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Making sense of Chopin's Etude in E, Op. 10 No. 3

by Roy Howat



E editing all of Chopin's Etudes for the new Peters Chopin edition (*The Complete Chopin: a new critical edition*) has turned into more of a musical adventure than I could have foreseen when I took it on. Given the hundreds of editions of the Etudes already extant, I'd thought we must by now know pretty well all there is to find in these pieces. In fact I've repeatedly been surprised by details still lurking in their original sources. A longer article later this year will range through the Etudes more generally in that regard. My focus here, though, is on one of the most popular yet puzzling Etudes: op. 10 no. 3 in E major.

The piece's *cantabile* opening theme is one of Chopin's best known, to the point of having spawned Victorian parlour ballads (*So still is the night*, etc.). Yet it poses some awkward questions. What's a piece with such a drawn-out start and end doing as an Etude? (It might be seen as a study for singing *legato*, but where then is the difference from most other Chopin pieces?) Above all, why do its outer sections seem so roughly cobbled together with the faster middle portions? Such a perception flies in the teeth of all that's known about how meticulously Chopin thought through the structure and continuity of everything he allowed to be published.

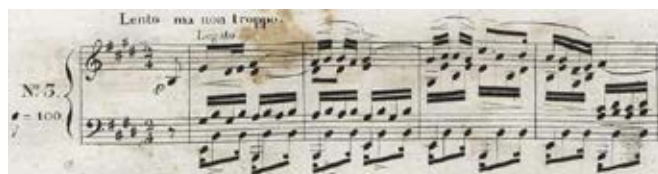
One key to this Etude's musical continuity has long been known, though it poses its own queries: Chopin sent it off to engraving in 1833 with the manuscript tempo heading *Vivace ma non troppo* (Ex. 1a). (The complete manuscript, at the Warsaw Chopin Institute, can be viewed online via www.chopinonline.ac.uk, following the OCVE option.)

Example 1a: Chopin Étude op. 10 no. 3, bars 1–4, *Stichvorlage* autograph used for the first French edition (reproduced courtesy of the Fryderyk Chopin Institute, Warsaw)



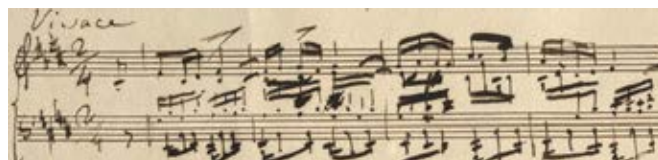
So how did the piece come to sport the *Lento ma non troppo* heading we all know? Only Chopin could have authorised that, in the course of correcting proofs: the first French edition (Ex. 1b) shows the word *Lento* slightly skewed and out of place, obviously added during proof correction to replace *Vivace*.

Example 1b: bars 1–4 in the first French edition (Maurice Schlesinger, 1833)



Might the original *Vivace* have been just a slip of Chopin's pen? It seems not, for the word's every bit as clear (now without *non troppo*) on his preparatory draft of the piece (Ex. 1c).

Example 1c: bars 1–4 in Chopin's preparatory draft (Morgan Library & Museum, New York; reproduced by courtesy of Robin Lehman)



The issues of structure and continuity in this piece are cogently addressed in a recent chapter by John Rink, one of the founding editors of the Peters Complete Chopin (John Rink, 'Chopin's Study in Syncopation', in *Bach to Brahms: Essays on Musical Design and Structure*, ed. David Beach and Yosef Goldenberg; Rochester, 2015, pp. 132–42). As a professionally trained and active pianist reading through scholarly eyes, Rink makes two primary observations that I'd heartily endorse.

The first one is that it's perfectly possible to read *Vivace ma non troppo* and *Lento ma non troppo* as signifying the same (or much the same) tempo here: *Lento* directs attention to the crotchet beat (a not-too-slow 2-in-the-bar), while *Vivace* pinpoints the lively motion and syncopation within that. My guess is that Chopin made the amendment out of fear that *Vivace* might mislead performers into an inappropriately skittish reading, particularly in a context of *Études*. Rink also observes that the only indicated tempo change in the piece is *Poco più animato* at bar 21; even that isn't in either of the manuscripts: again Chopin added it at proof stage. The implication is that the middle section needs only a slight nudge on from the opening tempo, one that Chopin hadn't even felt the need to signal when he first sent off the manuscript.

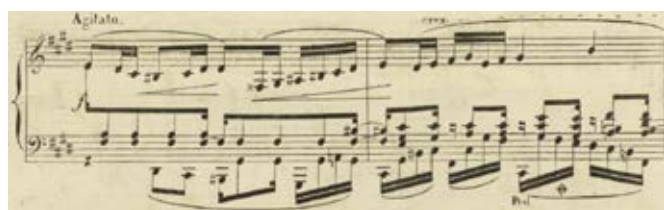
An immediate analogy suggests itself from a related piece in the same key, Chopin's last Nocturne, op. 62 no. 2. The steady tread of its *Lento* opening (Ex. 2a) continues unchanged into a brooding *agitato* central section, the agitation written into the notation (Ex. 2b). The texture here is astonishingly close to the outer sections of op. 10 no. 3, even to the extent of shared accented left-hand syncopations (Ex. 2c).

Example 2: Chopin Nocturne in E, op. 62 no. 2 (1st French edition, Brandus, 1846)

a. bars 1–4



b. bars 40–41



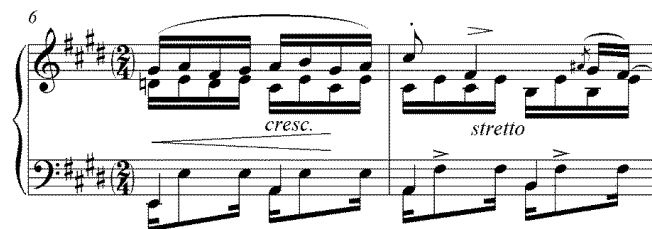
c. bars 44–45



One perceivable distinction is that the opening of op. 10 no. 3 doesn't exude the same dark urgency as the middle of op. 62 no. 2. In that regard the start of op. 10 no. 3 can arguably imply a slightly broader pacing than the middle of op. 62 no. 2 – but not much, for reasons that should soon be clear. The most immediate one is the Etude's obvious vocal conception – like virtually everything by Chopin, as with Mozart. But vocal in what character? A leisurely or anthem-like drawing-room ballad, or something more riveting? Chopin's constant modelling from Italian opera suggests an answer that's underlined by the Etude's opening left hand syncopations, suggesting something a bit breathless in what's implicitly being sung. (Few performances of the Etude make anything of these syncopated left-hand accents, for the immediate reason that too slow a tempo makes them intrusive and irrelevant.)

The other giveaway vocal detail here in Chopin's *Stichvorlage* manuscript is the unmistakable *staccato* dot on the opening melody's top C sharp in bar 7 (Ex. 3). Although some late nineteenth-century editions (by Breitkopf, whose editors had access to Chopin's autograph) made bold to print that dot, it didn't last long, and I don't know of any current critical edition that even mentions it. Presumably that's because it makes no sense at a funereally slow tempo. Let the piece flow in 2/4, though, and it explains itself as a vocal *staccato* (literally 'separate'), meaning a lift, without *legato* or *portamento* down to the following F#. That opening melody's now starting to make more operatic sense.

Example 3. Op. 10 no. 3, bars 6–7 with Chopin's RH manuscript *staccato*



Why that *staccato* isn't in the first edition would involve a longer debate; in brief here, that first edition (as is well known) was very incompetently engraved, and simply omits a large percentage of Chopin's dynamics and articulation. Unless Chopin's corrected proofs should ever surface, we'll never know for certain what happened.

In that respect it's also salutary to compare Examples 1a and 1b above for their variants of articulation and mark-up. From my experience of comparing manuscripts with the first edition in op. 10, here are a few of my suspicions:

- 1) The engraver probably moved the initial *p* indication to the opening upbeat (rather than where Chopin wrote it) because it would look neater. That overlooks Chopin's unprecedentedly ergonomic use of hands and fingers, and how often he starts a piece at the strong end of the hand with a horn-like dominant upbeat (like Ex. 1) which then passes to the outer fingers. That odd-looking manuscript slur from the opening upbeat in Ex. 1a (which doesn't really lead anywhere) could then make sense as a reverberation (or *legato* overlap) tie, though no edition has yet taken the initiative of treating it thus. (It would then exactly mirror the start of the A minor Etude op. 25 no. 4, whose autograph does the same upside-down, with what is unmistakably a level reverberation tie from the LH dominant upbeat to the barline. Most editions misprint that as a slur to the ensuing bass A.)
- 2) The more detailed dynamics and articulation in Ex. 1b, relative to Ex. 1a, possibly result from the engraver missing many of Chopin's original markings (as he did in the piece's closing section), leaving Chopin to mark it up again from scratch while correcting proofs. What particularly interests me here is how prescriptively Ex. 1a conveys just what we need to do. In bars 2 and 3, for example, the RH can't play a literal *legato* across notes 1–2, both of which need the 5th finger: the vital instruction there is the agogic accent at the 2nd quaver. The later mark-up of Ex. 1b maps out more descriptively how the theme should sound – something Chopin may have felt necessary for farther-flung buyers of the edition who would never hear him play. That fussier notation of Example 1b may have inadvertently contributed to slowing the piece down over the years.
- 3) It's not clear whether the first edition's hairpin swell across bar 3 beat 1 was specially designed to replace the manuscript's swell across the entire bar; the crucial point, though, is that we can play one *or* the other, not both simultaneously. I make that point because of the various critical editions that print both together on the same system. (Chopin may have intended the *diminuendo* hairpin across beat 2 to be deleted, or perhaps the engraver just failed to print the original *crescendo* hairpin across beat 1, prompting Chopin to add the shorter swell across beat 1. We can only guess now: an almost unbelievable number of things went wrong in that first edition.)

That either-or approach is central to the new Peters Chopin, whose core philosophy is NOT to mix different versions of a piece in the same text. It's surprising how many critical editions of Chopin mix and conflate Chopin's two quite disparate redactions of these opening bars. The new Peters Chopin will show one version above or below the other whenever it's important to see both. In this Etude I think it's especially vital to be able to read each version in the context of the other.

John Rink's other vital observation about op. 10 no. 3 is the importance of rhythmic coherence in bar 46 (Ex. 4), where it's long been traditional to park for a picnic on the first chord, before haring off from chord 2 as if we'd just spotted a crocodile by the barbecue. It not only disconnects the ensuing *bravura* sequence but also makes it sound banal if its essential syncopation is obscured. Again I couldn't agree more with John Rink's observation, not only for its local import but also as part of the long structural line Chopin is clearly drawing through the whole piece. As Rink notes, the syncopation here is of a piece (literally) with the syncopation in bar 1, and the listener should hear that.

Example 4: Etude op. 10 no. 3, bars 46–47
(staccato wedges from Chopin's autograph)



One other detail may have been picked up by observant readers: what about that metronome marking in Ex. 1b (quaver = 100)? It's a revealing indication of the piece's history that the editorial commentary in the 1949 'Paderewski' edition dismisses it as 'too fast'. In fact it strikes me as on the slow side (I'm inclined to start the piece at around crotchet = 60-66). Chopin's metronome indications are a complex topic, which the follow-up article to this will take up; but here in brief are the main contextual issues:

- 1) Although some of Chopin's op. 10 metronome indications are playable at a push, they often do the music's finer points few favours, are sometimes plainly impossible, and arguably make better musical sense if generally read about four to five notches slower (suggesting possible mechanical or calibration error in the metronome Chopin was using).
- 2) Op. 10 no. 3 (Ex. 1a above) is one of only three Etudes from op. 10 and op. 25 whose metronome marking doesn't appear in a manuscript: it must have been added at proof, raising the possibility of a misprint, particularly as it's the only metronome marking in those 24 Etudes that could be argued as being too slow rather than too fast.
- 3) It makes little sense to beat this Etude by the quaver (why didn't Chopin express it as crotchet = 50?). Taking the piece instead by its 2/4 metre allows agogic leaning on the RH accents within the broader beat, which guards against scrambling or flippancy.
- 4) Might quaver = 100 here thus be a misprint for *crotchet* = 100? Although that in turn is clearly too fast for the piece, it would be more in line with other manifestly overfast markings in op. 10, notably the first edition's dotted crotchet = 69 for Etude no. 6.

As it is, most composers are on record as regarding such markings as mere guides, and I recommend experimenting at practice (as boldly as one likes within musical reason).

Another essential piece of context here, incidentally, is that the first German and English editions of op. 10 were engraved from proofs of the French edition, thus perpetuating (alas) its many inaccuracies and omissions. Chopin proofed only the French edition, the other two being proofed by in-house editors, who corrected numerous missing flats and sharps but also added a few patently wrong ones (some of which are still piously played today). The first German edition incidentally printed crotchet (not quaver) = 100 for op. 10 no. 3, presumably on the initiative of Kistner's house editor in Leipzig. The article to follow will trace more of those issues through Chopin's collected Etudes.



Roy Howat at the EPTA conference 2017

Roy Howat can be heard (and seen) performing op. 10 no. 3 live, at the Crane SUNY School of Music, NY, in March 2017, as the first item at <https://vimeo.com/208360471/6fa24926cf>.

He holds the posts of Keyboard Research Fellow Royal Academy of Music and Senior Research Fellow at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and is well known for his critical editions of Debussy, Fauré and Chabrier.

He also co-translated and edited Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's classic *Chopin, pianist and teacher* (Cambridge UP, paperback). Among his present projects are Chopin's Etudes for *The Complete Chopin: A New Critical Edition* (Peters Edition).