which does not hinder their being models of artistic creation.

This study is part of the few with calm tempo and has an intimate character by developing a highly inspirational melody. Chopin offers the interpreter firstly the phrasing difficulty, the sonority difficulty and the dosage of the “*rubato*” singing.

In this sense Wilhelm Backhaus, a representative of the 20th century and the first to have recorded in 1928 a series of all Chopin studies, is relatively subjective in his expression by means of the static slowness of the tempo and particularly by means of the exaggeration of *rubato* play.

His interpretive vision is based on a great tempo differentiation between parts A, B and A, since this study is composed as a 3 sections lied. He does not obey the tempo indication required by the composer for the first section, namely *lento, ma non troppo* and neither the one referring to the middle section, namely *poco piu animato*.

He interprets the first section in a very slow tempo, which damages the flow of the musical phrase and its expression. The soprano melody must be played very *legato*, this raising difficulty because it is composed of several cells that must be innerly chained and supported. The interpreter needs very wide breathing in order to support such a phrase that contains static elements, because they must not be displayed as pauses, but as starting points for the next step, in order to reach the climax.

It is known that the most difficult to interpret are the slow and highly expressive works, particularly because it is more strenuous to sustain a melody on a slow tempo. Due to the slow tempo chosen by Wilhelm Backhaus the interpretation give the impression of static at times.

At the same time, although the middle section bears the indication *poco piu animato* he exaggerates the contrast between the main section and the latter, thus breaking the interpretive unity of the musical piece.

On the contrary, Vladimir Ashkenazy, a modern pianist prefers a more flowing tempo for the first musical idea, thus achieving an evocative fluency and simplicity by means of a well maintained *rubato* in which the subjective element is most discretely allowed. The first section therefore emanates purity and elegance which only a great interpreter may achieve.

The middle section is viewed by Ashkenazy in an appropriate tempo, slightly more moved than the one adopted for the beginning. He sustains the musical idea expressively by means of an impressive dynamic range. His interpretation has intense expressiveness and particular dramatic sense.

Study op. 10 nr. 12 by Frederic Chopin

I have selected three interpretive versions, namely by Ignaz Paderewski, by Wilhelm Backhaus and by Vladimir Ashkenazy.

The *study op. 10 nr. 12* also named *The Revolutionary Etude* due to its obvious dramatic character, is an extremely challenging piece for pianists, both from the viewpoint of the technique required for the left hand and from the standpoint of the pianist's capacity of rendering convincingly the generic rhythmical motive it is based on. The text demands great dynamic differentiation, corresponding to extreme state in rapid development. This capacity of expressive diversity is, in my opinion, the main difficulty of the study. The three interpretations mentioned are extremely different in this respect.

Wilhelm Backhaus approaches such a fast tempo that he can no longer emphasize the rhythmical motive which is the characteristic of this study. The rapid tempo prevents him from rendering the expressive contrasts so clearly required by the text, which leads to a monotony of expression and gives the impression of a show of virtuosity.

Ignaz Paderewski on the other hand builds his interpretation on a dramatic conception based on strong contrasts. The speculation of the bass is noticeable, which brings orchestral amplitude to the development of the music. It is interesting that, in spite of being old, the interpretation sounds very authentic.

As a representative of modern pianistic, Vladimir Ashkenazy is very colourful. Every phrase is rendered differently with him, both in tone and dynamics. The base motive is well sustained and dramatized. The dynamics are minutely elaborated. He has great expressive mobility from one phrase to the next which is an absolute necessity with this study. He renders this mobility with great mastery, balancing between the most virulent pathos and the most poetic delicacy. The study is thus rendered that the listener does not even suspect the technical difficulties that are surmounted. His interpretation is in my opinion an exceptional one.

Study op. 25 nr. 1 by Frederic Chopin

From recent discography I have selected three interpretations, belonging to Wilhelm Backhaus, Claudio Arrau and Vladimir Ashkenazy. Each is representative for the interpretive art of the three pianists.

The conclusions I have drawn come from comparing the three interpretive versions analysed against the traditional norms and the semantic demands of the text of this piano work.

The study does not focus on mechanical virtuosity. It is like a song with wide expressive course in which the soprano melody suggests a quiet development, discretely supported by the accompaniment imitating a harp. "The fact that Chopin writes the song differently (by using normal sized notes) from the rest of the extras (here the notes are written as if they were part of ornaments) must be made obvious by the pianist in his interpretation". [1]

The melody is formed by the normal size notes and it is a simple and beautiful melody. The tempo indication *Allegro sostenuto* is also a criterion for the climate that must be achieved for this composition. Chopin's characteristic poly-melody is present here by just a few interventions of some inner voices of rare beauty.

Matched against this standard, Claudio Arrau's and particularly Vladimir Ashkenazy's interpretations are placed on the line of a very close aesthetic ideal, by means of a capacity of supporting the phrase for wide areas, by means of poetic sensitivity and sonorous discretion. Claudio Arrau chooses a flowing tempo with moderate *rubato* which makes the phrase tense and climactic. He restrains from delimitating the phrases which he conceives as continuously flowing. Vladimir Ashkenazy masterfully individualizes the inner voices, by emphasizing the soprano. The music discourse is poetic, peaceful and pensive, since the interpreter concentrates on expression.

Wilhelm Backhaus conceives a slow tempo, with large phrases and strong inner voices, emanating a poetic state. It is noticeable that Wilhelm Backhaus allows for daring agogic freedom as regards the middle section of the study, which he builds in a more dynamic tempo. This method which brings to light the climax of the study is debatable, but interesting.

To conclude, I believe that Vladimir Ashkenazy's interpretation is remarkable and is what is called "exceeding virtuosity". In spite of the technical perfection he manages to draw the

listeners' attention away from this aspect completely and to impose a solid interpretive construction.

Finally, I would like to point out that an exegesis of all the studies by Chopin based on such comparative methodology would be of great interest, if the interpretive vision of great interpreters was considered.

References:

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