



Welcome to this latest, somewhat belated edition of our beloved *Piano Professional* magazine! As I write, summer is at last beginning to show its welcome face as yet another busy academic year draws to an exciting close. Many of us will be in the last stages of lessons in which pupils are polishing their programmes for ABRSM and Trinity Exams, whilst those of us in the piano community who work in conservatoires are currently in the middle of 'final recitals' and last lessons on substantial programmes that are the climax of courses at tertiary institutions the world over. Indeed, the International Piano Community has never been so vibrant, nor so accessible: just this morning I was enjoying wonderful playing from the previous day on my smartphone direct from the Van Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth, Texas! The wonders of modern technology combined with the astonishing facility and precocious talents of so many young pianists today makes for tremendous inspiration.

EPTA UK has been greatly indebted to Nils Franke for his erudite and inspirational editorial role as editor of *Piano Professional* since autumn 2015. In this new issue, Nils has organised a characteristically diverse, entertaining, informative and thought-provoking collection of essays, articles and news items. Look out for Melanie Spanswick's extremely practical and artistically helpful advice on playing one of Chopin's most popular Nocturnes, as well as for Laurence McNaughton's clear and common sense approach to improvisation in a jazz idiom - tips that even the most tentative beginners will find immediate and helpful. Lucinda Mackworth-Young welcomes all instrumental and vocal teachers to be inspired and revitalised on her five-day Music, Mind and Movement course later this summer, and our indefatigable EPTA UK champion Liz Dewhurst provides a telling glimpse into what it is like to be a regional organiser through her stellar work for EPTA Swansea. We also present the results of the 2017 EPTA UK Piano Competition, and news of our exciting national conference, to be held in Nottingham from 31 August-2 September.

Finally, if you are feeling adventurous in early August, don't miss out on the 39th EPTA International Conference, hosted by EPTA Finland and held at the Helsinki Conservatory of Music, Ruoholahdentori 6, 00180 Helsinki. The theme of the conference is Inspiration in teaching, learning and playing: See www.eptaфинland.fi for more information.

Murray McLachlan, Chair, EPTA UK

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Important Message From The Administrator

Email Communication

As I am sure you can appreciate, most communication from EPTA UK will be by email. Several members have recently told me that emails from admin@epta-uk.org are being diverted to "junk mail". If you find emails in your junk folder you can mark them as "safe" or "never block sender" and they will then appear in your usual inbox. Please let me know if you need any help with this. I will continue to send important information by Royal Mail to those handful of members without email addresses at least a couple of times each year.

It's crucial to constantly listen when pedalling; the pedal is often best controlled by the ear as opposed to written suggestions on the page.

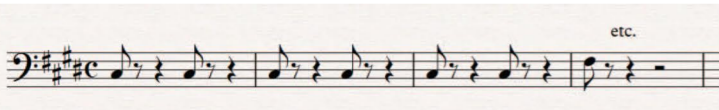
The melodic material in the right hand:



The broken chord quaver figurations in the left hand:



The bottom of the chord (the bass line) which is usually the first quaver of every minim group which generally occur twice in every bar:



It's always worthwhile practising the left hand alone for an extended period, until notes are fully grasped (it can help to know the patterns from memory too), because absolute consistency and evenness is necessary with regard to rhythm and tone. *Rubato* (or taking time) is a feature of Chopin's music, but even the composer himself apparently insisted on a rhythmic bass, proclaiming, 'The left hand is the conductor of the orchestra', above which the melody can enjoy some rhythmical freedom.

Students might benefit from using a variety of touches when practising; start by playing the bass line *fortissimo*, playing deep into the key bed, because then it is easier to pull back and achieve a smooth, soft, even sound. The bass notes at the beginning of each broken chord are the most important as already mentioned, and need slightly more sound and a *tenuato* (or held) approach (this note can be held for a fraction longer than the other quavers), because it's providing the bottom of the texture harmonically (the constant bass C sharps in the following extract. The example shows all three strands or layers of music from the examples above, combined (or as written)):



It's a good idea to be aware of the musical structure (which is ternary form) and the harmonic structure too, as this aids quick study, particularly if the piece is to be performed from memory.

Each quaver in the bass leads musically to the next, yet at the same time must provide the 'middle' and 'lower' layer of sound, and therefore should generally be in the background with regards to volume. Try to avoid the temptation to 'poke' or 'jab' at notes. To play these bass quavers evenly, it might be beneficial to play them in 'blocks' at first; blocking out chords involves playing the notes in each group (here, on every crotchet beat) all together, so the correct fingerings, hand positions and movement needed between notes is swiftly learned. When this has been done and thoroughly assimilated, ask pupils to play as written, encouraging the hand and wrist (especially) to roll from left to right, guiding the fingers into their positions, allowing fingers to 'hover' over the notes in preparation.

The large gaps between the notes in the left hand (i.e. between the C sharp, G sharp and the E, during the first two crotchet beats of bar 1, in the musical example above), is more comfortable with a wrist rotation (or lateral wrist movement), the hand moving quickly back to the C sharp on beat 3 (from the previous middle C (sharp) on the second quaver of beat 2 (bar 1)). To do this rhythmically and evenly, encourage students to stay on each note for as long as possible, quickly swivelling the fingers and hand into place in preparation for the next one; this way *legato* will hopefully prevail and there will be few gaps in the sound.

For note security and gradation of tone, the left hand can be practised without any pedal at first and certainly without *rubato*. As the bass part becomes more secure, so pedal can be gradually added. It's crucial to constantly listen when pedalling; the pedal is often best controlled by the ear as opposed to written suggestions on the page. This might sound obvious but it's easy to pedal mindlessly, not listening to everything clearly. During the 'busier' passages, pupils might experiment with 'flutter' pedalling; where the sustaining pedal is constantly moving up and down (or hovering) in order to 'clear' the sound and avoid blurring too many harmonic progressions.

The melody, as with many of Chopin's works, requires a real *cantabile* (or singing style) touch. It must soar above the bass and consist of a wonderful operatic quality synonymous with Chopin's style (Chopin was reportedly a fan of the Italian composer Bellini's operas). A free wrist with plenty of arm weight can provide a suitably rich, warm sound; even the *pianissimos* need some arm weight and the overall timbre should ideally project fully. The success of this line relies on an understanding of the nuances of each phrase. Rather like sentences, a melody must have punctuation. Aim to study each phrase 'feeling' the direction of the music, seeking where the most important note or notes lie and adjusting the sound and shape of the phrase accordingly. Ask pupils to listen to where and how the melody rises and falls, therefore enabling dramatic sections to stand out musically. Space is vital in this work, so students must allow 'breathing' time between phrases.

The tricky ornamental or *fiortura* (or embellished) passagework and scalic runs can be negotiated by working again with a full sound (for practice purposes only), encouraging all fingers to play fully on their tips (particularly the fourth and fifths), and deeply into the keys, as opposed to sliding over the top (make sure the fingerings have been written in the score before practice begins). Then experiment with different types of articulation (*staccato*, non-*legato*, varying accents and dynamics); complete clarity is desired in every figuration, with all notes 'sounding' equally, as opposed to being rushed or concertinaed together.

A particularly helpful method of practising trills, like that found in the musical example (in the right hand at bar 2), is to take the ornament out of

Practising Nocturne No. 20 in C sharp minor Op. Posth. by Fryderyk Chopin

By pianist, teacher and writer **Melanie Spanswick**

Fryderyk Chopin's *Nocturnes* offer a rich array of depth, emotion and expressivity. Written between 1827 and 1846, they consist of 21 short pieces. The genre was developed by the Irish composer John Field, but Chopin expanded on this original conception, producing what are generally considered to be amongst the finest short pieces ever written for the instrument. This *Nocturne* was composed in 1830 for Chopin's older sister, Ludwika, and was first published 26 years after the composer's death. It is frequently referred to as the '*Reminiscence*' *Nocturne*.

The *Nocturne* typically constitutes a romantic, dreamy character, suggestive of the night. The main feature of most *Nocturnes* is a beautiful song-like melody, often with melancholic overtones accompanied by a rolling unobtrusive bass. Ornament passages and filigree in the melody are commonplace, and the importance of the sustaining pedal cannot be overestimated, bestowing the overall dramatic effect. There are many variations, but the formula has produced some of the most haunting, emotional and exquisite piano music.

Whilst *Nocturnes* are generally slow and may sound fairly 'straightforward', in practice, nothing could be further from the truth. A *Nocturne*, or any similar slower-paced work requiring a *cantabile* (in singing style) touch and a deep connection with the key bed in order to produce a full, rich timbre, needs specific practice methods, and those ideas presented here could therefore be applied to a host of similar works.

During 2017/18, the piece featured on the syllabus of the ABRSM (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) Grade 7 piano exam. So with this in mind, here are a few practice suggestions for students to digest and apply, with the intention of making the path to examination success a little smoother.

The opening chords can present a few problems and need consistent balancing; an active, strong fourth and fifth finger (used to colour the top line) must be combined with a 'soft' approach in the wrists so as to cushion the sound. A daunting opening such as this, where each note must sound fully, should ideally be voiced perfectly and yet still extremely soft. The trick (other than trying the concert or examination piano first!) is to focus on the top note (or melodic material) making quite sure it's completely *legato*; ask students to change fingers, where necessary, keeping the *legato* line, and then combine with sparse pedalling. By making sure arm weight is transferred to the fourth and fifth finger (experiment by moving the right hand and wrist slightly to the right, away from the body, therefore providing more support for weaker fingers), pupils should be able to produce a full sound in the melody line allowing other notes (accompanying chords) underneath to fade into the background.

There are many different layers of sound in this work requiring a whole gamut of touches and pianistic colour

I encourage students to join fingers wherever possible in a *legato* melodic line - it's more effective than relying on the sustaining pedal. Play the remaining notes in the chords with a very relaxed arm and wrist, depressing the keys slowly, testing the key bed, checking where the sound kicks in. Note too that the repeat of the opening chordal passage must be played much softer, like an echo. Here's the passage:



And the melodic line, which needs special attention (with suggested fingering):



It can be helpful to practise the inner parts of the chords (as shown in the first example here) on their own, gauging the necessary feeling, balance, and sound in order to play sufficiently quiet, yet altogether. Add the top (melody) line when secure.

After the introduction, the remainder of the piece consists of a rolling, quaver bass constructed from arpeggio or broken chord figurations over which a captivating right hand melody prevails. There are many different layers of sound in this work requiring a whole gamut of touches and pianistic colour; the three layers at the opening can be separated and practised in isolation (from bars 2 - 5);

context, working at it alone. Begin by securing the fingering (and sticking to it!), then ask students to play each note in the trill slowly and heavily, using the full force of each finger (always ensure a relaxed free wrist and arm, preferably after every note, so tension doesn't arise). When the shape or pattern of notes has been understood, practise using accents on the weaker fingers, then on the stronger fingers.

Each note in the trill can be played twice or as a double note; every finger needs to enunciate the notes cleanly and with force here (but without any tension). Pupils can then play triple notes or triplets (three notes per trill note). When employing this approach, the wrist must be relaxed between every note, so the hand appears to be 'bouncing', as opposed to stuck in one position, which could indicate tension. By playing more notes than necessary, when the trill is played as written it feels much easier and more comfortable.

Longating trills can also be useful, and by making them more challenging than originally written, when pupils return to playing Chopin's score, inserting the ornaments into their rightful place, they seem much smoother and more controlled.

After practising the suggested methods using a distinctly heavy touch, a lighter finger touch should reveal even, accurate trills and florid passages, with fingers skating over the keys lightly. As with the left hand, work on the right hand separately until secure and confident. It might be a good plan to practise with the metronome until total rhythmic grasp is honed, and only then start thinking about *rubato*. Working under tempo is also advisable until any hesitations and insecurities have been ironed out, and coordination between the hands is exact.

Scale passages in the right hand from bar 55 onwards can be contoured

to 'fit' with the bass line; encourage students to mark the score at the most convenient 'meeting' places between the right and left hand passagework, and then stick to this every time during practice sessions; within a short space of time, these 'meeting' places will feel increasingly natural, and will eventually allow for more rhythmic flexibility. The left hand quavers will also need to be elastic rhythmically in order to accommodate the group of thirty-five right hand semiquavers at bar 56.

At bar 19, new material heralds the start of a less sombre section, characterised by a dotted rhythm and insistent triplet figure (which appears in the left hand from bar 31 to bar 42 (the main theme returns at bar 44)). Chopin has marked all details very thoroughly, from dynamics ('*ff*' to '*pp*') to the precise musical markings, which must all be noted.

If students can colour each layer of sound accordingly, and combine this with a thorough technical grounding, they will be on their way to creating a persuasive reading of this enchanting piece. And they will hopefully be able to tackle any subsequent *Nocturne* or similar work effectively, whether it be for a graded exam, diploma, or concert performance.

Suggested further reading:

- Chopin, Pianist and Teacher: As seen by his pupils*: Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (published by Cambridge University Press)
- After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* by Kenneth Hamilton (published by Oxford University Press)
- Teaching Notes on Piano Exam Pieces Grades 1 - 8, 2017 - 2018* (published by ABRSM)
- ABRSM Piano Notes 2017/18* (published by Rhinegold)

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