

## F. Chopin Op. 10 Etudes “Milestone of the Piano Technic”

Fahrettin Eren Yahşi

State Conservatory, Department of Music, Anadolu University,  
PO box 26050, Eskisehir, Turkey

### Abstract

F. Chopin has a significant place in piano music as well as the development of piano technique. Op. 10 Etudes which were first published in 1833 represented the first examples of musical technique apprehension which were desired to be done until that period. In this study, the development of early piano technique was presented through the examples from the composers who had studied in this field and the process up to Op. 10 Etudes was analyzed. In the last part of the study, the innovations introduced by the Op. 10 Etudes and its milestone characteristics in the development of piano technique were mentioned.

**Keywords:** Chopin, Op. 10 Etudes, Early Period Piano Technique, Technical Development, Analysis

**DOI:** 10.7176/ADS/71-03

**Publication date:** March 31<sup>st</sup> 2019

### 1. Introduction

As it is known, pianists who want to maximize their techniques need to perform various exercises. These technical exercises have been formed by the studies which were foreseen by the composers to overcome existing technical problems; many of the composed etudes were added to the piano repertoire with this purpose. Therefore, etudes are essential parts of occupational lives of pianists as necessary works to gain technical proficiency. When technical development is considered as a whole that includes concepts like musicality, finger agility, virtuosity; there are etudes of different composers which have contributed to the development of all these concepts in today's piano repertoire. However; piano technique in the process that reaches today have changed in various ways and reached its recognized standards. In this respect, in order to explain that Chopin Op. 10 Etudes have a milestone quality more clearly, it is necessary to analyze the first steps of this evolution process.

### 2. Early Period Piano Technic

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) had his place among most important composers for piano music through many concertos and sonatas he composed for the transition from harpsichord to piano. Although he had composed many works, he used piano as a means to express his music instead of using it as an instrument with technical purposes. Therefore, there are not any approaches that contain exercises or etudes apprehension in the works he composed. The foundations of piano technique were laid by Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) who shared a short period of time with Mozart.

The piano technique of Clementi indicates that he adopted an approach mainly based on finger agility. He had a chance to play with Mozart in Vienna during his European tour in 1781 by the invitation of Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790). The effects of these meeting were later understood by the expressions about Clementi in a letter by Mozart to his father; “He is an excellent cembalo player, but that is all. He has great facility with his right hand. His star passages are thirds. Apart from this, he has not a farthing's worth of taste or feeling; he is a mere mechanicus (Gerig, 2007 s.56) Technical approach of Clementi can be seen more clearly with the method called “Gradus ad Parnassum” he composed between the years 1817-1827. In addition to including the works of other composers who had lived before and in the same period with him, the method includes a lot of exercises written to strengthen and agility of the fingers as well as help them to become more independent. These exercises primarily prioritized technical and physiological improvement but did not target musical development. Mostly repetitious chord changes and arpeggios of these chords laid the foundations of this method.

Technical approach of Clementi is not only limited to this mechanics. Technical application of Legato which was suggested by him has the characteristics of determining the route of the improvement in piano technique. General approach in piano technique in Mozart period is to play passages as Nonlegato or Leggerio unless indicated otherwise in the text. Clementi thought about it this way;

When the composer leaves the staccato and legato to the performer's taste the best rule is to adhere chiefly to the legato, reserving the staccato to give spirit occasionally to certain passages, and the set of the higher legato (Gerig, 2007, s.60).

The suggestion of Clementi related to legato can be accepted as a pursuit of a new color in music. However, this did not prevent him to develop his approaches related to piano technique. He did not include legato or musical sentences that could be related to legato into his own technical approaches. In other words, mechanical playing is a technical approach for him, legato playing is a way of performing that did not necessitate technical practice.

Apart from his mechanic, technical perception and his suggestion of legato application, there is not an exact finding related to his pursuit of soft touch. The role of musical traditions of that time and the opportunities of the instrument is inevitable.

Johann Baptist Cramer (1771-1858) the student of Clementi also followed his path. The technical studies he did were a follow – up of existed studies. However, the way of playing related to the touch to piano he suggested separated him from Clementi even if just a bit. The suggestion of Cramer was like this;

“The extremity of the fingers, but not the nails, must strike the keys, their motion should be so smooth as not to be noticed, the thumb must be kept over the keys so as to bring the other fingers close to the black keys, ready to strike them, this will prevent the wrist moving uselessly backwards and forwards. (Gerig, 2007, s.62)”

This suggestion of Cramer is needed to be compared with present day soft touch apprehension. Cramer’s suggestion is more like a new idea for that period and was needed to be developed. However, to play the instrument like the way he suggested also affects the softness of the created sound. Therefore, although the approaches of both composers were mechanic, they were the first composers who suggested about the pursuit of new timbres or playing softly.

Clementi and Cramer who lived until their 80s did not find a big place for themselves in Romantic Period with their composition. They were labeled as out of date and old fashioned when compared to composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Liszt. Although Clementi, as a pianist, could play in accordance with the trends of the period even when he got older, Cramer was not as successful as him. Even though musical approaches of Clementi and Cramer were described as boring and poor, they were the pianists / composers who had established the early piano technique and contributed a lot to the development of this technique. Today the sonatas, sonatinas of Clementi and etudes of Cramer still have an important place in early piano training and it is accepted that they are quite important in the development of piano technique.

### 3. Early Romantic Period Piano Technic

Piano technique started to be formed with the search of touch and musical color in the beginning of the 19th century. Apprehension of Clementi and Cramer who had approached piano technique mechanically left their places to newer approaches that included searches to enlarge the musical possibilities of instruments. The most important of them is the occurrence of the idea that supported creating a technical apprehension which included playing well and more musicality as well as technical perfection.

Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837) put forward suggestions on the differences of playing correctly and well in piano technique. He suggested that not only virtuosity but also musical colors have effects on the audiences. According to Hummel, playing correctly was only about technical perfection based on finger agility and it was related to playing clearly. On the other hand playing well was related to playing technical passages softly and to transfer musical expressions stated by the composer on notes to the audience in a natural and realistic way. Therefore, the concept of playing well is not only technical preciseness but also is a whole created by the integration of musical expression with the emotions for Hummel<sup>1</sup>. Hummel composed a new method in accordance with this idea. The Art of Pianoforte which Hummel wrote related to the development of piano technique covers a wide range from beginning level to level of a concert pianist. It was first published at Wiemar in 1828. This method which includes both technical and musical phases has been accepted as one of the most important technical studies of 19th century. However, these practices of Hummel were the follow up of technical studies of preceding composers. With these studies Hummel, succeeding Mozart and Clementi, continued Vienna Piano School and became the pianist who put it over the top technically. However, despite the fact that Hummel had suggested a musical interpretation, the audiences did not find such a quality in his playing. Hummel’s technical suggestions which contained musicality could not go beyond being just a theoretical statement because the way he played the piano conflicted this musicality, and whether these exercises were beneficial practically or not created debates at the end of 19th century. Today these exercises still contribute to the development of early piano technique and Hummel’s pedagogical suggestions are also applicable in piano training.

Another composer who has an important place in today’s early period piano training is Carl Czerny (1791-1857). His contributions to piano technique and his pedagogical approaches attracted a lot of attention when he was alive and still his approaches has been an irreplaceable part of early period piano training. His approaches to piano technique and his pedagogical approaches were collected under three steps.

The first step is the approaches that are based on the way to sit in front of the piano, the positions of the wrists, hand and arm. These approaches had similar properties with the composers who had worked on this field previously. Therefore, Czerny’s first steps suggestions in piano technique provided continuance of existing suggestions and focused more on extending them.

The second step is related to the use of the fingers. Czerny suggested the rules below about the use of the

---

<sup>1</sup> R.R., Gerig (2007), *Famous Pianists and Their Technique*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press p. 76

fingers;

- The 4 long fingers of each hand...must never be passed over one another,
- The same finger must not be placed on two or more consecutive keys,
- The thumb and the little finger should never be placed on the black keys in playing the scales.
- Technical passages could be played with different finger numbers but the continuity of finger shifts should be avoided. (Gerig, 2007, p.113-114).

These finger use suggestions of Czerny were accepted as universal rules in that period.

The third step covers the subjects such as pedaling, memory, public performance, melody playing, touch, dynamics, style, rhythm. Czerny drew attention especially to pedaling among these approaches. He thought that the pedal, which started to be used frequently after Beethoven, contributed to musicality and suggested that the pianist could use it in everyway he/she wanted (Gerig, 2007, p.115). Additionally, Czerny also made suggestions about playing well and he expressed this as stated below;

“whoever possesses the art of always producing from the pianoforte a beautiful, harmonious, and smooth tone; who never carries forte or fortissimo to a disagreeable and excessive harshness; and further who combines the highest degree of volubility with perfect distinctness and clearness, will execute even the most startling assemble of notes, so that they shall appear beautiful, even to persons unacquainted with music, and give them unfeigned delight.” (Gerig, 2007, s.115)

At this point Czerny also presented us about what it should be about musicality. However his studies for this purpose were not enough while applying them, he continued his studies mainly within the context of mechanic technique.

Composers such as Clementi, Cramer, Hummel, Czerny presented their technical and musical approached pedagogically in the first half of Romantic Period and created the basis of piano technique. These composers' approaches which were a follow up of the 18th century piano technique apprehension were insufficient in practice and were unable to go beyond presenting how an effective musical performance should be. Thus, mechanic technical apprehension reached the top through the studies of these composers and there was nothing more to do.

#### 4. Op. 10 Etudes

Op. 10 etudes were composed<sup>1</sup> between the years 1829 and 1832 and first published by Maurice Schlesinger in France and by Friedrich Kistner in Germany in 1833, then by Julian Fontana in England in 1835-1836. These twelve etudes which were completed by Chopin when he was just twenty two years old gained a lot of attention through their innovative and liberal approaches. The concept of etudes, which had not been beyond being just exercises and had aimed technical development before Chopin, changed completely through these etudes and they became artistic works which contained extensive musical expressions. In addition, the apprehension of musical technique, which had been introduced as an approach to be in piano technique by composers such as Clementi, Czerny, was achieved by Chopin through these exercises and he presented the first examples of etude apprehension which would continue after him.

Unlike previous composers, Chopin primarily dealt with the ideas that create musicality. He did not adopt an aim that complicated piano technique or developed the technique. However, the build of his hands with unique flexibility was reflected on technical structures of etudes as well as his all other works (Gerig, 2007, p.162). Therefore, approaches such as structures with wide ranges, pedaling approaches that would contribute musicality, the use of first fingers on black keys which was forbidden at that time and could usually be used with the flexibility of the hands had been rarely seen before Chopin, appeared in these etudes. This situation technically forced the pianists who played Chopin's etudes, even if he adopted an approach prioritizing musicality. For instance, Arthur Rubinstein who is one of the most important pianists of 20th century expressed the technical and musical difficulty of Chopin's etudes like this;

“Liszt cultivated technical preciosity; the difficulties he contrived were a camouflage, and he exploited them for greater effect. Chopin was interested only in musical idea, and the difficulties of his work are logically inherent in his thought...I can play a pyrotechnical List Sonata, requiring forty minutes for its performance, and get up from the piano without feeling tired, while even the shortest etude of Chopin compels me to an intense expenditure of effort (Gerig, 2007, s.162).”

Chopin's unique build of hand also revealed the uniqueness of the technical apprehension created by him. To reach musical and technical quality expected in the etudes necessitated other pianists who did not have Chopin's hand build to put more effort while playing. Additionally, technical and musical approaches in the etudes created the background of other works of Chopin. Technical structures in the etudes can be seen in his works with bigger form such as concertos, sonatas, scherzos. Therefore Op. 10 etudes prepare pianists to the other works of Chopin. All the etudes in this Opus represent Chopin's innovative approach with their unique

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ourchopin.com/analysis/etude.html> (date of access: 10.04.2017)

technical and musical structures. However, the etudes numbered 2, 5, 6 and 12 are completely out of the necessities of that period.

#### 4.1. Op.10 No.2 A Minor

The first and the fifth fingers were considered as weak fingers in Renaissance harpsichord technique and therefore there was a technical approach where second, third and fourth fingers were used passed over each other. However, along with the piano technique started to develop in Classical Period, the approach in Renaissance period had been forgotten in time. Instead, the technical apprehension where 5 of the fingers were used effectively occurred. At this point, it is necessary to remember the rule related to finger passing introduced by Czerny. It was a rule that does not let the fourth finger coming after the third finger, in other words it interprets fingers passing over each other as something wrong.

However, in this etude Chopin ignored this rule of Czerny and brought us the harpsichord technique abandoned in Classical period again. Splitting hand position due to chords accompanying chromatic structure on one hand reintroduced to piano technique as an innovative approach. This idea of Chopin entirely rejected the rules of Czerny which were still in use at that time. Another rule of Czerny that Chopin rejected was the thumb and the little finger should never be placed on the black keys in playing the scales.

#### 4.2. Op. 10 No. 5 G Flat Major

A brand new structure which goes beyond this rule appears in etude number 5. Apart from 1 note, all the rest of the etude was composed on black keys. Composing such an etude by ignoring the apprehension of Czerny that stated the first finger should not be on black key while playing the scales was revolutionary. Of course this rule of Czerny does not mean that the first finger should not be used on the black keys. He also stated that “each finger can be used on each key in appropriate circumstances”. Hence this rule has a wiggle room. This is because the rule which states the first finger is not used on black keys started to change along with the enrichment of music both structurally and harmonically through the works of composers Beethoven, Schubert. Especially it is seen in the late period sonatas of Beethoven that the composer did not take this rule into consideration. However one needs to see this situation not as a radical change but as a natural result of structural and harmonic changes in the music. Although new apprehensions and changes were reflected in the works of the composers in this way, these were not as big as to change the strict rules of the period yet. However, these changes became more distinct in the beginning of Romantic Period, and the final reflection of it on piano technique was through this etude. The way right hand part of this etude composed, which necessitates it to be played completely on black keys, constituted the peak point of this change in piano technique up to that day. Even though the first finger was used on black keys, such a strict approach had not been practically experienced before this etude. Another new meaning created by etude numbers two and five is the freedom to play in which the music require without being dependent on specific rules. Technical apprehension started to be formed in accordance with this meaning and except from works which were composed in certain forms, the apprehension of freedom was created in works aiming technical development.

#### 4.3. Op. 10 No. 6 E Flat Minor

Another etude that is out of the rules of the period is etude no 6. The idea of “etude” which is to speed fingers and enable technical development in this way until that day gained almost a new meaning with this etude. In this work, which is not considered as an etude when it is first heard, musical expression practice was concentrated on. Left hand accompanies the musical phase of right hand which needs to be played in a strong musical expression with a melodic substructure all consisting of semi-quaver notes. There are two reasons why this substructure is important.

The first one is that it creates the expected musical depth although it looks like accompaniment. The reason for this is that harmonic movement and modulations occur this melodic structure. Therefore, musical phase of right hand loses its effect without this substructure.

The second one is that the tradition of the composers who composed for technical development before Chopin is if the technical development is for right hand, simple chords or patterns of these chords usually existed for left hand. Or when the etude was written for left hand, there was always a place for right hand, too. Here, it is seen that there is a structure which accompanies the melody of the right hand and completes the harmonic background. There it is not possible to understand which hand is given priority in the etude. If it is said that it is written for left hand, it is clearly seen that the melody of the right hand is not an accompaniment. If the melody of the right hand is considered as an idea of etude, which would be quite extraordinary, the accompaniment played with the left hand includes the melody. Actually, the patterns of the left hand which are called substructure can exist through the melody of the right hand. Therefore it is obligatory to practice this etude as a whole musically and play accordingly. When we consider this semi-quaver pattern is played along with the melody of the right hand, this wholeness becomes clearer. Since this approach is seen in all of the etudes in Op.

10, the apprehension of accompaniment before Chopin loses validity through these etudes.

#### 4.4. Op. 10 No. 12 C Minor

Another extraordinary example is the etude number 12. It is necessary to start with the musical structure of this etude. Since the source of inspiration creating the music is known, this etude necessitates an interpretation beyond being an etude. The etude which was composed in about 1831, has the effects of Poland's revolt against Russia, which ended in failure, in November of the same year. Therefore the etude is known as "Revolutionary" or "Warsaw Bombardment Etude". His statement "All these caused me much pain. Who could have foreseen it?" has reached until present day (Niecks, 1945, s. 98). This enables us to have an idea related to the emotions of the composer about the situation identified with this etude. It is clearly seen that this etude is an etude for left hand. Additionally, again we can see that the main theme of the right hand creates a big part of musical expression. What is new at this point is that such music whose source of inspiration is known is written as an etude. Technical development remains in the background due to the created musical atmosphere. Although Chopin did not name it "Revolutionary", no other etude representing an event was composed before this one. Therefore, it necessitates a practice which is both on technique and on interpretation. The combination of technique with musicality is the most important point for a pianist to be equipped for public performance. It can be clearly said that this etude provides such a development.

### 5. Conclusion

Composers, who had worked on the development of piano technique before Chopin, suggested the idea of musical etude; however, they did not get a realistic result. This musical etude concept was achieved by Op. 10 etudes. Composers who dealt with the same subject following Chopin traced this approach created by Chopin and shaped the piano technique in the same direction. Therefore, Op. 10 etudes contribute greatly to musicality, touch and even musical maturity as well as innovative technical approach to the development of today's piano technique.

Although the subject of naming etudes which was not approved by Chopin has led the pianists in a specific direction, narrating a musical piece is one of the basic elements of interpretation. Since the musical narrations suit technical structures in these etudes, it is possible for the pianist to be free as long as the imagination allows, not just by being dependent on the known titles.

In addition to all these, virtuosity and extensive musical expressions in these etudes have made these etudes an irreplaceable part of concert halls. In accordance with all these the development of a pianist in his/her field would be insufficient and lacking without technical and musical acquisitions provided by the Chopin etudes.

### References

- Cortot, A. (1915), *F. Chopin Op. 10 12 etüt çalışma yöntemi* (Çev: E. Bahçeban).
- Eyüpoğlu, E.B. (2016), *F. Chopin'in Op. 10 No. 2 kromatik etüdünün piyano tekniğine etkileri*. Yüksek Lisans Tezi. Eskişehir: Anadolu Üniversitesi.
- Eren, O. (2014), *Klasik müzik tarihinde kırılma anları*. Ankara: Sevda – Cenap And Müzik Vakfı Yayınları.
- Frederick, N. (1902), *Frederic Chopin, as a man and musician*. London: Novello and Company.
- Gerig, R.R. (2007), *Famous pianists and their technique*. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press.
- Yahşi, F.E. (2017), *F. Chopin'in Op. 10 Etütlerin Yapısal Analizleri ve Yorumlanması*. Sanatta Yeterlik Tezi. Eskişehir: Anadolu Üniversitesi.
- <http://www.ourchopin.com/analysis/etude.html>  
(Date of access: 10.04.2017)