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Mastering Chopin's Opus 25: A Pianist's Guide to Practice

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Mastering Chopin's Opus 25: A Pianist's Guide to Practice

by

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Treatise

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For my parents Kyoung Sang and Koo Mi Kwak

Mastering Chopin's Opus 25:

A Pianist's Guide to Practice

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The present study of the Op. 25 Etudes is based mainly on the author's personal insights gained while learning the set of studies to what is generally considered a performance level. It is the goal of the present work to share this experience with other pianists at a comparable stage of development, in the belief that the basic principles of posture, fingering, arm weight and rotation applied by the author in his own study of these pieces can be helpful to other pianists. In addition to the author's personal

experience, the research will also draw on writings by various authors on this same subject mainly the edition of the Op. 25 Etudes by Alfred Cortot, the book *Chopin: A Graded Practical Guide* by Eleanor Bailie, and *Mastering the Chopin Etudes and Other Essays* by Abby Whiteside.

The following discussion will proceed etude-by-etude. For each Etude, I assess the helpfulness and limitations of the work of Cortot, Bailie and Whiteside. When their work fails to address important issues, I present my own suggestions for methods of practice that I believe to be generally helpful to the advanced student. It is the author's belief that the application of the principles and practice methods described herein will lead the advanced student of piano efficiently to master this daunting reperatory.

Contents

Chapter 1

The Chopin Etudes Today

In today's piano world, the Chopin Etudes represent a standard for the advanced pianist's technical limits. Demanding the highest level of pianistic skills, the Etudes have troubled many great pianists for years. Jonathan Yungkans says that 'usually those who manage the more athletic pieces come up short in poetry in the quieter ones, while the fingers of those adept at evoking the tints and colors in these tone poems have sounded awkward when the pace quickened'.[1] Because of the criterion set by the composer through his reputation and the standards set by the great pianists of the past and present through flawless recordings, the Chopin Etudes are often regarded with fear by many of today's advanced pianists. Even Chopin himself did not often recommend these Etudes to his own students. Instead, Chopin preferred suggesting selections from Cramer's Etudes, Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, Moscheles's *Stylstudien zur hőheren Vollendung*, and J.S. Bach's Suites and individual Fugues from *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*. According to Carl Mikuli, he entrusted these Etudes only to students who already were technically very advanced.[2]

[1] Jonathan Yungkans, 'The Chopin Etudes' from http://inkpot.com/classical/chopinet_lug.html, 1.
[2] Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils* (Cambridge, 1986), 60.

Every Etude of Chopin is first and foremost a work of art with no two being alike. Siepmann states that 'many of the Etudes, and the underlying concept of them all, can be traced to his early immersion in Bach, the only other composer to have combined so consistently the requirements of art and instruction at the very highest level.'[3] Chopin's greatest feat of all with his Etudes may be that he instituted a new compositional style with the genre, which inspired many composers to follow suit, including Franz Liszt. The sound of the piano in Chopin's Etudes, compared with that of his predecessors (Czerny, Cramer, Clementi), is more modern and grand. In his book, *Chopin – zycie I droga tworcza*, contemporary Polish musicologist Radeuz A. Zielinski writes 'not only did they (Etudes) become an orderly demonstration of a new piano style and the formulas peculiar to it, but also an artistic ennoblement of this style.'[4] Because Chopin was able to establish in his Etudes that unique balance of poetic expression with the highest pianistic demands, the Etudes have become arguably the most famous set of character pieces in nineteenth-century piano literature.

In order to perform these studies, a pianist needs both artistic vision and technical facility. Although they require the highest level of technical challenges, no one has ever accused the Etudes of lacking the rich qualities we associate with the Polish composer's works. These works have always been regarded as far more than mere pedagogical studies to improve the technical abilities and interpretational skills of the pianist. In fact,

[3] Jeremy Siepmann, *Chopin, the Reluctant Romantic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995), 112.
[4] Smendzianka, 1.

many have argued, including Smendzianka, that for Chopin the Etude, much like the Scherzo, 'was a title that should be treated figuratively rather than literally: in both cases conveying expression with profound content. The complexity and extreme difficulty of the means should not lead performers to make them an end in itself'.[5]

Yet for many pianists, the goal in playing the Etudes is to conquer the technical requirements, and not to comprehend the music. In today's piano world, clearly evident after reviewing the requirements of various piano festivals, one is more likely to find a performance of the Etudes in a competition or an audition setting rather than a concert venue. Moreover, in the teaching methods of many teachers, the Etudes are present in private lessons more as a guideline to improve the pianist's manual facility than to enhance his interpretative abilities. Finally, when one finds a performance of the Etudes at a concert venue, the performer's motive to program the Etudes seems more to demonstrate his or her technical prowess than to showcase his or her understanding of the music. Examples of this can be seen in the use of an 'absurdly fast tempo in the virtuoso Etudes or exaggerated bravura and dynamics (the latter going beyond Chopin's stylistic convention), or in the demonstration of a dexterity verging on sheer acrobatics while totally ignoring the expressive content or appropriate emotional program'.[6]

[5] Smendzianka, 1.
[6] Smendzianka, 1.

For these reasons, the Chopin Etudes are noted more for their technical demands than their artistic qualities. This reputation has come about without anyone denying the Etudes' exceptional poetic traits. Instead, the reputation became what it is today because of the ways the studies have been received and treated, which have changed considerably through the years. Many pianists today use as a reference the many recordings available to us, the majority of which seem to be a sheer demonstration of dexterity in the fingers. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the overall level of technical skill among the pianists has risen gradually through the years.

Along the same line, one must also consider the evolution of the piano. For most of his life, Chopin owned and performed on a Pleyel piano and was once quoted as having said 'Pleyel's pianos are the last word in perfection.'[7] While the instrument met all the needs required of his compositions, the Pleyel piano can hardly be compared to a concert-sized Steinway in terms of the action and the volume of sound produced. Moreover, Chopin on the whole chose to convey his intentions by subtle refinements of execution rather than by a broad and powerful treatment of the instrument. As a pianist, Chopin rarely played with a great volume of sound due to various reasons including health and physical stature.[8] Yet subtle refinements and physically incapable pianists are the last thing to enter one's head when one thinks of modern performance of the Chopin

[7] Eigeldinger, 25
[8] James Methuen-Campbell, *Chopin Playing: From the Composer to the Present Day* (London, 1981), 29.

Etudes. With this in mind, one must wonder how far off today's performances of the Chopin Etudes are from the composer's original intent.

The Chopin Etudes are first and foremost a genuine creation of a musical impression filled with all the attributes that characterize his output. In all, the Etudes of Chopin 'demonstrate a sensitivity to medium for which Chopin has no peers.'[9] Further, they still push advanced pianists to their technical limits. Finlow states that 'the eloquence with which these etudes render their expressive message in the difficult vernacular of the piano's technical idioms bespeaks Chopin's unique feel for the potential and limitations of the instrument.'[10]

[9] Jim Samson, *The Music of Chopin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 73.
[10] Simon Finlow, *The Twenty-Seven Etudes and Their Antecedents*. Edited by Jim Samson, *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 74.

The Research

The present study of on the Op. 25 Etudes is based mainly on the author's personal experienced insights gained while learning the set of studies to what is generally considered a performance level. It is the good of the present work to share this experience with other pianists at a comparable stage of development, in the belief that the basic principles of posture, fingering, arm weight and rotation applied by the author in his own study of these pieces can be helpful to other pianists. In addition to the author's personal experience, the research will also draw on writings by various authors on this same subject, mainly the edition of the Op. 25 Etudes by Alfred Cortot, the book *Chopin: A Graded Practical Guide* by Eleanor Bailie, and *Mastering the Chopin Etudes and Other Essays* by Abby Whiteside.

Alfred Cortot:

Many pianists agree that Alfred Cortot's edition of the Chopin Etudes is an invaluable adjunct to learning the studies. His edition offers many insightful suggestions that have assisted greatly in learning the Etudes.[11] However, the Cortot edition is effective only when used in addition to other resources. As excellent as his edition is, Cortot often altered or ignored Chopin's fingerings without comment. Bailie states the reason for such omissions is because 'Cortot was probably unaware of various fingerings and other indications in scores belonging to pupils of Chopin, since some of these have

[11] Afred Cortot, ed., *12 Studies Op. 25 for Piano* (Paris: Editions Salabert 1967).

only come to light over latter years'.[12] For this reason, the pianist should keep a copy of a recent urtext edition while learning the Etudes. Cortot's edition offers numerous finger exercises for each Etude. At first glance, some of these exercises do not seem relevant to the Etude. However, as I applied his suggestions while learning the notes of each study, I learned them to be pertinent to the Etude. Each one of Cortot's exercises is designed to make the fingers more independent in the style of the particular Etude's task. Cortot's edition does lack in one critical aspect of learning the Etudes. While he prefaces all the studies with very helpful exercises for the fingers, he is remiss in suggesting any exercises for wrist or arm gestures. While having technically sound fingers may be the foundation to playing these studies, equal attention to wrist and arm gestures can also assist the pianist greatly, especially in the studies with rapid finger movements or fast double notes.

Eleanor Bailie:

Chopin: A graded practical guide by Bailie gives a complete survey of Chopin's music for solo piano, including a graded list of his works, together with detailed and constructive suggestions for study and performance. On the whole, Bailie does an excellent job describing the Op. 25 Etudes. Included in her suggestions for the studies are a brief history of the Etude, suggestions for study and performance, and comments about the Cortot edition. Bailie does not treat the Etudes with the same level of detail as Cortot with respect to fingerings and exercises. However, she does cover many areas that

[12] Eleanor Bailie, *Chopin: The Pianist's Repertoire* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1998), 385.

Cortot lacks, including comments about Chopin's own fingerings and detailed discussions of gestures in particularly difficult passages. Overall, one should find many of her suggestions to be beneficial, especially the way she describes certain techniques such as voicing chords and leaping in both hands. Further, her comments on commonly made mistakes also prove to be helpful. While the book covers every Etude, it does not cover every problem the pianist might encounter within each Etude. In fact, in some instances, she seems to omit some of the most difficult passages of some of the Etudes. For instance, her chapter of Op. 25, No. 6 discusses the left hand far more than the right hand. While no one denies the importance of the left hand in this study, the real problem with No. 6 for most would be executing the right hand. Curiously, out of all the chapters on the Op. 25 Etudes, the longest chapter is on No. 7, which happens to be the only slow study of the set. Overall, while an excellent source for solving some aspects of the Etudes, Bailie's book should also be used only in conjunction with other sources.

Abby Whiteside:

Whiteside's book *Abby Whiteside on Piano Playing* consists of two previously published books: *Indispensables of Piano Playing* and *Mastering the Chopin Etudes and Other Essays.*[13] Unlike the works of Cortot and Bailie, Whiteside does not give a complete survey of all the Etudes. Instead, both books begin with the theme 'basic

[13] Abby Whiteside, *Indispensables of Piano Playing and Mastering the Chopin Etudes and Other Essays*, Edited by Joseph Prostakoff and Sophia Rosoff, (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997)

rhythm'. Afterwards, she describes in detail her views on posture and basic musicianship. The only Etudes from Op. 25 that Whiteside talks about in detail are the last three from the set. Whiteside's views on the Etudes are unique, to say the least. Her suggestions are written in a pedagogical manner, almost like introducing a new school of piano playing. One may find her suggestions to be quite helpful when taken in small doses. For instance, all her comments about the use of the upper arm, forearm, and the torso are beneficial, but only when she relates them to a specific passage in an Etude. The same could be said about her views on gaining control over rhythm and mastering intervallic relations. What one may find troubling about Whiteside's work is some of the more radical comments she makes. For instance, she states in her book that 'fingering in most cases is not a vital problem – certainly it is never a primary cause of frustration in achieving success with a passage. It is always the reaching for position with the fingers, and not the specific choice of fingers, which is the great destroyer of ease'.[14] Statements such as this go directly against Chopin's statement that 'everything is a matter of knowing good fingering'.[15] Overall, Whiteside's work was helpful in some phases to my approach of the Etudes, especially in her discussions of physical approaches to the piano. However, the pianist must be careful not to rely solely on suggestions made in her book.

The following discussion will proceed etude by etude. For each Etude, I amass the helpfulness and limitations of the work of Cortot, Bailie and Whiteside. When their

[14] Whiteside, 99.
[15] Eigeldinger, 19.

work fails to address important issues, I present my own suggestions for methods of practice that I believe to be generally helpful to the advanced student. It is the author's belief that the application of the principles and practice methods described here will lead the advanced student of piano efficient mastery of this daunting repertory.

Chapter 2

A. The Op. 25 Etudes

The Twelve Etudes Op. 25were published in a single volume in 1837, when Chopin was 27. The only precedent for etudes as original, as musical and as difficult was provided by Chopin's Op. 10, completed by the age of 22. The new set was dedicated to the Countess Marie d'Agoult, mistress of the dedicatee of the first set, Franz Liszt.

Like the Op. 10 Etudes, the Op. 25 Etudes are largely studies written in various forms of legato[16], which focus on a single technical problem and a single musical idea. Further, like Op. 10, the Op. 25 Etudes 'offer an almost encyclopedic compendium of the resources of the piano and in particular a workshop for the preparation of Chopin's own later music'.[17] Finally, like the Op. 10 Etudes, the tonal make-up of the Op. 25 set suggests that Chopin may have intended that the group of Etudes be performed as a set.

The Op. 25 Etudes do exhibit several characteristics that make them different from his earlier set. The most notable difference between the two sets of studies is the

[16] Siepmann, 250.
[17] Samson, *The Music of Chopin*, 71.

involvements of both hands in the Op. 25 set. While Op. 10 contains only one study with two equally demanding hands (No. 11), Op. 25 expands that number to ten, with No. 6 and 11 being the exceptions.

The broad outlines of these Etudes are simple enough. They are almost all cast simply in a slightly modified ABA form, with or without coda.[18] Most of the Op. 25 Etudes distinguish their different sections harmonically instead of thematically. They function as a 19th-century character piece in that they are generally based on a single figure. Moreover, with a couple of exceptions (No. 5 and No. 11), the musical and the technical styles in the Op. 25 Etudes are maintained from beginning to end.

Each Etude from Op. 25 presents its own unique set of challenges. One has to analyze each etude separately and decipher each Etude's individual challenges. Although the tonal scheme might suggest these Etudes ought to be performed as a whole, there are no thematic relations between adjacent Etudes. Therefore, when the pianist completes one particular Etude, he must gear himself for a completely new set of demands presented by the following Etude.

Before approaching each Etude separately, a pianist must keep some general rules in mind. These few points hold true for all piano playing and they certainly apply to the Chopin Etudes:

[18] Gerald Abraham, *Chopin's Musical Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 40.

Hand Position:

In the piano method *Alfred Prep Course Level A*, a student is told that a proper hand position is a hand pretending to hold a bubble.[19] While such an analogy may work for a beginning pianist, an advanced pianist needs to consider hand position more carefully. What one needs to keep in mind is the length of the fingers and their particular functions. Of the middle three fingers, the second finger functions as the strongest, the third finger acts as the longest and the pivot, and the fourth finger as the weakest because of the way it is bound to the third by a common ligament. If a pianist wants to maintain a natural hand position while performing, he must keep in mind his hand position in relation to how it sits on the keys. For example, anytime either of the short fingers plays a black key, the inner three fingers must adjust to the short fingers and play the keys closer to the fallboard of the piano. This means that the middle three fingers of the hand will often play the white keys between the black keys. As a result, the pianist will eliminate many unnecessary gestures of the arms and wrists. Furthermore, the fingers should work much more efficiently, which might result in faster playing and endurance for the pianist. Chopin, from the first lesson, unceasingly directed the attention of the pupil to the freedom and independence of the fingers. He recommended, with this object, that 'the fingers should fall freely and lightly on the keyboard, and that the hand should be held as though suspended in the air without weight.'[20]

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[19] Morton Manus, Willard A. Palmer, and Amanda Vick Lethco, *Prep Course for the Young Beginner: Lesson Book Level A* (Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing Company, Inc., 1988), 4.

[20] Jean Kleczynski, *Frederic Chopin. De l'interpretation de ses oeuvres* (Paris: Mackar, 1880.) quoted after Eigeldinger, p. 33.

Loose thumb:

In general, pianists train their fingers to become all equally powerful. However, as each finger is differently formed, Chopin comments that 'it is better not to attempt to destroy the particular charm of each one's touch but on the contrary to develop it.'[21] Maintaining a loose thumb while playing the piano is a must. A relaxed arm hanging from a body results in a naturally curved hand. However, of the five fingers, the thumb is the only one that is not naturally curved in this position. This thought must always be present when attempting a technical work, as tightness in any part of the body while performing usually causes a domino effect that spreads the tension throughout. For some pianists, the result may be a curved or a tight thumb. For works as demanding as the Chopin Etudes, not maintaining a loose thumb will make these studies an even greater challenge.

Comfort Zone:

In general, the technical challenges of the Chopin Etudes cannot be mastered by mere advice or reading unless the principles acquired from the sources are carefully and patiently worked out by the pianist. Even then, a pianist might be unsure if he has actually conquered the demands of a particular Etude. One of the tougher challenges facing a pianist is to know if he has reached at least a sufficient level technically with the given work. With demanding works like the Etudes, it is especially difficult to know for sure if one has reached one's own maximum level. One must be very conscious of the

[21] Eigeldinger, 32.

hands at times like this. Moreover, the pianist has to be aware of certain sensations of his own hands and arms when he feels he has conquered a particular technical challenge. Afterwards, the pianist should establish these sensations as his 'comfort zone' and must attempt to meet that level with all the other technical challenges he faces. A good indicator of reaching the 'comfort zone' is when a pianist feels a particular simplicity to the technical challenge. Niecks advises 'after having exhausted all the difficulties, after having played immense quantities of notes, simplicity should emerge with all its charm, like art's final seal.'[22] Although pianists should gather as much advice to support their practice, they should always realize that these sources are useless unless this study allows the pianist to reach his own 'comfort zone'.

[22] Frederick Niecks, *Frederick Chopin as Man and Musician* (London, 1880), 342.

Op. 25, No. 1

Of all the Etudes, no other conveys such intricate arabesques of sounds as the first Etude of Op. 25. Bailie states that 'this Etude was written during Chopin's visit to Dresden in 1836, a time of optimism when his hopes of eventual marriage to Maria Wodzinska were running high.'[23] Known also as the "The Shepherd Boy", this Etude is usually called "The Aeolian Harp", a title given by none other than Robert Schumann, who described the study after hearing a performance by Chopin:

> Let one imagine that an Aeolian harp had all the scales, and that an artist's hand had mingled them together in all kinds of fantastic decorations, but in such a way that you could always hear a deeper fundamental tone, and a softly singing melody, then you would have something of a picture of his playing.
>
> It is wrong to suppose that he brought out distinctly every one of the little notes: it was rather a billowing of the chord of A flat, swelled here and there by the pedal; but though the harmonies could be heard in sustained tones, a wonderful melody, and only in the middle section, did a tenor part once stand out more prominently from the chords and the principal theme. When the study has ended you feel as

[23] Bailie, 418.

you do after a blissful vision, seen in a dream which, already half-awake, you would fain recall.[24]

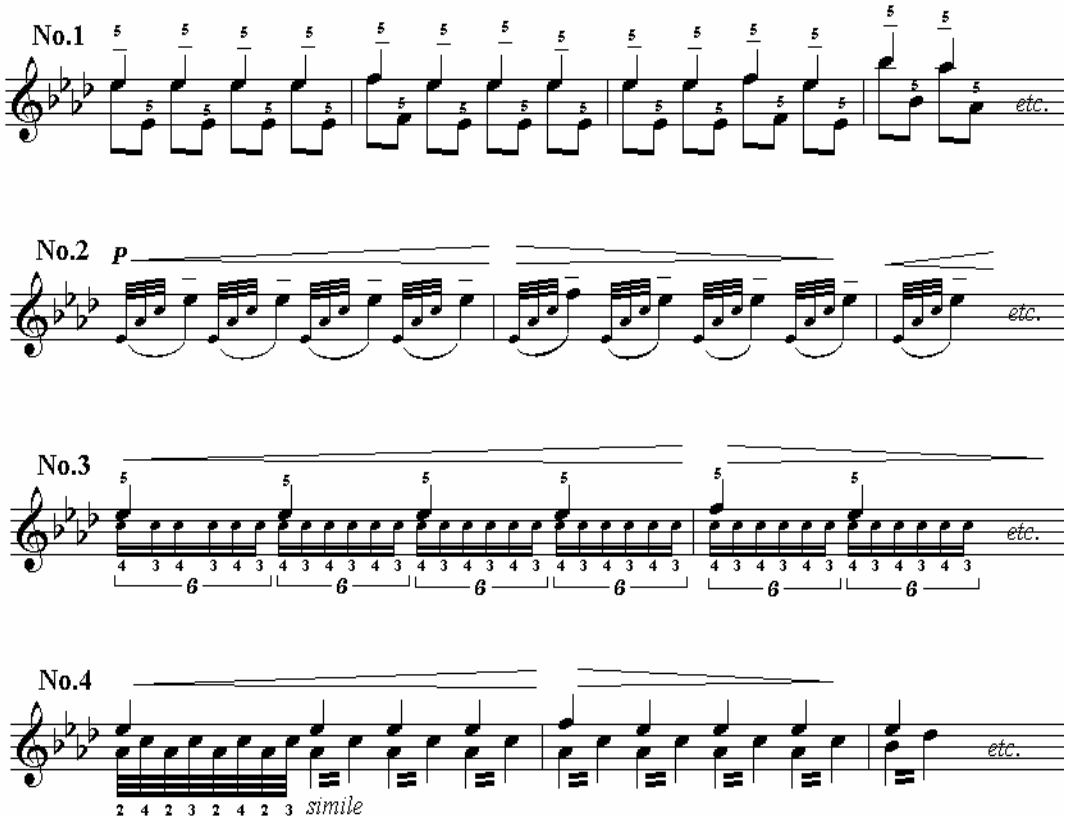
Schumann's comments not only provide a wonderful imagery for the performance, but also describe a standard that a performer must try to attain. Further, he also gives the reader insight into how the Etude was performed by Chopin. Although the performance Schumann heard was played on a very different piano than the modern Steinway, the pianist should attempt to duplicate as much as possible the Etude's original intent. Alfred Cortot states that 'he understood from Schumann's words what perfect technique, what lightness of touch and what subtle knowledge of both keyboard and pedal went towards creating the poetical and vaporous atmosphere in which Chopin shrouded the arpeggio design which is the harmonic – but almost immaterial frame of this melody'.[25]

Looking at the score to Op. 25, No. 1, the performer should notice a few features of the Etude immediately. First, the melody of the study is played almost exclusively with the fifth finger of the right hand. Second, low bass notes appear very infrequently throughout the work. Third, the entire Etude is filled with inner voices containing the broken arpeggiation. Fourth, the dynamic marking in the beginning is *piano*. With all these facets in mind, the pianist should recognize that the accompaniment figures must be

[24] Arthur Hedley, *Selected Correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin* (London; Melbourne; Toronto: Heinemann, 1962), 121.
[25] Alfred Cortot, ed., *12 Studies Op. 25 for Piano* (Paris: Editions Salabert, 1967), 7.

played in an airy manner so that the melody can be heard above it. Hence, the pianist must keep a rather firm fifth finger in the right hand to voice the melody accordingly. Yet the melody must not be struck too loudly since the dynamic marking is *piano*. Therefore, along with the firm fifth finger, the pianist must use the weight of the arm, instead of speed of the finger, to produce the appropriate volume to the melody.

To assist with the melody, Cortot suggests the following exercises for the right hand in his edition of the Etudes: [26]



[26] Cortot, 7-8.

These exercises should assist the pianist in several ways. They help the pianist achieve the proper weight distribution within the right hand. Moreover, the exercises seek to improve the distribution of weight to the melody, exercise inner finger dexterity, and assist leaping ability of the fifth finger. Cortot offers several more exercises for the first Etude consisting mostly of finger dexterity exercises and variations on the first four exercises with various rhythmic patterns.

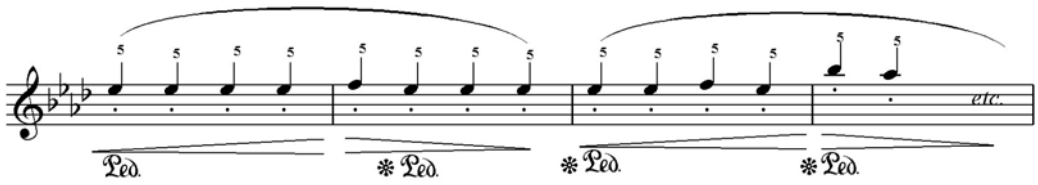
Whereas many of Cortot's exercises seem beneficial, his neglect of certain critical aspects of the Etude is striking. First, he gives very little attention to the left hand. Second, he writes very little about the use of the pedal. And finally, the biggest omission of all is that he says hardly anything about the movements of the hands in performing this Etude. In fact, in some of the exercises, he even writes 'how the pianist should eliminate hand motion and take great care to play with the fingers only, alternately legato and staccato, with the hand perfectly steady.'[27]

A distinctive trademark of many of the Op. 25 Etudes is the involvement of the left hand, which in this piece offers almost an identical image of the right hand rhythmically. However, Chopin makes the Etude rather challenging by not making the notes in the left hand a mirror image of the right. One of the first great challenges of this Etude is to learn two separate gestures of both hands and bring them together. In the right hand, the pianist should keep his hands over the keys in order to sustain the melody as

[27] Cortot, 8.

long as possible. However, in the left hand, the pianist should practice expanding and contracting the hand to keep it as loose as possible. Eleanor Bailie suggests that 'it is well to practice mm. 1-2 over and over until the hands are able to synchronize the different shapes of the right hand and left hand patterns, listening for perfect co-ordination between the hands.'[28] While repeating these two measures, the pianist should also concentrate on the different gestures made by the wrists. Because of the repeated patterns throughout the Etude, learning the gestures early here will greatly facilitate mastering this Etude.

Another great difficulty in this Etude is maintaining the line in the top voice. While Cortot took great time to address the voicing issue, he omits any suggestions for the melody in the right hand. Yet performing the melody legato is one of the more difficult aspects of this Etude. The following exercise is good preparation for this Etude:

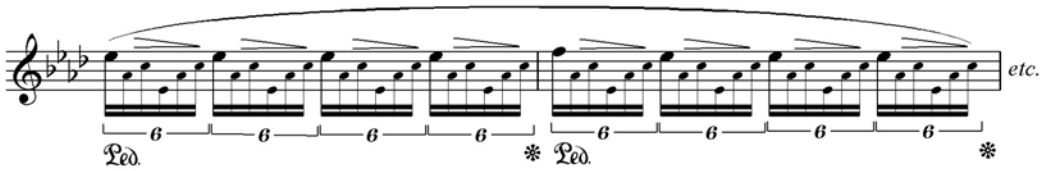


This exercise looks very simple at first sight, yet one should notice several details. First, one should observe the two-measure phrases. Second, one should be very careful to carry

[28] Bailie, 419.

out the dynamic swells indicated within the two-measure phrases. Third, the pianist should be faithful to the explicit pedal markings. Finally, one should maintain the melody line with the portato markings indicated. The portato markings are placed in this exercise to help the pianist maintain the melodic line when it requires rather large leaps by the right hand (i.e. mm. 4-6). It would be wrong to practice the beginning measures without the portatos, and then add them to the leaps because that might cause a disruption in the flow of the melody. Instead, the pianist should get used to performing all the melodic notes in a portato manner. The melodic line here should be practiced with the arm weight, and the pianist should always keep in mind that the most important aspect of this drill is to maintain a flowing melody.

Although practicing the melody will help the performer overcome the larger leaps, it will not always solve the problem. Unless a pianist can comfortably reach a twelfth, he might encounter problems achieving accuracy with the higher melodic notes. One exercise that might help with the high melodic notes is the following:



By practicing with a decrescendo at the end of every sextuplet, the pianist can train his right hand to come off the note faster. This happens because a pianist's natural tendency

is to lighten the hand gradually during decrescendos. As a result, the hand is least committed to the notes at the ends of the sextuplets, allowing an easier leap to the higher notes. The small decrescendos placed on every beat should be done very lightly, almost unnoticeably. Of course, these decrescendos should only be understood as technical aids and should not be regarded in any way as determinants of the phrasing of the melody.

Op. 25, No. 2

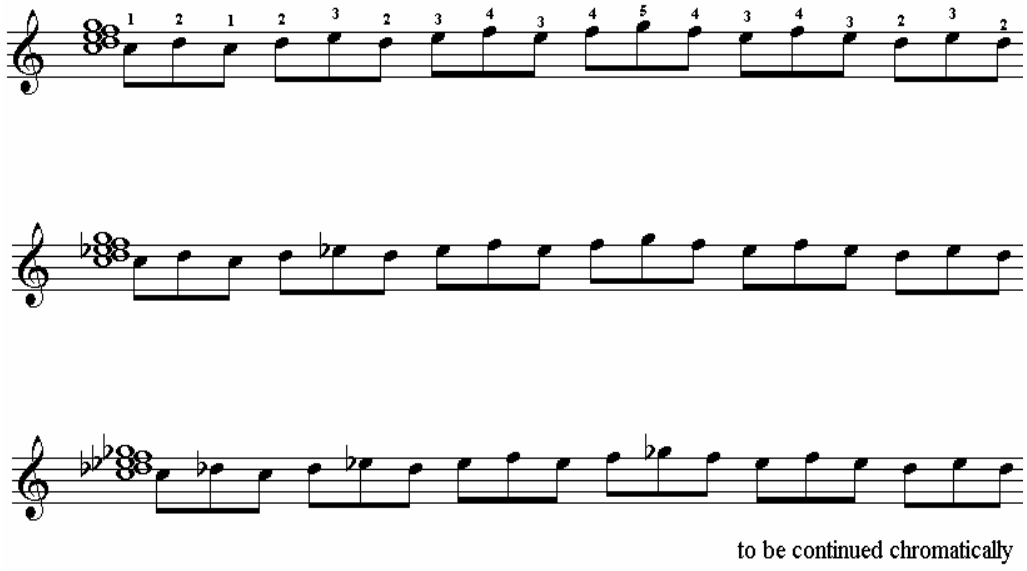
At first glance, Op. 25, No. 2 seems far less intimidating than many other Etudes from the set. The study does not require any double notes, big stretches, or tricky articulations. Instead, this Etude seems to lie within the realm of improvisation as the right hand flows along in various shapes while the left hand counters with a line with its own rhythm and articulation. In all, Op. 25, No. 2 is arguably the most poetic study of the set. In fact, after hearing the Etude performed by Chopin himself, Schumann commented that the study 'impresses itself unforgettably: so charming, dreamy, and soft that it could be the song of a sleeping child.'[29] Yet Op. 25, No. 2, like all the other Etudes, presents its own set of difficulties that must be worked out carefully.

Bailie states of this Etude that 'the principal difficulty of this study is that of synchronizing the differently paced left-hand and right-hand triplets, which create a continual cross-rhythm effect.[30] The goal for the pianist in this work will be for both hands to attain perfect independence while lining up harmoniously with each other. The right hand triplets must be nuanced in groups of three, as so not to be heard as eighth-note duplets above the quarter note triplets of the left hand. In order to achieve this, the pianist must study the melodic and rhythmic shape of each hand separately. Because any premature merging of the hands can be disastrous due to hands depending on each other

[29] Eigeldinger, 70.
[30] Bailie, 422.

for rhythmic security, one must be especially secure with the melodic and rhythmic contour of each hand. When putting the hands together, the pianist must be able to hear the integrity of the line in both voices, similar to the way one approaches a Baroque work. Similar approaches can be found in other works of Chopin including *Nouvelles Etudes* No. 1 and 3, Waltz Op. 42, and the famed *Fantaisie-Impromptu* Op. 66.

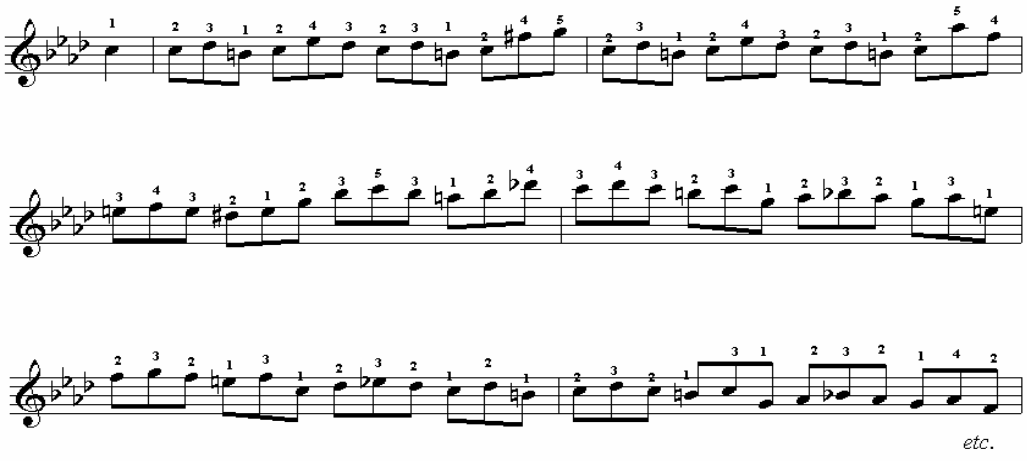
Another difficult facet of this study is to maintain evenness of the fingers and steadiness of the hand. These qualities are necessary for the pianist to be able to maintain the poetic tone required by the study. Unlike most of the Etudes from the set, Op. 25, No.2 involves only the fingers and no gestures from the arms. To facilitate evenness of the fingers and steadiness of the right hand, Cortot suggests the following exercises: [31]



[31] Cortot, 13.

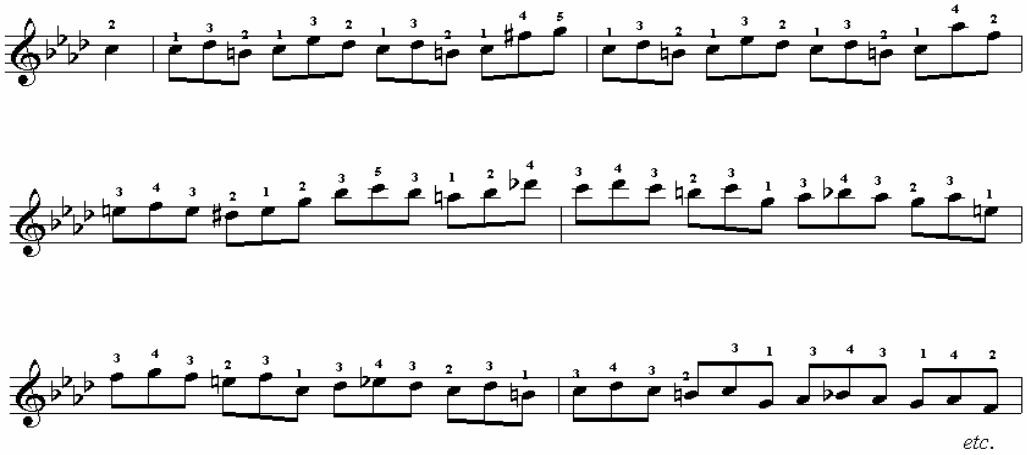
The preceding exercises should be played with many variations in key, speed, and rhythm. The eighth notes should be played as triplets, though one should make every effort not to accent any of the notes. Afterwards, the pianist should attempt the right hand of the Etude alone. Before practicing the right hand, he should carefully plot out a fingering scheme, a pattern consisting of the 'most comfortable succession of fingers, best suited both to the form of the hand and to conveying the musical discourse.'[32] When figuring out fingerings, one must keep in mind the heavy thumb and the weak fourth finger and the different sounds produced by those two fingers. For this reason, the fingering in the Cortot edition differs greatly from the fingering in the Paderewski edition:

Cortot: [33]



[32] Eigeldinger, 19.
[33] Cortot, 16.

Paderewski: [34]



As shown in the example above, Cortot seldom uses the thumb on the beginning of the triplet pattern. By using Cortot's fingering in the first three measures, the right hand can avoid unnecessary accents at the beginning of a triplet figure. By the same logic, using Paderewski's fingerings for measures 4-6 will produce the same result. Since both fingering patterns finish measure 3 with 1-2-4, the logical fingering here is Cortot's fingering for measures 1-3, followed by Paderewski's fingering for measures 4-6.

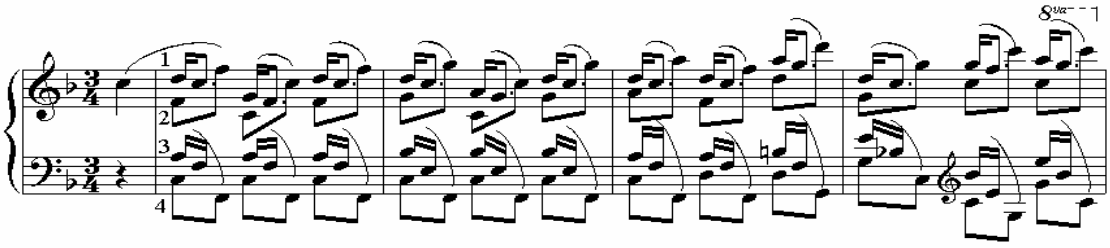
Although it contains far fewer notes, equal attention should be paid to the left hand. In fact, Bailie suggests that 'it is well to study the left hand first, as it is the quarter notes of the left hand which propel and carry the right hand eighth note triplets'.[35] Like the right hand, the pianist must be very careful not to accent any notes unnecessarily in

[34] Ignacy J. Paderewski, *Etudes*. (Warsaw: Fryderyk Chopin Institute, Polish Music Publications, 1949-61), 115.
[35] Bailie, 422.

the left hand, particularly the middle note of the quarter-note triplet. Throughout the Etude, the biggest leap in the left hand usually occurs on the second note of the first group of quarter-note triplets in each measure. As the pianist practices the left hand separately, he must keep two practice habits in mind. First, keep the left hand close to the keys so one can avoid landing on the note following a large leap. Second, the second note must be softer than the first note of the quarter note triplet. The exception to this rule is when there is a crescendo written in. In these cases, the second note can be at least the same volume as the first note. However, during these sections, the pianist should carry out the crescendo by making the third note of the triplet slightly louder than the second note. By doing this, one creates a line with the left hand, preventing any notes from sticking out unnecessarily.

Of all the Etudes in the set, Op. 25 No. 3 may demand the most from the pianist with regard to independence of fingers along with quick gestures from the wrist. Samson states that 'much of the point of the study rests in the detailed changes made by Chopin on subsequent varied repetitions of the material, not only changes in the structure of the motives but in their dynamics and articulations.'[36] The pianist must not only recognize the various subtleties of notation, but also the various gestures required by the different directions of the notes.

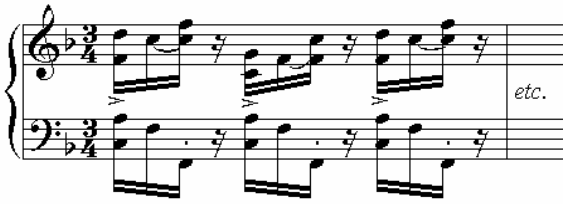
The first aspect of this Etude the pianist should recognize is the differentiated notation of the right hand and the left hand. In this study, Chopin distinctly writes 'not one figurative pattern but a combination of four elements which nevertheless allow a melodic profile to emerge on the surface of the texture'.[37]



The four elements are divided equally between the two clefs. At first glance, the combination of elements seems quite similar in both hands. Yet there are distinct

[36] Samson, *The Music of Chopin,* 72-73.
[37] 72.

differences between the hands that will affect how one approaches each hand technically. For starters, the first and the third element both are played in the first two sixteenth pulses of each quarter note beat. However, the voice in the treble clef, until measure 49, follows the first sixteenth note with a dotted eighth note while the voice in the bass clef follows the sixteenth note with another sixteenth note. Knowing that the dotted eighth note must be held in the right hand will cause the two hands to approach these figures differently. Meanwhile, the remaining two elements have eighth notes during the same time. However, since the two eighth notes descend in the bass clef, the left hand can gesture in one direction for both of the voices. On the contrary, the right-hand eighth notes ascend, causing a different gesture for the right hand. Although the figures in both hands look similar initially, each hand requires a different technical approach by the pianist. To assist with this technical challenge, Cortot suggests the following exercise: [38]

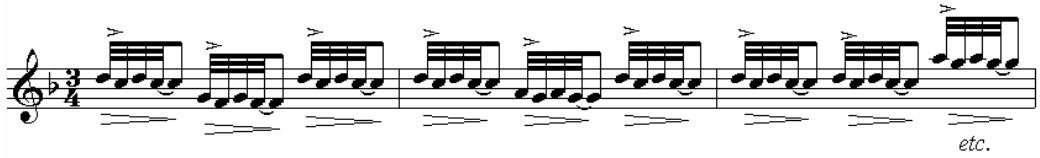


In both hands, the pianist should prepare to play the harmonic interval that starts each group of sixteenth notes as if they were not double notes at all. Instead, the right hand should focus on the bottom of the double note while the left hand focuses on the top of the double note. As the pianist plays the double notes, the hands should already be in the shape of the interval. Instead of playing the notes in a balanced, vertical position, one

[38] Cortot, 20.

should shape the hands slightly in the direction of the last note of the group. Hence, the hands will be prepared to move properly to the outer notes, creating only one gesture. Moreover, by having the hands already in the shape of the interval, the other note of the interval will be played, but will not interfere with the gesture.

The other challenging facet to this study occurs at measure 9. Chopin replaces the sixteenth plus dotted-eighth figure with thirty-second notes. Although much busier, the principle of the gesture from the opening measure still remains. One point the pianist might consider is how one attacks the first note of the thirty-second group. By accenting the first thirty-second note, the pianist can use that very note as a spring board to quickly 'throw' in the remaining thirty-second notes. The following exercise might assist this point:



The decrescendos written should not be taken literally. Instead, the remaining thirty-second notes should naturally fade away as a reaction to the accent on the first thirty-second note. The pianist should also explore different fingering possibilities for the thirty-second notes. Bailie suggests 4-2-3-2, 3-2-3-2, or using a combination, i.e. 4-2-3-2

on the first and third beats of measure 9, and 3-2-3-2 on the fifth on the second beat, and so on.[39]

The final challenging aspect to this Etude is playing the larger leaps. In most of the figures, the pianist should instinctively use the last note of the figure as a spring board to bounce towards the following set of notes. In sections with smaller leaps, usually under an octave, the pianist would use a loose wrist to start the up gesture towards the next set of notes. However, in sections with larger leaps, the pianist will need to involve the upper arms as well. When facing sections with larger leaps, the pianist should also use the elbows to start the up gesture. By using the elbows, the pianist will involve the entire arm, allowing better accuracy to all parts of the keyboard. This technique should only be used for large leaps. While using the entire arm provides easier accuracy for figures following large leaps, constant use of the entire arm may cause premature fatigue.

[39] Bailie, 426.

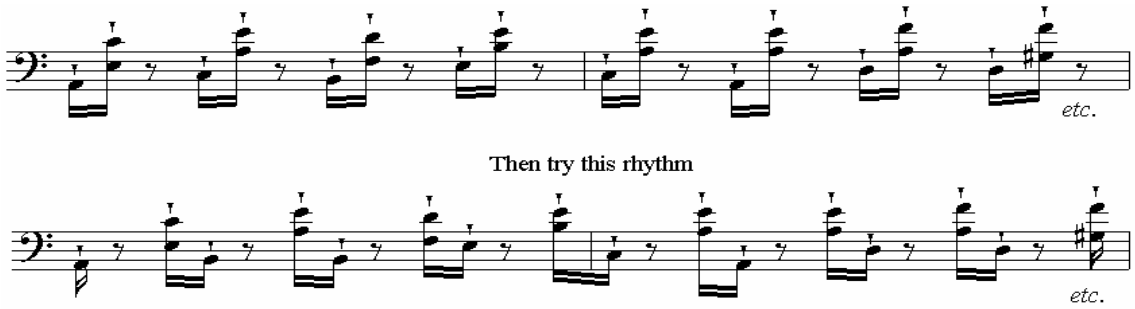
Op. 25, No. 4

Although the right hand is difficult throughout this study, Op. 25, No. 4 arguably possesses the most challenging left hand in all of Chopin's Etudes. Bailie comments of the Etude that 'the concentration has to be undeviatingly beamed upon the accuracy of aim in the left hand, and as well as this exacting exercise of concentration; the left hand is extremely taxing in a physical sense.'[40] The study seems especially difficult when taking into consideration Chopin's metronome marking of the quarter note equaling 160, a tempo one rarely hears even in recordings. Cortot suggests a more realistic tempo of the quarter note equaling 120. Nevertheless, in order to execute this Etude well, the pianist must own the highest level of technique.

The difficulty in the left hand is caused by several aspects. First, throughout the Etude, the left-hand comprises a single bass note leaping to various intervals and triads at a very rapid tempo. Because of the inconsistency in the size of the leaps, and of the off-beat intervals, the pianist faces a huge challenge with accuracy. Furthermore, not only does the pianist need to worry about the leap up to the interval, but also from the interval back to the next bass note. In order to assist with the accuracy, Bailie suggests 'plucking the eighth note on the first beat, giving it a little kick-off with the fifth finger so that the hand is lifted by the little kick-off or spring in the fifth finger, and 'directioned' upwards

[40] Bailie, 428.

towards the interval, which in turn is plucked, with a little spring or kick-off 'directioning' the hand downwards again to pluck the bass note on the second beat'.[41] This advice is helpful for a technical understanding of the left hand and how to attack and release the notes. To enhance Bailie's suggestions while securing the accuracy even further, it is wise to practice the left hand with mixed rhythms in the following manner at half the speed:

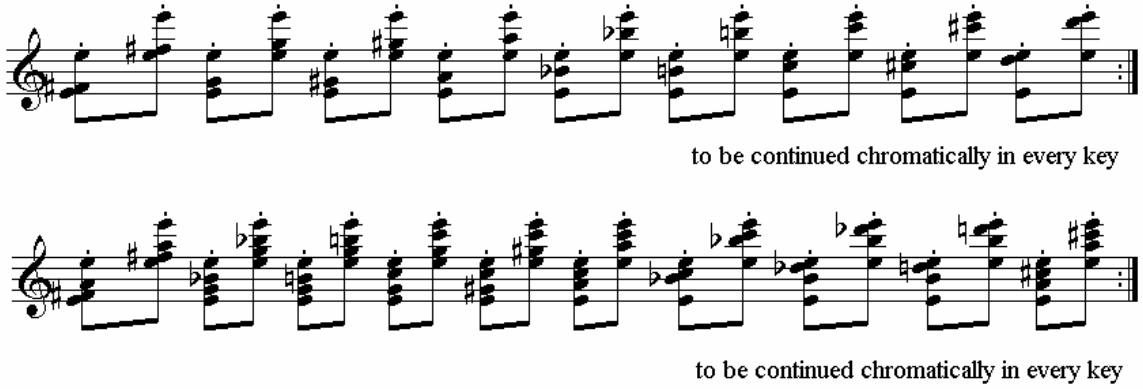


After becoming proficient with these two exercises, the pianist should attempt the left hand passages for the first time, making sure the technique already learned is always in use. The principles described above can apply to the entire study.

With a grasp of the more difficult left hand, the pianist can now concentrate on the right hand. The right hand's technical requirements are far less demanding, yet it does require some attention. Cortot suggests that the pianist should 'raise the hand high above the keyboard and attack with decision and release the key immediately so as to

[41] Bailie, 428.

bring the hand back to its former position'.[42] While his suggestions are noteworthy, he makes no comment on the release technique. Except for the creating a melodic line with the top voice, the pianist should match the right hand release technique with the left hand. Hence, in accordance with Bailie's suggestions for the left hand, the right hand chords should also pluck the notes and release the hands towards the next chord when the right hand chords are marked staccato. Cortot does, however, provide a good exercise for practicing various shapes of chords.[43]

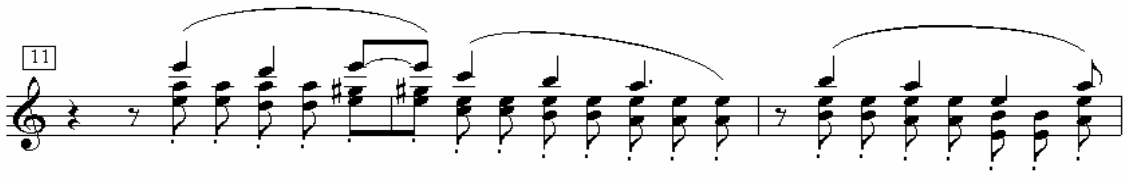


Cortot comments that the fingers and the hand should be kept firm, both when playing the chords and between the chords. One must be careful not to misinterpret this statement as a suggestion as to lock the hand in position. Instead, the hand should be kept in the shape of the chord, both when playing and between the chords. If one were to lock the right hand in the shape of the chord, the wrist would also lock up, causing the right hand to become very fatigued. However, if the hands are only formed in the shape of the chord

[42] Cortot, 25.
[43] Cortot, 25.

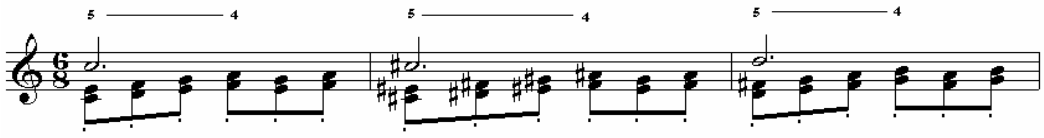
yet still supple, the wrist can remain flexible, allowing the tension from the hands to release.

The final technique to discuss in this Etude is the combination of staccato and legato in the right hand when the top voice of the right hand carries a melodic line. During these sections one should consider the technique of substituting fingers during held notes. To practice the combination of staccato and legato, the pianist might benefit from the following exercise from mm. 11-13:



Although much of the pianist's focus should be on the soprano voice, the pianist must maintain the written articulation for the bottom part of the chord. Further, maintaining the short staccatos throughout on the bottom parts of these chords will enhance the legato line even more.

As for substituting fingers, Cortot offers the following exercise: [44]



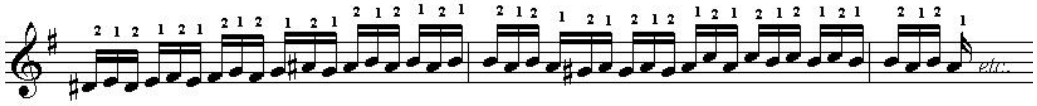
[44] Cortot, 426.

As before, the pianist should make great effort to differentiate between the two articulations. Further, when substituting fingers, one should be careful not to overpress the finger to which the held note is switched.

Op. 25, No. 5

Due to the effect of the continuing inner-voice appoggiatura against the right hand, this study is commonly known as the "wrong-note" Etude. Although the study provides many advanced challenges technically, including complexity with double notes and rhythms and includes a glorious contrasting middle section in E major, it is safe to say that this Etude is 'less often heard in the concert room than any one of its companions.'[45] The lack of popularity may be due to several reasons, with one being the uncertainty of how one is to perform the rhythms between the hands. Or perhaps this study may be the most difficult to understand Chopin's intentions. In different recordings of the Etudes, Op. 25, No. 5 reveals the biggest contrasts among pianists. Even with all the contrasts, the study, like its companions, supplies plenty of technical challenges.

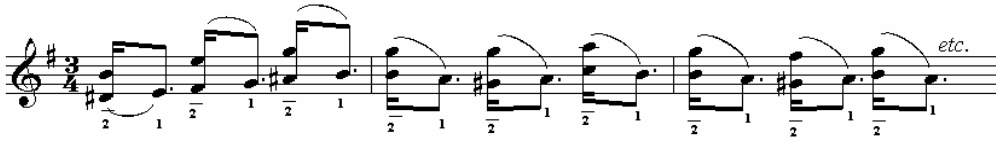
The first technical challenge presented by this Etude is the performance of the appoggiaturas in the lower voice of the right hand. Cortot suggests the following pattern for an initial exercise:[46]



[45] James Huneker, *Chopin: the Man and His Music* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966) 185.
[46] Cortot, 31.

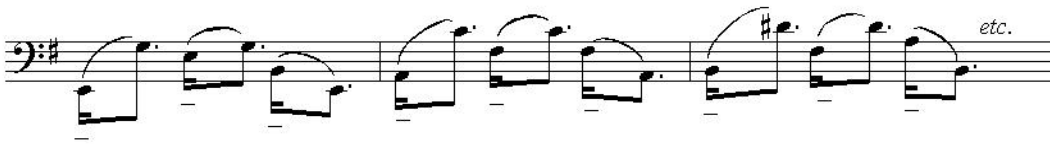
Following the exercise Cortot suggests adding upper notes in chromatic and arpeggio patterns. Practicing Cortot's suggestions should allow the pianist to acquire lightness and mobility between the thumb and the second finger. Further, these exercises will allow the pianist to get accustomed to using the thumb continually as a pivot for shifting the hand.

Along with Cortot's exercises, the pianist must also keep in mind the quick shifts of the hands needed to perform this study at Chopin's suggested tempo. In order to attain the proper speed, the pianist must depend on the second note of the appoggiatura patterns as a springboard to the next hand position. Placing a slight tenuto on the first note of the two-note slur will also assist in shifting the hands smoothly.



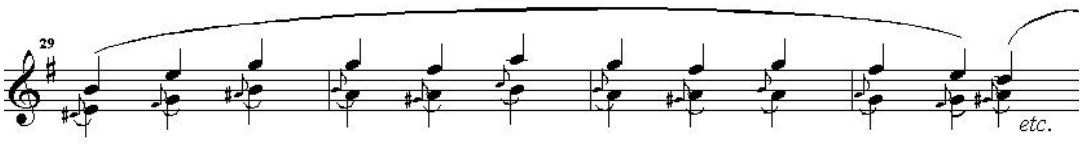
Imagine that both the upper note and the lower note of each sixth or seventh is slurred towards the single dotted eighth note, at the same time lightly 'sketching in ' the implied upper melody line, B, E, G, G, F-Sharp, etc. Bailie suggests 'releasing the thumb from the dotted eighth note just in time to allow the hand to 'lift' sufficiently to 'fall' with light natural emphasis on the next appoggiatura, so that the general effect is as smooth as possible – i.e. with as little a gap as possible between each slurred figure.'[47] The same approach can be taken for the left hand beginning on measure 9:

[47] Baillie, 430.



The articulations presented in this exercise should only be used for practice situations. Therefore, when performing this Etude, the pianist should refer back to Chopin's original marking for the left hand, which is a slur per measure. Further, when practicing the left hand in this section, one must be careful not to accent the dotted eighth notes, which means the pianist must be especially light in playing the thumb of the left hand.

Following this section, Chopin either maintains the rhythmic complexities or switches to even notes. These patterns stay the same until measure 29. At this bar, Chopin switches the appoggiaturas to acciaccaturas:



While the appoggiaturas and the acciaccaturas may appear to create different effects, most authorities agree that 'the acciaccaturas from measure 29 should be placed on the beat, like the beginning.'[48] Hence, the effects will virtually be the same. The real difference between the two sections will be in the different treatment of the soprano line.

[48] Baillie, 431.

Unlike the beginning, Chopin incorporates long slurs, which stretch across a minimum of three measures. The a very light-hearted character in the beginning has now become long *cantabile* phrases. Due to the slurs, the technical approach must change as well.

The lift and fall approach with the thumb can no longer be used here. Instead, one must depend on a clever fingering scheme along with careful pedaling. Cortot suggests 'if the conformation of the hand permits, one should switch the fifth finger to the fourth, when playing up the keyboard, as this way of playing ensures perfect legato of the phrase, which becomes here tenderly expressive; in the case when the substitution proves impossible, use the fifth finger throughout.'[49]

The middle section of this Etude begins in the parallel major. The main feature of the section is the rich melody in the left hand, which, 'if soulfully conceived and delivered, will sing its way deep into the heart of the listener.'[50] As Simon Finlow notes, the section transforms the three-hand effect common in Thalberg's music to produce one of the most memorable moments in all of his works. [51]

The section begins with the melody in the left hand, accompanied by the right hand in broken chordal accompaniment in triplets and later in sixteenths. The accompaniment flows calmly up and down on the keyboard as it supports the rich melody

[49] Cortot, 53.
[50] Huneker, 188.
[51] Finlow, 77.

of the left hand. One aspect of this section that might cause trouble for the pianist is the suspensions in the left-hand melody. The tension of the suspended note usually causes the pianist to accent the note instinctively. Yet the suspended note in the left hand is usually simultaneous with a note played by the thumb of the right hand. One must be careful not to create any accentuation throughout the right hand, especially when the melody might provoke it.

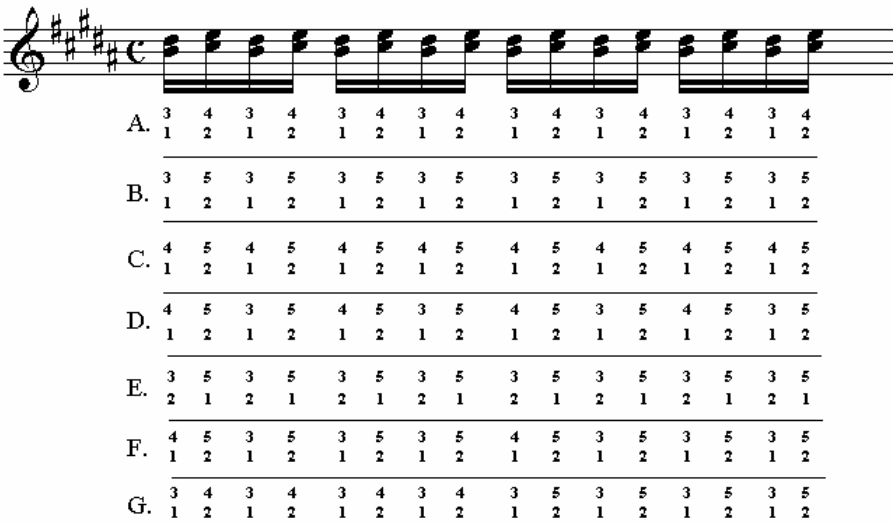
Op. 25, No. 6

Op. 25, No. 6 is often regarded as one of the most feared Etudes of the set. Herbert Weinstock says this study is 'fascinating to pianists but fascinates listeners only when a rare technical titan plays it. Either it is technique heightened to sorcery, or it is nothing but notes'.[52] Technically, the difficulty of this study lies mostly in the right hand, which comprises entirely thirds. In addition, the thirds must generate an eerie but rapid murmur throughout the Etude as it supports the melody of the Etude provided by the left hand. Pianists would agree that the level of technical difficulty increases when one has to perform a passage at a soft volume. In all, Op. 25, No. 6 is an Etude that requires the highest level of technical facility.

One of the most daunting sections of this Etude is the very opening. Because the study opens with a written out trill in thirds, the pianist cannot resort to forearm rotation. Instead, the pianist must rely only on the fingers, which immediately makes it much more difficult to gain the necessary speed. In addition, because of the 'sotto voce' marking, the pianist should avoid producing a full sound, especially with so many notes. Therefore, one should attempt to play smooth thirds that never reach the bottom of the keys. Further, because the thirds expose the different sizes of fingers, it is impossible to give one standard fingering for the scales and passages in this section. Hence, the student will

[52] Herbert Weinstock, *Chopin, the Man and his Music* (Alfred a. Knopf, 1959), 213.

have to employ the fingering that is best suited to the individual structure of his/her hand. Cortot provides the following options in his edition of the Op. 25 Etudes: [53]

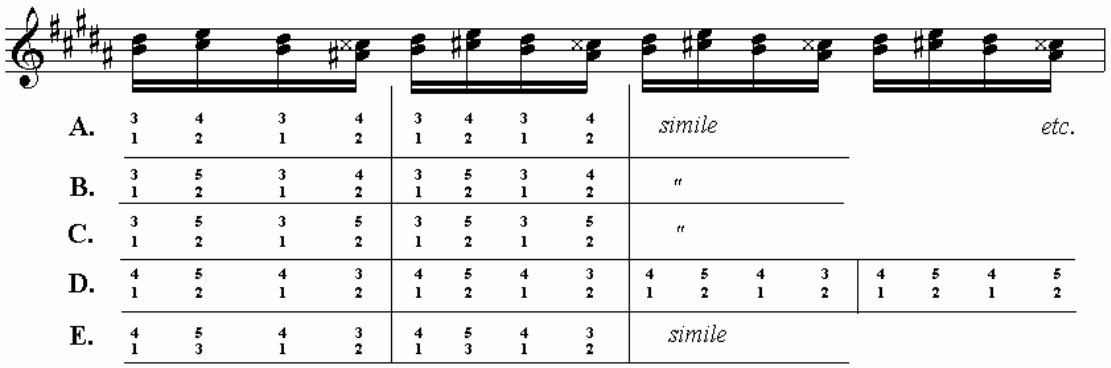


The fingering chart provided by Cortot is an excellent manual for each pianist to determine his/her own fingering. The pianist should thoroughly attempt every pattern to find the combination that not only feels most comfortable, but also provides the most even tone. Evenness in tone is especially important because Chopin requests the right hand to be legato. In double notes, the legato effect depends not so much on the actual and strict binding of the two voices, but on the evenness of the tones between the thirds. Cortot further mentions that 'the student should indeed keep in mind that using a more difficult fingering usually ensures greater firmness of execution.'[54] Once the pianist decides on a fingering, he/she should practice with the particular fingering countless times until finger strokes settle in evenly. This process could take weeks, months or even

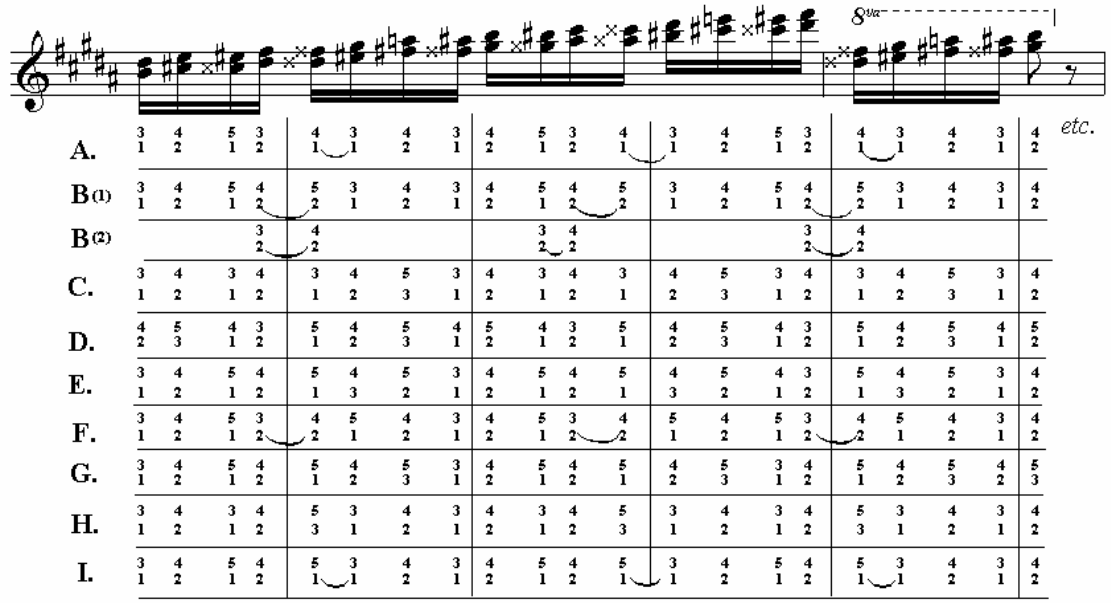
[53] Cortot, 39.
[54] Cortot, 40.

years. The same care in choosing fingerings should be taken in other sections of the Etude, including the ascending and descending chromatic third runs, and the various turns in thirds. Cortot also provides detailed finger suggestions for the other sections are also in his edition: [55]

For bar 4, and similar passages (bars 8-20-24 and 36)



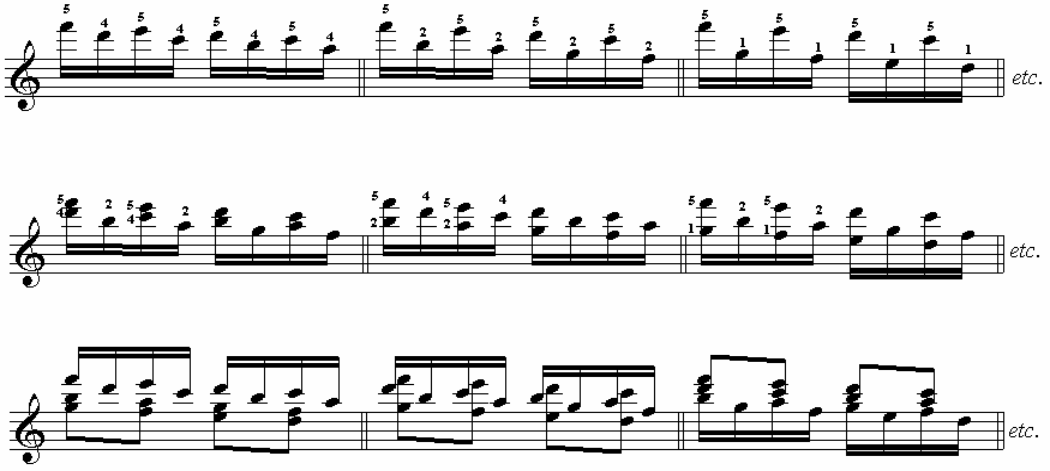
For bars 5 and 6, and similar. The following fingering may be applied to all chromatic ascending scales in minor thirds.



[55] Cortot, 39.

In the preceding example, letter A of the ascending chromatic thirds is Chopin's own fingering suggestion.

In mm. 27-34, Chopin uses a descending seventh chord sequence in the right hand, with each chord separated into two groups of thirds. Because these seventh chords are divided into two thirds which do not lie on top of each other, the pianist can now use the forearm rotation technique. The first pattern, in mm. 27-28, uses exclusively the white notes. In his edition, Cortot goes into great detail to suggest exercises to handle these measures. Here are three of his suggested exercises: [56]



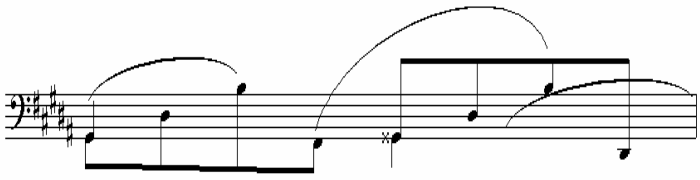
Yet for one reason or another, he does not do the same for mm. 29-34, which are the more difficult passages. Because mm. 27-28 use exclusively white notes, the student can use forearm rotation with minimum movement. However, in mm. 29-34, many black notes occur in the pattern, which forces the hands to go back and forth on the keys. The

[56] Cortot, 42.

top part of the chord, with its switching from black to white notes, does not create as much of a problem as does the bottom part of the right hand, for the pianist can simply use the fifth finger on the white notes and the fourth finger on the black notes on the top part of the chords. However, for the bottom part of the seventh chord, the pianist must use the thumb on both the black and white notes. Because of the length of the thumb, the right hand (and the left hand in mm. 31-34) is forced to travel back and forth to the inner part of the keys close to the fallboard of the piano. A solution to this problem is to use the entire hand exclusively on the inner part of the keys. Practicing carefully on the inner part of the white notes along with the black notes will help to minimize excessive movements. In order to play on the inner part of the keys, the wrists must now be slightly higher to avoid running into some of the black notes, yet not too high to cause tension during forearm rotation. With this in mind, the pianist would be wise to apply the suggestions by Cortot in mm.27-28 to mm. 29-34.

Whereas most of the attention should be taken for the technical challenges of the right hand, the pianist must not forget the underlying melody provided by the left hand. Chopin takes great care in marking specific articulations for the left hand and how the left hand melody should come through. For example, Bailie comments 'note the way that the left hand slur from the fourth and eighth notes of mm. 3 and 4, i.e. on the 'upbeat', to the main *alla breve* beats, creating a series of overall upward sweeps:' [57]

[57] Bailie, 433.



By having the slurs start on the fourth and the eighth notes, the musical flow is altered because the slurs do cause an extra lean towards those beats.

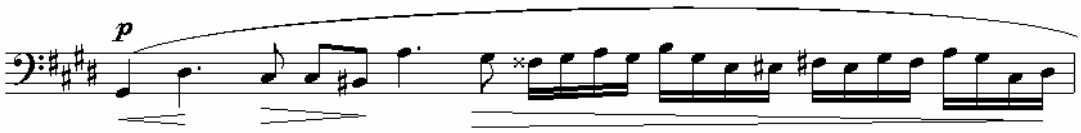
In m. 5, Chopin writes a series of descending eighth-note chords as counterpoint to the ascending thirds of the right hand. For these, Cortot suggests many various rhythmic exercises and articulations. While his exercises do yield some good, they seem excessive. With respect to voicing, the pianist should simply bring out the descending top note of the chords while being true to the slur. As for the suggested articulations in Cortot's edition, Chopin would have written such indications had he so desired. The one aspect of Cortot's exercise that should be considered is the decrescendo he suggests for the left hand in m. 6. Because the right hand's ascending line ends after one beat in m. 6, the left hand plays its descending line by itself for the remainder of the measure. Also, because it is the left hand that finishes this particular phrase, the line should die away to finish the phrase.

Op. 25, No. 7

The seventh Etude of Op. 25 is often referred to as the 'Cello' Etude due to the sorrowful song-like quality of the left hand. Chopin's admiration for the Cello seemed obvious since the cello was virtually the only other instrument for which he wrote. Yet such a title can be misleading to the performer. Cortot's edition 'warns the performer against any summary conception that might lead him to emphasize only the figure of the bass, either by playing with too much feeling, or exaggerated volume of sound, while confining the right hand part to a discreet accompaniment.'[58] While most will agree that the main melody does lie in the left hand, one must be careful not to ignore the counterpoint, which begins in m. 2 at the top of the right hand. As Weinstock says 'One melody begins after the Introduction; the other – its fraternal, but not identical twin – begins in the topmost voice of the RH, in the second measure. The result is complex musical poetry of an exalted and heart-shaking sort.[59]

One of the most challenging aspects of this Etude is to express the contours of the melody properly. For instance, the introduction comprises several changes of melodic direction and specific dynamic instructions:

[58] Cortot, 48.
[59] Weinstock, 214.

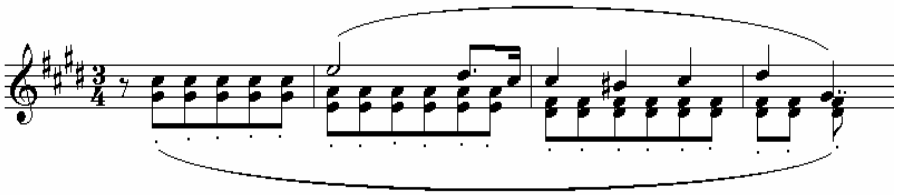


The opening starts with a simple leap of a perfect fifth, supported by crescendo marking. The leap is then countered by a descending line with the next three notes, which are supported by a decrescendo. Afterwards, the line leaps up a diminished seventh with no crescendo to support it. Such phrases seem much more common in the string repertoire than the piano repertoire. The opening takes on a completely different meaning when one hears it played on a cello due to how long notes speak through a bowed instrument. Throughout this Etude, one should either have a good cellist play the left hand line for him or imagine hearing this melody being played on a cello. If one can allow oneself to visualize aurally the lifts up to the high notes and maintain the tones of the long notes, one's success at shaping this opening will be greatly enhanced.

Along the same lines, starting from m. 1, the melodic lines in both hands should be practiced separately with the closest scrutiny. While the left hand should receive a great amount of attention, the right hand countermelody should also receive equal attention, just not equal volume. Cortot mentions that 'the real technical interest afforded by this study rests on a proper distribution of the tone-value of the two melodies, and on the exact quality of touch required for binding – though not blending – the notes together

while retaining to each its expressive individuality.'[60] With this in mind, the right hand now becomes the more challenging hand technically. Not only does the right hand need to be expressive with its counter melody with the top fingers of the hand, it also needs to maintain the inner rhythmic ostinatos with the bottom part of the hand. If one were to view this Etude as a string quartet, the right hand would be responsible for all of the instruments except the cello.

To assist with the right hand, one might consider the slightest portatos on each of the inner eighth-note voices. Yet the portatos should only be relative to the length of the note. In order to maintain the legato, the fingers should always remain in contact with the keys. Because the performer's concentration is focused on the outer melodies, the inner voices are often left unattended, which might be left to bump along at random. Therefore, the pianist would be wise to practice the right hand separately and with great care so that the two voices can be distinguished. One way to make a distinction between the voices in the right hand is to use different articulations in the two voices. In this way, the pianist will add another feature to differentiate the voices:



[60] Cortot, 48.

Bailie mentions that the inner eighth-note voices serve two principal functions essential to the framework of the piece. Bailie suggests 'they provide a quiet and persistent inner rhythmic ostinato (it will be seen that they are present in some form almost continuously throughout the piece), and they provide a continual harmonic 'ballast' between the two melody lines.'[61] Hence, they serve a very important role for the entire Etude, acting as the ever-present inner pulse. The inner voices, however, should never interfere with the two principal voices. Cortot offers the following distinctions among the voices:

Upper melodic line : ***mp*** *penetrating*
Accompaniment : ***pp*** *but well-sustained*
Lower melodic line : ***mf*** *eloquent* [62]

The dynamics provided by Cortot are a good guideline for the majority of the Etude. However, during mm. 21-27, when the left hand begins its improvisatory sections, the louder dynamics should occasionally switch over to the top melody line so that it can balance well with the much busier melody in the bass. Moreover, during these improvisatory runs in the left hand, the pianist should replace the full sound with a sound far less pronounced, produced by the hand merely gliding over the keys. A good approach to this section is to imagine how the notes would sound if all the notes of the runs were to be played on a cello with a single bow stroke.

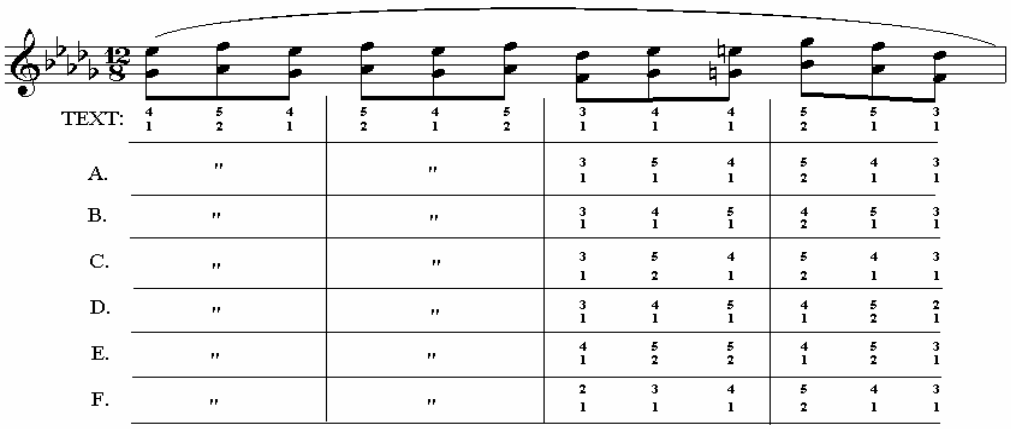
[61] Bailie, 436.
[62] Cortot, 49.

Op. 25, No. 8

Similar to Op. 10, No. 10, Op. 25, No. 8 is also comprised mostly of sixths. But in purely technical terms this is an even more formidable study. For one thing, both hands proceed mainly in double notes. For another, 'the right remains constantly in the 'extended' position necessary for the continuous, long phrases in sixths, without the opportunity to 'retract' as it can in Op. 10 No. 10.'[63] Furthermore, like Op. 25 No. 6, the continuous double notes force the pianist to spend a significant amount of time figuring out fingerings. In all, unless the pianist's hands are absolutely supple around the knuckle area, the right hand of this Etude will require a great deal of work to perform the study at its proper tempo.

As he does with No. 6, Cortot provides several fingering suggestions for the continuous double notes in this Etude. Here are his suggestions for the first measure of the study: [64]

[63] Bailie, 440.
[64] Cortot, 53.

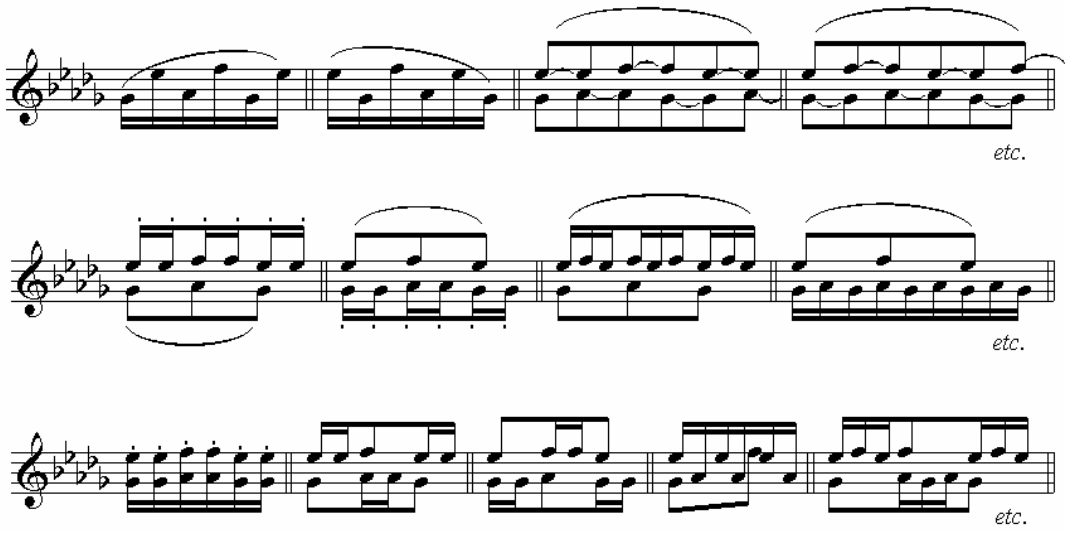


Cortot provides similar fingering charts for several other bars in the Etude, including suggestions for the difficult chromatic run in mm. 32-33. The pianist would be wise to read through all of his fingering suggestions, paying more attention to the ones that feel particularly comfortable.

One interesting facet of Cortot's fingerings is how often he advises the same finger to repeat the next note. Because most of the right hand is to be played legato, the pianist must be very skilled at playing legatos with double notes. As a rule, if both notes cannot be connected through fingering, then the pianist should make sure that at least one of the two notes is connected while the other note produces the slightest gap between the notes. This rule also applies to any fingering that requires difficult crossover fingerings, such as when the fourth finger of the right hand crosses over the fifth finger. Moreover, the wrist must always stay supple yet stable during these runs. It must stay flexible

enough for the hand to move in and out of the black keys yet stable enough not to produce extra motions.

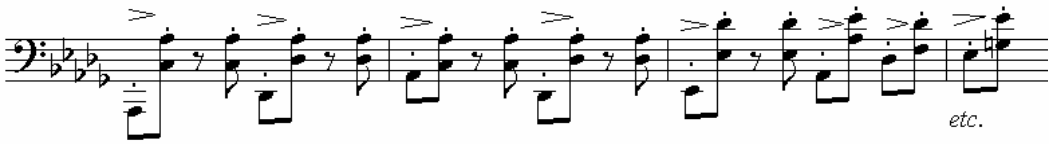
The next focus for the pianist should be placed on gliding the hands evenly while playing the continuous sixths. For playing double notes and chords, Chopin demanded that the notes be struck strictly simultaneously.[65] Because playing sixths requires the hand to stretch a bit, consecutive sixths sometimes cause the double notes to fall unevenly. Furthermore, some of the more obscure fingerings do not allow the hand to balance properly. Therefore, the pianist will prepare himself well for this Etude by playing various exercises designed to assist in playing sixths, particularly the exercises provided by Cortot: [66]



[65] Frederic Chopin, *Etudes,* ed. By Carl Mikuli (Leipzig: F. Kistner, 1879. Reprint, New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1949), 4.
[66] Cortot, 55.

These exercises not only get the hands accustomed to the various chords, but also help develop a balance within the right hand. Further, the first exercise listed here helps the pianist with gliding the hand across the keyboard.

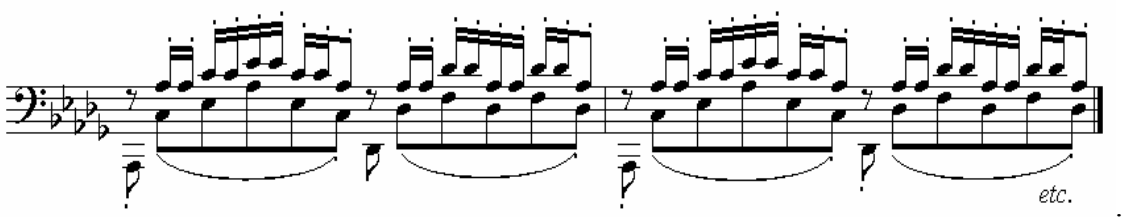
Although not as difficult, the left hand should also be studied with as much care as the right hand. Although the left hand also contains many double notes, it is not limited only to sixths. In addition, in most measures, the left hand starts with a single staccato bass note. Because of the large leap from this single note, the left hand can cause the right hand to wait, causing a disruption to the rhythmic flow. To avoid the interruption, the pianist should keep in mind to jump off the bass note in the direction of the chord. Along the same line, the double note preceding the bass note should also contain the same kind of leap, this time towards the bass note. The following exercise will help the pianist execute this technique:



The small decrescendos are placed so that the pianist treats the consecutive eighth notes as if they are two-note slurs. On the other hand, the staccatos are placed on all of the eighth notes so that the leap to the next note or notes occurs rapidly

Another problem arising in the left hand is the excessive use of the thumb. Many of the double notes in the left hand involve the thumb in the top voice. Since making a

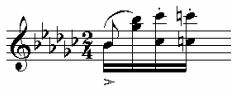
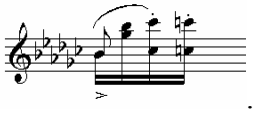
smooth legato while playing consecutive thumbs is quite challenging, the pianist might practice this exercise:



The most important aspect of this exercise is to keep the bottom voice of the double notes legato. This exercise can apply to all measures that start with a staccato bass note. Although staccatos are marked for the top voice, the pianist should still try to limit the gap between two notes. Instead of playing the traditional staccato, simply let the finger be softly pushed back with the key.

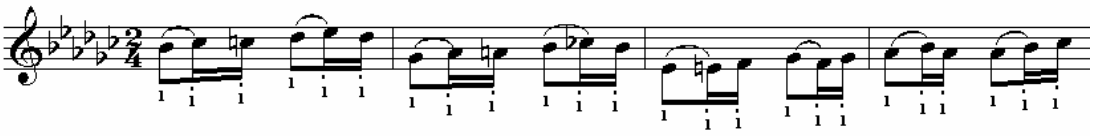
J. Op. 25, No. 9

The shortest of all of Chopin's Studies, this Etude is playfully known as the "Butterfly". Cortot remarks that 'this study demands a refined, humorous, and somewhat carefree performance.'[67] Although based entirely on a single motif, this Etude, like all of Chopin Etudes, presents its own set of various challenges.

To begin, the pianist needs to observe the articulations in the right hand. In the opening bar, Baillie remarks that the right hand is often misunderstood by students (and also in some old editions). The articulation shown is not  but the less obvious, more difficult  .[68] The motif would be much simpler to perform in the former maneuver, for playing it incorrectly allows the pianist to play a two-note slur, a very familiar down-up gesture. However, by carrying the slur to the third sixteenth note, the hand must transfer the weight through an extra sixteenth note. Having the slur going to the third sixteenth becomes especially difficult when performing this study at the suggested metronome marking of a quarter note equaling 112.

[67] Cortot, 59.
[68] Bailie, 443.

Yet the task becomes a bit simpler if one observes Chopin's markings. Chopin marks an accent on every beat from mm. 1-4, allowing the pianist to put weight on the thumb. Leaning on the thumb will allow an easier springboard to the third sixteenth, provided the second sixteenth note is played lightly and legato. To assist with this technique, the pianist might try practicing the thumb alone:



For mm. 5-7, the thumb no longer plays the downbeat of every measure as Chopin reverses the direction of the first two sixteenth notes of each measure. The pianist must still put weight on the main beat and play the thumb lightly and legato. To assist with this section, Chopin adds in specific pedal markings beginning in measure 5.

In mm. 9-16, Chopin excludes the accents and adds in swells, which stretch across four-measure phrases. The same technique from the beginning measures can apply here, with the exception that the weight on the main beats must now be controlled in accordance with the hairpins.

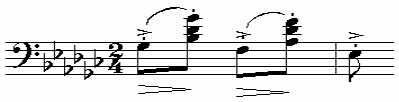
In mm. 17-23, the pianist cannot rely on the weight of the downbeat. Yet the gestures used in the opening still hold true. Since the technique used to accent the thumb

involved the forearm rotation, the pianist uses less rotation to play the main beats of these bars. With enough practice, the gestures to play these motifs become self-generating.

The remainder of the Etude, on a whole, does not introduce any new technical demands for the right hand. There are, however, a few exceptions. For instance, what started as a very light-hearted motif in the beginning returns in m. 25 with markings (forte and marcato) requiring a heavier statement. One must be careful, however, not to be too heavy here as m. 25 serves as the beginning to a gradual build-up that culminates in m. 33 with very pronounced fortissimo and appassionato markings. Furthermore, the combination of a loud dynamic with a challenging technique often results in stiffness of the arm. Although the right hand needs to play at a louder volume, the pianist must maintain the gestures from before and merely produce a louder but similar character.

Another new character, although brief, appears from m. 46 to the end. For the first time in the Study, Chopin uses a slur that covers more than three sixteenth notes. That the motif here does not contain any octaves helps the pianist with fingerings. These last few bars are the only section in the study where the right hand does not use the same technical gesture as before. Instead, one must be sure not to make the last two sixteenth notes of the group staccatos.

The left hand at a glance does not seem to showcase any major complexities. For the most part, the left hand notes contain only staccatos and no accents. Even so, the left hand is often played incorrectly: [69]



The reason for this common mistake is due to the right hand. Because of the accent on the first sixteenth, along with the staccato in the third sixteenth of the right hand, the left hand can be easily influenced into making two note-slurs. To avoid this mistake, it is a good plan to study the Etude's left hand first. Be sure to avoid any accents or slurs, and use every note to spring to the following note. Afterwards, when putting the hands together, be sure the articulations between the two hands are played correctly.

[69] Bailie, 443.

Op. 25, No. 10

The tenth Etude in Op. 25 is a study centered on octave playing. Even for the most technically advanced players, octave playing for a prolonged period can be very tiring. Increasing the difficulty, all of the octaves in this Etude are to be played legato, which prevents the pianist from bouncing the hands from one octave to another. Moreover, in many sections, the pianist must also concern himself with additional voices, which must be carried through the octave passages. In all, Op. 25 No. 10 requires the highest level of technical skill.

One of the first challenges of this Etude is to realize the role of the pianist's wrists. Not having loose wrists can cause tightness immediately. Because pianists use the wrist as a point in the arm to release tension, it must stay flexible throughout the Etude. If not, the tension can rise rapidly through the arm and cause the pianist to use the shoulders to play the octaves, which will cause not only excessive movement, but also rapid fatigue. Therefore, the first rule the pianist must keep in mind for this study is to limit the movements only to the wrists. However, this can cause some problems with playing the octaves legato. To assist with the legato playing, the pianist should map out a plan consisting of fingerings suited to his hands, carefully placed articulations, and slight touches of the pedal.

To begin, the pianist can use the fourth and fifth fingers to maintain the legato when the octaves are switching from black to white octaves and vice versa. However, there are many patterns that require the pianist to play two successive white-key octaves. In the same vein, the thumbs in both hands are always responsible for the inner doublings of the octaves. Although using the fourth and fifth fingers will help with the legato feel, the pianist must ultimately depend on the wrists to execute this Etude. Cortot distinguished three categories of wrist movements required for perfect legato playing of octaves:

1. Suspension-movements, i.e. alternate raising and lowering of the wrist, the fingers which are playing the octaves remaining on the keys.
2. Backward and forward-movements, from the black keys to the white ones – and vice versa.
3. Lateral shifting-movements, up or down the keyboard.[70]

The second and the third types mentioned by Cortot are without doubt important concepts to follow when playing this study. The first type, however, does bring up some questions. For instance, does the pianist use the raised wrist for the black-note octaves and the lowered wrist for the white-note octaves? Further, does the raising and lowering of the wrist apply to both notes of the octave interval?

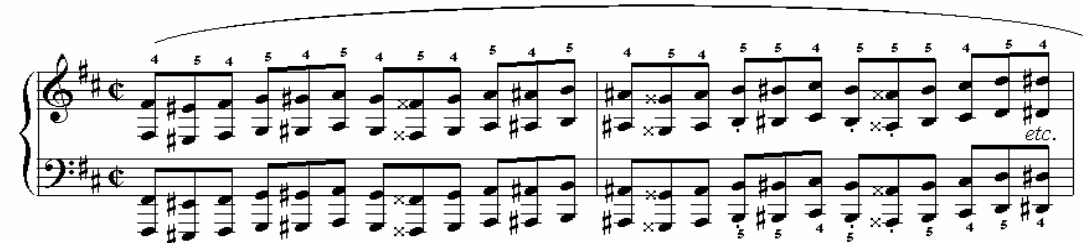
Cortot further explains this type of legato later by stating that 'it is exactly suited to the thumb-part of the octaves and for the illusion to be complete, it is necessary to

[70] Cortot, 63.

balance the tone of the thumb with that of the finger-part of the octaves which can be fingered – and consequently played with real legato'.[71] Does this mean that the raising and lowering of the wrist only apply to the top note of the octave? Following Cortot's suggestions might assist some pianists, but for others, his suggestions might create more problems caused by excessive movements of the wrist.

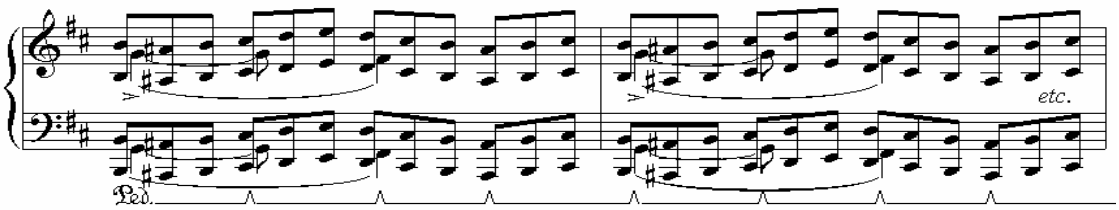
To play these octaves successfully, the wrist movements must happen naturally. For those with a big enough hand span, switching between fourth and fifth fingers must be done without being conscious of the wrist, yet the wrist should always stay loose. Furthermore, in order to play these octaves legato, the pianist should depend more on the ability to match the tones of the octaves instead of connecting one of the octave notes with clever fingering. At the rapid tempo suggested by Chopin (half note = 72), a slight staccato should be unnoticed. Author and piano teacher Abby Whiteside mentions 'this Etude is always played (when it is played brilliantly) as nearly staccato as possible. Great speed prevents a time unit between tones, which allows the ear to hear disconnection'.[72] Although Whiteside's suggestions are valid, performing the entire Etude with staccatos seems unnecessary. Instead, the pianist might consider using legato fingerings while utilizing staccatos only when the staccatos are needed due to consecutive white-note octaves. The following is an example to this point:

[71] Cortot, 63.
[72] Whiteside, 67.



The preceding exercise contains staccatos in both hands when successive octaves are played on the white notes. These staccatos are only in place to assist the pianist with fingerings and should not be noticed in performance. At the proper tempo, along with touches of the pedal, the staccatos should not disrupt Chopin's legato marking. The staccatos can be used throughout the study whenever one finds two or more successive white note octaves.

An additional problem in this Etude is the occasional presence of notes in the middle of the octaves. These middle notes are written as half-notes and quarter-notes as though they should be held. However, holding these inner notes is a difficult task, especially for pianists with smaller hands. One should always respect the markings of the composer by trying every way possible to be true to the score. If all else fails, the pianist should look for other ways to be as close as possible to the indicated markings. In mm. 7-8, the held notes suggest a two note slur. Since it is very difficult to hold onto the half note for two full beats, one must resort to other means to connect the two notes, such as the following:

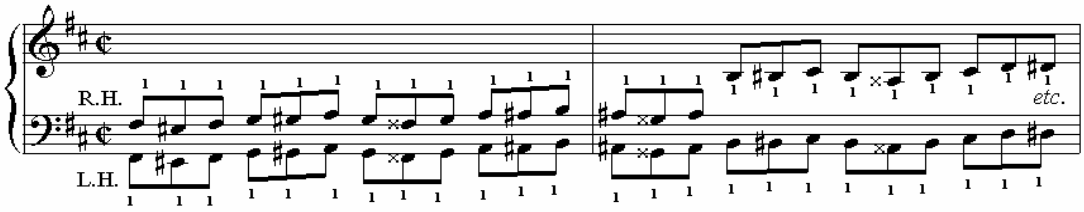


Whiteside states 'what is desired (in the inner notes) is that the tones should be important in sound. It will be the manner of using dynamics which will makes these tones important – not the length of time they are held'.[73] Although Whiteside's statement that the length of time the notes are held is not important is debatable, she does bring up an important point about the dynamics of the inner tones. The most important aspect of the held notes is that the two-note slur is heard among the octaves. Therefore, by changing the pedal at the beginning of the second beat while holding onto the half note, one can create the effect of sustaining the note, allowing the pianist to let go of the note. However, even though the half note is no longer held, one must continue listening to the note all the way to the quarter note in order to create the effect of a two-note slur. Matching the volume of the fading half note to the quarter note should create the effect one desires.

Another aspect to consider for this study is the execution of the thumbs. Most pianists often forget about the thumb when thinking of legato octaves because the thumbs themselves cannot produce a true legato line. Yet if one ignores the roles of the thumbs,

[73] Whiteside, 69.

they can cause the octaves to be non legato. The pianist might try the following exercise throughout the Etude:



Practicing the thumbs alone in this Etude serves many purposes. It allows the pianist to hear the inner voices, which might influence the pianist to play the thumbs differently. Because of the thumbs' short length and their place on the hands, the thumbs might require more movements than the other fingers. However, by raising the wrists slightly higher and straightening the thumbs, the pianist should be able to eliminate unnecessary movements. Further, by playing the thumbs closer to the edge of the black keys, the pianist should be able to attain better legato lines. Practicing the thumbs alone can assist greatly in acquiring legato octaves throughout this study.

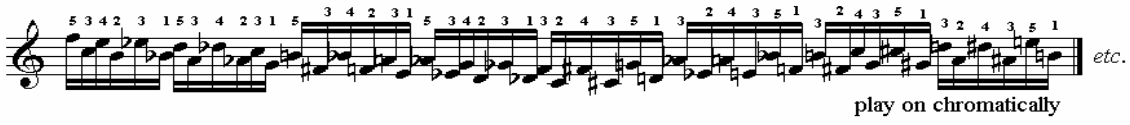
Op. 25, No. 10 is rare in that it is one of only two Etudes from the set (No. 5 being the other) with a contrasting middle section. Although the right-hand remains in octaves, the technical approach should be quite different. Chopin writes the marking *ben legato* for the section. Further, Chopin also suggests fingerings throughout the middle section. For these reasons, the pianist should use a different technique for the octaves. Instead of

depending mostly on wrists, one should depend more on the fingers to create a true legato. While pedal markings are indicated, the pianist should make every effort to create the legato effect with the fingers as well, for using both finger legato and pedal will create a better legato on the whole.

Op. 25, No. 11

The "Winter Wind" Etude is arguably the most difficult Etude of the Op. 25 set. The unruly right hand pattern, which lasts from m. 4 to the end, demands a combination of rapid finger work with a brilliantly controlled forearm rotation. The sound must be furious, yet must never be out of control. The rotation utilizes the thumb often, yet it must never overpower the weaker fingers of the pattern. Moreover, the pianist must be careful not to over-rotate the forearm. Over-rotation will not only cause premature fatigue, but also will generate too much arm weight per note, which may result in uneven notes throughout the right hand pattern. On top of all this, against the fiery right hand the pianist must keep a strong, rhythmic motive of the left hand, which recalls the opening largo theme. The slightest miscalculation, or the slightest lapse in concentration may cause an abrupt interruption to a performance of this Etude.

To conquer this demanding right-hand pattern, which lasts throughout the study, one must first attain even finger strokes throughout the right hand. To assist with this task, Cortot suggests the following exercise: [74]



[74] Cortot, 73.

The exercise should be practiced not only with the written in fingerings but also with fingers 5-2-4-1, 5-3-4-1, 5-2-3-1, 4-2-3-1. In addition, the same exercise should also be practiced again a semi-tone higher. This exercise provides the pianist with an excellent drill that will assist him attain equal strength amongst all fingers. Cortot goes on to suggest several more exercises, specifically targeting thumbs passing under in disjunctive positions, various rhythmic drills, and various finger combinations.

While Cortot does much to express the importance of fingers being even, he lacks greatly explaining the importance of forearm rotation. Besides a small comment on p. 74, Cortot neglects forearm rotation altogether. Yet this study cannot be performed successfully if the pianist depends solely on the fingers. In order to execute the right hand properly, the pianist must be conscious of the correct application of the forearm rotational adjustments – that is, upon the precise timing of the exertions and relaxations of the forearm in its twisting direction.[75] Keys to a proper forearm rotation include a loose but steady wrist, minimum movements by the fingers, and a stable elbow to function as the socket to the forearm. A great resource for attaining proper forearm rotation is *The Nine Steps towards Finger Individualization through Forearm Rotation* by Tobias Matthay. The writings by Matthay cover in detail the correct provisions and applications of forearm rotation.

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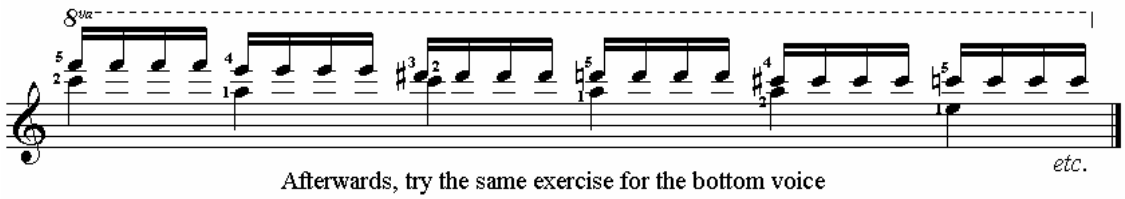
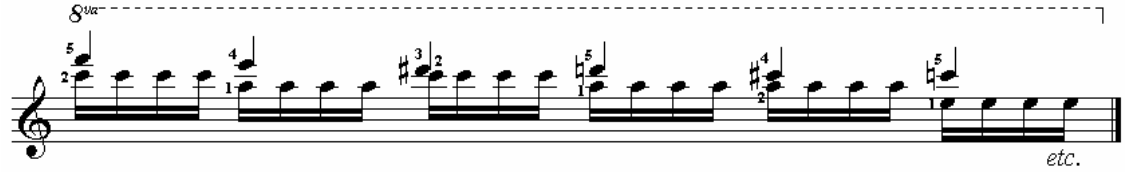
[75] Tobias Matthay, *The Nine Steps Towards Finger Individualization Through Forearm Rotation*. (London: Oxford University Press. 1923). ii.

With a good understanding of Matthay's methods, the pianist can now tackle the demanding right hand of Op. 25, No. 11. The following exercise can assist the pianist in limiting the involvements of the fingers and focusing the movements required by the notes on the socket of the elbow:

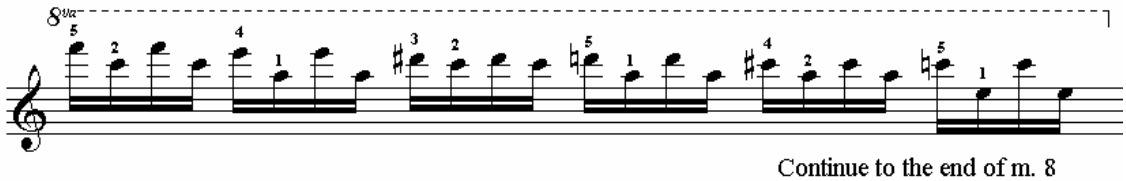


Afterwards, try the same exercise for the bottom voice



In both exercises above, the pianist must follow a couple of simple rules to maximize their effect. First, the voice with the quarter notes must be held and remain stable. Second, the voice with the sixteenth notes must be played exclusively with the wrist, and one should avoid using the fingers as much as possible. Finally, any fingers not being used must stay relaxed on top of the keys.

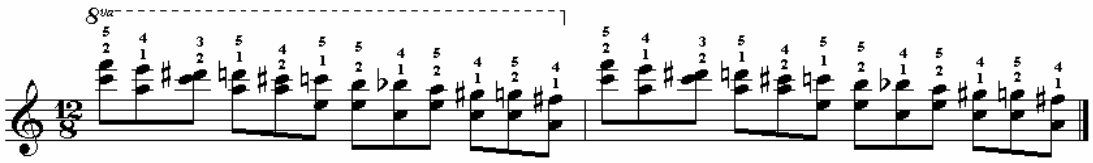
After practicing the previous exercise for a period of time, the pianist should now try the right-hand pattern with forearm rotation in the following manner:



Continue to the end of m. 8

As before, the pianist should try to use exclusively forearm rotation and limit the use of fingers. Further, the pianist should attempt to disperse the amount of weight evenly between both ends of the hand, especially the thumb of the bottom voice. As a solution, the pianist should listen carefully to the descending chromatic line of the top voice.

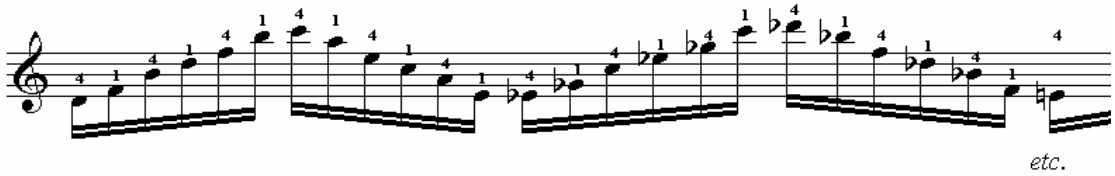
With a solid understanding of the forearm rotation, the pianist should now focus his attention on absorbing the harmonic shapes of the double notes of the right hand. To assist with 'geographic' shapes of the double notes, Bailie suggests the following exercise for the right hand: [76]



Since gaining familiarity with the harmonic shapes pertains to the entire study, Bailie's exercise should be used for the entire Etude. Pay close attention to the awkward shapes of some double notes as well as the double notes that precede and follow it.

The final problem many pianists face in this Etude occurs in the bars in which the thumb passes under disjunctive positions. To assist with this challenge, Cortot suggests the following exercise: [77]

[76] Bailie, 447.
[77] Cortot, 74.



Cortot suggests practicing all the suggested exercises in two different manners: either 'exaggerating the swaying of the hand entailed by the finger-progression – or, on the contrary, endeavoring to keep the hand almost completely motionless, the wrist, however, remaining quite flexible throughout the exercise.'[78] In addition, when the pattern ascends, the pianist must make sure that the hand settles quickly into its new position after the thumb slides under. Likewise, when the pattern is descending, the thumb must move down quickly after the fourth finger crosses over.

[78] Cortot, 74.

Op. 25, No. 12

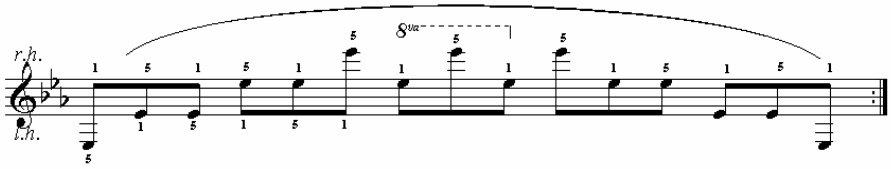
Like the final Etude of Op. 10, Chopin closes Op. 25 with a heroic C-Minor Etude. Due to thunderous waves of arpeggios sweeping the full range of the keyboard, this Etude is nicknamed "The Ocean".

Technically, this arpeggio study is somewhat of a return to the first study of Op. 10, only now involving both hands. Also like Op. 10 No. 1, the motif set by Chopin in the opening measure is maintained to the end. Yet the technical demands of this etude are less challenging than those of Op. 10, No. 1, due to shorter arpeggios, fewer turns, and easier stretches as the hands span only an octave rather than a tenth or more. Further, with the exception of switching the thumb with the fifth finger, the fingerings mostly remain in consecutive order.

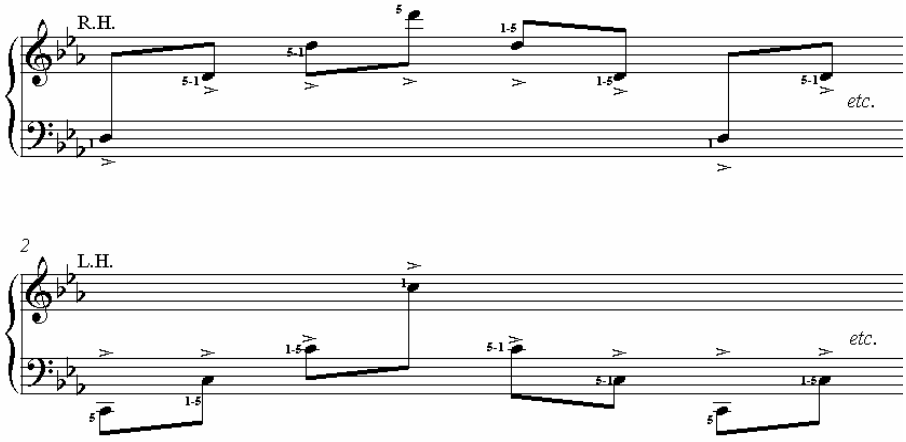
The immediate difficulty presented by this Etude is to produce smooth yet powerful arpeggios with both hands. Both Cortot and Bailie suggest practicing arpeggios using only the root note with the thumb and the fifth finger: [79]

[79] Cortot, 84.

Cortot



Bailie (The Author shows the right hand example using measure 2) [80]



These exercises will be important not only to create a flow but also to help the arm muscles memorize the different ranges of the piano. Moreover, these exercises help even out the volume when playing the same note with both the thumb and the fifth finger. Both Cortot and Bailie suggest adding the third and the fifth to this exercise while applying various rhythmic patterns to these exercises. After becoming fluent with these exercises, the pianist should attempt to attain longer phrases. Although no specific phrase markings over the entire bar are indicated in the opening measures, the accents should create a sense of direction and the pianist should swell and diminish properly according to the music.

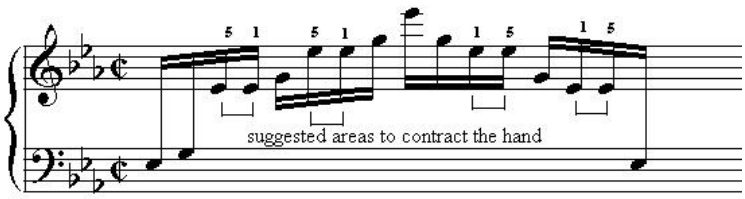
[80] Bailie, 449-450.

Another set of difficulties presented by this Etude involves creating the right pulse while playing the arpeggios. Cortot mentions two levels of difficulty, with the second challenge pertaining to the pianist making the arpeggios sound in groups of four instead of three. This problem is inevitably created by the heaviness of the thumb and how it naturally accents the notes it plays in a large arpeggio group. This problem is not only related to this Etude, but in arpeggio playing in general.

One of the most effective ways to eliminate this problem is verbally to count out to four while practicing this Etude slowly. By practicing in this manner, one will line up "one" with the proper note of the arpeggio. As a result, the only time the pianist accents the thumb will be if the thumb falls with the pulse.

Both Cortot and Bailie present many thorough exercises for this Etude. Yet both of these authors seem to neglect an important technical aspect to this etude. Bailie makes a point about how this etude involves 'expansion and contraction of the hand.'[81] Yet are both movements of the hand really necessary? In measure 1 of the right hand, the repeated E-flats are played with fingers 1 and 5:

[81] Bailie, 449.



After playing the first E-flat with the fifth finger, should the right hand contract to play the second E-flat with the thumb? It seems as though the fifth finger should be close to the thumb as the hand contracts. Yet could one execute this Etude without the contraction? For those pianists whose hands are large enough, keeping the hands open might eliminate unnecessary contractions, hence eliminating unnecessary motions that might hinder the necessary tempo to perform this Etude. Instead, the pianist might consider rolling over the fifth finger while ascending on the arpeggio and rolling over the thumb while descending on the arpeggio. Taking this approach will require a very loose open hand and very advanced forearm rotation. Furthermore, taking this approach will cause the pianist to practice the initial exercises provided by Cortot and Bailie in a different manner.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

Learning an entire set of Chopin Etudes is a tremendous challenge. Before even beginning this task, the pianist must already possess a great deal of knowledge and technical skill. During the learning stage, the pianist must dedicate countless hours of practice, filled mostly with unyielding results. Further, the pianist must be prepared to change his approach at any time during the learning period as different suggestions from various sources are comprehended at different stages of the learning period. Finally, the pianist must be open-minded enough to realize that the end result is only provisional, as various factors, including how one grows as a pianist, contact with new teachers, and newly acquired insights from various authors, will influence how one approaches the Etudes the following time.

Cognizant of the provisional nature of any pedagogical advice, the author nevertheless believes that the principles and exercises presented in the foregoing study will help the advanced pianist overcome the technical challenges in Opus 25 and thereby allow him to focus on matters of musical interpretation. It is the author's own success in tackling this repertory that encourages him to advance such a claim. Of course, the pianist should always keep an eye out for new methods in learning these studies as performers and pedagogues all over the world are constantly searching for new ways to

conquer these studies. Nevertheless, thoughtful practice informed by the advice of Cortot, Bailie, and Whiteside and by the present author's experiences will bring these great pieces within the grasp of the advanced student of piano.

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