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"Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils" By Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger

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Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils*. Trans. by Naomi Shohet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. xiii, 324p.

Although teaching held an important place in Chopin's life for at least seventeen years, most books about Chopin have been more zealous in treating other aspects of Chopin's life than they have been in exploring ideas he passed on through his students. As a result, information essential to Chopin performance practice has been scattered, fragmented, and generally inaccessible to the Chopin interpreter. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger set out to remedy that with his *Chopin vu par ses élèves* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970). A revised edition appeared in 1979. Now the work has become available in English with further revisions and additions by the author. At last we have an English source of authentic evidence about performance practice for Chopin's music drawn from advice written by Chopin in his letters and his notes for a piano method, as well as advice recalled by Chopin's students and associates in their letters and memoirs.

The unusual arrangement of the book evolves from Eigeldinger's stated purpose of "letting the texts speak for themselves," and the final product becomes a sort of Chopin bible. Like all scriptures, these must be interpreted by an informed reader, not followed slavishly.

The primary evidence about various facets of Chopin's teaching and playing appears under two main headings, (I) "Technique and Style," and (II) "Interpretation of Chopin's Works." The first part is subdivided into "Basic Technique" and "Musical Style." Under "Basic Technique" we have Chopin's opinions about topics such as mistakes in customary approaches to technique, desirable qualities in a piano, and how to practice, as well as Chopin's decided views about misguided attempts to make all the fingers equally powerful:

For a long time we have been acting against nature by training our fingers to be all equally powerful. As each finger is differently formed, it's better not to attempt to destroy the particular charm of

each one's touch but on the contrary to develop it . . . As many different sounds as there are fingers (pp. 32-33).

Later sections of the book, especially those dealing with Chopin's individualized fingerings, bear out Chopin's concern for utilizing the unique characteristics of each finger; he assigns delicate passages to the weaker fingers but entrusts emphasized notes to the stronger fingers, idiosyncratically designating that an entire melodic line should be played by the third finger.

Included under "Musical Style" are Chopin's ideas about phrasing, ornamentation, rubato, the use of the pedal, and *bel canto*. The latter subject highlights Chopin's conception that fine singing should be the pianist's model. Chopin, who was himself an avid opera-goer, believed his students would learn more about playing the piano from listening to singers than from anything else. And when he told Mme. Rubio, "You must sing if you wish to play," he meant it literally; he had her take voice lessons that she might become a better pianist (p. 45).

Part II, "Interpretation of Chopin's Works," consists of collected references about Chopin's performance and teaching of various genres as well as about specific Chopin compositions. The references appear under the heading of specific compositions, arranged alphabetically. Here we learn about the unique rhythms of Chopin's Mazurka interpretations which sparked a quarrel between Chopin and Meyerbeer, because Meyerbeer insisted he was playing the Mazurkas in 2/4 time while the composer angrily maintained he was playing them in 3/4 time. But others, including Ignaz Moscheles and Charles Hallé, had noticed the same rhythmic peculiarity, and Chopin finally admitted to Hallé that the national character of the dance demanded a prolongation of the first beat of the measure (pp. 72-73). As to remarks about specific compositions, many of them — although interesting — will have little practical use for the performer. About the Etude op. 25 no. 1 in A-flat major, Chopin is reported to have said:

Imagine a little shepherd who takes refuge in a peaceful grotto from an approaching storm. In the distance rushes the wind and the rain, while the shepherd gently plays a melody on his flute (p. 69.)

Other remarks, however, might provide an added glimmer of light on the interpretation of specific compositions such as Chopin's words about the Waltz op. 70 no. 3 in D-flat major (post.):

In the trio, the bass melody must dominate until the violin's Eb in the fifth bar [bars 33-37] (p. 89).

Although Eigeldinger quoted from Chopin's sketch for a piano method in the two French editions of his book, he did not include the entire sketch. It was available in Cortot's *Aspects de Chopin* of 1949, but with numerous omissions and misreadings. Eigeldinger's Appendix I provides a complete transcription of the autograph of Chopin's notes for a piano method. Here Chopin rails against technique for the sake of technique:

People have tried out all kinds of methods of learning to play the piano, methods that are tedious and useless and have nothing to do with the study of this instrument. It's like learning, for example, to walk on one's hands in order to go for a stroll. Eventually one is no longer able to walk properly on one's feet, and not very well on one's hands either. It doesn't teach us how to play the *music* itself and the kind of difficulty we are practising is not the difficulty encountered in good music . . . (p. 193).

Appendixes II and III deal with annotated scores of Chopin's works belonging to Chopin's pupils and associates, containing numerous corrections and emendations made in Chopin's hand. These, of course, often pose more problems than they solve. This is a tantalizing section, referring to added fingerings, dynamic markings, pedalling indications, etc. — all added in Chopin's hand. But, as Eigeldinger himself remarks, "The thorny problems raised by the annotated scores of Chopin's students and associates have not hitherto been subjected to any systematic or comparative approach," (p. 198) so one cannot always ascertain which marks were added by Chopin's own hand. Moreover, it soon becomes apparent that one cannot arrive at the final word about performing any Chopin composition because the composer himself offered so many examples of varied fingerings as well as varied tempos, dynamic indications, and phrasing. Chopin's well-known hatred of taking up the pen is easy to understand when one remembers the improvisatory quality of his playing so often commented on by listeners; some aspects of his compositions could not be adequately represented by the pen. Moreover, composing and performing were inextricably woven together for this composer, so it is not too surprising to learn that he sometimes departed from the printed score when performing or teaching.

Appendix IV, entitled "Chopin's Playing Described by His Contemporaries," includes descriptions of Chopin's piano playing by Hiller, Berlioz, Moscheles, Liszt and a few contemporary critics, as well

as commentaries by some of Chopin's students. While it is certainly of great interest, it provides little specific information that would be of help to the Chopin performer and it also contains Berlioz's appropriate warning:

His [Chopin's] playing is shot through with a thousand nuances of movement of which he alone holds the secret, impossible to convey by instructions (p. 272).

Eigeldinger explains and interprets much of the primary material with about seventy pages of notes. These are illuminating and well-considered and should not be neglected in favor of the primary material. Eigeldinger also provides biographies of Chopin's students whose recollections he has quoted. Although the book is expensive, one must bear in mind that it can replace several sources among which the material had been scattered. Moreover, it provides other material that was inaccessible heretofore. Eigeldinger's book belongs in the library of every serious Chopin performer and scholar.

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