

THE EARLY SOUND RECORDINGS AS PRIMARY EVIDENCE: LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY EXPRESSIVE TECHNIQUES RELATING TO CHOPIN'S NOCTURNES

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1. Introduction

“We know our Chopin too well,” wrote Edward T. Cone in his chapter on ambiguity and reinterpretation of Chopin’s music (Rink and Samson 1995). This startling line kept coming back to me while working on this paper, which accompanies the lecture-recital video made in Vilnius at the Doctors in Performance conference of September 2018. Cone refers to Chopin’s compositional language, and his line made me question whether this is really true. This paper presents a small snippet of research on early sound recordings and its application to my own performance of Chopin’s works—which may be heard in the accompanying lecture-recital. I used the recordings as inspiration for my interpretation, as I wished to systematically study and understand past performances and late nineteenth-century attitudes towards the musical text.

It is important to stress that I do not copy the recordings; I believe that the interpretative choices made by recording musicians were likely to have been specific to both the recording medium and the instruments of the time. Since many of the physical, haptic, and proprioceptive cues employed by those musicians cannot be abstracted from or identified through listening alone, we must instead strive to understand the stylistic conventions in the context of the recording medium originally employed. Accordingly, even though I endeavored to understand and appreciate aspects of nineteenth-century pianism, I interpret and articulate such aspects from my own social and cultural standpoint.

2. Editions and Recordings as Research Sources

Chopin’s editions are well-researched. They do need to be briefly mentioned here, however, as I used some rare editions for my performances. Chopin’s alterations and variants are many, including: autographs, authorized copies; the first German, French or English editions; and pupils’ scores (Jim Samson 1985). From various copies of works used in teaching, we know that Chopin had a habit of altering his text, which is unsurprising in the nineteenth-century context. Furthermore, popular pieces often had numerous transcriptions and adaptations.

One of these was Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2, written between 1830 and 1832, which appeared in 1833 from all three of Chopin’s publishers. The first editions differ in various respects: the Paris edition was based on the original manuscript, whereas the London and Leipzig ones were created using proof sheets from the Paris edition. Besides regular reprints of the first editions, this Nocturne was published by, amongst others, Breitkopf & Härtel (ed. Woldemar Bargiel, 1880), Schirmer (ed. Theodor Kullak, 1881), Schirmer (ed. Karl Mikuli, 1894), Peters (ed. Herrmann Scholtz, 1905), Augner (ed. Karl Klindworth and Xaver Scharwenka, 1882), Schirmer (ed. Rafael Joseffy, 1915), and Senart (ed. Alfred Cortot, c. 1916). These numerous editions and publications reveal conspicuous differences in the musical text. The situation is further complicated by the existence of at least fifteen annotated scores produced by Chopin’s own students. These variants, made by Lenz, Stirling, Franchomme, Mikuli, and Tellefsen/Kleczyński, contain further textual changes, particularly in respect of ornamentations between the strophes, along with different versions of the coda.

The popularity of this Nocturne is further evidenced in a number of transcriptions for other instruments first made during Chopin’s lifetime by Karol Lipiński. Violin transcriptions were also carried out by Friedrich Hermann (1828-1907), published by Peters in 1880 as a set of eight Chopin Nocturnes transcribed for solo violin with piano accompaniment, and by Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908), August Wilhelmj (1845-1908), Jeffrey J. Poole (years unknown), Harold Waverly (years unknown), Hans Sitt (1850-1922), and Ferdinand David (1810-1873). Bosworth & Co, which specialized in popular music, included an arrangement of the Nocturne for violin (or cello) with piano in their series of popular pieces. Fabian Rehfeld’s (1842-1920) arrangement for viola was published

by Carl Fischer in 1903, three years after Henry Tolhurst's (1854-1939). The cello versions include arrangements by Friedrich Grützmacher (1832-1903), Adrien-François Servais (1807-1866), David Popper (1843-1913), and Ernest Reeves (d. 1942). Other transcriptions include those for plucked guitar, flute, horn, organ, and mandolin.

In my research I use both non-piano transcriptions and recordings as I believe that they are crucial for my understanding of nineteenth-century playing techniques. For example, the transcriptions clearly show us general approaches when it comes to alterations and treatment of the melodic line. Also, they are good exemplars of large-scale textual changes, which were common in the late nineteenth century, highlighting various freedoms enjoyed by performers. Such changes are often confirmed in early sound recordings, since limits associated with the chosen recording medium dictated the duration of recorded material. Many of those recordings support this observation; there are numerous cuts in the original text, clearly commensurate with plausible durations using particular technologies.

Unsurprisingly, given its popularity, the Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2 is one of Chopin's most recorded pieces. The recordings examined for this paper display clear differences between instrumental approaches and techniques whilst evidencing performance fashions of the time. As we can hear in the accompanying video, there are significant similarities in the various performances, revealing general trends from the end of the nineteenth century. All the examined recordings showed a great deal of textual changes, tempo modifications, various types of tempo rubato, and rhythmical alterations. Strings and singers used portamento excessively, and all the pianists used dislocation and unnotated arpeggiation. The musicians, for example, also used over-dotted rhythms, prolonging various notes, and they all tended to group semiquavers into large units. Put in layman's terms: the recording artists examined for this research did not play what is written in the musical score. All the performers also showed a vast amount of differences and personalities, but they had something in common: they've used the interpretational freedoms in a different way to our contemporary understanding. Comparing various recordings with various scores, supported by written evidence, helps us to build a picture of how to read the musical text in style of the nineteenth-century.

I examined performances registered on wax cylinders, recordings, and reproducing piano rolls, made between 1890 and 1927. Even though the recordings were made with different technologies, including easy phonograph wax cylinders, acoustic records, early electric recordings, and different types of piano rolls, all the performers showcased—some more, and some less—late nineteenth-century playing styles. The scores I used in the recital include Telefsen's versions of the Op. 9. No. 1, Mikuli variants for Op. 9 No. 2, and Leschetizky's version of the Op. 27 No. 2 (which is a wonderful example how the text is one thing on paper and another when read).

3. Conclusion

In an attempt to comprehend and adopt aspects of late nineteenth-century performance practice, I embarked upon a reconsideration of my own ways of reading musical texts. This was a considerable challenge, as I needed to "unlearn" how to play, to borrow Milsom's term (Milsom 2003). The techniques of metrical rubato, dislocation, and textual changes—although straightforward—are very demanding and required a complete reorganization of my playing style. The number of recordings examined is, of course, insufficient to draw any definitive conclusions about nineteenth- and early twentieth-century performance practice in its entirety. Even so, this investigation revealed central features of such practice and, crucially, has confirmed the value of early sound recordings within musicological research; they provide invaluable insights into changing fashions of, and stylistic conventions in, performance practice that are rarely identifiable in either written documents or musical scores. I use these insights as inspiration to create a new type of performance, and the accompanying lecture-recital demonstrates how these sound in my playing. Ultimately, through research of the old we come closer to something which is new and constantly changing. For me, this is the greatest value of early sound recordings: they show us different performing world and support building the new one. Personally, I do not think I will ever know

Chopin “too well,” and his works will always remain an infinite source of inspiration, both in research and performance.

Bibliography:

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