

## Poetry on the piano

### Robert Schumann: Fantasy pieces op. 12

Robert Schumann started his musical career at the piano, and the piano would later seduce him to this “fatal jog” in Leipzig which prevented him from visiting the councils obligatory for a law student.

After breaking off his unloved studies, he pursued his piano career all the more ambitiously. Friedrich Wieck, Clara Wieck’s father and a highly successful educator, took over his education, which would however soon fail due to a hand disease Schumann contracted.

Schumann compensated for the loss by turning towards the piano as a composer: In the center of his first creative period he concentrated on the piano as a solo instrument, the expression of which – after an initially conventional way of composing – would soon be enriched in an unimagined manner. His pieces, passionate, poetic, and resonant with wonderfully changing chromaticism, open up unprecedented dimensions of musical expression and tenor: most of them are *fantasies* and resist the clarity and regularity of traditional musical forms to give space for fantastically formed thoughts and a unique variation of divergent moods.

These characteristics of Schumann’s style – with some exceptions like *Papillons op. 2*, *Carnaval op. 9*, *Kreisleriana op. 16* and others – are perfectly demonstrated in the eight *Fantasy pieces op. 12*. They, too, belong to the series of those works which owe their form not to manifestations of compositional techniques alone, but as much to Schumann’s vision of the merging of music and poetry. All of the eight pieces have literary titles, not intended to constitute a program but instead to give room to the fantasy: The composer himself arguably found them only after completing his work and thus put into words again what was expressed in German recital descriptions and in the music. These are pianistic paintings of the soul, which encompass states between hope and despair, febrile dreams and heartfelt exaltation.

Schumann composed his opus 12 in the summer of 1837, and it seems obvious that his relationship to Clara Wieck, veering between joy and distress, had a key influence on the sequence of the pieces and their form. Even so, he did not dedicate the work to her, but to Anna Robena Laidlaw, at that time a much-lauded pianist, with whom he became acquainted at a morning performance in Leipzig and whom he wanted to keep “in quite nice memory.”

In an exchange of letters with Clara, he did nevertheless dwell on the poetic background of some *Fantasy pieces*: The legend of Hero and Leander came to his mind after completing the piece *Night*; Florestan, the gladiator, and the dreamer Eusebius – both pseudonyms from Schumann’s music publicistic work – played a role in many pieces; and in the piece *End of the song*, everything resolved “into a cheerful wedding,” sounding “like wedding and funeral bells all jumbled up.”

In real life, the two fiancés were refused a wedding for the time being; Robert and Clara were not even allowed to meet. Meanwhile, Clara, as if to seal their relationship against all opposition, included the *Fantasy pieces op. 12* in her concert programs and was thus the first to play them in public. Franz Liszt followed suit in the spring of 1838, and, as a piano virtuoso and widely read writer, made Schumann’s work well-known to large circles of society.

## Frédéric Chopin: Etudes op. 10

Frédéric Chopin also owes a great deal to Franz Liszt, but it was Robert Schumann who was the first to recognize Chopin's importance and to pen an essay praising his music in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. One of the first notices in the trade press on Chopin's etudes was also from Schumann. He had studied both books and listened to most of the pieces played by the composer himself; among them, the *Etude in A Flat Major* op. 10, "...more of a poem than an etude." The fact that in his description artistic evaluation mingles with pictorial interpretation is – in the light of Schumann's perception of arts – less astonishing than the fact that the poetic critique was directed towards a prosaic genre such as the etude.

The etude, intended as no more than a study piece for the practice and perfection of the playing technique, possessed a perfected form – unlike most practice *exercises*. However, its content was limited to a particular technical problem which, embodied by a single theme and performed with the most possible practical value, determined its musical form. In this manner, piano etudes were meant to single out from the entire piano literature and put into exercises particularities and problems of playing techniques, and to guide the student through the order of the study material with an eye towards the mastery of progressive levels of difficulty. It is obvious that in this way, the educational aim was to determine not only the form of the single etude, but also that of an entire collection of etudes. But as much as Chopin included univocal proposals from the Vienna as well as the French and English school of piano playing, on that score, he did not follow the transmission: neither a systematic compilation of technical exercises, nor the progression from lower to higher levels of difficulty define the order of his collections. Instead, a tonality scheme, the principle of which he may have adopted from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, appears as a model of cyclic cohesion; and musical contrasts and tension and release in the succession of the pieces enforce it as much as the alternation of different characters of expression. It is thus beyond doubt that Chopin's etudes are, if nothing else, character pieces. It is even more remarkable that – according to the classic definition of etudes – every piece still addresses a single technical and usually only one musical motive. Nevertheless, an enhancement of traditional piano technique becomes manifest in each of the pieces.

In cases – such as in the etude op. 10 no. 1 – where Chopin uses the arpeggios already dealt with by Cramer and Clementi, he creates a forward flow and differentiated sound effect through details such as the accompaniment with a bass octave and delayed entrances by a sixteenth. When in op. 10 no. 2 he inseparably integrates chromatic runs into the formation of melody and augments them for the practice of complicated fluency, the technical motive appears as a natural medium of expression. The same is true for keystroke exercises (op. 10 no. 3 and 6), double grip and fluency exercises, dissembled sixth chords, third chains, polyrhythmic combinations or for free figures of play which – obviously without commitment to the traditional pool of pianistic means – have emerged from virtuoso movement impulses. Ultimately, Chopin also establishes the use of the pedal as an indispensable element of sound and expressive effect.

The persuasive power at Chopin's disposal in creating the fusion of bravura performance and poetic atmosphere, and in the mutation from the technical exercise to music as an art of expression, is illustrated by the fact that the title *Revolution Etude* has been adopted for op. 10 no. 12. This gained the piece more popularity than would have ever been granted a work of exercises designed for the study. Yet Chopin's etudes are not intended simply for study. Their place in recital or concert

literature is as undisputed as their relation to the very tendency from the genesis of the concert as a business, which forced traveling virtuosos into an impressive and oftentimes spectacular performance of technical specialties.

### **Claude Debussy: Preludes**

Claude Debussy – like Robert Schumann, unlike Frédéric Chopin – has not exclusively occupied himself with compositions for the piano, but in his oeuvre, his piano works also rank highly.

Like Schumann, who found his path as a composer by dealing with classical form and composition traditions on the piano, Debussy also had a special relationship to this instrument – and thus proves himself in many respects a successor to Chopin (who had died in Paris thirteen years before Debussy was born). In his piano works, Debussy developed fundamental characteristics of his impressionist style, and on the piano, he established pianistic standards for an interpretation rich with nuances and differentiated in sound. Debussy played in a “lovely, light and delicate” unheard of new way, as his student, the pianist Maurice Dumesnil, would later remember, and he thus accentuated the very characteristic with which Chopin, too, had once enchanted his audiences in the Paris parlors.

What Debussy owed to Chopin’s example becomes quite impressively manifest in his etudes from 1915, which he dedicated to the memory of the great Polish composer. Likewise, his preludes bespeak an inner relationship. Aside from the accomplished balance between technical and musical demands which are innate to both, it is an arrangement of the great piano cycle modeled on Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Twenty-four pieces in two parts – this is the basic pattern which can be found in Chopin’s *etudes* and *preludes* as much as in Debussy’s *preludes*. Yet while Bach created the order “through all tones and semitones” in the major and minor tonalities according to the circle of fifths, Debussy did without this principle. Instead, he provided each prelude with a title. Indeed, he did not put it in front of the piece but at the end. This unusual procedure seems to position his *preludes* between the so-called absolute music (which would, for example, be related to the *preludes* and *etudes* by Chopin) and the programmatic one accessing non-musical perceptions. Strictly speaking, however, this points towards another direction: It makes clear that it is not the music which follows the literary or imaginary inspiration, but that the titles put the musical impressions attached to the *prelude* into linguistic images. Who would not think of Schumann here?

As many interpretations music permits, as little is the intend here to provide a musical image of real incidents: What may have inspired its creator at the moment of creation, which impressions may have affected him, whatever may be hidden behind poetically captured work titles – these questions have always challenged music lovers’ and experts’ fantasy and scholarly curiosity. Many have tried to disclose the secrets of Debussy’s titles or signatures:

The identity of the girl which he helped to gain immortality with *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (*The girl with the flaxen hair*) has long been a mystery. A belle from his circle of acquaintances? A painting? In fact, it was probably the following lines from a poem by Leconte de Lisle which inspired him to possibly his most famous prelude:

Who is singing so early in the morning  
sitting in the blooming clover?  
It is the girl with the flaxen hair

the belle with the cherry lips.

Debussy also followed his poetic inspiration with *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (*Sounds and fragrances fill the evening air*); this line is from Charles Baudelaire's poem *Harmonie de soir*.

*Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* (*What the west wind has seen*) could originate from a similar source; but the emphasis of virtuosity and striking dissonance spark associations of destructive forces of nature, which are peculiarly contradictory to the poetic motto of the piece.

*Feux d'artifice* turns the commemoration of 14 July, Bastille Day, into a grand finale: highly virtuosic and brilliant, a display of *Fireworks* with sparkling runs, arpeggios and tremolos abruptly falling into a rumbling bass. A fragment of the melody of the *Marseillaise*, barely noticeable, waves after them. What could Debussy have meant?

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