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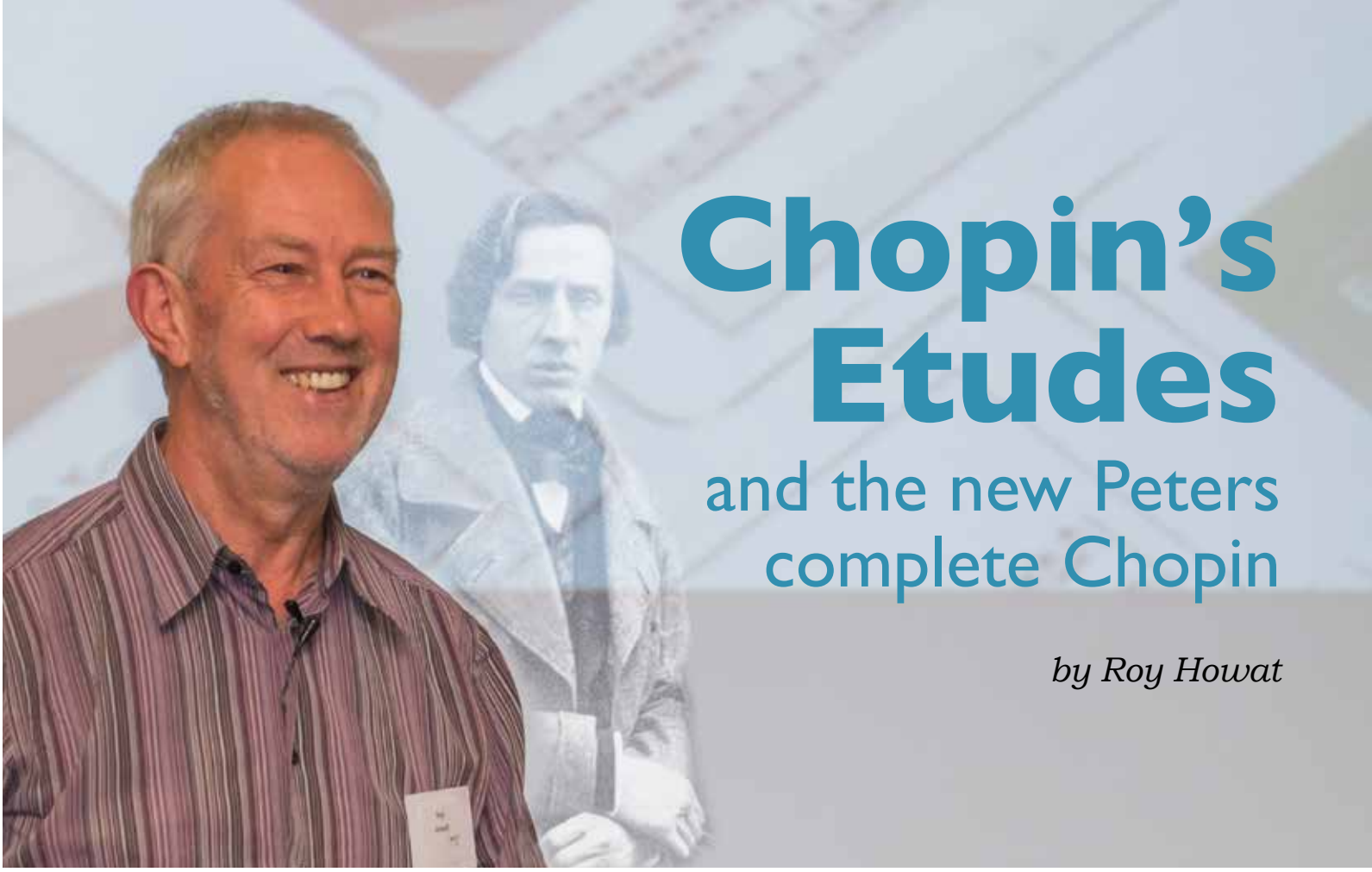

Chopin's Etudes

and the new Peters complete Chopin

by Roy Howat

In last March's *Piano Journal* I wrote about tempo and rhythm in Chopin's E major Etude op. 10 no. 3. This follow-up is about more varied issues that have emerged in the course of editing Chopin's Etudes for the Peters Edition *Complete Chopin: a new critical edition* (six volumes of which are already in print).

Given the hundreds of editions that already exist, including the recent Polish national edition masterminded by Jan Ekier, we might query the point of yet another one. An immediate answer is that the original sources still amazingly bring up details and corrections never printed, or which have oddly vanished from modern editions. (My earlier article mentioned an instance of the latter in op. 10 no. 3.) A broader answer comes from what Paul Badura-Skoda observed in his 1973 Wiener Urtext edition of Chopin's Etudes: for any work by Chopin there's often 'not a single Urtext, but at least two, sometimes even three or four different ones, all on a par with each other.'

Badura-Skoda navigates that thicket with an array of text annotations and footnotes on the page, inviting performers to experiment. Other editions mostly offer a single musical reading, usually compiled by combining the best-seeming readings from different sources. The results inevitably differ vastly, even across critical editions. The new Peters edition – planned and overseen by Chopin scholars John Rink, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Jim Samson and Christophe Grabowski, with different editors for each volume – is based on a new premise of making the whole process transparent: a single principal source is identified for each piece and a critical edition made of it (correcting obvious errors but otherwise not interfering). Any useful variants from other sources are then shown on *ossia* staves or in footnotes or the critical commentary. Details from other accredited sources like extra dynamics, articulation, pedalling or phrasing can be shown in parentheses, provided they're compatible with what's around them. (If they're part of a different larger pattern, the whole larger pattern can be shown as a variant.)

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Performers then have freedom to experiment and explore, in full awareness of where we're navigating from, to or through at any point. An immediate benefit is that it instantly shows how Chopin varies articulation and phrasing across reprises and parallel passages, except when there's obvious logic to maintaining a pattern more exactly.

If that variety reflects Chopin's restless creative spirit – he could never write out anything the same way twice – publishing circumstances also played a part. In order to protect his copyright and pre-empt pirate editions, Chopin had most of his works simultaneously published in France, England and the German states (or Austria), a process that entailed preparing the three editions for publication on the same day. For many works including the op. 10 Etudes, that was done by first engraving and proofing the French edition, then sending its final proofs to Leipzig and London to serve for the German and English engravings.

The main problem there – and some of Chopin's letters wax indignant about it – was the ineptitude of the French engraver, who left the first French edition teeming with inaccuracies which then infected the English and German editions. For the op. 25 Etudes Chopin tried to avert that by having his assistants Julian Fontana and Adolf Gutmann make manuscript copies of his autograph to serve for the

German and English editions; the various manuscripts were sent off after Chopin had checked the copies.

This ruse in turn went partly awry when Chopin, in the course of checking the copies, started tinkering again and revising them. Some revisions he managed to collate across the copies and work into the French edition, but by no means all of them; then he tipped the cart yet again by marking different revisions into proofs for the French edition! Nor could Fontana and Gutmann always work out exactly where Chopin's slurs were meant to start and end. The op. 25 Etudes therefore appeared in three editions (French, German, English) that all show variants of pitch, texture, phrasing, dynamics, pedalling and fingering. As a further complication, Chopin would then mark revisions or corrections on printed copies (usually of the French or German edition) that pupils brought to lessons. These sometimes matched, but sometimes didn't, revisions made for reprints of the French edition.

What is an editor to do with all that? The Peters approach comes into its own here, for any attempt to mix versions very quickly becomes a slippery slope. Again it's best to see immediately how one particular source goes, while having all relevant options in front of us. It does mean performers may find some of their (and the editor's) favourite readings on an *ossia* staff, but that reflects how Chopin worked. Most importantly it prompts us to think inventively as we use the edition.

An essential element of flexibility in the Peters edition is that the main source doesn't have to be the same for every piece. So if one Etude from op. 25 shows Chopin's most careful revision in (say) the French edition, but another Etude suggests he skipped through proofs and put more effort into revising the manuscript bound for the German edition, or if an autograph best serves another Etude, we can go with that and get the best for each, while maintaining integrity through each piece.

Chopin didn't normally proof the German (or English) editions, so it was left to house editors to check them for accuracy, and to remedy any missing accidentals (which the first French editions often leave unaddressed). Occasionally the editors overdid it, leaving several miscalculations that became established fixtures. Most critical editions now correct one case in op. 10 no. 3, which shows Chopin cleverly exploiting four modal permutations across bars 30–31 and 34–35; the original German editor's failure to grasp the subtlety of it resulted in subsequent editions dumbing it down by making bars 34–35 blandly re-enact bars 30–31 a tone higher. (I've even heard Chopin criticised for being repetitious there, by people who didn't know it wasn't what he wrote.)

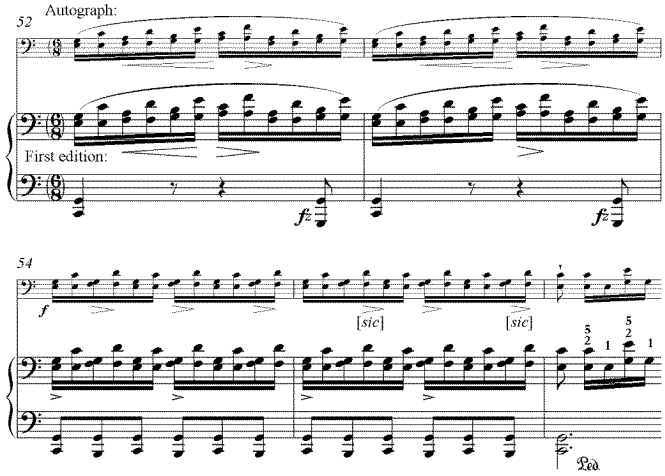
Equally worth knowing is that Chopin intended A-naturals all through bar 25 of op. 25 no. 1 (just going into the climactic section), not the A-flats that the first German edition introduced at beat 4, a reading that persists even in the recently completed Polish national edition. Musical logic there supports A-natural through the bar, leading to the next bar's B-flats as well as A-flats. (The Leipzig editor in 1837 didn't see Chopin's early draft of the piece, which clarifies matters by repeating the natural at beat 4 of that bar.)

Let's return to the op. 10 collection. The autographs used for engraving Etudes 3 and 5–12 from that set survive, and show myriad differences from the first French edition. Some of these clearly result from Chopin revising proofs (though they often lie cheek by jowl with engraving corruptions). Some of the differences suggest Chopin applying damage limitation to engraving errors; but sometimes they also clarify a line or texture or take the music in a valid new direction. In that sort of context it's usually essential to show both the manuscript and the first edition readings.

Those manuscripts make a viable main source for some of the later op. 10 Etudes in which the first edition shows only very minor revisions. These small revisions can easily figure on *ossia* staves, a procedure we might even see as advantageous, highlighting them for what they are. But another element comes into play here, involving more major proof revisions by Chopin which raise queries when we examine them more closely.

One example occurs shortly before the end of op. 10 no. 7. The main system in Example 1 shows where hairpins and accents appear in the first edition across bars 52–6; the auxiliary staff shows how they (and an additional ***f*** marking) appear in the engraving autograph.

Example 1. Op. 10 no. 7, bars 52–6, autograph versus first French edition

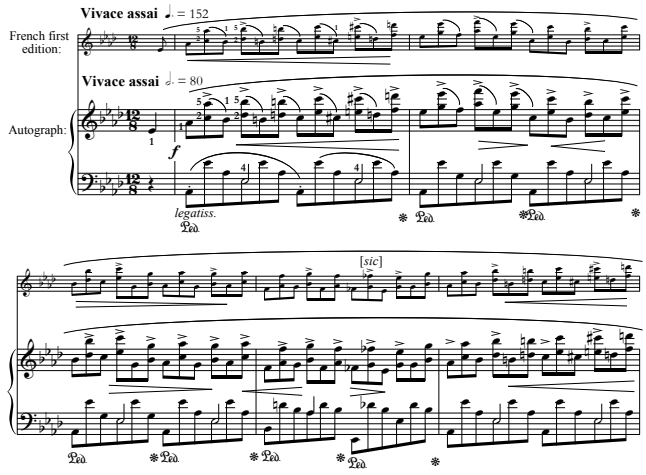


Are the differences just carelessness by the engraver? Or was the engraver befuddled by two misplaced accents in the manuscript (flagged in Example 1)? Or did Chopin arrive at the first edition's reading as a safe compromise, perhaps in the course of correcting worse misprints in the proofs? It could also have been a musical failsafe, for the manuscript accent pattern can sound jarring if not voiced skilfully (it needs balance from the bass, something Chopin's manuscript doesn't quite make clear). The first edition also introduces a new element of consistency in its half-bar accents. On the other hand, it loses the manuscript's link back to bars 40–41 (with the same pattern of accents every other chord on local dominants). Whatever our personal preference there, we really need to see both versions to allow informed decisions as we play. (Most editions show just one of the readings, though the choice of which one varies from edition to edition.)

While we're with Example 1, we might also note the pedal indication in bar 56, shown here as it appears in both the manuscript and the first French edition. Most editions relocate it under the initial bass dyad – understandably, because Chopin sometimes did place pedal indications to one side when there wasn't space under the bass. But for once I think the source placing is correct here, allowing a real staccato for the initial right-hand chord while the left hand holds the bass. (The staccato wedge appears only in the manuscript, but that gesture can stand independent of whatever we play before it.)

A definitive reading is equally impossible to establish at the start of the lovely op. 10 no. 10. The main system in Example 2 shows the autograph reading; the auxiliary staff shows the first edition. We can no longer tell if it was Chopin or the engraver who changed the opening up-beat to a quaver (confusingly leaving a crotchet rest on the lower staff), whether the start of the main right-hand slur and the opening dynamics were amended at proof or just misread, and likewise with the initial thumb indications (which don't work the same way anyway from a quaver upbeat).

Example 2. Etude op. 10 no. 10, bars 1–5, autograph versus first French edition



The only variants there that we can safely ascribe to Chopin are the amended metronome marking (for what it's worth) and the accents absent from the edition. We know these accents were removed at proof, because faint 'ghost' traces of them persist in the first edition, the engraver not having managed to erase them completely. (An accent at bar 5 beat 3 was also left by obvious oversight.)

We might conclude that since it was clearly Chopin who removed those accents, that's our definitive reading, QED. (That's what the new Polish national edition does; the Henle edition follows the autograph.) That, however, leaves two problems. The first one is the first edition's bunch of more dubious variants over these bars. (The first edition reveals why the hairpin swell across bar 4 is missing: the engraver didn't leave any space for it between the staves.)

The second and larger problem becomes apparent if we examine the high-quality images of the earliest editions that anyone can view online, at www.chopinonline.ac.uk (follow the OCVE option, and click on bar 5 of the piece). Look at successive reprints of the first French edition, and we can see ghost traces reappearing (as the printing plates wear) of accents originally engraved on every second quaver of bar 5 – erroneously continuing the accent pattern from bars 1–4 instead of changing to every three notes, as in Chopin's manuscript.

In the process of removing the misplaced accents at proof, Chopin somehow weeded out so many of his own accents that the first editions no longer show his original shift of articulation across bars 4–5, a gesture that seems fundamental to the piece's purpose and structure (its varied articulations of the right-hand figurations). That missing change of articulation then weakens the ensuing changes, present in all sources, to slurred quaver pairs from bar 9 note 1 until the end of bar 12, then staccato quavers from bar 13. Whatever Chopin had in mind as he corrected the proofs, we're left with an incomplete grasp of this piece and its ostensible purpose unless each version of bars 1–8 is seen in the context of the other.

I also intend the new Peters edition to clarify a few issues still not widely perceived, starting with the observation that, according to the original sources, the recap of the opening C major Etude in op. 10 should come in quietly at bar 49. (Romantic virtuosity changed that in late nineteenth-century editions to a thundering *fortissimo*, a spurious habit still widespread.) It makes for a much more interesting Etude, technically and musically, if we can hear Chopin effectively telling us at bar 49, 'Now play that again, this time quietly.'

My earlier article in March raised the issue of the oddly breathless metronome indications Chopin marked in op. 10 and op. 25. Although a critical edition is obliged to show them, I would (and will) suggest treating them with caution (all sorts of mechanical and user issues arise with metronomes particularly of that time), and with due consideration of how Chopin's Etudes relate musically to the rest of his output. It's notable that Chopin, having used metronome markings from the op. 6 Mazurkas onwards, abandoned them after the op. 27 Nocturnes, a decision that might suggest he no longer trusted them.

I can't sign off without mentioning the *Trois Nouvelles Études*, Chopin's contribution to a *Méthode des Méthodes* compiled and published in 1840 by Ignaz Moscheles and François-Joseph Fétis. Devoid of metronome markings, these three ravishing pieces have never served as velocity fodder: their challenges are subtler, involving voicing, cross-rhythms and contrasted articulation across voices. They also show some pleasingly delinquent fingering by Chopin, including thumb on several successive melodic notes (on black and white keys) in the opening F minor Etude. He then winds up the final D-flat Etude by mischievously inciting pianists to bounce down through three octaves of black keys on just the thumb. (Accounts of Chopin with his friends in his younger years, when he was still well, suggest he could be a riot at parties.) The original publishers were too embarrassed to print most of these thumb indications, though most reputable editions now do. The Peters edition will also include a couple of very useful manuscript B-flats never printed before (it's amazing what still lurks in these sources), with particularly striking results in the central A-flat Etude (a piece Debussy loved: he used to say he wore his fingers down with it). Keep an eye on *Piano Journal* for news of the new edition's appearance.

Pianist and researcher Roy Howat is Keyboard Research Fellow at the Royal Academy of Music and Senior Research Fellow at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. His many publications include two seminal books, *Debussy in Proportion* and *The Art of French Piano Music*, and numerous critical editions of Debussy, Fauré and Chabrier. He also was responsible for the English edition of Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's classic *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher*, and is now completing the new Peters edition of Chopin's Etudes.