IMPROVISATION

Chopin's testament

David Dolan continues his series with a look at improvisation in the romantic era and some ideas which are perhaps not so old-fashioned after all

It may appear that the romantic era leaves less space for improvisation than the baroque or classical periods. This is because musical works are written in more and more detail - unlike the practice of earlier times when the text was meant to be only a general guide-line to the performer. So there isn't much freedom left for the interpreter? I would like to suggest that the opposite is true. In the last part of this article we'll start looking into what I feel is one of the most important books ever written for us pianists, *Chopin - pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils* by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, where some keys to Chopin's concept of creative interpretation are found. But first let us look at some general points about improvisation after 1800.

On the surface, it looks as if a discussion about improvisation in the romantic era should explore the following points:

1) Free improvisation
2) Preludes
3) Ornamentation
4) Cadenzas

A fifth, and I believe deeper element we shall try to look at, is the **search for integration of the 'HOW' with the 'WHAT' - 'How' representing the interpreter's work while the 'What' represents the composer's. Where the two meet is real time - the only domain where music comes to life.** (see article no 1 in this series [CP March/April 1996]).

In the 18th century there was an intimate link between composer and performer. The composer knew 'his' interpreter's temperament and tendency; most music that was played was music of 'now' (few earlier pieces were heard). The composer then left most ornamental detail to be added or adjusted during performance. **The realisation of a score in a concert was intended as a meeting point of the composer's creativity (providing structure and general lines) and the spontaneous creativity of the performer - after he has thoroughly learned the score - which provided the immediacy and personal effect. This meant to some extent variety from one performance to the other. This is where interpretation and improvisation in its deep sense meet.** This basic concept was true until the last part of the 19th century.

1) **Free improvisation** was alive, well and flourishing in the 19th century (contrary to some assumptions). Free improvisation remained, until the last part of the 19th century, a major aspect of performance, in both the salon and the concert hall. The suggestion of a subject by a member of the audience continued to be a favourite part of the menu. (And this can teach us a lot about the direct contact between performer and audience that we have lost in our efficient times). Czerny describes this phenomenon in detail, describing six types of such improvisations - on a single subject, on several subjects, the potpourri, variations, the chordal and fugal style, and the capriccio. Any subject could be used as basis for an extemporisation in any style or form (variations, rondo, sonata, fugue, etc). Improvisation was mainly a keyboard phenomenon although other instrumentalists improvised too. Improvising in pairs was common, and we can learn about these musicians' virtuosity in active listening from that. Hummel with the violinist Clement, Brahms and Remenyi, and most importantly, Chopin and Liszt on two pianos are some examples.

2) **Preludes**. The romantic era was rediscovering the old masters and old traditions, like preludes. This explains the return of this genre. The reason for renewed interest in it was the freedom that preludes allow. (Remember that some 'Préludes non-mésurés' of the French baroque look like contemporary notation, and sound amazingly free.) Chopin's preludes are, of course, among the most important examples. For keyboard players, mostly, improvising a prelude before the written composition continued to be an obvious expectation. In fact, to begin with the work itself was considered poor taste or a proof of lack of competence. As we cannot cover in this article the whole scope of the issue, let us just mention the following sources for methodological examples of written out models for improvised preludes - Hummel, Cramer, Ries, Czerny, Moscheles and Kalkbrenner.

Czerny deals with the issue in more detail. He distinguishes two sorts of preludes or 'short fantasias'. First, a short one, being a gentle 'warm-up'. It will end on the tonic chord of the following piece, which may be preceded by its dominant or a cadential passage. Such a prelude can be of chordal character or elaborated with passages or a combination of the two, depending on the case in question and, above all, good taste.

Secondly, Czerny speaks of longer and more developed preludes in the manner of an introduction. There is a use of motifs from the piece itself, together with passage-work, and the conclusion is often on the dominant or dominant seventh. The prelude can also begin in a foreign key and proceed to its goal by 'bold and strange modulations'. This is a unique contribution of the romantic approach. For Czerny, the first 15 bars of Beethoven's piano sonata op 57 is an example of that kind of prelude (!).

3) **Ornamentation.** Ornamentation consists of a) conventionalised diminutions of single notes - usually indicated by symbols; b) free diminution and variation of melodic lines; c) insertions interrupting the written continuity of the piece such as cadenzas or short preludes. The source of inspiration is usually the vocal lines of opera.

Ornaments started to take on a more and more dramatic aspect, sometimes departing from the bel canto tradition. Further into the 19th century, the increasing influence of the German tradition led to the more precise and detailed writing of ornaments (as well as cadenzas). One element that contributed to the fact that performers were sometimes treated with considerable mistrust was the increasing number of amateurs and less capable players.

The performers' role started to have an additional dimension - the idea of subjecting themselves to the composer's will as the means by which his masterpieces are communicated. But that means

David Dolan's concert and improvisation workshops at the South Bank Centre in association with *Classical Piano* will take place on 1 May (concert) and 3 and 4 May (workshops) 1997. There will be six to eight places for active participants on each day of the workshops. Piano students and teachers who would like to be considered to take part should contact Helen Donlon, Arts Management & Communication, 1 Carlton Road, London N11 3EX. Tel/fax: 0181 361 3782.

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conveying the free improvisational character of a written out ornamental passage (or cadenza) when this is the case. And indeed 19th-century ornamental passages can become very fantastical.

4) **Cadenzas**. Cadenzas continued to play a major role on the musical scene (both in vocal and instrumental music). In the 19th century there were still two sorts of cadenzas - the fermata and the cadenza itself. The fermata was an elaboration on the final chord of a cadence (in most cases a dominant half-cadence) preceding an important change. Czerny describes this practice as 'indispensable' but warns to watch out for errors of taste - for example, not to use it in the case of works of profound content and serious character'. The fermata should not depart from the harmony of the relevant chord (unlike the cadenza). It is to be extemporised in a way appropriate to the work's character, dimension and motivic material. In the 19th century fermatas were often written out by the composer but it was expected that a *capable* performer should replace it with an extemporised one of his own. The performer uses the written one as a guide-line for the composer's intentions.

True cadenzas are characteristic mostly of concerto movements and arias. Beethoven characteristically provided a very influential example by composing the cadenza in his fifth piano concerto as integral part of the work. This later became normal practice. Although written out, the improvisatory and fantasy-like character is very powerful and should be performed accordingly.

CHOPIN AND BEL CANTO

The framework of this article does not allow more than trying to urge those who are not yet intimately familiar with Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's book - *Chopin: pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils* - to become so. It is for the public at our side, making and of integrating creativity into every possible aspect of performance, including technique. Improvisation is not only a goal in itself, but also a means for freedom in the interpretation of a written work. Chopin was much more influential as a teacher than he was as a performer. Artists from all over Europe travelled to work with him, which is our good luck, as we can get through his pupils' many notes a clear picture of Chopin's credo.

One key to understanding Chopin's approach is his very strong liaison with vocal expression. He always made sure that his pupils went to listen to the great singers he considered masters of bel-canto. Chopin belongs to what the romantic musicians called 'the old school', taking vocal expression as his main campus. **Bel canto was a model for pianistic declamation, fullness of tone, phrasing, and - as piano technique is the servant of the musical idea - also technical approach. Chopin's words 'The wrist, respiration in the voice', is an example.**

Another is 'strange' fingerings, like using the same finger (even the thumb) repeatedly in a melodic cantabile line in order to achieve a portamento parlando result. (Some examples of this can be found in the Nocturne op 9 no3 bars 16 and similar; op 15 no2 bars 13, 57, Berceuse op 57 bars 47-49 and many others). Movements of the arm are to be minimal, the most natural possible, allowing a natural flow with the phrasing. This is the idea behind Chopin's suggestion that B major is the easiest scale to play (and the first to learn) because it 'falls' into the palm of the hand naturally. (C major is in fact the most difficult one, for the same reason.) The actual place of improvisation in Chopin's performance and instruction to his pupils was huge. Please bear with me until the next issue is out.

In the next article we'll look more closely into possible links between Chopin's ideas (as well as Schnabel's), improvisational approach, and what we can do with it.

Editor's note: The points mentioned in these articles are part of the author's method, detailed in his doctoral thesis for Paris University.