

Zlata Chochieva – October 15, 2017

***Trois nouvelles etudes* Op. Posth.**

Frédéric Chopin
1810-1849

Anyone who has gotten past the third or fourth year in the study of a musical instrument knows that the typical etude can dull the senses as much as it taxes the fingers. The works of this genre – whether under the title “prelude,” “exercise” or “etude” – set up difficult technical problems, repeated throughout the piece until the student eventually gets them right. But in the hands of great composers – as opposed to mere pedagogues – the etude becomes a vehicle for the display of both technical *and* aesthetic virtuosity. Such is the case with many of Bach’s 48 preludes for the *Well-Tempered Clavier* or Paganini’s Caprices, Op. 1, which Chopin is known to have admired.

Early in the nineteenth century, with the rapidly increasing popularity of the piano in the home, a number of collections of piano studies appeared, some of which have remained in the piano teacher’s armory to this day. The most notable ones were by J.B. Cramer – considered by Beethoven as an excellent introduction to the study of his own works – and Muzio Clementi’s massive *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Stairway to Parnassus). Chopin was familiar with both and used them in his teaching.

Chopin composed two sets of twelve Etudes, Op. 10 and Op. 25. The first set was written over the period between 1829 and 1833 and the second probably in 1837.

In 1839, Chopin composed three additional etudes, *Trois nouvelles etudes*, for inclusion in *Méthode des Méthodes*, a three-volume tutorial for the piano compiled by pianist, teacher and composer Ignaz Moscheles and François Fétyis. These etudes were included in Volume Three, together with contributions from Mendelssohn and Liszt. All three Etudes are particularly tricky.

No. 1 (F minor): Chopin’s music is most often characterized as emotionally charged and/or technically challenging. But Chopin, like his contemporary Franz Liszt, often explored the limits of tonal harmony. The F minor Etude has a deceptively simple two-voiced texture; the chromatic theme in quarter-note triplets wanders in and out of all sorts of unexpected dissonances and keys. The left hand plays a broken chord accompaniment in steady eighth notes, creating a cross rhythm of three against four.

No. 2 (A-flat major): This Etude is in 2/4 meter. The left hand plays steady eighth notes, while the right plays triads in eighth-note triplets, creating cross rhythm of three against two. To make things worse, in the middle of the piece Chopin creates a middle melodic line by tying certain notes in the triads.

No. 3 (D-flat major): The pianistic equivalent of patting your head while rubbing your stomach, this Etude requires the upper line – the melody including trills – in the right hand to play legato while the lower line in the same hand plays staccato. Meanwhile, the left hand executes an accompaniment consisting of wide leaps in single notes or chords, some of the latter in intervals so wide that they have to be rolled.

Etudes, Op. 25

Frédéric Chopin
1810-1849

The Opus 25 *Etudes* are not only fiendishly difficult but also harmonically innovative. While each one maintains a basic ABA structure and a consistent figurative pattern, they often explore unusual harmonic relationships and reach intense emotional depths for such short works.

No. 1 (A-flat major) is an elegant melody whose legato quality and expressive phrasing must be retained despite the repeated notes in the melody. Below, both hands play sextuplets of grace notes, creating a sound like a voice soaring over an accompanying harp.

No. 2 (F minor) features contrasting rhythms between the two hands: eighth-note triplets in the right and quarter-note triplets in the left.

No. 3 (F major) has an unusual ostinato galloping rhythm and an ambiguous rhythmic notation that makes it difficult to coordinate the two hands.

No. 4 (A minor) requires rapid leaps in the left hand accompaniment that entail lifting the hand completely between each figure. The top line of the right-hand chords carries the melody.

No. 5 (E minor) is in ABA form: the A section in E minor with the melody in the right hand; the B section in E major with a new legato theme in the left hand. Each section entails a different difficult rhythmic pattern in the accompaniment. A short coda is a tour de force with grace-note chords under tied upper notes.

No. 6 (G-sharp minor) exercises thirds: chromatic trills in thirds and chromatically ascending and descending scales.

No. 7 (C-sharp minor) begins with a piano recitative. It is the slowest of all 24 etudes and the most operatic. Its mournful melody in the left hand is elaborately ornamented. A middle section in E major lifts the mood temporarily and shifts the melody to the upper voice, creating a dialogue between the two hands. The return to the A section involves more melodic participation of the upper melody, as in a duet.

No. 8 (D-flat Major), a companion to No. 6, exercises sixths in both hands.

No. 9 (G-flat major) is a study in which the melody occurs in the middle voice.

No. 10 (B minor) begins with a long section in chromatically ascending and descending octaves for both hands. The middle section in B major introduces a true melodic line but a continuation of the octaves in the right hand. The chromatic octaves in both hands return, but with even darker chromatic harmonies.

No. 11 (A minor), the so-called “Winter Wind” Etude, features a melody in the left hand accompanied by chromatic broken chords descending like whistling wind. The challenge is to keep the melody in focus over the left-hand chords.

No. 12 (C minor) concentrates on a slow melody in the piano’s lowest range under rapid arpeggios in the right. A secondary melody makes an appearance in the middle voice.

Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op. 22

Sergey Rachmaninov
1873-1943

Following the success of his Second Piano Concerto in 1901, Sergey Rachmaninov's career took off and evolved successfully in three directions. He continued to compose, he traveled extensively both at home and in Western Europe as a virtuoso pianist, and he was a sought-after conductor. He tried to apportion his time evenly among the three.

Rachmaninov was a master of the piano miniature. For his own use as pianist, he poured out a constant stream of them in sets with such vague titles as *Morceaux*, *Moments musicaux*, *Préludes*, *Etudes-tableaux*, etc. These works range in character from superficial salon pieces to highly complex and emotionally charged outpourings.

The Variations on a Theme of Chopin, is actually an extension of these miniatures. Based on one of Chopin's more lugubrious preludes (C minor, Op. 28, No. 20), the mood fits neatly into Rachmaninov's generally pessimistic outlook on life.

That being said, the Variations are remarkably inventive. Instead of tying himself down with a set of increasingly virtuosic versions of the theme, Rachmaninov often takes small rhythmic or melodic motives from the already short theme and works with them. Nor does he repeat the two strains of the melody as is often the case with variations. They generally advance in difficulty, the first variation being a single line, while the final ones are expansive. Variation 12, more or less the centerpiece, is a long fugue on the theme in the style of Bach. Starting with Variation 15, Rachmaninov wanders into new keys and greater length, creating a mystery, for example, of how he's going to get back to C minor from Variations 19, 20 and 21 in A major, D-flat major and E major respectively.

Sometimes his devices make any remnant of the theme difficult to discern, but listeners will have a genuinely good time scavenging for it as the variations sweep by.

Program notes by:
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn
Wordpros@mindspring.com
www.wordprosmusic.com