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## Book Reviews

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# Recovering the suppressed truth about Frédéric Chopin

by Fred Haight

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### **Chopin: Pianist and Teacher, As Seen by His Pupils**

by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger  
Cambridge University Press, New York, 1986  
324 pages, hardbound, \$89.95; paperbound, \$24.95

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Wishing to be an objective reporter, Mr. Eigeldinger has limited the main text of his book, originally published in French in 1971, to direct quotations from Chopin's students and contemporaries, and has restricted his own observations to voluminous footnotes, thus leaving the reader free to judge for himself what was meant. The quotations themselves are aphoristic, but are well-organized by the author, and those familiar with Lyndon LaRouche's breakthroughs in musical science, as elaborated in the Schiller Institute's *Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*, will find tremendous riches in them.

Perfectly objective reporting is, of course, impossible, and Mr. Eigeldinger's greatest weakness is revealed in his typical musicologist's ideology of a "Romantic Period," to which Chopin reputedly belongs, and subsequent "Modern" and "Post-Modern" periods.

In fact, there never was a "Romantic Period." The 19th century was characterized by a pitched battle between those who sought to uphold the Classical tradition of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, led by Schumann, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Brahms; and the Romantic movement, which sought to destroy it, led by such "below-the-belt" musicians as Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, and Hector Berlioz.

Thus, the great promise of the book's cover (a cartoon of Chopin lecturing a student, "That's the style of playing of Liszt; one must never play that way when accompanying the voice!") is never delivered on. Although veiled references abound to Chopin as an angel, and Liszt as a devil, one senses

that Mr. Eigeldinger could have revealed much more, were he not laboring under the myth of musical "periods."

Much of the book's 324 pages is devoted to biographies of the students, and their utilization of Chopin's unorthodox fingerings for his own pieces. These hints are of great, but specialized interest to pianists. The quotations are organized according to subject matter, but our review will proceed by the different levels of ideas presented.

### **Technique and musical ideas as one**

The book contains much corroborating evidence that Chopin, in the best tradition of Classical beauty, shunned the Romantic idea that there was a special category of "purely instrumental music" which is exempt from the laws and requirements of *bel canto* singing. Such a tradition was clearly expressed by J.S. Bach, for example, in his introduction to his book of Two- and Three-Part Inventions, which reads: "Honest method by which the amateurs of the keyboard—especially, however, those desirous of learning—are shown a clear way not only (1) to learn to play cleanly in two parts, but also, after further progress, (2) to handle three *obligate* parts correctly and well; and along with this not only to obtain good inventions but to develop the same well; above all, however, to achieve a *cantabile* [singing] style in playing and at the same time acquire a strong foretaste of composition."

Part and parcel of this instrumental imitation of human vocal beauty is the use of shifts in vocal register as a means of developing, and then solving musical paradoxes. And luckily, the pianos constructed in Chopin's day were still constructed with this in mind—unlike most modern pianos, where great pains have been made to "iron out" any sudden jumps in tone quality.

Chopin wrote in his essay "Projet de Méthode" that "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 the instrument. It's like learning for example, to walk on one's hands in order to go for a stroll. . . . It doesn't teach us how to play the *music* itself. . . . It's an abstract difficulty, a new genre of *acrobatics*."

Chopin's stance is confirmed by one of his students, Karol Mikuli, who explained, "In complete opposition to Chopin, Liszt maintains that the fingers should be strengthened by working on an instrument with a heavy resistant touch, continually repeating the required exercises until one is completely exhausted and incapable of going on. Chopin wanted nothing to do with such a gymnastic treatment of the piano."

Now, one can no more learn to play piano from a book, nor more than one can learn to sing *bel canto* from a book. This reviewer, however, knows that among better pianists

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and teachers, much of what Chopin taught, on this level, is still in use. In such an environment, Mr. Eigeldinger's book is very useful.

Chopin's approach to technique was intellectual rather than muscular, and he forbade his students to practice more than three hours per day; he even then recommended that they stop and read a book if ever they found themselves not thinking. Contrast that to the method of Kalkbrenner, where hours of rote exercises could be relieved by reading something else *while* practicing! In Chopin's regimen, scales were to be performed slowly, emphasizing production of a beautiful singing tone rather than velocity. This was a long tradition among the world's best keyboardists. The Italian composer Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) was recruited to the singing tone in a competition with Wolfgang Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven's "legato touch" was said to be unrivaled. Clara Schumann's father once denounced Liszt, the Swiss-German pianist Sigmund Thalberg, et al. as "finger heroes," and told Liszt, "you could have been the first pianist in the world, if only you had a proper teacher."

Chopin strove to eliminate all stiffness and tension, to obtain a quality he termed *souplesse* (suppleness) in not only

the hand and wrist, but "right to the tips of the toes." He said that all there really was to the study of piano was a proper positioning of the hand, and fingering, since intonation was taken care of. Both were conceived to maximize the singing quality and the relaxation of the hand and wrist.

Much damage has been done in the shaping of the hand. Chopin neither wanted the fingers completely flat, nor, worse, curled up like "little hammers," so he caused the student's hand to be lightly thrown on the notes E-F-sharp-G-sharp-A-sharp-B, with the longer fingers on a slightly higher level on the black keys, thus introducing a natural curve into the hand. He started scale playing not with the C major scale, but with B major, so that the crossing from finger to thumb always passed from a black key to a white key.

Chopin himself wrote, in his unfinished "Projet de Méthode": "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." Thus, just as the violin can imitate the human voice through changing from one string to the next, the pianist's hand can do so, if required, by changing from one finger to the next!

### **Bel canto vocalization of poetry**

Karol Mikuli also wrote that "Under his fingers, each musical phrase sounded like song, and with such clarity that each note took the meaning of a syllable, each bar that of a word, each phrase that of a thought."

Another Chopin pupil, Jan Kleczynski, remarked: "All the theory which Chopin taught to his pupils rested on this analogy between music and language. . . . In a musical phrase of something like eight measures, the end of the eighth will generally mark the termination of the thought—that which, in language written or spoken, we should indicate by a full point; here we should make a slight pause and lower the voice. The secondary divisions of this phrase of eight measures . . . after each two or four measures, require shorter pauses . . . commas or semicolons."

Brahms's student Gustav Jenner makes exactly the same point in his memoir *Johannes Brahms als Mensch, Lehrer und Künstler (Johannes Brahms as Man, Teacher, and Artist)*, soon to be published in the first English edition by the Schiller Institute and cited in the aforementioned *Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration*: "It need only be added that we are speaking of musical cadence as the punctuation of the poetic stanza, and not the derived, but lower-order prose paragraph."

Chopin himself goes deeper, and shows the same insight into the origin of poetry as Lyndon LaRouche, and the poet Friedrich Schiller: "Thought is expressed through sounds. . . . The indeterminate language of men is sound. . . . Word is born of sound—sound before word" (from "Projet de Méthode").

Those who misunderstand Chopin's concept of *rubato* ("robbed time") as simply a license to alter the temp at will, ought to carefully examine what the master said about how the left hand must keep strict time while the right hand may lengthen or shorten notes. "The left hand is the conductor, it must not relent or bend." (Pieces like the Nocturnes clearly have the character of a soprano aria, with an orchestral accompaniment). His pupil Jan Kleczynski wrote the following, "Chopin differed, in his manner of using . . . ornamentations, from the usual manner of his time, which was to dwell upon such passages and to imbue them with importance, as in the cadenzas attached to the airs of the Italian School. . . . These ornamental passages should not be slackened but rather accelerated toward the end. . . . They may be regarded as parentheses which, quickly pronounced, produce a greater effect than they would if they were retarded." Anyone who has endeavored to communicate profound and complex ideas as a unity will recognize the truth in that observation.

Kleczynski also reports that Chopin's ideas on declamation were grounded on rules that guide vocalists, and that he exhorted his students to hear specific *bel canto* singers singing specific works. He constantly cited the tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini (1795-1854) as a model for pianistic declamation, and prized his autograph copy of Vincenzo Bellini's cavatina "Casta Diva" from his opera *Norma*. Chopin's student Emily Gretsch says, "His playing is entirely based on the vocal style of Rubini, [Maria Félicité] Malibran, and [Giulia] Grisi, etc.; he says so himself. But it's a purely pianistic voice that he uses to recreate the style of each of these artists, while they have other means at their disposal." In other words, the Chopin's "purely pianistic voice" is an *lawful extension* of the principles of *bel canto*, and not a synthetic substitute, as today's "pianistic school" would claim.

Mr. Eigeldinger helps us surmise Emily Gretsch's meaning about creating the style of particular singers in his footnotes, where he quotes Chopin on Rubini: "He sings in full voice, never falsetto . . . besides trilling endlessly . . . his *mezza-voce* [half-voice] is incomparable."

One can thus imagine that the "Rubini tenor voice" in a Chopin piano piece never sang falsetto in the third register, but "in full voice."

The author's footnotes also root these revelations historically by citing how *rubato* was used by Mozart and Beethoven, and pointing out that all good approaches to instruments are based on the *bel canto* singing voice, as stated directly by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (Johann Sebastian's son), Leopold Mozart (Wolfgang's father), and the flautist Johann Joachim Quantz, in their celebrated books on playing keyboard, violin, and flute respectively. There are only a couple of references to Chopin's understanding of string instruments, where he insists on grouping notes in piano pieces into upbows—a somewhat weaker action in which the string player draws the bow across the string from frog to tip—and

downbows, which move in the opposite direction and are generally somewhat stronger.

### Agape, not eros

The book also identifies a higher level of idea, which, however, is nowhere organized by the author as a conscious object of thought, but can be found in the quotations. Both Chopin's—and, later, Clara Schumann's—students reported that their teachers despised sentimentality and affectation in music; yet none felt more deeply about music than they. If that seems paradoxical to you, read on.

Much is made of Chopin's supposed "femininity." Even his student Wilhelm von Lenz fell into this trap, when he claimed that Chopin's playing of Beethoven's Op. 26 Piano Sonata was a total revelation and beautiful, but was "feminine, where Beethoven is always a man."

Admittedly, Chopin is not quite the equal of Beethoven, whose later works represented a creative breakthrough on an entirely new level only comparable to the revolution in mathematics sparked later by Georg Cantor. But this supposed feminine-masculine dualism is in fact non-existent. (The ludicrous Hollywood movie "A Song To Remember" went so far as to claim that "manly" Polonaises reflect Chopin the Polish revolutionary, while the "feminine" Nocturnes reflected the, admittedly unfortunate, influence of Georges Sand). It simply doesn't work that way, and the book's treatment of Chopin's patriotism as something incidental, rather than essential, betrays the Romantic prejudice of mislocating *eros* as the wellspring of creativity.

Human creativity is what makes both men and women, acting in the image of God, members of the human species as a whole. As with the register-shifts discussed above, valid distinctions between "masculine" and "feminine" exist solely to the end of establishing paradoxes to be resolved through a further creative act. One must read Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters on the Education of Man*, where he demands that the artist master both a rousing or "masculine" beauty to energize the languid man, and a melting or "feminine" beauty to soften the heart of the hypertense man. What subsumes the apparent paradox, is the composer's intent to use scientific discovery to organize, uplift, and educate the listener. Both types of beauty are necessary to accomplish this goal; *allegro* and *adagio* thrive in the same work.

Scientific breakthroughs in intelligible musical ideas are the source of the true agapic emotion, not the summoning of soap-opera style "deep feelings" by the performer or composer. On this score, Chopin is in a different universe than Liszt, as Chopin clearly understood when he wrote that Liszt chose to look at the stars through an enema tube instead of through a telescope.

Chopin wrote, "We are concerned with the end-result—the goal, the response evoked in the listener, not the means used to evoke it. You can be struck dumb with astonishment at unexpected news, equally whether it is shouted out loud, or barely whispered in your ear."