

*The Timeless Genius of Chopin*

Jiayan Sun, piano

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The Complete Études

Frédéric-François Chopin (1810-1849), born of a Polish mother and a French father in a little village twenty-five miles west of Warsaw, is one of those unparalleled composers, with Mozart and Schubert, who forever marked the musical world and who died too soon. After brilliant studies at home, and early concert tours to Berlin, Vienna, and Prague, Chopin came to Paris in the autumn of 1831 and remained there for the rest of his life. Of a temperament opposite to that of Franz Liszt, and thus little attracted to the fame and fortune of the stage, Chopin largely retired from the concert hall after 1835, enjoyed his role as a superstar of the aristocratic *salon*, and became one of the outstanding piano pedagogues of the Romantic Generation.

His first piano teacher, a violinist by trade, was a great admirer of Johann Sebastian Bach, something that might explain Chopin's affinity for the form of the *étude*, the form that Bach would transform into a study of high art. According to the leading Chopin scholar, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (who lectured at Smith College in 1982), Chopin's remarkable innovations as a keyboard composer are due to his extraordinary flexibility as a pianist, and to his uncanny ability to conceptualize for the keyboard the larger world of sound. Eigeldinger considers the case of Chopin's Op. 10 No. 1, in C Major, which expands the principles of the opening prelude (in C Major) of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* by causing the entire range of the piano to resonate as though it were activated by the violin bow of Paganini himself. The creative impulse of the young Chopin was thus double: it was firmly anchored in the traditions of the past, and it was forcefully stimulated by the present "romantic" necessity of astonishing virtuoso accomplishment. Add to this the overmastering influence of Rossinian *bel canto*, with its attendant ornamentation and rubato, and Chopin's legendary ability to improvise at the keyboard, and you have an explanation of Chopin's dazzling originality.

The twelve *études* of Opus 10 were all composed before 1833, when they were published. Ten of them are members of a pair consisting of a relative major and a relative minor (like the first two, for example, in C Major and A Minor), but it is not clear that Chopin wished that all twelve pieces be performed in order, as one. The same may be said of the twelve *études* of Opus 25, which are likewise tonally linked in no conspicuous way. For their concert programs over the years, the great pianists have made differing selections from both groups: those that have most frequently been anthologized will come to you as old friends.

Chopin composed the *Trois Nouvelles Études* at the end of the eighteen-thirties for a piano method published in 1840 by his friends the pianist Ignaz Moschelès and the music theorist François-Joseph Fétis. Like the more exalted *études*, though perhaps in a more relaxed manner, these pieces, too, are at once ingeniously didactic, focused as they are upon a particular technical difficulty, and deeply expressive, enmeshing the difficulty in a web of high-tech figuration, gentle lyricism, rhythmic subtlety, and radical harmonic imagination.

The number of composers who wrote *études* is large, but three names rise to the top of the list: Debussy, Liszt, and Chopin. Debussy's *Études*, fiendishly difficult, were composed "in memory of Chopin." Liszt's *Transcendental Études*, fiendishly difficult, are not dedicated to Chopin, but Liszt played Chopin's *études*, and dedicated other works to the Franco-Polish composer. Chopin dedicated his Opus 10 to Liszt—and his Opus 25 to the mother of Liszt's three children, Marie d'Agoult. Are Chopin's *études* as fiendishly difficult as the others? Arthur Rubinstein thought so. In his memoirs he wrote that he had recorded practically all of Chopin—*except the études*. "I played many of them in concerts, but left out those to which I felt I couldn't do justice." Jiayan Sun, taking on a challenge from which even Rubinstein demurred, will do justice to them all.

—Peter Bloom

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