

THE PIANO ETUDE

Historical Perspective, Evolution and Development of the Etude up to the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

The following text is part of my doctoral studies and provides a historical overview of the evolution and development of the piano étude as a genre, until the second half of the twentieth century. The analytical approach proposed herein starts from an attempt to define the genre and continues with a presentation of what we considered to be its roots, namely **the prelude** and **the toccata**. The analysis focuses on the chronological evolution of the two aforementioned genres throughout the major music history periods, identifying the aspects that validate them as precursors of the piano étude. The pinnacle of the piano étude was reached during the Romantic period, with the development of the concert étude, invested with strong poetic and expressive resonances. Thus, the piano étude was freed from its essentially didactic or pedagogical label and became a viable and compelling means of artistic expression. Its didactic function continued to be an important component in the works written in the Romantic period or in the first half of the twentieth century, while allowing, however, the free exploitation of ideas and thus expanding the genre’s horizons through the compositional play between synthesis and experiment.

Key words: piano étude, evolution, didactic function, prelude, toccata, Romantic period

The piano étude traces its evolution throughout the past four centuries, alongside the development of keyboard instruments.

While an exact, unequivocal and complete definition of the term would seem quite difficult to achieve given that its name, form and function have changed over the centuries, we nevertheless find it appropriate to present some of the attempts at a definition of the term “étude”. In his article from the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Eric Blom defines the étude as follows:

An étude, or study, be it only a mechanical exercise or a character piece, is, as a rule, distinguished from all musical forms by the fact that it is evolved from a single phrase or motif, be it harmonious or melodic in character, upon which the changes are rung and which is designed to exercise the player on some special problem¹.

In a more recent edition of the same dictionary (2006), Howard Ferguson and Kenneth L. Hamilton give the following definition of the “étude”:

A musical composition of considerable difficulty, usually for a keyboard instrument, intended mainly for the practice of some point of technique, without omitting aspects related to musical expression. Even though at a certain time “étude” and “exercise” designated the same thing (Fr. “exercice”; Ger. “Übung”; It. “esercizio”), the latter term implies, in its contemporary sense, a short melodic figure or passage to be repeated “ad libitum”, either in its original form, or on different chromatic or diatonic scale degrees, as well as in different tonalities. The distinction is illustrated by Robert Schumann in “Studien” Op. 3 (1832), which are preceded by short exercises (“Übungen”) based on technical difficulties encountered in the études proper².

Based on the above definition, Peter Felix Ganz divides the étude into two categories: “the etude proper” and “the exercise”. Although his dissertation on the piano étude³ was written in 1960, his intuition in distinguishing between these two terms was right and his arguments were simple, cogent and to the point:

[An] étude denotes a complete composition with pedagogic intent and content that features at least one consistently recurring problem of psychological, technical or musical difficulty which requires of the player not only mechanical application, but proper study and correct interpretation as well.

¹ Eric Blom, ed., *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 8, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London, 1954.

² Howard Ferguson, Kenneth L. Hamilton, *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Macmillan and Co., London, 2006.

³ Peter Felix Ganz, *The Development of the Etude for Pianoforte*, Ph. D. diss., Northwestern University, 1960.

In contrast, an exercise is a purely mechanical note pattern of undetermined length, usually repeated on each chromatic or diatonic scale degree, that will familiarize the player closely with a specific technical aspect of his instrument and will develop his own physiological faculties; it is never, strictly speaking, a complete musical composition¹.

The purpose of a definition is to explain the defined term as accurately and thoroughly as possible. In the case of the *étude* as a genre, this apparently does not apply. Although a certain meaning of the genre of the *étude* can be derived from the above lines, a thorough explanation of the term would require, in our opinion, a brief overview of its evolution through different historical periods. We do not intend to present all the details or implications of the genre of the *étude* throughout music history, nor do we wish to evaluate its definition from the point of view of the development of the instruments' construction, but rather we seek aspects related to the pedagogical function of the *étude*, as well as to its evolution up to the peak of its ascendancy as a concert *étude*, charged with a strong poetic and musical force.

The foundations of the emergence of the *étude* and its organization or "internal anatomy" principles date from the sixteenth century. In Peter Felix Ganz's dissertation *The Development of the Etude for Pianoforte*, the first two chapters deal with the history and roots of the *étude* up to the Baroque era. The author brings into discussion five categories of works that he finds representative of the evolution of the "*étude*": variation, toccata, prelude/preamble/intonation, *Handstück*, didactic instrumental methods².

During the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term "*étude*" was used interchangeably with "exercise", "study" and "lesson". The term "*étude*" was generally used to describe a collection of musical pieces, "exercise" described an individual piece, while "study" referred to a musical piece serving a practical purpose³ (the development of technical skills). Many researchers begin their historical overview of the *étude* with the Baroque composers who wrote didactic pieces for the harpsichord.

Before continuing our exploration of the development of the *étude* throughout music history, we propose a short explanatory digression about two of the categories mentioned above, which we find most relevant and probably closest to the current concept and understanding of the *étude* as a genre, namely the **toccat**a and the **prelude**.

¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 12.

² *Ibidem.*, pp. 42-53.

³ *Ibidem.*, pp. 9-10.

Primarily understood as an instrumental work whose main purpose is the display of virtuosity, *toccata* (It., *toccare*: “to touch”), often a free improvisatory composition and almost always for a keyboard instrument, consists of figurative elements involving scale passages, arpeggios, chords and sudden, unexpected changes in harmony, tempo or dynamics. The toccata style is based on improvisation, with the accent falling on the figurative elements which are well adapted to the technical possibilities of the keyboard instruments; this type of writing exploits the specific idiomatic qualities of the instrument. Given that these pieces had an introductory nature and were used in both sacred and secular musical contexts, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine specifically the instrument for which these pieces were composed – organ or other keyboard instruments. On the one hand, the toccata principle is found in many works not so called; at the opposite end, there is a large number of works labeled as “toccatas”, which, however, incorporate other, more rigorous genres (the fugue), or other forms (such as the sonata form).

The first examples of some short works in free rhythm, whose function was to precede a motet or another piece performed in a liturgical service, date from the fifteenth century; these improvisatory works playing an introductory role, written for keyboard instruments and different from the dancing forms, *cantus firmus* or any other vocal model, first appeared in German manuscripts such as the *Tablatures* of Adam Ileborgh (c. 1448) and *Buxheimer Orgelbuch*. Mostly composed for organ, these works were intended to accustom singers to the pitches of the piece to be performed (rather than to the specific character of its mode, let alone its tonality); these introductory pieces were therefore called “intonations” (*intonazioni*), and later “preludes”.

Although this style continued into the sixteenth century, with examples like the “intonations” (*intonazioni*) composed by Andrea Gabrieli (1510-1586) or the works of John Bull (1562-1628), the toccata gradually grew into a stand-alone genre. Although the quasi-improvisatory model continued to prevail, the entire composition became larger, containing several contrasting sections. The alternation between contrasting sections served as a basic concept, the sections became longer and episodic passages using imitative counterpoint were also introduced. The most representative composer of this period was Claudio Merulo (1533-1604), whose toccatas were based predominantly on a ternary formal scheme: a first section filled with brilliantly virtuosic passages, massive chords and rapid figurations, then a middle part featuring imitative counterpoint and, finally, a concluding section in which the virtuoso character of the first section returns. Other toccatas consist of five sections/parts, with three parts in toccata style separated by two in imitative counterpoint. Merulo’s rhythmic figurations are full of inventiveness and

echo Frescobaldi's emotional intensity. We note here that the first toccatas that saw the light of print belong to Sperindio Bertoldo (1591). Of greater significance, however, are the pieces contained in the first volume of the collection *Il Transilvano* (1593) by Girolamo Diruta, including toccatas composed by Diruta, Claudio Merulo, Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, Antonio Romanini, Vincenzo Bellavia and others. Merulo's most important toccatas are contained in the two volumes of *Toccate d'intavolatura d'organo* (1598 and 1604).

With Girolamo Frescobaldi's works (1583-1643), the toccata took one step forward in its evolution. Although essentially Frescobaldi borrowed the formal pattern used by Merulo, the difference lies in the higher artistic quality of Frescobaldi's music, which is largely due to his harmonic and rhythmic inventiveness, the contrapuntal complexity, the extensive use of chromaticism and the unexpected, surprising contrasts between the toccata sections. The use of chromatic elements and the expressive contrasts derive from the culture of the madrigal. With the appearance of his first volume of toccatas (1615), a new era was inaugurated; contrasts became more obvious and even violent at times, while the rhythmic fabric gained significantly in complexity. The variety of melodic figurations increased, the harmonic colors became more subtle, or even strange at times, while the improvisatory fantasy required more and more complex technical skills. For example, the twelfth toccata contained in this volume is a "chromatic essay" promoting innovative possibilities and solutions of chromatization. The counterpoint is frequently based on short motifs treated in a quasi-imitative style in different sections of the work and accompanied by figurative material, so that instead of the two different types of texture found in Merulo's works (figurative and contrapuntal-imitative), in the works of Frescobaldi they are combined. In other works, such as the *Toccata IX* (1637), form is articulated by juxtaposing several short and contrasting sections, thereby producing a sense of nervous discontinuity. A build towards a climax at the end of the piece leads to an impressive conclusion, as indicated in the score by the following remark: "It is not without difficulty that one reaches the end." The "chromatic essay" mentioned above, offering the most significant and elaborate example of the use of chromaticism, is the *Toccata di durezza e ligature* (1637); the title refers to dissonances (understood as asperities) and tied notes.

Frescobaldi's legacy was felt until the end of the seventeenth century, toccata being the preferred form of expression of the Italian Baroque composers. His style is reflected prominently in the works of Michelangelo Rossi (1602-1656). His toccatas are even more extravagant than those of Frescobaldi, at least from a harmonic viewpoint.

In the eighteenth century, the genre of the étude gained particular importance and a higher level of evolution in the works of Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725). The novelty lies in the fact that Scarlatti's toccatas are composed specifically for harpsichord and that his approach is close to the orchestral style of the time. In the fast sections this is due to the themes with swift, agitated rhythms, in which figuration plays key role, while structurally they resemble the formal pattern with *ritornello*, often used in the orchestral music of the time, in which contrasting sections are inserted between recurrences of the thematic material (*ritornello*). Quite surprising is the large number of contrasting sections of the toccata (six or seven), consisting of varied elements such as the fugue, recitative or variations: an illustrative example is the toccata No. 7 from the *Primo e secondo libro di toccate* (1723), which concludes with 29 variations on "*La folia*".

The second miniature genre with profound implications in the evolution of the piano étude is the *prelude*. Along with the toccata, it represents the incipient, germinal form leading to the establishment of the piano étude as a stand-alone genre.

Prelude (Fr. "prélude"; Ger. "Vorspiel"; It. "preludio", Lat. "praeludium", "praeambulum") is a term with various meanings and applications, its primary meaning being that of an introductory piece whose role is to preface another musical piece and to determine its mode or tonality. It is a purely instrumental work (the roots "*ludus*" and "*spiel*" indicating the performance on an instrument as opposed to vocal performance) as well as an improvisatory one (hence the French "*préluder*", or the German "*präcludieren*", meaning "to improvise"). The term "praeambulum" (preamble) carries the rhetorical function of capturing the attention of an audience and introducing the subject to be presented.

The earliest written works of the genre were designed for organ and served to introduce and precede sacred vocal music pieces sung in the liturgical service. The preludes for lute developed from improvisation, with the main purpose of checking the tuning and timbre of the instrument, as well as of "warming up" the performer's fingers. The reason why improvisations were notated was to provide models to those willing to learn, which already indicates a pedagogical intent. Thus, the attention paid to the development of instrumental technique (more precisely of a particular aspect of instrumental technique) became – and has remained – a chief characteristic of the prelude. Given that improvisation can suggest a wide variety of manners, styles and techniques, the term "prelude" was later used to describe works with different formal structures or of undetermined genre. A brief history of the prelude up to the nineteenth century will allow us to notice important parallels with the toccata, sometimes even the undifferentiated use of the terms, and especially their common roots and most

distinctive features: improvisation, the introductory character, the pedagogical function and the development of instrumental skills.

Among the earliest surviving examples of preludes are the five *praeambula* for organ from Adam Ileborgh's collection of tablatures compiled in 1448, grouped together into one section headed *Incipitum praeludia diversarum notarum*. Each of the five pieces consists of quasi-improvisatory figurations in the descant (right hand) over simple chords in the middle/low register (left hand) or scalar descending lines in the pedal part. The German sources, particularly the *Fundamentum organisandi* (1452) by Conrad Paumann or *Buxheimer Orgelbuch* (1470) indicate a distinction between the two prevalent types of texture: simple chords in long note values (*schlicht*) and decorative, ornamental figurations (*colour*).

These characteristics of the prelude continued to be fundamental in the sixteenth century, when the character of "free" improvisation (fixed, however, through notation) was gradually abandoned in favour of a coherent and rigorous formal organization. The tablatures for keyboard instruments of Leonhard Kleber (1524) and Hans Kotter (before 1535) add greater variety to instrumental writing; Kleber used sequential passages still suggesting improvisation, while Kotter's *praemia* (preludes) contain simple imitations contrasting with antiphonal passages between the groups of voices.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the term "praeludium" was no longer used routinely in southern Germany, Italy or Spain, where works with similar characteristics bore different names (*intonazione, intrada, ricercare, toccata*). The extended, quasi-improvisatory pieces with virtuosic passages and free style were called "toccata".

A parallel development continued in central and northern Germany, where the title *praeludium* continued to be used, with the equivalent terms (toccata-prelude) being suggested by titles such as *Praeludium toccata* (Jan Sweelinck) and *Toccata vel praeludium* (Matthias Weckmann).

The most elaborate form of the Baroque prelude, namely the *praeludium pedaliter*, developed in northern Germany with the generation of Sweelinck's students. Heinrich Scheidemann's preludes (*praeambula*) are based on a ternary formal scheme: two free sections framing a contrapuntal middle section (imitative or *fugato*). The highlights of the development of the genre were Dietrich Buxtehude's multi-sectional preludes. They bring into opposition sections of instrumental virtuosity with elaborate contrapuntal sections (*fugato*), as well as the traditional rhetorical style with the energy and vivacity of the Italian style, with frequent connection points between sections being achieved through subtle techniques of motivic elaboration. In seventeenth-century France, the prelude remained a miniature genre, lacking the specific developments present in Italy or

Germany, and characterized by a quasi-improvisatory style and particularly by rhythmic freedom and flexibility. Jean-Henri d'Anglebert (1635-1691) or Louis Couperin (1626-1661) composed works with no indication of measure (*prélude non mesuré*). For example, Louis Couperin notates all the sounds with the same rhythmic value (whole notes), so that the meter and rhythm are at the performer's discretion. The melodic material consists largely of arpeggios. However, some of Couperin's preludes have two sections: a free section followed by a contrapuntal one, carrying the designation *changement de mouvement*; this suggests a connection with the orchestral overture in the French style.

This brief overview of the origin and development of the prelude would not be complete without a few words on Johann Sebastian Bach's works of the genre (1685-1750). For the sake of the clarity of this analytical presentation, we will refer only to the preludes from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The fact that this work was created for didactic purposes is evident right from the preface written by Bach himself: the purpose of the work is not only to help young people to learn music, but also to add more diversity for those already initiated into this art. The preludes contained in the two volumes maintain the characteristics and general pattern of the genre. They are short, coherent works, generally cast in one movement; each prelude has its own character, which is maintained throughout the entire piece. The general tendency is to operate with a short theme or with a motif, phrase, characteristic texture, rhythmic pattern, or type of configuration which sets the character or "affect" of the piece and provides the main thematic material at the outset. This thematic material is most often based on figuration: scalar figurations (D major, Volume I, F major, Volume II), arpeggio figurations (D minor and G major, Volume I), broken arpeggios, chords (F major and B flat major, Volume I and D minor, Volume II).

On the other hand, some of the preludes consist of well defined sections. The largest one, in E flat major (Volume I) and consisting of three sections and a typical mixture of imitation and figuration, has its roots in the old forms of toccata. In some of the preludes, a change of tempo is required (C minor, E minor, Volume I). There are also binary preludes, with a repetition sign in each part (B minor, Volume I, C minor, E major, A minor and others in Volume II). In some of the preludes, the initial thematic material returns towards the end, in the original key, which gives the effect of a recapitulation (D major, A major, Volume I; C sharp minor, F major, B flat major, Volume II). The influence of forms and procedures from other types of instrumental music which affects keyboard music is also felt in the preludes from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (the same influence can be seen in the works of Alessandro Scarlatti, Louis Couperin or d'Anglebert).

For example, the following devices are apparent in these preludes:

- *style brisé*, arpeggiated chords derived from lute music (C Major, Volume I; E flat major, Volume II)
- chamber music, particularly the trio sonata (C sharp minor, A major, B major, Volume I; C sharp minor, E major, A major, Volume II)
- orchestral associations (D major, Volume II, with the “trumpet melody”)
- *arioso*, associated with the recitative of the *opera seria*, in three preludes (E flat minor, E minor and B flat minor, Volume I)
- the pastoral character, related to the *siciliano* dance (E major, Volume I; C sharp minor, E flat major, A major, Volume II).

Although a detailed analysis of the preludes exceeds the scope of this study, we can nevertheless notice the diversity of these works, the variety of the material used, the contrapuntal perfection and the depth of expression. In our opinion, the preludes from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* mark the climax of the evolution of the genre up to the end of the musical Baroque, as well as a model to be followed by the future generations.

After this short digression from our main topic we will continue with a brief history of the piano étude. The following is meant to provide some general guidelines and to highlight several key aspects in the rise and development of the étude.

In 1716, **François Couperin** (1668-1733) published one of the major musical treatises of the eighteenth century: *L'art de toucher le clavecin*. In this treatise, Couperin gives detailed instructions on the principles of fingering, the execution of ornaments and other practical matters relating to harpsichord performance. The treatise also includes eight preludes for didactic purposes, designed to help the performer learn the art of playing the harpsichord. As shown in the presentation of the prelude, this miniature genre can be considered the precursor of the piano étude. The preludes contained in Couperin's treatise are characterized by abundant use of harmonic delays, complex rhythmic formulas and slow tempos. Six of the eight preludes of the treatise are short (from 18 to 24 measures in length), while two (numbers 6 and 8) are longer and more elaborate.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) wrote numerous didactic pieces for harpsichord, which he dedicated to his son, Wilhelm Friedemann. Many of these pieces were published in *Clavierbüchlein* (1720-1721), which is an introductory manual covering both instrumental technique and composition. These pieces served as teaching material for little Friedemann, comprising elements of instrumental technique, articulation, harmony and performing styles of the time. The manual also included applications for proper fingering and an explanatory table of ornaments. The two- and three-part inventions were originally published in the *Clavierbüchlein* and were called *Preambles* and *Fantasias*. A final, revised form

of the inventions was published in 1723, with the pedagogical intent of developing instrumental technique, learning to play convincingly in two or three contrapuntal voices and developing a *cantabile* style of playing. Since the intention of these pieces is to assist and improve instrumental technique, they can be considered as a precursor of the piano études of the Classical era. We also mention here the two collections that Bach dedicated to his second wife, Anna Magdalena, published in 1722 and 1725 respectively, which were also written for teaching purposes. These books include five of the six French suites, along with the two sets of little preludes (BWV 933-938 and BWV 939-943). The most important contribution Johann Sebastian Bach made to the keyboard repertoire for pedagogical purposes are the four volumes published under the title *Clavier-Übung* (1731-1741). The first volume includes six partitas (“German” suites) for keyboard (BWV 825-830), the second one contains various works for keyboard among which the *Concerto nach italienischen Gusto* (BWV 971), *Ouverture nach französischer Art* (BWV 831), a few toccatas and other pieces, the third volume is dedicated to the organ (including chorales and chorale arrangements), while the last volume contains *Aria mit dreissig Veränderungen* (the *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988). Although declared as “pedagogical” works, their purpose exceeds today’s understanding of the terms “pedagogical” or “didactic”, representing actually a summum or a compendium of the evolution of the art of the keyboard and composition up to that time. The variety of textures, the complexity of contrapuntal techniques and the instrumental virtuosity that these works require, along with the size and magnitude of the works and the level of erudition and musical training required for their performance give us a clear, complete and well-defined picture of the pedagogical demands of the time. This work includes all the aspects of instrumental and compositional practice and offers a comprehensive picture of the pedagogical phenomenon of the time.

In 1738, **Domenico Scarlatti** (1685-1757) published a collection of pieces for harpsichord, under the title *Essercizi per Gravicembalo*. These “exercises” are one-movement pieces called “sonata”, which introduce new technical devices and ideas such as the execution of the double thirds and sixths (played harmonically), rapid octave passages in one hand, wide spreads between fingers, impossible leaps, crossed hands, long trills and rapid repeated notes. With this collection, Scarlatti created a new style of keyboard virtuosity. Although these “exercises” or “sonatas” are intended rather for instrumental practice in general and are not focused mainly on the improvement and development of a specific technical problem, the high degree of virtuosity required for their performance and the diversity of technical problems lead us to regard them as an important predecessor of the piano étude.

For information purposes, we will also mention several other “didactic” volumes that prompt us to think of their pedagogical intent related to the improvement of instrumental technique: **Johann Mattheson** (1681-1746) published the collection *Die wolklingende Fingersprache* (*The Euphonious Language of the Fingers*, two volumes, 1735 and 1737); **Georg Philipp Telemann** (1681-1767) published two volumes of suites entitled *Esercizii musicali* (1739-1740) and the volume of *Fantasies* (1732-1733) including 36 fantasies for harpsichord, which are didactic works that exhibit early elements of the new “galant style”. Of the many European composers whose treatises or compositions have made important contributions to the development of the art and repertoire for keyboard instruments, we mention **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach** (1714-1788), the most famous of Johann Sebastian Bach’s sons. Although a thorough discussion of his significance would go beyond the scope of this paper, we will nevertheless mention his famous treatise *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen* (1753 and 1762), a major work at the time, as well as his pieces for clavichord (and less for harpsichord), particularly the sonatas, rondos and fantasias. Of these, the fantasias seem most relevant for the subject here under discussion.

The fantasia is one of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s most individual contributions to the keyboard repertoire. In the last chapter of his treatise, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach clearly explains the purpose of this type of works. The discussion suggests that the foundation or cornerstone of the fantasia lies in improvisation. According to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, “a fantasia is said to be free when it is unmeasured and moves through more keys than is customary in other pieces, which are composed or improvised in meter”. Further on he states that “a free fantasia consists of varied harmonic progressions which can be exposed in all manner of figuration and motives”. Such a work is obviously related to the improvised prelude, except that a prelude prepares the listener for the content of the piece that follows and is more restricted than the fantasia, which in turn is completely independent. In addition to these explanations, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach offers suggestions on suitable modulations in the improvising of a free fantasia, but emphasizes that the piece must be oriented to a particular tonality.

The fantasias included in the collection *Für Kenner und Liebhaber* are composed in the style of the improvised free fantasia. They are sectional works that incorporate much variety, with figuration dominant in the thematic material, passages in free rhythm (*senza misura*) that often involve solo lines, cadenza-like passages ending in fermatas, sudden changes in harmony (usually chromatic), or a contrasting texture. For example, *Fantasia in E flat Major* is in three large sections, the first consisting solely of figuration, especially arpeggios, with a recitative in the

middle; then comes the *Poco Adagio*, a primarily chordal passage in measured rhythm but with unusual harmonies; the last section, *Allegro*, brings back much of the material of the first part. Worthy of mention are also the *Fantasia in C Minor*, published in 1753 (and also included among the illustrative examples of the treatise) and *Fantasia in F-sharp minor*, published in 1787, also known as *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's Feelings*.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the piano ("pianoforte") started to be the favorite instrument of amateur and professional pianists alike. Composers from all over Europe began writing didactic works for the new instrument, which contributed to the enrichment of the didactic piano repertoire. Around 1800, the word *étude* was accepted and commonly used to refer to individual works of a pedagogical nature or collections of works written for that purpose.

The collections of *études* usually included pieces designed for the development and improvement of piano technique, with musical expressiveness being left in the background. Generally, these *études* were focused on the development and exploitation of a particular technical aspect, mostly on scalar figurations, arpeggios, chords, octave technique, double notes etc¹. These materials gradually developed into specific collections with emphasis on technique, designed for different training levels from simple exercises to progressively more difficult ones. Many of these collections included discussions about harmony, music theory, accompaniment, music history, performing practices, hearing and tuning. More than 80 such collections were published during this period, mostly written by German pedagogues².

Johann Baptist Cramer (1771-1858) was the first composer to publish an *étude* collection useful for both amateur and professional pianists. Cramer's best known collections of *études* are *Etudes pour le pianoforte, contenant 42 exercices, en différents tons, calculés pour faciliter les progrès des personnes qui se proposent d'étudier cet instrument à fond* Op. 39 (1803-1804) and *Etudes pour le pianoforte* Op. 40 (1810).

These two collections, Op. 39 and Op. 40, incorporate 84 *études* that were later combined to form the fifth part of Cramer's work entitled *Grosse praktische Pianoforte-Schule*³. These *études* are organized neither by key relationship, nor by progressive level of difficulty. They focus mainly on technical problems related to double notes, trills, arpeggios or broken chords used in varying arrangements; the technique of pivoting the hand (wrist rotation) around the thumb (passing the

¹ Robert Dale Marler, *The Role of The Piano Etude in the Works of Charles-Valentin Alkan*, D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1990, p. 14.

² Peter Felix Ganz, *The Development of the Etude for Pianoforte*, ed. cit., pp. 53-55.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

fingers over the thumb by rotating the wrist and the hand) is quite common in these études. Cramer's études favor developing technique for the right hand, the left hand being less employed in difficult technical passages.

Seven years later, **Muzio Clementi** (1752-1832), Cramer's teacher, composed his own collection of études entitled *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1817) or *The Art of Playing on the Pianoforte, Demonstrated by One Hundred Exercises in the Severe and in the Elegant Style*¹. The work consists of a hundred pieces divided into three volumes. Most of them are études in that they focus on a particular technical problem. *Gradus ad Parnassum* also consists of exercises designed to develop strength and independence of the fingers, to achieve even tone, equal finger action, execution of repeated notes, scales, arpeggios, ornaments and double notes. It also includes other pieces such as sonatas, canons, fugues, rondos and adagios, which, however, are not regarded as études. Many of these pieces are quite lengthy, aiming to stretch the performer's abilities, while their musical value is rather questionable. Worth mentioning is the attention Clementi paid to the development of both hands, a goal that Cramer failed to achieve².

The most prolific composer of études of the nineteenth century was without any doubt **Carl Czerny** (1791-1857), who composed more than eight thousand études. Czerny learned the basic techniques of piano playing from his father³. At the age of ten, Czerny started studying piano with Beethoven, and later, when he was 15, he started his own "teaching career". Due to his passion for piano teaching and his friendship with the piano maker Andreas Streicher, Czerny's reputation grew, bringing him more and more students⁴. Czerny taught piano for 10-12 hours a day, while at night he devoted himself to composition⁵. Among his students were Theodor Leschetizky, Theodor Kullak and Franz Liszt. When Muzio Clementi visited Vienna in 1810, Czerny took the opportunity to observe his teaching style and methods, which he later incorporated into his own teaching. Throughout his teaching career, Czerny composed numerous études to be used by students as practical materials in developing their technical, stylistic and expressive skills. Many of his étude collections are ordered progressively and grouped into sets dealing with all aspects of piano technique. These études contain problems of articulation and ornaments (*Die Schule des Legato und Staccato* Op. 335, agility (Op. 380) and various areas of interest (*Etudes for the Young* Op. 694, *Studies for Small Hands*, Op. 749 *Studies for the Left Hand* Op. 339, 718 and 735), to name

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

² *Ibidem*, p. 120.

³ Reginald R. Gerig, *Famous Pianists and Their Technique*, Robert Luce Inc., New York, 1974, p. 103.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

only a few. Among his most important collections that have stood the test of time are *Die Schule der Geläufigkeit* Op. 299, *Die Schule des Legato und Staccato* Op. 335, *Die Schule der linken Hand* Op. 399 and *Die Kunst der Fingerfertigkeit* Op. 740. *Die Schule der Geläufigkeit* Op. 299 includes 40 short studies dealing with basic technical problems, scales, chords and arpeggios. As is evident from the title, the 50 short studies included in *Die Schule des Legato und Staccato* Op. 335 focus on technical problems related to modes of attack. *Die Schule der linken Hand* Op. 399 is a set of 10 longer études written for the left hand, aimed mainly at developing velocity and dexterity. *Kunst der Fingerfertigkeit* Op. 740 contains 50 studies of a higher level of technical difficulty than most of Czerny's études, written in a brilliant style. They require a high level of efficiency in piano technique and focus on instrumental virtuosity¹.

Czerny's most highly regarded pedagogical book for the piano is the extensive treatise entitled *Klavierschule* Op. 500 (1839), in four volumes. The first volume contains 19 lessons that focus on the fundamental aspects of piano technique. This first volume begins with remarks and recommendations on the frequency of the lessons, the duration of the daily practice and how to teach the lessons, as well as basic concepts that should be taught in the first lessons. A discussion about good posture at the piano is also included in this volume. Czerny speaks about the position of the head, forearms and legs, bench height and distance from the piano, and the position of the hand and fingers. His remarks go as far as suggesting even the appropriate length of the nails required for an effective learning of the piano technique².

The second volume is divided into 16 chapters which include finger exercises. The third volume contains 24 chapters focused on different aspects of expressiveness such as dynamics, rhythm, tempo, touch, ways of interpreting the melodic lines, style, memorization, use of the pedal, sight reading and tuning. In this volume, Czerny also includes a stylistic history of piano interpretation divided into categories of composers. The presentation begins with the composers of the Baroque era, especially Bach and Scarlatti, then moves to Classicism, mentioning Mozart and Clementi, and continues with Dussek, Cramer, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, Moscheles and Kalkbrenner. Czerny concludes by presenting the new stylistic trends adopted by contemporary composers like Chopin, Liszt and Thalberg³. The fourth volume deals with the interpretation of Beethoven's works and the study of contrapuntal techniques (especially the fugue).

¹ Peter Felix Ganz, *op. cit.*, p. 183-186.

² Reginald R. Gerig, *Famous Pianists and Their Technique*, ed. cit., p. 110.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 116-118.

Overall, Czerny's études are relatively short and lack musical and expressive depth.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most of the études continued to feature technical aspects, emphasizing particularly finger development and independence. **Ignaz Moscheles** (1794-1870), composer, pianist and German conductor of Czech origin, was among the first composers to write études for public performance, in which he combined technical elements with musical ones¹. Schumann thought of Moscheles's études as bridging the gap between Clementi's and Chopin's études and as being influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach's *Clavier-Übung*. Moscheles's étude collections include 24 (*Charakteristische Studien* Op. 70 (1826), *Charakteristische Studien zur höhren Entwicklung des Vortrags und des Bravour* Op. 95, two études published as Op. 98 (1840) and *Tägliche Studien über die harmonisierte Skalen* Op. 107.

Together with **François-Joseph Fétis** (1784-1871), Moscheles published an important collection of études written by several contemporary composers, entitled *Méthode des Méthodes* (1837). It was Moscheles's task to publish these études².

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) was the first composer to fully combine elements of musical expression and substance with the technical demands of the étude. His études gave birth to a new genre called "virtuosos" or "étude de concert" (concert study), designed particularly for professional pianists. Chopin composed two volumes of 12 études each, i.e. Op. 10 (1833), dedicated to Franz Liszt, and Op. 25 (1838). A third volume, known as *Trois nouvelles Études* (1839) was later published in the aforementioned collection, *Méthode des Méthodes*, edited by Moscheles and Fétis.

The 12 studies Op. 10 feature technical aspects such as virtuosic arpeggios (Nos. 1 and 8), scalar and chromatic passages (Nos. 2 and 12), touch, attack and expressiveness of the sound (Nos. 5 and 7). The études Op. 25 generally focus on touch (Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 12), parallel thirds, sixths or octaves (Nos. 6, 8, 10), rhythm (No. 3), musical expression (No. 7) and chromatic figurations (No. 11). The three études contained in *Trois nouvelles Études* concentrate on rhythm, technical and musical subtleties such as polyrhythms, stretches up to a tenth and left-hand leaps in chords and arpeggio figurations.

While Chopin's études display a variety of forms, the most common one is the ABA ternary form. Most of his études contain "a coda of significant length when considered proportionally"³. One of the main technical challenges is

¹ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, p. 363.

² Peter Felix Ganz, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

³ Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, Schirmer Books, New York, 1996, p. 284.

presented in the opening measures, and a second may be included in the B section if the étude is in the ABA form. B sections are usually unified by the thematic material taken from the original motif or figuration presented at the beginning of the étude.

Overall, these 27 études concentrate on aspects related to touch, counterpoint, dynamic subtleties, gradations of touch, cross accents and complex rhythms¹. Technical innovations include extensive use of chordal passages, consecutive use of thirds and sixths with the same hand, extended arpeggiated figurations, variations of the melodic line and substantial use of the black keys². John Gillespie notes that “excellent as the études written by Clementi, Cramer and Czerny are, they remain just studies in technique. Chopin’s études go beyond this. They include not only the expected studies in various matters of technique but also studies dealing with musicianship”³.

Robert Schumann’s (1810-1856) first collection of études, *VI Etudes pour le Pianoforte d’après des Caprices de Paganini*, Op. 3 (1833), was directly influenced by the art of the great violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini (1787-1840) and his *24 Caprices* for solo violin. These études are a literal transcription of Paganini’s caprices numbers 5, 9, 11, 13, 19 and 16. In 1835, Schumann composed a second set of études modeled after Paganini’s caprices numbers 12, 6, 10, 4, 2 and 3, entitled *6 Études de Concert d’après des Caprices de Paganini*, Op. 10 (1835). In these études, Schumann used a much freer approach of transcribing for piano, a dense contrapuntal texture and more formal freedom, rearranging and changing the original structure of the caprices. A third work dedicated to the étude and originally published as *Etude fantastique en double sons* Op. 6 (1834) later became known and published as *Toccata* Op. 7. This work includes elements that develop pianistic dexterity, cross rhythms, syncopated inner voices and double notes. In terms of form, the work possesses strong elements of variation technique.

Schumann’s most important contribution to étude literature is the *Symphonic Etudes* Op. 13 (1852). The Op. 13 études are structured on the formal pattern of theme and variations. The theme is 16 measures long and is followed by 10 variations, with the last titled *Finale*. Each étude combines the thematic motif with a different technical device, aiming to develop two or three technical ideas. The individual variations are relatively short in duration, except for the finale which consumes approximately one third of the total length of the work. Unlike other étude collections from which one could extract a single étude for study and performance without affecting the unity of the cycle, *The Symphonic Etudes* is to be

¹ Charles Rosen, *op. cit.*, pp. 372-372.

² Peter Felix Ganz, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

³ John Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1965, p. 224.

played in its entirety. The variations present a wide variety of tempos, characters, moods and textures. The work includes technical devices such as articulation, voicing, arpeggiated passages, rhythm, large leaps and trills in both hands. "It is probable that by using the form 'theme and variations' Schumann intended to make an innovation in the field of the piano étude, thus presenting a composition which partakes of the character of both étude and variation."¹

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) began his teaching career at the age of 16, to support himself after the death of his father in 1827. Liszt was familiar with the études composed by Czerny, Kalkbrenner and Moscheles, and used them as examples for his own students. His first and most highly regarded collection is *Études d'exécution transcendante*, entitled, in a first phase, *Études en forme de douze exercices pour piano* Op. 6 (1826), composed at the age of only 15.

Liszt revised and expanded this collection in 1837 and published it in 1839, increasing the technical difficulty of the études and choosing a new title – *Vingt-quatre grandes études*. The final revision of these études (1852) returned to the original title, *Études d'exécution transcendante*. Having thus reached its final form, the volume includes 12 études, with 10 possessing descriptive (programmatic) titles. These études encompass a wide variety of moods, improvisatory styles, massive chords, difficult trills, chromatic figurations, technically difficult tremolos, cadenza-like bravura passages, parallel octaves, arpeggios spanning the entire keyboard, *fioritura* ornaments – thus expanding the technical possibilities to exhaustion. Like Chopin's études, Liszt's are highly original creations that ingeniously combine technical elements with musical expression. But unlike Chopin, Liszt attaches paramount importance to instrumental virtuosity. "Liszt's creative talents were best suited to technical matters, his études stand as solid examples of his personal art."²

Liszt first heard Paganini play in 1831 and was entranced by the art of the great violinist. His contact with Paganini's personality and music inspired young Liszt to experiment with new technical innovations at the piano, as did Paganini with the violin. The result of these pianistic innovations was *Grandes études de Paganini* (1834). This work was so difficult from a technical viewpoint that it was withdrawn and republished in 1837, and later, in a final version, in 1851. The volume includes six études, five of which are transcriptions after Paganini's *Caprices* for solo violin. Etude number 6 is written in theme and variations form (theme and 11 variations). In addition to these two volumes, Liszt composed five

¹ Erlinda P. Feliciano, *The Development of the Piano Etude from Frédéric Chopin to Claude Debussy: An Analytical Study of Representative Piano Etudes from the Nineteenth Century Composers*, D.M.A. diss., Boston University, 1961, p. 91.

² John Gillespie, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

concert études in two separate collections. The first collection, *Trois études de Concert* (1848) includes the pieces *Il Lamento*, *La Leggerezza* and *Un sospiro*. The second collection, *Zwei Konzertétudes* (1862-1863), comprises two études: *Waldesrauchen* and *Gnomenreigen*.

In 1849, Liszt abandoned concert life and dedicated his time to composition and piano teaching. During these years, Liszt composed a final collection of *Technical Exercises* in 12 volumes, which were published posthumously by Alexander Winterberger in 1886. These technical exercises were focused on the technical problems that Liszt observed in his students whose technique was already advanced.

Without claiming to have exhausted the subject of the nineteenth-century piano étude, which is an extremely rich and generous topic for musicologists, we would like to mention one more name to which history was not particularly kind, leaving it almost completely forgotten, i.e. that of **Charles-Valentin Alkan** (1813-1888). Although highly regarded and appreciated by Liszt and by many other great pianists of the time, Alkan was neglected by posterity, most of his music being unknown to the general public or the professional pianists. Although his piano works, which make up the bulk of his output, stand out particularly by a virtuosity carried to the degree of exacerbation, the harmonic refinement, rhythmic inventiveness and varied texture present in his music force us to reconsider this highly original composer. Thanks to the effort and skill of contemporary pianists like Jack Gibbons, Steven Osborne and Marc-André Hamelin, Alkan's music starts to regain its rightful place in the piano repertoire.

Alkan's main contributions to the piano étude literature are the three monumental volumes: *Douze Études dans tous les tons majeurs* Op. 35 (1848), *Douze Études dans tous les tons mineurs* Op. 39 (1857) and *Études* Op. 76 (ca. 1839). These études exceed in difficulty anything that his contemporaries wrote (Liszt, Chopin, Thalberg and others). Although we are not concerned here with a detailed analysis of these études (which would certainly reveal their genius), we would like to draw attention to the undeniable value of this music. The études Op. 39 are perhaps the most neglected masterpiece of the nineteenth-century piano literature. This volume includes works of extraordinary proportions, posing a great challenge to the pianist's endurance, technique and mental strength. Thus we note the presence of a scherzo of symphonic proportions (No. 3), a symphony for solo piano (No. 4-7), a concerto for solo piano (No. 8-10), a broad overture for solo piano (No. 11) and a substantial set of variations (No. 12).

As noted previously, in terms of the architectural construction, proportion, unusual harmonic boldness, texture diversity and level of virtuosity that these études require, they surpass all that was written at the time.

The Romantic tradition of the *étude* was continued in the twentieth century by composers like **Alexander Skriabin** (1871-1915), **Karol Szymanowski** (1882-1937), **Leopold Godowsky** (1870-193) or **Sergei Rachmaninov** (1873-1943).

Between 1887 and 1912, Skriabin wrote an extensive number of *études* that clearly illustrate the evolution and transformation of his musical language. Early works such as *Etude Op. 2, No. 1* (1887) and *Twelve Etudes Op. 8* (1894) are heavily influenced by Chopin's music in the use of textural and technical devices such as expressive right-hand *belcanto* melodies, chromatic harmonies, left-hand accompanimental arpeggios and, perhaps the most important feature of these early works, frequent resort to melancholic and dreamy moods. The *Eight Etudes Op. 42* (1903) show a more complex harmonic and rhythmic language. In these studies the meter is blurred by the frequent use of cross rhythms or polyrhythms, while tonality is disguised by the high degree of chromaticism. The transformation of Skriabin's musical language, culminating in his use of harmonies based on series of fourths, is revealed in numerous works, including *Three Etudes Op. 65* (1911-1912). Although technically each *étude* incorporates a single intervallic idea (No. 1 - ninths, No. 2 - sevenths, No. 3 - fifths), their extatic nature, harmonic ambiguity and rapid fluctuations of tempo and character present the performer with tough challenges. Although Skriabin's musical language changed visibly over the years, the essential qualities of his music remained unchanged: rhythmic, harmonic and timbral sensibility and an impeccable pedal technique.

Szymanowski's *Four Etudes Op. 4* (1900-1902) show the influence of Chopin and early Skriabin in their texture, harmonic language and emotional expression. On the other hand, his *Twelve Etudes Op. 33* (1916), obviously intended as a cycle (many of these *études* last less than a minute), are based on motivic and harmonic coherence, incorporated in a concise form. Compared with the *Etudes Op. 4*, these works are notable for their coloristic sonorities – Debussy's influence being especially noticeable in Nos. 1, 2 and 9 –, for their chromatic elaborations and the wide range of characters and emotions in the manner of late Skriabin (Nos. 4, 5, 7). Also present are percussive elements in the manner of Prokofiev or Bartók (Nos. 3 and 6).

Another major figure of the Romantic era and an exponent of Russian endless melancholy is Sergei Rachmaninov. He wrote two volumes of *études*: *Etudes Tableaux Op. 33* (1911) and *Op. 39* (1917). Without being a great innovator in harmonic style, he "concentrated on the Chopin-Liszt framework of singing melodies and rich sonorities, decorated by elaborate technical embellishments"¹. Nevertheless, his style reflects superb individuality. Using his in-depth knowledge

¹ Richard A. Leonard, *A History of Russian Music*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1957, p. 238.

of the instrument's resources, Rachmaninov combines orchestral piano writing and the deepest emotion and expressiveness with rare refinement and imagination.

Even a brief presentation of the continuation of the Romantic tradition in the twentieth century would not be complete, in our opinion, without the name of Leopold Godowsky. His *53 Studies on Chopin's Etudes* (1914) is the quintessence of Romantic piano music (particularly of the Liszt tradition). These studies are the highest expression of Romantic piano technique and contain a compendium of all the figurations and technical possibilities of Romantic piano music. After several editions published over time, today's definitive five-volume edition published by Robert Lien contains an introduction and a few personal or general remarks by Godowsky. In addition to the foregoing, it includes two essays by Godowsky on the use of the pedals and on the 22 studies conceived for the left hand. Many of the studies contain Godowsky's specially written preparatory exercises which, according to Theodore Edel¹, "are of a quality very rarely seen. Godowsky's fingerings resemble the moves of a great chess master who, as a result of deep thought, selects the best from a field of many possibilities". Each study is a unique jewel, culminating in works that use simultaneously two or three études by Chopin. Published by the editor as a collection of "modern pianistic art", these studies hold a special place in the piano étude literature. Except for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji's music (which will be subject to our further research), perhaps no other segment of the repertoire has acquired such legendary status, as a simple look at the scores will show. The performer is faced with unexpected levels of difficulty, especially mental demands that are quite rare in the piano repertoire, requiring great concentration and dedication so that all details are presented and articulated with the utmost clarity. Each study may contain, for example, two or three contrapuntal lines, each with its own character and requiring a clear differentiation. Because of the extraordinary difficulty of these works, it is not hard to understand why they were generally neglected.

We conclude by urging both pianists and musicologists to approach this music with confidence and perseverance, for it definitely deserves a prominent place in the piano repertoire.

If so far we have seen how Romantic piano aesthetics and techniques are presented in twentieth-century music, we will continue with a brief presentation of another group of composers whose intentions are exactly contrary to those of the Romantic pianistic tradition. We will refer here to **Igor Stravinsky** (1882-1971), **Sergei Prokofiev** (1891-1953), **Béla Bartók** (1881-1945) and **Claude Debussy** (1862-1918).

¹ Edel Theodore, *Piano Music for One Hand*, Indiana University Press, 1994.

Although treating the piano as a percussive instrument is one of the key features of Stravinsky's music, his *Four Etudes Op. 7* (1908) continue to some extent the Romantic tradition. The fact that we present him first in this second group of composers is due to his études being still under the influence of the expressiveness and elegance of Romantic music, without however benefiting from the emotion and feeling that characterize it. The extensive use of polyrhythms in these études could be compared to that in Scriabin's *Etudes Op. 42*. However, Stravinsky's music lacks the ecstatic atmosphere of Scriabin's music, reflecting instead the intellectualism and objectivity so typical of Stravinsky. His études are particularly notable for their rhythmic experimentation. Although neglected by pianists, these études deserve more consideration and present a different facet of the composer's personality.

Another exponent of anti-Romantic aesthetics is Sergei Prokofiev, who explores a different facet of the pianistic technique, namely the ability to produce sharp, harsh and percussive sounds. His *Four Etudes Op. 2* (1909) prove his nonconformist attitude toward pianistic texture and technique. His sharp touch, along with his declared intent to make his piano music sound like "broken glass", infuses the étude with a new kind of energy and brilliance. His vigorous, energetic rhythms and the sarcastic, grotesque character of his music have enriched piano literature with new means of expression. His études stand out particularly for their motoric rhythm and toccata figurations (No. 1 and No. 4), their timbral play (No. 2) and their sarcastic character (No. 3). Through their rhythmic figurations and sound effects they prefigure Bartók's études.

Bartók's *Etude for the Left Hand* from the *Four Pieces for Piano* (1903) still bears traces of the Romantic musical idiom, continuing the tradition of Liszt and Brahms in the use of a "fanfare" motif in the main theme, the transparency of the second theme and the melodic use of the Gipsy idiom (e.g. scales with augmented seconds).

His *Three Etudes Op. 18* (1918) introduce new stylistic features: the dissolution of tonal elements, broad melodic lines, harsh, though expressive dissonances and a new piano technique, based on large stretches in both hands, in a perpetual motion (Etude No. 1). Also present are wide-ranging arpeggios of timbral sonorities (Etude No. 2) and rapid leaps of the left hand through various registers, complex metrical figurations and syncopated rhythms (Etude No. 3). If we think back to the meaning of the étude in the Baroque era and consider the didactic nature of such works, then Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* (1926, 1932-1939), a six-volume collection of pieces written for didactic purposes, follows the same line of significance of the term as in the Baroque era. Written in the form of exercises (or of composition exercises, we might add), the 153 pieces are based on

the use of new musical idioms. We are presented with a small “treatise” of modern pianistic art, modes of attack and varieties of colors, along with a broad array of pianistic textures.

At the forefront of this group of composers who moved away from the Romantic tradition and are briefly presented in the above lines, stands, in our opinion, Claude Debussy. His *Douze études pour le Piano* (1915), divided into two books, is perhaps the most profoundly original work written by Debussy for the piano. His études sum up the work of a lifetime, his explorations and discoveries in the field of pianistic technique, and are one of the great jewels of the twentieth-century étude. Following in the footsteps of Couperin and Chopin, his études encapsulate the experience and refinement of a composer who knew the tiniest details about pianistic techniques and resources. His études are to the same extent compositional and pianistic pieces. The first book of études is largely based on the principles of harmony, while the second deals with timbral explorations and spectacular coloristic effects that summon up vivid and highly expressive poetic images. Presented here only for informative purposes, Debussy’s études call for a deepening of the knowledge of the language elements that are so characteristic of the composer’s music; formal innovations and his well-known sensitivity prove to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for both composers and pianists.

A great admirer and to some extent a follower of Debussy is **Olivier Messiaen** (1908-1992), one of the leading representatives of the music of the second half of the twentieth-century.

His *Quatre Études de rythme* (1949-1950) are more overtly compositional experiments than piano études in the Romantic sense of the term. They are not concert études, they have not captured the hearts and interest of music lovers and are rarely addressed by pianists. Though quite difficult to grasp even after repeated hearings, these études contain several features that are worthy of notice. While of more interest to composers and musicologists, these études incorporate a series of innovations in piano writing. As the title suggests, the main feature of these études is rhythm. *Île de feu 1* and *Île de feu 2* (Etude No. 1 and No. 4) (*Fire Island*) draws inspiration from primitive music, or rather from the primitive spirit of the music of Papua New Guinea. The magical rituals of the indigenous tribes are reflected through a violent and ferocious music, bristling with energy and excitement. *Neumes rythmiques* (*Rhythmic Neumes* – No. 3) take their inspiration from the various neumes found in the medieval *cantus firmus*. According to Messiaen, this étude was conceived as an attempt to find the rhythmic equivalents of the medieval neumes; the melodic sinuosity indicated by the neumatic sign is transformed into a group of durations. Each rhythmic neume is assigned a fixed

intensity and resonances in sparkling colours, either lighter or darker, but always contrasting.

Mode de valeurs et d'intensités (No. 2) is certainly the best known and most interesting of the four études. This étude was to be the spark of a writing technique that would dominate the 50s and 60s of the twentieth century, namely integral serialism. Although Messiaen had never used this technique in the form he did in this étude, he offered a model to the young Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who took this writing technique to the extreme, and virtually to its extinction. Consequently, we can notice that the maximum organization of the musical material resembles, in terms of sound quality, with aleatoric music or with a spontaneous improvisation. This étude employs a mode consisting of 36 pitches (tones), 24 durations, 12 attacks and 7 dynamics. All these elements are presented and explained in the preface to the piece. By using highly complex, elaborate and rigorous combinatorial devices, the composer draws new timbral, coloristic and technical effects from the piano. However, with all the intellectual inventiveness that pervades this music, it lacks the human element, the expressive factor and the emotion that are the essential core of any artistic expression.

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