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An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music

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Citation

Mooiman, A. (2021, December 14). *An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247235>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 5. *Clavier und Gesang: singing on instruments*

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the influence of bel canto on nineteenth-century instrumental music will be examined. I will argue that the importance of Italian opera within the context of Western music was such that its performance tradition, including extempore facets, influenced other areas of music-making. Indeed, several instrumental methods show traces of bel canto-oriented thinking: Pierre Baillot's *L'Art du violon* and Louis Drouët's *Méthode pour la flûte* will be presented as examples. In addition, the music for piano most clearly shows the direct influence of bel canto. Arrangements of vocal compositions for this instrument were a popular musical genre, and many original compositions for piano refer to vocal music. Even the opposite occurred: sometimes piano music was turned into songs. I will argue that bel canto served as a reference not only for song-like piano compositions themselves, but also for the way how they were performed. 'Instrumental bel canto' was part of the horizon of many nineteenth-century scores. The importance of the piano within nineteenth-century music-making will be discussed, along with the connection between the sound of nineteenth-century pianos and the possibilities of evoking vocal music on these instruments. An important part of the chapter is devoted to Frédéric Chopin, the composer who more than anyone else referred explicitly to bel canto in his piano music. It is especially what we know about the way he performed his own music, or compositions by other composers, that offers clues for a renewed orientation on bel canto as a model for performing nineteenth-century lyrical piano music today – including extempore ornamentation. I will argue for a way of performing that can be termed 'rhetorical' in the sense described in chapter 3.

5.2 Bel canto as an archaism

From a now traditional point of view that prioritises instrumental over vocal music (→ chapter 4.1), bel canto might be seen as a style that looks backward, instead of contributing to the tempestuous developments of nineteenth-century music. Especially within music analysis, the bel canto repertoire has largely been neglected, probably because of its alleged lack of formal and harmonic sophistication. Also its strict performance tradition, deeply rooted in (and in fact closely connected with) the eighteenth century, seems to be at odds with Romantic hyper-individuality and the associated cult of genius. As for the topic of this study, the habit of improvising ornamentation could from this point of view be seen as an anachronism in the nineteenth century, something that some 'old-fashioned' Italians were still doing while the 'real' music had been moving on already for decades.

This is a view that is at first glance supported by remarks of contemporary musicians from the north side of the Alps. The German violinist, composer and conductor Louis Spohr visited Milan,

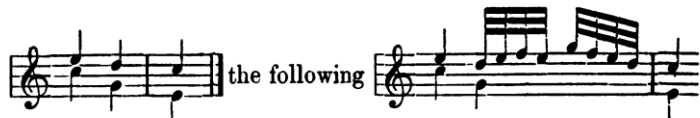
Bologna, Florence, Venice and Rome in 1816. Especially in Rome he was very displeased with the quality of the orchestra musicians, and he complained that they were adding embellishments whenever they liked.

Zwar verbat ich mir zu wiederholtenmalen jede Note, die nicht in den Stimmen steht; es ist ihnen aber das Verzieren so zur anderen Natur geworden, dass sie es gar nicht lassen können.³¹⁶

[I certainly forbade several times every note which did not stand in the score; but ornamentation has become so much a second nature to them, that they cannot desist from it.³¹⁷]

It is interesting that Spohr adds notated examples of passages that bothered him the most:³¹⁸

The first hornist, for instance, blew once in the *Tutti*, instead of the simple cadence,



The Clarinets blew perhaps at the same time



instead of

Example 5.2.1

Clearly, the Romans had chosen a classical locus for their embellishments: a cadence formula. What distressed Spohr most was the fact that the musicians were playing all kinds of different embellishments at the same time. It must be said that improvising ornamentation in orchestral parts or even in several ensemble parts simultaneously was generally disapproved of in eighteenth-century treatises. Fifteen years after Spohr, the young Felix Mendelssohn visited Rome, and apparently the old habits hadn't died by then:

³¹⁶ Spohr, L.: *Selbstbiographie*, erster Band. Kassel, 1860; 330.

³¹⁷ Spohr, L.: *Selbstbiographie*. Translation: *Louis Spohr's Autobiography*, vol. I. London, 1865; 309.

³¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Die Blasinstrumente verzieren ihre Mittelstimmen, wie wir es auf den Höfen zu hören gewohnt sind, u. kaum so schlecht.³¹⁹

[The wind instruments execute flourishes like those we are accustomed to hear in farm-yards, which are even better.]

Also in Naples, Mendelssohn criticised the ‘old-fashioned ornaments’ he heard in any instrumental solo.³²⁰ To be sure, the criticism of Spohr and Mendelssohn primarily concerns the automatism and tastelessness of the improvised ornamentation they witnessed in Italy (along with the, in their eyes, bad musicianship in general), but it is also true that in these composers a new aesthetics is exemplified, that sees the role of the musical text differently and is averse to the ‘arbitrariness’ of extempore ornamentation. Indeed, it is unlikely that Mendelssohn wanted his own music to be ornamented at all. In 1820, Spohr watched a performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* in the *Théâtre-Italien* in Paris, with Manuel García *père* as Don Juan and Josephine Fodor-Mainvielle as Zerlina. Though he was impressed with the level of the singers, here again he criticised the abundant ornamentation. The performance he attended must in every respect have been typical for the bel canto tradition: Spohr comments that the applause was given rather to the singers than to the composer (who in any case had been dead for almost 30 years) and that ‘Signor García’ had transposed his arias up to one tone higher because he didn’t have ‘sufficient depth of voice’. Both Fodor-Mainvielle and García apparently added ample ornamentation, much to Spohr’s distress. He thinks that Zerlina’s part is characterised by simplicity, which was spoiled by Fodor-Mainvielle’s high-flown embellishments, and García also added extensive ornamentation where it was out of place, according to Spohr; he even took a very slow tempo to make it possible.³²¹ At the background of Spohr’s verdict is his idea that Mozart’s music should not be ornamented at all. As discussed in chapter 3, this idea is historically untenable, since there is contemporary evidence of heavily ornamented parts in Mozart’s operas; what is revealed in Spohr’s belief, though, is the fact that during the few decades after his death, Mozart’s compositions had already developed a canonical status, along with the canonisation of their creator. Spohr mentions the *classische Vortrefflichkeit*³²² [classical excellence] of *Don Giovanni*, obviously a reason for him not to touch upon this ‘sacred’ score. It is an idea that would remain vivid ever since.

It is tempting to see in Spohr’s and Mendelssohn’s remarks a support for a modernist view on the performance of nineteenth-century music. They seem to be spokesmen for the idea that in the nineteenth century, all music should be performed as it was written, with bel canto as an anachronistic exemption. I argue, however, that this would imply the extrapolation of an essentially

³¹⁹ Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F.: *Briefe einer Reise*. Zürich, 1958; 102.

³²⁰ Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F.: *Briefe einer Reise*; 150.

³²¹ Spohr, L.: *Selbstbiographie*, zweiter Band. Kassel, 1861; 125.

³²² Spohr, L.: op. cit., 124.

post-World War II view on performance (the *Urtext*-paradigm) to a performance practice of two centuries ago. Above all, it means neglecting the overwhelming importance of bel canto for musical culture in the early nineteenth century.

5.3 Bel canto as a reference

A contrasting view focuses on the close relationship between vocal and instrumental music as it was discussed in chapter 4.1. A ‘singing tone’ is a well-known ideal on many instruments, and especially on the piano, an instrument that was developed mainly during the nineteenth century, it became a downright obsession. It is a goal that today’s musicians also are striving for. However, it seems that the singing tone has become a rather general quality of a musician’s ‘sound’: we tend to speak of the beautiful tone of a cello player, or of the rich sound a pianist draws from his instrument. It will be argued in this chapter that the metaphor of a singing tone on an instrument went much further in the period under investigation: in some cases playing was actively understood as an abstract (or universal) form of singing. These cases concern what is usually called ‘lyrical’ music. Generalisations are always dangerous, but they can also offer a useful perspective. Here is one: music either sings or dances – or the two may be combined within one piece. It is a view that I will be happy to defend for almost any tonal music.³²³ Here it is instrumental music with a singing quality that I would like to relate to vocal music. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the emancipation of instrumental music was still a relatively recent phenomenon; Rossini was unrivalled in popularity, and Italian singers had the world at their feet. It seems not far-fetched to think that pre-eminently bel canto served as an example for instrumental performance, even if sometimes subconsciously.

Friedrich Wieck’s book *Clavier und Gesang* was already mentioned in chapter 4.1, but there are more instances that can support the close connection of vocal and instrumental music. A couple of years before Wieck published his book, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy founded the first conservatory in Germany at the *Gewandhaus* in Leipzig (1843). The first timetable of this school mentions several still famous names; Mendelssohn himself was teaching three different classes: *Übungen in der Composition*, *Übungen im Instrumentenspiel*, and finally, more surprisingly, *Übungen im Sologesang*.³²⁴ There were also two specialised singing teachers affiliated with the young institution, that attracted a very international student population from the very beginning.

That even vocalists themselves might have considered their art something musically universal is strongly suggested by the title page of Alexis de Garaudé’s *Méthode complète de chant* (1830’s). Garaudé was a student of Girolamo Crescentini, and later became singing teacher at the Paris

³²³ The situation in atonal music is complex: some early atonal music still shares qualities of tonal music, whereas circumstances start to change with manifestations of a new focus on the pure sound in the twentieth century. This discussion exceeds the scope of this study.

³²⁴ *Lectiōns-Plan* (reproduction). Collection Hochschule für Musik und Theater „Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy“ Leipzig.

conservatory. His method was firmly rooted in the Paris bel canto tradition: the book was based upon Honoré Langlé's *Méthode de chant du Conservatoire de musique* (1803), which on its turn rooted in the material Bernardo Mengozzi had collected.³²⁵ The complete title of Garaudé's book reads: *Méthode complète de chant, ou Théorie pratique de cet art, mise à la portée de tous les professeurs, même instrumentistes* [Complete singing method, made available to all teachers, including instrumentalists]. It is, however, every inch a singing method; nonetheless, it obviously was considered to be of interest to non-vocalists as well.

Much more than the piano, the violin was considered an instrument of which the sound can actually resemble the human voice. Pierre Baillot's violin method *L'Art du violon*,³²⁶ also written for the Paris conservatory, praises the instrument because of its *analogie avec la voix, analogie qui le porte à l'imiter jusques dans les accents de la parole*³²⁷ [similarity with the voice, which it can imitate almost to the point of the expression of the words]. He also mentions the concertos of the Italian violinist Giovanni Battista Viotti, his teacher and the founding father of the nineteenth-century French school of violin playing. About Viotti's concertos Baillot writes that the *chants nobles et expressifs* (...) *semblent avoir été faits sur des paroles*³²⁸ [noble and expressive melodies seem to have been composed on words]. This emphasis on words indicates an essential difference from a more general search for a 'beautiful tone' as we know it today. A beautiful tone can be something irrespective of the musical content, whereas the primary motivation of these and many other nineteenth-century musicians seems to have been in the singing quality of an instrumental performance on the level of musical syntax. Supposing that such an intimate connection between singing and playing indeed existed, several aspects of vocal performance art (notably bel canto) must also have been true of instrumental practice. Telling in this respect is the fact that as late as 1834, Baillot devoted an entire chapter to the art of ornamenting, in which he not only pays attention to 'essential', but also to 'arbitrary' embellishments. Baillot's book deserves a closer look.

5.4 Pierre Baillot

Baillot's initial remarks on ornamentation echo Rousseau:

L'Imagination invente les ornemens, le goût s'attache à les diversifier, à les caractériser et à les placer convenablement. Il les permet, les choisit, et doit souvent les exclure, car il ne suffit pas que les ornemens soient gracieux et fleuris, il faut, sur toutes choses, qu'ils ne soient employés qu'à propos.³²⁹

³²⁵ Stark, J.: *Bel Canto: a History of Vocal Pedagogy*. Toronto, 2003; 4.

³²⁶ Baillot, P.: *L'Art du violon*. Paris, n.d. [1834].

³²⁷ Baillot, P.: *L'Art du violon*. Mainz, n.d. [1835]; 161.

³²⁸ Ibidem. This remark recalls Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny's analysis with text setting of Mozart's String Quartet KV 421, published in his *Cours complet d'harmonie et de composition* (Paris, 1803 / 1805).

³²⁹ Baillot, P.: op. cit., 155.

[The imagination invents the ornaments, taste aims to vary, to characterise and to apply them appropriately. It permits, chooses, and sometimes excludes, because it is not sufficient when ornaments are gracious or flowering, but above all they should be used at the proper places.]

Important in the early-nineteenth-century context is Baillot's remark that it is the difficult task of a performer to recognise whether a composition needs to be ornamented, and how.³³⁰ He mentions early composers (*les plus anciens pour la musique de violon*) such as Corelli and Tartini, who composed their *Adagios* as a *canevas* [a sketch] that demanded ornamentation; the examples of ornamentation Baillot shows are by the composers themselves or from sources within their environments. Closer to Baillot's time are fragments of *Adagios* from concertos of Viotti. The need for ornamentation here is motivated on the usual grounds: to vary passages that are repeated several times, and standard cadence formulas. Baillot's ornamentation of the *Adagio* from Viotti's third *Violin concerto* is extremely rich:³³¹

EINFACH GESCHRIEBEN.
Ohne alle Bezeichnung von Verzierungen.

NOTE SIMPLE.
Sans aucune indication d'ornemens.

(Adagio du 1^{er} Concerto composé par Viotti, 3^e dans l'ordre numérique.)

Solo.

Example 5.4.1

³³⁰ Baillot, P.: op. cit., 156.

³³¹ Baillot, P.: op. cit., 157-158.

*Malheur à qui voudrait y ajouter quelque chose!*³³² [woe unto those who'd like to add something to it!] One wonders whether Mozart's status as a canonic composer is of influence here, though Baillot continues to give examples of elaborate lyrical passages (*chants larges*) from concertos of Viotti, Kreutzer, Rode and himself, that according to him should not be ornamented either: *moins il s'y trouve de notes, et plus il peut y avoir de richesse dans l'accent*³³³ [the less notes they contain, the richer their expression will be].

Baillot acknowledges the problem that with the spread of instrumental music, the uses of notation have become more diverse. He observes the emergence of a 'dramatic' style since the later eighteenth century, which made it necessary for composers to notate more precisely their intentions. He sees the 'abundance of signs' in (for him) modern music as useful for unexperienced players, but at the same time as a danger because it might

*éteindre le génie d'exécution qui se plaît surtout à deviner, à créer à sa manière.*³³⁴

[extinguish the performing talent which enjoys to divine, to create in its own way.]

A striking description of an improvisatory state of mind! Baillot advises the reader not to neglect the study of early music, just because of its notational openness:

Elle laissera toujours à l'imagination un vaste champ pour s'exercer.

[It offers the imagination a vast area to exercise itself.]

Baillot sees ornamentation as a part of the larger complex of *Vortrag*, of musical *elocutio*, precisely like bel canto authors such as García and Lablache. Applying bel canto praxis to music-making with instruments implies embracing the manifold means of expression that singers were familiar with. Baillot takes much trouble to distinguish between *caractère* and *accent*. The character of a piece is determined by matters such as tempo, key, rhythm, the nature of its harmony, etc.; in short, it is provided by the composer. The *accent* is rendered by the performer; it is usually notated only imperfectly or even not at all. However, Baillot asks, of what use would all signs of the world be if the player would not participate with all abilities of his soul?³³⁵ The picture that emerges here is an ideal of performance that takes the score with all its clues and expectations as a starting point, and that uses the imagination to create a personal rendering from this *canevas*. It is about playing with the score.

³³² Baillot, P.: op. cit., 159.

³³³ Baillot, P.: op. cit., 160.

³³⁴ Baillot, P.: op. cit., 162.

³³⁵ Baillot, P.: op. cit., 190.

5.5 Louis Drouët

Baillot's book may be extraordinary, but it is not unique. In 1828 the French flute virtuoso Louis Drouët published his *Méthode pour la flûte*.³³⁶ Drouët, who was often called the 'Paganini of the flute', was born in Amsterdam as the son of a French father, studied at the conservatory in Paris, became the flute teacher of king Louis Bonaparte of Holland when he was sixteen, was a close friend of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and toured extensively. An important part of his book is devoted to basic information such as finger tables, including a section on general music theory with much attention paid to chord connections and modulations. Despite the fact that Drouët does not go into details about performance in the way Baillot does, the structure of the book echoes the art of bel canto, for instance in the important position that is given to a chapter like *Pour filer les sons*, in which the *messa di voce* is described and practised. Interestingly, Drouët also pays much attention to ornamentation, initially to the *agrèments* (the 'essential' ornaments) but also in a later chapter to more extensive and 'arbitrary' ornamentation: *De ce qu'on appelle Broder* [about what is called ornamenting].

The section starts a bit discouraging:

J'écris moins un Article sur ce Sujet pour vous apprendre à faire des Broderies, que pour vous engager à broder très rarement. Ces petites misères qui se trouvent sous la rubrique: Agrémens du Chant, sont celles dont on se sert ordinairement pour broder. On se sert cependant aussi d'autres dessins Mélodiques pour orner une Mélodie très simple, qui se répète souvent, et toujours avec la même Harmonie.³³⁷

[I write this article less in order to teach you how to make ornaments, than to advise you to ornament only very rarely. Usually, for ornamenting one makes use of these trifles that come under the heading: *Agrèments* (grace notes). However, one also makes use of different melodic lines for ornamenting a melody that is very simple, and that is often repeated, always with the same harmony.]

From what follows, it seems that Drouët's main worry is that players will bring in ornamentation that conflicts with the harmony. Harmony occupies an important part of the book anyway, and already in the section on *agrèments* he warns against ornaments that result in poor voice leading:

Quand on ne sait pas bien l'Harmonie, il faut se borner à jouer la musique comme elle est écrite.³³⁸

[When you don't know harmony well, you should limit yourself to playing the music as it is written.]

Drouët writes that one should never use ornaments in pieces of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and other composers *à peu près de cette trempe*³³⁹ [of a similar calibre]. 'Admittedly one can find in the

³³⁶ Special thanks to Rien de Reede for pointing out this source to me.

³³⁷ Drouët, L.: *Méthode pour la flûte*. Paris, n.d.; 60.

³³⁸ Drouët, L. : op. cit., 15.

³³⁹ Drouët, L. : op. cit., 65.

final movements of symphonies of these great masters many often repeated motifs, but they always appear in different harmonic circumstances.³⁴⁰ In other words, it is not desirable to vary the repeated motifs when the composer already has taken care of that. An underlying idea, though not explicitly mentioned by Drouët, might be that the scores of these composers were already canonic because they were felt to be on a much higher level than a lot of ‘ordinary’ compositions. Chapter 4.6 already touched upon the fact that it is usually such ‘sacred’ scores that kept being performed, while much ‘ordinary’ music sank into oblivion. As mentioned previously, even in bel canto one of the goals of ornamentation was to ‘improve’ a composition.

Drouët gives an example in the form of a simple melodic phrase that is varied in many ways; to make explicit the need to be aware of the harmony, he harmonises the fragment in ten different ways and shows how the chords influence the ornamentation.³⁴¹

La première opération que la pensée doit faire lorsqu'on veut broder quelques Notes, c'est de reconnaître l'Accord auquel elles appartiennent.³⁴²

[When you'd like to ornament a few notes, the first action of the mind should be recognising the chord to which they belong.]

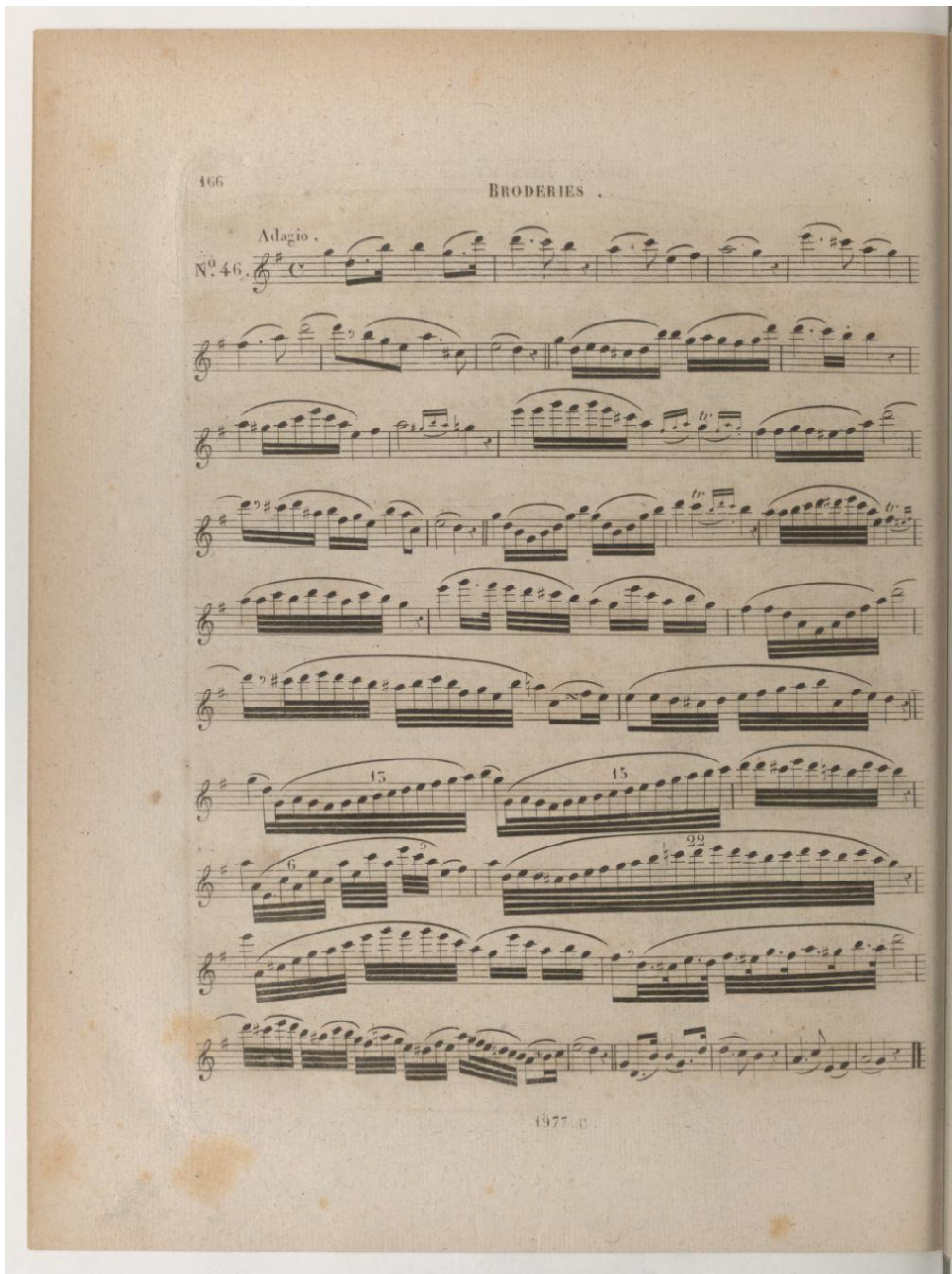
The second half of the *Méthode* consists of exercise pieces, one of which shows possibilities for ornamenting a short and simple melody. A harmonic background, by the way, is not made explicit in this monophonic composition (ex. 5.5.1).³⁴³ Exactly like in bel canto ornamentation as discussed in chapter 4, the ornamentation in this etude enhances the phrase structure and the direction within a phrase; besides, all flourishes clearly spring from the anchor tones in the melody.

³⁴⁰ Ibidem.

³⁴¹ For the complete set of examples (p. 60-63), see the appendix.

³⁴² Drouët, L. : op. cit., 62.

³⁴³ Drouët, L. : op. cit., 166.



Example 5.5.1

In Wieck's book title (→ chapter 4.1), the art of singing is not united with instrumental music in general terms, but specifically with an instrument that occupied centre stage in nineteenth-century music: the piano. The remainder of this chapter will be centred on this relation.

5.6 The central position of the piano

The piano is more than just an instrument whose development happens to coincide with the period central to this study: it can be regarded as the very picture of nineteenth-century music, especially instrumental music. Already within the revolutionary context at the end of the eighteenth century

the piano was associated with the ascendant citizenry, as opposed to the old-fashioned harpsichord, which was seen as the instrument of nobility. To the 'Romantic generation' (Charles Rosen), the piano must have incorporated all essential musical qualities. The genius cult with its strong emphasis on the lonely artist, creating in solitude by divine inspiration, found its perfect image in the pianist who could evoke an entire musical world under his two hands; it took a wizard musician like Franz Liszt to make the final step and create the solo piano recital. To be sure, the percussive piano sound seems not very suitable to convey a sense of 'line', and in this respect objectively falls short when compared with almost any other instrument, let alone the voice (something that already Beethoven complained about); however, the expressive and textural possibilities of the piano make it particularly well-suited for 'summarising' music that would otherwise be sung or played on many different instruments. Probably it is precisely the 'abstraction' of the piano tone, lacking the continuous quality of the tones of string and wind instruments, that makes it possible for a pianist to suggest a much more elaborate kind of music, but in this case realised by a single person.³⁴⁴ It is this transcending quality of the piano that made Robert Schumann hear 'veiled symphonies' in the piano sonatas of Johannes Brahms; conversely, it became usual during the nineteenth century to publish piano arrangements of symphonic works, sometimes even earlier than the score. Even Gustav Mahler still made piano roll recordings of parts of his symphonies. The piano had an important role to play during the compositional process, as well: even if music was not actually composed at the piano, the early stages of, say, a symphony consisted of sketches that usually took the form of a primitive piano score.

The role of the piano described above existed throughout the nineteenth century and continued for decades into the twentieth; its importance for the understanding of tonal music, I argue, is inestimable. Controversial though it may seem, it means that, during that period, aspects such as harmony, melody, rhythm and form were of more fundamental importance for a piece's identity than vocal or instrumental timbre. It should be added that not all nineteenth-century piano repertoire has this 'orchestral' quality: there are compositions for piano that seem to depend on the pure piano sound itself, and that therefore are hard to orchestrate (for instance the first movement of Beethoven's *Mondschein* sonata op. 27 no. 2, or a virtuosic etude like Chopin's op. 10 no. 1). In general, however, it was only during the twentieth century that sound quality became a parameter of equal (sometimes predominant) importance in composed music. The relevance of this observation

³⁴⁴ The organ, which can be seen as occupying a central position in Baroque music just like the piano did in the nineteenth century, is very different in this respect. In fact it is the only traditional musical instrument that, though the 'shape' (development) of its tone is recognisable by its rigidity, does not have one characteristic tone colour; the very different colours that can be created by choosing combinations of stops are much more specific than the piano sound, quasi to the point of imitating other instruments or voices. Ironically this makes the organ less suitable to evoke e.g. a Romantic orchestra. Consequently 'organ reductions' of symphonic music are rare in the nineteenth century (unlike reductions for harmonium, which were very popular).

for the topic of this study is in the hierarchy of parameters. A passage in a piano piece may, for instance, bring to mind associations with the sound of trumpets, on the basis of a typical combination of harmony, melody, rhythm, texture and range; in other words: these parameters strongly suggest a *locus communis*, and the performing pianist will be guided by this. And although this pianist cannot possibly make his instrument sound like real trumpets, the music as performed can make the same impression, provided that the locus is familiar to the listener. The consequence is that actual sound colour is of secondary importance – not because it is not clearly conveyed in the score (which is also true), but for the intrinsic musical and stylistic reason mentioned above. In short, musical parameters in nineteenth-century tonal music show a characteristic hierarchy.

This means that some aspects of tonal music are much more open to variety during performance than other ones: they make possible an improvisatory approach to a score without losing the identity of a composition. Harmony and form are first in the hierarchy, being parameters that are unquestionably provided in the score. (Even in an ornamented bel canto aria, one does not tamper with harmony and form.) Sound characteristics, however, are left much more to the discretion of the performer. The late-twentieth-century search for the ‘original’ sound of early music in my view often neglects this fundamental issue and thereby reveals itself as an essentially modern practice. Even a pianist like Clara Schumann, who dedicated her long professional life to promoting and performing the work of her late husband, never seems to have thought back nostalgically to the pianos of her youth, for which these works were written. Similarly, Carl Czerny, who discusses the recent developments in piano building and pianistic technique in the supplement to his *Grosse Pianoforteschool* op. 500, clearly sees developments such as the use of heavier strings as an improvement because it lends ‘force and melody’ to the sound of the higher octaves that ‘used to be so thin’.³⁴⁵ Of course, it is not my intention to argue against the use of early instruments; I think, however, that it is important not to petrify our idea of sound; there are good inherently musical reasons not to do so, reasons that also foster an improvisatory approach to the score. Chopin’s study in c-sharp minor op. 25 no. 7, for instance, clearly evokes a violoncello melody in the left hand. At the same time it has become fashionable to assume that Chopin’s piano music should ideally be performed on a Pleyel piano from the 1830’s or 1840’s because this was the instrument Chopin himself preferred. I argue that what counts here from a nineteenth-century perspective is the suggestion of a cello, not the actual sound of a Pleyel. The improvisatory state of mind of a nineteenth-century performer, as articulated by Baillot, would enable him to get the best result from

³⁴⁵ Czerny, C. : *Die Kunst des Vortrags. Supplement zur grossen Pianoforteschool* op. 500. Wien, n.d.; 5.

any instrument, making optimal use of its possibilities. The actual sound colour did not belong to – in Baillot’s terms – the *caractère* of a composition, it was a matter of *accent*.³⁴⁶

The phenomenon of ‘translating’ instrumental (especially orchestral) music to the piano is well-known, but the possibility of evoking vocal music on this instrument often seems to suffer from a certain negligence. In the nineteenth century it was perfectly usual for pianists to be inspired by the rich performance tradition of *bel canto*. In this chapter, a couple of examples will be investigated, but by way of introduction to the art of singing on the piano, I will examine a forgotten composition of Stephen Heller.

5.7 Singing on the piano: Stephen Heller’s *L’Art de phraser*

Heller was a Hungarian pianist who studied in Vienna and spent his adult life in Paris. He was well acquainted with Berlioz, Chopin and Liszt. His work was already forgotten at the end of his life, except for three sets of studies for piano (ops. 45, 46 and 47) which are still popular in elementary piano teaching today. Heller composed mainly for the piano, in an idiom that was poetic rather than brilliant or virtuosic. In 1841 he published his opus 16, a series of pieces he referred to in letters as his *Études*, but which were published by Maurice Schlesinger in Paris as *L’Art de phraser*, and which in 1843 appeared in Berlin with Heinrich Schlesinger (the brother of Maurice) under the hybrid title *L’Art de phraser. Morceaux de salon. Études mélodiques*. At the insistence of Heinrich Schlesinger, each piece received a title,³⁴⁷ which enhanced the impression of a collection of Romantic character pieces. The later German edition was entitled *Schule des Vortrags*. Though probably not Heller’s own invention, this title in a telling way refers to the contemporary tradition of *bel canto*, in which *die Kunst des Vortrags (l’art de phraser)* had such an encompassing meaning. The association is strengthened by the mainly lyrical character of the pieces, some of which even carry the title *Lied*.

³⁴⁶ A similar rigidity can be discerned in modern concerns about the choice of instruments for a basso continuo group, e.g. whether a recitative should be accompanied on organ or harpsichord. It is very likely that eighteenth-century musicians were much more pragmatic in this, making the most of what was available. As for piano arrangements: they even existed for organ works. The title page of Léon Boëllmann’s popular *Suite gothique* for instance (original Durand edition, 1895 / 1915) mentions arrangements for piano solo, piano à 4 mains, two pianos and even two pianos à 8 mains! To be sure, such arrangements in the pre-recording era served the practical goal of facilitating the enjoyment of music outside the concert locations; nevertheless, there is a tension between the casualness with which a ‘symphonic’ organ piece was arranged for such a different instrument on the one hand, and the strong belief of many modern organ lovers that this music should be performed on a ‘proper’ French symphonic instrument (read: Cavaillé-Coll) on the other hand. This phenomenon also occurs in vocal music. In our time, it is a matter of principle for singers to perform music in the original language because it is considered of vital importance for the timbre, and therefore the identity of the piece. When a singer does not master the language of the music he performs, phonetic symbols will help. This habit is in stark contrast with the nineteenth-century practice, when singers usually performed in their own languages; compositions in less well-known languages were published with an additional translation, like Antonín Dvořák’s songs which had a Czech and a German version, the latter even with rhythmical adaptations in the melody. In addition, operas were often performed in the language of the country, even until World War II.

³⁴⁷ Heller, S.: *Lettres d’un musicien romantique à Paris* (ed. J.-J. Eigeldinger). Paris, 1981; 106.

One of these 'songs without words' (the genre had already been made popular by Mendelssohn at that time), number 12 in the collection, shows an instruction that is highly unusual in piano music: the left hand melody (the 'voice' part) is to be played *con portamento*.³⁴⁸



Example 5.7.1

In bel canto, the *portamento* was the expressive and smooth connection of two different tones by way of a quick pitch sliding. It was an important technique that was described in all singing methods, and that probably was applied much more often than nowadays: in the post-World War II performance tradition the *portamento* was easily associated with sentimentality and bad taste. In his famous recording of Bach / Gounod's *Ave Maria*, made in 1902, 'the last castrato' Alessandro Moreschi can be heard using it throughout. Heller's *Lied* stylistically refers to the bel canto style, and the *portamento* indication is added at a very expressive moment, right before an important cadence. A *portamento* can in no way be performed on a piano; the best option for suggesting it here, at least, seems to be enhancing the melodic expression of the descending 6/4-chord by playing the left hand with a large tone and 'over-legato'.³⁴⁹ What makes this passage so interesting, though, is the fact that the piano is so overtly used in what I called a 'transcending' way. Now, suggesting *portamenti* on the piano might be an extreme case, but Heller's use of the term implies that the whole complex of bel canto *Vortrag* serves as a model for playing the piano here. Again, I propose to take seriously the enormous diversity and richness of the means of expression as elaborated in methods such as García's and Lablache's – with the use of *accent*, with all colouring of the words, even with ornamentation when appropriate – and to apply it to the piano. Of course, bel canto expression to a large extent depends on words, which are absent here. What counts, though, is to play *as if* there are words. This includes searching for variety, highlighting the individual character of phrases, and also a much more subtle use of articulation than is usual in piano playing nowadays. Louis Spohr, for instance, suggests imitating on an instrument (in his case the violin) the 'separation caused by pronouncing two different syllables on one pitch' in singing, an effect he achieves by a finger change on one tone.³⁵⁰ The result will be a truly rhetorical manner of playing, not in the sense of a petrified *Figurenlebre*,

³⁴⁸ Heller, S.: *L'Art de phraser. Morceaux de salon. Études mélodiques*. Berlin, 1843; 36.

³⁴⁹ The imitation of portamento is enhanced by the 'sliding' chromatic passing notes in the right hand arpeggios. In section 5.12 a similar effect is described in Chopin's Nocturne op. 27 no. 2.

³⁵⁰ Spohr, L.: *Violinschule*. Wien, 1832; 175.

but of a musician who is like an orator, playing to his audience, which above all means exploring *varietas*.

To most modern musicians, this is an area that needs to be rediscovered. The short pieces in Heller's *L'Art de phraser* may generally be of little musical interest today, but it is exactly this quality that makes them suitable material for an exploration of the possibilities of expression, if only because the player feels the urge to vary more keenly than in generally acknowledged master works. Heller's forgotten collection can really serve as a *Schule* to us. In this way it will be possible to develop a repertoire of expressive means that forms a good basis for an improvisatory approach to lyrical piano music, especially from the first half of the nineteenth century.

A few examples might be useful to clarify what is involved when one aims to apply *bel canto Vortrag* to the piano. In his *Lied* op. 16 no. 12, mentioned above, Heller uses phrasing slurs throughout, in a way that had become common in nineteenth-century piano music. To most modern pianists, such slurs practically equal legato slurs. At the background of this conception is the modern sound ideal that favours unity: equality in tempo and movement, evenness of tone, a sustained sound. It is an aesthetic ideal that not only matches the way singers are trained today, but that also suits the modern piano very well (more about the characteristics of pianos in the next section). The fingerings that are added in a later Schott edition by Moritz Mayer-Mahr (not dated, presumably in the 1930's) support the idea of the first melodic phrase being played as a legato line.³⁵¹

39

No.12 Lied

Con moto ♩ = 100
sempre *p* l'accompagnamento

ben pronunziato il canto

Example 5.7.2

³⁵¹ Heller, S.: *Schule des Vortrags*. Mainz, n.d.; 39.

Interestingly, the 1843 edition shows a different and rather unusual fingering, in which four successive melody tones in the left hand are played with the second finger:³⁵²

The image shows a page of a musical score for a piece titled 'LIED' by Stephen Heller, Op. 12, No. 12. The score is in 2/4 time, marked 'Con moto' with a tempo of quarter note = 100. It features a piano accompaniment with a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The left hand has a unique fingering pattern where the second finger plays four successive notes in the melody. The score includes performance instructions such as 'sempre p l'accompagnamento.' and 'ben pronunziato il canto.'

Example 5.7.3

Bar 5 in the second phrase also contains an unusual fingering, which has been preserved in the later edition. By contrast, the fingering of the third phrase (bars 9-10, both editions) seems designed to ensure *legatissimo* playing. The remark *ben pronunziato il canto* literally means that the melody should be 'well pronounced'. It is easy to overlook this seemingly superfluous remark, since it is clear that the melody has to be brought out; however, the usual expression for such playing 'in relief' would actually have been *ben marcato il canto*. The term *pronunziato* rather refers to text, to the articulation of words, to 'colouring'. Fingering definitely had a lower status than the other indications in the score and was to be interpreted as advice; nevertheless, the repeated second and third fingers strongly suggest the imitation of what Spohr called the 'separation caused by pronouncing two different syllables'. Frédéric Chopin's original fingerings also make use of this phenomenon at times. It should, however, not be forgotten that a singer's textual articulations don't necessarily prevent the flow of the legato line. Similarly, playing a melodic line with one finger on the piano does not mean that this line has to sound 'choppy', as many witnesses of Chopin's playing testify: *le troisième doigt est un grand chanteur* [the third finger is a great singer], he used to say.³⁵³ Altogether the performance indications point into the direction of a 'rhetorical' approach, without determining the way how exactly this should be done. A late-twentieth-century composer might in such a case perhaps have tried to notate the articulation as precisely as possible, for instance by using different note values for the quarter notes; in the nineteenth century this aspect was deliberately left to the discretion of the performer, as it belonged to the *accent*.

³⁵² Heller, S.: *L'Art de phraser. Morceaux de salon. Études mélodiques*. Berlin, 1843; 35.

³⁵³ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: *Chopin vu par ses élèves* (nouvelle édition mise à jour). Paris, 2006; 72.

How can we explore this way of playing today? It might be a good idea to actually imagine a concrete text here. Which one exactly is not important, as long as it fits the melody well; what counts is that the imagining of concrete words will direct the articulation and colouring on the piano, and as such will contribute to the ideal of variety in the shaping of the melodic line.

[5.7 #1: 11 different versions of this passage]

Even more suggestive is the first piece in Heller's collection, *Canzonetta*.³⁵⁴ Again the melody is to be played 'well pronounced', and this time the rhythmic shape is more marked and almost seems to evoke specific words, for instance in German: 'Komm herein!'. The basic motif (bar numbers 1-2) is repeated so often in this piece that it can be interpreted by the performer as an exercise in *varietas*. Pronouncing the same text in many different ways, each time with a different tone, is, incidentally, a well-known exercise for actors. A beautiful bel canto detail finally is the small slur from bar 2 to bar 3 that bridges the separation between phrases. Similar slurs occur in *Lied*, and are atypical for piano scores; they seem, however, to evoke the way a singer can subtly link the two motifs with a very light *portamento*, gracefully hiding the all-too-obvious structure and avoiding the tiring repetition of many equally short phrases.

Example 5.7.4

[5.7 #2: 8 versions of beginning *Canzonetta*]

One issue that has not been discussed yet is the possibility of adding ornamentation. On the one hand, some of Heller's melodies present some clear opportunities for ornamentation, if only of 'essential' nature. Bar 7 of *Lied* (ex. 5.7.3), for instance, almost seems to call for a turn figure between the d and the f in the melody. On the other hand, however, the texture of the composition, often combining melody and (part of the) accompaniment in one hand, makes it technically troublesome to add even simple ornamentation, let alone extemporised free embellishments. Heller must have been aware of this, since he organises the recapitulation of the beginning in a different way: this time

³⁵⁴ Heller, S.: *L'Art de phraser. Morceaux de salon. Études mélodiques*. Berlin, 1843; 3.

the melody is played in the right hand, which makes a (notated) turn possible (sixth bar of the example).³⁵⁵

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system consists of ten bars. The right-hand part (treble clef) features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The left-hand part (bass clef) has a simpler accompaniment. The last two bars of the first system are marked 'ritardando.' and 'a Tempo.'. The second system consists of five bars, continuing the complex rhythmic patterns in both hands. There are various articulation marks, including slurs and accents, throughout the piece.

Example 5.7.5

In general, it will be technically problematic to add embellishments to the piano pieces in *L'Art de phraser*. For practising purposes one might also turn to the vocalises that Alexis de Garaudé added to his *Méthode complète de chant* and that were discussed in chapter 2.6.2.

5.8 The role of the instrument

An allusion to the influence of early pianos on the extemporised aspects of articulation was already made above apropos of the proper interpretation of long slurs. Without going into too much detail, a brief discussion of this phenomenon seems appropriate.

While improvising, a performer tends to adapt to the specific instrument at hand, since one improvises *with* the instrument, and therefore naturally explores the possibilities the instrument offers. Especially organists know this very well, since the differences between organs are much more obvious than between instruments in any other category. Put the other way around, the influence of the instrument on the sounding result is an important factor, even when it is a question of relative improvisation, because the instrument tends to invite a way of playing that suits its possibilities. Though it was argued above that being dogmatic about performing the works of a particular composer on a specific instrument it is not a good idea, it is still possible that a certain type of piano lacks possibilities that are essential for a much desired result. Being open-minded and willing to explore the different properties of instruments does not mean that anything works on any piano.

Where the modern market for concert grand pianos is dominated by a few large factories such as Steinway & Sons, Bösendorfer, Fazioli and Yamaha, with – despite the differences – highly

³⁵⁵ Heller, S.: op. cit., 36-37.

standardised products, the nineteenth century still knew a variety of instruments that is hard to imagine today. During the first decades of the century, Vienna alone accommodated hundreds of piano builders. Even by the end of the century, there were still important differences among national traditions in France, Germany, England and Austria. These differences included the mechanical construction of the instrument; as late as in the early twentieth century, piano builders still used their own design for the action, whereas today there is virtually one standard type in use.

For this reason, it is very risky to generalise about the sonic characteristics of ‘early’ pianos, all the more so because the instrument underwent an enormous development during the nineteenth century, from the almost harpsichord-like type Mozart played on to essentially the piano as we know it today. Especially during the first decades of the nineteenth century, important innovations occurred continuously. Nevertheless, there are common threads that allow the comparison between a typical modern piano, say, a Steinway D as they have been built since the last decades of the twentieth century, and almost any nineteenth-century instrument. Two differences that are important with respect to the topic of this chapter will be highlighted: the shift of tone colour that accompanies an increase in dynamics, and the amount of resonance in the instrument. The descriptions will be largely qualitative, as it will be sufficient for the aim pursued here.

An important difference between almost all nineteenth-century pianos and modern ones is that the tone of the early instruments tends to become more full-bodied with increasing volume, whereas the sound colour on modern instruments becomes brighter, even resulting in a certain ‘metallic’ quality (usually associated with Steinway, but also imitated by other firms). The dynamic range on the Steinway is also larger than on any earlier instrument.

There are several possible explanations for this difference. Ever since the earliest instruments, pianos have become more and more heavy in every respect: the strings and sound board became stiffer and thicker, the frame became stronger in order to support the increased tension, and the hammers became heavier. Even between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century, there is an important difference in hammer weight. The hammer felt acts as a non-linear spring, and the more the hammer head is compressed, the stiffer it becomes. As a result, the spectrum of a forte note is richer in high frequency content.³⁵⁶ By contrast, the Viennese pianos had felt hammer heads that were covered with soft leather, leading to very different tonal characteristics. A second reason for the increased brightness of the tone is in an 1873 patent of Steinway, the ‘duplex scale’. This invention made use of the segments of the strings outside the ‘speaking’ length. These parts (at the tuning pin, and beyond the outer bridge) were normally muted, but Steinway made them sound harmonically related to the main tone, thus by resonance increasing the brightness of the tone.

³⁵⁶ Öberg, F.: *Acoustical and perceptual influence of Duplex stringing*. Unpublished Master Thesis in Music Acoustics, Royal Institute of Technology. Stockholm, 2009; 10.

Another difference is the type and the amount of resonance. Very important in this respect is the influence of the thickness of the soundboard, which has continued to increase during the twentieth century. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century pianos had thinner soundboards, which resulted in a quick response; the piano tone reached its full resonance relatively early, and also had a shorter life. A modern piano tone has a longer duration, but is also slower in its realisation. The response of early instruments invites the performer to ‘speak’ and to explore subtleties of articulation, whereas the slower response of modern pianos rather inspires long and even legato playing.

The amount of resonance is also an important factor. A modern piano tone, played without pedal, ‘sings’ less than the same tone on an early instrument. A part of the cause might be quite simply the increased efficiency of the dampening of the strings during the twentieth century. On almost all earlier pianos, the other strings resonate with the main tone to a certain extent, reinforcing the lower partials and causing a resonant and ‘singing’ tone. The quick response and rich resonance of earlier instruments make it attractive to play passages without using the damper pedal, and in fact make it possible to take nineteenth-century pedal indications literally. On a modern piano, one feels the urge to use the pedal as a matter of course, since a tone without pedal easily sounds dull. As a result, modern pianism to a large extent depends on pedalling – which of course has to be extremely subtle in order to avoid unwanted mixing.

How does all this affect an improvisatory approach to piano scores that evoke *bel canto*? The circumstances described above are of enormous influence on the shaping of the instrumental *bel canto* line. The difference in development of tone colour has important consequences for the dynamic shadings one applies. When the louder nuances sound fuller than the quieter ones without changing the tone colour too much (as on nineteenth-century pianos), they remain ‘connected’, like a singer who sustains the breath support in pianissimo passages. Soft passages sound mysterious or remote; it is the type of sound Chopin must have had in mind with the *sotto voce* indication (a *bel canto* term) he frequently uses. Louder passages sound expressive and full-bodied, as if the music has come closer. On a modern piano, on the other hand, playing louder automatically means changing the tone colour considerably, which endangers the suggestion of vocalicity. Making small scale dynamic differences within a melody works more easily on an early piano because it makes a rhetorical impression, as if words from an unknown language are being sung. In contrast, attempting the same effect on a modern piano can create the impression that the soft tones are ‘dropping out’ of the melody, like a singer who performs with a faulty breath support.

The pedalling is also important. No matter how subtly the player of a modern piano applies the damper pedal – that is, by depressing it only partially in all possible gradations – the almost constant use tends to unify the sound, very much comparable to the constant vibrato as it has become normal for string players (and singers!). Especially on pianos from the first decades of the nineteenth century,

the damper pedal was more like a ‘stop’ on an organ, a special effect that could be applied at will (some Viennese pianos had five such stops). The flip side of this is that the early damper pedals could be more ‘primitive’ in their functioning, hardly allowing for the subtleties of partial use that have become so important nowadays.

The tintinnabulum-like, crystal clear and perfectly balanced piano and pianissimo registers on a modern grand, the relatively slow development of its tone, and the use of pedalling described above, together facilitate smooth melodic lines as referred to in the previous section. The character is essentially legato, though the touch itself is rather non-legato for many modern performers, with the legato sound often achieved with the pedal. It is a type of playing that can be heard in many recordings of Chopin’s *Nocturnes* from the last fifty years, for instance. Conversely, on a nineteenth-century piano the legato often has to be achieved by the fingers since the pedalling tends to be less continuous, and the quick response and more generous resonance of the instrument allow for a more subtle articulation.³⁵⁷ This makes it easier to evoke bel canto *pronuntiatio* on the piano. Of course, a modern high quality grand piano is a very versatile instrument that allows for a wealth of nuances, so it is possible to play in a rhetoric style even on a modern Steinway. Partial use of the *una corda* pedal considerably expands the possibilities of colouring. However, it demands a lot to play in such a way, just as it is difficult for a singer who is trained to sing in a modern, force-driven way, to embrace a versatile and rhetorical bel canto style described in nineteenth-century method books. For a pianist it means working *against* the instrument to a certain extent. To be sure, in section 5.6 I argued that to nineteenth-century musicians, pianos with very different characteristics could be equally suitable for performing a specific piece of music; however, it is still true that twentieth-century piano builders moved in a direction that doesn’t foster rhetorical playing.

5.9 Song and aria arrangements for piano

The early piano turned out to be a very suitable instrument for accompanying solo songs. Beethoven is generally seen as the first one to have composed a lied cycle (*An die ferne Geliebte* op. 98), and Schubert made the genre famous. The popularity of lieder during the nineteenth century must have been enormous: one has the impression that there is hardly any composer from that period who never wrote songs. In the nineteenth-century song culture, the large difference between musical praxis then and now is beautifully exemplified. Lieder were essentially performed in small family or salon circles, or even for one’s own pleasure: they were intended primarily for domestic music-making, only

³⁵⁷ An important factor here is also the regulation of the dampers: on many modern pianos the damper already touches the string when the pressed key is released about two-thirds of the way back to its position of rest; on early instruments this moment occurs much later, just before the end of the key release – a phenomenon that corresponds with the increased possibilities of repetition on modern grands. However, this is not a structural difference between early and late pianos, since it is very well possible to adjust modern dampers to make their action more ‘lazy’.

secondarily for the concert stage. The same is true for much piano music; Schumann thought that many of his piano pieces were too intimate for concert use. It is very interesting that already during the first decades, it became popular to arrange existing songs for piano solo. In 1838, Franz Liszt published his first arrangements of lieder of Franz Schubert, ten years after the composer's death. The *12 Lieder von Franz Schubert* (published by Diabelli in Vienna) include many songs that are still famous, such as *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, *Der Wanderer* (the song Schubert based his *Wanderer-Fantasie* upon; the latter was to be arranged for piano and orchestra by Liszt in 1851), and *Erlikönig*, Schubert's first opus, which would immediately become famous. Liszt's transcriptions have long been criticised for being tasteless, though they have become increasingly popular with pianists in recent decades. Often Liszt's philanthropic nature is stressed, and in this line of thinking the transcriptions are explained as his effort to promote the works of lesser known composers. What matters in the context of this study, though, is the basic fact that transcriptions of vocal repertoire for the piano became popular in the nineteenth century. In the letter to Eugène de Froberville from 1842 quoted earlier, Heller writes that the German publisher Heinrich Schlesinger has asked him to write eight pieces on themes of Schubert. Eventually Heller composed only four of them, all based upon songs and published as opus numbers 33 to 36.³⁵⁸ It may taint the popular image of the Romantic composer as a free spirit, only obeying his own inspirations, but publishing music was also business. In the nineteenth-century music market, a composer's income primarily depended on the number of sold copies, and the many musical amateurs were, as potential buyers, an important source of income. In the same letter Heller writes that Schlesinger also wanted to publish a four hand version of another popular composition of his, *La Chasse* op. 29, most likely with the goal of selling copies to amateurs for whom the original version was too difficult. Johannes Brahms's *Waltzes* op. 39 (1866) even appeared simultaneously in three different versions of varying difficulties.

To summarise, there is reason to see song arrangements for piano not as a disputable peculiarity of the super-virtuoso Franz Liszt, but as a popular genre in a world of blossoming and still increasing cultural participation. Playing vocal repertoire on the piano wasn't something exceptional, it was a natural thing to do.

So far the focus of this section has been on lied repertoire, which is of course often stylistically different from bel canto. Adding ornamentation to a lied would in many cases be rather out of place, but that doesn't mean that a performance could not benefit from other aspects of *l'art de phraser* as it existed at that time. Liszt's arrangements of Schubert's songs treat the accompaniments rather freely, fleshing them out in a typical Lisztian way, but keep the melodies as composed by Schubert. Significantly, Liszt adds the original texts, printed exactly synchronous with the melodies. This is

³⁵⁸ Heller, S.: *Lettres d'un musicien romantique à Paris* (ed. J.-J. Eigeldinger). Paris, 1981; 105.

probably taken for granted by many players, but there is good reason to interpret it as an invitation to a rhetorical playing style. Also fascinating are Liszt's arrangements of his own songs, most famously the three *Liebesträume* which were published simultaneously in 1850 as songs and as piano pieces; in his piano transcriptions of original songs, Liszt printed the texts separately above the musical score. The reason for this difference is not clear, but a result is that the text is presented much more in its quality of a poem – followed by the musical version of this poem, a procedure that showed the way towards the symphonic poem, a genre coined by Liszt. As late as 1884, Edvard Grieg (a prolific lied composer) published piano arrangements of his own songs (opus numbers 41 and 52). Grieg prints the texts in the piano scores; his arrangements are usually faithful to the originals, with occasional changes in texture to enliven the repeats of stanzas. The famous song 'Jeg elsker dig!' op. 5 no. 3 even becomes quasi a duet between a female and a male voice. The rhetorical and rhythmically free performance of Grieg's songs will be discussed in chapter 7.

Nobody pushed the application of bel canto techniques to the piano further than Sigismond Thalberg with his *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano*. The work consists of two series of piano arrangements of vocal pieces, published as opus 70 in 1853; ten years later, two more series followed.

Thalberg was a supreme piano virtuoso and a prolific and successful composer, mainly of music for the piano; his work has passed into oblivion today. Thalberg, a son-in-law of Luigi Lablache (→ chapter 4), was almost of the same age as Liszt and was considered the latter's most important rival by contemporaries. In line with the fashion of the 1830's and 1840's, he dazzled audiences with his allegedly superb technique in large-scale fantasies on opera themes. In *L'Art du chant*, Thalberg published faithful transcriptions of vocal repertoire that apparently was popular in his day: arias as well as ensemble pieces from operas (including compositions by Mozart, Weber, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and others), religious music such as Stradella's *Pietà*, *Signore* and Mozart's *Requiem*, and two *Lieder*: Beethoven's *Adelaide* and *Der Müller und der Bach* from Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*. With a few exceptions, the originals are still famous today.

For the topic of this chapter, Thalberg's 'programme' is of interest, since he explicitly writes that the art of singing can be conveyed on any instrument. The introduction to the book contains some passages that are worth quoting in full.

L'Art de bien chanter (...) est le même à quelque instrument qu'il s'applique. En effet, on ne doit faire ni concessions, ni sacrifices au mécanisme particulier de chaque instrument; c'est à l'interprète de plier ce mécanisme aux volontés de l'art. Comme le piano ne peut, *rationnellement* parlant, rendre le bel art du chant dans ce qu'il a de plus parfait, c'est-à-dire la faculté de prolonger les sons, il faut à force d'adresse et d'art détruire cette imperfection, et arriver non-seulement à produire l'illusion des sons

soutenus et prolongés, mais encore celle des sons *enflés*. Le sentiment rend ingénieux, et le besoin d'exprimer ce que l'on éprouve sait créer des ressources qui échappent au mécanicien.³⁵⁹

[The art of singing beautifully (...) remains the same on whichever instrument it is exerted. Indeed, one should make neither concessions nor sacrifices to the particular mechanism of an instrument; rather it is the task of the interpreter to bend this mechanism to suit the demands the art makes. Since the pianoforte, rationally speaking, is not capable of rendering the beautiful art of singing in its most perfect qualities, namely in the faculty of prolonging a sound, this imperfection should be corrected with artificial aids, in order not only to suggest sustained and prolonged, but even swelling tones. Feeling makes ingenious, and the need to express one's emotions will create resources which escape the mechanical player.]

The opening sentence confirms the central topic of this chapter. The following idea, namely that the performer has to force his artistic will on the instrument, recalls Beethoven's famous exclamation to the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who complained about technical difficulties in a passage: 'Glaubt Er, dass ich an seine elende Geige denke, wenn der Geist zu mir spricht?'³⁶⁰ [Do you really believe that I think about your silly fiddle when the spirit speaks to me?] It seems to contradict the role of an instrument as it was discussed in the previous section. Thalberg, however, speaks about the general characteristic of an instrument, in this case specifically the dying tone of the piano.

Thalberg then gives several remarks on performance. One of these concerns a phenomenon that is vehemently discussed nowadays, and that is generally termed 'dislocation: playing one hand after the other'.³⁶¹ In the musical climate after the Second World War it was condemned by many, who saw it as a sentimental excrescence of a degenerated romantic taste. With the growing interest in historical performance styles and the increasing availability of early recordings, however, it became clear that, historically speaking, it is playing precisely together which is the exception, not dislocation. The confusing thing is that sometimes nineteenth-century pianists warn against dislocation in their texts, but use it in their recordings all the same. Thalberg's text also shows a certain ambiguity; in fact he advises the performer not to overuse dislocation, and above all not to make it the default option. It seems, though, that he suggests a much more generous amount of dislocation than many modern pianists would consider desirable.

Il sera indispensable d'éviter, dans l'exécution, cette manière ridicule et de mauvais goût de retarder avec exagération le *frappement* des notes de chant longtemps après celles de la basse, et de produire ainsi, d'un bout à l'autre d'un morceau, des effets de syncopes continues. Dans une mélodie lente écrite en notes de longue durée, il est d'un bon effet, surtout au premier temps de chaque mesure ou en

³⁵⁹ Thalberg, S.: *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano*. Leipzig, n.d. [1853]; 1.

³⁶⁰ Quoted in Indorf, G.: *Beethovens Streichquartette. Kulturgeschichtliche Aspekte und Werkinterpretation*. Freiburg i. Br., 2004; 33.

³⁶¹ Peres da Costa, N.: *Off the Record*. New York, 2012; chapter 2.

commençant chaque période de phrase, d'attaquer le chant après la basse, mais seulement avec un retard presque imperceptible.³⁶²

[Absolutely to be avoided during performance is that ridiculous and tasteless manner of striking the melody tones exaggeratedly long after those in the bass, thus producing the effect of continuous syncopations, from the beginning of the piece till the end. Nevertheless, in a slow melody, written in large note values, it is a beautiful effect to play the melody after the bass, especially on the first beat of every bar or at the beginning of every phrase – however only with a hardly perceptible delay.]

The final remark of the introduction echoes advice that Chopin gave to his students. There are several reports about Chopin telling his students to listen to the great singers of the 'Italian school' as often as they could; he considered this an absolute necessity for a pianist.³⁶³ The obvious place to enjoy this performance style was the *Théâtre-Italien*, with singers such as Giulia Grisi, Maria Malibran, Giuditta Pasta, Luigi Lablache, Giovanni Battista Rubini, Antonio Tamburini, Laure Cinti-Damoreau and Adolphe Nourrit, many of whom figured in the previous chapter (→ chapter 4). Thalberg writes:

En terminant ces observations générales, le meilleur conseil que nous puissions donner aux personnes qui s'occupent sérieusement du piano, c'est d'apprendre, d'étudier et commenter le bel art du chant. Dans ce but, on ne devra jamais perdre l'occasion d'entendre les grands artistes, quel que soit leur instrument, et surtout les grands chanteurs ; c'est dès le début et dans la première phase de son talent qu'il faut savoir s'entourer de bons modèles. Si, pour les jeunes artistes, cela peut être un encouragement, nous leur dirons que personnellement nous avons étudié le chant pendant cinq ans, sous la direction de l'un des plus célèbres professeurs de l'école d'Italie.³⁶⁴

[At the end of these general observations, the best advice we can give to those who occupy themselves seriously with the piano, is to learn, to study, to work through the beautiful art of singing. Therefore one should never miss the opportunity to listen to great artists, on whichever instrument, and in particular to the great singers; for from the very beginning and the first stage of development of one's talent on, one should try to surround oneself with good models. If it can encourage young artists, we'd like to tell them that we personally studied singing for five years under the direction of one of the most famous teachers from the Italian school of singing.]

This last disclosure is remarkable, and indeed reflects the importance attached to the practice of singing itself. One wonders whether this very famous professor of the Italian school was Lablache, who by then was Thalberg's father-in-law.

³⁶² Thalberg, S.: *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano*. Leipzig, n.d. [1853]; 2.

³⁶³ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit.; 68.

³⁶⁴ Thalberg, S.: op. cit., 4.

As stated above, the aria transcriptions in *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano* are fairly precise. The singing parts do not contain written out ornamentation, except for a few added cadenzas, such as this one at the end of the duet at the end of the first act of Rossini's *Zelmira*:

Example 5.9.1

Technically speaking, the same difficulty that was already noted in Heller's music applies here as well: when one hand plays more than just the melody, as it is often the case, it becomes awkward to add ornamentation in a *bel canto* style, let alone to do it extempore.

Thalberg never gives the original text, nor does he indicate articulation, apart from what is already in the original score. Interestingly, the beaming of the vocal original is often preserved, resulting in isolated eighth and sixteenth notes where the original had different syllables. It would, however, be speculative to deduct an idea of articulation only from this notational peculiarity, since the succession of different syllables in the original does not automatically imply an interruption in the sound.³⁶⁵ What Thalberg does add, however, is some occasional indications of tempo change, and especially dynamic markings that sometimes evoke 'le bel art du chant', in particular where he applies the left pedal. Such *una corda* passages can presumably be interpreted as the instrumental equivalent of the vocal effect of *sotto voce*. The use Thalberg makes of this effect suggests a strongly text-related, rhetorical 'colouring' of the words. In *Der Müller und der Bach* (ex. 5.9.2), for instance, the next-to-last song from Schubert's *Schöne Müllerin*, the sad miller's vocal line is indicated with a soft dynamic throughout the entire song (*p* or *pp*); however, Thalberg also occasionally specifies nuances for individual words or phrases. The pianissimo within the *una corda* in the last bar of the third system, for instance, on the Neapolitan sixth chord, coincides with the text 'seine Thränen' [his tears] in the original. The full phrase reads: 'da muss in die Wolken der Vollmond gehn / damit seine Thränen die

³⁶⁵ This recalls the habit in French of treating the feminine ending -e(s), which is mute in spoken language, as a separate syllable in a musical setting of the text, for instance in the last bars of Gabriel Fauré's song *Automne* op. 18 no. 3: ... *a-vaient ou-bli-é-es*.

Menschen nicht sehn' [... the full moon must hide in the clouds / so that the people won't see its tears]. Highlighting expressively one word or group of words (such as 'seine Thränen' in the present case) is an outstanding example of a rhetorical style of delivering a text that easily can be experienced as old-fashioned or exaggerated today, but that evidently was a stylistic feature until into the twentieth century (→ Alexander Moissi's performance of Goethe's *Erlkönig* ballad in chapter 7.7), and that arguably underlies the colouring of text in bel canto. Interestingly Thalberg increases the effect by adding a small grace note to Schubert's melody in the first bar of the fourth system, creating the effect of a small sob. In the original edition of *Der Müller und der Bach* (Vienna, 1824), dynamic markings, slurs and other performance suggestions are absent.

3

LE MEUNIER ET LE TORRENT.

From the CHANSONS de la MEUNIERE by F SCHUBERT.

10th. Transcription. ————— S. THALBERG.

The Melody is Printed in larger notes.

87

7626

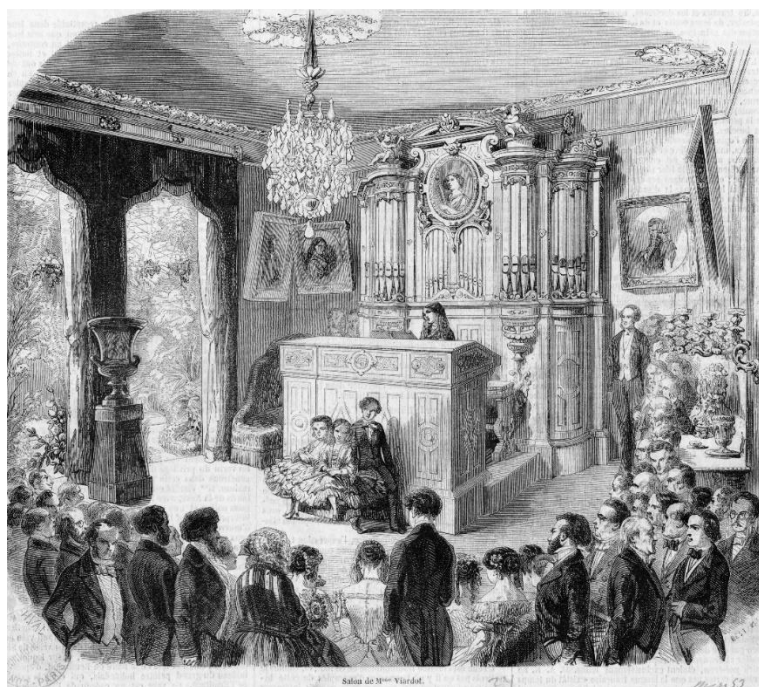
Example 5.9.2

5.10 Singing a piano piece

One highly unusual and therefore very rare kind of transcription is the exact opposite of what was described above: the arrangement of an original piano piece for voice with accompaniment. Though song-like piano compositions such as Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* were a popular genre, taking

the step of actually turning them into vocal pieces was exceptional. It is therefore all the more remarkable that a number of Chopin's mazurkas for piano were transcribed as songs by the famous mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot.

Pauline Viardot, the sister of Maria Malibran and Manuel García *fijs*, was a close friend of George Sand and met Chopin during her long stays at Sand's estate Nohant, where they spent much time together studying music. Like her sister, Viardot had received a very broad musical education from the best teachers, including Reicha for composition (harmony / counterpoint) and Liszt for piano. Her first wish was to become a piano virtuoso; however, her father died when she was eleven, and on her mother's request she decided to give up the piano, a decision she would always regret.³⁶⁶ Viardot was an opera star who performed worldwide, in the *Théâtre-Italien* as well as in St. Petersburg. In addition, she taught and composed, and from 1851 on, she conducted an influential musical salon at 48 Rue de Douai in Paris.³⁶⁷



Example 5.10.1: *Salon de Mme Viardot*; H. Val, W. Best, 1853.³⁶⁸ Pauline Viardot is playing the organ (and possibly singing to it).

³⁶⁶ Harris, R.: *The music salon of Pauline Viardot: featuring her salon opera Cendrillon* (diss.). Louisiana State University, unpublished (2005); 5.

https://web.archive.org/web/20070307112626/http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04082005-095548/unrestricted/Harris_dis.pdf

³⁶⁷ Shuster, C.: 'Six Mazurkas de Frédéric Chopin transcrites pour chant et piano par Pauline Viardot'. In: *Revue de Musicologie*, T. 75, No. 2 (1989); 274.

³⁶⁸ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8425570j.r=Salon%20de%20Pauline%20Viardot?rk=21459;2>

The first arrangements of Chopin's mazurkas were made in the 1840's, with Chopin giving his advice during their meetings at Nohant.³⁶⁹ Viardot seems to have written them primarily for personal use, as they were published only in the 1860's.³⁷⁰ Chopin accompanied her at several occasions, and after his death she continued performing them, mainly in salons. The texts were written specifically for this project by Louis Pomey. Pauline Viardot also made transcriptions of instrumental music by other composers, for instance Brahms, whose sixth Hungarian Dance formed the basis for the duet *Les Bohémiennes*.

The first six texts of the mazurkas roughly tell the story of a love from the point of view of a young girl, starting with the *ivresse* of the first love (*Seize ans*) and finishing with *Séparation*. This group of six mazurkas was written first and published as a set. They could be seen as a frivolous counterpart of Schumann's almost contemporary cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben* (1840). The remaining six mazurkas do not have a connecting narrative.

Viardot's arrangements are very precise and faithful to the originals. Sometimes repetitions of phrases are omitted or added, and when Chopin's piece does not have an introduction, she adds one, mostly derived from another place in the composition – for instance, in *Aime-moi*, based on Chopin's op. 33 no. 2, where Chopin's coda inventively appears as an introduction. The keys are in most cases the same as in the originals, though some mazurkas (among them op. 33 no. 2) were transposed for reasons of vocal range.

The arrangements of Viardot can be understood as interpretations of Chopin's originals. Though they are compositions in their own right, they shed light on how Chopin's contemporaries might have understood his scores.³⁷¹ Just like Ernst Ferand's notated embellishments (→ chapter 3.1), the way she treats the mazurkas can be seen as the residue of an improvisational practice. Viardot's arrangements open a window on an improvisatory approach to these scores. In her study on the six mazurkas, Carolyn Shuster writes that 'their musical indications reinforce the idea that the interpretation of Chopin's music requires a spontaneous variety of expression guided by a natural musical intuition'.³⁷² The examples she gives to support this idea focus on the different dynamic and tempo indications at various repeats of passages in Viardot's scores, differences that are absent in Chopin's scores. It seems to me, though, that Shuster is too cautious here: from a *bel canto* point of view, this music invites to a wide range of expressive variety, which the indications in the score can only evoke in very general terms.

³⁶⁹ Harris, R.: op. cit., 10.

³⁷⁰ Shuster, C.: op. cit.; 271.

³⁷¹ For the question whether also composing can be seen as an improvisatory activity, see chapter 11.4.

³⁷² Shuster, C.: op. cit., 278.

An echo of a nineteenth-century bel canto way of performing this music can be heard on a recording of *Aime-moi* Rita Fornia made in 1912.³⁷³ Fornia was an American coloratura (mezzo-)soprano who studied and performed in Europe and in America. Apart from generous tempo changes (which will be the subject of chapter 7), one can hear how she approaches the piece with a characteristic lightness and flexibility of voice, allowing her to perform all small ornamental turns in the melody with great clarity. The vocal line is clearly organised by phrases, but with a constant variety in colour, timing, and with subtle *portamenti* preventing monotonous phrasing. In his invaluable collection of testimonies of students and other people who were close to Chopin, *Chopin vu par ses élèves*, the Swiss musicologist Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger mentions an orally transmitted performing tradition of this mazurka that stems from Chopin's student, the princess Marcelina Czartoryska, and that contradicts all editions of the musical text. According to the princess, Chopin wanted this piece to express the contrast between the pub and the salon, which is why he made her play the main theme vividly and briskly the first time around, without too many nuances, while she performed it caressingly and elegantly at the recapitulation.³⁷⁴ Viardot suggests a similar difference by marking the last appearance of the theme *rubato*, which Fornia interprets by a sudden slowing down of the tempo (1'47").

[5.10 #1 Chopin / Viardot: *Aime-moi* (Rita Fornia, 1912)³⁷⁵]

By comparison, I present a recording of the original mazurka made by the Polish pianist Moriz Rosenthal in 1937, at the end of his career. Rosenthal studied with Chopin's most famous pupil, Karol Mikuli, and with Franz Liszt. Mikuli took great care to transmit the ideas of Chopin about performance, which is why Rosenthal can be seen as a musical grandson of Chopin.³⁷⁶ Striking features of his playing are the many subtle articulations, and a lightness that reminds one of Fornia. Both Rosenthal and Fornia have a similar way of marking the beginning of the B-part (at *Mais quoi! Des pleurs, ma belle* [0'38"] in Viardot's arrangement, in Rosenthal's recording at 0'50") by performing the first two bars in a different (languid) character, then disrupting it suddenly when the music continues. Though Rosenthal's performance is less varied in tempo and expression than Fornia's, he clearly seeks for *varietas* in the way the phrases are connected. Chopin's mazurkas are stylised versions of several different Polish folk dances, which are never reproduced in their pure form; it has to be said that this mazurka has features of the *oberek*, a fast dance that does not invite

³⁷³ Special thanks to Wilanne Mooiman for pointing out this recording to me.

³⁷⁴ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 108-109.

³⁷⁵ <https://youtu.be/EcVcEK2UG7k> (uploaded 2016 by 'CurzonRoad').

³⁷⁶ A popular type of qualification whose relevance, however, is generally limited.

the performer to indulge in excessive rubato: it is dancing rather than singing music. In recordings of other mazurkas, for instance op. 24 no. 3,³⁷⁷ Rosenthal plays much more freely.

[5.10 #2 Chopin: Mazurka op. 33 no. 2 (Moriz Rosenthal, 1937)³⁷⁸]

Mazurka .

F. CHOPIN. Op.33, No 2.

23. *Vivace.*

Example 5.10.2: Chopin, F.: *Mazurka op. 33 no. 2* (beginning).³⁷⁹

Rosenthal obviously interprets Chopin's slurs as phrasing slurs, not as an indication for legato. He articulates the melody tones in the first (and similar) bars two-by-two, which reminds one of text articulation, especially when the text placing is dense like in Viardot (who incidentally adds dots instead of a slur):

légèrement

Tu commandes qu'on t'ou-bli - e, J'ai grand peine à t'ou - bé -

Example 5.10.3: Chopin / Viardot: *Aime-moi*, bars 19-22.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ https://youtu.be/MStF_PeC-ko (uploaded 2011 by 'gullivior').

³⁷⁸ <https://youtu.be/ViwG5EhkMmM> (uploaded 2008 by 'd60944').

³⁷⁹ In: Chopin, F.: *Complete works for the piano* (K. Mikuli, ed.), vol. 2. New York, 1895; 58.

³⁸⁰ In: Viardot, P.: *12 Mazurkas* (J. Rose, ed.). New York, n.d.; 7.

Viardot does not give Chopin's consistent accents on the third beats (indicating the 'groove' of the *oberek*), perhaps for vocal reasons. Rosenthal does play them, but in a subtle way: the third beat is neither really louder nor longer, but seems to be the 'goal' of the movement within each bar. In the melody Rosenthal plays 'in the direction of' the last note of the bar. In bar 1 the final *g* (piano version) thus becomes slightly longer and louder, creating the effect of a Lombardic rhythm on the last beat, very different from the first and second beats – another instance of variety within the shaping of the melodic line. It is also an example of the fact that articulation as such doesn't necessarily influence the flow of a melody.

Viardot hardly adds any written ornamentation in the mazurkas (unlike Chopin himself when he taught his own music; see the next section), with one important exception: in many cases she adds a short cadence on characteristic dominant harmonies, preparing for the return of the tonic. In such cases the chord is stretched (usually beats or bars are added), and often there is a virtuosic flourish in the voice, ranging from a chromatic downward scale across an octave to a full-blown cadenza of high virtuosity. Her setting of op. 33 no. 2 also has such a cadenza, preparing for the recapitulation:³⁸¹

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The top system consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la Ah!". Above the vocal line, there are markings for *cresc.* and *rit.*, and a dynamic marking of *f*. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and some moving lines. The bottom system shows a more complex piano part with a chromatic scale and a dynamic marking of *pp*. The lyrics "Tu commandes qu'on t'ose" are written below the piano part. There is a *Ped.* marking at the end of the piano part. The number 3235 is written at the bottom left of the page.

Example 5.10.4

Readers who are familiar with Chopin's mazurka might have trouble recognising the music in the upper system of the fragment above; this is because Viardot had to adapt the latter part of the B-section, since this in fact consists of only a skeleton of chords and rhythm, a feature very characteristic

³⁸¹ Viardot, P.: op. cit., 10.

for Chopin's piano music. Viardot preserves the exciting harmony but adds a melody that convincingly gives the compulsive repeated chords a Spanish flavour.

To summarise, Viardot's arrangements may be a historic exception, but their very existence is symptomatic of the entwining of vocal and instrumental music that existed at that time, above all in Chopin's music. Taking this connection seriously is a very promising way to get to a better understanding of a truly *cantabile* playing style, traces of which can still be heard in some of the earliest recordings. In the next section some of these recordings will be examined.

5.11 Songs without words

During the early nineteenth century the character piece for piano quickly became popular; this is the context in which instrumental songs began to appear. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy coined the genre *Lieder ohne Worte* [songs without words], compositions for piano solo with the structure and appearance of an accompanied song, but without vocal counterpart. The pieces, which were published in sets of six throughout his life, became immensely popular in Biedermeier Germany and abroad.

Mendelssohn's dislike of ornamentation was already mentioned in section 5.1; an over-exuberant *bel canto* style of playing the piano also seems not to have been to his liking, as seen in a letter from 1834 in which Mendelssohn describes an unexpected meeting with his friends Frédéric Chopin and Ferdinand Hiller in Düsseldorf. With self-mockery he compares the playing of his friends with his own:

Beide laboriren nur etwas an der Pariser Verzweiflungssucht und Leidenschaftssucherei, und haben Tact und Ruhe und das recht Musikalische gar zu sehr aus den Augen gelassen; ich nun wieder vielleicht zu wenig, und so ergänzten wir uns und lernten, glaub' ich, alle Drei von einander, indem ich mir ein Bißchen wie ein Schulmeister, und sie sich ein Bißchen wie *miriflors* oder *incroyables* vorkamen.³⁸²

[Both, however, rather toil in the Parisian spasmodic and impassioned style, too often losing sight of time and sobriety and of true music; I, again, do so perhaps too little, - thus we all three mutually learn something and improve each other, while I feel rather like a school-master, and they a little like *miriflors* or *incroyables* (i.e. dandies - BM).]³⁸³

Chopin had moved to Paris in 1831. This is in fact one of the very few less enthusiastic reports about Chopin's playing, which generally was greatly admired. As I have shown in section 5.3, this does not mean that Mendelssohn would not have been interested in singing as a source of inspiration for any

³⁸² Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F.: *Briefe aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1847* (zweiter Band). Leipzig, 1863; 41.

³⁸³ Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F.: *Mendelssohn's Letters from 1833 to 1847* (transl. Lady Wallace). London, 1863; 38.

instrumentalist.³⁸⁴ The young *Leipziger Conservatorium*, founded by Mendelssohn in 1843 (→ section 5.2), published a prospectus to advertise the school and attract students. The text includes a description of the organisation of the curriculum, which appears to have been focused on educating ‘complete’ musicians – which included singing lessons. Among other things it reads:

Jeder Aufgenommene hat, abgesehn davon, welchem Instrumente (Clavier, Violine, Orgel) er sich vorzugsweise widmen will, jedenfalls an dem Unterrichte im Generalbass, Clavierspiel und Gesang regelmässig Theil zu nehmen.³⁸⁵

[Every accepted student, apart from the instrument (piano, violin, organ) he wishes to dedicate himself to, has to participate frequently in the classes for figured bass, piano and singing.]

It is likely that the curriculum reflected Mendelssohn’s view, even though he was not a member of the ‘Direction’ [management board] and did not teach actively from the second semester on. (On November 25th 1843, the Mendelssohns moved to Berlin.³⁸⁶) Fifteen years later and eleven years after Mendelssohn’s death, the young Edvard Grieg visited the Leipzig conservatory and still had to take the singing lessons (besides music theory and composition, piano, organ and ‘Vorlesungen’ [lectures]).³⁸⁷ Apparently singing was considered an essential element of the training of any musician, even in ‘conservative’ Leipzig.

Some early recordings of pianists who represented a late-nineteenth-century performing style (i.e. who were becoming old-fashioned when they were recorded in the early decades of the twentieth century) give us an inkling of how early-nineteenth-century cantabile might have sounded, even though in most cases the instruments played were modern at that time. For this chapter I selected two recordings of Mendelssohn’s *Lied ohne Worte* op. 30 no. 6, the ‘Venetian gondola song’ in f# minor. It is a barcarolle that actually hints at a bel canto style in its harmonic simplicity, in the parallel thirds in the middle section, and of course in the rocking barcarolle rhythm.

The first recording is by Vladimir (de) Pachmann. Pachmann, born in Odessa in 1848, studied in Vienna and became a world-famous performer of Chopin’s works in particular. He recorded op. 30, no. 6 in 1912. His playing strikes the listener by the vividness with which the melodic line is shaped. Each phrase is coloured individually, with ongoing variation in timing, touch and articulation. Bar 40, for instance, is played without pedal and articulated the first time (1’16”), while in the repeat it is made part of a longer line (1’54”): it sounds as if the text is different the second time.

³⁸⁴ Or in bel canto, for that matter, witness the concert aria *Infelice* op. 94 (on a text of Pietro Metastasio) he composed in 1834 with Maria Malibran and the violinist Charles-Auguste de Bériot in mind; this piece has many stylistic features from bel canto. <http://riviste.paviauniversitypress.it/index.php/phi/article/view/04-02-into1/36>

³⁸⁵ Prospectus: *Das Conservatorium der Musik in Leipzig*. Leipzig, n.d. [1843]; 10–11.

³⁸⁶ Sutermeister, P.: ‘Lebensbild Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys’. In: Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F.: *Briefe einer Reise*. Zürich, 1958; 357.

³⁸⁷ Conservatory report Edvard Grieg, 1858; Hochschule für Musik und Theater „Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy” Leipzig, Bibliothek/Archiv, A, I.3, 720.

[5.11 #1 Mendelssohn: Lied ohne Worte op. 30 no. 6 (V. de Pachmann, 1912)³⁸⁸]

Ignaz Friedman was a Polish pianist, born in 1882, who studied with Theodor Leschetitzky. Friedman's memories of Theodor Leschetitzky recall the attitude of bel canto teachers such as Manuel García *père*, as described in chapter 4.6.4:

He was probably the last of the great artists who knew how to unite the sovereign and the Bohemian in one and the same person. He was one of the teachers who knew, who knew positively, when the student had ceased to be a student and had become an artist. Then the man who the day before had played the part of a veritable tyrant, would show himself the day after in the role of an old colleague, ready to consult on a footing of equality with his erstwhile pupil. Though he might have thrown a volume of music at his pupil's head a few hours before, once he felt that the former had crossed the boundary line which separated him from artistic maturity, he would discuss the most delicate nuances of his art with him in the most loyal and open-hearted manner, and permit him to take all sorts of liberties. All this merely because he realized that what had been merely grape juice was turning into wine.³⁸⁹

The second recording of Mendelssohn's gondola song presented here was made by Friedman in 1930.

[5.11 #2 Mendelssohn: Lied ohne Worte op. 30 no. 6 (I. Friedman, 1930)³⁹⁰]

Friedman's style is very different from Pachmann's: it is much more declamatory, and he starts many phrases with a big tone, followed by a diminuendo – something that can also be heard in recordings by Sergei Rachmaninov, a contemporary of Friedman. Friedman also takes the liberty of adding notes, especially lower octaves; the last two tones are even transposed an octave down. Nevertheless, the recordings resemble each other, inasmuch as they both highlight phrases by means of colouring. Friedman also plays with bar 40 by using a *sotto voce* effect, though only the second time instead of the first.

Notwithstanding the fact that together with the development of instruments themselves, also the playing style undoubtedly had changed greatly since Mendelssohn's days, one gets a faint idea of the possibilities that lurk when nineteenth-century vocal performance ideals are taken as a model for playing an instrument. (For the remarkable differences with modern performances concerning timing details – another aspect of the influence of vocal performance ideals – see chapter 7).

³⁸⁸ https://youtu.be/E_6sWESUghU (uploaded 2012 by 'Beckmesser2')

³⁸⁹ Evans, A.: 'At the piano with Ignaz Friedman.'

<https://web.archive.org/web/20050309170826/http://www.arbiterrecords.com/musicresourcecenter/friedtch.html>

³⁹⁰ <https://youtu.be/XnQAMvsPCB4> (uploaded 2012 by 'kakehavata')

5.12 Chopin

Bel canto techniques on the piano

The nineteenth-century composer of piano music whose name jumps to mind when the connection with bel canto is discussed is Chopin. Chopin's love for bel canto is well supported by numerous testimonies and was already mentioned in section 5.8. Time and again he spoke to his students about playing the piano in terms of singing: *Il vous faut chanter si vous voulez jouer du piano!*³⁹¹ [You have to sing when you want to play the piano!]. His basic approach of shaping a melodic line recalls Quantz: longer and higher notes are played louder, and dissonances and syncopations are more clearly marked; the end of a phrase 'before a comma or full stop'(!)³⁹² is always soft; a rising melody is to be played crescendo, a descending one decrescendo; the first beat of a bar is louder. 'These are the principles. Exceptions are always notated by the composers.'³⁹³ Chopin's student Mikuli reported: 'He made us sing the musical phrase under our fingers with such a clarity that every note became a syllable, every bar a word, every phrase a thought. It was declamation without being bombastic, simple and sublime at the same time.'³⁹⁴ The parallel between singing and playing was even extrapolated physically, when Chopin equated rising and dropping the wrist with the breathing of a singer.³⁹⁵

In addition, vocal *wesentliche* [essential] ornaments can be found in Chopin's compositions. They were hardly discussed in chapter 4, but because Chopin so strikingly translates them to the piano, thereby enhancing the impression of instrumental bel canto, a brief survey is given here. The *portamento*, for instance, an important feature of bel canto singing, occurs – according to Eigeldinger – sometimes in the form of a chromatic scale, for instance in the waltz op. 69 no. 1, bar 35:³⁹⁶



Example 5.12.1: Chopin, F.: 2 Valses op. 69 (œuvre posthume). Paris, n.d. [1855]

³⁹¹ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 25.

³⁹² Chopin's expression recalls Reicha's classification of cadences in his *Traité de Mélodie* (1814). See chapter 4.5b.

³⁹³ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 65.

³⁹⁴ Ibidem.

³⁹⁵ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 69.

³⁹⁶ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 153.

Several other ornaments can often be found in Chopin's scores, such as the *gruppetto* or turn, most often notated in detail, not with the sign ∞ .

Closely related to the *portamento* is the *cercar la nota*, in which a tone is approached from below, often from the previous tone. It is a way to ensure legato.³⁹⁷ In Chopin's scores it occurs very frequently, for instance in the nocturne op. 37 no. 1 (bar 10, second beat), where it is preceded by a written-out turn.³⁹⁸



Example 5.12.2

The *messa di voce*, a gradual crescendo and decrescendo on one tone, was an essential ingredient of bel canto technique. Like the *portamento*, it is impossible to produce on a piano. In section 5.9 Thalberg was quoted, stating that ‘this imperfection should be corrected with artificial aids, in order not only to suggest sustained and prolonged, but even swelling tones. Feeling makes ingenious, and the need to express one’s emotions will create resources which escape the mechanical player.’ Unfortunately he did not specify how the effect of the *messa di voce* could be imitated on a piano, but there is a moment in Chopin’s nocturne op. 27 no. 2 (bars 22-24) that seems to evoke this ornament (see example 5.12.3). Under the long e-flat in the right hand, the left hand plays a remarkable harmonic progression of almost Wagnerian chromatic complexity that suggests a crescendo towards the dissonant half diminished seventh chord on the downbeat of the second bar, followed by a stepwise resolution suggesting diminuendo. The direction of the chromatic lines is intensified by the highlighted tenor voice in the second bar of the example that rhythmically blurs the chord progression in that bar. In this way Chopin suggestively creates a ‘replacement’-*messa di voce* in the left hand. The effect is repeated in a condensed and weakened way on the turn from the third to the fourth bar.³⁹⁹

[5.12 #1 Harmonic background]

³⁹⁷ Berne, P.: *Bel canto. Historische Aufführungspraxis in der italienischen Oper von Rossini bis Verdi*. Worms, 2008; 102.

³⁹⁸ Chopin, F.: *Nocturnes* (Complete works, vol. VII. Ed.: I. Paderewski). Warsaw, 1949; 58.

³⁹⁹ Chopin, F.: *2 Nocturnes op. 27*. Paris, n.d. [1836?]; 8.



Example 5.12.3

Fioritures

Chopin provided his cantabile melodies with many written-out melodic flourishes, described by Liszt as ‘petits groupes de notes surajoutées, tombant comme des gouttelettes d’une rosée diaprée par-dessus la figure mélodique’⁴⁰⁰ [little groups of superadded notes, falling like light drops of pearly dew upon the melodic figure⁴⁰¹]. Liszt explicitly connected Chopin’s *fioritures* with the ‘grande école de chant italien’. Interestingly, many eye witnesses testify to Chopin’s habit of improvising new ornamentation during performances of his own compositions, notably the nocturnes and mazurkas. It is important to be aware that such reports do not primarily concern large-scale public concerts. Chopin disliked playing for a large audience, and the number of public recitals he gave was limited. He performed a great deal in salons though, and also during private lessons he used to play entire pieces with great dedication. In fact, Chopin didn’t see his teaching task as an inevitable burden; in the rendering of Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Chopin’s teaching is even presented as an essential part of his musicianship. Chopin is a convincing example of music ‘happening’ not only on stage, but also in more intimate circles and most definitely in the teaching room.

Apart from extempore ornamentation added by himself, Chopin also liked to suggest alternative *fioritures* to students who played his music; he usually scribbled such variants in the margin of the score. About the performance of ornaments, Chopin said (as reported by his student Wilhelm von Lenz):

Es muss improvisiert erscheinen, aus der Herrschaft über das Instrument, nicht aus der Einübung, sich ergeben.⁴⁰²

[It should sound as though it is improvised, and result from mastery of the instrument, not from practising.]

In order to attain a certain casualness, the *fioritures* were not to be played *rallentando*, but rather were to speed up towards the end. They are just fragments of the phrase, and slowing down would inappropriately give them the significance of independent ideas; they should merge with the musical

⁴⁰⁰ Quoted in Eigeldinger, op. cit., 28.

⁴⁰¹ Transl. M. Walker Cook, 1863.

⁴⁰² Lenz, W. von: ‘Übersichtliche Beurteilung der Pianoforte-Kompositionen von Chopin.’ In: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung*, 26. Jahrgang, Nr. 36. Berlin, 1872; 283.

thought just like a little brook loses itself in the river.⁴⁰³ This description of Chopin's view matches what was written in chapter 4.5: ornamentation follows or enhances the direction of the musical phrase.

One nocturne that inspired Chopin to many variants is op. 9 no. 2 in E flat major, very popular in Chopin's days and still the most well-known nocturne. The structure is simple: a theme with three variations, twice separated by an interlude ('ritornello' in Lenz's terms), with a coda. Obviously the three variations call for increasing ornamentation; the interlude, which also occurs twice, is hardly ornamented at all the second time. This strongly suggests that the main theme resembles a vocal solo, with the 'ritornelli' taking the place of orchestral interludes. Some variants (from various sources) are reproduced here as examples of Chopin's constantly changing ornamentations, and as a source of new ideas.

a. Bars 4-5 (end theme, beginning of first variation):

Example 5.12.4: Chopin, F.: Nocturne op 9 no. 2, bars 3-5.⁴⁰⁴

Eigeldinger gives two variants for the upbeat to bar 5, both suggesting a *portamento*, once diatonic and once chromatic:

Example 5.12.5: Variant bars 4-5.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 78.

⁴⁰⁴ Complete works, vol. VII. Ed.: I. Paderewski. Warsaw, 1949; 13.

⁴⁰⁵ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 112.

b. Bar 8 (end of first variation):

1. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. *

Example 5.12.6: Chopin, F.: Nocturne op 9 no. 2, bars 7-8.⁴⁰⁶

The following variant to bar 8 (example 5.12.7) can be interpreted as a written-out *tempo rubato* (a term indicating rhythmic changes in the melody above the original accompaniment; → chapter 7):

Example 5.12.7: Variant bar 8.⁴⁰⁷

c. Bars 14-16 (end of second variation):

Example 5.12.8: Chopin, F.: Nocturne op 9 no. 2, bars 14-16.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁶ Complete works, vol. VII. Ed.: I. Paderewski. Warsaw, 1949; 13.

⁴⁰⁷ Complete works, vol. VII; 110.

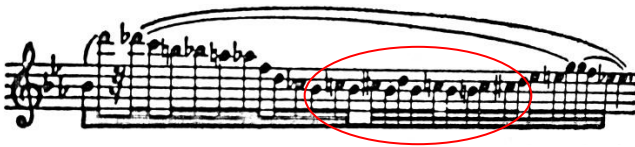
⁴⁰⁸ Complete works, vol. VII; 14.

In this variant of bar 14 (example 5.12.9), the melody that originally covered the first half of the bar has been sped up (blue oval); in this way, space is created for an inserted flourish on the high c'' (red oval), consisting of a downward arpeggio of the supporting dominant seventh chord (with added tones), after which the original melody is picked up again (green oval):



Example 5.12.9: Variant bar 14-15.⁴⁰⁹

A similar procedure occurs in this variant to bar 16 (example 5.12.10), also on a dominant seventh chord. Here again, the original is extended by the insertion of a flourish on the root of the chord, this time in the form of a chromatically filled third in a pendulum movement (red oval):



Example 5.12.10: Variant bar 16.⁴¹⁰

d. Bars 22-24 (third variation)



Example 5.12.11: Chopin, F.: Nocturne op 9 no. 2, bars 21-24.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ Complete works, vol. VII; 110.

⁴¹⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹¹ Complete works, vol. VII; 14.

Compared to the variant of ex. 5.12.9, the first variant of bar 22 (supposedly starting on the sixth eighth note in the bar; see example 5.12.12) simply expands the arpeggiated chord with one more octave (blue oval), followed by a turn on the c'' (red oval) and a rising arpeggio that brings us back to the original melody (green oval).



Example 5.12.12: Variant I bar 22.⁴¹²

The second variant of the same spot only extends the previous one by ornamenting the appoggiatura b flat in the second half of the bar (blue oval):



Example 5.12.13: Variant II bars 22-23.⁴¹³

The first variant of bar 24 completely replaces the right hand in first half of the bar (on the dominant seventh chord) with a descending chromatic scale in minor thirds, concluding with a turn and a connecting formula:



Example 5.12.14: Variant I bar 24.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Complete works, vol. VII; 110.

⁴¹³ Ibidem.

⁴¹⁴ Ibidem.

The other variant of bar 24 ornaments the chromatic passage leading towards the resolution of the dominant seventh chord by inserting a chromatic oscillation spanning a very limited range (blue oval):



Example 5.12.15: Variant II bar 24.⁴¹⁵

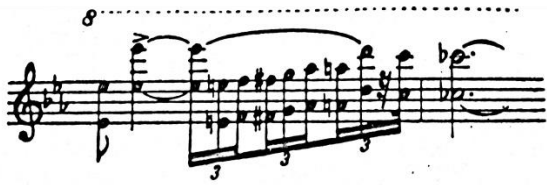
e. The ending

Example 5.12.16: Chopin, F.: Nocturne op 9 no. 2, bars 30-34.⁴¹⁶

Two variants of bar 31 both ornament the simple melodic f–c interval over the F dominant seventh chord in first inversion at the end of the bar. The first one (example 5.12.17) uses a chromatic movement in octaves and an appoggiatura on a high d that resolves to c:

⁴¹⁵ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit.; 113.

⁴¹⁶ Complete works, vol. VII; 15.



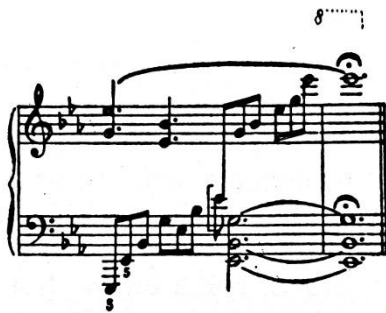
Example 5.12.17: Variant I bars 31-32.⁴¹⁷

The other variant (example 5.12.18) does something similar (though with a smaller chromatic range) but monophonically:



Example 5.12.18: Variant II bars 31-32.⁴¹⁸

Two variants replace the last bar with a large arpeggio, stretching the end:



Example 5.12.19: Variant I ending.⁴¹⁹



Example 5.12.20: Variant II ending.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ Complete works, vol. VII; 110.

⁴¹⁸ Ibidem.

⁴¹⁹ Ibidem.

⁴²⁰ Ibidem.

Apart from the chromatic thirds in bar 24, all the variants expand the original version by inserting a passage or by amplifying a movement. They most clearly start from anchor tones and do not leave the supporting harmony. Furthermore, though the connection with bel canto ornamentation has been stressed so far, most of the *fioritures* (apart from the *portamento* in bar 4) actually exceed the limits of what is vocally possible, whether by applying parallel thirds or by stretching the range beyond the compass of a human voice. This is because Chopin merges the language of bel canto ornamentation with the so-called *brillanter Styl* [brilliant style] he inherited from the first generation of travelling piano virtuosos, above all Johann Nepomuk Hummel. This style will be discussed in chapter 9, which deals with ornamental preludes.

Early recordings of op. 9 no. 2

There is a beautiful recording of this nocturne in which many of the described variants are played, made by Raoul Koczalski in 1938. Koczalski, born in Warsaw in 1885, was a child prodigy and later became a student of Karol Mikuli. He was extremely famous, especially for his Chopin performances. This performance is notable for its singing quality, including a remarkable variety of touch, even in the ornaments. This is probably as close as we can get to hearing an early nineteenth-century way of playing that took its inspiration from bel canto.

[5.12 #2 Chopin: Nocturne op 9 no. 2 (Raoul Koczalski, 1938)⁴²¹]

With such a popular piece, there is a wealth of historical recordings available, from which a few are selected here to serve as a comparison. Although none of the following pianists plays the ornamentation described in this section, and though they differ in many respects, all of them can be heard to ‘sing’ on the piano in a way that clearly draws from the nineteenth-century bel canto style. Something else they have in common is that they all make an ‘improvisatory’ impression that to a large extent is caused by the timing (→ chapter 7). All recordings were made within a time span of fourteen years, starting with the first electrical recordings in the late 1920’s.

The earliest one is by Sergei Rachmaninov, who emigrated to the US in 1918, where he focused on a career as a solo pianist and conductor, in order to ensure an income for himself and his family.

[5.12 #3 Chopin: Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 (Sergei Rachmaninov, 1927)⁴²²]

Alfred Cortot (1877) was a French pianist, famous for his poetic renderings of Romantic music. He studied among others with Émile Decombes, a relatively unknown student of Chopin. According to Wilhelm Lenz, Chopin said that this nocturne should stylistically be modelled after *la Pasta*,

⁴²¹ <https://youtu.be/VRmek8kADWA>, uploaded 2008 by ‘Xqwertz’.

⁴²² <https://youtu.be/kj3CHx3TDzw>, uploaded 2007 by ‘theoshow2’.

becoming emotionally more intense with every variation of the theme.⁴²³ Cortot really seems to follow this advice. One way in which he intensifies the expression is by arpeggiating chords even more extensively than the other pianists. This aspect will be discussed again in chapter 7 (Improvisatory timing).

[5.12 # 4 Chopin: Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 (Alfred Cortot, 1929)⁴²⁴]

Ignaz (Ignacy Jan) Paderewski was born in Poland in 1860. Besides having an impressive stage career, he managed to be the prime minister of Poland for ten months in 1919. Paderewski attached his name to a well-known Polish critical edition of Chopin's collected works, also quoted above. This recording from 1930 reveals how a text-critical approach does not necessarily exclude a very free treatment of the score in performance:

[5.12 #5 Chopin: Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 (Ignaz Paderewski, 1930)⁴²⁵]

Moriz Rosenthal, like Koczalski a student of Mikuli, was already mentioned in section 5.9:

[5.12 #6 Chopin: Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 (Moriz Rosenthal, 1935)⁴²⁶]

Emil von Sauer (1862), known as one of the most successful Liszt students (though he actually didn't receive many lessons and Liszt was already advanced in years by that time), was famous for his elegant and 'aristocratic' playing. His recording of op. 9 no. 2 forms an interesting contrast with the previous ones, because von Sauer's lines are much more smooth and regular – in a way, more 'modern'. Compare, for instance, bar 14 (o'33''-o'36'') in von Sauer with o'36''-o'39'' in Koczalski, o'38''-o'42'' in Rachmaninov, o'36''-o'39'' in Cortot, o'45''-o'48'' in Paderewski, and o'35''-o'38 in Rosenthal. Sauer incorporates the passage within a longer crescendo, subordinating the detailed colouring suggested by Chopin's text, whereas all the other pianists 'dwell' on this passage.

[5.12 #7 Chopin: Nocturne op. 9 no. 2 (Emil von Sauer, 1940)⁴²⁷]

Varietas in Chopin's performances

In other pieces as well, Chopin left *ossia* passages in his students' scores, for instance in the *Mazurka* op. 7 no. 2.⁴²⁸ Sometimes a 'portamento' was in such annotations only shown with a wavy line or a

⁴²³ Eigeldinger, op. cit., 111.

⁴²⁴ <https://youtu.be/o-kaDxaVBFA>, uploaded 2009 by 'Musikschule Lengerich'.

⁴²⁵ <https://youtu.be/FeoVTMyv9vU>, uploaded 2011 by 'Ewa Chamic. Czarmuzyki'.

⁴²⁶ <https://youtu.be/X77Nm1nrcG8>, uploaded 2008 by 'truecrypt'.

⁴²⁷ <https://youtu.be/sTCokIodTrY>, uploaded 2008 by 'd60944'.

⁴²⁸ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 194.

similar symbol. This all strongly suggests the kind of extempore ornamentation Chopin himself liked to add when he played his own music. However, his need for variety went far beyond just ornamentation. There are several witnesses who remarked that Chopin never played his compositions twice in the same way, and apparently the differences were considerable. In the rendering of his own music, he completely followed his inspiration of that moment – and every time it is said to have sounded beautiful.⁴²⁹ These differences included not only agogics, ornamentation and dynamics, but even the basic tempo.⁴³⁰ With respect to the latter, it may be worth noting that Chopin's tempo indication for the etude in E major op. 10 no. 3 has not always been the *Lento ma non troppo* to be found in all editions of the piece: Chopin's autograph has *Vivace*, slowed down in an autograph fair copy to *Vivace ma non troppo*, until he changed it to *Lento ma non troppo* in the first printings.⁴³¹

Chopin did not perform music of other composers very often, but he liked to play nocturnes by John Field. Field was famous for his *cantabile* playing, and his nocturnes foreshadow Chopin's music in that genre. Several witnesses mentioned Chopin's pleasure in performing Field's nocturnes with improvised added *fioritures*. Though he did not notate any of such variants, we may assume that he availed himself of the kinds of ornamentation mentioned in section 5.11.

Taking into account that people in general consider worth mentioning whatever strikes them as unusual, a question now arises: To what extent was Chopin's highly improvisatory approach actually exceptional at that time? Admittedly, Chopin notated variants in his students' scores, but he did not (like García *père*) urge them to come up with as many variants as they could. His habit never to play his music in the same way was seen as a striking contrast with Frédéric Kalkbrenner, a leading pianist in Paris at the time when Chopin arrived in the French capital.⁴³² Like Mozart, Chopin was famous for his *tempo rubato* (→ chapter 7), but the fact that it had to be explained in so many texts suggests that this was not something common. Already Liszt, who admired Chopin's work, forbade his students to alter anything to his friend's scores – which might be seen as an early sign of canonisation of the untimely deceased composer. Altogether, it appears that Chopin's art of performing was indeed seen as rather exceptional. Why, then, do I present it as an argument for the idea that what I call an 'improvisatory approach' to music-making was ubiquitous at this time? The reason is that, even though contemporaries might have heard unusual elements in his playing, they nonetheless admired it, just like Paganini's playing was admired, or Liszt's. Also, Chopin's art connected both to the past and to the very influential contemporary tradition of *bel canto*. There is good reason to believe that his contemporaries saw it as an ideal, which makes it relevant to us. In the meantime, it

⁴²⁹ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 81.

⁴³⁰ Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 169.

⁴³¹ Chopin, F.: *Studies* (Complete works, vol. II. Ed.: I. Paderewski). Warsaw, 1949; 137.

⁴³² Eigeldinger, J.-J.: op. cit., 81.

should not be forgotten that Chopin was known for his own music; he was famous as a pianist / composer. Witnesses testify to his art, not to how one should play the piano in general. In fact, a pianist who made a living only by performing repertoire written by other composers did not yet exist at that time. Reports about Chopin performing music of colleagues are scattered. This is the context in which eye-witnesses write about his habit of performing Field with ornamentation: their reports don't tell us much about how Field's music was generally played, but they are still relevant because they tell us that what Chopin did with these pieces was considered convincing, maybe even improving the original.

The earliest-born pianist whose playing was preserved is Carl Reinecke, a German composer, conductor and pianist who was born in 1824. Reinecke studied with Mendelssohn, Schumann and Liszt, visited Paris before Chopin died, premiered several pieces of Brahms, conducted the *Gewandhaus Orchester* and taught at the Leipzig *Conservatorium* from 1860 until 1895. A pianist of a classicist nature, Reinecke became very popular as a performer of Mozart, but in 1907 (aged 83!) he also made a recording of Field's fourth nocturne in A major on a Hupfeld piano roll. Historically speaking, this is as close as we can get to Chopin's performances of Field. The piano roll was essentially a technology for reproducing piano music; it did so by means of a device that was built into (or used in combination with) a normal piano – the so-called 'reproducing piano'. The physical movements were stored as perforations on a roll of paper. The Hupfeld system did allow for fixing the exact start and duration of every tone, but not the dynamics. Therefore the result sounds a bit wooden, and it is impossible to make any judgments about Reinecke's touch. What the roll does tell us though is that, unlike Chopin, he did not add any ornamentation during this performance; but in addition, that hardly any chord is played simultaneously, an aspect that will be discussed in chapter 7.

[5.12 #8 Field: Nocturne 4 (Carl Reinecke, 1907)⁴³³]

Ornamenting Field today

The fact that Chopin liked to ornament Field, combined with detailed knowledge about the nature of Chopin's ornamentation, makes Field's nocturnes a valuable experimental garden for improvised ornamentation. Additional inspiration might be taken from an example in Pierre-Joseph-Guillaume Zimmerman's *Encyclopédie du pianiste compositeur*, a piano method from approximately 1840 (see example 5.12.21).⁴³⁴ Zimmerman was a professor of piano at the Paris conservatory. His book contains a large number of study pieces, one of which is a nocturne in a style that recalls John Field.

⁴³³ <https://youtu.be/xSGkcozo1OI>, recorded and uploaded 2009 by Julian Dyer.

⁴³⁴ Zimmerman, P.-J.-G.: *Encyclopédie du pianiste compositeur*. Paris, n.d. [ca. 1840]. Special thanks to Gerard Bouwhuis for pointing out this source to me.

Interestingly, Zimmerman suggests an ornamented version of the original melody, though he does not discuss this type of ornamentation in the text of his book. The resemblances to Chopin's manner of ornamenting are striking. It is worth quoting the piece in full since it must be one of the most appropriate existing models for ornamenting a Field nocturne. Completely in line with the norms of bel canto ornamentation, extended flourishes occur towards the end of a phrase (see the blue ovals), thus increasing the sense of direction. Usually they spring from anchor tones, sometimes replaced with a different member of the chord (red oval) – always a high note.⁴³⁵

NOCTURNE par ZIMMERMAN ⁽¹⁾

Cantabile ed espressivo (♩=72)

ANDANTE

(1) Ce morceau et le suivant sont extraits de l'oeuvre 21 de Zimmerman.

⁴³⁵ In this case, the high F extends the original II6 to an equally usual II6/5.

The image shows a page of musical notation for Chopin's Mazurka No. 2, Op. 24, No. 2. The score is arranged in systems, each containing multiple staves. A blue circle highlights a specific passage in the first system, which includes a complex melodic line in the upper voice and a corresponding accompaniment in the lower voice. The score is annotated with various musical terms and symbols, including dynamics like *dolce*, *f*, *p*, and *pp*, and performance instructions such as *Ped.*, *ritenuto*, and *cresc.*. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, time signatures, and various rhythmic and melodic figures. The page concludes with the number "2. 2." at the bottom.

The image shows a page of musical notation for a nocturne. It consists of six systems of staves, each with a treble and bass clef. The notation includes various ornaments such as mordents, grace notes, and trills. Performance instructions like 'con grain', 'p', 'Ped.', 'rallentando', 'espress.', 'cresc.', 'f', 'pp', 'smorz.', and 'a Tempo. dim.' are scattered throughout. A red circle highlights a specific ornament in the second system. The page number '2' is visible at the bottom center.

Example 5.12.21: Zimmermann, P.-J.-G.: Nocturne from *Encyclopédie du pianiste compositeur*, vol. 2/2. Paris, n.d. [1840]; 70-72.

A nocturne of Field that could serve very well as a piece to experiment with is his nocturne in B-flat major (see example 5.12.22), a work that contains an almost exact written-out repetition. Thinking along the lines of bel canto ornamentation, it is instructive to take a phrase from the composition and strive for ornamentation that enhances the sense of direction within that phrase. The phrase from bar 5-8 will serve as an example (marked blue). The most obvious places for ornamentation that ‘amplify’ the movement within the phrase are the dominant or diminished seventh chords (marked red), since they contain the tension of a dissonance with a very clearly expected resolution. Here are different possibilities for ornamenting this phrase:

Example 5.12.22: Field, J.: *Nocturne in B-flat major*, bars 1-11.⁴³⁶

[5.12 #9: 6 different ornamentations]

It is not really possible to discuss nineteenth-century piano music without mentioning Franz Liszt. It is to this key figure that I will turn in the concluding section of this chapter.

5.13 Liszt

Liszt was not only the most influential personality of the nineteenth century when it comes to piano virtuosity; he was also famous for improvising on stage. The young Liszt was notorious for changing pieces of other composers capriciously, a habit he started to regret when he had already withdrawn from the concert stage. There are also reports about Liszt by students who studied his compositions with him, varying from interpretational issues to ad hoc additions to the score. A number of such reports were collected as early as 1902 by Lina Ramann in her *Liszt-Pädagogium*.⁴³⁷ Ramann was a German piano teacher and writer, and an admirer of Liszt. Between 1880 and 1894, she published his authorised biography, *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch*.

As for the topic of this chapter, Liszt's style had a less clear connection with *bel canto* than Chopin's, and in his music ornamentation occurs more in cadenza-like passages than in *fioritures* as is the case with Chopin. His notes in the scores of his students mostly concern extensions to cadenzas and also real variants, typically for the final bars of a piece. Both types of variants are, for instance, handed down for the third concert study *Un sospiro*.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁶ Musik-Beilage zur Neuen Musikzeitung, X. (Ed. C. Reinecke). Stuttgart - Leipzig, 1889.

⁴³⁷ Ramann, L.: *Liszt-Pädagogium* (Leipzig, 1902). Reprint: Wiesbaden, 1986.

⁴³⁸ Ramann, L.: *Liszt-Pädagogium*, IV. Serie, Nr. 11.

Though Ramann's biography of Liszt has often been criticised, there is a genuine late-nineteenth-century atmosphere in her characterisations of Liszt's style, which lends to them a sense of authenticity. In her introduction to the *Liszt-Pädagogium*, bel canto as such is not mentioned, neither does it play a referential role in the main text. However, some key concepts of bel canto do inform her observations of a more general nature.

Regarding Liszt's arrangements of songs for the piano, she writes that in these pieces the text is latent, but 'floats as a poetic programme behind and in between the lines'⁴³⁹ – very much in accordance with the discussion of these pieces in section 5.8. The piano versions are 'Neugestaltungen' [new versions] that change the vocal song into an 'Instrumentalgedicht' [instrumental poem]. Ramann writes that when Liszt himself played these arrangements, his lips could be seen moving as if he was whispering the text, especially in lyrical passages.⁴⁴⁰ She also criticises the 'modern' habit of making a very big difference between the melody, which is played in a large 'chest voice', and the accompaniment which is effaced. According to Ramann, this was far from Liszt's principles; he mockingly called applying such an unmotivated 'Großton' [big tone]: 'groß thun' [boasting].⁴⁴¹

Ramann's introduction also contains interesting remarks about the nature of performing compositions in general. She distinguishes between the style of composing (*Kompositionsstil*) and the style of performing (*Vortragstil*) – the latter belonging to the field of 'reproducing art'.⁴⁴² The goal of her book is to clarify a style of performing that fits in with the *Kompositionsstil* of Liszt's music – very much like what authors of bel canto methods were doing, in fact. She makes explicit that 'reproducing' has a creative core, noting that a pianist often faces 'creative demands'. This sense of creativity is described as 'eine dichterisch-freie, dem jemaligen Stoff, der Situation und dem Charakter des Ganzen entnommene Gestaltung'⁴⁴³ [a poetic and free realisation that is based upon the musical content, the situation and the character of the piece]. It is an attitude that favours an improvisatory approach to Liszt's scores, very much in line with what was described in bel canto, but also in instrumental methods such as Baillot's. The ideal performer strives for 'eine den architectonischen Aufbau und die psychologische Entwicklung des Stoffes nachschaffende und nachdichtende Einheit mit dem Komponisten'⁴⁴⁴ [a unanimity with the composer by re-creating and re-poetising the architectonical structure and the psychological development of the composition]. This is an understanding of performance that differs essentially from the *Urtex*t-paradigm.

⁴³⁹ Ramann, L.: op. cit., nr. 14.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴⁴² Ramann, L.: op. cit., 3. For Ramann, 'reproducing' lacks the connotation of being 'uncreative' (cf. chapter 1.5).

⁴⁴³ Ramann, L.: op. cit., 5.

⁴⁴⁴ Ramann, L.: op. cit., 6.

Liszt is reputed to be the great innovator of piano virtuosity; apparently already at that time several pianists saw in his *Passagenwerk* an invitation to bravura and mechanical virtuosity. Ramann, however, stresses the poetic background, even of passages of technical fireworks. Not only at the time of Ramann, but also today, performances of Liszt in a ‘macho’ fashion can be heard frequently; the contrast with recordings of, e.g., Emil von Sauer, who played Liszt much more elegantly, is striking. Though virtuosic passages in Liszt by far exceed Chopin’s ‘bel canto’ *fioritures*, one is reminded by Ramann of the spirit of bel canto singers who managed to ‘colour’ their ornaments, using them as a means for enhancing the melodic gestures, instead of a ‘stirrup for virtuosos’.⁴⁴⁵

In chapter 4, the fundamental importance of the musical phrase was described. The same focus on the phrase as a unit can be found in Liszt’s ideas about performing. Ramann refers to his preface to the collected symphonic poems, where Liszt introduces his concept of the *Periodischer Vortrag* [periodic execution]:

Gleichzeitig sei mir gestattet zu bemerken, dass ich das mechanische, taktmässige, zerschnittene Auf- und Abspielen, wie es an manchen Orten noch üblich ist, möglichst beseitigt wünsche, und nur den periodischen Vortrag, mit dem Hervortreten der besonderen Accente und der Abrundung der melodischen und rhythmischen Nuancirung, als sachgemäss anerkennen kann.⁴⁴⁶

[Also I would like to remark that I prefer to abolish the mechanical, dissecting bar-by-bar playing as it is still usual at some places; only the periodic execution, in which special accents can appear and the melodic and rhythmic nuancing is rounded off, can be acknowledged as appropriate.]

Ramann calls the principle of *periodischer Vortrag* Liszt’s ‘first requirement’, based upon his ‘poetic and free style’. It is a way of performing in which a coherent passage (like the phrase in bel canto, but probably also longer) is treated as a unit (*Zeiteinheit*), to which the single bar is subordinated, just as a beat is subordinated to a bar. Ramann writes:

Für die Reproduktion liegt in diesem Prinzip eine vollständige Neugeburt. Die sich aus ihr ergebende Elastizität der Rhythmen löst die taktische Fesselung zur Freiheit der Bewegung und zu höherem Schwung des Ausdrucks, zu gefühlswahren Accenten und höchster Gewalt der Sprache; sie bringt die Architektur des Baues zu lebendigem Fluß und wahrt zugleich die lichte Durchsichtigkeit ihrer Einzelteile – in summa: sie führt zum großen Stil des Vortrags.⁴⁴⁷

[For the musical reproduction this principle means a complete rebirth. The rhythmical elasticity in which it results will dissolve the metric confines, enabling freedom of movement and a higher flight of expression, emotionally sincere accents and supreme power of language. It will turn the architecture of

⁴⁴⁵ Ramann, L.: op. cit., 5.

⁴⁴⁶ Liszt, F.: *Symphonische Dichtungen für grosses Orchester*, Bd. 3. Leipzig, n.d. [1885]; 1.

⁴⁴⁷ Ramann, L.: op. cit., 4.

the musical construction into a living flow, and at the same time guarantee the transparency of its elements – in short: it will lead towards a grand performance style.]

This important passage truly transcends the role the musical phrase played in *bel canto*, elevating it into an encompassing principle of performance. To remain in the figurative language of the time: the phrase as a guiding principle has grown up, and like an eagle spreads its wings to take to the air, ready to rule the domain of music. The aspect of rhythm and timing has been postponed in the previous chapters; Liszt's theories about performance inevitably lead towards this area, which is so important for the improvisatory aspect of music-making. Before the issue will be analysed in chapter 7, an *intermezzo* aims to offer a fresh (and possibly surprising) perspective on timing.